Acknowledgment

I do not like saying ‘thank you’ to anybody. Nor have I heard the folk back there in the villages indulging in this exclusive ‘thanking’. There has been however a full-fledged performance to express gratitude to the social and the divine beings, and I have personally participated in those performances on several occasions. As I switched to the urban context where it is but a norm to deliver thanks every now and then, and even full length thanking speeches, I am seemingly unperturbed. We all realize the shallowness of convenient ‘thanking’. Unless it is felt everyday, till one breathes last, any amount of expression would not suffice the need to be thankful. As I attempt acknowledging everything and everyone in the span of last five years, the period of this research, I feel my target of gratitude ranges from humans, non-humans, to situations, to contexts, and also a lot of emotional aspects. They are just too many to be thanked in a lifetime. Albeit, I try doing so with the maximal theatrical precision.

First of all, I would thank those moments of realization, whereby it dawned upon me that the power of my attachment cannot rescue/deviate my dearest from the passage of death. For, I remember as a child I stood in the courtyard and looked into the starry sky to declare to the cosmos, as though tying a knot in my conscience, ‘they can not die until I am alive’. It was unknotted in the passage of life, and I was compelled to imagine death, through coevade syndrome, experiencing the art of dying with them who did not relent from their path. I am thankful to that volcanic eruption of question as to how they died, as to how they afford to leave me, as to how they untie the bonding with their final departure. The pangs of separation, I am thankful to, let me re-imagine the separation from even those who left me mercilessly without offering me a valid reason. I am thankful to them who exclaimed that they are weaning away from me for the same reasons why they once felt solidly attached to me. Every mark of ending that the perforated sheet of a life bears deserves my gratitude.

It is in this context, that I began to think and understand with some friends, some teachers, some colleagues, and some of those from my kinship network, to whom I owe more than mere gratitude. Prof. Avijit Pathak embodied an intellectual temperament apt for this kind of understanding I was seeking for. I had already received an orientation in the discipline of academic writing from Prof. Susan Vishvanthan, though till date my writings are not free from my inscrutable self. I am filled with gratitude for them, also for another reason, that they could understand the significance of an emotionally charged research project. It was during those times of emotional upheavals that some teachers like Prof. Maitreyi Chowdhury and Prof. Anand Kumar assumed the roles of safety cushion. I would not shy away from being thankful to some other teachers who play very significant role by infuriating and provoking our intellectual selves. My strong disagreements with Prof. Dipankar Gupta and Surinder Jodhka, in any seminar or conference, gave me fillip of interesting kind. A fumbling Prof. Gupta was a reassurance to my self-confidence. Similarly, some students who I taught in this period in the capacity of temporary teacher in Bluebells school, Jamia Millia Islamia, Hindu college, and subsequently in Kamla Nehru college, happened to be my easy admirers and suppliers of instant belief in the work I was doing. In this regard, I can not forget to thank some of the school teachers and the principal of Bluebells international exclaiming about the subject of my research—‘folklore is good, but why notion of death, why not vibrant life’? So much so that, I began to feel the unnerving nature of the demand I often faced of speaking about my research.

iii
On several occasions I felt the lustful obsession humans have with life, to the extent of blinding us to see the unfolding death. It is no different from friends and doctors alike, clinging on to the optimism and re-emergence of life force, as though death were a real unwanted thing. While I am thankful to them, I am also thankful to those who died in front of my eyes so gracefully in spite of suffering they went through. In addition to my own parents, I would be thankful to Mrs. Nutan Pathak, for becoming my muse throughout this research. Some occurrences of death from my childhood memory also played a crucial role in deciphering the notions of life and death in this research. It enveloped me so neatly, and thus I thank it, that I could feel the death of even non-human bodies like trees, flow of water, fire, air, and also the dying time. I thank them all. Those women, on the verge of dying, and those who are yet to fathom the codes of death, who sang for me deserve my humble ‘thanks’; and so do those men in the villages who irritated me endlessly with their ‘personal’ questions. Some of those little kids in the village who lent me their friendship and reaffirmed my faith in possibilities need a mention of special kind.

The tryst with destiny in the course of research occurred especially when I was on a look out for some resources, be it in library or in the field. The stacks of books, the smell of the past and sound of time ticking away, in the ruffled structure of JNU library helped me believe in the virtues of not finding a right book at a right time. Not very differently, when the staff of IGNCA library tried hard to find a book and eventually disclosed in hush-hush that some celebrity-scholar has not returned the book for last whole year, I felt thankful that I would not have to read that book. It was in Teen Murti Nehru Memorial and the DSA library of CSSS that I could not escape the need to read. My dismay upon the visit of the central library of Lalit Narain Mithila University was not in comparison to the utter disrespect the theses of the scholars of the university is meted out to. But it helped me understand many things, of the book and of the field. Attending conference on oral tradition and interacting with teachers and young scholars from LNMU, in the possibly most rustic format of academics, kindled a critical perspective in me. It helped me emerge from the ‘hail Mithila’ mode.

At the end, it would not be wise to forget those informal tidbits coming from friends and those whom I never treated as my friend. Sharing my agonies with Byas was always at the price of his criticism of my ascribed-caste identity, and Ravi was almost an extension of myself whenever I spoke to him. Interestingly, never did we feel like discussing our research work and what tied us together was a thin link of liking of one other. If anybody, it has been always Priya who listened to me, my proud and intermittent lectures, with rapt attention, along the roller coaster of our relationship. Besides, she also took the painful task of copy-editing this thesis. Tuni took pride in my work without knowing much of it and went about bragging among her friends and colleagues. Pankaj and Jhunna always felt vindicated at every step of my work.
Nachiketa was very unhappy to witness his father’s ethical decline: his father, the king Vajashrava, was donating unhealthy cows to the priest who had performed in the yajna. It was the young son’s resistance to the deviant father. And, thus, anguished by his son’s unrelenting query the father uttered the words which perhaps wrote Nachiketa’s destiny. The child had to set on a journey to meet the god of death. The travail eventuated into meeting the god, after spending and knocking at the door of the god’s abode for long. The clever and kind god allured him with many glittering gifts the mortals cherish. But Nachiketa wanted only answers to his questions that could enable him to understand the mystery of life and death. The winsome innocence and disarming curiosity of the learner worked, and the god gave in.

