culture matters

# Guftugu

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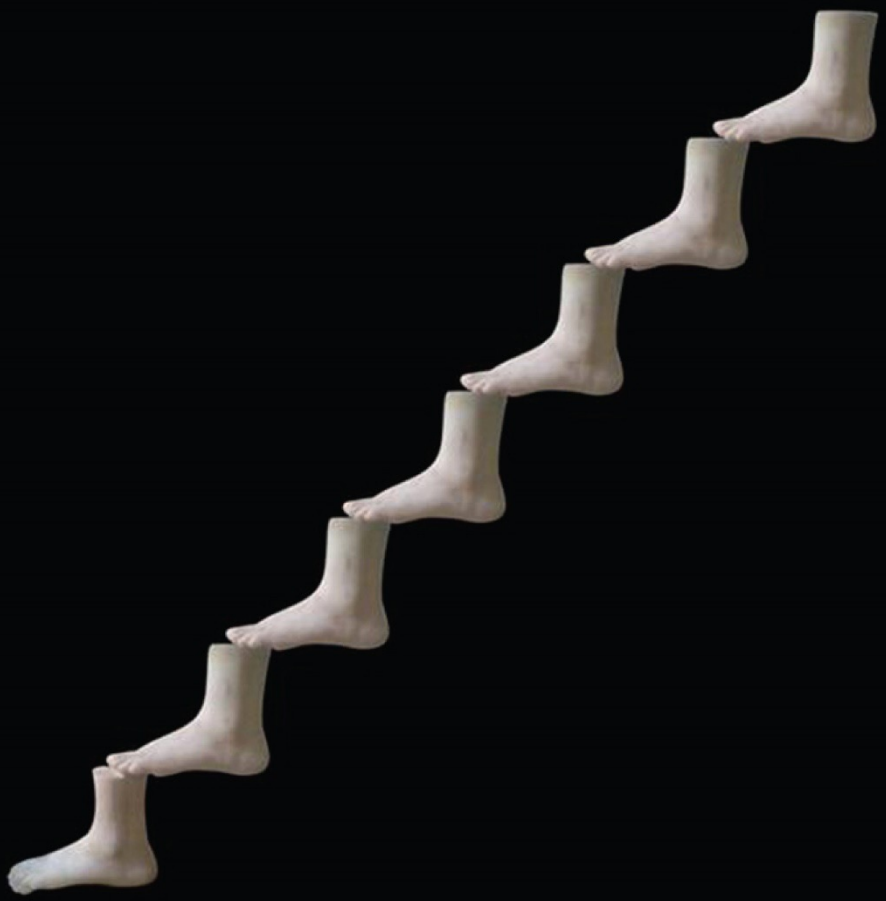

Contributors

# About Us

Culture matters. And it *has* to matter in India, with its diverse languages, dialects, regions and communities; its rich range of voices from the mainstream and the peripheries.

This was the starting point for *Guftugu* (www.guftugu.in), a quarterly e-journal of poetry, prose, conversations, images and videos which the Indian Writers' Forum runs as one of its programmes. The aim of the journal is to publish, with universal access online, the best works by Indian cultural practitioners in a place where they need not fear intimidation or irrational censorship, or be excluded by the profit demands of the marketplace. Such an inclusive platform sparks lively dialogue on literary and artistic issues that demand discussion and debate.

The guiding spirit of the journal is that culture must have many narratives from many different voices – from the established to the marginal, from the conventional to the deeply experimental.

To sum up our vision:

Whatever our language, genre or medium, we will freely use our imagination to produce what we see as meaningful for our times. We insist on our freedom to speak and debate without hindrance, both to each other and to our readers and audience. Together, but in different voices, we will interpret and reinterpret the past, our common legacy of contesting narratives; and debate on the present through our creative work.

# Our Team



Contributions: Guftugu welcomes contributions from writers, academics, artists, cartoonists, film makers, performing artists and scientists. Please email us at guftuguejournal@gmail.com with your ideas and / or work, and we will get back to you.

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# From the Editors

## Rage, rage, against the dying of the light…

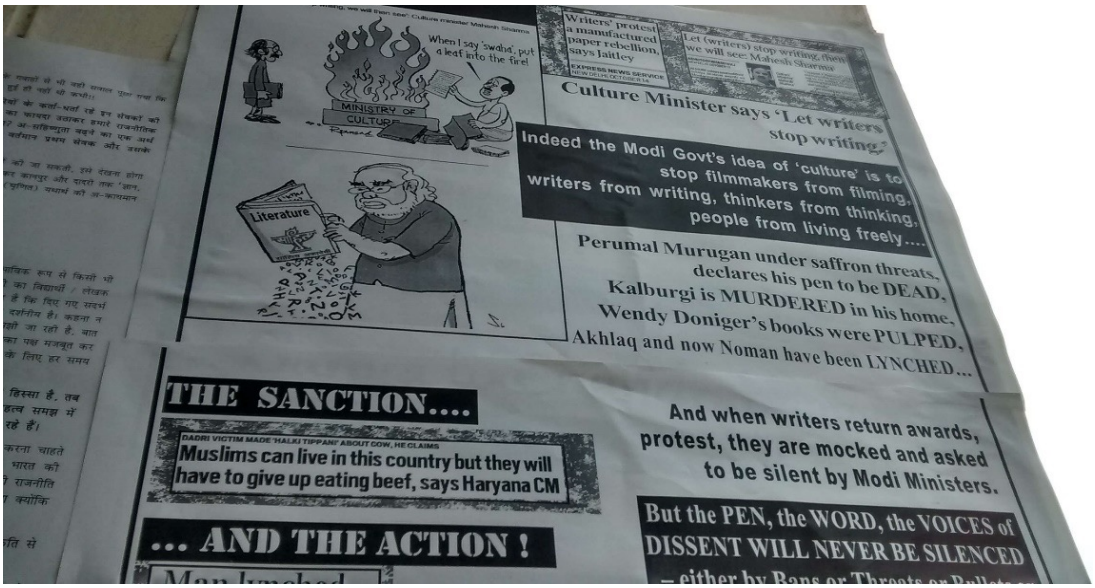



Photo by Githa Hariharan

The spate of protests by Indian writers in 2015 — against the murder of dissenting writers and thinkers, and the suppression of freedom of expression — once again proved that our land is not yet barren. The writers were "squeezed like olives", to recall Joyce's metaphor, so that they could yield their best. What the writers said, some when resigning from posts in the Sahitya Akademi, some when returning their awards, others in letters and essays, began a chain of protest. Sociologists, artists, filmmakers, academics, scientists — a range of public intellectuals — spoke up in large numbers across the country.

They said many things, but this is a tiny sample:

"We cannot remain voiceless."

"To writers like me, this is an issue of our basic freedom to live, think and write. Annihilation should never be allowed to replace argument, the very essence of democracy."

"Your moment of reckoning has come… I do this [return my Akademi award] as an expression of my solidarity with several eminent writers who have recently returned their awards to highlight their concern and anxiety over the shrinking space for free expression and growing intolerance towards difference of opinion…"

"The Prime Minister remains silent about this reign of terror. We must assume he dare not alienate evil-doers who support his ideology."

"There is a growing fear and lack of freedom under the present government."

"These incidents are an attempt to destroy the diversity of this country and it signals the entry of fascism into India."

“We clearly see a threat to our democracy, secularism and freedom. There have been attempts to curb free speech earlier also, but such trends have become more pronounced under the present government.”

“We are perturbed by the attempts at disrupting the social fabric of the country, targeting particularly the area of literature and culture, under an orchestrated plan of action…”

“We are pained by the attacks on progressive writers, leaders of the rational movement and the forcible saffronisation of education and culture… and the communal atmosphere being created in the country… The central government is not performing its duty as the representative of a secular and democratic country.”

“In this land of Gautama Buddha and Guru Nanak Dev, the atrocities committed on the Sikhs in 1984 and on the Muslims recurrently, because of communalism, are an utter disgrace to our state and society. And to kill those who stand for truth and justice puts us to shame in the eyes of the world and God.”

“I don’t think there has been a time when three rationalists have been murdered, and the way in which they were, suggests a resemblance in the crimes. If writers and dissenters don’t protest, who will?”

“What the regime seems to want is a kind of legislated history, a manufactured image of the past, glorifying certain aspects of it and denigrating others, without any regard for chronology, sources or methods of enquiry that are the building blocks of the edifice of history.”

“The writers have shown the way with their protests. We scientists now join our voices to theirs, to assert that the Indian people will not accept such attacks on reason, science, and our plural culture. We reject the destructive narrow view of India that seeks to dictate what people will wear, think, eat and who they will love.”

“Silence is an abetment.”

“The scale of social violence and fatal assaults on ordinary citizens (as in Dadri; Uttar Pradesh; Udhampur, Jammu and Kashmir; Faridabad, Haryana) is escalating… while the actual affiliations of the protesting writers and artists, scholars and journalists may be many and varied, their individual and collective voices are gaining cumulative strength.”

Writers, artists, filmmakers, scientists, historians and other academics and scholars — together, their voices told us about a variety of “official” and “unofficial” efforts to silence dissent and erode constitutional rights. But they also told us that the core of our democracy is still intact.

In his timeless poem “On Wishes”, Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish spoke for India in the twenty-first century:

My friend, our land is not barren,
Each land has its time for being born,
Each dawn, a date with a rebel.

The cultural fraternity speaks in two places and in two different ways: in a public space, to and along with their fellow citizens; and through their critique of our society, a critique embedded in the nuances, layers and texture of their work. With this issue of *Guftugu*, we are proud to present ample evidence of this.

*K. Satchidanandan*
*Mala Dayal*
*Githa Hariharan*

*January, 2016*

# Learning Himmat

## Four Paintings of the Shah-e-Alam Relief Camp

*The art project called the Himmat Workshops was coordinated by Vasudha Thozhur, and the participants included Shah Jehan Shaikh, Rabia Shaikh, Taslim Qureshi, Tahera Pathan, Farzana Shaikh and Rehana Shaikh.*

What role can art practice play in a collective trauma?

Himmat, a collective formed by the widows of Naroda Patia with the help of Monica Wahi and Zaid Ahmed Sheikh, provided the supporting infrastructure for an art project. The project involved my working with six adolescent girls who had lost several members of their families in the carnage at Naroda Patiya, Ahmedabad, on the 28th of February 2002.

Together, we took on issues from personal loss and displacement, exploring the possibility of mobilisation and economic revival through the use of visual language. The focus was, throughout, on process rather than a set outcome; and on the recording of the process, whether through writing, painting or digital media. The result was an archive against forgetting, and a context-specific resource.

The first phase (2002-2008) of the project involved, for the most part, fieldwork in which the community spoke for itself through the work produced. The second phase of the project (2009-2012) included my paintings, mostly done in retrospect.

The idea of working with display as a narrative mode is central to the curation/exhibition. A project that functioned actively within the community as a locus for mobilisation, and as a mode of beginning a creative process, was transformed into an artwork. Art that enters the area of display could, in that sense, be seen as an afterlife; but also, almost always, as a presage of things to come.

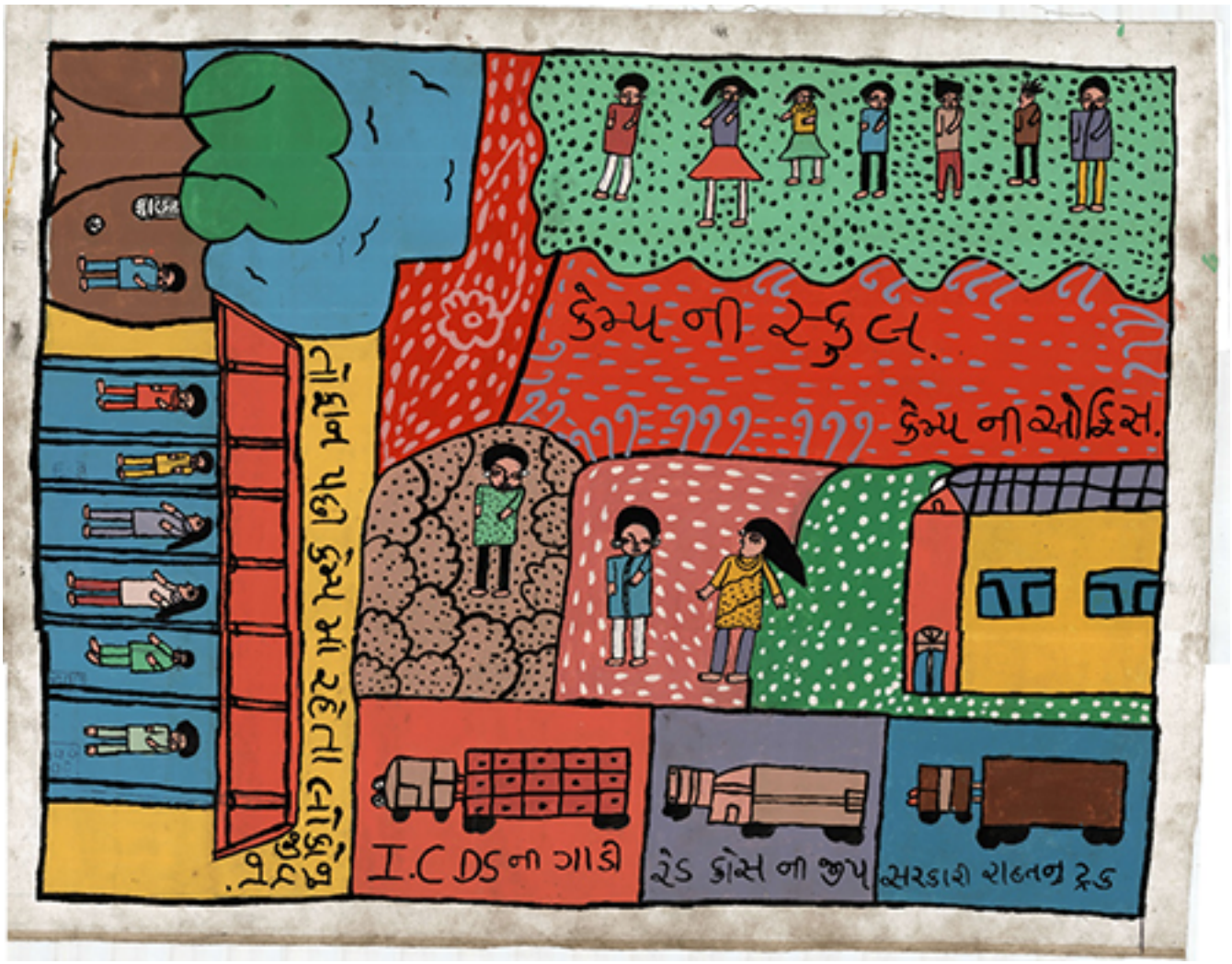
The exhibit focuses on building an understanding, and the underlying theme is friendship. The process could be considered a working model through which a range of skills is acquired along with political awareness, and the possibility of resistance, intervention and change through creative means.

