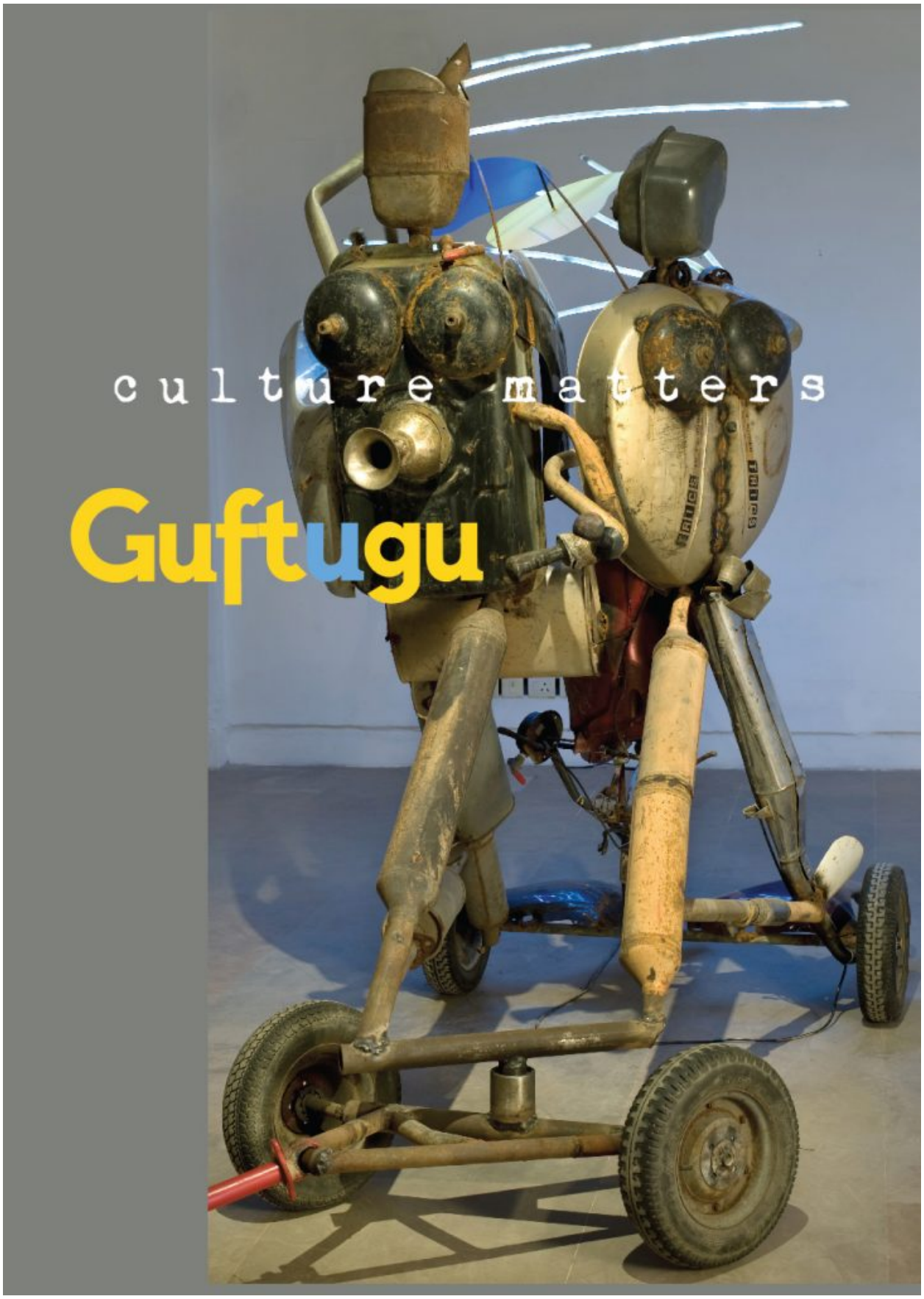
culture matters
Guftugu

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.

रज़ा फ़ाउण्डेशन | THE RAZA FOUNDATION
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From the Editors

Keeping Our Democratic Will Optimistic

Over the last two years, the business of life has been turning into a nightmare for most Indians. Art; popular culture; education; or, simply, getting on with livelihood: all are all under siege.

There are, of course, opposing voices being raised. These voices speak in every Indian language, literal and metaphorical; they are raised in every setting, from classroom and court to the media and the street; they come from every region; and from every walk of life.

What is the response to these multiple voices? In our constitutionally secular, democratic republic, how is opposition — the rights of citizens to question and oppose — being treated in the India of the current dispensation?

The voices of the opposition are not met with arguments, but with threats, abuses, and enquiries based on false charges. Often they are silenced with lathis, bullets and knives, especially when opposition comes from those perceived to be powerless. Consider the growing list:

Lynching seems to have become an acceptable response to the "crime" of disobeying the majoritarian dictat. Shooting a dissenter passes off for a morning sport. Silencing a writer is deemed a legitimate mode of literary criticism. Removing clinching evidence of arson and murder against one's ilk is seen as the best defence strategy. Minorities have become the easiest scapegoats for everything that goes wrong in the country. Writing in Urdu is treason. Interrogating communal bigotry, criticising the government's domestic or foreign policy, raising uncomfortable questions about anything from perverted educational reforms to nuclear reactors and mega-development schemes that render people homeless, declaring solidarity with the ostracised and disempowered Muslims, Dalits or tribal people are all apt to invoke the colonial sedition law. The conscientious acts of returning awards, or resigning positions, is "manufactured dissent". Every honest historian and dissenting intellectual, whatever his/her ideological persuasion is inevitably a "leftie". Myth is turned into history and history into myth through senseless rhetoric. Films are censored for absurd reasons and now a "leader" wants literature to be censored on similar lines. The only quality required to head prestigious institutions is a connection to the ruling ideology, whether it is through mere sycophancy or the Hindu communal outfits. Corruption of the worst kind has become the only legacy the new dispensation has inherited from their predecessors. A new lexicon is underway where the term "secular" is being replaced by "pseudo-secular" and anyone with a liberal socialist political persuasion is called a "Nehruvian" which is considered an effective put-down. Gandhi is being replaced by Godse as a national icon. Discrimination against Dalits is on the increase; farmers continue to be forced into suicide and workers deprived of the freedom to fight for their rights.

Yet, despite this long sampling of an even longer list, the voices of resistance have become stronger. They are determined that the feverish attempts by Modi and his court-drummers to drown the cries of the people will not succeed. There's dismay and courage on display; argument and debate; and most of all, both the recognition that India is being unmade, and the anger this recognition stirs. Recognition of the unmaking of India: as the Hindi poet Srikant Verma once said in a delayed if oblique response to the Emergency in *Magadh*: "O, King of

kings, thought is spreading like epidemic in the country." The anger that follows: Rainer Maria Rilke could have been describing people of reason in India today when he wrote, in "Duino Elegies", "We who sleep with our anger/ Laid beside us like a knife…"

We cannot be blind to any of this, to a situation in which we may be ostracised, beaten, silenced or murdered for what we eat, ask, question. But we also need that fuel for staying power: hope. We cannot lose hope that people's voices will prevail, and that we will seize and build the democracy all Indians are entitled to. No pessimism of the intellect should kill the optimism of the will, to recall Antonio Gramsci's famed phrase. And yes, we can impose our reason-driven will on those who seek to unmake India, because we must.

K. Satchidanandan
Githa Hariharan

July 2016

Labhshankar Thakar's Poems, Atul Dodiya's Paintings

Bako Exists. Imagine.

Translated by Arundhati Subramaniam and Naushil Mehta

"Bako Exists. Imagine." is a text-based work consisting of twelve paintings and an installation with nine wooden cabinets. These poetic episodes are based on a fiction, written in Gujarati by the major contemporary poet Labhshankar Thakar.

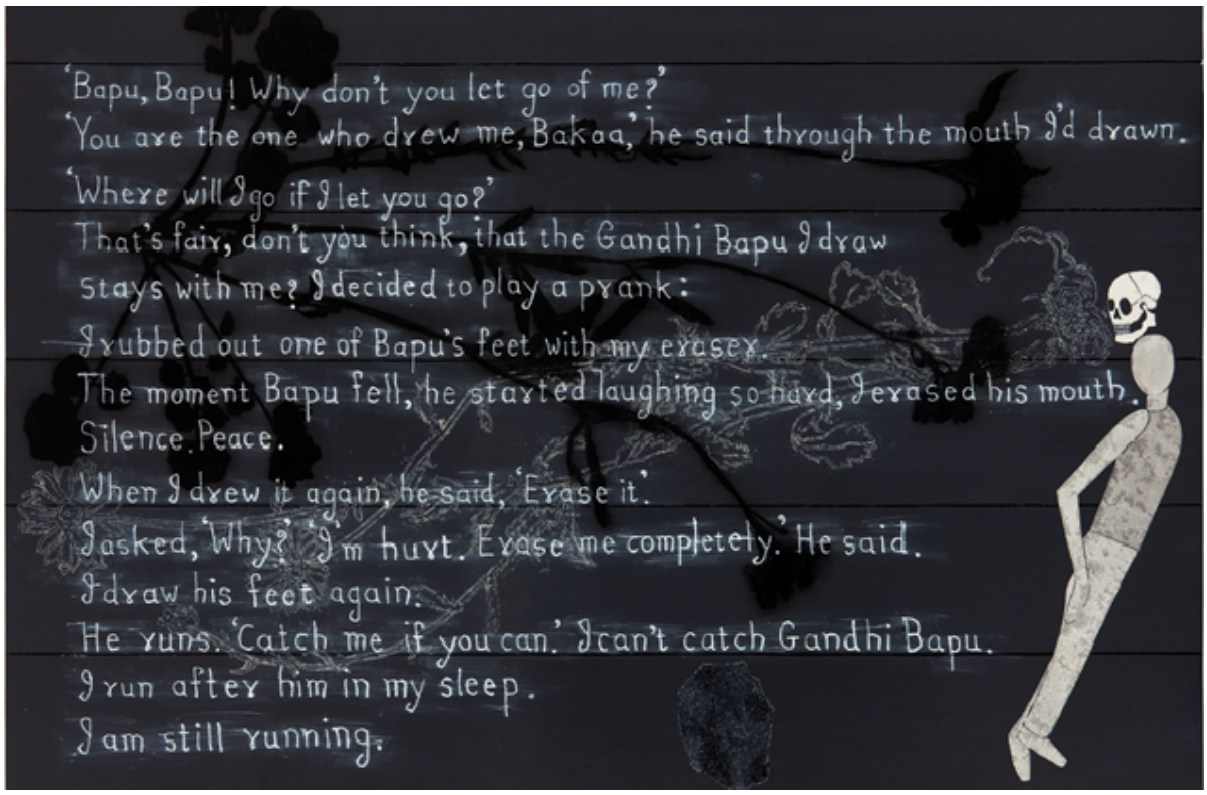
Bako is a boy who meets Bapu — Mahatma Gandhi — in his sleep. In fact, they meet each other only in their sleep, and they talk. This is a kind of fantasy which allows and evokes childhood memories. There is no fence of age between this old man and the young boy. They joke, they laugh, they talk of the abstract.

In these twelve blackboard paintings, and in the cabinet installation, autobiographical references gradually mingle and flow into a larger creative journey. The intention is that the viewer no longer remains an outsider, but subconsciously becomes an invisible character, involved with Baka and Bapu in this hilarious fantasy.

Atul Dodiya, *August 2011*

Read more about Atul Dodiya's exhibition here and his interview with the Indian Express *here*.

Erase It

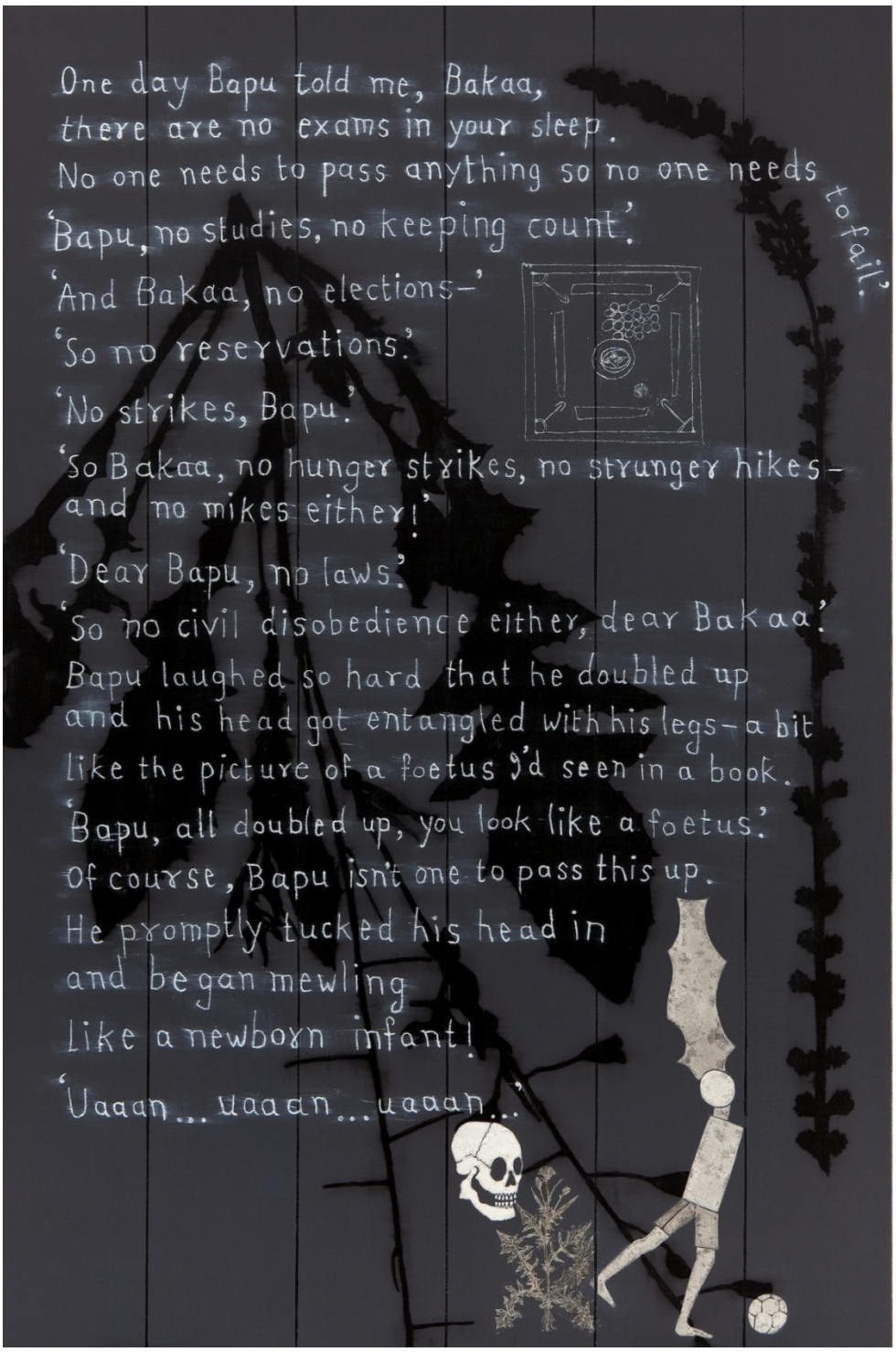


Atul Dodiya, "Erase It", 2011. Oil, acrylic, watercolour, oil bar and marble dust on canvas, 60 x 90"

The Gujarati original by Labhshankar Thakar:

'બાપુ બાપુ તમે કેમ મને છોડતા નથી ?'
મેં દોરેલા મોંથી એ બોલ્યા : 'તેં તો મને દોર્યો છે, બકા.
પછી તને છોડીને ક્યાં જાઉં ?'
એમની વાત તો સાચી જ ને ?
મેં દોરેલા ગાંધીબાપુ મારી પાસે જ રહેને ? મેં ગમ્મત કરી :
બાપુના એક પગને રબ્બરથી ભૂંસી નાખ્યો.
બાપુ તો પડ્યા નથી ને એવા હસ્યા એવા હસ્યા કે મેં રબ્બરથી મોં ભૂંસી નાખ્યું.
મૌન. નિરવતા.
પછી મેં મોં દોર્યું એટલે બોલ્યા : 'ભૂંસી નાખ'
મેં કહ્યું : 'કેમ ?' બોલ્યા : 'હું રિસાઈ ગયો છું. મને આખ્ખે આખ્ખો ભૂંસી નાખ.'
મેં તો એમના પગ પણ દોરી નાખ્યા છે ફરીથી.
એ દોડે છે. 'લે પકડ.' પકડાતા નથી ગાંધીબાપુ.
હું દોડ્યા કરું છું એમની પાછળ અને પાછળ મારી ઊંઘમાં.

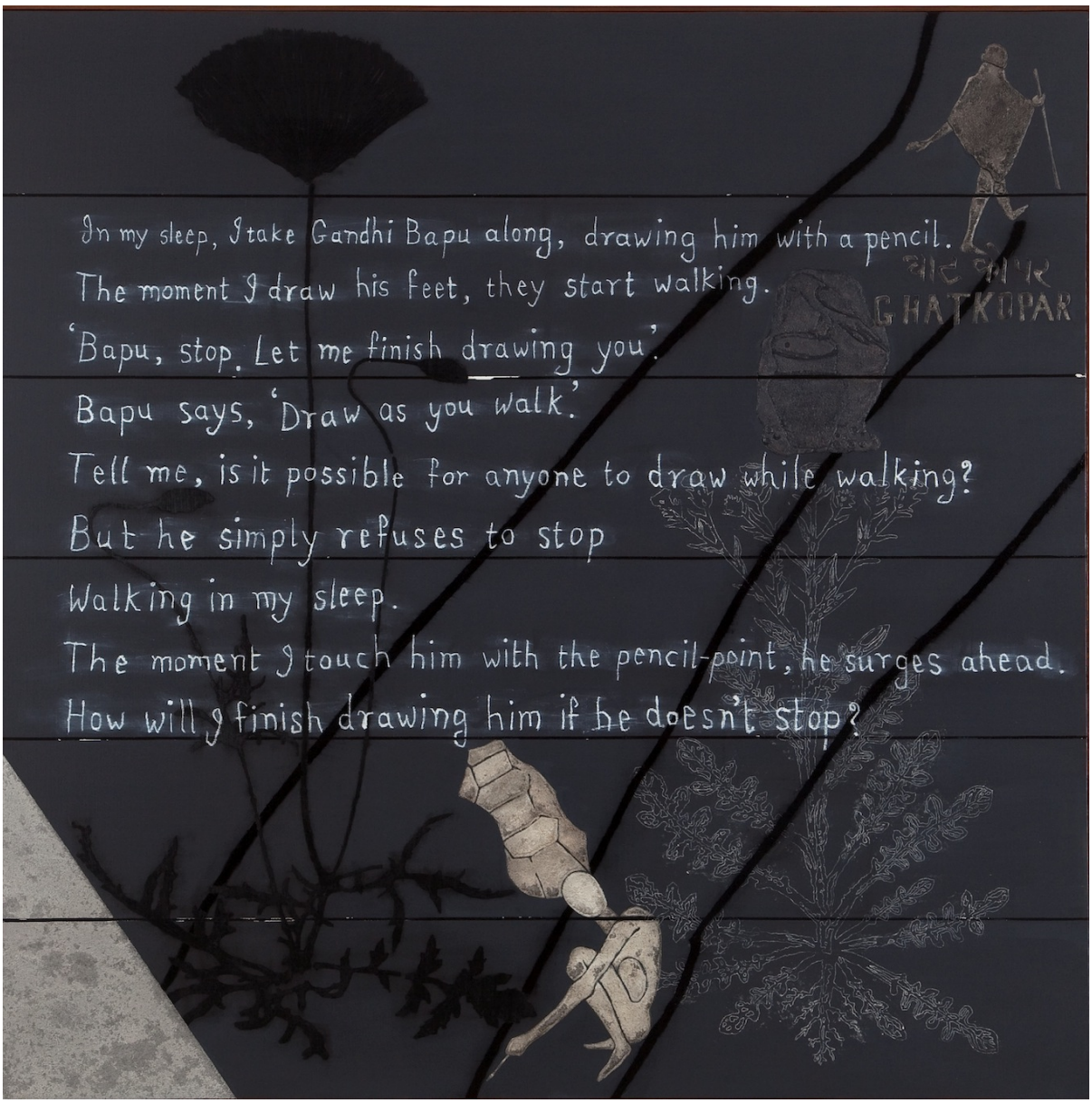
No Studies, No Keeping Count



Atul Dodiya, "No Studies, No Keeping Count", 2011. Oil, acrylic, watercolour, oil bar and marble dust on canvas, 90" x 60"

એક વાર બાપુએ મને કહ્યું : 'બકા, તારી ઊંઘમાં પરીક્ષા જ નહિ.
કોઈએ પાસ થવાનું નહિ એટલે કોઈએ નાપાસ થવાનું નહિ.'
'બાપુ, ભણવાનું પણ નહિ અને ગણવાનું પણ નહિ.'
'અને બકા, મત જ નહિ -'
'એટલે અનામત નહિ.'
'ન ધરણાં બાપુ'
'એટલે બકા ઉપવાસ ને કુપવાસ બી નહિ અને પારણાં બી નહિ.'
'ડિયર બાપુ કાનૂન જ નહિ.'
'એટલે સવિનય કાનૂનભંગ નહિ ડિયર બકા.'
બાપુ હસી હસીને બેવડ વળી ગયા એવા કે પગ-માથું એક થઈ ગયાં !
જાણે ચોપડીમાં જોયેલા ગર્ભનાં ચિત્ર જેવા.
'બાપુ આ તમે એવા બેવડ વળી ગયા છો કે ગર્ભ જેવા લાગો છો.'
બોલો બાપુ પણ કંઈ જાય એવા છે. એ તો સળવળીને માથું આગળ
લાવીને સરક્યા હોં અને પછી જન્મેલાં બાળકની જેમ અવાજ કર્યો :
ઊંવા.... ઊંવા.... ઊંવા....