This famous story from Kathopanishad was in the backdrop of this research as well as of every episode of my personal tryst with the event of dying. Every time somebody died, I experienced my own death, something anthropologists have discussed as couvade syndrome in a different context. Simply put, it was a vicarious experience of dying with the dying. Dying is an extreme form of separation. The other myriad versions, of separating, may be equally potent and pertinent for the invocation of Nachiketa. I do not claim to be Nachiketa incarnate, but I believe anybody approaching the issue of suffering, separation, and ending, with simmering conscience, is likely to take a Nachiketa-route. Be it the ethical decline of a father in a ritual performance of sacrifice or a father’s willingness to die following the death of his wife, there occur moments of crises whereby agency shelters in liminality. The liminality becomes the womb of a research/a quest, to know the unknown. Hence, walking in the corridor of All India Institute of Medical Science in Delhi, on several occasions, built up for me a phase of ‘neither here nor there’; I was betwixted. It was no less than an emotive drama under the dictate of some divine conspiracy the cruelty of which is inexplicable. To have my father diagnosed with kidney-failure and deciding on his behalf to put him on a regular dialysis system was almost like nudging myself along with him toward the abode of death. Asking my father insistently to generate some life-force and live for me for a few more years, and seeing his helplessly blank face with moist eyes, happened to be the impetus for the eternally curious Nachiketa. Then descended a night with an uncanny dream whereby the ailing
father asked the unrelenting son whether he can take leave as nothing was holding him back. The son looked at him with his tearful eyes and said, “May I accompany you to wherever you intend to go”? The father said, “You can not”, and he walked off the dimly lit stage. And the son could see with blurring eyes the merger of his father into a silky dark auditorium.

This was the closure in the script for a play titled *Melodrama of Death* I wrote after experiencing the death of my parents. All the hypothetical assumptions that emerged from there were also interspersed in the songs I often heard since my childhood days. When everything was rosy, I did not hear the pangs in those songs. It was soothing and mildly annoying when my mother sang them every now and then. The same songs magnified in meanings and I began to ask questions from women of my mother’s age in the villages, about the meanings of the songs and also the stories about my parents’ lives. Alongside unfolded myriad stories, punctuated with songs, which became the skeleton of this research-project.

The failure of scientific-objective thinking, calculation, and certainty invokes a more sensible social scientist. When the intended consequences are superseded by unintended ones, science has to reorient itself. In the face of such situations my rational thinking faltered, at many junctures, as though it were a shock to a struggling doctor whose every bit of medical analysis is washed away by the tide of time. Somehow it dawned upon me that one can not die until one wants to, almost like the Bhishma (the grandfather of the Kaurawas and the Pandwas) in the epic Mahabharata. Bhishma stayed on the spiky deathbed (a bed of arrows) for almost a fortnight and decided to die only at the right, auspicious moment. There is a moment somewhere in life whereby everybody instantly realizes the visibility of death in the shadows of life. As soon as it is accepted it becomes possible to die a happy death. Thus, acceptance is key to happiness. Acceptance of sorrow too thereby becomes a reason for ecstasy, about which a distant observer may only wonder or turn cynical.

If I have to put the whole of thesis, the crux of this research, in one line I would say is, “life and death unfold simultaneously and hence they are imagined in the same breath using the same set of metaphoric symbols”. The element of sorrow (especially pertaining to separation), widespread throughout life, is the best evidence of the interrelatedness. We learn to say ‘yes’ to an ending. Not that, after this there is no continuity in the journey of Nachiketa, for the god of death was cunning enough to answer only three questions.
My exposure to the anthropological and sociological literature on performative art and notions of life and death generated both: an optimism to tell the tale in the language which offers objectivity and a pessimism that everything that belongs to felt-knowledge of the folk can not be put into the same language. Yes, this work is also a compromise on the infinite possibilities as it restricts the articulation to the domain of the institutionalized. But then, I do not regret this compromise as it is the only way to say the unsaid. Another level, on which this work assumes distinction, is to do with slightly unconventional interest in the folk imagination. While most of the *a priori* analyses have been focused on the ritualistic dimensions, or the institutional arrangements, in the studies of the folk literature or oral tradition, they fail to comprehend the philosophical import and the fluidity of imagination. Also, this work is an antithesis to the age-old social scientific prejudice that poetry is mere fantasy and thus unreal. If life is a work of art, everything people say and do are artistic expressions. While there may be occasional spectacles to remark certain ideas, there are more benign and ordinary expressions in everyday life as well. This work attempts at the totality with unflinching interest in the ordinary and lackluster moments in routine set up. For, human emotion does not conform to the socio-structural restrictions, and often the former redefines the latter, it was but necessary to investigate the presence of sorrow in every day life, and its significance in the occurrences of life and death. It was all supported by a single couplet from the rich anthology of Mirza Ghalib, which reads:

*Quaid-e-hayat Band-o-gham Asta mei dono ek hai*

*Maut se pehle aadmi gham se nizaat paaye kyu!*

Parallel are the two indeed

Prison of life and chain of grief

Why would, thus,

We shall be free

from sorrow before death

and this is the decree