

June 2019



# Guftugu

c u l t u r e   m a t t e r s

Merlin Moli, 'Of Blood, Veins and Flesh', fibreglass, 2013

## 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](http://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.

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## Our Team

### *Consulting Editors*

K. Satchidanandan  
Githa Hariharan

### *Editorial Collective*

Daniya Rahman  
Ishita Mehta  
Kanika Katyal  
Bharathy Singaravel  
Satyam Tiwari

### *Site*

Shweta Jain

### *Design, Art and Layout*

Shoili Kanungo

### *Advisory Panel*

Adil Jussawalla  
Anand  
Gulammohammed Sheikh  
Jerry Pinto  
M. Mukundan  
N.S. Madhavan  
Orijit Sen  
Shubha Mudgal

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

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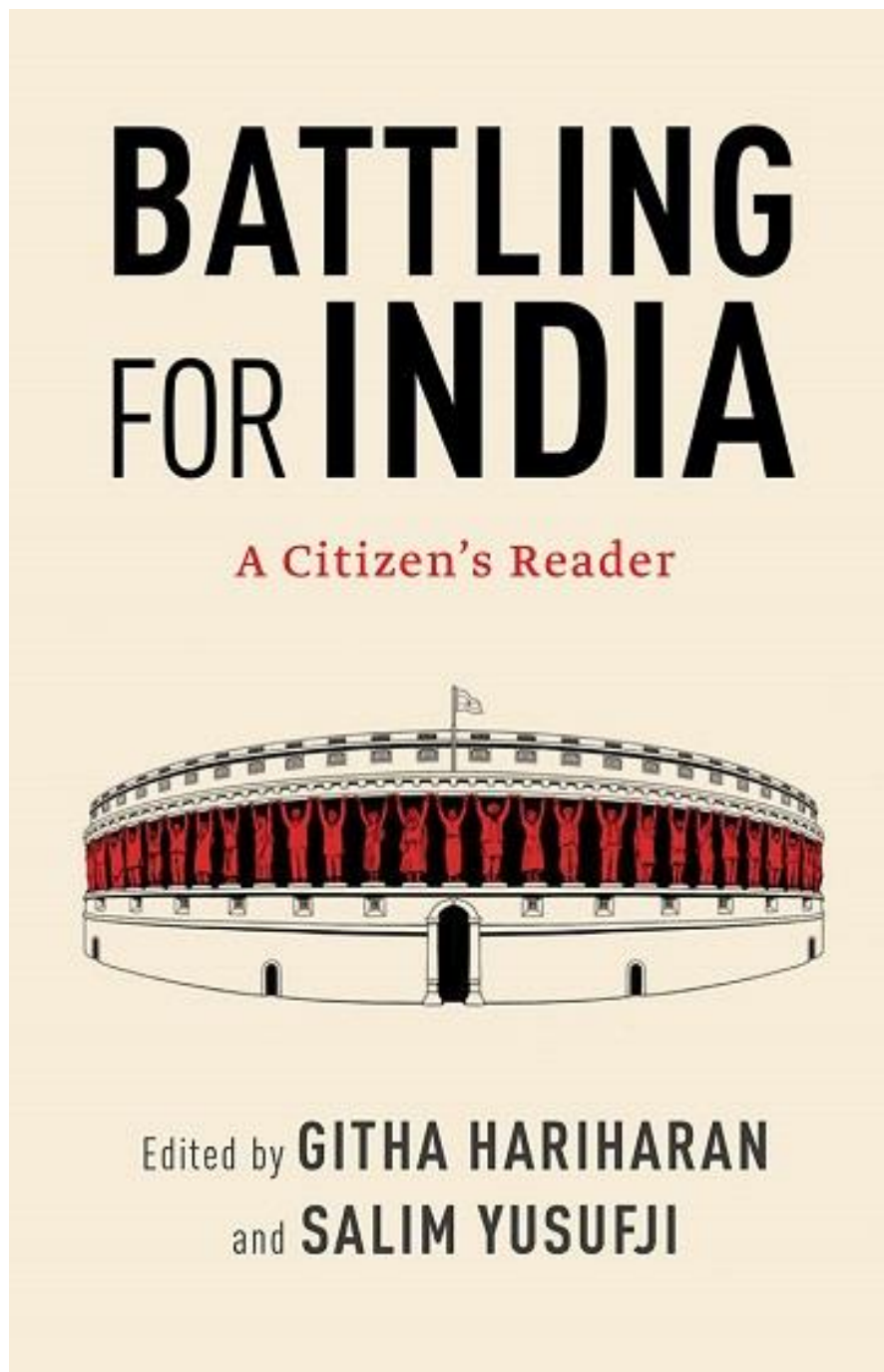
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## From the Editors

Battling for India in 2019

There are those who battle the idea of India – an idea that insists that the country belongs to all its citizens. And there are those who battle *for* this inclusive idea of India.

*Battling for India: A Citizen's Reader* brings together the efforts of many writers, artists, activists – and citizens – to resist the ideology that has unmade India; and to imagine a more just and equal India.



*“We can’t look back. We are moving forward. They can’t stop us and we won’t be able to stop ourselves either. We have a long way to go; we are fighting for the rights of the generations to come.”*

*-Sukalo Gond*

For well over a decade, there has been a battle going on in India, as old divisions and inequalities have become deeper. Since 2014, this battle has reached a feverish pitch with the combined onslaught of majoritarian politics and market-driven policies. There are now, as the editors of this anthology argue, two signposts as we enter the Indian nation—one reads: *Battling India*, and points to a domain of coercion and plunder; the other says: *Battling for India*, and invites us to spaces where many brave, indomitable people demand their share of dignity and lay claim to citizenship.

This necessary collection brings us the voices and experiences of those who are battling for India through their private struggles and public activism: Alivelamma, a woman farmer, Huchangi, Rohith, Ravan—poet, scholar, activist; all dalit. Sukalo, Rajkishor, Leelabati—activist, poet, singer; adivasis. Eighteen-year-old Muddu Thirthahalli and ninety-one-year-old Nayantara; both writers. Amarjeet, Sonia and 2000 others who gathered at a workers’ rally. Salima, Hafiz, Aslah, who refuse to be second-class citizens. Among them, and with them, are the voices of journalists, artists, teachers and students. Together, they speak to us of the many ways in which state and extra-state forces have been excluding more and more citizens from India. Together, they show us ways to re-make the nation envisioned by our Constitution—a nation whose people can, without exception, live as free and equal citizens.

*Githa Hariharan*

*K. Satchidanandan*

*March 2019*

**Anti-Nationals of the World Unite!**  
(You have nothing to lose but the love of your governments)

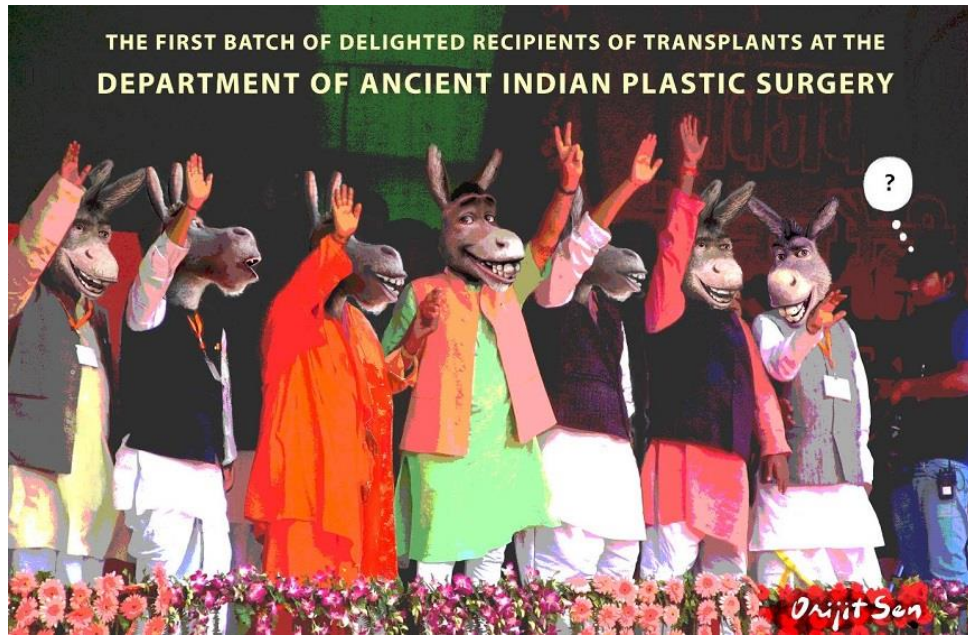
*Orijit Sen*

There are those who battle India.



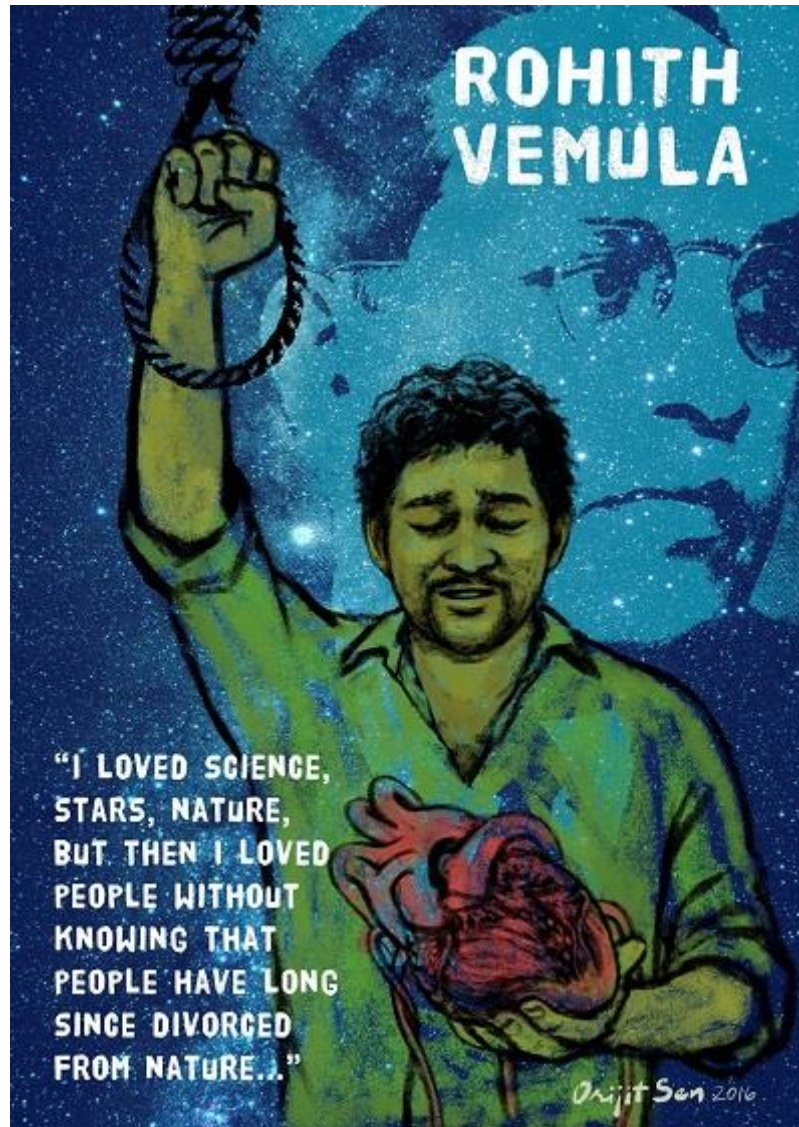
Gauboy





Plastic Surgery

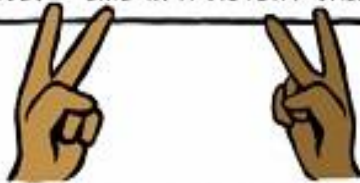
And there are citizens — farmers, workers, students, teachers, writers, artists, activists — who **battle for India**. Together, they show us ways to re-make the nation.



Rohith



RAISE HANDS TOWARDS EACH OTHER, WITH INDEX AND MIDDLE FINGERS RAISED - LIKE IN A VICTORY SALUTE.



TOUCH FINGER TIPS LIGHTLY.



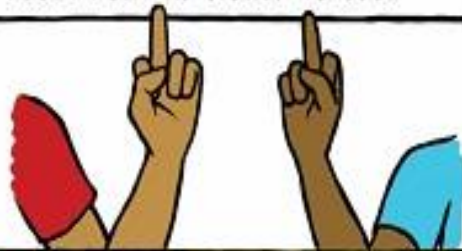
FOLD BACK INDEX FINGERS AND SIMULTANEOUSLY HOOK MIDDLE FINGERS IN SPIRIT OF CAMARADERIE.



UNHOOK MIDDLE FINGERS AND DRAW BACK SLIGHTLY WITHOUT ALTERING ANY OTHER FINGER POSITIONS.



WITH A SMOOTH SWING FROM THE ELBOWS, RAISE BOTH HANDS SHARPLY UPWARDS, AND HOLD ALOFT FOR THE WORLD TO SEE.



WHEN SURROUNDED BY NATIONALISTS (AS ANTI-NATIONALS OFTEN ARE) SWIVEL AROUND A FEW TIMES - AND FLEX THE BICEPS WHILE AT IT.



**ANTI-NATIONALS OF THE WORLD UNITE!**

YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT THE LOVE OF YOUR GOVERNMENTS

Onjit Sen



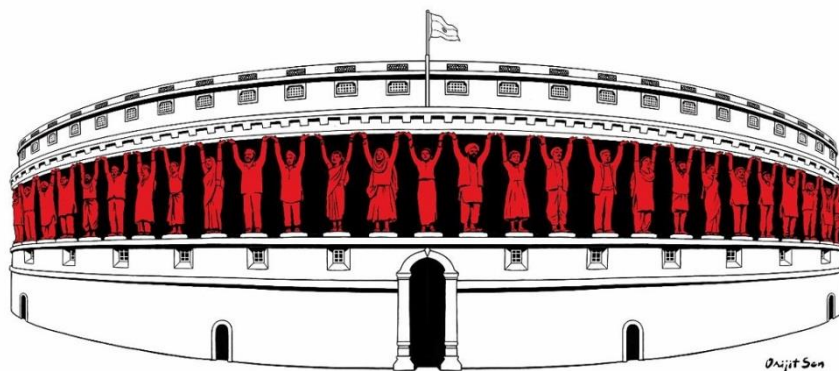


Orijit Sen

**WHEN THE  
FARMERS GO  
MARCHING  
IN...**

**We want to  
be in that  
number!**

Farmers' March



Orijit Sen

Farmers' Parliament

## An Ark for India

Ananya Vajpeyi



Gulammohammed Sheikh, 'Ark,' Digital Collage Print in two parts, 8' x4' each, 2008

At the recent release of Chaitanya Sambrani's edited volume, *At Home in the World: The Art and Life of Gulammohammed Sheikh* in New Delhi (Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, February 17, 2019), I was reminded of many of Sheikh's artworks that I have seen, admired and studied over the years. A high-quality, limited-edition, signed print of one of them, titled 'Ark' (2008), hangs in my living room in New Delhi, a familiar presence and permanent talisman to remind me of an idea I find particularly compelling: that India's moral sensibility can be understood as a dialogue between Kabir and Gandhi, signifying respectively, tradition and modernity, two powerful embodiments of radicalism and dissent in medieval and modern times.