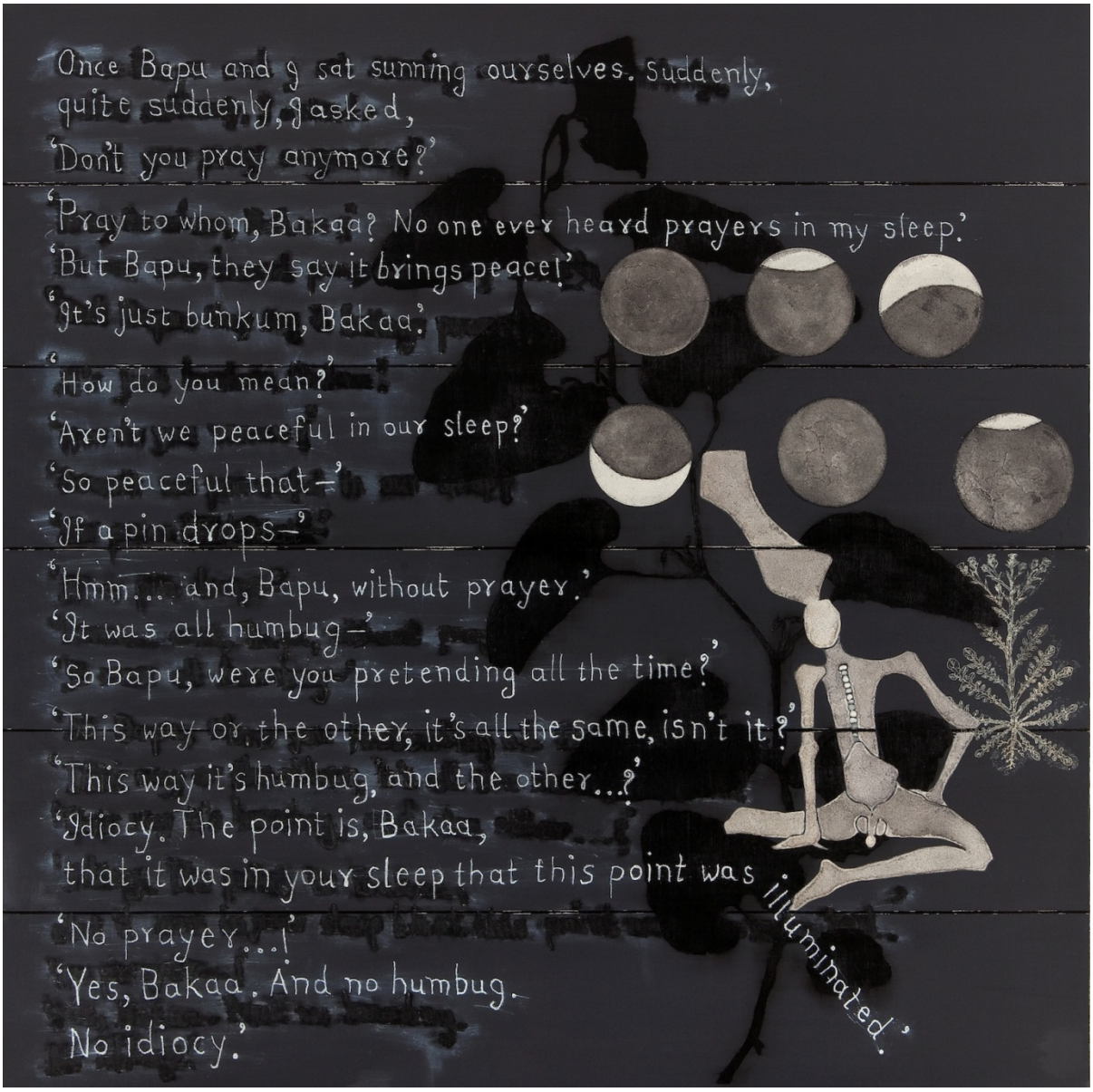
Draw as you Walk



Atul Dodiya "Draw as you Walk", 2011. Oil, acrylic, watercolour, oil bar and marble dust on canvas, 78" x 78"

ગાંધી બાપુને હું મારી ઊંઘમાં લઈ જાઉં છું દોરીને પેન્સિલથી.
એમના પગ દોરું ત્યાં તો ચાલવા માંડે.
'બાપુ ઊભા રહો. હજી મને પૂરા દોરવા તો દો.'
બાપુ કહે : 'ચાલતા ચાલતા દોર.'
બોલો ચાલતા ચાલતા કંઈ દોરી શકાય ? એ તો
અટકતા જ નથી મારી ઊંઘમાં.
હું પેન્સિલની અણી અડાડું ત્યાં તો આગળ અને આગળ.
અટકે તો પૂરેપૂરા દોરું ને !

Pray to Whom?



Atul Dodiya, "Pray to Whom?", 2011. Oil, acrylic, watercolour, oil bar and marble dust on canvas, 78" x 78"

એક વાર હું ને બાપુ તડકો ખાતા બેઠા હતા. મેં અચાનક, સાવ અચાનક પૂછ્યું.

'તે બાપુ હવે તમે પ્રેયર નથી કરતા ?'

'કોને કરીએ બકા ? મારી ઊંઘમાં તો કોઈએ સાંભળી નહિ.'

'બાપુ શાંતિ તો મળે ને ?'

'બકા, વાતો બધી.'

'કેમ વાતો બધી ?'

'આ આપણી ઊંઘમાં બકા, શાંતિ છે કે નહિ ?'

'શાંતિ એટલે બાપુ ન પૂછો વાત'

'પીન ડ્રોપ્સ...'

'હંઅ, અને બાપુ વિધાઉટ પ્રેયર.'

'ઢોંગ બધા -'

'તે બાપુ તમે ઢોંગ કરતા'તા ?'

'આમ કે તેમ બકા વાત નો એકની એકજ ને ?'

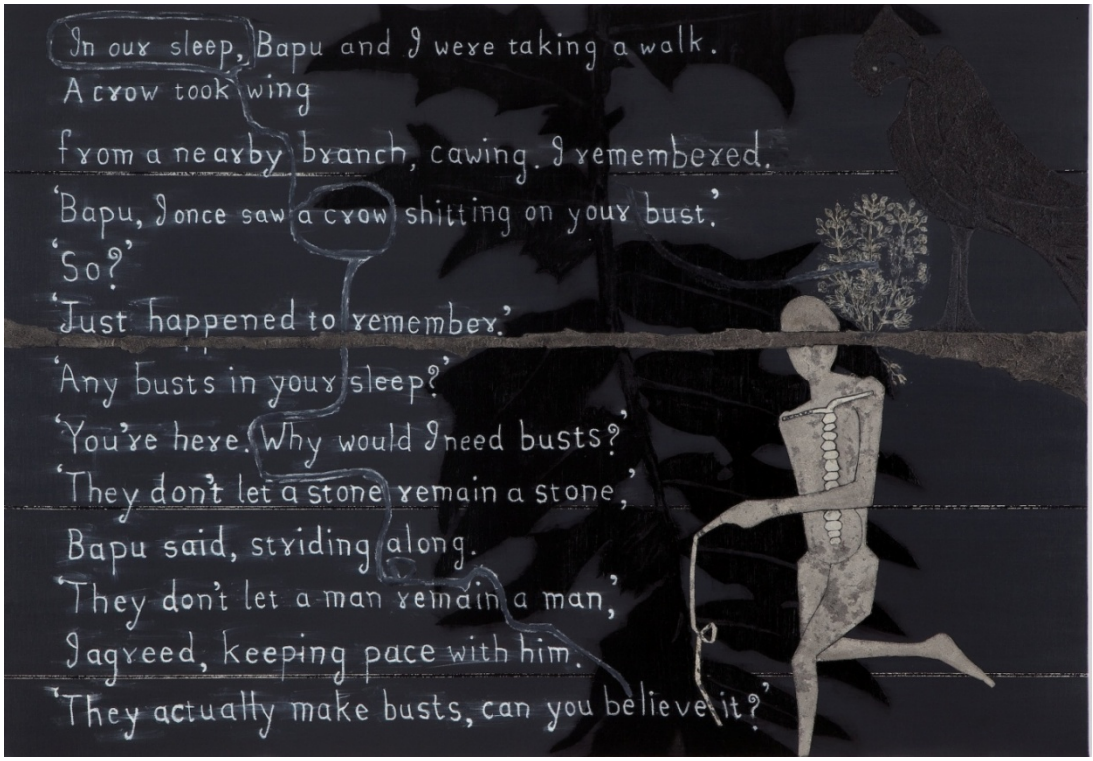
'આમ ઢોંગ બાપુ તો તેમ...?'

'બાઘાઈ. મૂળમુદ્દે બકા તારી ઊંઘમાં આ અજવાળું થયું.'

'નો પ્રેયર.'

'યેસ બકા. એન્ડ નો ઢોંગ, નો બાઘાઈ.'

A Crow



Atul Dodiya, "A Crow", 2011. Oil, acrylic, watercolour, oil bar and marble dust on canvas, 54" x 78"

અમારી ઊંઘમાં હું ને બાપુ વૉક લેતા હતા. એક કાગડો
ઝાડની ડાળ પરથી ક્રો.. ક્રો... કરતો ઊડ્યો. મને યાદ આવ્યું.
'બાપુ તમારા બાવલા પર મેં એક વાર કાગડાને ચરકતો જોયો હતો.'
'તે ?'
'જસ્ટ યાદ આવ્યું.'
'તારી ઊંઘમાં છે એકે બાવલું ?'
'તમે છો પછી બાવલાની શી જરૂર ?'
'બકા, પથ્થરને પથ્થર નથી રહેવા દેતા.' બાપુએ ચાલતા ચાલતાં કહ્યું.
'માણસને માણસ નથી રહેવા, દેતા.' ચાલતા ચાલતા મેં માથું હલાવ્યું.
'બાવલા બનાવી દે છે, બોલ.'

Vivan Sundaram

409 Ramkinkars

"Mill Recall", 2015. Moveable stage prop, motor car parts. Photo Gireesh G.V.

The starting point of the show "409 Ramkinkars" (2015) is the work of one of the pioneers of modern Indian art, Ramkinkar Baij. The challenge of paying homage to the critically inspired and restless Baij, and the equally challenging "retake" of his work and idiom for the present called for an innovative artistic strategy. Vivan Sundaram calls the creative response "a show of paintings and sculptures in spatial and theatrical terms".

The response, in fact, was more than a "show". It involved promenade or immersive theatre, so that the lawns, exhibition gallery and Mati Ghar areas of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts in Delhi became a performance space for an audience of about 150 people, walking a two-hour journey of installations, theatre-performances and songs. The journey-performance brought together art and theatre, Baij and the contemporary artist. This multi-stranded engagement also brought together artist Vivan Sundaram, former National School of Drama director Anuradha Kapur, and the theatre group VIVADI.

Guftugu *spoke to Vivan Sundaram about the project.*

Extracts from an interview with Vivan Sundaram

Revisiting a historical figure in art

How would a contemporary artist return to a historical figure? …Not in terms of biography or heroic representation, but in a creative, critical way? …My interest is in repositioning him [Ramkinkar Baij] in terms of the contemporary. My engagement with installation art already implies a very different spatial aspect, an architectural context, and repositions any work within that defined space. …Ramkinkar was asked, "Are you a sculptor or a painter?" He said "I ride two horses." But there's a third horse he didn't mention: theatre, theatre in all forms. He did set designs. He made the comment "I'd like the viewers to first go on stage and look at the sets". He also directed plays and acted in them; very little information about them remains.

On 409 Ramkinkars

There is this big hall (120 feet by 40 feet) and there are twelve distinct spaces. So I said let me propose from Ramkinkar's paintings, mainly, certain themes that he dealt with. They ranged from women to famine, and playful relationships of the mother and child. He was very inclusive, both in his theme as well as in the way he dealt with them in terms of the form… His work was very open-ended, and in a sense his own crossing over multiple isms of modernism… was something I could empathetically relate to and rework.

Sets were made on each of these spaces based on these works. Santanu Bose directed the performance in these spaces. All of those twelve spaces — which finally had thirty characters – had performances happening at the same time… This title –"409" is just to signal that it is something contemporary.

…The audience enters and walks around, comes to the studio space, and goes to where these performances are taking place. They enter from two sides. It was like a mela… There was an intentional chaotic anarchy… It's all in fragments. It is like a table of contents and this is the range of issues that Ramkinkar dealt with. Each form was different and the actors ranged from a solo person to up to three to five women in one space. This set the tone for a different kind of theatrical experience, and what would be a part of immersive theatre, because in each of these spaces one had to walk around; there was a central isle and one could go around and in and out of it.

Mukti Ravi Das with armature of “Santal Family”. Photo Gireesh G.V.

There is an amusing story: Ramkinkar had decided that the two workers [in “Mill Call”] are going to be women — whereas “Santhal Family” has a man, woman, children and a dog — and both are striding forward. He did them outdoors, and made an armature of bamboo initially. This fell down, following which he made a metal one. Then, like an action painting, he would throw the cement which would stick, and slightly model it. There was a very performative aspect to this. He would also work in the night and have a light. One night Nandalal Bose turned up, and he looked at it and said, “Why are you making both of them look in front? Why don’t you turn one of them to look back?” It would then have a different posture, and Ramkinkar immediately realised that it was too simplistic to make them just look ahead, in one direction. He then broke the head and turned the body around.

Movement as an aesthetic agenda in “Mill Call” and its reworking in “Mill Recall”

“Mill Call” was made in 1956 and the [backdrop of the] peasant uprising was already a part of the working class. The title “Mill Call” suggests that the tribal has gone to the factory for work. They are not used to the siren and they run. Movement, Ramkinkar said, was something absolutely central to his aesthetic agenda, and he brought in movement wherever he could. Even in the “Santhal Family”, which was done in 1937, the gate is a very gentle one and the tribal is in a semi-dance pose, with a particular lightness, and there is a whole family. The sense of gate and speed is very different from “Mill Call” where they are literally rushing and running for work. …Taking the cue from his interest in movement, one of the things with velocity and movement in the modern world is the motor car, so everything here (in “Mill Recall”) is made of

motor car parts. …There is an open-air theatre on one side and people come out when they hear a siren… It starts moving towards the open-air theatre with people following it. Then it enters the stage and makes an exit. It is being used as a prop, signalling the aspect of the "found object" and the "ready-made". When the play ends, it again returns and exits. So the sculpture was used as a prop.

"An older artist can inspire a leap into the unknown"

The other remarkable thing, about which very little is known, is about the art historian Stella Kramrisch, who actually became very well known for engaging with traditional Indian sculpture. Tagore seems to have met her somewhere and he invited her. She was also quite engaged in modern contemporary art. So in 1923, she came and spent almost six to eight months, speaking about Dadaism and Surrealism. And Ramkinkar always said, "I only heard about these lectures; I was never there." But he was the one who took the spirit of the most avant-garde modernism at that time, into his body, soul and mind… Nandalal Bose told Ramkinkar that "If you want to really develop as an artist, you have to read, go to the library and even learn English; only then will you grow." He became a voracious reader and because of Tagore's influence, books on modern art were already in the library… People say that modern art came later on — whether it's Amrita Sher-Gil or the Bombay Progressives — but this aspect has been hugely undermined. That part was very important for me — to link to this moment of change and break in Ramkinkar's work.

…Tagore leapt completely as a self-taught artist into modernism, and he was already familiar with European modernism — he had visited places and seen Expressionist works. He propagated that, and he found Ramkinkar doing this kind of work — he saw the sculpture "Sujata" and asked, "Who has done this?" and then said "Make more, fill the whole place! Do you know in the West they have these confident and monumental sculptures?" Tagore was an international modernist and gave him that signal. That whole spirit and the rest of him — his multiple mediums, theatre and performance — completely influenced him.

The 1991 break in the Indian art world

In reflecting on my own practice and modern Indian art, a break took place as late as post-Independence art till 1990 — I would say almost ninety-seven percent was painting and sculpture. The word "avant-garde" was criticised by many people… and all of us were influenced by our living traditions. It took till 1991 for this "break", which is when artists started using new medium and materials, bringing in photography, video and installation. It's also a historical juncture with the collapse of the Soviet Union. In India itself, electronic media opens itself out, and capitalism starts entering… This "break" was a shift away from the art object as a commodity which circulates in the market, like traditional painting and sculpture. However, once you enter into installation art, the "found object", and into things that are ephemeral, they certainly do not appear in auction houses. It is only later that galleries realised that they should, once in a while, support some aspect of installation art which won't sell… There was a boom in the early 2000s in the price of everybody's work. There was speculation about young artists whose works then would be sold for tens of thousands and lakhs of rupees. In one sense, it created a whole flank of Indian artists

who could be called fulltime professional artists. Their skills and infrastructure greatly improved, and they could have assistance. The demand was so much that they were producing large amounts of work. On the one hand it was feeding a market, but it also gave them the liberty to do ambitious non-conformist works. The political climate post Babri Masjid, the riots in Bombay and the aggressive frontal attack of the BJP also deeply affected artists.

Installation art has very little written about in a complex way. There is a word which emerged from the radical movement in the 60s initiated by Italians called “Arte Povera”. It means “poor art” and was practised early on, since the Dadaists. The “idea” was foregrounded. Many collages, for instance, were made by things that were not going to necessarily last. It is the unit or element that can generate both a form and an idea, which is repositioned with the notion of skill, because art was largely seen as how you could draw or sculpt well. This was a “break” which did not come from Picasso, as generally thought, but from Duchamp because he critiqued the notion of skill. For instance, if an object was placed on a table as a work of art, then you would have to think about what made it a work of art. Installation art grew and developed only in the late 60s. It curiously came about when some well-known curator informally put up an exhibition. The idea of curating became a distinct category only in the 60s where you brought together different works of art. The curator would have an argument, would see something happening, and would want to bring this configuration to start a dialogue across disciplines, mediums, etc. The word “install”, suddenly became “installation” and then became “installation art”. Initially there were singular objects but installation art meant that it became spatial. It then took on architecture; sculpture went off the pedestal and came to the floor. So it is humble, formal, minimal, ephemeral, coming from the “Arte Povera”, on the one hand, and then you can get to spectacular scales.

…Site specific installation means it has to be destroyed. The destruction of the work then exists only as a document… The translation into text, into critiquing and theorising it, is also a repositioning or a renewed understanding of what installation is both historically – in India – and in its theorising in the West… This understanding of something that has taken place sometime ago, and how it articulates itself today, is bringing the politics of art in a richer and complex way.

Listen to the full conversation here

Adil Jussawalla

Occcupation

S. Vijayaraghavan, “Existence”, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 4 x 3’

I’m the fire that comes with forests.
I’m entitled to them –
floor, top, and everything in between.
Though I got no evolution,
I frequently thank it for keeping things limited,
for denying trees vertebrae, opposable thumbs,
carpi, things like that.
Imagine trees with left-and-right hands
that could douse me as I sprang on them.
I’d have been quite put out. Haha!
…Yes.

Thank *you* too, man,
for giving my birth a much-needed nudge
whenever lightning failed.
I understand the unthinkable: Pouf!
THAT.
What I don't understand is people
who think they've grown roots, or worse,
who go looking for them as though they were shopping.

See what I'll do to this rooted thing I've just occupied,
how I keep up the pressure,
exalt my right to its land as it burns.