*Vasudha Thozhur*

Tasleem Qureshi, Shah-e-Alam Relief Camp, 2006, enamel paints on canvas

Shahjehan Shaikh, Shah-e-Alam Relief Camp, 2006, enamel paints on canvas


Rabia Shaikh, Shah-e-Alam Relief Camp, enamel paints on canvas




Tahera Pathan, Shah-e-Alam Relief Camp, 2006, enamel paints on canvas

# Arpana Caur

## Day and Night


3 x 5.5 inches, oil on canvas


3 x 5.5 inches, oil on canvas

# Madhavikutty

## The Holy Cow

*Translated from Malayalam by K. Satchidanandan*

Courtesy Bradshaw Foundation

One day a little boy picked up a banana peel from a garbage bin on the road. While he was eating it, a cow snatched it from his hands. The boy felt sad; he pushed the beast away. The cow ran along the street, mooing aloud. Some mendicants suddenly turned up from nowhere.

“Did you hurt the holy cow?” they asked the boy.

“I didn’t. I only chased it away because it snatched the banana peel I was eating.”

“What is your religion?” asked the mendicants.

“Religion? What’s that?” asked the boy.

“Are you Hindu or Muslim? Or Christian? Do you go to the temple or to the mosque?”

“I don’t go to any of them,” the boy replied.

“So you don’t believe in prayer?”

“I don’t go anywhere. I have no shirt. My trousers are torn at the back.”

The mendicants whispered among themselves, then turned to the boy.

“You must be Muslim. You hurt the cow.”

“Is that cow yours?” asked the boy.

The mendicants wrung the boy’s neck and threw him into the garbage bin.

Then they chanted together, “Om nama shivaya. Let thy holy name be praised.”

# Vasudha Thozhur

## Beyond Pain

2011 – 2013, height 8 feet, oil on canvas

# E.V. Ramakrishnan

## The Darkest Word in the Dictionary

Photo by Salil Chaturvedi

You walk the day without the burden of facts.
The evil is always at hand, it takes an effort
to look beyond it. You think of the polar bear
starving for the fifth day. She had cubs to feed.

By now you know all the synonyms of despair
but the clerk at the table surprises you.
He is a linguist; he has just coined the darkest word
in the dictionary. It does something to your body,

for the mind cannot register it. The mind has its devious
ways of dealing with facts. But the body will never
lie; it will pronounce it backward and forward
till the hair turns white and the eyes turn inward.

I have a prayer for my children, for all children:
May they find love. May they walk a land
where they are not suspects. May they never
hear the word I just heard, a word that

should be banned from the dictionary.
The man behind me said, Say your prayers
elsewhere. This is an office. I said, This is a prayer
for everyone, including you. His mobile rang

and he said, “O God, O God”, and he ran weeping.
The queue moves like a conveyor belt. When my
turn comes, just before the lever is pulled,
I will think of the tamarind tree, its stout roots

pushing into the soil, its canopy like
a carnival. Run your fingers on its fissured,
weathered bark, and any word you speak
becomes a prayer. Open its lumpy

brown pods of fruits and you are in the land
of folk-tales. Eat its pulp that melts in your
mouth like a rhyming proverb, and you are
no more a dwarf like me, standing in queues

your whole life. I move to the next table. Before
the linguist there pronounces the unspeakable
word a second time, confirming it,
I tell him, Take this brown-eyed shiny seed,

please pass it on to your grandchildren or any
children. They will know one day what
I meant to say to you, when they turn it
in their hands like a globe that is out of shape.

# Mangalesh Dabral

## These Times: Three Poems

*Translated from Hindi by Sarabjeet Garcha*

"Reluctant Eve", Shoili Kanungo

### Love

It was an illustrious Mir
who said, *Love is an unwieldy rock*
*How would a weakling like you lift it*?

I thought:
*Let me pick it up in pieces.*

But then how would it be love any longer?
It would be a massacre.

### The Room

In this room, dreams appear.
You get transported to
the age of ten, twelve.

Rain falls on the floor here,
clouds hover over those asleep.

Every day a mountain slowly
breaks apart over the room,
a forest sheds its leaves here,
a river washes away some
of this region's belongings.

Here god and man are for sale,
barefoot,
roving about in rags,
thinking of leaving
the house together.

## These Times

Those who can't see
can't make out their way.
Those who are crippled
can't reach anywhere.
Those who are deaf
can't listen to life's footfalls.
The homeless don't build a home.
Those who are mad can't know
what they want.

These are such times
when anybody can turn
blind, crippled, deaf, homeless, mad.

Click here to read originals
http://guftugu.in/%E0%A4%AE%E0%A4%82%E0%A4%97%E0%A4%B2%E0%A5%87%E0%A4%B6-%E0%A4%A1%E0%A4%AC%E0%A4%B0%E0%A4%BE%E0%A4%B2/?preview=true&preview_id=1751&preview_nonce=6f2dd56ad8

# Pushpamala N

## Indrajaala / Seduction

A still from Indrajaala, 2012

The video *Indrajaala /Seduction* is based on the punishment of Surpanakha by Prince Lakshmana, who cuts off her nose and ears. With hybrid imagery and magical transformations which refer to early ethnographic and animation films from the silent era, and the work of India's first filmmaker Dadasaheb Phalke, three screens simultaneously show the act in slow motion.

(Watch: http://guftugu.in/2016/01/pushpamala-n/)

# Keki Daruwalla

## A Half Act Play

(*Village Beerpura in the district of Muzzafarnagar. The setting is a poor household. The wife is fanning the firewood stove on which she is cooking. The husband enters. Bespattered with dust, he takes his shoes off and sprinkles water on his feet. He dries them and squats.*)

Husband: Phew! Much noise and much dust — jeep after jeep, big cars with headlights rotating like a chakri in Diwali, leader in dhoti kurta, sarkari afsar in suit pant, photographer in jeans — all here. All asking what happen? Tamasha!

Wife: No daal today, only roti, school closed so no pay for me.

Husband: And they have fridge and we eat roti with pyaz! And all type leader abusing us on loudspeaker!

Wife: What you expect after such incident? Laddu? Shabash?

Husband: Enough woman! But why bloody leader? No one came when sookha fell on land! Not two drops water we had. More water in eyes than in our fields. Where were bloody leaders then I ask?

Wife: First you had lafangas, now you have leaders. Sometime leader follow lafanga, sometime lafanga follow leader. I want to ask question.

Husband: Ask, but don't forget, wife, you are married to a Brahmin, you of agricultural caste, throwing seed by handful and your father-brother ploughing! Brahmin would never touch plough! Degrading! I upgraded you by marrying! Uplifted you like crane pick up bad stone and bajri.

Wife: Agree, marriage uplifts woman. But don't forget I am High School pass and you are unpad — in angrezi we say illiterate, unread.

Husband: Wife. Lower voice! If my partywallas hear angrezi in my house, I will have trouble.

Wife: Now we can't even talk the way we want! Na kabile-bardasht!

Husband: You want me get killed by speaking Urdu, language of Musalmans! Woman, what wrong with you? Speak Hindi, language of Vedas, Sam veda, I don't remember name of other veda.

Wife: Wah, wah. You can't remember any except bedroom veda! Shame! But I want to ask a question.

Husband: Ask bloody question, but not in Urdu!

Wife: What made you do it?

Husband: What made me do what?

Wife: Kill Basheer.

Husband: Slowly, softly — you will get me in *jail*, woman. Phansi ka takhta! (He puts his hands on his throat!) What use passing High school if you don't know that much! Everyone beat him. I also added my stick. Look bad if you don't.

Wife: Your stick had an iron knob.

Husband: Speak slowly! I have thrown it in a well four miles away. Won't tell you where. No trust anybody now.

Wife: You gave last blow on head! Your blow killed him.

Husband: Who told you?

Wife: Your son, Munish. He saw it. And why you hit? We used to come and go in their house. You even ate his saiwain — angrez call it vermicelli.

Husband: But he ate cow.

Wife: How you know?

Husband: Stored it.

Wife: What if it was not cow, but only goat? Your father was a cook.

Husband: Good Brahmin cook.

Wife: But you told once that his sahib came from America and even ate cow meat. And your father cooked beef for him.

Husband: Hush! Quiet or I will beat you as I did last night and night before! Now I feel sorry I threw away stick. Stupid woman that meat came in tins and it was American cow. Not ours. If you must know I did not join killing because he ate cow or stored cow. I killed because he owned refrigerator! *Curtain falls.*

# Orijit Sen

Uniformity in Diversity

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Nation Station

© Orijit Sen

# Githa Hariharan

## Learning another Ramayana in Bangkok

There is a sharp self-reflexive question at the end of some versions of the Ramayana: "How many Ramayanas have there been?"

In his essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation"[1], A.K Ramanujan responds to this question by tracing several branches of this banyan tree of an epic. For the past 2,500 years or more, the Ramayana has lived in multiple versions in at least 22 languages across India and Asia. The epic has spoken to people through poems, myths, sculpture, mask plays, puppet plays, shadow plays, music, dance, TV serials, films and comic books.

Can the hanging branches of a banyan turn invisible? Can an epic be shrunk to size?

In 2011, Ramanujan's essay was dropped from the syllabus of Delhi University's B.A. Honours course as a result of protest and vandalism by "nationalist" Hindu groups. These groups were led by the student wing of the Bharatiya Janata Party, the party that rules India today.

The protesters claimed that the idea of multiple Ramayanas would "negatively influence the minds of young undergraduates". Their real problem is that the essay effortlessly debunks the pseudo-cultural (and pseudo-religious) propaganda that there is one "authentic text" of the epic. The right wing has always feared the plurality at the heart of life in India and, indeed, any Asia we may choose to either remember or forget. As the epic travelled across classes, regions, communities, languages and dialects within India, then regions outside India in Southeast Asia and North Asia, it adapted and shape-shifted. The text became a manifestation of the many Indias contained in every little slice of India, and of the many Asias layering every part of Asia. There is a variety of "tellings" in Tibet, Thailand, Burma, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Java and Indonesia.

*But the past in India today is the site of slippery memory games. If the past is reduced to a strand of a complex narrative, or to one authoritative (often invented) narrative, even a travelling epic that needs to multiply itself can be shrunk down to the desired size. A. K. Ramanujan, curator of plural texts, narrator of plural India, will always be a threat to those who want to imagine a homogenous story, myth, history, literary text; or an officially sanctioned view of India in the singular.*

*Ramanujan makes it clear that the Ramayana can never be merely "official". The Valmiki Ramayana was an epic first. It may have become a sacred text for some people over a period of time. But even in this case, we could ask a few pertinent questions. Who are the people who made it a sacred text? And who were they doing it for? Most important, what about all the people for whom the text did not become sacred — people who continued to recite, sing and story-tell their own legacies of the epic?*

As an epic, Valmiki's Ramayana is bound up with a sparkling array of other Ramayanas, many of which recount stories that are potent even when they are nugget-sized. One story, for example, describes how sixteen thousand sages want to turn into women because they have fallen in love with Rama. Rama asks them to wait — he has taken a vow of monogamy in this life. But when he comes back as Krishna, he tells them, they can be his beloved cowherds.

*In the past, Hindus did not react with shrill intolerance to this range of tellings of the Ramayana — whether the epic was recounted by Kamban, Kritihas, or Tulsi. These were*

*accepted as kavya, and then as sacred texts; their differences with Valmiki were known. In our times, we might pose some more pertinent questions to those who want one authoritative "sacred" reading of the Ramayana. Why do they want to break with tradition? Why do they pretend to "defend" tradition and culture by turning both upside down?*

In the Jain retellings, Ravana is a tragic figure, killed by Lakshmana, not Rama. In a Kannada folk Ramayana, Ravula (the Ravana figure) becomes pregnant, and at the end of nine days, "sneezes" Sita into existence. (In Kannada, the word sita also means "He sneezed.") This motif of Sita as Ravana's "daughter" occurs elsewhere — in, for instance, Jain stories, Telugu folk traditions, and in several Southeast Asian Ramayanas. "The oral traditions," writes Ramanujan, "partake of… themes unknown in Valmiki." How, asks Ramanujan, do these tellings and retellings, oral and written, epic and tale, relate to each other?

They do it in ways that impoverish a part — one story or tradition or genre — if it is mistaken for the whole. The grand saga of the epic has to be viewed along with their homely versions, folk tales and traditions that cut down to size the grand narratives for daily consumption. Love, lust, death, the afterlife — nothing is too big for the debate conducted among these tales, and between this earthy body of tales and the more revered "classical" texts and traditions. Acknowledging the familial relationships among all the possible types of "tellings" means reaping the reward of an astonishing body of systems and counter-systems; traditions and alternative traditions; tales and counter-tales; private and public lore; a large and amorphous body that can never quite be complete as long as people continue to "complete" the telling for their times and lives.

Perhaps the biggest gift Ramanujan, the go-between, has given us through his work on our rich heritage is showing us how important it is for culture to travel; to give and receive. Almost as a recipe for world literature, Ramanujan quotes the 12th century poet and historian Kshemendra:

A poet should learn with his own eyes
the form of leaves
…his mind should enter into the seasons
he should go
among many people
in many places
and learn their languages.[2]

I could hear Kshemendra's voice in my ear when I was in Bangkok recently. My life as an Indian, and my life as a writer and reader, only has meaning if I can hold the multiple possibilities of a narrative as the self-evident truth of all storytelling. The time I spent on the grounds of the Wat Pra Kaew, the Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok, brought home the truth of Kshemendra's words, and Ramanujan's essay on the many Ramayanas. The walls of the Wat Pra Kaew, lavishly decorated with paintings representing stories from the Ramakien, confirmed my conviction that the same text lives and breathes as another text, among different people, in many places and languages.

All photos by Githa Hariharan

The Ramakirti (The Glory of Rama) is usually referred to as the Ramakien (The Story of Rama) in Thailand. Archaeological evidence of the story dates from the 14th century in the Wat Phra Rama at Ayuthia.[3]

Ayuthia (Audhya, Ayudhya, Ayutthaya) — the Thai Ayodhya — was a riverine island city-state founded in 1350 AD by Prince U-Thong who took the title Ramathipodi (Rama the Sovereign). For some 417 years, Ayuthia was the "heart of Siam" till it was destroyed during a battle with Burmese invaders in 1767. A new capital was subsequently established on the site of a riverside market town called Ban Kok (Village of Wild Plums). King Rama I made a deliberate attempt to recreate the Ayudhyan way of life, and this included sponsoring, and closely supervising, a written version of the Ramakien. The version was in verse, and it was meant for secular use to be performed as masked drama.