It is also a conversation between the Muslim and the Hindu, immersed in a process of exchange and translation over centuries of their irreducible difference, a balancing act, a necessary engagement that is frontal but occurring over a short distance. In the gap between the two figures lies the haven, the sheltering ark, that is our composite culture, *ganga-jamuni tehzeeb*. But for the continuation of this dynamic of mutuality, the idea of India would perish. Sheikh has spent his entire life as an artist meditating on the moral, aesthetic and political significance of what we refer to, in a rough-and-ready, often unthinking and sometimes dismissive way, as 'Indian Secularism'.

Ahead we reproduce an extract from the conclusion of my first book, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (2012), that dwells on the meaning of Sheikh's 'Ark' at some length. I wrote *Righteous Republic* between 2007 and 2011, five years marked by Barack Obama's presidency in the United States and a Congress-led UPA coalition government in India, the two countries where I lived, taught and did my research. In those years, it was in no way possible to anticipate either Donald Trump or Narendra Modi as the future leaders of the two democracies. Although the world struggled with a major financial crisis, the global turn to authoritarian populism, right-wing strongmen, and majoritarian rule was yet to occur in the way that it subsequently did.

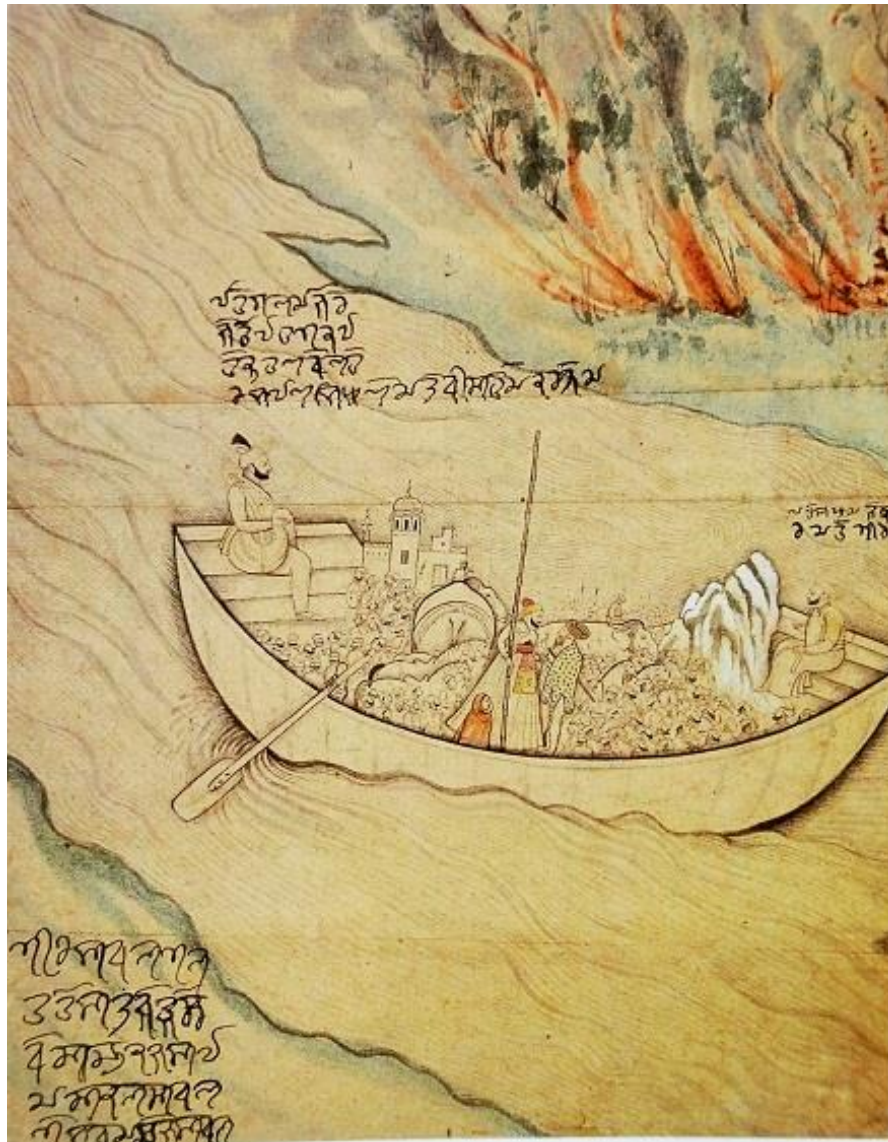
My own understanding of the making of modern India emerged from my study, for the book, of colonial-era nationalism, which I saw as a search not just for sovereignty, but also for selfhood, the *swa-* in *swaraj*, in the political and moral thought of the founders of the Indian republic. The figures of Gandhi and Tagore, anti-colonial anti-nationalists, confronted in a sense, Nehru and Ambedkar, modernists and advocates of the nation-state and its sovereign power. Whatever their disagreements, the political idealism, complex historicism and sheer moral force of these men coloured my view of India, even into the flawed and failing present.

In the Modi years, the 'righteousness' of the republic took a serious battering. My project had always been about uncovering a structure of ideas, the wheels and gears of norms and values fashioned in the late colonial period, on which the political juggernaut of Indian democracy could move forward over the decades after Independence. But in the past six or seven years, after my book came out, it has seemed that this entire scaffolding of egalitarianism, democratic principles, constitutionalism and indeed secularism, has come under sustained attack from the popularly elected regime of the Hindu Right. As I have written elsewhere, 'Hindu Rashtra' has all but supplanted 'Hind Swaraj'. Many have attacked my argument, especially my book's title, as though the fall from any sense of an ethically responsible, non-violent and truth-centric polity, in a Gandhian vein, were my fault for having chronicled the building of a road not taken.

True, I had tried to search for the genealogy of the philosophical categories that made the Indian experiment so unique in the annals of modern politics. I had evaluated both the intellectual and the moral efforts of the founding fathers, assuming that they were made in good faith. But today it is clear that the unfinished business of Partition, the unaddressed scandals of Gandhi's assassination and Ambedkar's conversion, the breaking of the Babri Masjid and the carnage in Godhra, all of these open wounds of our post-colonial history have run over into rivers of blood, like some terrifying installation by the contemporary artist Nalini Malani. Or indeed, like several works by Gulammohammed Sheikh himself, set in Ayodhya or Gujarat, in which the fires of communal hatred and sectarian violence are seen to consume the delicate, many-hued fabric of India's public life.

Like so many in the broad spectrum of the Indian secular left, I too have spent the years between 2014 and 2019 in a state of protest and refusal, often literal, on the street, in demonstrations, in signature campaigns, in writing and in art, in speech and in silence. I have been witness to the decimation of liberal institutions and the gagging of dissenting voices. I have been forced out of the shelter of the library and the archive into the open grounds of political struggle and critical pedagogy, as a virulent Hindutva threatens to completely overwhelm everything I hold dear about my country and the political culture I grew up with. I have met Gulam and Nilima Sheikh countless times in recent years not at art exhibitions but at protest marches and meetings of concerned citizens to save our collapsing universities, get our embattled journalists, students, writers and activists out of jail, denounce the appalling lynchings and rapes of minorities, and try to find ways to keep our democracy afloat in the face of a flood, a world-wide deluge, of aggressive right-wing populism and toxic nationalism.

The ark whose image hangs on my wall is foundering. On the eve of the 2019 general election, its preservation is all I care about.



Nainsukh, 'Boat Adrift on a River: Illustration to a Folk Legend', tinted brush drawing on paper, c. 1765–1775

## Two Painters

In the mid-eighteenth century, the master miniaturist Nainsukh, who belonged originally to Guler in the Kangra foothills of the Himalayas in northern India, painted a work showing an entire township aboard an ark, adrift on a river, while the far bank appears to be on fire.<sup>1</sup> The town was probably the Rajput fort city of Jasrota, in Jammu, where Nainsukh lived for many years with his patron, the connoisseur Raja Balwant Singh, a royal who was exiled from his hill principality and spent a long time wandering in the plains, together with Nainsukh and other artists and retainers in his entourage. Two seated figures, Balwant Singh and in all likelihood his son, face one another at either



end of the ark, while in between them is their entire city, with populace, animals, buildings, and even a mountain, crammed into the center of the boat. The protagonists of this painting, as well as their historical relationship with its painter, Nainsukh, have only recently been identified and deciphered by the scholars B. N. Goswamy and Eberhard Fischer.<sup>2</sup>

The contemporary Indian painter Gulammohammed Sheikh quotes Nainsukh's work, *A Boat Adrift on a River: Illustration to a Folk Legend* (c. 1765– 1775) in his own monumental work, *Ark* (2008), a digital collage print made as the inner wall of a shrine called *Kaavad: Home*.<sup>3</sup> Sheikh's *Ark* is a complex image that refers not only to Nainsukh's painting, but also to several other medieval and modern Indian and European works, weaving a dense web of intertextual references.<sup>4</sup> Sheikh transforms Nainsukh's boat into an ark of Indian tradition. On one end of this ark sits Gandhi, quoted from a 1921 work by Abanindranath Tagore that shows Gandhi at Santiniketan in 1915, in conversation with Rabindranath Tagore and C. F. Andrews.<sup>5</sup>

On the other end of the boat sits Kabir, quoted from a work by Mangal Chatterra, made at almost exactly the same time as Nainsukh's painting, about 1760, either in Amber or elsewhere in Mughal India.<sup>6</sup> Stretching between Gandhi and Kabir inside the ark is what appears to be a water body, a bluish expanse, in which float tiny figures of sages, saints, skeptics, and Sufis, each one again a quotation, in Persian, Italianate, and Indic styles. This array of figures includes St. Francis of Assisi, Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khana (Rahiman), and the twentieth-century artist and Sheikh's friend and colleague Bhupen Khakhar (1934–2003), as well as other known and unknown characters from history. Sheikh calls this a *sangat*, literally, an assembly of the virtuous.<sup>7</sup> The blue in which they are studded like small jewels is in fact a lake in the city of Baroda, Gujarat, where Sheikh lives and works (as did Khakhar). The palace of Jasrota, as well as the mountain shown in Nainsukh's painting, also make it onto Sheikh's ark.

The ark in Sheikh's painting floats in a turbulent expanse of dark, swirling waters, on the far extremity of which, poised like an island, is Surendranagar, where Sheikh grew up. The work has a visual richness that comes not only from the splicing of multiple other works into the body of the image, but also from the mixture of painting and photography on the one hand, and reproduction and interpretation on the other. I saw this painting on display in New Delhi, in October 2011. As I stood before it, looking at Gandhi and Kabir on either end of a huge ark, sheltering between their gigantic figures numerous small and often anonymous figures representing spiritual and skeptical, creative and analytic aspects of civilization, I understood in a single moment of apprehension—not unlike Coomaraswamy's *samvega*—that what Sheikh sought to depict was a composite image of India's traditions: religious, aesthetic, and learned. Sheikh does not invent his own Gandhi and Kabir ex nihilo; rather, he quotes, Abanindranath's Gandhi and Chatterra's Kabir, both of whom are thoroughly historicized in the moments in which they are articulated—respectively, nationalist and Mughal.

The modern, political figure of Gandhi is in dialogue with and acts as a counterbalance for the medieval, mystical figure of Kabir. Both are necessary to keep the ark from foundering in the stormy waters of moral uncertainty and historical oblivion that surround the idea of India. India is neither the past nor the future, but a present that emerges out of the conversation between tradition and modernity, the concrete and the transcendental, the political and the poetic, the Hindu and the Muslim, Gandhi and Kabir. In a lovely postmodern gesture, the conversation between the painters Nainsukh and Sheikh, one a precolonial master, the other a postcolonial master, embodies and encapsulates the dialogue of tradition and modernity even as it takes that very dialogue as its subject. The recently deceased Bhupen Khakhar, set apart from the cluster of non-modern ascetics—Hindus, Muslims, and Christians—at the center of the boat, absorbed in his canvas at a distance from the others, perhaps stands in for Sheikh too, invoking the contemporary artist who at once is



thoroughly individualistic, suffers from a very modernist alienation, and thinks deeply about the rich and sometimes mysterious past with which he may or may not be connected.

### **A Dialogue of Past and Present**

I take Gulammohammed Sheikh's *Ark* to be an almost perfect symbol of the argument I have tried to make in this book. Over the years that it took to write, political debates in India have naturally traversed a varied territory, from the rise and recession of the Hindu Right, to the electoral rout of the Communist Left, to the intensifying violence between the Indian state and its Maoist opponents, to the fluctuating fortunes of the Kashmiris, and, most recently, a public outcry over widespread corruption in the highest echelons of the government and the private sector. At different moments, developments and discussions in contemporary politics reminded me of the founders and their concerns, and of the promises of anticolonial nationalism that often seem to have been badly broken in our own time.

But I also began to see, as political life in India today changed and shifted, that many of my questions go to values and norms that are in a sense stable and abiding underneath the flux of news and current affairs. One wants to know how Hindutva as an ideology of majoritarian religious nationalism distorts and instrumentalises history in order to persecute minorities, or how Anna Hazare, the aged farmer-activist leading a citizens' campaign against corruption in 2011, alludes to the memory of Mahatma Gandhi through the tactic of the hunger strike. But even if such queries were answered through a careful analysis of the present, one would still seek an account of how it was that by placing ourselves in a complicated yet determinate relationship to tradition, we actually became modern.

At the very beginning of my inquiry, I took as my talisman MacIntyre's insight that a crisis in the self is a crisis in the tradition that has formed the self. India's sense of self seems once again under stress, as the country enters its third decade of globalization and neoliberal economic policy, and they bring in their wake stronger manifestations of what Gandhi called 'Western civilization' (or *kudharo*: literally, 'the evil stream'), such as aggressive urbanization, rampant consumerism, and late capitalist hypermodernity. We may or may not be able to look objectively at the current crisis in sovereign selfhood, but by reflecting on the crisis that India went through less than a century ago—a crisis whose resolution provided the warrant for the new nation-state—we may discover what kinds of soul searching, acts of reading, and interpretive leaps are necessary at such junctures in history. It may be too much to ask for new minds of the order of Tagore, Nehru, and Ambedkar to apply themselves to the construction of India's future in the twenty-first century and beyond, but because we still have the work done by the founding generations as an example and a precedent before us, there is a plinth upon which we stand, and a vantage from which we may survey what is past, or passing, or to come.