You won't hear it screaming but *I* will.
See what I do.
See what I do.

Dil-o-Danish

A Reading from Krishna Sobti's celebrated novel

Watch the reading here

Krishna Sobti's epic novel *Dil-o-Danish* is set in the Delhi of the 1920s. It weaves a web of relationships that maps the Ganga-Jamni tehzib of the city. Languages, tastes and loves interlace in complex ways, so that we experience a life history – not only of two families in Delhi, but also of the city itself.

The decision to do a durational reading of the novel for three hours or more came about for two reasons. We wanted to keep the registers of language in the novel – Hindustani, Urdu Hindi – intact. We also wanted to enunciate the subtly inflected speech patterns used by Krishna Sobti so that they brought to mind the various "vocalities" of North India. And we hoped to retain these cadences without any editorial intervention, and without any "characterisation" by the actors. We did not want this world to bustle with "actorly physicalisation" because we thought that would come in the way of aural pleasure. The actors sat on a takht with their books in their hands. They read evenly rather than acted. We wanted the audience to immerse itself in a world created principally by listening.

The reading took place in the lawns of a private house in Jamia Nagar where a green shamiana was constructed. The shamiana created a sense of being in a gazebo or a pavilion, as well as a baithak. A green carpet was laid out on the lawn, again emphasising the inside/outside experience of the structure. Angeethis were placed to counter the December cold. There was an old chandelier hired from a shop of odd light fixtures, an assortment of chairs, shawls, cutlery and crockery borrowed from friends and actors, and also copies of *Dil-o-Danish* should the audience want to hear and read together.

Listening, not acting, created a world; and listening channelled the atmospheres in the novel towards the eyes, like the images in a dream. We felt that immersion in these worlds was possible by stretching the protocols of performance time.

Durational readings elongate time out of the "habitual mode" or the current default mode, that standard unit of experience dictated not just by clocks, but by the now of the city – work, leisure, commuting, breakfast, lunch, dinner, bus, metro, auto rickshaw, Ola – into another rhythm. They prepare us to hear a polyphonous moment when Delhi lived slow, quite different from the Delhi NCR we now know. By stretching time, durational readings also test the stamina of both reader and listener; together, we shed the hectic pace of today. Then we enter the rooms, the havelis, the streets and the shops of old Delhi. The atmospheres that form them seep into us. The interconnections of environmental qualities and human emotional states that make up these atmospheres seep into us. They propel us into an act of remembering. What we remember is an experience of our own felt memory of the city that has passed.

Anuradha Kapur

Akhil Katyal

Four Poems: The Hindus Never Ate Beef*

Santanu Mitra, “The Bite”, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 24 x 24”

Dehradun, 1990

As a kid I used to confuse my d’s
with my g’s, and that bit of dyslexia

didn’t really become a problem till
I once spelt ‘God’ wrong. That day,

the teacher wrote a strictly worded
letter to my parents, and asked me

to behave myself. Also, as a kid,
I could not pronounce the letter ‘r,’

so till I was sent to some summer
vacation speech correction classes

at age 5, I used to say, “Aam ji ki
jai,” “Aam ji ki jai,” — then a teacher

taught me to hold my tongue against the
ceiling of my mouth and then throw it out

quivering, ‘R,’ ‘Rrrr,’ she wrenched it
out of me, over many sessions, “Ram,”

until then, I did not know God was so
much effort, till they made him tremble

on the tip of my tongue, God was only
a little joke about mangoes.

The Hindus never ate beef*

(thanks to B.R. Ambedkar and Ram Puniyani)

*except
charmakars (cobblers) did,
bhattas (soldiers) did,
natas (actors) did,
and so did Dasas & Medas & Vratas & Bhillas,
all sunk their teeth afresh,
when served cow’s flesh,
&
they were joined by (drum-beat) Vedic Gods,
Indra was fond of bull’s meat,
& Agni loved both bull and cow,
& old books even suggest how
& what kind of cow should be
sacrificed for which God, see
that you get
a dwarf ox for Vishnu,
& a big horned bull for Indra,
& a black cow for Pushan, & etc. etc.,
so that whenever the Gods were in the mood,
“verily the cow [was] food,”
and secretly, even now,
the Bhakts who have a beef but still eat it,
they always heave a sigh of relief,
knowing their Vivekananda
(they don’t know how to treat it, it shakes their belief)
liked Biceps, Bhagwad & [yolo] Beef.

Namesakes

On the second date, he asked,
“What does your name mean?”

“It means the whole universe, all
of it, the whole damned thing,” I
said, quite tipsy, and elated, but
found myself very soon deflated,
“Akhil,” he said – being creepy –
“isn’t that the first word of ABVP?”

Maruti Swift

(thanks to Anumeha Yadav, Satish Dalal and Imaan Khan)

It takes a 1248cc diesel engine,
4 cylinders,
16 valves,
a max. torque of 190 newton meters
@ 2000 revolutions every fuckin’ minute,

it takes rack & pinion steering
& drum brakes & disc brakes
& steel tyres,

it takes one thousand five hundred kilos of metal
moving, always moving
in 48 second loops on the assembly-line,

painted & cut & bolted & fed
by workers.

It
takes
workers

on 9 hour shifts,
one 30min lunch break,
and two 7 minute tea-cum-toilet breaks
(those two-seconds-late-&-pay-cut-breaks)

it takes “if my leg itched, I do not even
have time to scratch it,”

it takes waiting
for one’s own fingers

it takes white-hot “discipline” cut by teeth,
welded by metal to townships
with smoke-grey evenings

it takes 13 days of occupation,
months of sit-ins, lock-outs, it takes 147 workers
arrested on manufactured evidence,

to make one of these.

The Things that Fear Needs

New Bangla Poetry Selected by Subhro Bandopadhyay

Santanu Mitra, “Charu and Fire”, 2010, acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48″

অনমিখি পাত্র / Animikh Patra

যা যা ভয়রে কাজে লাগে

যা যা ভয়রে কাজে লাগেঃ

ক। একটা সময়বাঁধানে া দওেয়াল ঘড়ি (পনে্ডুলাম অবশ্যই দুলবে)
খ। সাদা কাগজরে মতে া অসীম হয়ে থাকা (আর ভয় পাওয়া মুখরে উপমা)
গ। ঐ তে া, দরজা একটু খুলে গলে। দমকা হাওয়া এলে া। (লক্ষ্যণীয় ‘ঐ’ বলে তর্জনী দখোনে া)
ঘ। আলে া না নভিলওে চলব। আলে া য় মানুষ ও তে া লুকে াতে পারে না !
ঙ। ফুটফুটে নজিরে শরীর। স্নানে তাজা। (বশিুদ্ধতা রক্ষা হয় এতে)
চ। দু-একটা শব্দ মহিনি। (না থাকলে ঘররে আত্মা মানুষরে ভতির-বাহরি এক করে দয়ে)
ছ। টানা একটা অবস্থা।

যখন ঘররে অংশগুলে া জ্যান্ত হয়ে ওঠ। কথার মতন হচ্ছ, কন্তিু, আওয়াজরে টরে হচ্ছে না

তার মান, কখন যনে পর্দা উঠে গছে। যার অপক্ষো, স অনকে আগে এস, আমার মধ্যে বস আছে

The Things that Fear Needs

The things that fear needs:

a. A wall clock that keeps the time in check (the pendulum must definitely oscillate)
b. Infinity like a white paper (and a simile for a horrified face)
c. There, the door opens slightly. A gush of wind enters abruptly (Saying “there”, pointing it out with a forefinger)
d. Okay if the lights don’t go off. People can’t hide even in the light!
e. Your lovely body. Fresh after a bath. (Impurities can be kept in check by this)
f. Some faint noise, one or two. (Otherwise, the spirit of the room flattens both the core and surface of man)
g. A continued state.
While parts of the room become alive. Like speech that can’t be heard.

This means you do not know when the curtain has been raised. The one I have been waiting for has come and taken a seat inside me a while ago.

পাহাড়ি

শ্রুতমিধুরতা আমি বর্জন করছে।ি এক পাহাড়ি কুয়াশায়
জীবনরে পা-দানটিি হারয়িে গয়িছে।ে পাহাড় যাদরে ভাল ো লাগে
তাদরে জন্য জুড়ে দয়িছেি আনাড়ি ড্রাইভার, যে কে ানে ো খাদরে নচিে
ভগ্নাংশ জপিরে। রডে ো ডনেড্রন ঝরে গছে
আমাকে নরিন্তর আমার বাইরে দখেতে পয়েে, সারা দহে
ফুটয়িে তুলছেি আমি ধ্বনরি বীভৎস শরিা
তাড়া করে বড়োনে ো র মতে ো

Hilly

I have given up on words sweet to the ear. In a mountain fog

my life’s pedestal has been lost. For those who like the mountains,
I have arranged for an anari driver of some car-debris which
fell over the ridge. The rhododendron has shed itself
Looking at my outer skin all the time, I have
blossomed – all over my body – horrible veins of speech
They run after me like a holiday

Translated by the poet and Souradeep Roy.

চামেলির জন্য কবিতাগুচ্ছ

১

কার চটি পা-য় দিয়ে এত পথ পেরিয়ে এলাম?
খুলে ফেলে যাচ্ছি আজ, বাকি পথ খালিপায়ে যাব
ধুলো থেকে মাথা তুলে ধুলোয় লুটিয়ে পড়বে বলে
যেভাবে ফুটেছে ফুল আমিও তেমন দিলখোলা
জলের প্রস্তাব নিয়ে হেঁটে যাব আগুনের দিকে

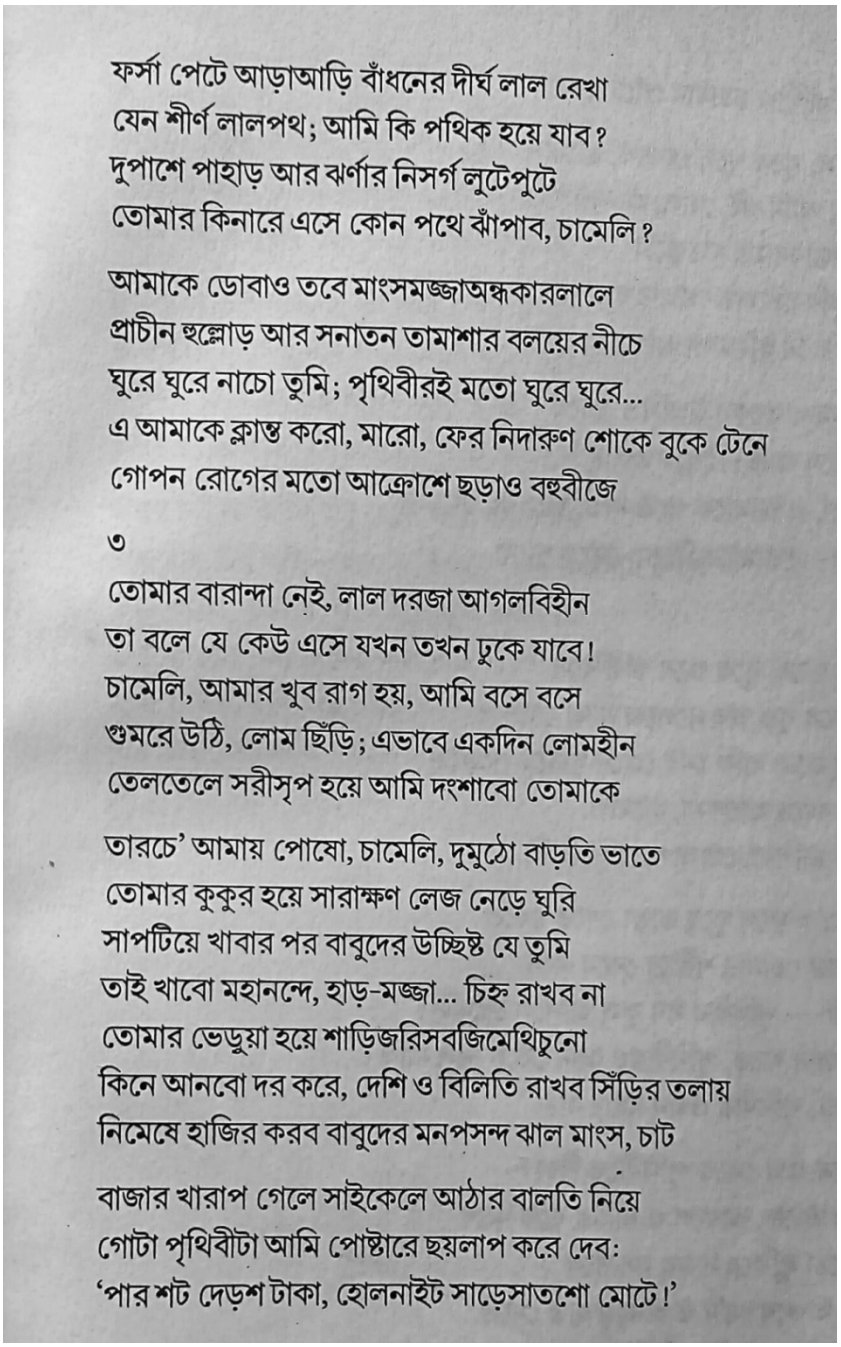
অন্যের নির্দেশ শুনে যে হাত শানায় তরবারি
অন্যের নির্দেশে ছুঁড়ে ফ্যালে
সে হাত আমার ভেবে কতবার তোমার দুহাতে
রেখেছি, কত যে হাতসাফাইয়ের খেলা শিখে আমি
শিশুকে করেছি অন্ধ, বিছানায় টেনেছি নারীকে
এই নষ্ট হাতও তবে ছুঁড়ে ফেলে যেতে হবে আজ!
ধার করা বাক্যবাণ, পোষমানা মেধার কারসাজি
নুড়ি কাঁকড়ের মতো পথের দুপাশে ফেলে রেখে
আলোয় আলোর মতো হাওয়ায় হাওয়ার মতো মিশে
চলে যাব লালামূত্রডেটলগন্ধের ছায়ানীড়ে

ফুরফুরে বাতাস হয়ে দোল দেব তোমায়, চামেলি

২

স্বর্গ থেকে নেমে আসছি, চামেলি, তোমার বিছানায়
ফুলফুল চাদর পাতো, খালি জগ ভর্তি করে আনো
ওভাবে পা ফাঁক করে শুয়োনা, চামেলি
আমি লুঙ্গিছাপ জগুবাবু নই
আমার ভণিতা লাগে
পাতার আড়াল লাগে সচেতন আপেলের মতো

চম্পা আমি পথে পথে দেখি রোজ নানানরকম
চামেলি দেখিনি আমি, কোনওদিন দেখিনি, চামেলি
দেখিনি কখনও আমি এরকম শাড়ি খুলে খুলে
তোমার মেরুণ শায়া, মায়াগিঁট আলগা করে দিলে



ফর্সা পেটে আড়াআড়ি বাঁধনের দীর্ঘ লাল রেখা
যেন শীর্ণ লালপথ; আমি কি পথিক হয়ে যাব?
দুপাশে পাহাড় আর ঝর্ণার নিসর্গ লুটেপুটে
তোমার কিনারে এসে কোন পথে ঝাঁপাব, চামেলি?

আমাকে ডোবাও তবে মাংসমজ্জাঅন্ধকারলালে
প্রাচীন হুল্লোড় আর সনাতন তামাশার বলয়ের নীচে
ঘুরে ঘুরে নাচো তুমি; পৃথিবীরই মতো ঘুরে ঘুরে...
এ আমাকে ক্লান্ত করো, মারো, ফের নিদারুণ শোকে বুকে টেনে
গোপন রোগের মতো আক্রোশে ছড়াও বহুবীজে

৩

তোমার বারান্দা নেই, লাল দরজা আগলবিহীন
তা বলে যে কেউ এসে যখন তখন ঢুকে যাবে!
চামেলি, আমার খুব রাগ হয়, আমি বসে বসে
গুমরে উঠি, লোম ছিঁড়ি; এভাবে একদিন লোমহীন
তেলতেলে সরীসৃপ হয়ে আমি দংশাবো তোমাকে

তারচে' আমায় পোষো, চামেলি, দুমুঠো বাড়তি ভাতে
তোমার কুকুর হয়ে সারাক্ষণ লেজ নেড়ে ঘুরি
সাপটিয়ে খাবার পর বাবুদের উচ্ছিষ্ট যে তুমি
তাই খাবো মহানন্দে, হাড়-মজ্জা... চিহ্ন রাখব না
তোমার ভেড়ুয়া হয়ে শাড়িজরিসবজিমেথিচুনো
কিনে আনবো দর করে, দেশি ও বিলিতি রাখব সিঁড়ির তলায়
নিমেষে হাজির করব বাবুদের মনপসন্দ ঝাল মাংস, চাট

বাজার খারাপ গেলে সাইকেলে আঠার বালতি নিয়ে
গোটা পৃথিবীটা আমি পোষ্টারে ছয়লাপ করে দেব:
'পার শট দেড়শ টাকা, হোলনাইট সাড়েসাতশো মোটে!'

Verses for Chameli

I

Whose shoes did I wear to travel so far?
I'll take them off today, walk the rest of the path barefoot
Like a flower that bloomed after raising its head up from the dust
only to fall back into it, I will, while carrying a proposal for the water,
walk towards the fire without care

These hands are easily satisfied with holding the sword at someone else's will
They throw it away at someone else's will as well
I have thought those hands to be mine and kept them
between yours, I have learnt so many tricks with these hands
have made the child blind, pulled a woman to the bed
I have to throw away even these two hands today!
I'll take the loan words, the tricky untamed intellect
and leave them on the two sides of the road like pebbles and stone chips
I'll mix with the light like light, mix with the wind like wind
and then go to the shadowy nest of red piss smelling of Dettol

I'll become a lonely breeze and put colour on you, Chameli

II

I'm coming down from heaven, Chameli, spread a flowery sheet
on your bed, fill up your empty jug
Don't spread your legs like that and sleep, Chameli
I'm not that fucking lungichap Jagubabu
I need a prologue
I need a gap between two leaves like a vigilant apple

I see many Champas everyday, everywhere in a variety of trades
but I haven't seen a Chameli, never seen you, never Chameli
While unwrapping, haven't seen a saree like this
After unknotting the string of your maroon petticoat,
the red line across your fair belly
is like a lean red path; will I become a traveller here?
Between mountains on both sides and the thrashing of a waterfall
I will come to your edge, onto which road should I jump, Chameli?

Then let me dip into the crimson darkness of the fleshy marrow
Beneath the orbit of sanatan tamasha's ancient bustle
dance in a circle; spin the way the earth spins…
This tires me, hits me, in a merciless mourning pulls me to its heart
Like a hidden disease spread yourself across various seeds in vengeance

III

You don't have a veranda, your red door is boltless
But does that mean anyone can creep in anytime?
Chameli, I get very angry, I sit haughty,
pull my body hair; this way I will
turn into a hairless serpent, I will tear into you

Better if you adopt me, Chameli, for two handfuls of homemade rice
Let me become a dog and wag my tail as I roam all the time
After the babus have had their sumptuous meal, you will have the leftovers

from their plate in great joy, the bone-marrow…
I will become your procurer and buy the saree-silver thread-methi-lime
after bargaining for them, keep the desi and foreign liquor below the stairs
will bring the babus' favourite chilly chicken, chaat in a moment

If the market is down, I will take a bucket full of glue in my cycle
and cover up the entire planet with posters:
"One fifty per shot; just seven fifty bucks for the whole night!"

Translated by Sankar Basu and Souradeep Roy.

Subhadip Mitra

এইট বি মিজের

সক্কিার দু-পঠিই আসলে এক, হডে টলে-এ ভদে নহৈ
সে শুধু জানে ক্ষমতার টকিি সিব বাঁধা কার হাতে,
অকালবে াধনে তাই জগেছেলি যারা প্রতবিাদী ফসলরে গানে
প্রতরিে াধ জল দাও তাদরে, সার দাও দাও পর্যাপ্ত বৃষ্টি
এইট বি মিজেরে বাঁধা থাক সে সব গান নরিন্তর, আগামীর দকিে।
যতবার তুমি বাঁধতে যাবে সইে সুর,
লাথি, ঘুসি, নখ দাঁত নমে আসবে বারবার। ভয় পয়ে না
জনে া তাদরেও রাখতে হবে কন্ট্রাপয়ন্টে াল।
আর সইে সজীব অর্কস্ট্রেশনে হটেঁ যাব আমরা
স্বপ্নরে মধ্যে হানা দবে বসন্তরে বজ্রনর্িঘে াষ,
মঘেনাদ ভয়ে যমেত কাঁপলি রাম-সনো
নডিক দমে বলে স্বচ্ছোচারী প্রসেডিন্টে ত্রাসে মরে,
তমেনি বলষ্ঠি মূর্ছনায় পা চালাবে যাদবপুর, একা নয়,
নস্পিৃহ একুশ শতকরে সমস্ত হৃদয় ছনেে নয়িে।

8B Major

The two sides of the coin are the same, its head and tail don't differ,
it just knows whose hands power is tied to.
So for those who rose up in untimely songs of protesting crops,
give waters of resistance, give manure, give them ample rain.
Let those endless songs remain tuned at 8B Major, walking towards the future.
Each time you try to tune that pitch
blows, kicks, nails, teeth will come down over you. Don't be afraid.
Remember you have to keep them contrapuntal too.
And through that vivacious orchestration we will walk

The roar of thunder in the spring will raid dreams
How Ram's rabble-army trembles in the fear of Meghnad,[1]
How the despotic President fears even while shouting "Nuke them",
In that sturdy cadence will Jadavpur walk, not alone,
but after having sieved through the heart of the indifferent 21st century.