In present-day Thailand, images and tales from the Ramakien are alive in a range of locations and forms, from ubiquitous state symbols such as the garuda, to Lakhon classical drama, Khon masked dance dramas, Nang shadow plays, Buddhist temple statuary, decorative elements and murals, illustrative material for religious manuscript cabinets and talismanic tattoos. Since 1902, the Ramakien has been part of the Thai school curriculum; it is considered the "national epic". The Ramakien is Thai, not some Thai version of the "Indian" Ramayanas.

*As in India, some readings of the Ramakien recall the emphasis on the sacredness of the text. But the difference is also fairly sharp: The Thai Ramayana is a narrative with its own audience, and its own emphasis on adventure, magic and, ultimately, how men and women should live in the real world. In effect, the Thai Ramayana tells us that the sacred tellings have not diminished the space for "non-sacred" retellings of the epic.*

In his essay on the many Ramayanas, Ramanujan points out that the different Ramayanas are better described as "tellings" rather than "versions", which may imply that one telling can be valorised as the authoritative mother-text. The tellings obviously take on the storyteller's language, landscape, clothes, food and customs. Each telling is the result of a particular

travel route; the Ramakien, for instance, owes more to the Tamil telling than Valmiki's. The plot also has elements from the Malay Hikayat Sri Rama (The Annals of Sri Rama), the Thai prose work Narai Sip Pang (Ten Incarnations of Vishnu), and certain sections of folk tales from the Laotian Rama Jataka. Most of all, says Ramanujan, it's not just differences in story detail that marks each telling as a unique text. It's the style, tone, texture and discourse. Together, these make the import of the story different in the telling.

This is exactly what the Ramakien illustrates.

As I looked at an almost endless series of detailed, glittering paintings in the Wat Pra Kaew, there was much that puzzled me. I could make out the usual outline of the story — Rama (Phra Ram), Sita (Nang Sida) and Lakshmana (Phra Lak) going to the forest; Phra Ram and Phra Lak slaying demons; Nang Sida's abduction; the war; Hanuman (Anuchit) and the monkeys helping Rama; Nang Sida's recovery and her trial. But there was a great deal I could not recognize in terms of episode and character. I met, for instance, Benjakaya, Suphanna-Maccha and Maiyarab for the first time in the Wat Pra Kaew paintings of the Ramakien.

When Tosakanth (Ravana) begins to worry about the way the war is going, he decides to fool Phra Ram into thinking Nang Sida is dead. Perhaps this will blunt Phra Ram's appetite for battle. Tosakanth orders his niece Benjakaya to transform herself into Nang Sida, pretend to be dead, and float in the river past Phra Ram's camp. Benjakaya studies Nang Sida so well that Tosakanth is filled with lust when he sees her transformed appearance. With some difficulty, Benjakaya manages to convince him that she is still his niece, and escapes his clutches to carry out his order. When Phra Ram sees the dead Benjakaya-Nang Sida floating in the river, he is heart-broken. But Anuchit is suspicious: the body is floating against the current. He knows Nang Sida is impervious to fire; so he sets alight Benjakaya-Nang Sida. Benjakaya escapes into the skies, but Anuchit chases her though the clouds. They are "married" (mid-sky?) and she comes back to the camp as his ally.

Another female relative of Tosakanth is enlisted to prevent the building of the causeway to Lanka. Tosakanth asks his mermaid daughter Suphanna-Maccha to go do her disruptive best. As usual, Anuchit sees what is happening, and as usual, he converts another female enemy into an ally. Suphanna-Maccha later has a son, Macchanu, who resembles Anuchit.

Tosakanth then orders Maiyarab of the underworld to put Phra Ram to sleep and carry him away. There are no prizes for guessing who saves Phra Ram and kills Maiyarab. In fact, I was struck by how ubiquitous Anuchit is in the tales the paintings told. He is everywhere visually. He is the actor who precipitates dramatic change; at the end of the tale, Phra Ram gives Anuchit a kingdom of his own.

Anuchit is an invincible warrior; he has an unbreakable bond with the ruler. His strength, his superpowers, can take on all kinds of enemies, as well as all kinds of women. There is an

undercurrent to a number of his amorous encounters — he turns the female enemy, whatever demonic form she assumes and whatever magic she knows, into a submissive ally.

Episodes and details in the Ramakien make for stark or subtle shifts in mood and characterisation. Details, such as Phra Ram and Nang Sida falling in love at first sight before the archery contest, are reminiscent of the Kamban Ramayana. The focus of the Ramakien, though, is the war: layer upon layer of intrigue and strategy, destruction and magic, unfold the story. I saw spy scenes, interminable battle scenes. I was not surprised to learn that the war campaigns make up the favourite themes of the Nang and Khon plays. But I was surprised to learn that Anuchit and Ongkot (Angada) pretend to defect to Tosakanth and steal the receptacle that contains Tosakanth's soul. When Phra Ram's arrow strikes Tosakanth's chest on the battlefield, Anuchit crushes the soul in the receptacle. This is what finally kills Tosakanth.

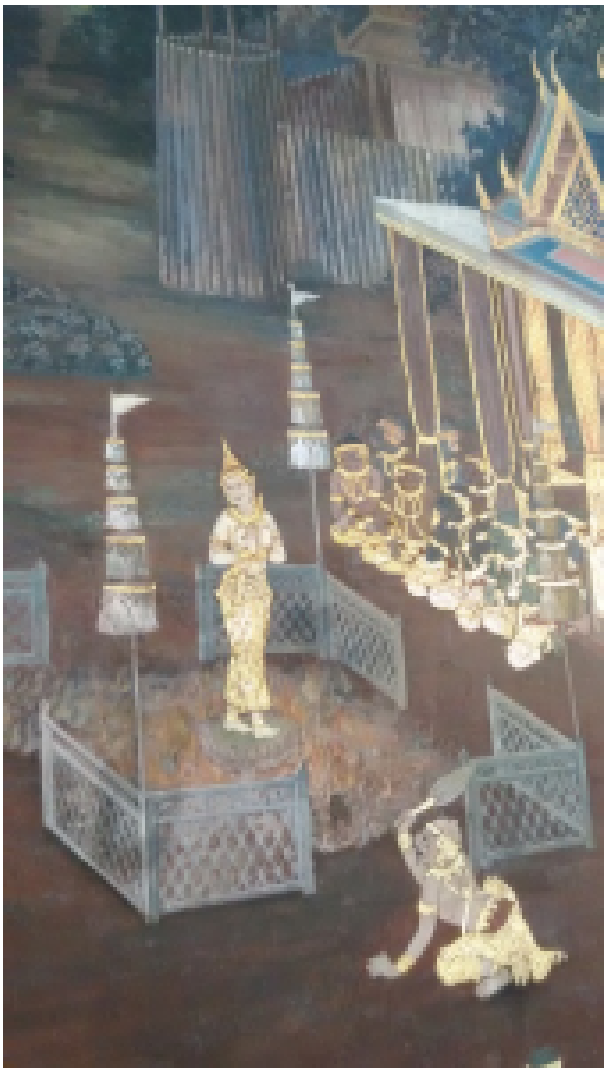
Perhaps one the most distinctive features of the Ramakien, other than Anuchit's substantial role, is Nang Sida's life — her birth, her banishment, and her final reunion with Phra Ram.

Nang Sida does not appear miraculously in the furrow for Chanok (Janaka) to adopt her, as in the Valmiki or Kamban tellings. The Ramakien's Sita is related to the Jain and oral tellings: Nang Sida has a link at birth to Tosakanth. When the gods decide that Vishnu and Lakshmi must be reborn as Phra Ram and Nang Sida, a magical rice dish is sent to earth. Three portions go to Tosaroth's wives, and they give birth to green-faced Phra Ram, scarlet-faced Bhrot, gold-faced Lak and purple-faced Satrud. The fourth portion, via a divinely managed theft by a crow, is flown to Longka, to Tosakanth's wife, Montho. She gives birth to Nang Sida.

The instant Nang Sida is born, she cries thrice: "Destroy the demon race!" A disturbed Tosakanth asks his brother to cast a horoscope for this born rebel. The professional opinion is that Nang Sida will cause the demons great misfortune. Tosakanth wants to kill her on the spot. But the mother stands in his way. You will have to kill me before you kill my daughter, she says. The horoscope-casting brother (Pipek, who will later go over to Phra Ram's side) suggests Nang Sida be put into a silver casket and floated downstream on a river. This is an ancient practice to do away with evil.

A lotus rises; it keeps the casket afloat. Schools of fish escort the casket till it passes a hut where the hermit Chanok, erstwhile King of Mithila, lives. He places the baby under the care of forest spirits and buries the casket for safety. Chanok meditates for many years, but enlightenment is elusive. He returns to Mithila and his childless queen. But first he arranges for the ground to be ploughed to locate Nang Sida, now a sixteen-year-old daughter of the earth.

The banishment of Nang Sida and her reunion with Phra Ram are also distinct in detail — as well as in the unspoken shaping of human character.



After the war, Nang Sida undergoes a trial by fire and is exonerated. (Phra Ram sets alight the logs of wood with his arrow.) But in Ayodhya, Nang Sida has a new maid. The maid is actually a demon called Adun, and she is the daughter of Surpanakha (Sammanakkha). The daughter has not forgotten how her mother was disfigured. She coaxes Nang Sida to draw a portrait of Tosakanth. The portrait is indelible; Nang Sida hides it under Phra Ram's bed, and it fills his body with a strange heat till he discovers it. Phra Ram doubts Nang Sida's purity a second time. He orders Phra Lak to take Nang Sida to the forest and kill her. But Phra Lak spares Nang Sida, and returns to Phra Ram with the heart of a deer.

Meanwhile, Nang Sida is in the care of Sage Wachamarik, yet another surrogate father. This father will later create a miraculous clone of her son so that Nang Sida has "twins". Phra Ram finds out that his family is alive and tries to persuade them to return. Nang Sida refuses, but she lets her sons go with their father. Phra Ram then sends Anuchit to say the king is dead, and Nang Sida should come to Ayodhya for the cremation ceremony. When Nang Sida finds out that she has been tricked, she is furious. Rather than live with Phra Ram, she prefers life in the underworld. Finally, Isvara breaks the impasse; he intervenes, and gets Phra Ram and Nang Sida married all over again.

Phra Ram is all too human in the Ramakien. Anuchit, the favourite of the Thais, is a brave, shrewd and happy warrior, neither celibate nor saintly, and, in the words of S. Singaravelu, "an embodiment of all that expresses the freer and the unrestricted aspects of life". Tosakanth is complex; he is strong and resourceful, and his end is an occasion of sadness, as is his wife's thwarted motherhood. The major characters of the Ramakien, says Singaravelu, "represent human life in its different facets, and the Thai people regard them as examples of… human society, and this is the reason for the continuing popularity of the Rama legend" in Thailand. Singaravelu goes on to show that though several episodes and motifs in the Ramakien are related to other tellings, such as Kamban's, or the Jaina, Bengali and Malay tellings, "the stories of Rama, transmitted to the Thai people through the shadow-play as well as literary and oral sources, have not only been extended, but also transformed into a distinct work of literature."[4]

The Ramakien is not just a distinct telling in literary terms. There is also a distinct way in which the epic *lives* in Thailand — achieving a delicate balance between an all-pervasive literary and performative strand on the one hand, and an iconic and cultic strand on the other. In response to the question of whether the Ramakien can be considered a "Hindu" or "Buddhist" text, Frank E. Reynolds outlines an argument against viewing the Ramakien as an unambiguously Hindu text, or perhaps a Hindu text at all. He refers to the epilogue attached to the original composition by King Rama I: "The writing of the *Ramakien* was done in accordance with a traditional tale. It is not of abiding importance; rather, it has been written

to be used on celebrative occasions. Those who hear it and see it performed should not be deluded. Rather, they should be mindful of impermanence." Rama I uses the word "lailong" for the notion of delusion — a direct translation of the Pali "moha" that refers to one of the three pre-eminent Buddhist vices (delusion, anger and greed). "Rama I explicitly highlights his own conviction that those who participate in the *Ramakien* tradition can and should approach the *Ramakien* story in a way consistent with Buddhist teachings and insight."[5] While"…the *Ramakien* versions of the Rama story do not exhibit the full-fledged Buddhist structure characteristic of earlier Buddhist tellings"… "it *is* a tradition which self-consciously sets the Rama story in explicitly Buddhist contexts, thereby giving it an explicitly Buddhist significance. In the literary and performative strand of the tradition, the Buddhist significance remains relatively muted and largely audience-dependent. In the iconic and cultic strand, the vision of Rama as a royal hero who embodies Buddhist values is vividly portrayed for all to see. Coexisting and subtly interacting, these two strands of the *Ramakien* tradition have, over the past two centuries, maintained the story of Rama as an integral, Buddhist-oriented component in Thai religion, culture, and politics."[6]

I learnt a great deal about the Ramayana from the Ramakien. I learnt a great deal about the nature of the epic; its links with, and differences from, the sacred telling; and the vast space people have always given the travelling text.

I learnt something about home in Bangkok too. I saw, once again, how the new tradition-makers in India seek to tame and diminish a rich epic which has *always* been given voice through multiple narratives. Distorting tradition and culture in the name of tradition and culture: this is the irony of the way these new cultural experts squander our rich legacies. As for the stark contrast between the way the Ramakien lives among the Thais, and the way the Hindutvadis would like the Ramayana to live in India, Ramanujan has, as usual, the last word. The Thai telling, he says, is "not regarded as a religious work or even as an exemplary work on which men and women may pattern themselves."[7]

Notes:

I would like to thank Romila Thapar for her comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

1. A. K. Ramanujan, "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation". Richman, Paula, editor. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Berkeley: University of California Press, c1991 1991. (22-48) http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3j49n8h7/

2. From the Sanskrit poem by Kshemendra, a poet, satirist and historian. The poem is from *Kavikanthabharana*, a book on the education of a poet.

3. *The Poetics of the Ramakian*, Theodora Helene Bofman, Monograph Series on Southeast Asia, Special Report No 21, 1984, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University.

4. S. Singaravelu, "The Rama Story in the Thai Cultural Tradition", *Journal of Siam Society* 70, parts 1 and 2, July 1982, 215-25 (reproduced in Asian Folklore Studies 44, no, 2, 1985, 269-79).

5. Frank E. Reynolds, "Ramayana, Rama Jataka, and Ramakien: A Comparative Study of Hindu and Buddhist Traditions". Richman, Paula, editor. *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*.
Berkeley: University of California Press, c1991, (48-59), 56-57. http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft3j49n8h7/

6. Ibid, 57.

7. AKR, 149.

# Manohar Shetty

## Drawings on the Wall: Three Poems

"Cinema Paradiso", Shoili Kanungo, drawing

### Mythologies

The paintings on the roadside wall
Are in primary shades
And of the same size:
A star and crescent moon,
The Golden Temple shimmering
In a lake, Lord Shiva crowned
By a hooded snake, Buddha's locks
Like a mound of peppercorns
And a whiplashed Christ crucified.

The streetlights are stoned every night.