On the banks of our river there are raging fires unleashed by economic liberalization. Urban settlements that are more slums than cities remain mired in polluted land, air, and water. Adrift in a time of turbulence, a delicate ark harbors the fragile resources for cultural renewal, civilizational memories that are also our only hope for salvation from the more virulently antihuman manifestations of modernity. Foregrounded in our consciousness are the ideas and words of giants like Kabir and Gandhi, boatmen who forded the confusions of their own times with insights, whether political or poetic, that restored balance and provided direction to societies—to our own society at earlier points in its history—that might otherwise have been plunged into extreme uncertainty and perhaps terminal decline. Traditions that do not renew and reorient themselves, that fail to make the epistemological breakthrough, that do not gather themselves and chart, with the help of the

oars of criticism and creativity, a course through the onrush of the future, are doomed to founder and be forgotten.

About 250 years ago, Nainsukh saw his patron, Balwant Singh of Jasrota, plunged into a political crisis, howsoever local and personal its dimensions. Everything precious had to be sheltered and carried to safety, at least in the painter's imagination. Gulammohammed Sheikh, painting in Gujarat not long after the carnage of 2002, makes a similar plea for saving the traditions of self-examination and self-mastery, of peaceful coexistence and affective community, of rational inquiry and ecstatic transcendence, that have characterized India and kept it buoyed for at least a millennium. Sheikh's ark of tradition is both capaciously accommodating and precariously poised on stormy waters. His Gandhi is speaking to (an invisible) Tagore, the modern poet, but looks across to Kabir, the medieval poet, who weaves his subtle cloth as he always did, into the fabric of meaning. In this wordless, continuing, and resonant dialogue the ark is balanced and kept afloat, and perhaps by paying close attention to our ancestors, we too may be able to get across to safer shores.

[...]

### **Kabir, the Sovereign Self**

Kabir, who sits at one end of Gulammohammed Sheikh's ark, appears to me as a symbol of the self that India seeks—not because he appears in any direct or prominent way in the discourse of the founders (although all five knew of Kabir, obviously), but because Kabir exceeds the binaries in which Indian history remains imprisoned; because Kabir too ought to be read with the same seriousness, the same lack of presumption, the same willingness to encounter something completely unforeseen, and the same daring with which the founders read the texts that they felt called out to them from the welter of past traditions. Today Kabir's popular reception makes him well-known, but his peculiar language leaves him poorly understood. We are too eager to make him into an icon of our concerns— secularism *avant la lettre*, early modernity, a poetic canon, linguistic innovation, syncretistic culture, social radicalism, premodern egalitarianism, subaltern consciousness, or any number of other desiderata and agendas that we love to foist on him.

But in fact these quick fixes and facile characterizations do not even begin to capture the imaginative worlds, the spiritual power, and the discursive fecundity of the poet Kabir. Even as we fill out the details of Kabir's life and times, even as we know more and more precisely his biography and historical surround, even as we sing and recite Kabir with alacrity, the full import of his metaphors eludes us. This ignorance on our part is a result of our inattention to what Kabir did, with and to language, in order to address the mutually constitutive crises of self and tradition that he faced in his own context, his own moment. Gulammohammed Sheikh's intuitions—that Kabir balances the boat, that he steadies the ark, that he fords the waters, that he weaves the fabric, that he converses with the modern even while remaining in and of the medieval—these for me image with an uncanny perfection the role that Kabir must play, and the quest that he represents, as we try to understand the relationship between crisis and self-fashioning at the very moment of India's emergence into presence within the horizon of capitalist modernity.

### **‘Khadar ki Ladkiyan’**

A hip hop music video co-produced with young women in Delhi’s urban peripheries

*Ayona Datta*



‘Khadar ki Ladkiyan’ (Khadar girls) is a freestyle hip-hop song and video written and performed by young women from a Delhi resettlement colony. It brings to light the opportunities and challenges of navigating the city as these women leave home to pursue paid work and education, and are simultaneously constrained by the boundaries of traditional gender roles. It makes a radical break from what has largely been a masculinised terrain of hip-hop underlined by the success of *Gully Boy* recently.

‘Khadar ki Ladkiyan’ is part of a wider project ‘Gendering the smart city’ funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, whose aim is to understand how women use technology and how that technology impacts the ways in which they negotiate the home and the city on a daily basis. We started in early 2017, with small seed-funding from King’s College London, which led us to Madanpur Khadar, one of Delhi’s many resettlement colonies created in 2000 when slum dwellers across south Delhi were forcefully evicted and relocated in its south-eastern peripheries close to the neighbouring Haryana state border. We were fortunate to partner with Jagori, a well-established feminist NGO in Delhi; and with Safetipin, a well-known ICT social enterprise involved in mapping and crowd-sourcing safety in cities across the world. We initially developed strong relationships with women participants through semi-structured interviews and mental mapping, which helped us understand some of the dynamic ways in which women use the mobile phone to access previously inaccessible spaces in the city while simultaneously being subject to harassment, violence and abuse across digital and physical spaces, from the home to the city.

The Khadar girls can be described as urban millennials, who are living the paradox of India’s digital revolution in an urban age. As second-generation migrants to the city, they have little memory of slum life or forced eviction. They identify themselves as young urban women, but have to constantly deal with the stigma of slum identity. They are relatively better educated than their parents and have therefore moved away from the informal and domestic labour that sustained their parents’ livelihoods. They still struggle to maintain paid employment within a precarious service sector in Delhi. They are avid users of the mobile phone, and active on social media through which they

create solidarities, friendships, and support networks, yet struggle to access welfare services and information that could potentially improve their lives. Most significantly, due to their association with a number of NGOs through which they have attended youth and gender training programmes, they are well versed in gender sensitive language and practices. In contradiction to this, they are still severely constrained within their home and extended families by conforming to traditional gender roles. Within these paradoxes they emerge as young, millennial, gendered citizens straddling the 'new' and 'old' India, eager to speak, but held back. They claim their rights, and transgress traditional gender boundaries, despite the restraints placed on them, and the pain they will bear for each transgression.

Understanding these paradoxes needed more than conventional methods of cultural investigation and study; rather we began sharing our experiences across time and space (between India and UK, researcher and participants, city and peripheries, home and family, night and day) in a closed WhatsApp group where the Khadar girls would make regular multimedia diary entries. This WhatsApp group became our site of research, revealing the dynamics and complexities of gendered safety, mobility, and everyday life in the urban peripheries. From it emerged knowledge and action from Delhi's urban peripheries to 'speak back' to top-down visions of digitally-led urbanism in the smart city.

As regular participants in Jagori campaigns, training programmes, and street theatre, the Khadar girls are adept at writing verses. After about 4 months of WhatsApp diary entries, in one of our brainstorming sessions, the idea took shape of using hip-hop as a mode of expression to talk back to the city. We scheduled regular face-to-face sessions, working with the participants in co-producing a freestyle song that told their story in their own words, on their own terms, and through digital technology. In each session, they wrote short pieces on different themes such as *ashawa* (wind), *andhera* (darkness), *ujala* (light), *rang* (colour), *mera sheher* (my city) etc. and then collectively turned some of these prose into song lyrics.

Despite their interest and commitment, the sessions were on a very tight schedule, since they were all in paid employment or were studying. It was in about ten Sunday evening sessions that the script was collectively written and recorded. The video was filmed and edited in about seven days within severe time constraints. Adding to these challenges, was the need for the Khadar girls to have to negotiate with their families for approval to appear in the video. The result redirects traditional boundaries of gender, power, and structure from the family to the city, from the physical boundaries of their home/neighbourhood, to the online space of India's hip-hop scene on YouTube.

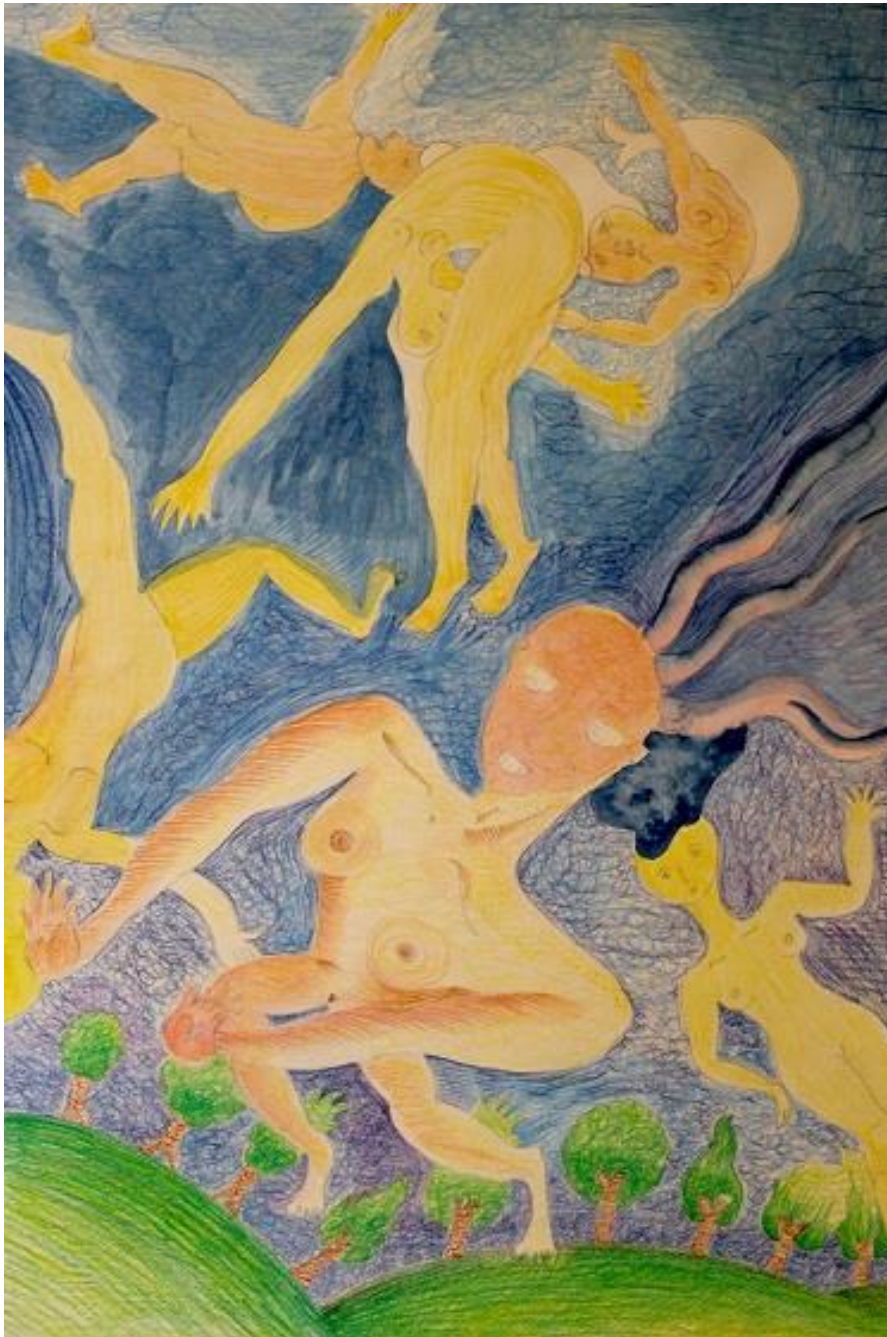
### **Curating and speaking with technology as a transformative process**

'Khadar ki Ladkiyan' is a short 03:05 music video made on a low budget. Though it has only a modest viewership on YouTube (4.9K currently), we must pay attention to it because of the positive impact it can have on those who are often left out of top-down urban visions. This project that focused mainly on gender was unconventional, unlike the 'gender training' programmes run by NGOs. It gave them agency and a safe-space. It started as WhatsApp diaries, where they could express their feelings and curate their experiences in a closed supportive environment that then organically evolved into a hip-hop music video. The power to direct the course of this project was exciting for them. The Khadar girls said that the project gave them the chance to 'speak', gave importance to their stories and made them feel like they counted. Most of all they said it made gender 'fun' by creating a safe space for hanging out, for producing laughter, and expressing solidarity towards one another. It triggered a process of re-negotiating their identities and relationships with their family, home, and the city.

It is in the process of co-production that lies the potentialities for intervention and of changing the gender based power structures. While filming the video, the Khadar girls stood against the control over their bodies by their families – defying curfew hours, defying their families' restrictions on showing their faces on YouTube, and through several other micro-subversions. Even the choice of filming in the streets of Khadar permanently changed aspects of the girls' lives, since it emphasised their visibility as 'celebrities' (their term). Although they had not considered the significance of their stories earlier, they began to realise the scale of it and what they were doing, when we required crowd control during the filming, when neighbours started asking what they were doing, when their friends wanted to join the project, when their parents asked relatives in their village to watch the video on YouTube, and most significantly, when people in Khadar began to recognise them on the streets as the 'Khadar ki Ladkiyan'. Our Khadar girls are telling not just their own stories on YouTube, but the story of millions of young women living the contradictions of life in India's digital and urban margins.

## When or why a woman whorls

*Poems by Salil Chaturvedi, Sanaaz Davood Zadeh Far, Saheli Khastagir, Michelle D'costa, Jhilaam Chattaraj*



Shoili Kanungo, 'Flight'

### **small leaves**

small leaves  
under your pillow  
just after dawn  
sure enough  
there's pollen  
on my lips  
from the edge  
of my sleep  
i can see  
the snails  
in your ears  
curled up in sleep  
i'm partially sad  
but i wish  
i knew  
when or why  
a woman  
whorls into wood  
—*Salil Chaturvedi*

### **Ten poems**

1

When we meet  
The distance between us is several cigarettes' smoke  
When we don't meet  
There is only a cup of tea with one cube of sugar.

That is what the experience is

2

If you open your borders,

I will immigrate to you

Without visa.

My case is not political.

I fled as a lover.

If I get back home,

They will sew up my tongue and lips:

Wordless love

And without home.

3

The mist of your words

Envelopes my imagination

Look at our shared dreams

They are so close to each other.

But your hands have been

Far from me for a long time.

4

I was born and I was crying.

I lived and I was screaming.

I want to leave this world with a smile Like Mona Lisa's.

5

When I emit the perfume of love

I am better than a full factory

Tear me to pieces like petals,

And ship me to Paris,



Then call me Juliet.

I will be your best-selling perfume

6

If an earthquake cracks the land anywhere

My heart will split too.

My heart thought the earth is like a cradle,

Its quake will sing a lullaby to my pain.

Oh earth, sing happily to your mistakes.

7

When you look at me,

You don't clearly see my pain

To understand my looks

You need to listen to the sparrows

They speak the same language.