Translated by the poet and Souradeep Roy.

Notes:

1. The line in the original Bengali version is a quote from Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Meghnadbadh Kavya* (*The Assassination of Meghnad*).

This poem was written after the police atrocity in Jadavpur University and which led to the 'Hok Kalorob' movement by students. 8B is the name of the bus stand opposite the campus and the four-way crossing as well.

Sanghamitra Halder

রয়ছে পাথর

প্রয়ি নাম শসি দলিে
ছড়িে যায় আত্মার একক

ওড়ে া দদোর
আচ্ছা করে হানা দাও

Like a Rock You Stay

If someone whistles your favourite name
the unitary soul snaps

Fly abundantly
Raid well

Translated by Animikh Patra and Souradeep Roy.

Santanu Mitra

House with Legs and Other Paintings

Santanu Mitra, “Untitled”, 2009. Watercolour on paper, 38 x 27 cm

House with Legs

Santanu Mitra, “House with Legs”, 2010. Acrylic on canvas, 12 x 12”

Eye-Candy

Santanu Mitra, “Eye-Candy”, 2011. Watercolour on paper, 9.5 x 12″

Ritu Menon

The Importance of the Dissenting Voice

When artistic freedom is forbidden, the compulsions of life and literature become the same.
— Nayantara Sahgal

Writers protest at the Sahitya Akademi, Delhi, 2015. Photo by Githa Hariharan

Let me begin by highlighting a few significant aspects of both the enquiry and pursuit of knowledge. The three aspects, or rather the three desirables, are debate, dissent, and critical reasoning.

I'd also like to relate these to the question of voice, through which debate, dissent and critical reasoning find their articulation. This is what I am talking about: the Silent Voice. The Dissenting Voice. And The Disobedient Voice.

I take as my premise the fact that we are social beings; that as a people and a society we believe that we are interdependent, by which I mean that we acknowledge that there is a social contract which not only operates between an individual and society, but which becomes the source of authority for governance. I also take as given that in addition to leading our lives as private individuals in the domestic sphere, and engaging in our workaday lives with a community of colleagues and fellow professionals in the professional sphere, we are also active in the public domain, an arena in which we participate, interact and contribute variously as spectators, as interlocutors, and as socially responsible citizens. We may enact these several roles discretely or simultaneously; they may on occasion overlap; they may occasionally be in conflict with each other; but together they constitute what we think and make of ourselves as complete social beings. So, to illustrate, I am simultaneously wife and mother; daughter and friend; publisher and writer; activist and advocate; interlocutor and mediator; employer and manager; and each of these selves is in a dynamic relationship with the others, and with society and family. In other words, each influences, and is influenced by, these relationships – which are both private and public.

Let me turn now to the three aspects/issues I mentioned at the beginning, namely debate, dissent and critical reasoning, and why they are important, not only in the interests of enquiry and the pursuit of knowledge, but in public life, and in the life of the nation.

We are all familiar with the figure of the "Argumentative Indian", famously categorised as such by Amartya Sen. You encounter this Indian on the street, in the television studio, the classroom, at home, in Parliament, in the law courts obviously and so on – this is the level of the everyday or trivial. We are also familiar with this figure in academia, where the value of a well-argued proposition or hypothesis is recognised as essential to both theory and practice. But, as Bhikhu Parekh reminds us, there is an equally valuable tradition that we have inherited. This is the tradition of public debates, a practice that seems to have fallen out of favour or, at least, to have receded somewhat in present times.

These public debates, Parekh says, were a public spectacle, where two or more individuals debated issues in front of thousands of people. He gives the example of the debate between Christian missionaries and Hindu pandits in the early twentieth century, a debate that was chaired by the Maharaja of Banaras. This debate continued for three weeks, with the Maharaja asking the Christian missionary to fire the first question. It would be rare for such a public debate to take place today, I think.

Parekh goes on to say that Gandhi in his time was at the centre of no less than six debates – between him and Veer Savarkar, from which emerged his seminal work, *Hind Swaraj*; between Gandhi and the "terrorists" or revolutionaries, as we say now, on non-violence; between Gandhi and Tagore on education and on foreign cloth; between Gandhi and the modernists on what the model of development for India should be; and, finally, between Gandhi and Ambedkar on the question of caste. The debate between Gandhi and Nehru on agriculture vs. industry is, of course, well known. These debates, far from being a display of egotism or an exercise in one-upmanship, were conducted in the public domain. They sought to chart an ideological, philosophical and political course for the country, by taking on board competing, sometimes opposing, world-views; and, at other times, even fundamentally different strategies for arriving at a modus operandi for the country. One way or another, they became part of public consciousness. In some critical respects, they are still current, since the project of defining who and what we are, as a country and as a people, is a continuing one.

The existence of public debates should have also seen the concurrent emergence of what is today called a public intellectual – and, in a way, Tagore, Gandhi, Nehru, Azad, Asaf Ali and others could be called that, too – as a robust and regular feature of public life in India, but, barring a few exceptions, this has not been the case. Who or what is a public intellectual, and does he or she have a defined role in society? This is, in my view, an appropriate issue for debate; but here I would like to attempt a characterisation (not a definition) of such a person. A public intellectual is someone who, by virtue of his or her professional or social or creative endeavour, enjoys a status in the public sphere that accords them a certain respect and credibility. Such a person, in Romila Thapar's words, should be autonomous, should take a position independent of those in power, should be able to legitimately interrogate, challenge or critique ideas, issues and isms of whichever hue, in the public interest, and at critical or

significant junctures; such junctures are frequently accompanied by a churning of some sort, and may herald important social changes.

The most obvious, and possibly the most well-known of such intellectuals in the ancient world was the philosopher Socrates, poisoned because he objected to the Athenian judicial system, and because he denied the existence of deities. In the Christian era, as Professor Thapar has pointed out, European philosophers such as Locke and Hume, and writers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu, Diderot and Rousseau questioned conventional knowledge and practice. What is noteworthy in these examples is the fact that these thinkers proceeded from critical reasoning and rational argument; and from within an intellectual tradition that, in time, placed a value on such debating. Debates may be contentious, even virulent, but they cannot and must not be stopped by a bullet.

This brings me to my second issue, that of dissent, and the presence of public intellectuals in society provides me with an entry point to this discussion. Before I go on, however, I should add that public intellectuals require, as Romila Thapar has said, a public that is aware of what needs to be discussed and why, one that would respond to critiques and questions in a spirit of respect and mutual exchange.

In October 2015, a small, individual act of protest by two creative writers snowballed into a phenomenon of unprecedented proportions, and brought the question of institutional accountability to the foreground, and into public consciousness, as never before. Uday Prakash, a Hindi writer, and Nayantara Sahgal, writing in English, returned awards that they had been given by the Sahitya Akademi, in protest against the silence of the Akademi following the assassinations of three fellow writers: Narendra Dabholkar and Govind Pansare in Maharashtra in February 2015, and M.M. Kalburgi in Karnataka in September. Kalburgi, like Uday Prakash and Nayantara Sahgal, was an Akademi award winner; returning their awards was, for Prakash and Sahgal, simultaneously an act of solidarity with the murdered writers, and an expression of disquiet and unhappiness at the literary body's failure to condemn the assassinations. Sahgal's letter accompanying the return of her award said:

It is a matter of sorrow that the Sahitya Akademi remains silent. The Akademis were set up as guardians of the creative imagination, and promoters of its finest products in art and literature, music and theatre.

… In memory of the Indians who have been murdered, in support of all Indians who uphold the right to dissent, and of all dissenters who now live in fear and uncertainty, I am returning my Sahitya Akademi Award.

Within a few days of Sahgal returning her award, the writer Shashi Deshpande resigned from the English Advisory Board of the Sahitya Akademi, in a similar gesture of protest, and in a very short span of time other well-known writers – Ashok Vajpeyi, Keki Daruwalla, Sarah Joseph and Krishna Sobti among them – followed suit, creating a wave of what the media called, "award wapsi", a wave that very quickly became a flood. Each writer's letter to the Akademi echoed the disquiet and unhappiness expressed by Sahgal at the continued silence of this national academy of letters, as well as at what they apprehended as the growing intolerance of points of

view, opinions and beliefs that did not conform to dominant ideologies. Krishna Sobti, the nonagenarian writer said: “I protested because the country cannot afford Babri and Dadri,” referring to the lynching of Mohammad Akhlaq that had taken place in the immediate past. Uday Prakash said he protested because, “Authors stand with ordinary citizens and the disadvantaged last man. Now, no one is safe against offenders.” Sarah Joseph protested because, “Writers are murdered and the right to eat what one wants is denied. Plurality of society is at stake.” Ghulam Nabi Khayal said he protested because, “… returning the award is the only way to express my resentment. I want to live in a country that is secular, not a place where freedom of speech and religious identities are facing threats from communal forces.”

And so on.

By the end of October, more than 40 writers had returned their awards, and their protest was joined by 400 artists, 12 filmmakers, 53 historians and more than 100 scientists. Resolutions in support of the writers came from all quarters, including the International PEN, which noted the vitiated environment in which books are no longer burned, and writers no longer censored – they are simply killed for their views or for what they have written.

The world had never seen anything like this spontaneous, collective protest before.

Image courtesy the Indian Express

Narendra Dabholkar, Govind Pansare and M.M. Kalburgi were rationalists who wrote and spoke on faith and superstition; on scientific temper; on ethics and religion; on literature and society. The hundred scientists who joined the writers, artists and filmmakers in their protest, responded

to what they saw as an alarming erosion of rationality, and the threat that this posed to any scientific enquiry. Their statement said:

The scientific community is deeply concerned by the climate of intolerance, and the ways in which science and reason are being eroded in the country. It is the same climate of intolerance that led to … the assassinations of Professor Kalburgi, Dr. Narendra Dabholkar and Shri Govind Pansare. All three fought against superstition and obscurantism to build a scientific temper in our society.

Scientists who signed the statement included five recipients of Padma Awards, and heads of science research institutions: the Indian Institute of Sciences, the Harish Chandra Research Institute, the Atomic Energy Regulatory Board, the Centre for Cellular and Molecular Biology, the Institute of Life Sciences, the National Institute of Immunology, the Tata Institute of Fundamental Research and the Raman Research Institute, IIT (Mumbai) among others. Dr. Pushpa Bhargava, former vice chairman of the National Knowledge Commission, returned his Padma Bhushan award, saying:

In any rational and reasonable society, as in a democracy, dissent is accepted as a norm, and reasoned dissent is encouraged. However, in India at present, the space for reasoned dissent is shrinking day by day.

T. Jayaraman of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences said, “In a democracy like ours, there is no option but to tolerate dissent. Dissent is integral to science … Reason must prevail.”

In an extraordinary and unequivocal declaration, the scientists acknowledged that they had been influenced by the writers:

The writers have shown the way … we scientists now join our voices to theirs, to assert that 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.

I think it would be correct to say that never before in the history of independent India had there been a concerted action like this by the scientific community, or a spontaneous convergence of resistance by a very large number of people who we might legitimately call public intellectuals, acting in the public interest.

How do we read this powerful voicing of dissent? What meaning can we assign to it that is not fleeting or purely topical? What implications does it have for such protests in the long term?

There is nothing new about individual acts of resistance that are intended to shame those in power into recognising and acknowledging the importance of what is being resisted. Fasts unto death, hunger strikes, even immolations, are a fairly common last resort in India. We have only to recall Irom Sharmila’s decade-long fast protesting the imposition of AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Acts) in Manipur to know its continuing occurrence. Or, more recently, Anna Hazare’s Anti-Corruption fast, which – unlike poor Irom Sharmila’s – obtained the desired result. The writers’ protest was nowhere near as extreme, and it was certainly not life-threatening, but it was a game-changer in other respects. Let me try and elaborate.

Image courtesy Sabrang India

Before the assassinations of Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi, the Tamil writer Perumal Murugan put out a statement announcing his “death” as a writer. This was in January 2015, and followed his self-exile from his village, where he had been vilified and hounded, and his safety threatened by a bunch of people who objected to his novel, One Part Woman. Murugan feared for his and his family’s lives, and has been in hiding, somewhere in Tamil Nadu, ever since. In an attempt to secure his own safety, he instructed his Tamil publisher to destroy all copies of his book; to recall whatever might still be in circulation; and informed him and the general public that he would never write another word. There is a strong suspicion that the guilty in all four instances belong to extremist organisations, possibly with political patronage, a suspicion that is strengthened by the fact that no one has yet been arrested for either the assassinations of Dabholkar, Pansare and Kalburgi, or the attacks on Murugan.

Image courtesy the Indian Cultural Forum

My concern, however, is slightly different, and has to do with both the symbolic and the actual value of gestures such as this declaration of “death”, or the returning of awards by writers and others.

Perumal Murugan’s symbolic death as a writer, powerful and poignant in itself, was simultaneously an announcement of his repudiation of a society that was unable to accommodate contrarian points of view, and unwilling to exercise restraint and tolerance. The only weapon Murugan had was his writing, and he chose to use that weapon – or, rather, to lay down arms – non-violently. His response was the opposite of what his attackers had done: he countered their aggression with renunciation; where they chose violent verbal and physical abuse he opted for silence; where they stalked the land and flexed their muscles, he made himself invisible. But it would be a mistake to see Murugan’s decision as one born of weakness, for it would not have been an easy choice. Indeed, steeped in pain, that painful decision radiated far beyond his immediate environment and struck a chord among hundreds who responded to his gesture with shock, dismay and outrage that things could have come to such a tragic pass. We did not know then that his symbolic “death” would be followed by three very real ones, in short order.

The return of an award clearly does not carry the same charge as an announcement of a symbolic “death”, but it is also a difficult decision, for any such act is an act of renunciation; and like all such acts, it entails a significant loss. Awards are hard-won, are a recognition of individual worth by a peer group, and are cherished above pecuniary or monetary considerations. Their return, however, like Murugan’s, is a repudiation, not so much of society but of the awarding institutions — in this case, the Sahitya Akademi, whose remit is the dignity and integrity of writers, and its mandate, the safeguarding of freedom of expression. The writers who returned their awards had a single-point demand: that the national academy of letters unequivocally condemn the murder of three of its constituents. That is all. But that was plenty.

The significance of this symbolic gesture was not lost either on society or on other groups and individuals, who also chose to break their silence and express their solidarity with the writers. Their protest stirred the collective conscience in such a way that individual resistance was transformed into a collective battle; more importantly, our duty as responsible citizens, to demand that fundamental rights be protected, was restored to centre stage. Equally, and again for the first time in independent India, an institution of the state was held accountable for its sin of omission, for remaining silent. (This silence is of a qualitatively different order than Murugan’s silence, for it is complicit in what is being violated.) As the sociologist Shiv Visvanathan said, “They (the writers) were not merely returning an award, they were fighting the crime of silence with dignity.” The writers who returned their awards did so on behalf of society, and by so doing, reminded the Sahitya Akademi of the fact that a) it is an autonomous body, answerable to no government or political party; and b) that its duty is to provide a forum and a safe space for the dissenting voice. As such, this moment of interrogation by writers and artists constituted a turning point of sorts, and in the words of the critic and cultural commentator, Sadanand Menon,

This is that moment when we will see a necessary contradiction between the institution and the state, a healthy and vital contradiction … It is a moment when that possibility exists. If it can be worked on and negotiated, then it would become what you would call momentous.

How then are we to understand the meaning of dissent? When Nayantara Sahgal linked the "right to dissent" with the "right to life" for a writer, she was telling us that an intellectual life is not simply, or only, a life of the mind, that it is concerned not only with ideas and esoteric problems; rather, it provides a normative frame of values by which individuals and societies live. And at the same time, she reiterated that writing entails a commitment to truth. I quote Shiv Visvanathan again:

Dissent becomes a way of life for a writer … Dissent is an act of courage, of standing up against a tide … It is an act of aloneness, of facing up to a crowd, when a single voice can puncture silence.

And as the feminist writer Sara Paretsky has said, "Silence does not mean consent. Silence means death." Paretsky continues:

Every writer's difficult journey is a movement from silence to speech. We must be intensely private and interior in order to find a voice and a vision – and we must bring our work to an outside world where the market, or public outrage, or even government censorship can destroy our voice…

I come now to the last part of my talk, and to what I have called the Disobedient Voice. I should clarify at the outset that I use the word "disobedient" in the same spirit that Gandhi deployed it, when he called upon Indians to take to "civil disobedience" in defiance of unjust laws and punitive taxes; to non-violently refuse to co-operate in perpetuating inequality and oppressive domination. I am referring here specifically to the work of women writers, and of feminists who have been active in the academy, in research and educational institutions, who have claimed the right to disobey, if what is demanded of them is submission, subjugation and subordination; of obedience to oppressive and discriminatory custom and practice, often accompanied or enforced by physical violence. Because to obey silently, to be seen and not heard, to comply, to never raise one's voice were, and still are, the desirables of good behaviour for women.

Writers, by definition, are a disobedient lot; but women writers who disobey, who break the rules, who do not uphold social taboos, can also be subversive, even dangerous. Because they begin to break their silence, begin to find their voice and raise it. They begin to write.

As writers we live by words, words are our currency. And like currency, the more they circulate the greater their value. The more they challenge, the greater their subversive potential. The more they subvert, the greater their danger. And women who live with words know that in patriarchal cultures, writing is a subversive activity.

So we are censored. The power of the word is neutralised by the guarded tongue, guarded by families and communities; muzzled by convention; silenced by the state or religion; ignored by the market and literary establishments; censored by ourselves.

But we persevere. The Pakistani writer Feryal Ali Gauhar says, “I only write from a place of siege, from an undefined sense of loss. This is not the same as a sense of deprivation … The only thing I can do is relieve my heart by writing.” Bama, the Dalit writer says,

Writing is not a hobby for me, it is a very personal struggle… to live the shame again, to feel the anger again, to see the dreams dissolve like a dewdrop evaporating on a rose petal. I must tell you that, for me, writing in a situation of social exclusion is to experience it as breaking the unbroken and forced silence of the victim, and allowing the militant in the victim to speak.

Mamang Dai from Arunachal Pradesh, a writer who has lived with insurgency in the north-east for close to a quarter century, speaks of being crushed into silence by state repression on the one hand, and by the death threats of militants on the other. She writes, she says, in order not to suffocate to death.

> … I am the woman lost in translation
> who survives with happiness to carry on.
>
> I am the breath that opens the mouth of the canyon,
> the sunlight on the tips of trees;
> There, where the narrow gorge hastens the wind
> I am the place where memory escapes
> The myth of time,
> I am the sleep in the mind of the mountain.

Mamang Dai’s writing is an act of resistance, just as Bama’s is an act of disobedience, and Feryal’s an act of survival. Yet each of them, like very many others, also sees her writing as a political act, because she is taking on social norms and mores, and breaking the taboo on what women are “allowed” to write about. They are writing about war, about violence, about sexuality, about caste, about religion, and about refusing to remain silent. When women name the oppressor in their writing, they are engaging in the ultimate act of disobedience — they are saying they will no longer be complicit in that oppression. When, through their individual voices, they speak of a common, even a collective experience of discrimination, they expose systemic and structural relations of power — between men and women; between state and citizen; between ruler and ruled.

To disobey by oneself, as only an individual, is to risk being disciplined or punished; to disobey collectively is to begin a movement. The women’s movement — born of the fire of consciousness, of a kind of disobedience, you might say — is unique in the world for having no “leader”, no “ideologue”, and no hierarchy of power or authority. It has no formal structures, no “party line”, no high priestesses. Some would say it has no pedigree. It is polyphonic, it speaks in many voices, using many tongues. It took as its starting point the fact that women make up half the world, and as such, their experiences, their labour, their productive and reproductive value, and their contribution to social, economic and political life had to be taken into account. Feminist writers and academics realised that in order for this accounting to happen, they would have to go about setting the record straight — for which they would need to devise new tools of analysis, forge new concepts, arrive at theory via empirical work that challenged received

wisdom, upset conventional disciplinary requirements, and departed from accepted methodologies. They would have to disobey the rules, at least some of them, for most of the time.