### Drawings on the Wall

You're allowed out in the yard
Twice a year to salute the limp
Tricolour; even on festive days
You watch from a guarded distance
Families bringing in home
Cooked meals, a few luxuries,
Snapshots of loved ones
And other garlanded memories.

Shackled for a crime framed
In some wasted forest, you've
Lost your visitation rights,
Your one acre to the feudal
Clan and the assembly line.
Now guards with mutton chop
Whiskers rattle the prison bars
With their phallic batons.

Barred from pen and paper,
With a piece of coal or chalk
You dab the walls with stick
Drawings of children, their arms
Raised before poised guns,
Ripped banners and of peasants
On their knees, their ribs like
Barbed wire, their eyes
Mesmerized by the headlights
Of jeeps, by foaming dogs
Straining at the leash.

## Revolutionary

I'm an open air facility not
Just for birds and mongrels
But for vagrants and peasants
In whose honour I've been
Set up, all chiseled stone
And iron in the soul,
My arm in a forward salute,
My boots grounded, in
My left hand an unbroken
Flag of freedom.

Once I was worshipped,
Groomed and garlanded.
Rousing speeches lit
Up my stony heart.
Now monkeys chatter
On my arm, scratch their
Puzzled heads and feed
On banana peels flung
From flashing new cars.

Today grassroots
Grow rank at my feet.
Today I'm washed down
By passing showers.

# Meena Kandasamy

## We are Not the Citizens

## நாமார்க்கும் குடியல்லோம் நமனை யஞ்சோம்

## நரகத்தி லிடர்ப்படோம்நடலை யில்லோம்

*naamaarkum kudiyallom, namanai anjom*
*naragathil idar padom, nadalai illom*

We are not the subjects of anyone
We do not fear the god of death
We shall not suffer, were we to end in hell
We've no deception, we've no illusions.

*naamaarkum kudiyallom, namanai anjom*
*naragathil idar padom, nadalai illom*

Nobody's citizens and nobody's slaves
Fearless of lynchings and beheadings
Unscathed by the torrent of hell-fires
We do not tremble at certain death.

*naamaarkum kudiyallom, namanai anjom*
*naragathil idar padom, nadalai illom*

As people, we refuse to be ruled
As people, we refuse to die
As people, we refuse to suffer
As people, we refuse to be deceived.

*naamaarkum kudiyallom, namanai anjom*
*naragathil idar padom, nadalai illom*

(After the *Thevaram*, as sung by Appar Thirunavukkarasar)

Notes:

1. "Naamaarkum kudiyallom, namanai anjomnaragathil idar padom, nadalai illom" are lines from the classic Tamil poetry of the Bhakti poet Thirunavukkarasar (Appar), who was persecuted for his faith in Shaivism by Mahendravarman, the Jain Pallava emperor. It's widely believed that these lines were sung when efforts were made to arrest him and produce him in Mahendravarman's court. Because the seventh century Tamil of Appar is still in use — and at the same time, some words have fallen out of the everyday vocabulary — it opens up to all of these renderings, all of these translations. This declaration, that we are not citizens/subjects, is a radical slogan to throw in the face of the state. In today's world, rife with the refugee crisis, these words resonate. They encapsulate the people's rejection of a state and, closer home, brings to mind the poet/writers disowning her/ his association with a state.

2. This poem is a rendering in the form of an independent poem. The initial lines are word-for-word, but later, the poem begins to convey the spirit without taking away from the meaning of the poem. Also, the plural address and collective speech amplify the voice beyond that of one poet.

# Sajitha Shankar

## Alterbody Series

2008, 1 ft/ 1 ft, acrylic on canvas

2008, 1 ft/ 1 ft, acrylic on canvas

2008, 1 ft/ 1 ft, acrylic on canvas


2008, 1 ft/ 1 ft, acrylic on canvas

# Meena Alexander

## Bengali Market: Two Poems


"Market outside the Park", Shoili Kanungo, Delhi Street Sketches

## On Indian Road

I
I have come drawn to water,
Rooks in trees preparing for winter,
A glazed horseshoe dropped a century ago,

Bits of arrowhead
From those who lived on this land,
Who thought the sun and moon beloved companions.
We were young,
Hair the color of crow feathers,
Mine spilling down, yours spiking skyward.

You had a shawl
Flung over your shoulders.
About you, the glamour of the very young poet.

We stood at a stall sipping tea.
A lorry painted with a four-armed goddess scratched to a halt.
The driver waved at us, strolled into the bushes.

Who is the greatest singer in the world?
Breathless, you picked up your own question –
Begum Akhtar. Who else? You must love her too.

My heart is given, I replied, to M. S. Subbalakshmi.
I will not take it back.
On the road where we stood it started to rain,

Under the neem roots
Earthworms wriggled.
I heard a supernal, fleshly music.

II

Shahid – the movie theatre where they showed *Fire*
Is burnt, rexine seats and all.
At the rim of Dal Lake, boats smoulder.

In your valley I see a girl, her feet so very clean,
Washed in a slipstream.
Her face pale, her kurta jonquil coloured

March birth flower,
For the month she died.
On her left breast, the marks of barbed wire.

You said you were at the last ghat of the world,
What did you mean?
A heron, feathers bloodshot, swims to the horizon.

Love is its own compulsion –
In dreams you become a black god,
Our splintered geographies of desire

Sucked into meteors,
Flaming round your head.
Now I hear your voice in the cherry trees

In the thud of lost arrowheads,
In the resolute clip clop of horses,
Manes blown into the sun.

You stroll through clouds: beside you Chinars float,
Four of them, making a secret island.
By me, small boats rock, hulls singing.

(In memory of Agha Shahid Ali, 1949 – 2001)

## Bengali Market

Dear Mr. Gandhi
It was cold the day the masjid
was torn down stone by stone,
colder still at the heart of Delhi.

Ten years later, entering Bengali market,
I saw a street filled with bicycles,
girls with rushing hair, boys in bright caps
I heard a voice cry

Can you describe this?
It sounded like a voice
from a city crusted with snow
to the far north of the Asian continent.

I saw him then, your grandson
in a rusty three-wheeler
wrapped up in what wools he could muster.
Behind him in red letters

a sign: **Dr. Gandhi's Clinic**.
So he said, embracing me, you've come back.
Then pointing to the clinic –
It's not that I'm sick

that gentleman gets my mail and I his.
That is why I am perched in this contraption.
I cannot stay long, it is Id ul Fitr
I must greet friends in Old Delhi, wish them well.

Later he sought me out in dreams.
in a high kitchen in sharp sunlight
dressed in a khadi kurta, baggy jeans,
he touched my throat in greeting.

Listen my sweet, for half of each year,
after the carriage was set on fire
after the Gujarat killings,
I disappear into darkness.

In our country there are two million dead
and more for whom no rites were said.
No land on earth can bear this.
Rivers are criss-crossed with blood.

All day I hear the scissor bird cry
*cut cut cut cut cut*

It is the bird Kalidasa heard
as he stood singing of buried love.

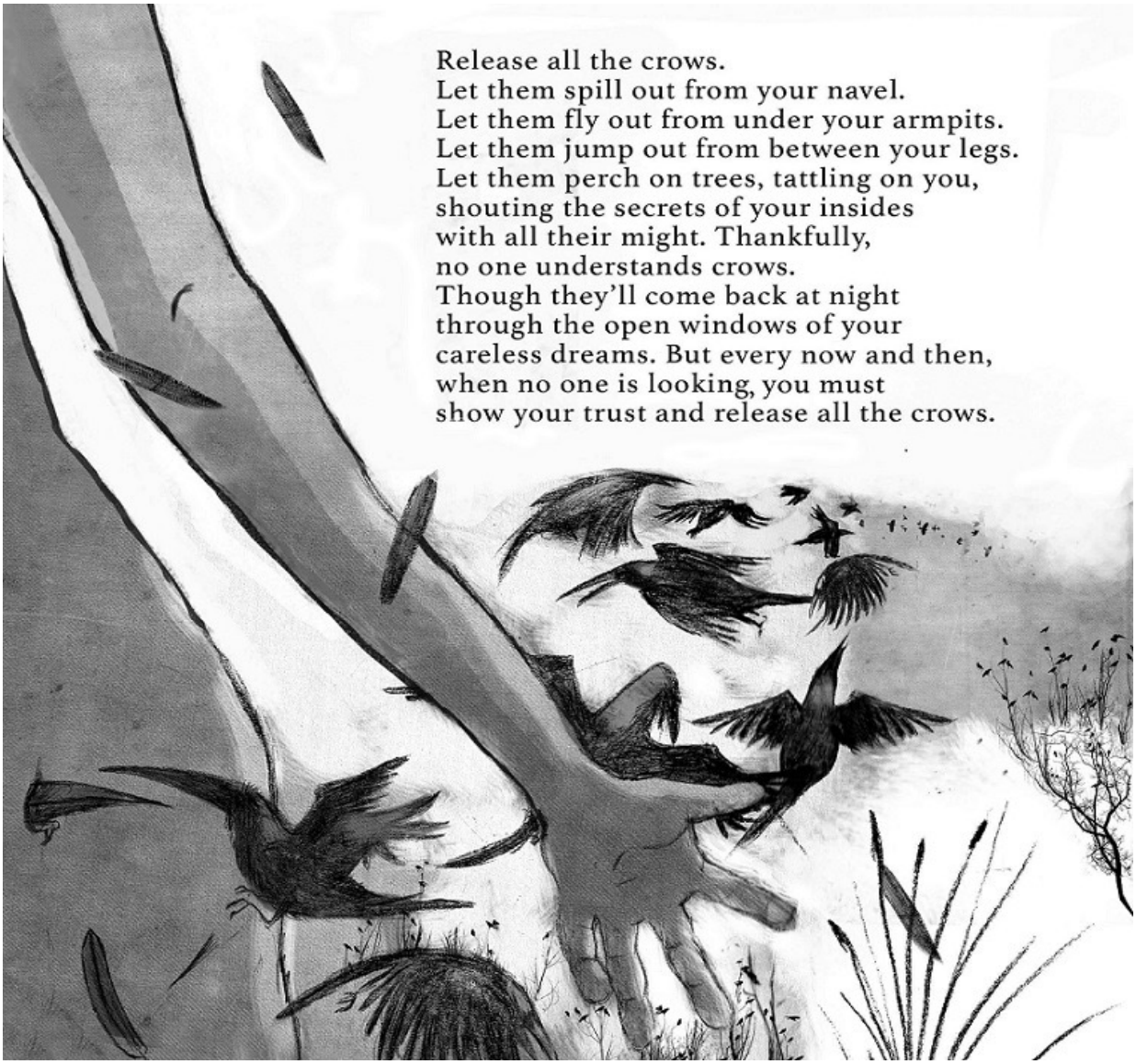
Now our boys and girls take
flight on rusty bicycles.
Will we be cured? I cried.
And he: We have no tryst with destiny.

My hands like yours are stained
with the juice of the pomegranate.
Please don't ask for my address.
I am in and out of Bengali market.

"Indian Road" is from *Birthplace with Buried Stones* (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2013). "Bengali Market" is part of the cycle, "Letters to Gandhi" from *Raw Silk* (TriQuarterly Books/ Northwestern University Press, 2004).

# Salil Chaturvedi

## Crows



# Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi

## Iddath – The Period of Mourning

*Translated from Kannada by Keerti Ramachandra*

If any of you die
and leave widows behind;
they shall wait
four months and ten days.
When they have fulfilled their term,
there is no blame
on you if they dispose
of themselves in a just
and reasonable manner.
And Allah is well acquainted
with what ye do.

Quran Al Baqarah 234

Mehrunissa's calculation was right. When this night passes into day, Iddath, the period of mourning will come to an end.

Abbah! It's gone so quickly. Seems like it happened yesterday. How do I look now?

"You must not look into the mirror during Iddath," Chikkamma, her stepmother, had said. But the other day, Mehrunissa had caught her reflection in the copper water-pot while bathing. She was startled. Ears bare without the alikhat, all other jewellery locked away in a trunk. No one had seen her take that peep, but the All-knowing, All-seeing Allah had. He holds all the strings. He rewards those who live by the rules.

He would have heard my "Tauba" when I looked at myself. He will definitely forgive me.

You alone can pardon my sins, Allah!
Show me mercy.
For reading the Holy Quran every day for these past weeks,
show mercy on me.
Allah, grant that by reading the Quran
I will remember what I have forgotten.
Lord of the Universe, grant that this Book
will be my life's anchor. Ameen.

Mehrunissa finished her prayer, raised the Book to her lips, wrapped it in the green cloth, and put it on the table. Then she pressed her hands to her eyes.

Just one more night. Tomorrow she would be free to warm herself on the washing stone near the well. She could sit on the armchair in the veranda and listen to songs on the radio. It would not be a sin. She could comb her hair before the mirrored cupboard in Samad's room, and Kaijamma would not scold her.

Samad. What was he like now? It seemed like years since she had seen him. But his banter, when he talked to Kaijamma, had forced its way into her room despite her resistance. They would laugh at him, but he still said, "Don't worry, let all that be, I am here, aren't I?" So

much had happened in those two years! Like a dream, all of it. Anything is possible if Allah desires it. He is the great magician.

Mehrunissa had never imagined that she would be the mistress of such a large house. In her impoverished dreams, even a palace would have a thatched roof.

When Mehrunissa was about fifteen, two monsoons before her wedding, her father was admitted to the government hospital. A week later, he came home on a bier. Mehrunissa's tears could have drowned the village that day. She rushed into the courtyard where her father's body was being washed, and rolled on the ground, wailing. Someone picked her up as if she was a bird, and took her indoors.

Why did I weep so much? Because my father was dead? Or because I was afraid of my own fate? Would I have grieved like that if my mother had been alive?

Was Chikkamma, her stepmother, the reason? And yet this same Chikkamma had made her the mistress of this mansion. Who would not have given a daughter to such a wealthy merchant!

On the first night, Puttaba Sahukar had sat his bride on the bed and explained, "You are the mistress of this household. You will not want for anything. Allah has given me enough. You will never have to hold out your hand to anyone for anything."

Even if she did, who was there to see her? That was not true. There were two others who cared about her.

Thirty years ago, Puttaba had walked the streets of Muthupady with a basket of dried fish on his head. Soon he was riding a bicycle selling fresh fish. In no time at all, he gave up the fish trade and opened a provision shop near the Panchayat office and, before long, built this large house. Behind the transformation of Puttaba the fish seller to Puttaba Sahukar was the story of years of hard work.

Puttaba Sahukar, who had passed away four months and ten days ago, was not old enough to die. Only forty or forty-five. He was not afflicted by any fatal illness. Is it possible to explain what or why things happen in Allah's game?