8

Enriched uranium sleeps with me now

Not your portrait any more.

I kiss it.

Each city is a white crow's smoke

My dream of a nuclear nightmare is

Ever growing hot.

9

All the options are on the table:

To draw the morning with your words.

To run alongside your absence.

To find a metaphor like your hands or lips

You still pour yourself into the glass

And I drink your shadow.

10

When I was sleeping

The nurses came.

The clouds came too.

There was the sound of a waterfall everywhere

The nurses left

And I stayed on the northern side

Everything inside it was new and fresh

And it had a wet smell.

*—Sanaaz Davood Zadeh Far*

**“Saheli stop! You are breaking them.”**

**“No. They were *already* broken”**

My leash is tied to the heart that made me.

An umbilical thread tying two fragmented lives.

“You breathe the life I could not have”, she told me.

I believed her.

I tend my wings,

rage at rusted iron grills.

A snail outgrows her shell.

Mother, she asked her, did you know I have gills too?

She taught me to fear water.

You taught me to swim.

I go to her room at night,

kiss the forehead he should have kissed.

When she opens her eyes to look into mine,

I choke her with the hands that stroke my sky.  
“Oh but didn’t you know?” the bird asks the egg,  
“You made me, to kill you.”  
“Mother, you are free now”, I tell her  
and wear the bangles I made her break.  
—*Saheli Khastagir*

### **Black magic**

My brother, a priest in the making, catches me  
reading Harry Potter. The church disapproves.  
I’ve to confess before the Holy Communion.  
Hasn’t he heard of black magic beyond books?  
(i)The price a family paid, when they returned  
from vacation. To a black doll on their door.  
Their dogs became cats and walked out  
knowing they couldn’t afford them anymore.  
Their parrots’ vocal chords used to royal songs,  
tone-deaf to the homeless, broke open  
their cages, pecked at their owners’ heads  
for jumping them with poverty. They waited  
outside windows of rich lonely kids to slip in  
when the kids wanted to jump out, settling in  
comfortably in their new homes. Not a fleck  
of recognition in their eyes when their previous  
owners’ passed by. Birds remember like dogs.  
They do. They just pretend they don’t.  
(ii)Or about the girl who said ‘No’ to a guy who’d

never heard the word before. Her teeth fall,  
hijacked buildings. Calcium powder fills her mouth.  
Her hair decides there are better places to reside,  
tired of conventional, they leech onto her toes.  
She now sits in a dark room, waiting for the curse  
to return to its owners. (iii) Or the man who went  
to Dubai on an Arab's leash only to return to  
a black leash back home, vomiting blood.

—Michelle D'costa

### **Self-portrait with Thorn Necklace and Hummingbird**

*Turmeric -the smell of my paint brush*

*plump with still born sunbeams*

*leaking into the morphine haze of my city*

Shades of sorrow bury her face,  
thin grass, one that can never grow in my concrete soil  
crown lips patiently waiting for words  
Eyes fixed at the bottom of space  
and above them  
a fallen bridge  
between two capsized boats  
moored(*fashionably*)at the shore of her forehead

*Come alive, you ancient beauty*

*for I have tasted light and water in the womb of your wounds*

*I wish to be faithful to details*

*every stroke- a dive into a body history gave you*

*each shadow- a dance into the chaos of creation*

Blood-worms push their way up your  
barb-veined neck  
they languish on your  
white skeletal shirt  
Yet, you, so loving to yourself  
such perfection in the creeks between the hair stands,  
the middle parting, the polished braids,  
crisp translucence of  
hushed wings,  
pale purple blossoms gliding across  
intense green

*The green light of ocean outside the cracked windowpanes of my eyes  
willow-spine- the air in my breath  
sunless pools on marshland skin,  
pills, syrups, bone-fires,  
my door closed upon the promises of the world*

And through its clefts, entered you  
washing with colours  
roots leaping across latitudes

*Once again, I dip my brush into the ink of the night  
its tongue, berry-black*

I paint familiar companions of the female species-  
one furry monkey, an arched cat, its glossy nose  
a hummingbird fixed at your chest like an ossified relic

You are complete  
now eat some air  
grace the throne of my godless country

as I  
with  
bent knees,  
curfewed eyes,  
folded hands,  
dressed in feathers of icy mist,  
probably, a little drunk on the honey of dawn  
pray for a joyful exit  
—*Jhilara Chattaraj*

## The Last Episode

*Kalpana Swaminathan*



'The Massacre of the Innocents', The Veneto, Black chalk heightened with white (partly oxidized) on paper tinted orangish red, 38.8 x 37.1 cm, 17th Century | Image Courtesy The Metropolitan Museum of Art

'Ask him, don't ask me' the star muttered with surprising venom. 'Just because he's got cancer—'

I was to remember that outburst much later.

On a misty December evening, I found myself speechless on a podium between two repellent men.

Two hours ago, I had tried rebellion.

'Shukla will be hurt,' Savio pointed out the obvious.

Shukla, mending a messily fractured leg, was out for the count.

Savio was over his ears in an even messier case.

Lalli was away visiting a friend.

Mrs Shukla, the last on Shukla's list of substitutes, was in distant Ajmer where her sister was having the annual meltdown.

Dr Q had gently but very firmly removed himself from the discussion.

It seemed predestined that I would be representing Shukla at the reading. It wasn't his book, but one of his cases appeared in it.

'You are natural choice,' Shukla stated as he was being wheeled into surgery. 'Find out what kachra they have made of Shukla.'

The book was called *Crime Episodes*.

'Mention is on Page 44,' the faithful Shaktivel put in. 'Before my time, but you are knowing the case, I think.'

This was his way of letting me know why he had been excluded from Poojya Shuklaji's list of possible substitutes.

'Very popular show,' Shaktivel pressed on. 'Book contains all episodes.'

And here I was, between the two authors, engaged to read Page 44.

The Chowki had handsomely put up a shamiana on the football ground, but the fringe scatter of constabulary, interpreted as security by the TV crew, had soon vanished under the insult.

Just as well. They would have felt terribly out of place once the audience moved in.

I had never seen a crowd quite like this one. The field was jammed with clones.

The men were all dressed in blazers and light trousers. Every man had a white satin carnation on his lapel, and at 7 p.m., sported shades. The women trailed multiple layers of sheer stuff, liberally iridescent and calling for a flash of thigh, sometimes both. Bling was at peak ferocity, right from fake *Choodamani* to the solitaire stud a twinkle on the toenail.

'Fan club,' Shaktivel explained. 'Gents are Inspector Kumar. Ladies are all bodies.'

'All?'

'Each and every episode is having one such. Same uniform, different girls.'

'How different?'

'Episode has girls. These are all ladies.'

'Which am I, Shaktivel?'



'You are not in uniform, so I cannot say.'

And with that he stepped back, abandoning me to the wolves.

'You are Mrs Shukla,' the guy to my left stated.

'No, I'm not!' My response had shot out before I took a closer look at him.

'Then why?' he demanded.

Stalling for a suitable answer, I took my seat and opened the bottle of water.

'Not Admin,' he stated flatly, alluding to the more decorative branch of the Force. Clearly, I was not up to scratch. 'Then what for?'

'Only to read,' I said.

'Why?'

'At Inspector Shukla's request.'

'Why?'

'Maybe because I've written a book too.'

This got me a very disapproving frown. 'About what?'

Curiously, for a guy in his late fifties, he seemed accoutred for combat, as heavily armored as a medieval knight. His shirt was a starched carapace, his trouser crease could have sliced a stone. His polished boots had long evolved from mere leather encasements into superior sensors. Their dark mirrors reflected a world that vindicated his worst suspicions. His face was visored with bulldog creases. I had to remind myself that there was a man inside.

The creases deepened under my scrutiny.

'What's your book about?' he barked. Then with the faintest glimmer of a laugh in his canny eyes, 'Love story?'

'Murder, actually,' I said, and turned away to answer the other guy's question. The other guy was the star.

He had to repeat the question, I was that dazed by his cologne. It wasn't unpleasant, even if mildly gamey—cedar, citrus, woodsmoke and leather rang out clear and separate—but it was thick as tear gas and about as alluring.

'Did you enjoy the last episode?' he repeated patiently.

'Sorry—the last episode of what?'

I had touched a nerve. His light brown eyes lost their frankness. Recovering rapidly, he laughed as if I had made a witticism. 'Point made! It is a bad title, especially now!'

The coin dropped.

*Last Episode* was the name of his show, and this guy was the prototype of the male clones clapping enthusiastically. Inspector Kumar, and as his fans were even this minute busily texting, *Mirish Kumar IRL!*

‘Especially as the book has so many episodes,’ I said, picking up the copy the compere had just placed before me. *Crime Episodes* by Mirish Kumar with Oswald Pinto.

It was hefty for a paperback. Four words to the line. Double-spaced, no doubt.

‘Only twenty-five,’ Mirish said. ‘True stories, every one of them.’

‘Really?’

‘Each one backed by 500 pages of research.’

‘Really?’

‘All Walden’s work. Four years of labour. Wonderful reportage.’

Walden Pinto the armored man, deprecated this with a wave.

‘He won’t take a compliment.’ Mirish shrugged. ‘Being a crime reporter is hard work.’

‘So is being Inspector Kumar,’ I said gravely.

Mirish examined me with sudden interest. His eyes turned toffee brown again. ‘Let’s discuss that over a drink.’

‘I don’t drink.’

‘Dinner, then. Sushi. You love sushi, I can tell by the way your eyelashes curl.’

I had to laugh at that.

‘No fish? No alcohol, no fish. Italian, then. No? Tell you what, good standard dal chawal. My place. Sixty-fifth floor. We can count the stars all night.’

‘I’m not having dinner with Inspector Kumar.’

‘Oh Inspector Kumar’s only for them.’ He blew a kiss at The Bodies. ‘You’ll be having dinner with Mirish. I’m the simple—’

‘—boy next door.’ I finished for him.

‘No dinner?’

‘No,’ I said, knowing he would offer me breakfast next.

And he did too, but luckily the compere interrupted the badinage, quelling me with a jilebi smile.

Mirish picked up the mike.

The audience stopped breathing.

Mirish set down the mike, walked to the edge of the podium and, throwing his head back heroically, flung out his arms.

Applause exploded, catcalls shrilled, and a heavy metal stomping established itself like a demented heartbeat. Through it all Mirish moved his head forward in a slow arc, sinking his chin into his boutonnière. This gesture of total surrender was completed with the arms energetically embracing the air till they came to rest across his heart.

As yet, he hadn't said a word and when he did, my brain supplied the lines:

*How he seemed to dive into their hearts*

*With humble and familiar courtesy*

*What reverence did he throw away on slaves,*

*Wooing poor craftsmen with the craft of smiles.*

'He's a politician born,' I said to Walden.

For the second time that evening, I seemed to have said the wrong thing. Only this time it was fear, not hurt that I read in Walden's bloodshot eyes. Surprisingly, he made no attempt to disguise it.

'Politics? You think so?'

'Look at him. Even without *Last Episode* he'll have the mob eating out of his hands.'

The creases tightened as Walden contemplated his meal-ticket slipping away.

Now Mirish was pronouncing his name, and I caught a stirring in Walden's face, but whether that was pleasure or irritation, it was impossible to say.

When it was his turn to speak, Walden turned heavily moral. The book had the most popular stories on the show, every word true, backed by 500 pages of research, and all of them showed just one thing. 'Ladies and gentlemen, CRIME DOES NOT PAY!'

*Last Episode*, he reminded them, had been going on for four years, and was on its 1000th airing this very night—

He stilled the applause with a gesture and continued rather chillingly, 'Who knows, it might be the last.'

Catching at the sudden silence, he added simply, 'Then it will be up to you, millions of viewers, to ensure that—CRIME DOES NOT PAY.'

There was some weak applause, but Walden had damned himself. The look I caught on Mirish's face told me Walden was out of a job.

*Four lagging winters, four wanton springs*

*End in a word: such is the breath of kings...*

Somebody was chiding me. A sugary voice. It was the compere, pushing the book in my direction.

I caught Shaktivel making wild faces at me from the audience, miming, 'Forty four!'

In numb obedience, I began reading.

Gradually, the words sank in. It was the most appalling drivel. Worse, it read like libel, (unless it was slander). I stopped short of the line that said *Inspector Shukla's typical middle-class morality failed to suspect a respectable householder, and so the investigation was stalled for a whole year*. I skipped the next paragraph too. Nobody seemed to notice. Eventually, the compere grabbed the mike from me, and I shut the book to polite applause.

I turned angrily to Mirish. 'That was very unfair to Inspector Shukla,' I said. 'I happen to know all about that particular case. Shukla got his man. You've practically accused him of negligence.'

Mirish shrugged. 'You should ask Walden.'

'Your name is bigger on the cover.'

'Walden has all the facts. I just get them right.'

'Well you didn't, this time. What about next time?'

'Ask him, don't ask me,' Mirish snarled. 'Just because he's got cancer—'

The next minute he had sprung to his feet, full of bright banalities, delivering each bromide like a revelation.

'Is it still no to the view?' he had the nerve to ask me when the circus ended.

'It is.'

'Won't be for long. I'm going to buy your book and if the idea interests me, I'll give you a call. I'm sure the view will interest you then.'

'Watch me,' I snarled and stalked off to vent on poor Shaktivel. 'Why didn't you warn me the book made an ass of Shukla?' I demanded.

'No copy available. Myself was wanting to immediate GBH Mirish Kumar. You left out many parts.'

'You bet I did. How do I face Shukla now?'

'Leave it to Shaktivel.'

And so I did.

But not for long. The next morning, we woke to the news that Mirish Kumar had been discovered dead on the lawn by the watchman at 6 a.m. He had landed on his back and fractured his skull, after falling 800 feet from his room with a view.

'Suicide.' Shaktivel delivered the verdict crisply, showering us with toast crumbs. He shone this morning. He was always very shiny and aromatic in the mornings, but today the glow was more than aftershave. It was pure gloat. 'Guilty,' he said. 'Guilty suicide.'

'Guilt over what?' Lalli asked, still immersed in the file she was reading.

'Insulting Shuklaji on Page 44.'

Shaktivel stated that with such complete conviction that Lalli shut the file and looked severely at him.

'Best not tell Shukla about Page 44. Not just yet,' I said.

'Best,' agreed Shaktivel.

Lalli made an impatient sound. 'How long is this 'Protect Shukla' campaign to continue? He won't thank you for it. He'll agree with Page 44.'

'You've read it, then?'

'Sure, I have a copy.'

'And you still think—'

'Never ever can Shuklaji be neglectful,' Shaktivel growled.

'Oh, he didn't neglect anything. He just didn't look close enough.'

'But that was a low hit about middle-class morality,' I cried.