In short, they would have to begin rewriting; Rewriting history, economics, sociology, political science, law, literature, autobiography and memoir – every field of enquiry and arena of expression from the perspective of their experience and analysis. The reality of one half of human experience would be brought into the light; be made visible, and given voice.

Underlying debate, dissent, and what I call disobedience, the thread that is common to all three, is their common purpose: to bring to public notice that something inimical or undesirable is occurring in our shared social lives; that trends or directions or events that are a threat to the social contract by which we live, are taking hold and need to be articulated and challenged. Implicit in bringing to public notice is a call to public action in order to restore, or redress, the social order. It is a call for intervention by what we now call civil society, by which is meant, simply, a socially responsible citizenry. Not surprisingly, such a call for public action, a call that necessarily questions the status quo, comes in for its share of rejection, resistance or even outright condemnation. It falls to all of us then, to raise our collective voice, to not remain silent, to persevere.

For implicit in this endeavour is the very much larger objective of progressive social change, of egalitarian gender relations, of substantive equality, where none of these currently exists. Equally, none of them can be achieved in isolation or without the co-operation of all participants. My point is simply this: in order for enduring change to take place, we move from silence and complicity to disobedience and non-co-operation, in order to arrive at a place where voluntary co-operation, becomes desirable, and where dissent is acknowledged as an essential condition of change.

Note: All quotes are from workshops on censorship that we conducted from 2000-2004, across the country. Mamang Dai's poem is from a published collection *called Interior Decoration: Poems by 54 Women from 10 Indian Languages*, published by Women Unlimited in 2010. All the writers quoted were part of our workshops.

This essay was the text of the First Annual Rajyashree Khushu Lahiri Memorial Lecture delivered by Ritu Menon at IIT–Kanpur on February 12, 2016.

Mourid al-Barghouti and Tamim al-Barghouti

Palestine Comes to India with its Poetry

Image courtesy Al-Awda

In March 2016, Delhi was the setting for a powerful session of poetry reading in the original Arabic as well as in English translation by two generations of Palestinian poets. The great Palestinian poet and memoirist Mourid al-Barghouti, and his son and probably the most acclaimed Arab poet of his generation, Tamim al-Barghouti, delighted, dazzled and moved the audience with their julgalbandhi of poems. The English translations of the poems were by the late Egyptian novelistRadwa Ashour and the award-winning Egyptian writer and political commentator Ahdaf Soueif, who also chaired the session. The poetry reading was part of an event, Palestine in India, organised by the feminist publishing house Women Unlimited, Delhi.

Mourid al-Barghouti

Photo by Dia Saleh, courtesy Wikipedia

In an interview with the *Indian Cultural Forum*, Barghouti spoke about poetry as a form of resistance. Its aesthetic perfection is an answer to injustice, refusing to be a failure, refusing to be ugly, refusing to be what the occupier sees you as, says Barghouti. The optimism that runs through the following poem with the understated but potent refrain “I have no problem”, defies the oppression and suffering imposed by powerful forces.

I Have No Problem

I look at myself:
I have no problem.
I look all right
and, to some girls,
my grey hair might even be attractive;
my eyeglasses are well made,
my body temperature is precisely thirty seven,
my shirt is ironed and my shoes do not hurt.
I have no problem.
My hands are not cuffed,
my tongue has not been silenced yet,
I have not, so far, been sentenced
and I have not been fired from my work;
I am allowed to visit my relatives in jail,
I’m allowed to visit some of their graves in some countries.
I have no problem.

I am not shocked that my friend
has grown a horn on his head.
I like his cleverness in hiding the obvious tail
under his clothes, I like his calm paws.
He might kill me, but I shall forgive him
for he is my friend;
he can hurt me every now and then.
I have no problem.
The smile of the TV anchor
does not make me ill anymore
and I've got used to the Khaki stopping my colours
night and day.
That is why
I keep my identification papers on me, even at
the swimming pool.
I have no problem.
Yesterday, my dreams took the night train
and I did not know how to say goodbye to them.
I heard the train had crashed
in a barren valley
(only the driver survived).
I thanked God, and took it easy
for I have small nightmares
that I hope will develop into great dreams.
I have no problem.
I look at myself, from the day I was born till now.
In my despair I remember
that there is life after death;
there is life after death
and I have no problem.
But I ask:
Oh my God,
is there life before death?

Translated by Radwa Ashour.

Click here to listen to Mourid Barghouti recite the translation at the end of his interview on the *Indian Cultural Forum* site.

لا مُشْكِلَةَ لَدَيّ

أتلمَّسُ أحوالي.. لا مشكلة لديّ
شكلي مقبولٌ. ولبعض الفتيات
أبدو بالشعر الأبيض جذاباً
نظّاراتي متقنةٌ
وحرارةُ جسمي سبعٌ وثلاثون تماماً
وقميصي مكويٌّ وحذائي لا يؤلمني
لا مشكلة لدي

فكّي بلا قَيْدٍ. ولِساني لم يُسكَتْ بعد
لم يصدر ضدي حُكْمٌ حتى الآن
لم أُطرَدْ مِن عملي
مسموحٌ لي بزيارة مَن سجنوهم مِن أهلي
وزيارةِ بعضِ مقابرهمْ في بعض البلدان
لا مشكلة لدي

لا يدهشني أن صديقي أنْبَتَ قَرْناً في رأسه
وتُعجبني بَراعَتُهُ في إخفاء الذيل الواضحِ تحت ملابِسِهِ
وهدوءُ مخالبِهِ يُعجبني.
قد يفتك بي، لكني سوف أسامحه فهو صديقي
وله أن يؤذيني أحياناً
لا مشكلة لدي

ما عادت بسمات مذيع التلفزيون تُسبِّبُ لي أمراضاً.
وتعوّدت على توقيف الكلكيّين لألواني
ليلاً ونهاراً. ولهذا
أحمِلُ أوراقي الشخصيةَ حتى في المسْبَح
لا مشكلة لدي

أحلامي ركِبَتْ أمسِ، قِطارَ الليلِ
ولم أعرف كيف أودعها
وأتتني أنباءٌ تدهْوُرِهِ في وادٍ ليس بذي زرعٍ

ونجا سائقُهُ من بين الركاب جميعاً!)
فحمدت الله، ولم أبكِ كثيراً
لديَّ كوابيسٌ صغرى
سأطوِّرها، إن شاء الله، إلى أحلامٍ كبرى
لا مشكلة لديّ

أتلمَّسُ أحوالي منذ وُلدتُ إلى اليوم

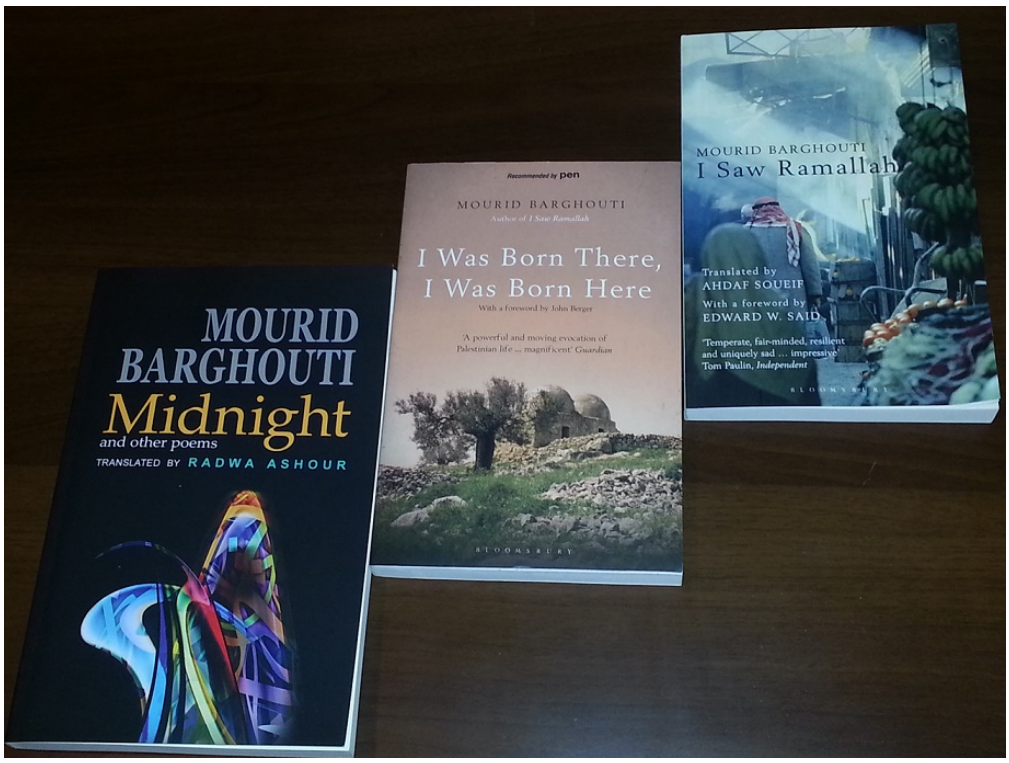


Photo by Sawad Hussain, courtesy Arablit.org

"We have been subjected to massacres at intervals throughout our lives. Thus we find ourselves competing in a race between quickly realised mass death and the ordinary life that we dream of every day. One day, I will write a poem called "It's Also Fine."

– Mourid al-Barghouti

It's Also Fine

It's also fine to die in our beds
on a clean pillow
and among our friends.

It's fine to die, once,
our hands crossed on our chests
empty and pale
with no scratches, no chains, no banners,
and no petitions.

It's fine to have an undustful death,
no holes in our shirts,
and no evidence in our ribs.

It’s fine to die
with a white pillow, not the pavement, under our cheeks,
our hands resting in those of our loved ones
surrounded by desperate doctors and nurses,
with nothing left but a graceful farewell,
paying no attention to history,
leaving this world as it is,
hoping that, someday, someone else
will change it.

لا بأس

لا بأسَ أن نموتَ في فِراشِنا
لِعمرِ خَدَّةٍ نظيفةٍ
وبين أصدقائِنا

لا بأسَ أن نموتَ مَرَّةً
ونَعْقدَ اليدينْ وفقَ الصدْرِ
ليس فيهما سوى الشُحوبِ
لا خُدوشَ فيهما ولا قُيودْ
لا رايةً ولا عَريضَةَ احتِجاج.

لا بأسَ أن نموت مِيتةً بلا غُبارْ
وليسِ قُمْصانِنا ثُقوبْ
وليسِ فضُلوعِنا دَلَّة

لا بأسَ أن نموت والمخدَّةُ البيضاءُ،
لا الرصيفتحتَ خَدِّنا
وكَفُّنا في كَفِّ نَحِبَ،
يُحيطُنا يأسُ الطبيبِ والممرِّضات
وما لنا سوى رَشاقةِ الوداعِ
غَيرَ عابِئين بالأيامِ
تاركين هذا الكونَ في أحوالِهِ
لعلَّ غَيْرَنا"...
يُغَيِّرونَها.

مريد البرغوثي

Tamim al-Barghouti

Courtesy WNYC

In Jerusalem

We passed by the home of the beloved but
were turned back by the enemy's law and the enemy's wall.
I said to myself perhaps it's a blessing,
what will you see in Jerusalem if you visit?
You'll see everything you cannot bear to see
when her houses start appearing on your path.
Not every soul when she meets her beloved
Rejoices, nor does every absence harm;
If meeting's joy will end with parting
How dangerous then is that very joy.
For once your eyes have seen Jerusalem
You'll see nothing else wherever you look.

In Jerusalem, a greengrocer from Georgia, bored with his wife
thinks of going on holiday or painting his house.
In Jerusalem, a Torah and a middle-aged man who's come from Upper Manhattan
to teach young men from Poland how to read it.
In Jerusalem, a policeman from Ethiopia
seals off a street in the market,
a machine gun hangs from the shoulder of a teenage settler
a hat bows to the Wailing Wall
and blonde European tourists who never really see Jerusalem
but take photos of each other
next to a woman who sells mint on the streets each day.
In Jerusalem, there are walls of basil.
In Jerusalem, there are barricades of concrete.
In Jerusalem, booted soldiers march on clouds.
In Jerusalem, we pray on the asphalt.
In Jerusalem there's whoever's in Jerusalem – except for you.

And History turned to me and smiled:
Did you really think your eye could miss them
and see others?
Here they are in front of you:
the main text while you're a footnote and a margin.
You thought a visit could draw from the face of the city, my son,
the thick veil of her present, that you might see there what you wish?
In Jerusalem there's every man except you.
Yes she's the deer in the distance. Your fate is to lose her,
and you've raced in pursuit since she glanced goodbye.
Go gentle on yourself – I see you fading.
In Jerusalem there's whoever's in Jerusalem – except for you.

But History, wait,
the city has two timelines:
one foreign, complacent, steady of pace
as though walking asleep.
The other lies in wait: masked,
and cautious, and silent.

And Jerusalem knows herself.
Ask the people there, everyone will tell you.
Everything in the city
has a tongue which, when you ask, will speak.

In Jerusalem the crescent moon curls tight as a foetus
curved over its likenesses on the domes;
over the years they've become father and sons.

In Jerusalem the stones of buildings quote Bible and Quran.
In Jerusalem beauty's octagonal and blue,
above it, gentle listener, a golden dome
that looks, I think, like a convex mirror
containing – look – the sky;
playing with it, pulling it close,
distributing it – like aid in a siege –
to the deserving.
As when people after the Friday sermon
stretch out their hands,
in Jerusalem the sky gives herself out among the people,
protecting and protected;
for we would carry her on our shoulders
if time were harsh to her moons.

In Jerusalem dark marble columns
as though their veins were smoke,
and windows high in church and mosque
hold morning's hand to show him how to paint with colour.
He says "like this",
and they say: "no, like this",
until they compromise
and morning's free outside the threshold but
to enter
the Compassionate's windows he lights by their rules.

In Jerusalem there's a school built by a Mameluke who came from beyond the river;
sold at a slave market in Isfahan
to a merchant from Baghdad who then went to Aleppo
whose prince was afraid of the blueness in his left eye
so gave him to a caravan heading for Egypt
where soon he became Conqueror of the Moghuls
and Sovereign Sultan.

In Jerusalem the scent of Babel and India in a herbalist's shop
in Khan el-Zayt –
I swear it's a scent with a language you'll understand if you listen;
it says to me
when they pitch their gas canisters at me:
"Ignore them."
And when the gas has gone it fills the air again and says:
"You see?"

In Jerusalem contradictions rest
and miracles are not denied,

people check them out like bits of fabric old and new;
miracles here are handled, put to use.

In Jerusalem if you shake hands with an old man or touch a building
you'll find etched on your palm a poem,
my friend, or two.

In Jerusalem, despite disaster:
an air of innocence, a breeze of childhood;
a pigeon flies and
declares independence in the air between two bullets.

In Jerusalem the rows of graves
are lines of the city's history, her dust the book.
Everyone's passed through;
for Jerusalem takes in the faithful and the faithless.
Walk through and read her tombstones in every nation's language:
it has the Blacks and the Franks and the Kipceks and the Slavs and the Bosniaks,
the Tartars and the Turks, the people of God and of Destruction,
the poor and the possessing, the debauched and the ascetic,
in it there's everyone who's trod the earth;
they were the margins of the book, now they're the text.
Oh History, how come you've excluded us?
Is it just for us that the city's become too small?
Old man, re-write and think again
For I see you're in mortal error.

The eyes close, then look again.
The driver of the yellow car turns north,
away from her gates.
And now Jerusalem is behind us.
I see her in the right wing-mirror.
Her colours change in the sun, and disappear.
Then a smile surprises me,
It crept to her face
and said to me, when I looked close and careful,
"Oh you who weep behind the wall, are you a fool?
Have you gone mad?
Let your eye not weep, you who've been dropped from the text.
Let your eye not weep, young Arab, and know:
In Jerusalem there's whoever's in Jerusalem, but
I see no-one in Jerusalem – except you."

Translated by Ahdaf Soueif and Radwa Ashour, September 2010.

Hear the original Arabic here, read by Tamim Barghouti.

القدس في

البرغوثي تميم

وسورُها الأعادي قانونُ الدارِ عَنِ فرَدّنا الحبيب دارِ عَلى مَرَرْنا
تَزُورُها حينَ القدسِ في تَرَى فماذا نِعْمَةٌ هِيَ رُبما لنفسي فَقُلْتُ
دورُها الدَّرْبِ جَانِبِ من بَدَتْ ما إذا احتِمالَه تستطيعُ لا ما كُلَّ تَرَى
يُضِيرُها الغِيابِ كُلُّ ولا تُسَرُّ حَبِيبَها تَلْقَى حينَ نفسٍ كلُّ وما
سرُورُها عليها بمأمونٍ فليسَ لِقاؤُه الفِراقِ قبلَ سرّها فإن
تُدِيرُها حَيْثُ العَيْنُ تراها فسوفَ مَرَّةً العتيقةَ القدسَ تُبْصِرِ متى
بزوجته برمٌ جورجيا من خضرةٍ بائعُ القدس، في
البيتْ طلاءِ في في أو إجازةٍ قضاءِ في يفكرُ
العُليا مَنْهاتِنَ من جاءَ وكهلٌ توراةُ القدس، في
أحكامها في البُولُون فتية يُفَقَّهُ
الأحباش من شرطيٌّ القدس في
السوق، في شَارِعاً يُغْلِقُ
العشرينَ، يبلغِ لم مستوطنٍ على رشّاشٌ
المبكَى حائطَ تُحَيّي قُبَّعة
إطلاقاً القدسَ يَرَوْنَ لا شُقْرٌ الإفرنج من وسيّاحٌ
صُوَرَاً لبعضهم يأخذونَ تَراهُم
اليَومْ طُولَ الساحاتِ في الفِجْلَ تبيعُ امْرَأةٍ مَعَ
الريحانْ مِنَ أسْوَارٌ القدس في
الأسْمَنْتْ مِنَ مِتْرَاسٌ القدس في
الغَيمْ فوقَ مُنْتَعِلِينَ الجندُ دَبَّ القدس في
الأسْفَلْتْ على صَلّينا القدس في
أنْتْ إلا القدس في مَن القدس في
مُتَبَسِّماً لي التاريخُ وَتَلَفَّتَ
تخطئهم، سوفَ عينَك أنَّ حقاً أظْنَنْتَ

غيرَهم وتبصرُ
أمامَكَ، هُم ها
وَهَامشٌ عليهِ حاشيةٌ أنتَ نصٌ مَتْنُ
يابُنَيَّ المدينةِ وجهِ عن سَتُزيحُ زيارةً أنَّ أحَسبتَ
هَواكْ فيها ترى لكي السميكَ واقِعِها حجابَ
سواكْ فتى كلَّ القدس في
بِبَيْنِها الزمانُ حَكَمَ المدى، في الغزالةْ وهي
بِعَيْنِها وَدَّعَتْكَ مُذْ إثْرَهَا تَرْكُضُ زِلتَ ما
وَهَنْتْ أراكَ إني ساعةً بِنَفسكَ رفقاً
أنْتْ إلا القدس في من القدس في
مَهْلاً، التاريخ كاتبَ يا
دهرانِ دهرُها فالمدينةْ
خطوَه يغيرُ لا مطمئنٌ أجنبيٌ دهر
النومْ خلالَ يمشي وكأنَّه
متلثمٌ كامنٌ دهرٌ، وهناك
القومْ حِذار صوتٍ بلا يمشي
نفسها، تعرف والقدس
الجميعُ يدْلُلكَ الخلق هناك فاسأل
المدينةِ في شيئ فكلٌ
يُبينْ تَسألُهُ، حين لسانٍ، ذو
الجنينْ مثلَ تقوساً الهلالُ يزدادُ القدس في
القبابِ فوقَ أشباهه على حَدْباً
بالبَنينْ الأبِ عِلاقةْ السنينَ عَبْرَ بَيْنَهم ما تَطَوَّرَتْ
والقرآنْ الإنجيلِ من اقتباساتٌ حجارتُها أبنيةٌ القدس في
أزرقُ، الأضلاعِ مُثَمَّنُ الجمالِ تعريفُ القدس في
ذَهَبِيَّةٌ، قُبَّةٌ عِزُّكَ، دامَ يا فَوْقَهُ،
محدبة مرآة مثل برأيي، تبدو
فيها مُلْخَّصَاً السماء وجه ترى
وَتُدْنِيها تُدَلِّلُها