Puttaba had an imposing personality. When customers saw him seated behind the counter with a turban on his head, they instinctively called him "sahukar". If he raised his voice, he could be heard a hundred yards away. A few streaks of grey had appeared in his hair, but his bushy eyebrows were still coal-black. Six months before his wedding, he had six false teeth fixed, but no one could tell. Though his belly had gone out of control, he was stronger than most men younger than him.

This man, who stood out in a crowd, had married Sakina before a hundred witnesses. Barely three months later, Sakina had run out into the courtyard in the middle of the night and thrown herself into the well despite Puttaba's entreaties. For four days, Puttaba ran a high fever. He clung to young Samad, the boy he had hired to help in the shop, and sobbed inconsolably. People felt sorry for him. Samad, barely fifteen, was frightened by his behaviour.

Vowing never to bring another woman into the house, Puttaba Sahukar sent for Kaijamma, a distant cousin, to manage his household. Suddenly, after twelve years, a month before the monsoon season last year, he decided to remarry, and brought Mehrunissa, twenty-five years younger than him, into the house. Samad smiled to himself under his newly sprouted moustache.

"You don't have to be veiled before him. Samad has been with me for many years. He is an orphan. There is no difference between him and me in this house," said Puttaba Sahukar as

he introduced the young and virile Samad to her. Samad offered Mehrunissa a bouquet of flowers with affection mixed with respect. The nubile eighteen-year-old girl was seeing such a bright face for the first time. She broke out in a sweat.

Puttaba Sahukar did not come home for lunch. Samad would arrive just as the afternoon call to prayer began, to pick up Sahukar's lunch box. Waiting by the window, her face pressed to the bars, the tinkle of Samad's cycle bell gave Mehrunissa much pleasure.

Everything her husband had told her that first night was true. She lacked for nothing. Who but a princess could eat chicken curry twice a week? She only had to mention it, and a juicy chicken leg would appear by her side as she sat twiddling the knobs of the radio. Even her mother could not have given her so much love.

Mehrunissa had no memory of her mother. She had died when Mehrunissa was only a year old. That the woman in the house was not her mother, Mehrunissa had realised very early. Her three stepsisters were born in quick succession, and when a son's cries filled the house, the responsibility for the girls fell on Mehrunissa's young shoulders.

Twelve-year-old Mehrunissa's record of rolling a thousand bidis in a day is still unbroken in the Muthupady bidi factory. Besides working in the bidi factory, Mehrunissa had to bathe, dress, and feed her younger sisters. Her day began before sunrise, when she filled the clay pot to heat water for a bath. Chikkamma suffered from severe back pain and a steaming hot bath provided some relief. Mehrunissa would do the cooking in between the other chores. After lunch, Chikkamma would sleep till four, wake up, nag Mehrunissa, and then go off to the neighbour's to gossip. She would come home only when dusk had fallen. Mehrunissa's father, a coolie in Kini's godown near the bus stand, would leave in the morning and return only at night. It wasn't as if he was unaware of the badar yuddha going on at home. But every time he spoke a sharp word about it to his wife, her back pain would flare up, and Mehrunissa would have to sit up all night, massaging Chikkamma. Mehrunissa's father could do nothing to prevent Chikkamma from ill-treating her. The day before he went into the hospital he told his wife, "Don't be unkind to Mehrunissa. Allah won't like it."

Chikkamma had heeded her husband's last words. Within two years of being widowed, she arranged a nikah between Mehrunissa and Puttaba Sahukar the provision merchant – something she was sure Allah would approve of. Mehrunissa may have been radiant with the glow of youth, but would getting her married be easy? Where would the ten gold sovereigns and three thousand rupees in cash come from? Allah didn't shower gold and cash from the sky, did he?

Puttaba Sahukar had gold. He had wealth. What he did not have, Mehrunissa had in plenty. As soon as he saw her, he agreed to the match, and thanked Allah for creating this lovely girl just for him.

But when Sahukar extended his hands during the nikah ceremony, his hands shook. Samad noticed this. He would often joke about it later, saying: "Your women are like your fields. Treat them as you wish."

When the bride was about to leave for Puttaba Sahukar's house, Chikkamma embraced her, weeping. Mehrunissa was taken aback. Even when they were lifting her father's body, Chikkamma had not sobbed like this. "You are going into a big house, Unissa… don't forget your Chikkamma's children once you are there," she cried.

Even if Mehrunissa wanted to, Chikkamma would not let her forget. She turned up every other week to ask after Mehrunissa. She brought an empty sack with her and Kaijamma would fill it with rice and coconuts before she left. For whom was her brother accumulating wealth anyway? And Chikkamma's children were not such distant relatives.

Mehrunissa could not understand Kaijamma. She had never had a confrontation with Mehrunissa. Mehrunissa had sometimes spoken rudely to her. Kaijamma had laughed it off. “You don’t know anything, you silly girl. You have not bathed in as much water as I have drunk in my lifetime.”

Mehrunissa got out of bed, crossed the kitchen and opened the back door leading to the bathing room. A pile of dry wood lay in a corner, waiting to be put under the boiler outside so the smoke wouldn’t come into the house. Whenever Mehrunissa felt dejected, she would lock herself in this room and weep her heart out. If crying could give her relief, she would have bawled so loudly that the paddy mudis stacked in the attic would tumble down. Her pain might have reduced if she could have shared it with someone. But how could she tell anyone that her saintly husband, much older than her father, had fallen at her feet that night and wept like a woman? What use would that have been?

“Tauba tauba!” How could I even think such wicked thoughts!

She poured lotas of water on herself, trying to erase the image dancing before her eyes – Samad, bathing by the well, emptying the large copper pot over himself in one gush, his strong male body shivering a little because of the cold water. Every time she watched him through the crack in the kitchen window she would whisper “Tauba!” and pray that she would be spared punishment by lashing.

Not much longer now. The clock in the veranda had struck twelve a long time ago. Even when Sahukar was alive it had been Samad’s job to wind up the clock once a week. He must be fast asleep now, spread-eagled like a frog.

Soon the chickens in the backyard would begin to cluck. There were many more chickens in the coop then. The twice-a-week meal of chicken saar and akki roti meant that Samad would grab two chickens from the coop, and take them to the nearby mosque to be slaughtered according to the rules. He would buy two more chickens and bring them home, the chickens dangling upside down from the cycle’s handlebar. To this day Mehrunissa had not seen a single chicken escape Samad’s grasp.

Everything Samad did was perfect. He was always enthusiastic, never indifferent. Ask for anything and he’d say, “Leave it to me. I’m here, aren’t I?” Hair pins, tins of kajal, perfumed oil: all delivered the same evening. Puttaba Sahukar was too embarrassed to go looking for plastic bangles or hair clips! Samad had as much authority in the house as Puttaba, and had free access to the cash box in the shop as well as the pickle jars in the kitchen.

But the keys to the shop were always on Puttaba Sahukar’s waist. The key bunch hung from a specially made thick leather belt, and Puttaba insisted on opening the shop every morning and shutting it at night. It was a strange obsession. Samad had never touched the bunch of keys. Nor had he wanted to. His mischievous smile did not need doors or keys to enter any room.

The only time Samad’s broad face looked serious and anxious, was for exactly eight days. During that time, the big brass lock remained untouched on the wooden door of Puttaba Sahukar’s provision shop.

One evening, barely a month after Ramazan, Puttaba Sahukar came home earlier than usual, refused his dinner and lay down, complaining of mild chest pain.

Mehrunissa immediately thought of her father. While she sat by her husband’s side, massaging his chest, she could hear Samad talking to Kaijamma in the room with the mirrored cupboard. He came to the bedroom door a couple of times and asked, “Shall I get the doctor?” Puttaba waved him away.

The next morning, when Puttaba Sahukar showed no signs of getting up, Samad looked grim— something that Mehrunissa had not expected— and said, “Whoever can decide whether to call the doctor or not does not lie in bed like this. Leave it to me. I am here, aren’t I?” He left like a gust of wind. Mehrunissa couldn’t believe it.

The worried look did not sit well on the face that broke so readily into a mischievous smile.

Puttaba had a heart like wax. It melted at the mention of sorrow or pain. But he wasn’t so stupid that he didn’t notice the admiring glances Mehrunissa threw at Samad.

Using poor light as an excuse, Puttaba moved his bed to the room with the mirrored cupboard. He did not want the doctor and Samad barging into his bedroom ten times a day. Mehrunissa never stepped into the room when Samad was in the house.

Puttaba and Samad left the house together after the morning tea and returned only in the evening. Mehrunissa had the house to herself. She would stand in front of the full length mirror all day, stroking her golden, smooth-as-silk stomach, sighing.

Puttaba suffered for only four days. On Thursday night he seemed slightly better, but on Friday morning he did not open his eyes.

Puttaba saw Mehrunissa’s long dark serpent-like hair reflected in the mirror and said sadly, “I have done you great injustice. Who will be there for you now?”

“Don’t worry. I am here, aren’t I?” said Samad. “I am not one to give up so easily. The doctor refused to come at night. But I grabbed his bag and ran.” He paused then turned to Mehrunissa. “Please go inside,” he said to her, and he summoned the doctor. Her husband’s last words faded away even before they were uttered.

Samad had remained awake all night but had dozed early in the morning. When he woke up, the crows were circling above the courtyard.

Oh peaceful soul, return to your God.
You will be happy there,
He too will be satisfied with you.
Join those in my service
and enter my heaven.

From the courtyard came sounds of voices, footsteps, wailing, consoling. In the bedroom, Mehrunissa sat alone, her face on her knees. “Don’t talk to her. Let her cry herself out till she is dry,” she heard Kaijamma tell someone. Boobamma, her daughter Saramma, and Radhakka were all there. How had the news spread so fast? Chikkamma had dragged her two youngest ones along with her and was demanding to be the chief mourner. Even Kaijamma found Chikkamma’s wailing, “What will become of you now, Unnissa?” intolerable.

When Mehrunissa had thrown herself on her husband’s cold body, Kaijamma held her and took her to her room. “Stay here, child. There is no use grieving. You have to face what has happened. Besides, what has happened? One person less to talk to, that’s all, isn’t it?”

Hmmm. How does Kaijamma know everything? Within four months of becoming mistress of the house, Mehrunissa had discovered that nothing could be hidden from the old woman.

One day, just after Samad had left with Puttaba’s lunch box, Kaijamma held Mehrunissa’s arm and said, “My child, even I was young once. Puttaba is very tender-hearted. He will not harm even an ant. You know that. Whether you immerse him in water or milk is up to you.” Mehrunissa fell at Kaijamma’s feet and sobbed bitterly. Kaijamma’s eyes also filled up. Kaijamma never had to speak to her like that again. Mehrunissa’s behaviour did not warrant it.

Samad knew hundreds of stories. Some he had heard, some he had made up. When Mehrunissa and Kaijamma sat by the well plucking a chicken, Samad would join them and tell them stories about brave princes and beautiful princesses. The prince would enter the seven-walled fort in the garb of a guard. The soldiers would try to capture him. He would mount his white Arab steed and fly off into the sky. Or, if the prince set off to fetch the pearl necklace the princess wanted, he would climb his magic horse and cross the seven seas and reach the fierce demon's cave. When the demon took the form of a pig, the prince would turn tail and run away. Samad's stories had humour too. The women would forget the chicken and lose themselves in the adventure. When the story ended, Samad would clap his hands and laugh aloud, bringing them back to reality. An embarrassed Kaijamma would scold him, "Now will you get out of here or shall I tell Puttaba to stitch up your tongue?"

Even after Samad had gone back to the shop, Mehrunissa would wander around the seven-walled fort with the prince till Kaijamma brought Mehrunissa out of her reverie. And each time this happened, Mehrunissa would bite her lip and admit her guilt. But the day her husband died, the prince who pushed his way into the seven-walled fort and went straight for the throne, startled Mehrunissa.

After the ritual bathing of the body, prayers were recited in the courtyard. Soon they would carry his body away. Then there would be no man in the house. Mehrunissa trembled with fear. Just then she heard footsteps. She looked up. Samad was leaning against the door. She stood up cowering against the wall, her heart thudding. Samad must have heard it.

"Want the keys to the shop."

Mehrunissa's blood ran cold. Her lips trembled, her mouth went dry.

"Need to buy agarbattis. Also require some cash."

Her legs wobbled. She felt faint, but she steadied herself and sat down on the bed. Her right hand reached for the bunch of keys under the pillow.

Puttaba Sahukar always kept his beloved keys under his pillow. He had told Mehrunissa, "You see these keys? They are mine. Only I have the right to them. My elders left me nothing. I have worked hard and earned all this. Not by breaking anyone's head. You must keep these keys safely."

Mehrunissa had fulfilled her duty diligently. When Puttaba returned from the shop, he would unhook the bunch of keys from his belt and hand it to Mehrunissa. She would tuck it under his pillow every night, and hand it over to him before he left for the shop the next morning. This had been the practice for the last two years. Even Kaijamma had never touched the keys. But the day Puttaba was moved to the outer room, the bunch of keys had remained under his pillow in the bedroom.

"It's getting late. Where are the keys?" This time it was not a request. It was a demand.

Lord of the universe, Allah,
if You wish it, You grant authority.
If You so wish, You snatch it away.
You reward those who You please,
You are capable of executing all things.
If my thoughts are wrong, forgive me.

Biting her lip, Mehrunissa stood up, reached for the keys and held them out to Samad.

As a child, Mehrunissa had learnt that crows begin to caw before the sun rises. Daylight would nudge its way into the room in another hour. Mehrunissa had got used to waking up for the morning namaz because of Chikkamma. No one would question her if she woke up at ten

o'clock in Puttaba's house. Kaijamma could manage all the work, but after Mehrunissa said her morning prayers, she would begin work in the kitchen before Kaijamma could protest.

But when Mehrunissa sat for Iddath, Kaijamma had to do everything. Mehrunissa was not supposed to step out of the room, except to go to the bathroom. No male eye was to fall on her. If there were children, it was different.

Surprisingly, she had no trouble adjusting to the new routine. It was not very different from her life with Chikkamma. Except visiting the government hospital when ill, or the annual fair, the Muthupady Urus, she had not stepped out of the house anyway.

What with looking after her sisters and rolling bidis, she had no desire to meet strange men. But when she heard Chikkamma making plans for her marriage, she must have had some vague dreams. But she had no clear idea about the man she would marry. So she was quite happy to be Puttaba Sahukar's wife. Who would not want three good meals a day without having to roll bidis?

The main change in her routine after Iddath was not going into the room with the mirrored cupboard and the veranda. She used to visit Maimoona sometimes to play with her child. But she did not miss those visits. They brought more humiliation than happiness.

Thirteen days after Puttaba Sahukar's death the fatiha took place. The next day Kaijamma said hesitantly, "The shop has been closed for so long. The provisions in the house won't last forever. What should we do?" Kaijamma left the decision entirely to Mehrunissa.