'Perhaps it was, but that was five years ago. I wouldn't say it today. It's upper-class morality now that keeps murder so respectable. Then, I meant it literally—'

'You said that, Lalli?'

'In an internal review, yes.'

'But Shukla got his man, I remember. Caught him red-handed on CCTV.'

'Yes, but it took some persuasion.'

'Still—'

'Madam, I'm having entirely different story,' Shaktivel protested.

'That's the one you should stick with.'

'A cover up?' I was shocked.

'Oh it was Shukla's first strike. He's been near paranoid since then, suspects even the chowki cat.'

Shaktivel left in a huff.

‘Now you’ve really got me curious,’ Lalli said. ‘How did this guy get his material? It was an internal review. Records never get out. But obviously they have. How?’

‘How does it matter, now that he’s dead?’

‘Well, it matters to me. It hurts to see something spoken in confidence used publicly to slander a friend.’

‘I thought it was libel.’

‘Whatever. Give me ten minutes for a phone call.’

‘Where are we going?’

Superfluous question. One look at the sari she swished in ten minutes later told me we were headed for the scene of crime.

My aunt only dresses up for murder.

‘This is suicide, Lalli,’ I reminded her. ‘There’s nothing to solve.’

‘Unsolvable, I agree, but that doesn’t keep me from trying. Anyway, I’ve got the goods on our hero.’

Mirish Kumar surfaced out of nowhere five years ago. He was working as a handyman with the film crew — *Last Episode* was into its fifth airing when the lead collapsed with dengue. With no substitute in view, at the eleventh hour, the director had caught hold of the nearest possibility—what the hell one guy in a blazer and shades looks as good as another, and they’d dub the lines. But his first performance stunned them. They kept him on, and the viewership rocketed. The rest is history. Soon he took over the show. He brought in his own material, working closely with the crime reporter Oswald Pinto. Within the year he was producing the show.

His personal life was curiously impersonal. There was no visible family. Serial girlfriends, arm candy, mostly. Unlike his Inspector Kumar persona, he was friendly, even chatty on the set, popular with the staff.

But there was no getting close to the guy. He maintained an isolation difficult to breach. *Last Episode* had made him tremendously wealthy—the room with the view was in the city’s tallest skyscraper. He supported several public charities sparingly. The money trail would show up more, no doubt, but this was all, for the moment.

The perfect actor, tabula rasa.

‘Hardly.’ Lalli read my thought. ‘You seemed to have discovered quite a lot in that brief encounter.’

‘Did I?’

‘Well, you described a frightened, resentful man.’

‘Not at all. I met a smooth-talking creep.’

‘Exactly.’

I was about to demand what she meant, but the T-junction into Stellar View approached. We were five minutes away from that famous view—the thought brought a stab of sadness that quite distracted me.

If Shaktivel was surprised to see us, he didn't show it. We found him taking a breather in the foyer, with his cap off. He had recently acquired a new barber and his scalp had been landscaped twice already in the last fortnight. Right now it was a daunting vista of Nazca lines. Only the vertex had real hair, a Hokusai Great Wave, gelled into stillness.

He hurriedly reached for his cap on seeing us.

'I have full details, Madam,' he said. 'Definite suicide.'

After the show ended at around nine last night, Mirish had driven home. Walden accompanied him, but was soon observed to exit the foyer. The watchman reported seeing him get into a cab. About ten minutes later, Mirish had sent out for paan, his usual practice. It was delivered at the gate, and carried up to the flat by the concierge who noted that Sahib appeared to be on his own that night. The watchman at the gate had the lawn in full view. In addition, there was CCTV. The night passed without event. An indistinct shadow on the lawn was noticed at 6 a.m. The watchman left his post to investigate. Within minutes Stellar View was woken by his screams.

Mirish was very obviously dead. The cause of death was equally obvious. He had jumped from his living-room window. It was a very long fall.

The concierge had called the ambulance. It served to transport the watchman who was threatening a heart attack.

We had no business being here, really. This was Prabhadevi jurisdiction, but Shaktivel had sidled past that hurdle and now waved us elevator-wards with a proprietary grace.

It was my first visit to a super tall building, and there was a moment of claustrophobic panic in the lift which whizzed at the speed of light to the 45th floor. We stepped out into a lavishly appointed sky lobby where a gloved concierge conducted us to the appropriate lift—instantly identifiable by the havalдар inside. He looked anxious, so Lalli flashed the badge she saves for sticky situations. It earned us an unqualified welcome past the entirely unnecessary cordon—there were no neighbours, the 65th floor belonged solely to the deceased.

I did impossible sums in my head and still came up short of what the place must have cost. A foreboding spelt out what we would encounter beyond the miniature orchid garden at the very ornate door.

*Empty lodgings, unfurnished walls*

*Unpeopled offices, untrodden stones*

*And what hear there for welcome, but my groans.*

I suppressed a giggle at the thought of how Mirish would have hammed those lines, especially the last. And then laughter fled, as aghast, I viewed the landscape of misery. Whatever else it was architecturally, this was an interior designed for suicide.

The colors—I counted just three—were flat. The contours, severely linear. The patterns, geometric. The walls, loaded with art, abstractions in controlled hues of beige, grey, black, merely enlarged the vista of despair.

It was like entering an optical illusion where everything seems to lead somewhere, but goes nowhere.

Into this cocoon the shining knight had retreated after every mock battle—but maybe he was one of those guys who never lived in the living-room.

The French window let in a wavering light this misty December morning. It was shut now, but it had been open this morning when the police entered the flat. The ledge, presumably Mirish's launching pad last night, was cushioned in black. The wall around it flickered indecisively in faint ripples of beige and grey. There were no curtains, of course. Instead, sculpted shades of spiraling bamboo and wrought iron hurtled down at the touch of the concealed button that Lalli located with pure prescience.

To my intense surprise, alarm even—there were books. Unread, possibly even untouched, marooned in a far corner, their crowded spines making a constrained rainbow.

A muffled cough announced the concierge. 'Any help—'

'Are all the flats furnished the same?' I asked.

'Oh no. Mirish Sahib was very particular. He had his own decorator. He liked everything neat and clean.'

Leaving Lalli at the French window, I strolled into the adjoining corridor. To my surprise, it didn't lead to the interior. It opened on a deck. I had a sudden sick feeling. *This*, and not the window was his seduction bait.

The city was a gauzy sari spread out to dry, patches and tatters unconcealed, its filthy hem crumpling into the sea. It had floated off me like a discard, leaving me free. The reality of the glass wall around me was hard to accept, so immediate was the sky. Just as well, the wind would have grabbed me otherwise—

Did that happen to Mirish? Had his fall been an accident?

I hurried back to the living-room, but Lalli wasn't there. I walked past the kitchen, a small octagonal space bee-hived with machinery. Nobody could ever have cooked here, obviously, but even survival foods were sparse. The fridge was bare. There was a jar of almonds and another of apricots on the shelf, a crate of milk cartons, and that was all. The bin had one empty milk carton, and a ball of crumpled foil.

The minibar was well stocked, but looked untouched.

I pictured Mirish Kumar glugging down the milk, throwing the carton into the bin as the doorbell rang with his paan—delivered, I guessed wrapped in that discarded foil.

These actions seemed casual enough.

Yet very soon after that he had made his exit from the 65th floor through the window.



The living-room seemed cheery compared to the bedroom, which was furnished completely in black. The enormous bed (black) bulged like a beached whale on the sandy floor. A huge oval mirror leered knowingly from the ceiling. There was more art, more abstractions, more dissolving dimensions, more black, beige, grey. The small red cushion on a chair was grim as a blood clot. The only other color in the room was Lalli, her green sari vibrant as a new leaf as she drifted through the pages of the dead man's life.

It was an empty book, though, there was so very little to read.

Clothes enough for ten men, with not a hint of intimacy. Bottles of unguents, cologne and other stuff filled a whole cupboard. Shoes that looked as if they had never been walked in. Props and disguises, the lot. Not a shred that breathed memory. A hotel room would have seemed more inhabited after an hour's stay, and Mirish Kumar had lived five uninterrupted years here. I wondered why Lalli was ferreting about so persistently. There was nothing to see. A strong odor of pine, emanating from some hidden source, erased the air.

'Aha!' Lalli, lost in the closet within a forest of jackets, emerged with a flush of triumph. 'Stuffed behind a suitcase on the top shelf.'

It was a small tight roll of clothing, in a plastic bag. Lalli placed it on the bed, then pulled out the suitcase—clearly empty from its lightness. Not entirely. Slipped under the lining she found a plastic sleeve with a single sheet of paper. The school leaving certificate of Mahesh Kanji Kotwal, aged 16, student of B.K. Society School, Naroda Patiya, Ahmadabad, dated 17th June, 2000.

Naroda Patiya—the name punched me with a sickening colic. Missing a heartbeat, I forced myself back to the moment.

The plastic bag contained a T-shirt, a faded yellow, worn and stained.

'His only memory?' Lalli murmured.

'No, he only put it there yesterday,' I surprised myself by saying.

It was the smell. Fighting past the overpowering pine, came an olfactory assault I had met before. It was the feral cologne Mirish had worn last evening. Faint, but undeniable, its shrill current wafted off the T-shirt.

'Of course he might have worn that scent every day.' I shrugged. 'It's hardly evidence.'

'I'm not sure it isn't.' Lalli frowned. She rolled up the T-shirt, restored the package, leaving it there for Forensics to find.

I spotted the cologne in his collection: *L'homme mystérieux*. It didn't smell so bad in the bottle.

'We'll just have to wait for Dr Q.' Lalli shrugged. 'Now, what about the other guy? He's just as curious, isn't he?'

'Why?'

'All that armor you noticed. One man in armor, the other in disguise. Don't you find it curious?'

‘Lalli, that was just my impression.’

‘Based on facts.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like Mirish Kumar’s resentment and loneliness. You noticed these things.’

‘Not really. He was just a creep.’

‘And you won’t credit a creep with pathos.’

Her statement brought me up short.

‘My life has been filled with creeps, Sita. A new one every day. I find it—I’ve always found it—impossible to dismiss them as creeps. They always explain. After the act they protest sameness, not superiority. They abdicate.’

‘Abdicate? A curious choice of word.’

‘They refuse power. It exalts them, that moment.’

Again, lines rose unbidden in my brain.

*For you have mistook me all this while*

*I live by bread like you, feel want,*

*Taste grief, need friends; subjected thus*

*How can you say to me, I am a king?*

‘So, the other guy,’ Lalli broke into my reverie. ‘What did you say his name was?’

‘Oswald Pinto.’

‘We should see him.’

‘What for? This was suicide, Lalli.’

‘Yes. But why?’

‘You said it just now—loneliness.’

‘Why last night?’

That question stabbed me. I had been with the guy, why hadn’t I sensed his desperation?

‘What did I miss, Lalli?’

‘You? Nothing. You were not in the picture. Oswald Pinto was.’

‘Oswald Pinto has cancer,’ I blurted out.

‘How do you know?’

I recalled Mirish’s outburst. ‘Just because he’s got cancer—’

‘So what did Oswald presume on an ague’s privilege?’ mused Lalli.

As we left, Lalli told Shaktivel to hold off a press release till the next day—and a news blackout if possible.

It was, as yet, only eleven.

The world had not yet learnt of Inspector Kumar’s last episode.

‘Already staff has been instructed,’ Shaktivel said smugly. ‘I have secured all mobiles.’

Prabhadevi, evidently, was almost grateful for being relieved of responsibility. Once things were sorted out they would step in for plaudits, though that could be sparse in a case of suicide.

We headed home to await Dr Q who had promised to drop by after the post mortem.

Dr Q had little to add. The cause of death was evident—shock from extensive injuries and massive internal bleeding.

‘Which suggests he lived after impact,’ Lalli said.

‘Yes. Half an hour at least,’ Dr Q agreed. ‘Hopefully, he was unconscious.’

‘Hopefully—you’re not certain.’

‘No. One expects this degree of trauma to cause instantaneous death, but it often doesn’t.’

I shuddered at the thought of that half hour.

‘Stomach contents?’

‘Aha. Curdled milk—and the residue of paan. We should get something out of that by tomorrow. And, you won’t believe this—his phone was intact. In his jacket.’

‘In his jacket? He died in his jacket?’ I asked incredulously.

Dr Q gave me that special look he reserves for moments when he thinks the idiot child has said something intelligent at last. Lalli smiled too.

‘In the absence of a note—’ Dr Q said gravely.

‘Exactly. Thank you, Sita.’

For what? I was clueless, but I could use the glow.

‘He made only one call after nine last night—that was to the paanwala. Here’s the number.’

I had no idea why he thought it important, but evidently, so did Lalli. She dialed the number immediately, switching to speaker mode.

‘Hello?’ A man’s voice, very cautious. ‘Who gave you this number?’

Lalli shocked me by giggling sharply, then sinking her voice in throaty confidence. ‘Mirish Kumar,’ she murmured. ‘Can I get it today?’

‘Two o’clock possible. Address?’

‘Oh, same building, leave it with the watchman as usual.’

‘Okay, madam, but cash on delivery.’

‘Cash? Mirish said I could pay on account.’

‘First purchase cash down, madam.’

‘Okay, no problem, just text me the amount.’

When the text came in, I gasped. ‘No paan can cost that much.’

‘Depends on what it contains,’ they said together.

Dr Q placed the time of death around midnight. Which meant Mirish had jumped (or fallen) at or before 11.30 p.m.

*In the absence of a note ...* Dr Q’s comment ran in a loop in my brain.

In the absence of a note, it was vital to reconstruct a suicide’s last hours. Sudden death didn’t get more sudden than a leap from the 65th floor.

He had been home for more than two hours when he took that decision. It had not been taken for him—Dr Q was certain about that. There were no signs of resistance. He could have been pushed—but only if he were standing on the ledge to begin with. The window was perfectly sound. Why on earth did he open it at all? The wind would have slid in its arm and scooped out the furniture.

No, he had opened the window with every intention of jumping.

Whatever the preceding hour had been like, he had kept the jacket on throughout. Now why would he—why would any guy do that? Was he planning to go out later? Still, it is the human urge to slip into something comfortable once you’re home. On the other hand, Mirish could never have been very comfortable in his home. Or did he simply forget he was still wearing his jacket?

‘Depends on his state of mind,’ Lalli said, without looking up from the file she was reading. The table had a small mountain of files and printouts. These kept arriving, and none of them from the police. A brief glimpse had revealed they were all follow-up files on harrowing news reports.

‘Depends on his state of mind,’ Lalli repeated. ‘If one man’s state of mind can drive him to suicide, consider what happens to the nation—which is the state of 1.2 billion minds.’

‘Chaos.’

‘Really? I see only conformity. A dull conformity of apathy and hatred, greed its only nourishment. I don’t know how much longer I can live with this.’