الحِصَارِ في المعُونَةِ كَأكْياسِ تُوَزّعُها
لمستَحِقّيها
جُمْعَةٍ خُطْبَةِ بعدِ من أُمَّةٌ ما إذا
بأيْدِيها مَدَّتْ
الناسِ في تَفَرَّقَتْ السماءُ القدس وفي
ونحميها تحمينا
حَمْلاً أكتافِنا على ونحملُها
الأزمانْ أقمارِها على جَارَت إذا
الداكناتُ الرُّخامِ أعمدةُ القدس في
دخانْ الرُّخامِ تعريقَ كأنّ
والكنائس، المساجدَ تعلو ونوافذٌ
بالألوانِ، النقشُ كيفَ تُريهِ الصُّباحِ بيدِ أمْسَكَتْ
،"هكذا بل لا" :يقول وَهْوَ
،"هكذا بل لا" :فَتَقُولُ
تقاسما الخلافُ طال إذا حتى
لَكِنْ العَتَبَاتِ خارجَ حُرٌّ فالصبحُ
دخولَها أرادَ إن
الرَّحمنْ نوافذِ بحُكْمِ يَرْضَى أن فَعَلَيهِ
النهرِ، وراءَ مما أتى لمملوكٍ مدرسةٌ القدس في
إصفهانَ في نِخَاسَةٍ بسوقِ باعوهُ
حلباً أتى بغدادٍ أهلِ من لتاجرٍ
اليُسْرَى، عَيْنِهِ في زُرْقَةٍ من أميرُها فخافَ
مصراً، أتت لقافلةٍ فأعطاهُ
المغولِ غَلاّبَ سنينَ بضع بعدَ فأصبحَ
السلطانْ وصاحبَ
عطارِ دكانِ في والهندَ بابلاً تُلَخِّصُ رائحةٌ القدس في
الزيتْ بخانِ
أصْغَيتْ إذا سَتَفْهَمُها لغةٌ لها رائحةٌ واللهِ
لي وتقولُ

:عَلَيَّ للدموعِ المسيّلِ الغاز قنابل يطلقونَ إذ
"بهم تحفل لا"
:لي تقولُ وَهْيَ الغازِ، انحسارِ بعدِ من وتفوحُ
!"أرأيتْ"
التناقضُ، يرتاحُ القدس في
العِبادُ، ينكرُها ليسَ والعجائبُ
وَجَدِيدَها، قَدِيمها يُقَلِّبُونَ القِمَاشِ قِطَعُ كأنها
باليَدَيْنْ تُلْمَسُ هناكَ والمعجزاتُ
بنايةٌ لمستَ أو شيخاً صافحتَ لو القدس في
قصيدَةٍ نَصٌ كَفَّيكَ على منقوشاً لَوَجَدْتَ
اثْنَتَيْنْ أو الكرامِ يابْنَ
النَّكَباتِ، تتابعِ رغمَ القدس، في
طُفُولَةٍ، ريحُ الجوّ، في براءةٍ ريحُ
يَطِيرُ الحمامَ فَتَرى
رَصَاصَتَيْنْ بَيْنَ الريح في دَوْلَةٌ يُعلِنُ
القبورُ، تنتظمُ القدس في
ترابُها والكتابُ المدينةِ تاريخِ سطورُ كأنهنّ
هُنا من مرُّوا الكل
مؤمنا أو كافراً أتاها من تقبلُ فالقدسُ
الأرضِ أهلِ لغاتِ بكلّ شواهدَها واقرأ بها أُمرر
والبُشْنَاقُ والصِّقْلابُ والقِفْجَاقُ والإفرنجُ الزنجُ فيها
والهلاك، الله أهلُ والأتراكُ، والتاتارُ
والنساكُ، والفجارُ والملاك، والفقراءُ
الثَّرى وطئَ من كلٌ فيها
قبلنا المدينةِ نَصٌ فأصبحوا الكتابِ في الهوامشَ كانوا
فاستثنيتنا جَدَّ ماذا التاريخ كاتب يا
!وحدنا علينا ضاقت أرأيتها
أخرى، مرةً والقراءةَ الكتابة فلتُعِدِ شيخُ يا
لَحَنْتْ أراك

تنظُرُ، ثمَّ تُغْمِضُ، العين
شَمالاً بنا مالَ الصفراءِ، السيارةِ سائقُ
بابها عن نائياً
خلفنا صارت والقدس
اليمين، بمرآةِ تبصرُها والعينُ
الغيابْ قبلِ مِنْ الشمس، في ألوانُها تَغَيَّرَتْ
بسمةٌ فاجَأتْني إذ
للوَجْهِ تَسَلَّلتْ كيفَ أدْرِ لم
أمْعنْتْ ما أمْعَنْتُ وقد لي قالت
أنْتْ؟ أحمقُ السورِ، وراءَ الباكي أيها يا
أجُنِنْتْ؟
الكتابْ متنِ من المنسيُّ أيها عينُكَ تبكِ لا
أنَّهُ واعلمْ العَرَبيُّ أيها عينُكَ تبكِ لا
لكنْ القدسِ في من القدسِ في
أنْتْ إلا القدسِ في أرَى لا

Note: The two poems by Mourid Barghouti are translated from Arabic by Radwa Ashour. The poems are from *Midnight and Other Poems*, ARC publications, Lancashire, 2009. First published as *Muntasaf al-Layl*, Riad El Rayyes Books, Lebanon, 2005.

We thank Ahdaf Soueif for her help with the originals of the translations, and acknowledge Women Unlimited for their Delhi event Palestine in India where these poems were read.

Orijit Sen

India Goes to Palestine with Murals

Watch the video here

Highly acclaimed artist Orijit Sen toured with the Jana Natya Manch (Janam) in Palestine, as part of the Freedom Bus. The Freedom Bus involves a journey in which students, artists and activists from across Palestine and elsewhere join residents in some of the key sites of oppression and resistance in occupied Palestine. This year, the tour began in Jenin on March 18 and ended in Hebron on March 30.

Earlier, in 2015, the Freedom Theatre came to India and rehearsed at Studio Safdar for six months. We spoke to Sudhanva Deshpande and Faisal Abu Alhayjaa as they were rehearsing for their play “Hamesha Samida” (Forever Steadfast) – the outcome of the first theatre collaboration between Palestine and India. Deshpande had also travelled to Palestine earlier in 2015 and recorded his experiences in a diary. “Hamesha Samida” travelled to 10 cities in India in December 2015 and January 2016.

On his return from Palestine, Orijit Sen spoke about his experience in Palestine at Studio Safdar. He described two kinds of Palestinian landscapes – the Palestinian landscape in his imagination, and the real landscape he encountered. Several images differ from the usual idea of Palestine: the Greek Orthodox Church, or the Church of Nativity where Jesus was born, for instance.

In Hebron, Sen saw buildings where the terraces or top floors have been occupied by the Israelis. These houses have staircases leading up to the windows of Palestinian floors, because they don't have access to what should be the common staircase of the building. Details like this make up the context for the everyday resistance of Palestinians, as well as the guiding slogan, "To resist is to exist".

Sen also explains the several murals he made in Palestine. He speaks of the process, peppered with funny anecdotes – from children ruining the murals sometimes to helping sometimes, to a Bengali insisting that there should be something in the Bangla script in the mural.

Bhaskar Chakraborty

Like a Dry Calm: Two Poems

Translated by Manash Firaq Bhattacharjee

Gopika Nath, “Wounded”, 2010. Unframed, material — cotton voile, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread; technique — photography, digital printing, tearing, layering, stitching, embroidery, 6 x 7.5″. Photo by Amitabha Bhattacharya

Camel

Even I am your companion – walking over sand all day long

Long-necked – with festive-less solemn eyes –

Listen, I

have been awake many nights, written many poems like a fool.

Do you have a manager?

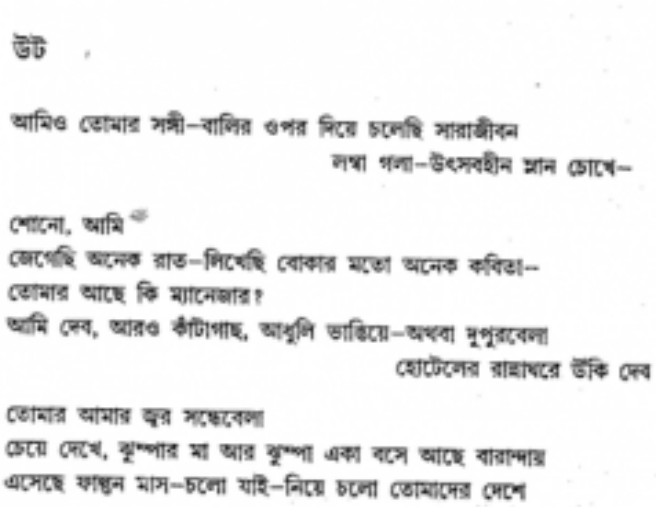
I will give you more cacti, deposit half a rupee – or else in the afternoon

I’ll peep into the hotel’s kitchen

You and I have this feverish dusk

looking back at us. Jhumpa’s mother and Jhumpa are sitting alone in the verandah,

The month of phalgun is here – let’s go – take me to your country



উট

আমিও তোমার সঙ্গী—বালির ওপর দিয়ে চলেছি সারাজীবন
লম্বা গলা—উৎসবহীন ম্লান চোখে—

শোনো, আমি
জেগেছি অনেক রাত—লিখেছি বোকার মতো অনেক কবিতা—
তোমার আছে কি ম্যানেজার?
আমি দেব, আরও কাঁটাগাছ, আঙুলি ভাঙিয়ে—অথবা দুপুরবেলা
হোটেলের রান্নাঘরে উঁকি দেব

তোমার আমার জ্বর সন্ধেবেলা
চেয়ে দেখে, ঝুম্পার মা আর ঝুম্পা একা বসে আছে বারান্দায়
এসেছে ফাল্গুন মাস—চলো যাই—নিয়ে চলো তোমাদের দেশে

The Story of My Disappearance

How did I disappear, don't bother to find out. So many people disappear
anyway. New clothes, table lamp, remain properly arranged – and
suddenly I wonder whose teardrop rolls from the veranda. The night falls.
Listen, I got mixed – like sand — with people. On a fragment of home,
on roads, sitting beside drains, I have passed my life away – saw,
in a tea shop, angelic Debdut washing the cups and plates and falling asleep all the time. Oh
unfamiliar people, I have loved all of you. Oh waves of iron, stones,
I have wished you would blow me away like a waterfall – I wanted
the house not to appear like a ghost's house. Through window after window
the day the breeze comes and blows away your colourful curtains, from the thick darkness
of your office-furniture, day dreams will wake up in abundance, know:
I was also among these things – like a dry calm – pale, alone…

হারিয়ে যাওয়ার গল্প

কীভাবে হারিয়ে গেলাম সেসবের খোঁজ কোরো না কোনোদিন। কত মানুষই তো হারিয়ে যায়। নতুন জামাকাপড়, টেবিল-ল্যাম্প, সাজানো থাকে ঠিকঠাক—আর এক-ফোঁটা চোখের জল হঠাৎ কার গড়িয়ে পড়ে বারান্দা থেকে. রাত্রি হয়। শোনো, ধুলোর মতো আমি মিশে গিয়েছিলাম মানুষের মধ্যে। একটুকরো ঘরে, রাস্তায়, নর্দমার ধারে বসে আমি কাটিয়েছিলাম জীবন—দেখেছিলাম চায়ের-দোকানে দেবদূত, কাপ-প্লেট ধুতে-ধুতে ঘুমিয়ে পড়ছে বারবার। হে অপরিচিত মানুষ, আমি ভালোবেসেছিলাম তোমাদের। হে লৌহ-তরঙ্গ, পাথর, আমি চেয়েছিলাম ঝর্নার মতো তোমরা ভাসিয়ে নিয়ে চলো আমাকে—চেয়েছিলাম, বাড়িটাকে যেন ভূতের বাড়ির মতো মনে না হয়।—তোমাদের জানালায়-জানালায় যেদিন বাতাস এসে উড়িয়ে দেবে রঙিন পর্দা, তোমাদের অফিসঘরের ঘন অন্ধকারময় আসবাবপত্র থেকে যেদিন রাশি-রাশি জেগে উঠবে স্বপ্ন, জেনো ; আমি ছিলাম ঐসবের মধ্যেও—শুকনো একটা তন্তুতার মতো—বিবর্ণ, একা...।

Ari Sitas

Two Delhi Poems

Courtesy Vasudha Thozhur, Himmat Project, Embroidery on fabric, 2005

1

Easter Dawn

The peacock-shrieked first light
And the grey leaves hiding the caking plaster
and tin, shiny tin
atop a wall, caking wall, with the stains of holi colour splashed searching for the ray
to snap the day awake with the first car's horn
peculiar Delhi dawn with the imam's voice aiming West
as if the city is still searching for a soul
still searching for a threadbare lie

to hide the unforgiving slums
ginger, knuckles of garlic in a pan
as if to hide the wafts of cabbage, rotting mulch
that the cows chew for cud
as the grey smog steams up the cowpats
Is it an offering to the heart's new spring
An awakening from a winter of the deepest discontent
Where each star was dabbed green by anti-nationals?

The sun will surely rise

2

Human Maintenance

There is a man
I am told
Who records the unclaimed dead
Who photographs each corpse found in the city
Who creates a file
Who creates a record if you please
In case someone one day comes to claim
something
And he is anxious because there is no rule
Of what to do:
Is he obliged to make a copy of the dead face
Or is he to make a copy for the claimant if and only if she pays
And it is untested because in the thousand and fifty nine files with faces
and descriptions that he writes with neat and ornate hand-writing
— in case someone else one day takes on his job —
no one has come to claim a face

He often hesitates at the thought
Of someone saying that he should have not ripped
out the image from the corpse
He should have only kept a photo of the living
And a description of the words she said
The day before she died as if that was ever possible.

You never know with people, they sometimes care.

Yousuf Saeed

Basant: A Sufi Celebration of Spring

Watch the film here

Sufi Basant at the Chishti Dargahs

North India wakes up from the chilly winter. It's spring again. The yellow of mustard flowers covers miles on end. It's time to celebrate joyful Basant with singing and dancing.

Few know that Basant is traditionally celebrated not only by Hindus, but also by many Muslims in India. It is believed that the Chishti Sufis may have begun the celebration of Basant among Indian Muslims as early as the 12th century.

The legend goes that Delhi's Chishti Saint Nizamuddin Aulia was so grieved by the death of his young nephew Taqiuddin Nooh, that he withdrew himself completely from the world for a couple of months. He remained locked in his room or sat near his nephew's grave. His close friend, disciple and famous court poet, Amir Khusrau, could not bear his pir's absence any longer. He began to think of ways to cheer him up.

One day, Khusrau met a few women dressed beautifully, carrying colourful flowers and singing. He asked them what they were up to, and the women told him it was Basant Panchmi, and they were taking the offering of Basant to their god. Khusrau found this fascinating; he said, smiling, "Well, my god needs an offering of Basant too." He dressed himself like the women, and walked toward the graveyard where his pir was sitting alone; he carried some mustard flowers and sang the songs the women he met were singing. Nizamuddin Aulia did not recognise him at first, then smiled in recognition. It was a smile that came to his face after two months. Amir Khusrau and other Sufis and disciples sang Persian couplets in praise of spring, and the mustard flowers were offered at Nooh's grave.

They may have sung the Persian lines:

> Ashk rez aamad ast abr-e-bahaar Saaqia gul barez-o-baada
>
> beyaar
>
> Or, Arab yaar tori Basant manayi

Or Hindi couplets like:

> Sakal bun phool rahi sarson
> Ambva borey, tesu phooley,
> koyal boley daar daar, Aur gori karat singhar,
> malania garhwa le aayin karson
> Sakal bun phool rahi sarson

The celebration of Basant became an annual affair in the Khaneqah (monastery) of Nizamuddin Aulia, and later, in other centres of the Chishti order all over the country. The local Muslims affiliated to all those Dargahs and Khaneqahs took to the tradition of celebrating Basant. In the Mughal era, this tradition probably evolved into a major public festival. In his book *Alam Mein*

Intekhab: Dilli (1987) Maheshwar Dayal describes one such Basant in Delhi at the time of Bahadurshah Zafar:

…the chill was on the decline. The spring had arrived. Dilli wallahs were setting up the fairs for Spring, as usual. Many were offering flowers and ittar on the Qadm Sharif (a sacred space in Jama Masjid). When people heard the announcement of Bahadur Shah Zafar's birthday, they gushed forth with joy. It was Thursday. There was such a crowd that not a hair's breadth of space was empty on either the Red Fort maidan or the shore of Jamuna. The curtains of houses, the Chadurs of women, the turbans of men, and the clothes of children, everything was dyed Basanti – even the candles hanging from the rampart were Basanti. It was as if mustard was growing in every nook and corner. Indoors and outdoors, people danced the whole night. Thousands of giant balloons made of mustard coloured paper, with candles lit inside, were being flown in the air. By four o'clock in the morning, the whole sky became Basanti. It seemed as if mustard was flowering in the eyes of the sky.

Compared to the glitter of Basant in the past, what we find today in the Dargah of Nizamuddin at Delhi seems more ritualistic, though it is festive. On Basant Panchmi, some qawwals from Dargah visit a village in nearby Haryana to collect mustard flowers. On the way back, they offer these first at the tombs of many saints related to Nizamuddin Aulia's order, including Naseeruddin Chiraghe-Dehli and others near Mehrauli. Back in Basti Nizamuddin, some interesting rituals take place — dyeing of the clothes in the Basanti colour being the most exciting one. One can see hundreds of people wearing Basanti scarves, handkerchiefs, chadurs and caps, almost dancing to the tune of Basanti qawwalis. They take out a procession, offering flowers and fateha on every little grave present here. The beautiful Hindi and Persian qawwalis sung here — mostly ascribed to Amir Khusrau himself — praise the coming of spring and the disciple's longing to meet his pir.

Sufis have a long tradition of adapting to the local culture and language of the places they visited to spread their message. The Chishti sufis too have not only tried to relate to Indian culture and music, but also enriched the various cultural forms with their experiments. Basant is a living example of this. Today, when communities are increasingly polarised, Muslims celebrating Basant or Hindus taking part in Eid may sound like a dream. But in the past, it was these Dargahs and Khaneqahs which served as platforms where the twain could meet. Don't we need that same inclusive spirit of the old dargahs today?

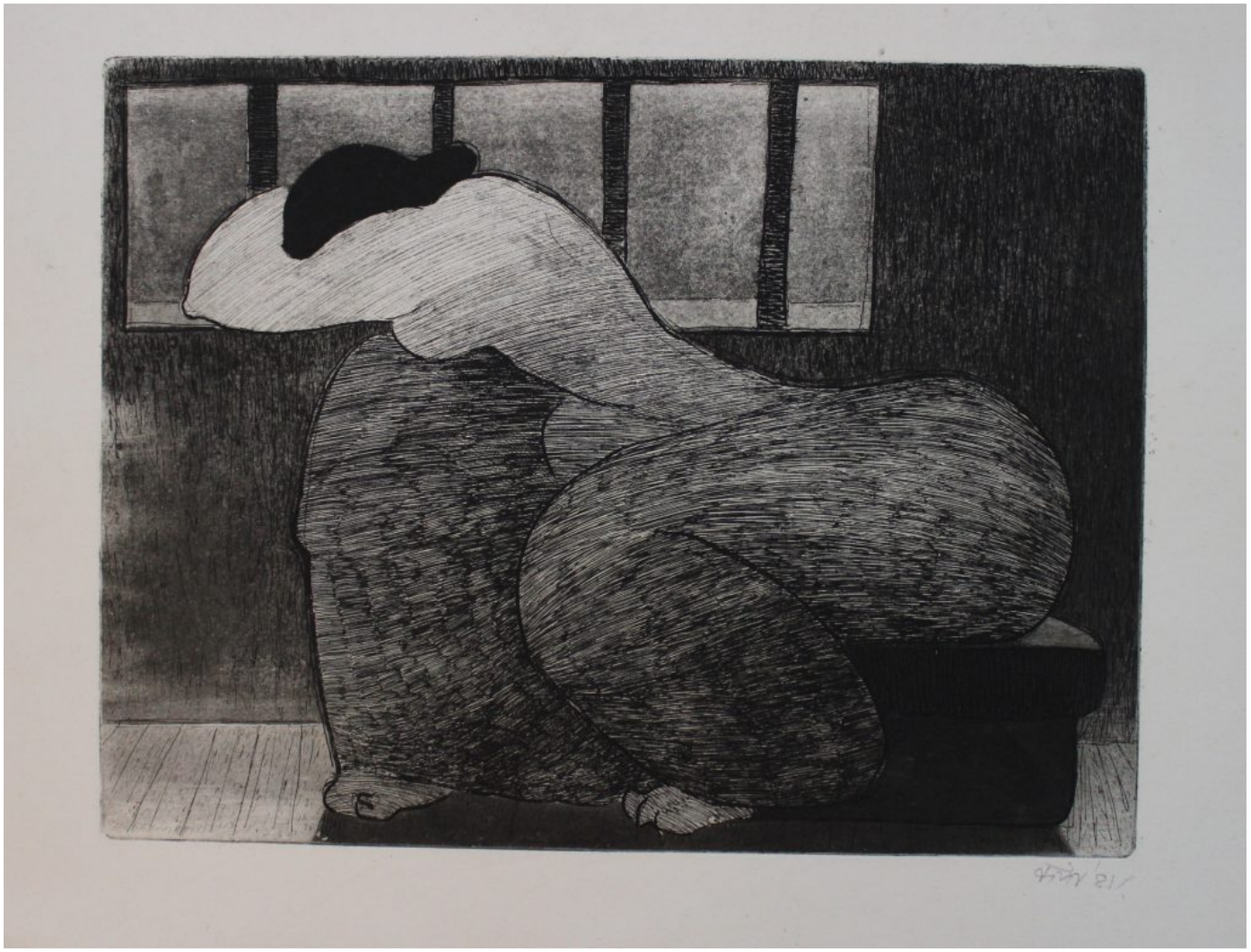
Unny


Get out of the way, Little Lord! Here comes Netaji Sena's invisible Flag March!
MATHURA
-unny.