It was not difficult for Mehrunissa to answer her question. Puttaba used to tell her about the business – how much profit he had made, what they would do if the price of coconuts suddenly fell. "Make coconut chutney and plaster it on our heads, what else can we do?" he would say then doze. Mehrunissa would lie there, staring at the ceiling, coaxing sleep to come to her.

Kaijamma waited for Mehrunissa's answer.

"I've told Samad I will speak to him in the evening. There is nothing wrong if he asks what is to be done. He is a man. He must know what he has here. We can tell him to leave. But who else do we have? Think over it till the evening," Kaijamma said and walked away.

The bunch of keys still lay under the pillow. Samad had taken it the day her husband died, and returned it through Kaijamma the same evening.

Mehrunissa tried to read the Quran but a hundred thoughts ran through her mind. Which other man can take charge of the house? Had Kaijamma been suggesting something this morning? Would he walk away if they told him to go?

He may not be a blood relation, but he came to this house before I did. He too has a share in the property. He is a man, what if he tells Kaijamma and me to get out and becomes the owner of the house? Mehrunissa shuddered.

Will Samad send me away? Chhey! He is not like that. I will remain the mistress here.

So what did Kaijamma have in mind? Tauba, tauba! Mehrunissa rubbed her eyes then focused them on the lines of the Quran.

During the period of Iddath,
discussing remarriage with the widows or considering it
is not wrong. Allah knows everything.
However, until the period of mourning is over,
do not take a decision about marriage.
Allah will be aware of it.

Be fearful of Him.
He is compassionate and merciful.

When Kaijamma brought Mehrunissa's lunch into the room that afternoon, Mehrunissa held out the keys to her. Kaijamma took them without a word. She did not like chatting with anyone in Iddath. She was now saddled with another job: taking the keys every morning and bringing them back at night. She did not refer to the shop, nor did she mention Samad. Mehrunissa did not ask. Reading the Quran all day and spending the night in restless sleep – that's how four months and ten days had gone by. But when Kaijamma came for the keys or when she returned them, Mehrunissa's thoughts galloped out of control.

Samad did not come home for lunch. Kaijamma had casually mentioned that he had employed a small boy to take his food to the shop. Mehrunissa did not react.

Allah, who controls the movements of the Sun and the Moon,
save me from the torment of hell.
Keep the doors of heaven open for me.
For those who have feared Allah, there are two heavenly gardens.
Gardens with spreading green trees,
each bearing two kinds of fruit
within reach. Reclining under them,
on silken cushions, honourable women. Not just beautiful,
but chaste, virtuous,
untouched by man or devil.
He who fears the Lord will be bound in matrimony
with a beautiful large-eyed woman.

A shiver went through Mehrunissa as she finished her namaz. The words thrilled her. She prayed that her husband would receive all these pleasures. And she?

Being born a woman is a grave sin. So where's the question of rewards?

She saw daylight creeping in through the window. In a few minutes, everything would be bright. She heard sounds from the kitchen. Must be Kaijamma. Samad woke up late.

She had often seen his reflection as he lay by the window, legs spread wide, the sunbeams making a halo around him. Was he sprawled like that today? It was four months and ten days since she had seen his face.

Kaijamma called out from the kitchen, "Are you awake, child?"

She asked the same question every day during the Iddath period and Mehrunissa did not bother to reply. But today she felt like answering. It was not a sin to go out now. But go where? To the kitchen? What would Kaijamma say?
Let her come and call me.

Putting away the Quran, touching her eyes with her fingertips, Mehrunissa lay on the bed. She had waited so long, what were a few minutes more?

She heard Samad talking to Kaijamma in the veranda. It was not yet time to go to the shop. She waited eagerly for Kaijamma to come and take the keys. But she didn't come. The front door opened then closed. Mehrunissa was surprised. Where could Samad have gone?

When Kaijamma came in with her breakfast, Mehrunissa was perplexed. Had she miscalculated? She marked the pages of the Quran every day. Kaijamma had told her yesterday that she did not have to wait much longer.

Why didn't she call me to the kitchen then?

Swallowing the question rising in her throat, she reached for the plate.

“Puttaba couldn’t stand menthe dosai,” Kaijamma said. “Samad loves them. Asked me to make them yesterday.”

Mehrunissa became suspicious. She peered at Kaijamma’s face but there was no deceit in her eyes.

“Samad is not going to the shop today. He is going to Kasargod,” Kaijamma said casually.

“To Kasargod? Why?”

Picking up the empty plate and glass, Kaijamma said, “He made me swear not to tell you till the Iddath is over. The Kasargod party has been after him. He told them, in my presence, that only when you go approve of the girl can they take things forward. He has gone to inform them that the girl-viewing will be next Thursday or Friday. My time is limited. You must like the girl who will come as your daughter-in-law. Samad has also agreed. If you say yes, he will marry her – even if she is blind or lame. Anyone must have done some good deeds to get a boy like Samad, isn’t it?”

Mehrunissa did not faint. In a daze she prayed,

Oh Allah!
Let fall the red scalded sun on a sinner like me.
Make me tread boiling water,
pour molten copper over me…

Notes:
Tauba: penitence/ an expression that signifies penitence
Sahukar: a term of address for master, employer
Badar yuddha: a key battle in the early days of Islam
Saar: a gravy dish
Akki rotti: flatbread made of rice flour
Agarbattis: incense sticks
Urus: fair
Fatiha: prayers for the dead

# M.K. Raghavendra

## The Liberal Nation and the Realist Film

Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* (2015) and M. Manikandan's *Kaaka Muttai* (2014)

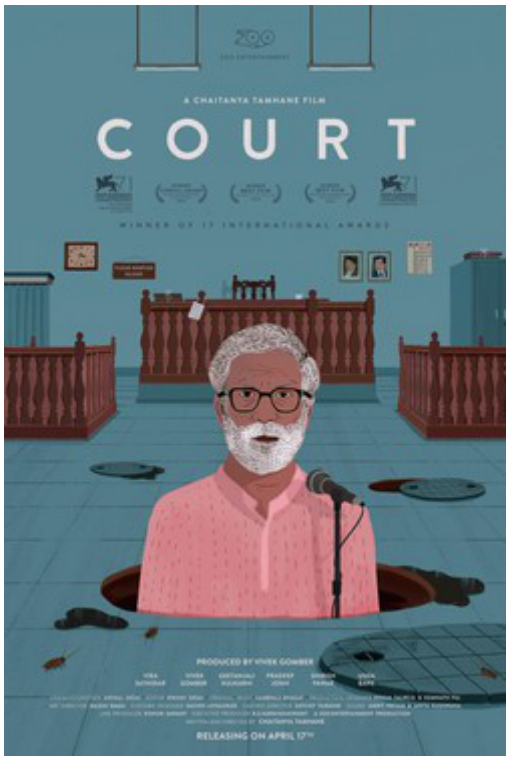



Photo courtesy Wikimedia

### Two Kinds of Realist Cinema

A welcome development in the past decade has been the gradual erasure of the distinction between the art film and the popular film – at least in formal terms – with the commercial successes of film-makers like Anuraag Kashyap and small films like *The Lunchbox* (2013). The difference between the two kinds of cinema – art and popular – arose because they came out of different impetuses. Popular cinema may be regarded as a continuation of the puranic narration and the Indian epics, while art cinema derives from the novel. Where action and characters in the popular film are heroic, those in art cinema have been closer to ordinary life. Art cinema, although it began much earlier (perhaps with the IPTA and K. A. Abbas' *Dharti Ke Lal*, 1946) really got going as a movement around 1970 through state intervention and the formulation of a national film policy. Although it had a sizeable public in the 1970s and 1980s, art cinema is now largely dependent on state patronage; where it had once functioned as the liberal conscience, it has become habituated to dealing with issues considered important by the state — like rural indebtedness and communal harmony — without the possibility of subversion.

It is because the art film derives from the novel rather than the oral tradition that it needs a public with education, broadly familiar with the strategies of fiction. One could argue that with the development of new economy businesses after 2000 there has been a gradual

movement of educated people (especially those who are Anglophone) into the metropolitan cities, and it is this public which has made realist fiction possible in popular cinema as well — a cinema which tries to tell stories instead of playing a conscious social role, realist cinema as entertainment.

The art film and the popular film are both national although in different ways. Art cinema has tried to direct the destiny of the nation by dealing with the social issues needing to be addressed, while popular cinema has enabled a large public distributed across a heterogeneous cultural space to imagine the nation. Benedict Anderson argued that the novel and the newspaper helped sustain the nation since they facilitated a community of readers to collectively imagine it; in India, where the level of literacy has been small, popular cinema has similarly helped a widely distributed public to collectively imagine the nation and help sustain it after 1947. Needless to add, their dissimilar roles mean that the nations posited by the two kinds of cinema are also different from one another.

The past year has been a fertile year for realist cinema in as much as it has produced highly acclaimed realist films, both in the art film and the popular film category. Where Indian art cinema has had an unremarkable stretch after 1990 and the commencement of the economically liberalized era, Chaitanya Tamhane's Marathi film *Court*, which won the national award for best film, can be justly regarded as a watershed. On the other side, in times when popular cinema has celebrated affluence and ostentation unreservedly, M. Manikandan's Tamil film *Kaaka Muttai* has contrived to turn a story about slum children living in poverty into a popular film success. This essay compares the two films, but its purpose is not to judge them, but to understand the nations that the two portray because they are unlike each other.

## Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court*

Chaitanya Tamhane's *Court* begins with an elderly dalit activist and singer Narayan Kamble (Vira Sathidar) being arrested by the police on the charge of abetting suicide. A worker in the municipality, Vasudev Pawar, died while cleaning the sewer, and since he did not use safety equipment his death is considered deliberate and tantamount to suicide. Narayan Kamble gave a performance in the vicinity of Mohan Pawar's tenement two days before his death advocating (in a song) suicide as a preferable alternative for municipal workers, to climbing into sewers. Narayan Kamble's case comes up for hearing and his advocate is a socially conscious young lawyer Vinay Vora (Vivek Gomber), who is unable to get bail for Kamble.

Much of *Court* takes the shape of court hearings and the film is filmed so authentically — with no indication of the actors being conscious of the camera — that one might even take it for a documentary. Making it highly effective is the courtesy constantly on display: the judge being sympathetic but not granting bail, the police inspector being polite but presenting a phony witness, the prosecutor Nutan (Geetanjali Kulkarni) being human and considerate but often arguing ludicrously — equating the dalit folk-singer with a terrorist and then turning this labelling into a hypothetical one ("just suppose he had been a terrorist"). Narayan Kamble spends months in jail as the hearing gets postponed time and again. The judge is reputation of sharp but — as in actual courts — his tolerance of weak logic from the prosecution is astonishing. At the climax of the film Vinay Vora manages to get Pawar's wife to give evidence and it comes out that Mohan Pawar was never given safety equipment; his only way of telling whether it was safe to go into the sewers was through the presence of cockroaches. If cockroaches came out it meant that the sewer was free of gas. Pawar was always inebriated when he climbed in because that was the only way he could stand the stench. And despite using cockroaches as safety equipment, Pawar had also lost one of his eyes.

As a social document the film should not perhaps be praised for its authenticity and one instance of its inauthenticity rests in Narayan Kamble being completely alone spending months in prison without bail; a dalit activist, in a city, who addresses a public from platforms is potentially political capital, and one would expect politicians of more than one hue to be willing to assist him because of the constituency he commands. Tamhane perhaps relies too much on the art film convention of the dalit as politically helpless (as in the cinema of the 1970s and 1980s), which might not be true of an activist with a constituency today. But more important to an appreciation of the film is the sense created of the vast gaps existing even between the marginalised in India and the middle-class activists sympathetic to them, like their advocates. A very powerful scene in the film shows Vinay Vora driving Mohan Pawar's widow in his car after she has tendered evidence, and the woman being completely non-communicative since there is no way that a middle-class activist — regardless of how well-intentioned s/he may be — will be able to understand the true predicaments of those they represent. This is not simply a portrayal of misery but the picture of a nation/society rent by divisions so immense that even to speak of a national community is a travesty. I described art cinema as having been the nation's liberal conscience but *Court* suggests that the notion is not pertinent because of the way the nation has excluded most of its subjects from its development. The banality of the courtroom discussions in this film when contrasted with the high drama of *Aakrosh* (1980) also points to public faith in state-administered justice slipping. These aspects of *Court* come into especially sharp focus when it is compared with *Kaaka Muttai*.


Image courtesy madaboutmoviez

## M. Manikandan's *Kaaka Muttai*

Manikandan's film is set in a slum in Chennai and tells the story of two brothers who help their mother (Iyshwarya Rajesh) keep their home running by picking discarded coal beside railway tracks, and eat crow's eggs to supplement their modest meals. Their father is in jail for some unknown reason, and the story starts moving when the tree from which they filch crows' eggs is brought down to clear the space for a pizzeria. A short while later their mother receives a television set as a gift from the government — meant for those 'below the poverty

line' — and it is on television that the boys see the object which creates the first disturbance. What the boys see on television is an advertisement for pizza. The way the pizza is shown makes them yearn so much for it that they can scarcely rest until they raise the Rs 200 needed to purchase one at the pizzeria. The boys contrive to get more coal than usual through a well-wisher and save up some money. It is not adequate for a pizza but their grandmother makes an imitation pizza — a dosa with toppings — which they pronounce inedible. A middle-class friend offers them pieces of the divine object but the boys want an entire pizza. Eventually, the boys raise the Rs 200 but the watchman shoos them away. This means they have to get new clothes as well, and they get them through a trade arrangement with some middle-class boys. But when they get to the pizzeria in brand new clothes they are still shooed away. To worsen matters, the manager slaps the older brother and knocks him down. But, unknown to them, the entire episode has been caught on a mobile by another slum boy. This mobile now falls into the hands of two idlers from the same slum and the cleverer one manages to get an offer of one lakh from the owner of the pizzeria to keep the footage from reaching the media. A businessman slapping a bona fide client for being poor will not look well. But before the transaction can be concluded, the idler's companion hands the footage over innocently to a television channel, and it goes viral. The film concludes with the boys being welcomed ceremoniously back into the pizzeria and given pizzas to eat. But the two are disappointed and compare what they taste unfavourably with the dosa made by their grandmother, now unfortunately dead.