*... this dear dear land*  
*Dear for her reputation through the world,*  
*Is now leased out, I die proving it*  
*Like to a tenement or a pelting farm.*

Dr Q called later that night with the toxicology report on the paan.

‘There are some new designer drugs on the street, a new bunch of crazies,’ Lalli explained. ‘Shukla discovered a qat plantation in Kalina recently—’

‘Kattha—catechu?’

‘No. That’s *Acacia catechu*. Qat isn’t endemic—Arabic and African, if I remember right. A mild stimulant. People chew it like paan, fairly innocuous, gives a mild high. But it can be cooked into more dangerous cathinones, and that’s become a kitchen industry. A new molecule pops up every week. We just cleaned up meow-meow and now there’s a new one that evidently gives you the sensation of flight.’

‘Mirish’s paan had that?’

‘And so did his blood. Now let’s see if the paan I’ve ordered has it too.’

‘So he was high when he jumped?’

‘Maybe, maybe not. Perhaps he was just flushed and hyper-alert, which is the usual effect.’

Perhaps he had felt hot and instead of taking off his jacket, opened the window. In a rush of bravado he had climbed the ledge.

What had he seen in the twinkling darkness?

An audience of twenty million, waiting in breathless silence, for him to speak?

And so he had opened his arms to them, as he had earlier that evening.

And jumped.

‘Except for one detail.’ Lalli’s calm voice broke into my fevered vision. ‘He was wearing that jacket when the concierge brought the paan at 10.30. I checked. Which could mean he was already pre-occupied. The arrival of the paan merely urged him to action. It alerted him to hunger. He gulped down the milk, chewed the paan. It takes about half an hour for the cathinone to kick in. And all that time, his preoccupation, anxiety or dread, kept up its charge. And then—’

That was it, then. Mirish Kumar’s death was no longer suicide. It was a drug-induced accident. The case was closed.

‘Time now to open the real case,’ Lalli said.

‘But we know why he died,’ I protested.

‘We also know where he came from, despite his every effort to conceal it. But we don’t know why he lived the way he did.’

‘Whatever the reason, it’s irrelevant now.’

‘To him, perhaps. Not to me. I’m very curious to discover what Oswald Pinto thinks.’

‘He doesn’t know yet?’

‘No. Also, luckily for us, today is Sunday.’

But Oswald was not at home. He was in hospital, reacting violently to chemotherapy.

To my surprise, that got no sympathy out of Lalli.

‘Can’t it wait till he’s home?’ I asked, irritated.

‘No.’

When my aunt’s that terse, I shudder at what’s ahead. But even that prescience, it turned out, had left me unprepared.

Lalli’s illegal badge, flashed at every hurdle, got us into the swank private room where Oswald Pinto was napping between drips while his exhausted wife dozed in an armchair.

The nurse who accompanied us woke her with a whispered introduction. ‘Urgent, important, please.’

Mrs Pinto’s face, lacking Oswald’s bulldog grace, showed an unexpected fear. She actually flinched at the sight of Lalli’s badge, held up this time with visible menace. There was something avenging in every line of my aunt’s still face. Implacable was the word my brain supplied.

Mrs Pinto nodded dumbly, and prepared to accompany us outside.

‘No, please stay. It’s your husband I must speak with.’

The nurse and Mrs Pinto protested together. ‘He’s asleep!’ Their indignation woke him and he opened his eyes and focused his irritation on his wife. The nurse fled.

His eyes travelled with growing puzzlement as he recognised me. He had seen Lalli before. He frowned in uneasy recall.

Calmly she showed him the badge. His face leapt out of its leathery armor as he murmured ‘Deva! Devadeva!’

Mrs Pinto’s silent reaction was even more disturbing. The look on her face told me she was witnessing the end of her world.

Lalli, who had her back to Mrs Pinto, spoke without turning around. Her words seemed totally irrelevant. 'Mrs Pinto, you have my word that when I leave this room you will still be Mrs Oswald Pinto, still married to this gentleman.'

The effect of those words on Mrs Pinto was remarkable. She clutched my arm hard, quite without realising. Her eyes returned to focus. She nodded with some secret intelligence, and stepped back, subsiding into the armchair.

Oswald Pinto too, seemed alleviated to some extent. His grunt may have been resentful, but it conveyed some degree of trust. He tried to speak, but his dry lips made no sound. Lalli restrained me with a look as I reached for the glass of water at his bedside.

Lalli pulled up the plastic chair and sat down, leaning back. This morning she had chosen a red violet cotton sari, and the rich color flamed up in that grey room, making her an effigy of power. I had never seen her in this cold inexorable role before.

'I had a great deal of trouble tracking you down, Lakshman Hegde,' she began. 'I had given you up for dead. But it was Oswald Pinto who died, I see that now. No matter, one name is as good as another for what I have to say. Do you remember me now?'

He found his voice. 'Tribunal.'

'Yes. It was at the Tribunal. I was reading your account yesterday, Constable Hegde. You were our most reliable witness. You gave us names. You gave us phone traces. You gave us leads that we followed to the Chief Minister, indicting him for the massacre.'

'Massacre!' My horrified exclamation rang in the still air long after it had ceased.

*Naroda Patiya.*

I remembered where I had last read the name.

Oswald's lips moved soundlessly.

'Not a word till I have finished,' Lalli said. Her voice, low and vibrant, struck terror in me.

'Massacre. Qatl-e-aam. Kill on sight. Those were the orders. You watched them carried out. You watched the slaughter of one thousand Muslims in Naroda Patiya. On the morning of 28th February 2002 between ten in the morning and again at two that afternoon you watched the mob throw gas cylinders and petrol bombs into Muslim homes. You watched two families burn alive. You watched your fellow policemen throw tear gas at the victims. You watched them turn away from piteous cries for help. You heard your superior officer say, '*Nahi, aaj to upar se order aaya ke aaj tumhari jaan bachane ki nahi hai.*' You saw all this. But when he ordered you to fire into the struggling crowd of victims, you did not. You said at the Tribunal you ran away because of a woman. You did not tell us more. Tell me about the woman now. What did she do?'

He shook his head. Grey and worn, he was beyond words.

'Tell me about that woman.'

'Don't make him speak', Mrs. Pinto pleaded. 'It's all long over. Don't open old wounds now.'

'Who are you to say that? Did these things happen to you?' Lalli shot back. She turned to the sick man again. 'Tell me about the woman.'

Lalli offered him the glass of water, but he refused it, and began speaking rapidly in a clear hard voice. I cannot report what he said, so I will let him narrate it.

#### **STATEMENT OF OSWALD PINTO/LAKSHMAN HEGDE**

*I watched it all. I lived in the hostel just a street away from Noorani Masjid. I was a bachelor from Hubli. I knew the basti people. They were my friends. All of them were Muslims, all my friends. You must understand this. I beg of you, understand this.*

28th February 2002.

*At about 11 a.m., everything had already started. The mob filled the street, yelling wildly. They were armed to the teeth, brandishing axes and choppers and trishuls, knives, pistols.*

*We were on one side, SRP men.*

*Down the road, the mob stopped.*

*Between us, the empty street.*

*I caught sight of a man trying to cross the street. I recognised him immediately. It was Hussain bhai. He had repaired my watch only last week. He repaired all sorts of things. He had a small kiosk at the edge of the market, a makeshift tarpaulin tent. We often spoke of a pukka shop.*

*Hussain bhai. He was carrying a baby, his youngest.*

*Hussain bhai had three children, always crowding his shop, so I always made certain I had a sweet or two in my pocket when I had to get anything repaired.*

*Hussain bhai.*

*Yes, it is Hussain bhai.*

*I am watching Hussain bhai.*

*He is carrying his baby and trying to cross the road.*

*Hussain bhai. Carrying his baby. Signaling across the road to somebody to hold back, stay back, signaling with one hand, keeping the baby safe with the other.*

*Signaling to his wife. She is waiting there, a child on either side. The children still as stone. The woman straining towards Hussain, held back by his signal.*

*Hussain bhai darts across the road.*

*I am watching Hussain bhai dart across the road.*

*Hussain bhai explodes.*



*His head is a globe of scarlet, whirling as if it will never stop.*

*Hussain bhai falls, his arms till clamped on the baby.*

*The baby begins to wail.*

*Till that moment, everything is still.*

*Hussain bhai is still.*

*His wife and children are still.*

*I am still.*

*Watching.*

*On either side of me, SRP men, my own company, watching.*

*Then the baby wails. Like a siren it goes on and on, wa-wa-wa.*

*The only thing I want is for it to stop.*

*I feel that want grow in the uniformed men on either side of me. That want grows in the mob before me.*

*Fingers curl around triggers. Hands clamp closer on broken bottles, axes, knives.*

*Wa wa wa—*

*The mother runs into the street, the children stumble after her.*

*I am still watching.*

*She is into the street now, trying to get to him, to Hussain bhai.*

*His head is gone.*

*Hussain bhai's head is a pool of red pulp, a smashed watermelon, but his legs are alive, jerking as if he will get up now and walk and the baby is going wa wa wa.*

*It cannot be borne.*

*Men from either side of me run into the street.*

*They stop the woman.*

*Everybody concentrates on that, even I.*

*They grab the woman.*

*She wrenches off their hold and lunges towards her husband.*

*The children scream. They pummel the men with their tiny fists.*

*The baby keeps going wa wa wa.*

*The men begin to hit the woman. They slap her face. They thrash her head. When she falls, they kick her. When she struggles to her feet, they knock her down. One man plants his boot on her stomach to hold her down, and the others hit her with the butts of their rifles.*

*And I am still watching.*

*The children are howling. Big harsh screams, but they cannot drown the wailing of the baby. The men thrash the children, now knock them down with the butts of their rifles.*

*The children are small, so small, like fallen birds.*

*I know their names. Rubina is five. Abdul is three.*

*I am still watching.*

*Then someone runs to Hussain bhai, and we all remember Hussain bhai's legs are still jerking.*

*The man who has run to Hussain bhai is a young fellow, little more than a boy. I don't know his name. From that knot of frightened people all watching Hussain bhai's legs jerking, this boy runs out and tries to lift him up.*

*Hussain bhai is twice this boy's size. The baby is still wailing, so this boy drags Hussain bhai, baby and all. By those jerking legs he drags Hussain bhai towards the edge of the road.*

*The policemen, all men I know by name, all my company, leave the woman and watch the boy dragging Hussain bhai.*

*The woman runs like lightning, her sari a flag in the wind, lifting over her head in a white streak, a green stripe, a flash of orange.*

*I can no longer see her face, but she has the baby now.*

*She has hushed the baby now.*

*On either side of me, men slump in relief.*

*The fellows who had crowded the woman back off.*

*Intelligence passes through the mob like a live current.*

*It's the signal they're waiting for.*

*I'm still watching.*

*The mob surges like a tide towards Hussain bhai.*

*The young man is seized and flung like a bag of bones on the road. They step on him as they advance towards Hussain bhai and I am still watching.*

*Someone pushes Hussain bhai's wife, someone catches her, someone else catches hold of the children. Now she has become part of the terrified huddle at the end of the road—*

*Wait.*

*That's a siren.*

*Here comes a jeep.*

*It's an open jeep.*

*Five convoys on either side.*

*A Minister.*

*Everybody knows the mad woman, a doctor with a permanent look of poison on her face.*

*She stops the jeep.*

*The mob waits, uncertain.*

*'What are you waiting for?' she screams. 'Kill the Mussalman. Kill! Kill!'*

*And then she is gone.*

*As if they had been waiting for her permission, the mob moves forward.*

*A cycle tyre is planted on the watermelon mush of Hussain bhai's head.*

*Somebody does an abhishek of petrol. Kerosene. Petrol. Kerosene. I smell both one after another. Together.*

*Hussain bhai's wife screams, screams and screams, worse than that baby, knocking her head on the road she screams, throwing her head back and beating her belly she screams as her husband bursts into a bright blue flame and the mob cheers and breaks into a dance, and I am still watching.*

*This is when someone throws a stone.*

*Someone from that helpless huddle, someone throws a stone.*

*Then one more.*

*'Fire!'*

*The order goes down the line.*

*I step back.*

*Bullets fly. Not into the mob, but into that huddle of doomed Muslims.*

*I disappear.*

*It is not difficult.*

*The crevice between two houses absorbs me.*

*I am not alone.*

*That day all the crevices are crammed with people.*

*In here we are not Hindu. We are not Muslim. We are not Christian.*

*Fear is the only faith in here.*

*After sometime there is silence.*

*Everybody has left.*

*The police have driven off the mob now.*

*The basti has barricaded itself as best it can.*

*The road is empty.*

*The air is thick with smoke from Hussain bhai's body, still burning.*

*His wife crouches next to it. She is feeding the baby. The children huddle against her, watching the flames.*

When Oswald stopped talking, the room returned into focus.

It was no longer high noon at Naroda Patiya, but the same hour in a climate-controlled, politely-upholstered and sound-proofed hospital room. But it was the mob I heard, not the sick man who had fallen back on his pillows exhausted.

When Lalli essayed to speak, he stopped her with a gesture.

We waited.

*I followed that woman when she got up at last. I shadowed her to see what she would do. Dragging the children with her, she moved towards the buildings at the end of the road. I followed.*

*The Society had locked its gates and wouldn't let her in.*

*I could see she was close to collapse.*

*Women looked down on her from the first floor balcony. I heard her beg for a sip of water. They laughed at her. One of them brought a glass of water and deliberately emptied it on the ground next to her.*

*Wearily, she moved away.*

*To my alarm I saw she intended to reach the SRP post set up near the big water tank. By then it hardly registered that these men had murdered her husband, beaten her and thrashed her children. All she wanted was that sip of water, and then she could take charge of her life again.*

*They stopped her. I heard one of them laugh and tell her, 'You are going to die today, anyway.'*

*And then I had to hide before they could spot me. By now I was a dead man. I sank back into the shadows again.*

'Your story is far from over,' Lalli said coldly. 'I must hear it all.'

'How did you find me?' he asked. Then turning to me, he said, 'It was you, wasn't it? The moment I saw you, I had a bad feeling. I knew my time was up. You were—what is that word—you were my Nemesis.'

'She knows nothing about you, but yes, she did give me the book. Page 44 gave your game away.'

'That Shukla business? Why?'

'You quoted an internal review verbatim. Unfortunately those were my words. It meant you had an intimate connection with the police. You could access records. You knew the hierarchy. You knew whom to bribe, whom to menace. You were—or had once been, a policeman. And then of course it was easy. We knew within the hour that no large media house had a crime reporter called Oswald Pinto. And we found a man of that name among the dead documented in Naroda Patiya. That's all I knew until your co-author finished the story.'

If Oswald had looked frightened earlier, it was nothing compared to the emotion he now displayed. He had the look of a man with nowhere left to run.