Dona Mayoora

A Drop of Ink

Translated by Ra Sh



Kanchan Chander, “Encaged”, 1981. Etching and aquatint

The kids who went
To school and college
From our home
Never returned.

Only when those who
Had the power to be unseen
Came back, we knew of it.

People at home never knew.
They were in a metal cage
Named Waiting.

The world cannot melt
Patient metal.

The people in the locality
didn't know.
The teachers
didn't know.
They had created
an invisible world
And caged themselves in it.

One of their classmates
Came home.
The blood
dripping from his soles
Had reddened the flowers
On the way.

We two and the cat
Whose tongue was removed
Because of cancer
Had identified some people
Who kneaded colours
under their foot
And turned them dark.

A knock came in the night.
Four people,
well built hunks,
Came in.

We hadn't had a morsel
For three days.
But, the blood shot eyes
Did not ask us about leaflets.
Asked us point blank
Whether we were terrorists.

The cat growled
and the absence of a tongue
Did not inhibit
The growth of claws.

Keep mum… keep mum…
A voice buried inside
Reached the sixth sense
Of the cat and echoed back.

The four
screwed up their eye brows
At the painting on the wall.

Eyes fixed on the painting,
They asked if I was a Muslim.

I replied that
Many took me for a Christian
Because of my name.

All seven of us were irritated.
They four got annoyed
That these days
One couldn't
guess the caste or creed
From the name.

They eyed our complexion
And asked about our castes.

In turn, we got annoyed.
We knew they would feel repulsed
If we revealed it to them.

The fur of the cat
That went into their bellies
Had started its work.

Their index fingers
Curled around the triggers.

The shot
Made a neat hole
On the wall.

A sliver from it
Flew to the table top.

From a crack in the ink-pot
Red ink flowed
Spreading on the table
Soaking the paper
On which was written
That ink is thicker than blood
And refusing to dry up
Kissed the floor
And pooled in
the image of a human being.

The third day,
We came back with the kids.

The fourth day after our return
Was God's seventh day.

God who was taking rest
Hid in the sheet of paper
On which a kid
Was writing an essay
On Creation.

Godmen formed a row
Of guards.

We spread on it as ink.

മഷിത്തുള്ളി

ഞങ്ങളുടെ വീട്ടിൽ നിന്ന്
സ്കൂളിലേക്കും
കേ ാളജിലേക്കും പേ ായ
കുട്ടികളെ ാന്നും തിരിച്ചുവന്നില്ല.

അദൃശ്യരായി
പേ ായിവരാനറിയുന്ന
ചിലർമാത്രം
മടങ്ങി വന്നപ്പേ ാഴാണ്
ഇത് സംഭവിച്ചത്.

വീട്ടുകാരറിഞ്ഞില്ല
അവർ കാത്തിരിപ്പന്നെ
ലേ ാഹക്കൂടിനുള്ളിലായിരുന്നു,
ക്ഷമയുള്ള ലേ ാഹത്തെ
ലേ ാകത്തിനുരുക്കാൻ കഴിയില്ല.

നാട്ടുകാരറിഞ്ഞില്ല
അദ്ധ്യാപകരറിഞ്ഞില്ല
അദൃശ്യമായെ ാരു ലേ ാകം തീർത്ത്

അതിനുള്ളിൽ അവർ
അവരയെടച്ചിട്ടിരിക്കയായിരുന്നു.

വിവരമറിഞ്ഞ
സഹപാഠികളിലെ ാരാൾ
വീട്ടിലക്കേ് വന്നു.

ഉള്ളം കാലുകളിൽ നിന്നും
ചേ ാരയുതിർന്ന് വഴിനീളെ
പൂവുകൾ ചുവന്നിരുന്നു.

ക്യാൻസർ വന്ന്
നാവു മുറിക്കണ്ടേി വന്ന
പൂച്ചയുമെ ാന്നിച്ച്
ഞങ്ങൾ രണ്ടു പരേും
നിറങ്ങളെ ഒന്നിച്ച്
ചവിട്ടി കുഴച്ചിരുട്ടാക്കുന്ന
ചിലരെ ഇതിനകം
തിരിച്ചറിഞ്ഞിരുന്നു.

രാത്രി കതകിൽ മുട്ട് കടേ്ടു,
തണ്ടും തടിയുമുള്ള
നാലുപരേ കയറി വന്നു.

മൂന്നുനാളായി
ലഘുഭക്ഷണം പേ ാലും
കഴിക്കാത്ത ഞങ്ങളേ ാട്
ലഘു ലഖേകളെ ാന്നും
ചുണ്ടപ്പൂവിട്ട കണ്ണുകൾ ചേ ാദിച്ചിലല്ല.

മാവേ ായിസ്റ്റാണേ ാന്ന് ചേ ാദിച്ചു.

നാവില്ലാത്തത്
നഖങ്ങൾ നീളാനെ ാരു
പേ ാരായ്മയാവില്ലന്നെ്
പൂച്ച ചെ ാടിച്ചു.

അടങ്ങടങ്ങന്നെ ാര ാച്ച
ഉള്ളിലടക്കിയത്
പൂച്ചയുട ആറാമിന്ദ്രിയത്തിലത്തെി
തിരിച്ചു വന്നു.

ചുമരില പയെിന്റിങ്ങ് ന ാക്കി
നാലാളും പുരികങ്ങളിളക്കി.

ചുമരില പയെിന്റ് ന ാക്കി
മുസ്ലിമാണ ാന്ന് ച ാദിച്ചു.

പരേു കട്ടോൽ
ക്രിസ്ത്യാനിയാണ ാന്ന്
ഇതിനു മുൻപ്
പലരും ച ാദിച്ചിട്ടുണ്ടന്നെ്
മറുപടി ക ാടുത്തു.

ഏഴുപരേും ച ാടിച്ചു.

പരേു ക ാണ്ട്
ജാതിയും മതവുമറിയാൻ
കഴിയാത്ത നാളിതന്നെവർ
നാലുപരേും ച ാടിച്ചു.

ഞങ്ങളുട നിറം ന ാക്കി
ജാതി ച ാദിച്ചു.

ഞങ്ങൾ മൂന്നുപരേും
വീണ്ടും ച ാടിച്ചു.

അതു പറഞ്ഞാൽ
അറയ്ക്കുമന്നെ്
ഞങ്ങൾക്കറിയുമായിരുന്നു.

അവരുട ഉള്ളിൽ പ ായ
പൂച്ചര ാമങ്ങൾ അത്രമൽേ
പ്രവർത്തിച്ചു തുടങ്ങിയിരുന്നു.

അവരുടെ ചൂണ്ടുവിരൽ
കാഞ്ചിയിൽ മടങ്ങി.

വടിയിൽ
ചുമര് പച്ചയ്ക്ക് തുളഞ്ഞു.

അതിൽ നിന്നെ ാരു ചീള്
മശേപ്പുറത്തക്കേ് തറെിച്ചു.

മഷിക്കുപ്പിയിലെ വിള്ളലിൽ നിന്നും
ചുവന്ന മഷിയെ ാഴുകി
മശേമൽേ പടർന്ന്
രക്തബന്ധത്തക്കേ്കാൾ
ദൃഢതയറേിയതാണ്
മഷിബന്ധമന്നേഴുതിയ
കടലാസും കുതിർത്ത്
ഉണങ്ങാൻ വിസമ്മതിച്ച്
മനുഷ്യാകൃതിയിൽ
നിലത്തുമ്മവച്ച് കിടന്നു.

മൂന്നാം നാൾ ഞങ്ങൾ
മടങ്ങി വന്നു,
കുട്ടികൾക്കെ ാപ്പം.

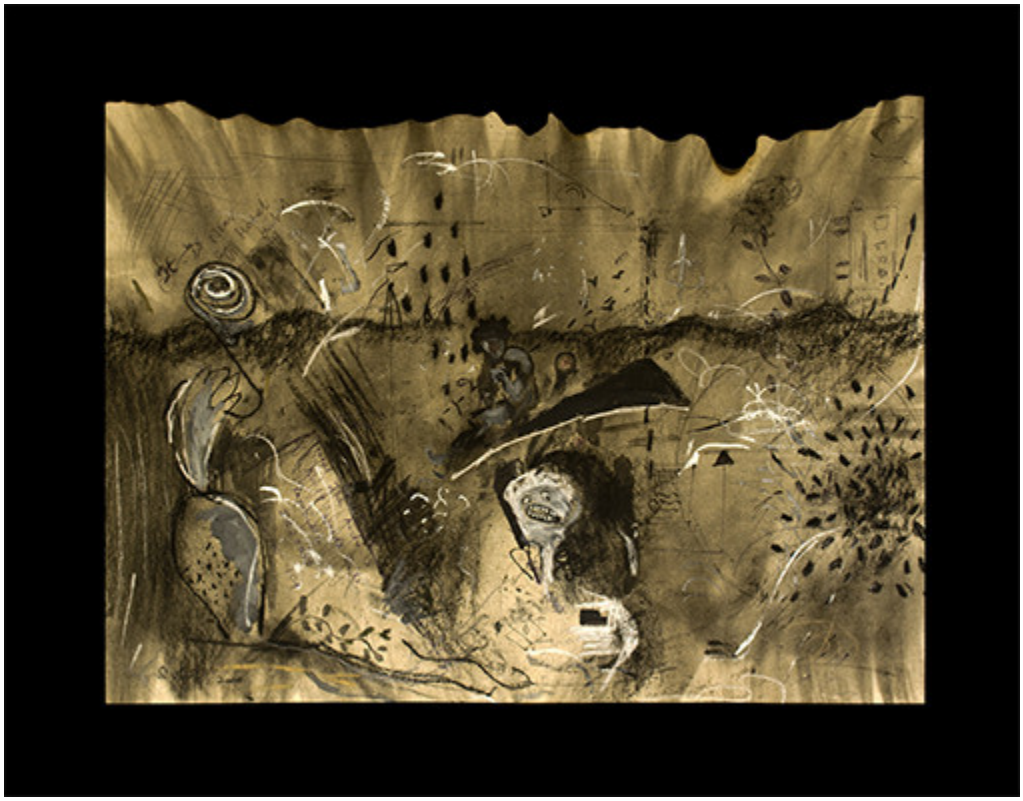
മടങ്ങി വന്നതിന്റെ
നാലാം നാൾ
ദവൈത്തിന്റെ
ഏഴാം നാളായിരുന്നു.

വിശ്രമത്തിലായിരുന്ന ദവൈം
ഉൽപ്പത്തിയെ പറ്റി
ഉപന്യാസമഴുതിക്കെ ാണ്ടിരുന്ന
കുട്ടിയുടെ കടലാസിൽ ഒളിച്ചിരുന്നു,
മനുഷ്യദവൈങ്ങൾ
കാവലാളുകളുടെ വരിയായി.

ഞങ്ങളതിന് മേൽ
മഷിയായി പടർന്നു.

Indira Chandrasekhar

No Word in Our Language



S. Vijayaraghavan, “Mystic Valley”. Charcoal on paper

Surya’s grandmother and mine were cousins many times removed. No one who can trace the relationship has survived, but everyone knew that fifty or sixty years ago, the two had been inseparable. I happened to be present the very last time they met. It was at a family wedding just before Surya’s grandmother died.

“Shailaja, Shailaja”, she had called out.

I had never heard anyone call my grandmother by her name. Most people called her Ajji, as if she were some universal grandmother with no other role but to be benign. On rare occasions I’d hear her referred to as Usha Bai, the name she had been given by her husband’s family when she was married at thirteen. Maybe they felt the moniker better suited the alignment of the stars that ruled their household. I wonder if it had made my grandmother’s life happier.

“Shailaja, Shailaja.” Surya’s grandmother’s voice was soft, yet it carried over all the other noises at the wedding hall. Ajji hurried forward, her eyes bright with tears. Just then the drums sounded fast and insistent, accompanied by the sharp, reedy melody of the nadaswaram, announcing the tying of the nuptial knot. “Maalu, my dear Maalu.” Ajji’s body bent at the waist as if her whole body was reaching towards her friend. Malathi Bai extended her arm and gently touched Ajji’s elbow. They walked slowly to the folding steel chairs near the fan and sat there hardly speaking.

“Why didn’t you talk more to her, Ajji?” I had asked when we got home.

“What is there to say, Ramu?” she’d replied. With everything I know now, I could counter: “What is not there to say?” But at the time I nodded as if I understood.

Malathi Bai’s grandson Surya contacted my mother to say that he and his fellow students from their university study group had to spend three weeks in an Indian village; there was no question that they would come to our village, or what was left of it, gobbled up as it was by the city.

*

The students arrived one morning around eleven, an odd scruffy bunch. In addition to their appearance, their coarse, wide-mouthed tones drew us in, and we gathered close to stare as they unloaded their things on to our dusty main street. They were obviously taken aback when they found that the village was not some idyllic pastoral place, but an ugly cluster of small concrete structures creeping in from a city fast encroaching our outskirts. It was only when one looked in the direction of the lake that there was any evidence of the tiled mortar buildings and granite courtyards that had characterised the area.

Surya and some other students stayed in the village while the rest were housed in a hostel nearby. They were like alien creatures; the noises they made, and their daily routine completely unlike ours. They were skilled at getting their way. They were not intimidated about asking for what they wanted as I imagine I would have been if I were visiting their place. “Oh the bath water’s cold. Papamma, can’t I have hot water, please?” The request was made with a pout and a hug. And Papamma set to lighting the fire to heat the water.

A few years ago someone left the fire untended under one of Papamma’s trees and scorched it to death. Every leaf had curled in brown agony and fallen to the ground. Papamma had cried and moved the spot where she lit the fire to one where there was no shade, which was fine most of the time since the water was only heated in the early mornings or during the cool winters. But this student rose at noon and only wanted to bathe in the middle of the blazing summer afternoon. Pappamma used mountains of good firewood to heat water.

“Thank you,” the girl would simper as the older lady carried buckets of steaming water, perspiring and red from the effort. Then bending ineffectually the girl would add, “Don’t lift it, I can do it,” after it was done. I don’t know why Pappamma didn’t just say, “Bathe in cold water,” as she would have to her own grandchildren. Maybe the foreignness of the girl was intimidating.

“Why are you here?” I asked one of the students. “Beats going to class,” he replied. What did that mean?

I got a better answer when I asked Surya. “Why am I here? Treasure my boy, looking for treasure.” He was laughing when he said it but I knew he was serious. Many people had searched for Tippu Sultan’s treasure chest which was supposed to have been buried in the sand near the lakebed. There was a perpetual debate about whether it contained coins or jewels. Some even said it was filled with chopped body parts of Tippu’s family. “Don’t worry, Suryanna. You’ll see, it will be full of gold, not bones” I said, wanting to reassure him that our village, our connection, and thus somehow, I, wouldn’t fail him.

“Gold?!” he roared. “This is bigger than gold. We are looking for treasure my boy.” More valuable than gold!? I laughed too, uncomprehending, excited.

Surya had a handsome face, a large unwieldy body and a friendly charm. He was more disciplined than the rest of the group. He rose early even when he’d stayed out late with the others. Once he was up, all he seemed to do was wander about, and talk to anyone who was around. I was fascinated and tagged along; happy when he paid attention to me, and bored when he asked people again and again for versions of old tales that none of us cared about.

The only time I enjoyed the stories was when he spent time with my grandmother. He would ask her questions that none of the family ever broached. My grandmother responded to the encouraging sounds he made; she forgot I was around, forgot that she had spent a lifetime hiding the family history from me. She talked about her son, the alcoholic recluse; about my mother, widowed and lonely; and about her own late husband’s mistress who lived on the next lane and who, my grandmother said, had given her husband something she never could. One day I walked into our cool, dark hall with its old rosewood table and chair. In the moments it took me to adjust to the dimness, my perceptions obscured by the afternoon glare, I saw my grandmother wiping her eyes with the edge of her cotton sari. “I wish”, she was saying softly. By the time I blinked a few times and could see again, she was sitting in her usual posture, leaning erect and gracious against the back of the chair, her head tilted solicitously towards us.

That evening Surya whispered excitedly into the phone, “Bonanza man. You won’t believe what I just learnt.” He looked up as I entered, and straightened. He changed his tone and started talking loudly about a walk along the lake bund which had a crumbling mortar structure. I knew, and I knew that he knew that there was nothing there. Why was he deliberately misleading whomever he was talking to?

Generally the April holidays were a nightmare. I had to resist the activities my mother tried to enrol me in at the high school, while she was at work. This time, however, her energies were distracted by a new colleague, so I was left to myself. While my mother was relieved that I was occupied following Surya everywhere, she was also irritated. “Gone all day again”, she said with a bitterness that had nothing much to do with me — she was bitter about everything in those days. “Well, I don’t care what you do, so long as you don’t get into any trouble and are back on time. Also, make sure you practise. Just because your violin teacher has traipsed off on holiday — imagine, she has gone to Disneyland while you and I can’t go anywhere — doesn’t mean you don’t keep up with practice.”

To appease my mother, I would take out the violin in the hot, torpid afternoons and play wild, wandering versions of tunes I had been taught. Surya would take a siesta, or work on his laptop, a sleek, city-looking device that he stored under his bed in a soft velvety grey, envelope-like case. Occasionally I would drop my bow and try to read over his shoulder as he typed but he would shoo me away with a laugh saying, “No peeking. This is a treasure hunt remember, each man for himself. We each have to follow our own clues.”

“How can I recognise the clues? I don’t know what I am looking for.”

“Man, there’s treasure everywhere” he laughed. “Just look around. Look around, and listen. Listen!”

*

They hadn’t found anything, I would have known if they had. They spent their last week working together and typing furiously on their computers rather than doing any more searching.

They used Mrs Kamala, the widow’s place for this final stretch. Her house was at the other end of the village and out of bounds for me. My mother distrusted Mrs K. “Why does she hang around near the gate, waiting to chat with every passer-by?”, I heard her saying to my grandmother.

I finally worked up the courage to sneak off and go to Mrs K’s. She happened to be in the garden, and took my arm and led me in. The small, pink, distempered hall had plush upholstered sofas arranged in a sharp square around a low glass-top table. The students lay about with their computers, their dirty feet everywhere. “Poor things, they work so hard”, she said as she looked around. “I have to provide refreshments.” She took out a bottle of ancient whiskey from a musty cupboard filled with her dead husband’s clothes. “He was saving it for something special”, she said with a sad smile. Then she perked up and took out some glasses and said, “Please, please, take some!” The group drank greedily once they got over the fact that the Scotch had apparently been wrapped in old-fashioned underwear for many years. Surya was leaning over his computer as one of the girls read out to him from a notebook. He looked up and grinned, and winked at me. I felt left out and embarrassed.

That week my mother arranged for me to take math classes as preparation for entering high school. And in a few days the group had left. “They’ve tossed their cardboard boxes into my storm drain” Mrs K cried, the morning after their departure as I wandered past her place to convince myself they were truly gone. “I’d had it cleared just before they arrived.” Her fingers anxiously balled up the material of her sari as she lifted it with both hands before stepping outside her compound wall. The border of the grim flower-print played at her skinny calves. “Cheeky things! When I asked them to clean the veranda before they left, they said, ‘yes, Mrs K, no problem, Mrs K’. And now look at the pulp that’s clogged up everything.” She gesticulated with both hands at the disintegrating boxes. A fine layer of stress-sweat gathered in the creased pockets below her eyes. She sighed and used the end of her sari to dab at her face, leaving a crushed rosette shape in the fabric she released. “I wonder why they were here. What did they want from us?”