It will be evident to the reader from this description that *Kaaka Muttai* deals with a more cohesive world than the one in *Court*. The film is presenting a real world in which there is genuine poverty as well as affluence, but there is little sense of there being a group classifiable as the marginalized. In the first place everyone is integrated into the economic mainstream with comparable aspirations, although the choices one makes might be different in the actual products chosen. It can be proposed that there are enormous segments in the informal economy which get by only by subverting legal processes. As an instance, people who subsist on railway coal may need to do more than search patiently for the lumps which have fallen off trains on their own. The sense of everyone being integrated into a single economic mainstream is also furthered by the discourse around the pizzeria. The owner of the establishment can be understood as belonging to an older feudal India in which one chose one's customers based on their stature. *Kaaka Muttai* is the product of an economically up to date India and shows the right kind of capitalism at work when the pizzeria's feudal ways are exposed, and the slum children admitted as legitimate customers, when they can pay for whatever they eat. Passing a judgment on the pizza after it has been eaten is the legitimate right of the consumer and this is also affirmed. The sense of cunning/subterfuge being necessary for the weak to survive — which infused fairy tales and the stories of the Panchatantra — is notably absent and only financially legitimate dealings are allowed. Another motif that needs comment is that of the father in jail, without his incarceration being questioned or explained. The man loves his family and they love him back, but he remains in jail, and the resolution of the film does not include his release. The father being in jail is, therefore, used as a mere detail to illustrate the fates that slum-dwellers tend to suffer. The argument here is that this detail points not only to the criminal ways that the poor are forced into, but also to the even-handedness of the law which punishes, but only to the extent of one's errors.

*Kaaka Muttai* is very authentic in pictorial terms but it furthers a mythology that one finds dubious. Its sense of social cohesiveness was not exhibited by Hindi cinema before 1990, in which there was an admission that a life of illegality is often the only way out for the marginalised. A society is cohesive if the state mediates effectively among private citizens,

and interests and illegalities happen because of inadequacies in the functioning of the state; those who do not have the benefit of its asymmetric umbrella are among those who seek benefits outside it. The fact that films like *Deewar* (1975) conclude with the triumph of the law does not neutralise their discourse on the inevitability of illegality in a certain kind of existence. Since one cannot believe that India has become a more cohesive space socially between 1975 and the present day, one is led to see the realism of *Kaaka Muttai* as an exercise in which cohesion serves an ideological end.

The social cohesiveness implied by *Kaaka Muttai*, as I have tried to show, is infused with a belief in an inclusive economic mainstream, and this is the mantra of those who hold that the trickle-down benefits of economic activity will eventually include everyone. Popular cinema has come some distance from the post-liberalisation ostentation of *Hum Aapke Hai Kaun*, but Manikandan's film may be the first to alter popular film discourse, from the poor as a footnote in the life of the nation, to the more insidious — the poor and the rich are equal cogs in its economic well-being. *Kaaka Muttai* is a Tamil film and it is perhaps only Tamil Nadu — where there has been a semblance of lower-class empowerment — that such a view will not strike audiences as patently absurd. One need only imagine the film with the slum boys taken from Mumbai to perceive this.

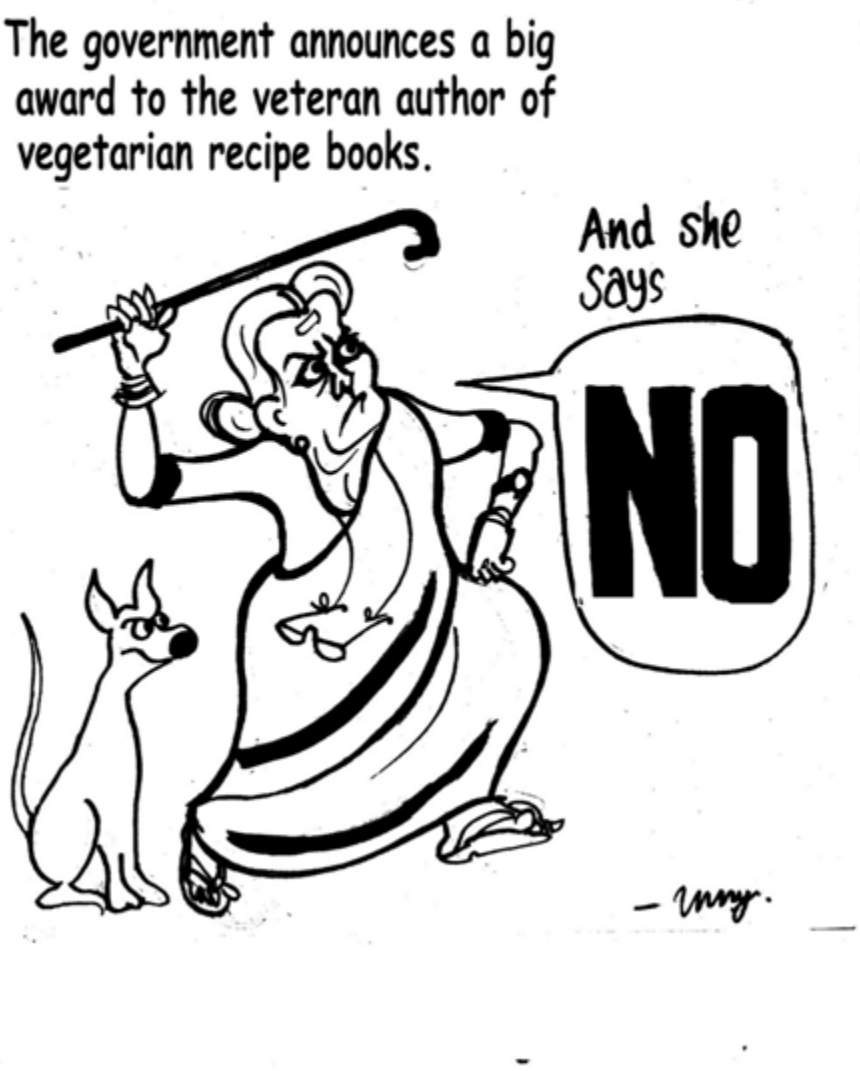
## The feel-good film

*Kaaka Muttai* is described as a "feel-good" film and it is so in the sharpest sense of the term. A "feel-good" film is not simply a film with a happy ending, but one which offers a reassuring social vision to it's audiences — though this reassurance could also be metaphysical as in *Forrest Gump* (1994), where fate intervenes relentlessly to make the mentally disadvantaged protagonist triumph at everything. I have conveyed the gist of *Kaaka Muttai* through its story, but the film also uses every formal means at its disposal to suggest an ordered society in which everyone takes his or her rightful place. The exchange of glances and smiles is one way in which it achieves this sense of perfect communion. This is entirely different from *Court* where people scarcely make eye contact — not even the dalit activist and his advocate. To use Bakhtinian terms, *Court* is "polyphonic" in its conception because it suggests the multiple voices that do not come together, creating a tumult which the liberal nation state is unable to contain. Narratives naturally accommodate a multiplicity of voices simply because people in society live according to different visions of human existence. But these voices are polarised and the multiplicity quelled when there is a single purpose at work in a text — such as nationalism or patriotism — when every voice echoes this single purpose. Where *Court* is true to the polyphonic character of society, *Kaaka Muttai* is a fantasy of economic communion; those who are made to "feel good" by it are evidently those who share its totalitarian vision of a nation marching ahead with one goal in mind — an economic one which allows no diversions. This leads us to wonder if all "feel-good" films are not, in some sense, totalitarian.



# Unny

## Scrawl






# Priya Sarukkai Chabria

## Poems after Andal

"Abhivyakti", Kanchan Chander, 2011, acrylic on paper

## Prayer as Three Camera Movements

*Falconetti's Joan of Arc Face*
Cracked sun the teardrop that hangs on a lash and falls
bursts skids down her pitted skin, down her brokenness
as she, stone flower, sunflower, turns towards the inquisitor's glare
and her sainthood is slowly hammered into chainmail breasts.
Her silent words are wrong whatever she says.
*Extreme close-up: no let up to transformation. See the trembling*
*of cell, phrase & faith*

*Kinuyo Tanaka's Nape in The Life of Oharu*
She drops her head to staunch her eyes'
rain as her son who reigns walks past not knowing that
sack of kneeling woman is his mother who sinned &
pulled herself out of icy seas like a wounded seal, sealed
to secrecy. See the bent stalk of her nape, how soft, how ripe for the axe.
*Crane shot ascends: suffering shrinks to dewdrop size. Silence of the enfolding*
*gaze*

*Jijai's Back in Sant Tukaram*
"Accompany me to heaven," her husband says. "Who'll feed

the kids & scrub the buffalo if I come with you? Go!”
she says rolling out chapattis, rough as dung-cakes, as holy bread.
The saint mounts god’s eagle & people chant. She flings
the sweat from her face on the earth. Her back sturdy as a tree, and bowed.
*Slow backward track: the unseen movement that remains as time forgets*
*the colour of clay*.

## Do/Don’t

I am
*meteorite hurtling*
*to collide with you:*
accept me

I am
*moon circling*
*your dizzying face:*
capture me

I am
*planetary system mesmerised*
*by your gravity:*
enlarge to absorb me

I am
*wheeling galaxy pulled by*
*your trillion trillion suns:*
rip through me

I am
*shadow wave emitted in the first*
*moment of your birth:*
be unborn

I am
*hunger falling into your dark*
*event horizon:*
eat me

Don’t free me /free me

Notes to “Prayer as Three Camera Movements”:
1. Maria Falconetti in Carl Dreyer’s *Joan of Arc*, 1928.
2. Kinuyo Tanaka in Kenji Mizoguchi’s *The Life of Oharu*, 1952.
3. Jijai in V. G. Damle and S. Fattelal’s *Sant Tukaram*, 1936.

# Jaspreet Singh

## Emperor's New Clothes

He drove me in a TATA cab
through the streets of Old and New
Delhi. The air unbreathable. I heard
his bone voice

breaking down
telling why he didn't vote
for "the man who wears a 9,00,000 rupee
pinstripe jacket"— why no vote for "the party with saffron testicles".

A week ago they kicked
His young wife
out of the government
hospital, where every micro-

peon to head-doctor has a cut
in the business, he said.
Needles programmed to take
600 gram blood

but the clerk acknowledges
"only two
hundred".
Not paying

19,000 rupees underhand
has consequences
for
a caesarian.

"Whole system
Bad for nothing." So perplexed
he was, even the slip
of tongue failed to change the mood. And

outside on the streets
the Saffron Man in the election poster
continued to look
down at dust-bright denizens

of the city and said nothing.

He was completely silent
about vandalized churches, ghar-vapsi, and Ram-haram.
Death was once again trying to become

a Dada in India. It was early February, and
the man in the poster was silent about hate

within his cadres. Silent about expunged
Ramanujans and Ramayanas.

So silent, he
seemed to have forgotten he was silent.
So forgetful,
he had forgotten his own name.

The cabbie
applied a sudden brake.
We approached
Glaring mirror towers of a 5-star.

I ascended into the hotel's
aromas. My hand made contact with hands
that had written poems and novels,
and my wine glass clinked with lit-fest

sponsors and arbiters of artistic taste-
n-talent. As I mutter-paneered and
rogan joshed with panelists (hush:
debating Charlie Hebdo) I wish I had asked

I wish I had asked the one in the TATA cab —
What color were the testicles of mega-merged publishers
who pulp their own author's
books? (Exhibit number one: Doniger's *Hinduism*)

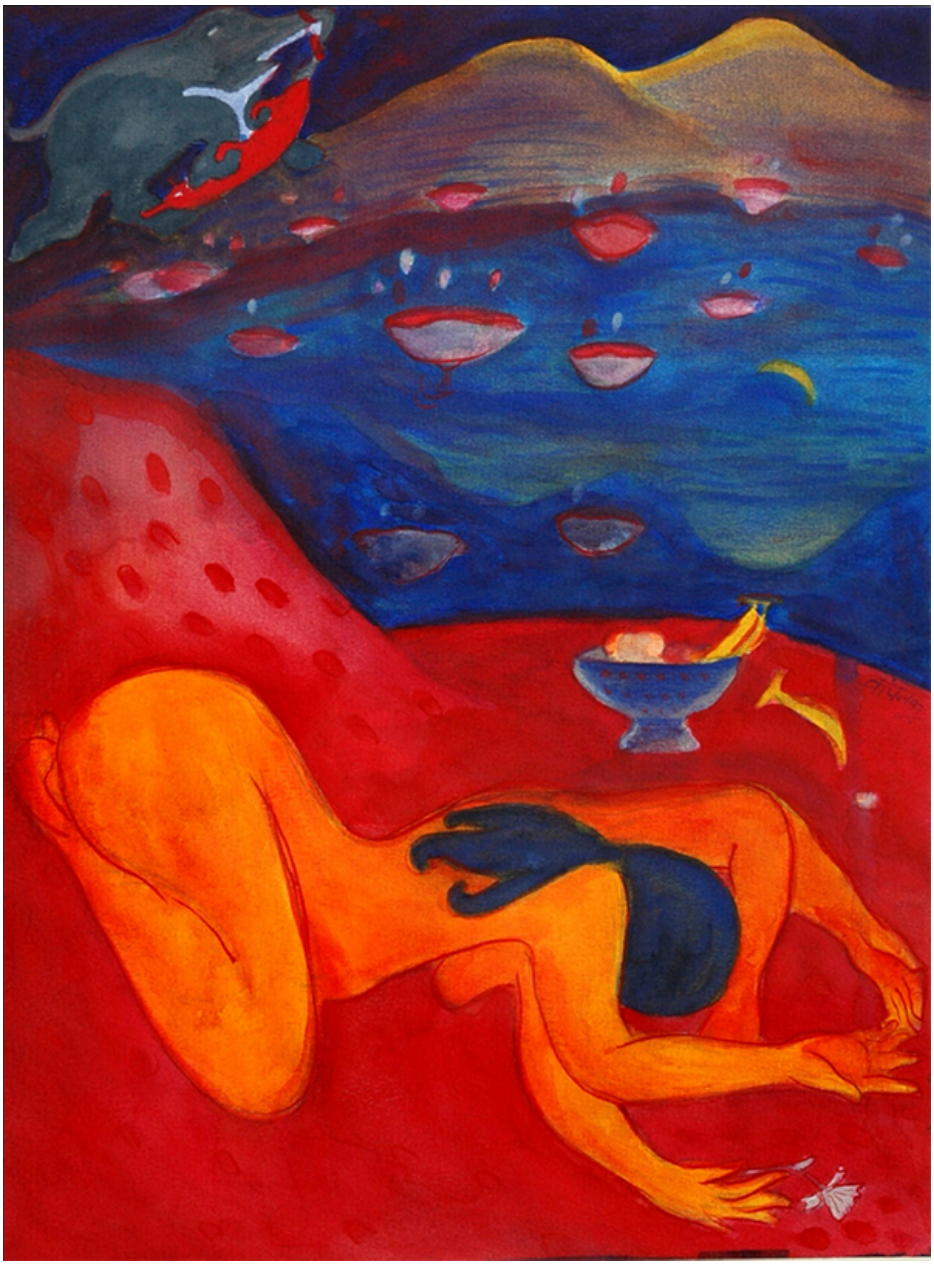
Now several months have passed by, and I am half
a continent away. And as I scribble this so-called poem
almost a shoem, the Saffron Man has gone silent again.
This time — savage lynching in Dadri.

So silent, he
seems to have forgotten he is silent.
So forgetful,
he has forgotten his own chest, his own clothes

And most eyes
are shut
or find themselves doubting
what they have seen.