'So you see, you had better tell me everything,' Lalli said quietly.

He tried to bluster, but half-heartedly. 'Why don't you ask Mirish, since he has already told you so much?'

'I would give anything to be able to do so,' Lalli said in a voice that chilled me. 'But he cheated me. He's dead.'

'Dead!'

The man almost leaped out of bed in a frenzy of terror. His wife calmed him, glaring reproach at Lalli who continued calmly.

'Yes, he was found dead on the lawn yesterday morning.'

'Yesterday morning! Why was I not told?'

'I ordered a news blackout.'

'You? You have the authority to do that?'

'Yes,' lied my aunt.

A sheen of cunning lit his face briefly. Then he shook his head gravely as if admonishing himself.

‘Give me a few moments, and I’ll tell you the rest of it,’ he said. ‘Go home, Gloria. You’ve heard enough. This is not for you.’

‘I’m staying.’

‘Suit yourself, though God knows what you’ll think of me afterwards.’

Again, I give you his narrative.

#### **STATEMENT OF OSWALD PINTO/LAKSHMAN HEGDE (continued)**

*I did not know then how long I stayed hidden in the shadows. I do now. It was a mere two hours by the clock, but within that span I had erased the life I had lived so far.*

*I was thirty-two.*

*My family was Hindu, conservative, religious. I started each day with a prayer, and ended it with another. Shuddha brahma paratpara Ram, Kaalatmaka parameshwara Ram.*

*And they were singing that holy name as they killed and tortured. What was left to believe in?*

*I was raised with a horror of even minor infractions. And that morning I had watched crimes beyond imagination being committed by ordinary men and women. No particular mark set them apart. And they had called on Ram to defend these terrible acts.*

*Let me make this very clear.*

*I had never known violence before that day, but I was there, wasn’t I?*

*I too was guilty of violence.*

*My hands had killed Hussain bhai as surely as if they had fired that bullet or cast that burning tyre on his shattered brains.*

*It was I who had refused that woman a drink of water. Surely that was a crime even beyond murder?*

*By doing nothing, I had done everything.*

*How could I return to my life? I did not belong there anymore.*

*Perhaps that thought forced me out of hiding. I can’t remember now.*

*Next I knew I was in the very centre of a mob that carried me on its surge. I was in uniform, but nobody minded that. The smell choked me, it was a stink of diesel. I realized that almost every*

*man in this mob was carrying a keg of fuel. Very carefully, I began to work my way out. Shouting with them, weaving my way in and out, somehow I escaped.*

*Once more, I watched.*

*I watched them fling the diesel and petrol on the walls of the basti. I watched them hurl rags soaked in petrol on the roofs. I watched them throw a flaming rag against the nearest building. Then a couple of hefty fellows rolled cylinders of gas right into the basti.*

*After that, I saw nothing.*

*Everything was noise. Explosions. Screams. Piteous cries for help. Thud of falling rafters. Long tearing sighs from collapsing roofs.*

*I still had my phone. I called the fire brigade. I called all my superior officers, one after another, higher up that ladder, rung after rung I went. The response was always the same. 'Take it easy.'*

*A relative of mine worked in the Chief Minister's office. I got through to him. 'Don't call me again,' he whispered. 'Everybody here knows what's going on. CM's orders are strict. Nothing is to be done. Things will take their course. He is congratulating them on their restraint.'*

*And now there was a new noise, one so loud and furious it blocked off all other noises.*

*It was my heartbeat.*

*It was like thunder in my chest, hammering the breath out of me, telling me what I would watch in the next few moments.*

*You see, the smoke had cleared, and I could see.*

*I could see women. Babies, children, girls, mothers, grandmothers. To the mob they were all—women. They had escaped with their families through the back of the basti. The mob was lying in wait there, silent, armed. They held knives against the men and marched the women out.*

*Now they were all herded into the middle of the road. Babies, children, girls, mothers, grandmothers, all, all.*

*In one squirming mass, the mob fell upon them.*

*Every man was a rapist that hour. Every single man, save only me.*

*I stood there helpless, loathing myself for hiding, but I hid still, hiding my shame.*

*I watched them rape a child till she was beyond screaming. And then one man hacked her small broken body in two.*

*That gave them fresh impetus. They were worn out now, so they needed a new game.*

*They let go every woman they had assaulted—then trapped her as she fled, cutting her down brutally limb by limb till someone in mercy severed her head.*

*And then they burnt her body.*

*I watched, as they forced down a pregnant woman and bared her domed belly.*

*I watched, as they plunged a knife into her and cut her open.*

*I watched, as one man extracted a fetus, bloody and twitching and held it up to the roaring crowd.*

*I watched, as he dropped it on the ground and stamped on its head.*

*That bought a moment of silence.*

*Then they took flight with a roar of triumph, leaving the dying woman in a widening pool of blood.*

*I thought there could be nothing beyond this, but there was.*

*A rush of running feet and a girl, fifteen or sixteen, no older, raced down the road. Her intense distress even more than her bloodstained clothing spoke of what she had just endured.*

*This time I could not watch. I rushed out to grab her and pull her into safety, but just then a boy burst out of the shopfront closest to her.*

*He was whirling an iron chain.*

*He hit her with it and drove her down the road, pursuing her, cheered on by his friends.*

*He slipped off his T-shirt and with a wild whoop, waved it over his head.*

*And then he caught her by her hair, looped the chain on her neck and pulled hard. She fell in a limp heap, dead.*

*Someone from the watching and cheering mob flung a petrol bomb at the basti, but it fell short and exploded on the road.*

*The mob took off, just vanished.*

*Every vestige of a riot disappeared.*

*It became just a quiet street with a rag of petrol burning itself out—for it was little more than that, a short fuse in a bottle.*

*The boy had fallen over the dead girl, but he was merely dazed.*

*All my hate erupted at that moment.*

*I ran out into the street.*

*I had my pistol. I jammed it against his head.*

*I couldn't pull the trigger.*



*He breathed noisily, his nostrils clogged with blood.*

*He would have died quickly, painlessly.*

*But I couldn't do it.*

*I vomited, a vomit of self-loathing at my cowardice.*

*I no longer cared if they found me there and slaughtered me.*

*I no longer cared if the police found me and shot me right there as I knew they would.*

*I sat there with the dead girl's head in my lap, not knowing why I soothed her broken neck, only knowing the touch of her dead skin kept me alive.*

*The boy woke up, opened startled eyes.*

*I held the pistol against his throat and willed myself again to shoot him.*

*I could not.*

*So I knocked him unconscious with the butt of my gun, and left.*

*Quite without understanding why, I picked up the T-shirt he had dropped.*

*What was I to do now?*

*The decision was taken out of my hands.*

*A jeep drove crazily round the corner and braked next to me. I recognised the driver. He was from my company. I only knew his name, because he had distributed sweets last week, there was a baby coming. Oswald Pinto. That was his name.*

*'Get in, Lakshman,' that's all he had time to say. I leapt in and he took off like the devil. Like me, he had deserted, but they didn't know it yet. 'They've been watching you,' he said. 'Drop me off at my place, take the jeep and go.'*

*'What about you?' I asked. 'They'll get to you too. Get your wife, we'll make it out of Naroda somehow.'*

*He turned desperate eyes on me. 'Can't. Baby's coming any moment now. Wife's alone at home.'*

*We had barely turned the corner when they started shooting at us. It was dark by now, the alley we entered was unlit and Oswald had no idea where we were going.*

*'Tell me your address.' I grabbed the wheel from him and thrust his head down. If I was shot they would abandon the chase and he might still make it home to his wife.*

*But it was Oswald who got hit. A clean shot, right through the brain. Felled him in a second.*

*I let the jeep veer out of control, pulled him up behind the wheel and slid out.*

*I found my way to his house.*

*I told his wife what had happened.*

*When I took her to hospital, the doctor addressed me as Mr Pinto. I did not contradict. Neither did she.*

‘And so your new life began,’ Lalli prompted after a long silence.

‘Yes. We left Naroda straight from the hospital and went to Goa. By and by I began a small business in electricals . I’m good at that sort of thing. It did well. I loved my daughter—she was my daughter now. Gloria was kind to me. It was a life.’

‘But you did return in May.’

‘Yes, I came to the Tribunal to give evidence. But I couldn’t continue. It was too much.’

‘You were offered money to stay away?’

‘Of course. If I refused, they would have killed me. So I had to disappear a second time. That was easy, I was Oswald Pinto now. I took the money and passed it on to people who needed it more.’

‘You know they’ve all walked now. The doctor who urged the murders is free. Even the man who led the rapes is free.’

‘On compassionate grounds! Who can consider compassion for such a man?’

‘I should have looked for you myself. I blame myself for not doing that. Why did you stay in hiding? You followed the trials, didn’t you?’

‘Every one of them, every argument.’

‘Yes, I know you’ve stayed in the loop. Once a policeman, always a policeman.’

‘You’re right there. I keep in touch with all the files I can access. Quite a few havaldars owe their promotions to me. But of course they all think Oswald Pinto is a crime reporter.’

‘So why didn’t you testify?’

‘I was afraid.’

‘You were afraid? I am afraid. The whole nation is afraid. We’re crazed with hate because we’re afraid. For the last four years the people who massacred Naroda have been in power, taking massacres into every village, every city, murders into every household, rapes into every street. We have become a nation of murderers and rapists who will sell every truth for just one more rupee, so afraid of the truth are we, so afraid of the face in the mirror. How can I blame you, Oswald or Lakshman? I am afraid too. And yet we must speak out. Afraid or not, you are always meant to.’

His hands rose in helpless denial. ‘No. I just wanted—to forget.’

‘And yet you kept this to remember what you could never forget.’

Lalli placed something on the bed next to him. It was the rolled up T-shirt from Mirish's bedroom. I was surprised—I distinctly remembered her putting it back for Forensics to find.

Again, a look of cunning washed over Oswald's face. 'What's that?'

'I found it in Mirish's house.'

'What is it?'

'Why don't you open it?'

'No, no, just tell me what it is.'

'It's an old stained T-shirt.'

'What's it got to do with me?'

'It's the T-shirt you picked up on the evening of 28 February 2002.'

'How do you know that? It could be any old T-shirt.'

'It could be. But I know that Mirish handled this a few hours before his death.'

'You have no way of telling that. He didn't have cameras within the house.'

'My niece told me. When I opened the package, even though it looked as if it hadn't been disturbed in a long while, Sita noticed a whiff of the strong cologne Mirish had worn that evening. He had definitely handled it very recently.'

Oswald sighed. 'Yes. I gave it to him yesterday. I was destined to kill him, wasn't I? After all these years. It was my intent then. But not now. I only wanted him to face up to the truth.'

'Why? Did you think he would feel remorse?' Lalli asked harshly.

'He killed himself didn't he?'

'I'll come to that. Tell me about the show. Tell me how you met Mirish.'

'Pure accident. One of the guys I knew told me about this TV program, and I watched one episode. Useless stuff. It gave me an idea. I had accumulated so many cases over the years. Why not try my luck and put my hobby to good use? My daughter was doing very well in school, I had big dreams for her future, I could use the money. Why not?'

'Why not, indeed. And you landed the job and met Mirish.'

'No, I didn't meet Mirish for months. I wasn't required to be there on the sets. I watched the show, but didn't recognise him. How could I have suspected he was part of that terrible day? He had gained a lot of polish. Spoke beautifully, dressed even better. Not a hint of Naroda Patiya. And then I went along for a party on the sets. Mirish called me personally. I was flattered. If only I'd known—' His voice trailed off as his mind travelled the last few years.

Gloria hadn't moved a muscle. Her intent eyes never left Oswald's face.

‘After a few drinks—what was it? I really don’t know, but in a flash that boy’s foolish face leapt out of this actor’s mask. It was the boy I had nearly killed. It was that rapist. That murderer. I knew him at once. Making some excuse, I left early.

‘The next day I told Gloria I didn’t want to write for the show anymore. I quit. But Mirish wouldn’t let me alone. He said the show couldn’t possibly go on without me. He doubled my salary. And I thought perhaps this is my chance to do some good.’

‘And make money, doing it.’

‘I wanted to know what had made this boy commit such evil. One question had consumed me all these years: what had compelled ordinary people into such heinous crimes? And they had done it all shouting Jai Ram! The holy name of Ram had turned each man and woman into a rakshas. It had taken no more than a minute for a man to plunge a knife into his neighbour. I had seen a woman pour petrol down the throat of small boy, throw a match at him, and laugh as that little body exploded. This too, I, Lakshman, saw! This too, Ram, in your name!’ He broke down, sobbing.

Lalli stopped me with a gesture, so I fell back, silent.

Gloria was frowning into a small prayer book.

Oswald composed himself and resumed.

‘This question had haunted me for years—what made them do it? How did they go back to their lives? And I thought, now through Mirish, I would finally understand. So I became his shadow. But I found no trace of that boy in this man anymore.

‘He was a great actor. It was difficult to resist him. And it was difficult to know him. I placed all sorts of baits, but he wouldn’t take them. He was charitable in the usual flashy sort of way, but in four years of knowing him, I didn’t get a glimpse of what his actual feelings were. He had plenty of girlfriends. Every time I saw him with a girl, it was that dead girl’s face I saw. Even as I tried to be rid of him, my hold on him increased. I demanded more money. He paid me. It seemed a strange reversal of fortune. His crime tainted my life, but not his.’

‘And then you fell ill.’

‘I was diagnosed with cancer, yes, but it’s an early stage yet. Biopsy’s not bad, confirmed last week. I’m going to beat it, chemo’s working already. But it got me thinking.’

‘You wanted to quit?’

‘Oh no, the show must go on. I told him I had cancer. I told him I was much worse off than I truly am. I thought that would make him listen.’

*Presuming an ague’s privilege...*

‘How did that make a difference to him?’

‘His first reaction was what I expected. He was eager to get as much material as he could from me before I caved in! I found that funny. Then as I began to nudge him in the direction of his own life, and he started opening up.’

‘What did he say?’

‘He was very affectionate, actually. I was the closest he had ever come to having a family, he said. He told me his real name—Mahesh Kotwal. He had run away from home, didn’t ever want to go back. That gave me some hope. It became my responsibility to get him to face his crime. But he was cagey. I could get him to do things—mainly to contribute money which I diverted to the survivors of that terrible day, I’ve been doing that for a while now. I’ve tracked many of them down. Some have died, either from want or despair. I told Mirish I was building an orphanage. He believed me. Once or twice I brought up the matter of the riots, without mentioning the locality. It was met with stony silence. I began to think maybe he had amnesia — memory wiped clean from shock.’

‘How convenient.’

‘People survive. Somehow people must survive.’

‘The show must go on?’

‘Exactly. But I persisted. He’d bring me whisky, single malt, to cheer me up, and then complain. ‘You’re getting very gloomy Oswald.’”