*

“The unscrupulous creep. I knew I shouldn’t have let him into our lives. Thank god your grandmother is no longer with us.” My mother tossed the book into the waste-paper basket and dusted off her fingers with a grimace of disgust.

My mother had been annoyed when Surya didn’t correspond, but that was a couple of years ago and she soon gave in, with an odd pleasure, to other more pressing melancholies involving that colleague who was now her beaux. But whatever Surya had sent made her angrier than I had seen in a while. She picked up the bulky yellow envelope with the Abraham Lincoln stamps

and extricated a letter. Holding it by the corners as if it were something dirty, she read out loud, “Hello dear friends.”

What the hell did he mean, “dear friends”? I was the one who had been his friend. My mother was my mother and my grandmother was dead. I cursed loudly. My mother glanced at me, continued reading quietly, and then exclaimed, “The pompous ass!” She crumpled the letter and threw it after the book.

As soon as I had the chance, I retrieved the book from the wastebasket and took it to my room. Finally I would find out what their stay was about, and what they had been searching for.

The introductory essay went on about folk tales and oral histories! No mention of the treasure. There was a section about the psychological implications of covert lesbian affairs on the dynamics of the village. Lesbian! Here? In our village?! Did anyone know that word? Did it even exist in our language? Next there was a bit about extra-marital relationships – men and their mistresses. There was a section on feminism and freedom, and I thought of Papamma and how all those grand concepts hadn’t trickled down in their attitude towards her. Abstract theoretical terms such as gender hegemony frameworks ran across the page. I laughed. This stuff had nothing to do with our small, conventional, characterless and squeezed-in corner of the city that, through developmental neglect, still retained some aspects of the village. This book was about some other interesting place.

I flipped to the chapter on the lesbian affair which sounded like a promising read for the afternoon. I was surprised it was written by Surya.

The story began with a description of an elderly lady, separated from her female lover by an unfulfilling marriage. The lady was described in great physical detail, down to her soft pink saris. It was without doubt my grandmother, and her lesbian lover? Malathi Bai, Surya’s grandmother! I understood why my mother had flung the book away. It all sounded so sordid and intimate. I recalled that afternoon when I had walked in on Surya and my grandmother, and how excited Surya had been afterwards. What did she say that led him to conclude that which he did? My grandmother was discreet and gracious. She would never articulate something that didn’t even have a word in our language.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” I screamed into my pillow. We had been bloody naive to assume they wanted to share our lives, when all they wanted to do was to take our stories and twist them out of shape. When I woke up it was dusk, just the kind of light in which Mrs K would lurk by her gate, waiting to talk to someone and share her husband’s whiskey. I could taste the vomit coating my tongue. I turned over, peeling my face off from the dampness of perspiration, tears and saliva that had soaked into the sheet, and returned to the book.

It concluded with a paragraph written by Surya. In it he said that during their stay in the village, a passing conversation with a child led to the project being viewed as a treasure hunt. “The boy asked me why I was there and I spontaneously responded that we were looking for treasure.’’

I had thought of myself as Surya’s companion and confidant, not some random child. I was offended but my rage was exhausted. I read on. “A treasure hunt! It was a perfect analogy. We were digging, digging deep for treasure, treasure that would enable us to examine our roots.”

I washed my face and slipped out of the house to visit Mrs K. There was no mention of her in the book. I took the long route via what was left of the lake, past the glass structure that was being constructed where the village square had been. I hoped on one hand that Surya had remembered to send her a copy of the book, and on the other that he had forgotten to do so.

Soibam Haripriya

Homeland: Three Poems

Kanchan Chander, “Running Figure”, 2008. Stainless steel, each 3’3” x 5’9”

Homeland

is reluctantly
walking into a nightmare,
plunging into the precision
of a razor.

is the anatomy
of the familiar room,
blinded by power-cuts,
still revealing to me
its musty secrets.

is shaping my day
around these hours of dark.

Homeland,
What good is a moth here?
The town plunges to darkness at 10:00 p.m.
Fireflies as if mocking – switch off, switch on.

No one walks
the dark irregular pavement.

Women carry a dark hollowed-out cavity
in place of a heart,
A hollowed-out heart-shaped cavity
to accommodate disappeared husbands and sons.
Newspapers make regular announcements
for all those who want
a brand new anatomy.

The Curse of Sight

Crying,
a primordial act
old as the heart's history.
Yet long taught so
we weep within,
Swallowing it down
wordlessly
as if an uncalled-for insult.
God in his prescience
crafted it so:
a logic to our bodies
that the organ of seeing
is that of weeping too.
The futility of the world
built into
the logic of our bodies.

From here on, infer
the curse of sight.

A Death of my Own

Of all the things
I wish to own,
I wish my death
To be my own.

A quiet dignity
of privacy,
Not a grainy picture
in a newspaper,
Not a being
ripped from a warm cocoon,
Not a mere body

trespassed in life,
trespassed beyond life.

I don't wish for the raging flames
to engulf me into ashes,
I wish
a piece of earth
to provide me solace
in its honeyed chest,
to undo the poison
This life has fed.

For a flower of red
to bloom
from my navel
and a drop of dew
to adorn its petals,

For the wind to play
among my branches
and carry in its trail
tales of my brimming passion,

For a lover to pluck my flowers
and embellish the beloved
with my petals,
with my scent,
With this
You will infuse
my death
with life again.

Note: "A Death of My Own" was included in the anthology *Tattooed with Taboos*, Partridge, 2014.

Chitpur Local

GALLERY GUFTUGU

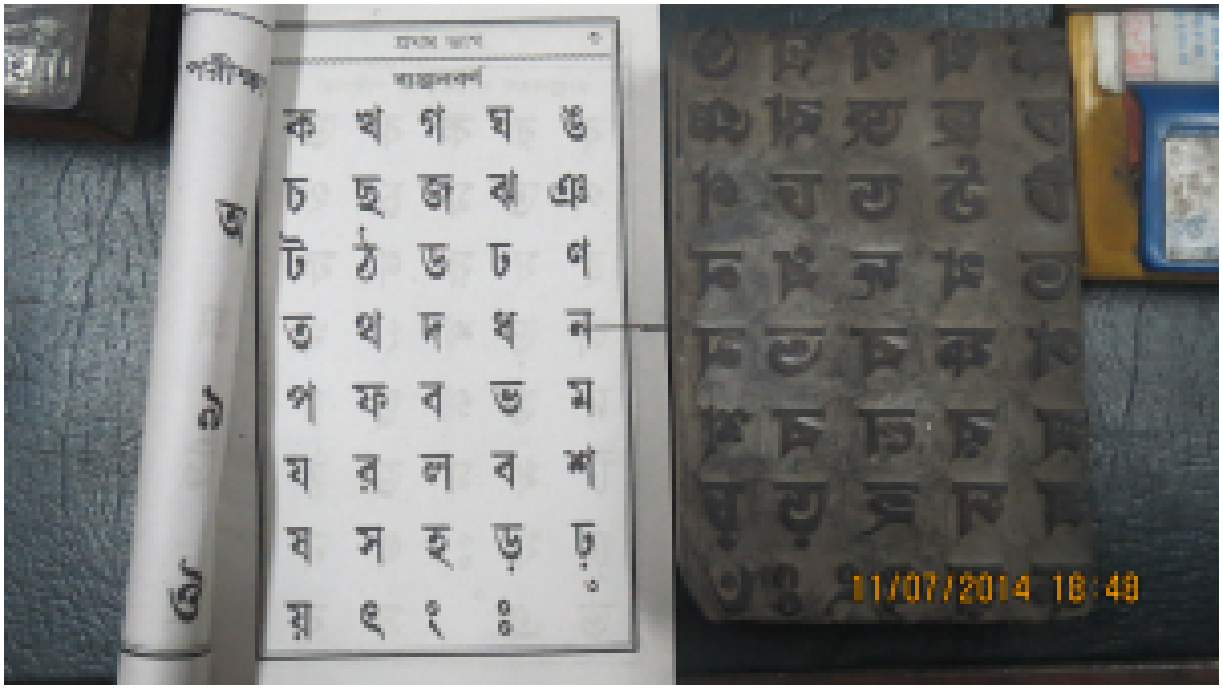
Watch the video here

Chitpur Local

Re-living a Para

Chitpur Local is a social art project that was initiated in November 2013 by Hamdasti, a Kolkata based collective of artists, at Chitpur Road, one of Kolkata's oldest roads. Chitpur is the main artery of the erstwhile "Black Town". Chitpur's palatial houses were juxtaposed with bustees, and its historic cultural centres of Bengal Renaissance coexisted with the more colloquial centres of cultural production.

The project is centered on one particular neighbourhood known as Jatrapara, or Battala, which was the hub of popular traditions like Jatra (travelling theatre), printmaking, publishing, jewellery-making and bamboo crafts.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It is also a neighbourhood with a history of shared spaces – private courtyards, bookshops, public street corner rowaks (platforms), that were once the focal points of interaction and cultural engagement. As artists exploring the role of the arts in communities, public spaces, trade, and even education, we were drawn to these local cultural traditions and platforms that were once an integral part of every facet of this community. Our project brings together a collective of artists, local students, teachers, residents and shop-owners in order to re-activate the spaces of this locality as shared cultural spaces for the community.

Over the past two years the project has constantly evolved in order to test and enact new ways of activating this locality's spaces and traditions. Starting with the small step of mapping the area and its diverse narratives, we developed three public projects at three sites. The projects included a pop up museum in the courtyard of the De residence, a card game that triggered a process of remembering the narratives of the community that was played at street corners, and story boxes for a historic bookstore.

Our experiments culminated in a Public Art Festival in the locality in March 2015 that deepened community networks and helped us reach out to wider audiences.

It helped us to collectively imagine new possibilities for the future of this locality. Since then we have been incrementally testing ways of appropriating these projects and developing new initiatives that can be taken forward independently. The festival led to the creation of new products for local craftsmen and businesses, a network of supporters for the local school, the design of an afterschool curriculum, increased visibility of local stores, as well as numerous other smaller relationships within and outside the community. Some of these are continuing to grow while others fade with time.

In 2016, we continue to explore the potential of social art practices to build collaborations, shape new relationships, and catalyse engagement and action. Through an exhibition at Studio 21 Gallery in Kolkata, with intensive public programs over two weeks, we created a laboratory for critiquing our journey so far. It helped in developing new ideas for social art practice, developing a collective of artists exploring social art practice in Kolkata and building new proposals for the future.

Sumona Chakravarty
Nilanjan Das
Varshita Khaitan
Manas Acharya

Note: The project was supported by the India Foundation for the Arts between January and June 2015.

Contributors

Arundhathi Subramaniam has published four books of poetry, including the recent *When God Is a Traveller*. Her prose works include the bestselling biography of a contemporary mystic and yogi, *Sadhguru: More Than a Life*, and *The Book of Buddha*. She edited *Pilgrim's India*, an anthology on sacred journeys and *Eating God: A Book of Bhakti Poetry.*

Ahdaf Soueif is the author of *The Map of Love* which was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for Fiction in 1999. She writes regularly for the *Guardian* in London and has a weekly column for *al-Shorouk* in Cairo. A collection of her essays, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*, was published in 2004. Her translation of Mourid Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* came out in 2004.

Akhil Katyal's first book of poems, *Night Charge Extra*, was published by Writers Workshop in 2015. He finished his PhD at SOAS and currently teaches literature at Shiv Nadar University (SNU) in Uttar Pradesh.

Animikh Patra's poetry collections include *Patanmoner Kursi* (2016), *Kono Ekta Naam* (2013), and *Jatadur Boidho Boli* (2009).

Anuradha Kapur is the former Director of the National School of Drama, New Delhi. She is the author of *Actors, Pilgrims, Kings and Gods: the Ramlila at Ramnagar*. She was associated with the theatre group Dishantar from its inception, and is also one of the founder members of Vivadi, a working group of painters, musicians, writers and theatre practitioners.

Ari Sitas is a South African poet, sociologist and activist who has published six poetry books, most recently *From around the World in 80 Days: The India Section*. His selected poems were published by Deep South as Rough Music in 2013. Sitas was the Bhagat Singh Chair in Historical Studies for a semester in JNU.

Atul Dodiya was trained at the Sir JJ School of Art, Mumbai, and the École des Beaux-Arts, Paris. He has been a highly acclaimed artist since the nineties, with more than 30 solo shows around the world, including a mid- career retrospective at the Japan Foundation Asia Centre in Tokyo, a solo show in Reina Sofia Museum, Madrid, and the Contemporary Arts Centre in the US. A major survey show of his work was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, in 2013.

Bhaskar Chakraborty (1943-2005) was hailed as one of the best poets in Kolkata when his first book of poems*Sheetkaal Kabe Asabe Suparna* (*When Will It Be Winter, Suparna*) was published. An entire generation of poets living in the city in the sixties and seventies attempted to write like him, but not of one of them captured metropolitan isolation with the delicate intimacy of Chakraborty's poems.

Dona Mayoora's poetry and art have been published in journals in seven languages. Her first collection of poetry in Malayalam, *Ice Cubukal*, was published in 2012.

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 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.

Gopika Nath is a textile artist and craftsperson working toward redefining the value of hand-crafting in India. She is a Fulbright Scholar and an alumnus of Central St. Martins School of Art and Design, UK. She is also an art critic, blogger, poet and teacher.

Indira Chandrasekhar is a scientist, a fiction writer and the founder and principal editor of *Out of Print*, an online platform for short fiction in the Indian subcontinent. Her own stories have appeared in literary journals across the world, and her collection will be published in 2017. She is the co-editor of the anthology, *Pangea*, Thames River Press, 2012.

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, and has had numerous solo and group exhibitions all over the world. For more on her work, read more here.

Krishna Sobti is of the first generation of prominent women novelists in modern Hindi. She was born in West Punjab, (in present-day Pakistan) on February 18, 1925. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel*Zindaginama*. She also received the Shiromani Award in 1981 and the Hindi Academy Award in 1982. Her well-known novels and short stories include *Dara Se Bichuri*,*Mitro Marajani*, *Surajmukhi Andhere Ke*, “Nafisa”, “Sikka Badal Gaya”, and “Badalom Ke Ghere”.

Labhshankar Jadavji Thakar, also known by his pen names Lagharo and Vaidya Punarvasu, was a Gujarati poet, playwright and short story writer. He had a modernist approach in literature and was heavily influenced by theatre of the absurd and other traditions of experimental literature. He received the Ranjitram Suvarna Chandrak Award, the Narmad Suvarna Chandrak Award, the Kumar Chandrak Award, and the Sahitya Akademi Award.

Manash ‘Firaq’ Bhattacharjee‘s poems have appeared in*The London Magazine, New Welsh Review, The Fortnightly Review, Elohi Gadugi Journal, Mudlark, Metamorphoses, Modern Poetry in Translation, The Postcolonialist, and The Indian Quarterly.* His first collection of poetry, *Ghalib’s Tomb and Other Poems* (2013), was published by The London Magazine. He teaches in the School of Culture and Creative Expressions at Ambedkar University, New Delhi.

Manas Acharya is an inter-disciplinary visual artist and curator. He completed his Diploma in Fine Arts from the Indian Collage of Art, Kolkata and his Postgraduate Diploma from Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan. His work spans across various media and art practices, including drawing, painting, installation, video, performance art, documentary film, popular art and craft, design and collaborative art projects. He is also engaged as a curator-coordinator of Studio 21, a multi-disciplinary art space that serves as a creative platform for young artists in Kolkata.

Mourid al-Barghouti is a Palestinian poet. His collections include *Collected Works* (1997); *I Saw Ramallah* (2003); *A Small Sun* (2003); *Muntasaf al-Layl* (2005); *Midnight and Other poems* (2008).

Naushil Mehta is a writer, translator, director and producer. His play *Atyare (Now)*, performed as Cafe theatre and staged by Sabira Merchant's Studio 29, is a cult production. He is the founder of Vikalp (The Alternative), a group dedicated to theatre. A collection of his short plays was recently published as *Leela Laghu Natako*.

Nilanjan Das graduated from Rabindra Bharati University with an MFA and BFA from the Graphics Department. As a printmaker, he uses the reproductive possibility of print; he chooses objects and formats for his work that are common, popular, witty, interactive, communicative, and commercial, often manipulating their marketable characteristics to connect to people.

Nirban Bandyopadhyay was born in 1974 and raised in Hooghly, West Bengal. His first book of poems *Ei Janmo, Jaduprabanata* was published in 2011. His second collection, *Mangsashi Medhar Trapeze*, was published in 2013, and awarded the Krittibas Award in 2015.

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.

Ra Sh writes poems in national and international online journals and has translated works from English to Malayalam and vice versa. His poems were included in the anthology *A Strange Place Other Than Earlobes*, and a collection, entitled *Architecture of Flesh*, was published by Poetrywala, Mumbai.

Radwa Ashour is an Egyptian writer and translator. *Hajar Dafi* is her first novel. Her trilogy *Gharnata* was declared best book of the year by the General Egyptian Book Organization in 1994. She co-edited *The Encyclopedia of Arab Women Writers: 1873–1999* (2005), and supervised the translation into Arabic of volume nine of the*Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* (2006).

Ritu Menon is a feminist publisher and writer. She was Convener of a multi-language project on "The Gendered Nature of Censorship in India", from 2000-2005. The project worked with over 300 writers from more than 10 Indian languages. She has written extensively on censorship and dissent in newspapers, magazines, and periodicals.

S. Vijayaraghavan holds an MFA degree with a major in painting from the College of Art in New Delhi. He has participated in various shows, festivals and residency programmes, in India and elsewhere. For more on the artist and his work, read more here.

Sanghamitra Halder writes poetry and non-fiction. Her collections include *Naamaano Rucksack* (2010), *Deergho-ee* (2014), *Hey Ektu Sambodhan* (2016).

Sankar Basu's collections of poems include *Shudhu Sur Jege Aachhe*, *E Basona E Nirbason* and *Backbencharer Travelogue*.

Santanu Mitra graduated in visual arts from Government College of Art & Crafts, Kolkata, and completed his post-graduate work in print making from the same institution in 2001. He has participated in various exhibitions, group shows and art workshops across India. He also likes to work illustrations for graphic novels.

Subhro Bandhopadhyay is the author of four books of poetry, one of which fetched him the Indian National Award for young writers in 2013 (Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar). Two of them were translated into Spanish and published in Spain. He has written a biographer of Pablo Neruda in Bengali, and also received the Antonio Machado International Poetry Fellowship from the Government of Spain.

Subhadip Maitra is an author, translator, and journalist. He writes in English and Bengali. His poetry collections include *Jadukori Boighar* (2014), and *Adar Bapari Jabe Armeni Ghate* (2016). His story has been anthologised in*Shunya Doshoker Golpo Sangraha*, a collection of Bengali short stories.

Sumona Chakravarty holds degrees in Art and Design from the Srishti School of Art Design and Technology, Bangalore and a Master's degree on art and design for civic engagement from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design. She has worked in the field of community art and participatory design practices in India, the US and Mexico. Chakravarty explores the role of participatory art and design practices in creating spaces for civic engagement and reactivating the public domain.

Tamim al-Barghouti is Palestinian poet, columnist and political scientist. His poetry collections include *Mijana*and *Al-Manzar*. He studied politics at Cairo University, The American University in Cairo, and Boston University where he received his Ph.D. in Political Science. He has written two volumes of history and political thought:*Benign Nationalism: Nation State Building Under Occupation, the Case of Egypt* and *the Umma and the Dawla: The Nation State and the Arab Middle East*. In 2000 he received the poetry prize of the Regional Cultural Foundation in Marrakesh, Morocco.

Vasudha Thozhur 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.

Varshita Khaitan completed her graduation in Visual Communication from Srishti School of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore in 2012. Since then, she has been working as a graphic designer at The Free Agency and a junior committee member at Dakshini Prayash, NGO for the underpriviliged in Calcutta.

Vivan Sundaram is a highly acclaimed painter/ artist who works in many different media, including painting, sculpture, photography, installation and video art. His work is politically conscious and highly inter-textual in nature.

Yousuf Saeed is an independent filmmaker and researcher. He has a Masters in Mass Communication from Jamia Millia's AJK Mass Communication Research Centre, and has worked in educational television and produced documentaries on a range of subjects. His films, shown in several film festivals, academic venues and television, include *Inside Ladakh, Basant, Yashpal — A life in Science*, and the *The Train to Heaven*. For more information on his work, read more here.

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