# Kanchan Chander

## Gathering Scattered Petals



1997, 11.6 x 16 inches, gouache on paper

## Abhivyakti

2011, acrylic on paper

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# Untitled

Charcoal, acrylic and paper cutouts on paper

# Priya Sarukkai Chabria

## Excerpts from Andal's Songs

*Translated from Old Tamil by Priya Sarukkai Chabria*

### *Excerpts from Tiruppavai*

Gateman of Paradise, unlock the jeweled doors.
Festoons and flags fly, but higher soars our desire.
The ritual drum beats within our hearts.
His sapphire irradiation calls.

Nandagopa, lord known for largess,
Fragrant Yasoda, blossomed lotus to us whorled buds,
Gold-hearted Baladeva adorned with aurous anklets,
Lord who ripped universes, awaken all.

Nappinnai, your perfumed tresses scent the air.
Black kuyil birds call from twirling white creepers.
With bangles clinking on slender hands we pry open
your husband's bedroom door. We're here to praise Him.

Speak, Lord, asleep in a glimmering room, head resting
on Nappinnai's breasts, her flower braids curtain you.
Lady of luminous kohl-lined eyes, cast a glance in our direction.
Be generous: share Him with us for just one second.

Awaken, Warrior of the Celestials. Impartial
One, shed your slumber. Nappinnai of coral
lips, full breasts, tendril-waist, awaken. Lend
us your soft fan and bright mirror so we attend on Him.

Fulfil our desires for we laud Your virtues. Watch:

Watch the world dazzled by the gifts we've received: Rare
gems strung like songs that call from tresses to toes; silken
garments swirling rainbows around our forms, glimmering
ghee and honeyed milk that runs to our elbows as we slurp.
Govinda, You will lull quarrelling hearts to peace.

We herd cows into the forest, as they graze, we eat.
We're simple folk but fortunate beyond words: You
are our kinsman, our bond is eternal. Don't anger
at our familiarity as we babble endearments.
Forgive us – and grant our boons please.

As dawn sings the horizon open we sing radiant
words to You. We make our home in Yours, Clansman,
accept our devotion. Know we come not for jewels, only
this: through unfolding eternities we seek to serve You.
If our intent be different remould us in your light, Heart-tease!

Click here to read Tamil originals:
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Kanchan Chander; charcoal, acrylic and paper cutouts on paper

Nacciyar Tirumoli, Song Three
The Song for the Clothes
(Koli alaippatan munnam)

Awake to your call, lit by love into the dark
lily pond we plunge as small flames spluttering.
The cockerel crows, dawn dulls, the molten sun dazzles.
Our beauty is solely yours to see, our passion yours
to quench but you sleep deep in the star-strewn sky.
Arms raised we implore – Lord *strip us of our shame*,
succour us – else return to us our drape
*of worldly life* and we shan't return to your pool of light.

*come*
*come to Me*

Why are you here? We stand amid the nectarine
lotuses of our world. Why lure us, radiant darkness?
Your curls wreathed in tulasi, drip nectar; *you are*
*our nectar*, lord of illusion, but don't ask *that*
of us though we're wild with passion. Wait!
You leapt from the wild lime tree to subdue
the serpent – now *subdue yourself*. Return
our robes *or have you bewitched yourself*, beloved?

*come now*
*to Me*

All-knowing you are but playing the urchin. If our
mothers catch us we'll be banished from home.

You're cruel but act the innocent perched
on the wild lime's flowering fragrance. Your bow
destroyed Lanka; know we aren't your enemy:
we surrender. Stop torturing us. *Unclothed
by devotion we're unfit for the world*. Return
our veils and we'll slink away unnoticed.

*come as you are*
*to Me*

Our glances darted all around before we slipped
into this common pond. You shut your eyes to our
tears that pearl our breasts and rain on lotuses' thick
emerald leaves. Grace you rained on destroyed Lanka,
you reclaimed Sita, you restored a simian queen
to her lord, you reign – king of monkeys – *but
us you forsake*. *Behold us looted girls who yearn
for you*. We beseech, cast down our covering.

*come blind*
*to Me*

Carp and cutlass fish nibble our young yielding thighs
*as if with homely anxieties' thousand mouths*. We are
in pain as you will be when our brothers, shining
spears held high, chase you away. Never again will
we play, *all joy will cease*. You're black to see, black
hearted too yet our sole beloved. Unbearable beauty
climb no higher on the wild lime with our fine
inner clothes, *our tender feelings*. Return all.

*come from pain*
*to Me*

Thick the lotuses in this pond. Yet *like entwining
chores* with each step we take spiky lotus stems
wind tighter around our toes and calves –
each prick a scorpion sting *poisoned by
your disinterest*. We're trapped. Remember
you danced on water pots *to save yourself from
venomous vermin*; *now be our antidote*. Release
us, return our clothes, *stop this sham*.

*come join*
*Me in dance*

In this cramped pond we stand and suffer. Though
you're famed for kindness you're unjust. *Alone,
splendid, you drifted on the vast bliss-lit ocean*.
Lord, we are bound to you alone. Our village is far
behind, *a dim memory of our past*. Yet if our mothers
saw us display our shimmering bodies and craving
hearts they'd be cross and mistake our love. Climb
no higher on that bountiful tree, *watch over us*.

*come abandoning*
*the world to Me*

Suspecting trouble our mothers and aunts
will gather here and see us in this bemused
state. On their approach you'll vanish *to trance*
*in your ancient star-charged home*, your eyes
*fresh as lotuses trembling open* shut to our plight.
This isn't right. Radiance, prince of the cowherd
clan perched high, don't confuse us with your mystery.
*Enlighten us in your embrace instead*.

*come crossing this*
*worldly dream to Me*

When Kamsa cast his net to trawl you towards
death you escaped across the dark river but harass
us girls trembling in nakedness. Our hearts flood
with disbelief. Yasoda spoils you, there's *nothing*
*you fear*. Worse – you were suckled by a demoness
*and drank draughts of deceit*. Wild shameless
beloved, see we're clear as leaping spring water.
Child, lord, tease: protect us, return our clothes please.

*come enjoy My play*
*I ache for you*

Kotai, daughter of priest Vishnucittan of Putuvai
City of gleaming golden cupolas and high balconies
Has strung this garland of ten verses to the dark glory
Of Nampi and the games He played with the girls.
Those who master this song will shed
Suffering to ascend
To Vaikuntha and dwell there forever
At the feet of Madhava.

Click here to read Tamil originals. http://guftugu.in/koli-alaippatan-munnam/

From *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess*, translated by Priya Sarukkai Chabria and Ravi Shankar, 2015. Published with permission from Zubaan, New Delhi, and University of Chicago Press.

# Contributors

Arpana Caur has had solo exhibitions in museums all over the world, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and Museums of Modern Art in numerous cities. She won the Gold medal in the VIth International Triennale 1986, and was commissioned by the Hiroshima Museum of Modern Art for its 50th anniversary in 1995. Since 1981, she has worked on large non-commercial murals in Delhi, Bengaluru, Hamburg and Kathmandu. For more on her work, see www.arpanacaur.com.

Bolwar Mahamad Kunhi, a highly respected award-winning writer of fiction in Kannada, was the first to introduce the language, customs and traditions of a small Muslim community of coastal Karnataka into Kannada literature. He weaves in the syncretic culture of this region into his fiction. His two major novels are *Swatantrada Ota* (The March to Freedom), and *Odiri* (Read), a fictionalised biography of the Prophet Mohammed. The latter book went into its second reprint within four days of publication.

E. P. Unny is a well-known cartoonist who has worked for a range of newspapers, from *The Hindu* in Chennai to *The Sunday Mail*, *The Economic Times* and *The Indian Express*, where he is currently the Chief Political Cartoonist. His most recent publication is *Business As Usual, Journey of the Indian Express Cartoonist*. He received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Indian Institute of Cartoonists in 2009.

E. V. Ramakrishnan has published poetry and literary criticism in Malayalam and English. He has three volumes of poetry in English, and several critical works in both English and Malayalam. The latter includes *Aksharavum Aadhunikatayum*, for which he was awarded the Kerala Sahitya Akademi Award. He is presently Professor Emeritus in the School of Language, Literature and Culture Studies at the Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar.

Githa Hariharan has written fiction, essays and columns over the last three decades. Her most recent book is *Almost Home, Cities and Other Places*. For more on the author and her work, see www.githahariharan.com.

Janice Pariat is the author of a collection of short stories, *Boats on Land,* and a novel, *Seahorse*. She was awarded the Young Writer Award by the Sahitya Akademi, and the Crossword Book Award for Fiction in 2013. Her art reviews, cultural features, book reviews, fiction and poetry have featured in a wide selection of national magazines and newspapers. She is a literary columnist for *The Hindu BLInk*. She was the Charles Wallace Creative Writing Fellow at the University of Kent at Canterbury, UK, in 2014.

Jaspreet Singh is an award-winning novelist and short story writer based in Canada. His latest novel, *Helium*, on the November 1984 anti-Sikh pogrom, has been called a "powerful meditation on historical forgetting". *Helium* was an Observer Book of the Year in the UK.

K. Satchidanandan is a widely translated Malayalam poet and a bilingual writer, translator and editor. His most recent works, available in English, are *While I Write* and *Misplaced Objects and Other Poems*. For more on the author and his work, see www.satchidanandan.com.

Kanchan Chander studied printmaking and painting at art colleges in New Delhi, Santiago, Berlin, and Paris. She received the International Print Biennale Award, Bradford, UK, in 1986. She has had numerous solo and group exhibitions all over the world. For more on her work, see http://kanchansartworks.net/.

Keerti Ramachandra is a teacher by training, aptitude, and inclination; and a freelance editor and translator by virtue of being multilingual. Her translation of a Marathi novel, *A Dirge for the Damned,* was shortlisted for the Crossword Award in 2015.

Keki N. Daruwalla writes poetry and fiction, and lives in Delhi. His novel *Ancestral Affairs* was recently published by HarperCollins. He won the Commonwealth Poetry Award (Asia) for his poetry volume *Landscapes*.

Madhavikutty (Kamala Das) (1934-2009) was an iconoclastic award-winning Indian poet in English, and a fiction writer in Malayalam, besides being famous for her autobiography, *My Story* in English, and her memoirs in Malayalam. She wrote six collections of poetry in English, including *Summer in Calcutta*; in Malayalam, she wrote three novels and 11 collections of short stories.

Mangalesh Dabral, a celebrated Hindi poet, has published five books of poems, two collections of literary essays and socio-cultural commentary, a book of conversations, and a travelogue on his experiences in Iowa, where he was a fellow of the International Writing Program in 1991. He has received numerous awards, including the Shamsher Sammaan (1995), the Pahal Sammaan (1998) and the Sahitya Akademi Award (2000).

Manohar Shetty has published seven books of poems, including *Domestic Creatures* and *Living Room*. His poems have appeared in *Shenandoah*, *The Common*, *Chelsea*, *Atlanta Review* and *The Baffler* in the US, and in *The London Magazine*, *Poetry Review* and *Poetry Wales* in the UK, and have also been widely anthologised. He has lived in Goa since 1985.

Meena Alexander has recently published her eighth book of poems, *Atmospheric Embroidery*. She has been a Guggenheim Fellow in Poetry, and her works include the PEN Award-winning *Illiterate Heart*. In 2014, she was a National Fellow at the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla. She is Distinguished Professor of English, Graduate Centre, Hunter College, CUNY. For more on her work, see www.meenaalexander.com.

Meena Kandasamy is a poet and writer based in Chennai.

Merlin Moli, a Delhi-based artist, has three decades of sculpting experience with various materials. She has participated in exhibitions in India and elsewhere.

M. K. Raghavendra is a film scholar and critic. He received the National Award (the Swarna Kamal) for Best Film Critic in 1997. He has authored three volumes of academic film criticism – *Seduced by the Familiar: Narration and Meaning in Indian Popular Cinema*, *Bipolar Identity: Region, Nation and the Kannada Language Film* and *The Politics of Hindi Cinema in the New Millennium: Bollywood and the Anglophone Indian Nation*. He has also written two books on cinema for the general reader, *50 Indian Film Classics* and *Director's Cut: 50 Film-makers of the Modern Era*.

Orijit Sen is a graphic artist, cartoonist, muralist and designer. He is the author of the graphic novel *River of Stories*, as well as many other works of graphic fiction and non-fiction. He is one of the founders of People Tree – a collaborative studio and store for artists, designers and craftspeople. Sen is also Mario Miranda Chair Visiting Professor at Goa University.

Priya Kurian is a children's book illustrator, comic book artist and animator. A graduate of the National Institute of Design, Ahmedabad, she has directed educational films for the Sesame Street show (India) and the Children's Film Society of India (CFSI), and illustrated numerous children's books for various Indian publishers. She currently lives in New Delhi, filling her sketchbooks with caricatures of its residents. For more of her work, see priyakuriyan.blogspot.com and pkuriyan.blogspot.com.

Priya Sarukkai Chabria's five books include a novel, two poetry collections, speculative fiction, non-fiction in collaboration with photographer Christopher Taylor and, recently, translations from the Tamil, including *Andal: The Autobiography of a Goddess*, co-translated

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Pushpamala N. has been called "the most entertaining artist-iconoclast of contemporary Indian art". In her sharp and witty work as a sculptor, writer, curator and provocateur, and in her collaborations with writers, theatre directors and filmmakers, she seeks to subvert the dominant discourse. She lives in Bengaluru.

Sajitha Shankar was a member of the Lalit Kala Akademi, Kerala, and on the governing body of Vyloppilly Sanskriti Bhavan. She has served as a member of the jury for several art exhibitions. She has had numerous solo shows around the world, and is also the founder-director of an innovative centre for art at Kallar – the Gowri Art Institute. She works at the Garhi Studios of the Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi.

Salil Chaturvedi writes short fiction and poetry in English and Hindi. He lives in Chorao, an island in Goa, with his wife, a cat, and a dog.

Sarabjeet Garcha is a bilingual poet, editor and translator. He has published a book of poems in Hindi and two books in English, the latest being *Lullaby of the Ever-Returning*. He received a Junior Fellowship in Hindi literature from the Ministry of Culture in 2011. Sarabjeet is the co-founder and director of Copper Coin (www.coppercoin.co.in), a multilingual independent publishing company.

Shoili Kanungo is a graphic designer, illustrator and visual artist. She has worked on a range of communication design projects in Sydney and New Delhi. She is currently visiting faculty at the School of Planning and Architecture. For more on her work, see http://www.shoilikanungo.com/#/.

Vasudha Thozhur was born in 1956 in Mysore. She studied at the College of Arts and Crafts, Madras, and at the School of Art and Design in Croydon, UK. She lived and worked in Chennai between 1981–1997 and in Baroda between 1997–2013. She is currently Associate Professor in the Department of Art, Design and Performing Arts at Shiv Nadar University, Dadri.

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