*... of comfort no man speak*

*Let’s talk of graves, of worms, of epitaphs*

*Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes*

*Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth*

‘What happened last evening?’

‘The event upset him. It was not our usual style, very low profile. He did it only to oblige the police, he said. It was Inspector Kumar’s obligation. I was uncomfortable. I had stayed out of sight for almost twenty years. Those policemen and politicians are all in power today—nabbing petty thieves and ruling the nation as if there had been no genocide. It was they who committed those crimes in Naroda that day. Every rape, every murder, every arson was theirs and theirs alone. The mob was only a puppet show. But, however unwilling, I too was a puppet that day. I was in uniform. The thought made me uncomfortable.’ Oswald paused, then without warning he pounced on me. ‘You! I blame you for everything that went wrong yesterday. Yes, yes, you said nothing, did nothing. All the same, I know if you hadn’t turned up— When you spoke, you said what a good politician he would make, and I knew I had run out of time.’

*I wasted Time, now Time doth waste me.*

‘Mirish didn’t have company that evening, so I said I had something to show him. I’d pick it up from home on the way, and we could discuss it over a drink. I had no plan in mind. When we got to his posh flat, it all got out of control. I refused that drink. I sat him down and started talking about Naroda Patiya. I told him I knew what he had done. I asked him if he remembered seeing my face when he woke up.

‘He denied everything, outraged.

'Then I reminded him of the girl. I described how he had broken her neck. His face began to crumple. I gave him this plastic packet. I made him open it. I showed him the T-shirt.'

'And then?'

'And then I left. Suddenly, I could not bear to breathe the same air as him. And yet, for years he has been my oxygen.'

Oswald Pinto subsided into a dull anguish from which it would be difficult to rouse him.

'What will you do now?' he asked Lalli.

'About you? Nothing. I'm not here to judge you.'

'Why did you come, then?'

'To understand.'

'To understand what happened in Naroda Patiya? For more evidence?'

'No. To understand how, knowing all that happened, knowing all that was done, our nation voted murderers and rapists into power, and might even do so again.'

'How can I explain that?'

'You just did.'

At the door Mrs Pinto said, 'Jesus will heal him.'

'Good luck with that,' said my aunt.

'What do you think happened after Oswald left?' I asked Lalli as we drove back.

'We'll never know. Definitely, Mirish was shaken up. He probably drifted about the flat in a daze—'

'Maybe he was amnesic, and Oswald's revelation opened the floodgates.'

'Oh, he remembered everything, all the time. Why did you think he lived like that, poised between erasure and flight? In all my years I've never seen an emptier existence. He was a hollow man. No, I think Oswald brought up a new fear—justice. Mirish decided to bluster it out. He bundled up the T-shirt and stuffed it as far out of sight as it would go.'

'But the paan got him.'

'Something—anything. He'd reached that point when...'

*—and with a little pin*

*Bores through his castle wall, and farewell king!*

We found Shukla desultorily popping grapes and reading Page 44. His smile was as dazzling and guileless as usual, practically pain free.

‘So Sita, total kachra Inspector Kumar has made of poor Shukla. Don’t worry, already Shaktivel has reported the result. One author, suicide. Second author, cancer. Nonsense, I told him. Still, he said, it is undeniable fact.’

‘Also undeniable nonsense,’ Lalli said.

‘Correct, Shukla’s opinion also. Also Page 44 is truth.’

Lalli took the book from him and popped it in her bag. ‘You don’t have time for such rubbish, Shukla, not when there’s a case to close.’

‘What case?’

‘That qat plantation is still waiting.’

‘Given up. No leads.’

In answer, Lalli scribbled the paanwalla’s number on his temperature chart. And hurriedly protesting a lunch appointment, we left.

## The Lotus Position

*Kanika Katyal in conversation with Saikat Majumdar*

Saikat Majumdar is a novelist and critic. His latest novel *The Scent of God*, published by Simon & Schuster India, is a story of two teenage boys grappling with their mutual attraction in an elite boarding school run by a Hindu monastic order. Set in the late-twentieth century India, *The Scent of God* explores same-sex desire in an institution that criminalises that kind of love. Excerpts from the chapter 'The Lotus Position' of the novel and a conversation with Kanika Katyal underline the relevance of this work in today's cultural climate.



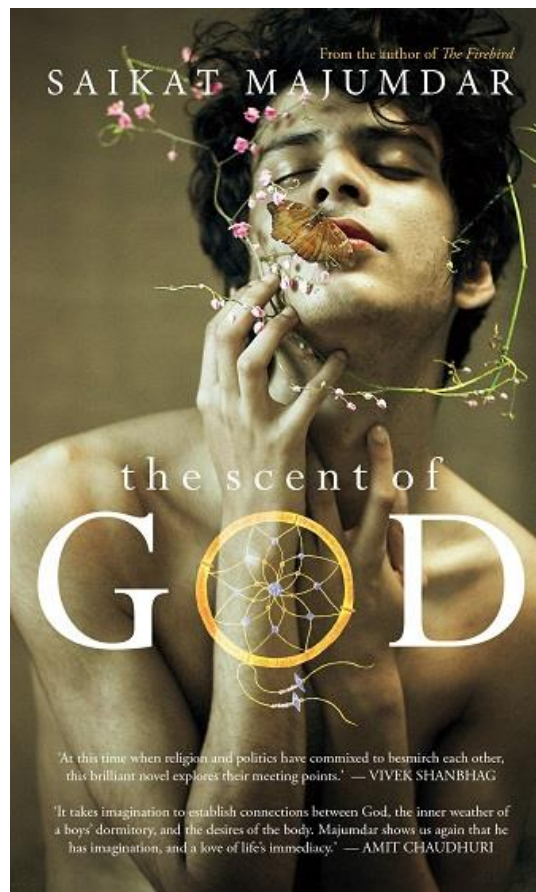
Kanika Katyal: How do you see the ongoing misuse of religion and religious places of worship?

Saikat Majumdar: I left the US in 2016, the year of Trump and Brexit. The reality of an angry, poor white population that bared vicious fangs from a sharp sense of disenfranchisement following everything from globalisation to eight years under a black President, still feels warm and real. That reality still smoulders in the West. The Indian story is far more frightening. You might dismiss the Hindutva crusader as a *tilak*-tattooed, *tika*-waving deprived plebeian who has nothing but the opium of religion, but the larger structural condition of his existence is made possible by the very enfranchised and empowered middle and upper-middle class Hindu male. I'm sure the equivalent exists in the rich right-wing white male in the US – Trump himself is the example of that – but the primal energy of white nationalism comes from a poorer class in the US, somewhat like the poor Boer in early 20<sup>th</sup> century South Africa who crafted apartheid and gave it a perverse moral legitimacy.



Which is to make the bizarre admission that I feel a modicum of sympathy for the poor whites in the US, but the smugness and disdain in the urban Hindu middle and upper-middle class really upsets and frightens me. I don't see the map of an easy exit out of this.

Secularism, I'm afraid, is a poor answer. India will *never* be a secular country. Religion is too important for the vast majority of people here. But it can be a pluralistic culture, as someone like Akbar had imagined. And honestly, religion is too important to be left to the fundamentalists. Bourgeois intellectuals and thought-leaders have done so, and the only people to take ownership of religion have been right wing ideologues. How can one take religion back? Is it possible to create, or perhaps revive, a Hindu Left? What role may artists and intellectuals take in crafting compelling narratives around religion, a subject that has inspired moving art, performance and stories for hundreds and thousands of years? How can such narratives sing to populations most deeply oppressed by the various incarnations Of Hinduism through history?



From *The Scent of God*:

Saffron sheathed Kamal Swami like skin. He was a taut bowstring, flashes of energy tossing around the smooth cotton and revealing fair, hairy flesh, patches of sweat that darkened the amber fabric as he breathed faster and faster like a stallion while Anirvan forgot to breathe, staring at muscles that

shot out as saffron seawaves. His heart stopped at the glimpse of his fair and lean arm as the Swami rolled up his sleeves on the badminton court. He dreamt of owning such arms one day. These very arms.

He was a saffron soldier with the eyes of a boy, eyes that sparkled with love and mischief but which never failed to hunt down the heap of dirt the students had swept under their beds or the cricket-magazines hidden under geography textbooks. The boys' rooms were restless, with blobs of shame hidden in odd cracks like the wet towels and the used underwear they forgot to give their mothers on Sunday.

The Swami knew everything.

The boys had marched out of the common room in silence that day. After the TV was killed and they were thrown out of the stadium in Peshawar. The air was thick with war. The firecrackers had gone out in Mosulgaon but anger smoldered at the sudden death of the match.

Kamal Swami stood at the door while the boys walked out quietly, all eighty of them. His fair face looked red and stormy.

'The two of you wait here,' he said softly as Anirvan and Kajol stepped out.

They waited. They were anxious but they didn't want to look at each other.

'Those boys are a shame,' Kamal Swami told them after everybody had left. His voice throbbed with passion. 'Animals, all of them.'

Anirvan and Kajol stood in silence. They looked down, wilted in shame. They didn't know what to say.

'You boys stay away from them.'

His voice was kind. Kind but cruel.

'From now on the two of you will sit at the back of the prayer hall.' He said softly. 'I want you to watch if any boy makes trouble. Just tell me if you see anything.'

What was Kajol thinking? Suddenly, the question screamed inside Anirvan's heart.

'You will spread out our prayer mats before prayer.' The Swami said. 'And put them back after it's over.'

Every night after the lights were off the Swami sat on the wooden bench outside his room and spoke about life, death, and life beyond life. When the day was over and their duties done, his voice was softer, kinder, and sometimes almost aimless. The boys could not see his face in the dark but his affectionate hands caressed their shoulders and the backs of their necks and slid along their arms in ways they never would in daylight. It was good to sit right next to him but it was not always possible because many boys crowded the bench after lights-off. But his voice melted in the dark and floated everywhere even if you were not lucky enough to sit next to him that night. He said the most beautiful things. Once Rajeev Lochan Sen had popped a tough question about the point of studying history. It was a scrap of a debate that floated in school for days.

'Is history a dead subject?' The Swami had laughed. Under the nightly softness, the laughter had a bite, and Anirvan imagined the pointed edges of his crooked teeth glistening in the dark. 'Go and look at yourself in a mirror,' he said.

'Mirror?' Rajeev repeated, full of wonder.

Kajol had walked into the gathering tentatively. He looked like he had lost his way.

'Move over,' Kamal Swami said. 'Kajol, sit next to Anirvan.'

There was no place next to Anirvan. The slight-framed Kajol came and sat on Anirvan's lap.

'Take a hard look at yourself,' the Swami's voice softened. 'What you see in that mirror is history.'

Rajeev was lucky that night. He was seated next to the Lotus.

'This face, this neck, these shoulders,' the Swami's voice trailed in the dark. 'The messy hair and the frown. The clothes you wear.'

'You'll see all of it in the mirror, won't you?' the voice floated, suddenly happy and boyish.

'This is history,' it said. 'And you ask whether history is a living being?'

Rajeev was silent. Anirvan wondered if his doubts were gone. But Anirvan didn't care anymore; he felt lightheaded. Kajol's childlike frame rested on him, and he could smell soap and talcum powder on his neck.

Anirvan knew why the Lotus was so brilliant at carrom. He could handle his mind like the red striker on the board. Anirvan had tried it too. He thought he could do it. *Leave your mind, swim out of it, and watch it wander.* The Great Saffron One had said a hundred years ago. *Watch it like a fish bobbing in the water, a trivial thing of colour that is no longer part of you.* Anirvan could lose his mind in the prayer hall, during the meditation time at the end, at least for a minute, two minutes, two minutes and twenty seconds...

KK: Why makes *The Scent of God* so relevant in today's political and cultural climate?

SM: One doesn't think of political and cultural relevance while trying to create art – at least I don't. Stories come from a different place, and when they come, they choose you, rather than the other way around. They leave the writer little conscious agency in the naked newborn act of telling. But it's also true that we share the spirit of the age. After the writing is done and we return to consciousness, we wonder at the ways the strange and private stories we tell are also the stories of our times.

Suddenly the two kinds of stories appear braided far more closely together than we thought. *The Scent of God* came to me half a dream, half real, a world real but invented, smelling of a universe where I had once lived and whose texture suggested to me moments and experiences that could potentially come to life, though I don't have real evidence that they did. A story of romantic passion between two teenage boys that take an unlikely turn is strange enough; what is the fate of that romance when it blooms in a monastic boarding school?

A story like this comes to you from a forgotten crevice of light and shadow far back in your life, and just when it's about to see life in print, Article 377, criminalising same-sex love is struck down by the Indian Supreme Court. Is this one of life's loving ironies?

And then comes something even more powerfully ominous. The fight over Sabarimala temple, and the sweetly innocent idea that you can ensure male monastic celibacy just by keeping menstruating women out of your world. That sex – and sexual temptation – is synonymous with women. How cute is that? *The Scent of God*, too, ends up narrating the fragility of that notion, and how it shatters into the shards of a saffron rainbow.

From *The Scent of God*:

*Don't fight it.* The Lotus said.

Slip out of it like you slip out of your shirt. Watch it play, a cheap toy. Slowly, the mind will become your slave.

The Lotus, he knew, could do anything. He could be like Arjun. Arjun shut out the rest of the world, fixed his gaze on the wooden bird on the tree, and shot its head off with his arrow. The carrom striker became an arrow in Kamal Swami's fingers. The red monster shot at the circle of coins at the heart of the board and ripped it open, sending a cluster of the right coins to the pocket. It was like a blast of dynamite.

Anirvan felt terrified to see the explosive force stored in the smooth, saffron-robed monk. But if you controlled your mind you controlled the striker. Kamal Swami, he knew, could stare hard at a coin so as to make everything else vanish from his vision. And then destroy it. Kamal Swami. The Lord Lotus. Meditation was a skill crucial to life in the ashram. It sharpened your mind, helped you master algebra, geometry and physics. Everything one needed to crack the engineering entrance tests. The boys stared at the tests, five years down the line, and tried to make the rest of the world vanish. How do you think the ancient Indians invented the zero and other foundations of mathematics? Kajol always said. And he cracked the puzzles of geometry so smoothly that it seemed that he felt the problems and the answers like tremors in his own body. *His lovely bony body.*

How do you think? Because yoga is the foundation of mathematics.

*Yogi.* Kajol fell in a kind of a spell whenever Anirvan meditated under the shower. Sometimes when Anirvan's mind wavered, he could feel Kajol's liquid stare on his skin. Sometimes Kajol would touch him lightly and Anirvan's focus would shatter. *Yogi.* Kajol called him Yogi. The one who has mastered Yoga. One who controls his mind like a steel toy. It became his name. No one remembered Anirvan.

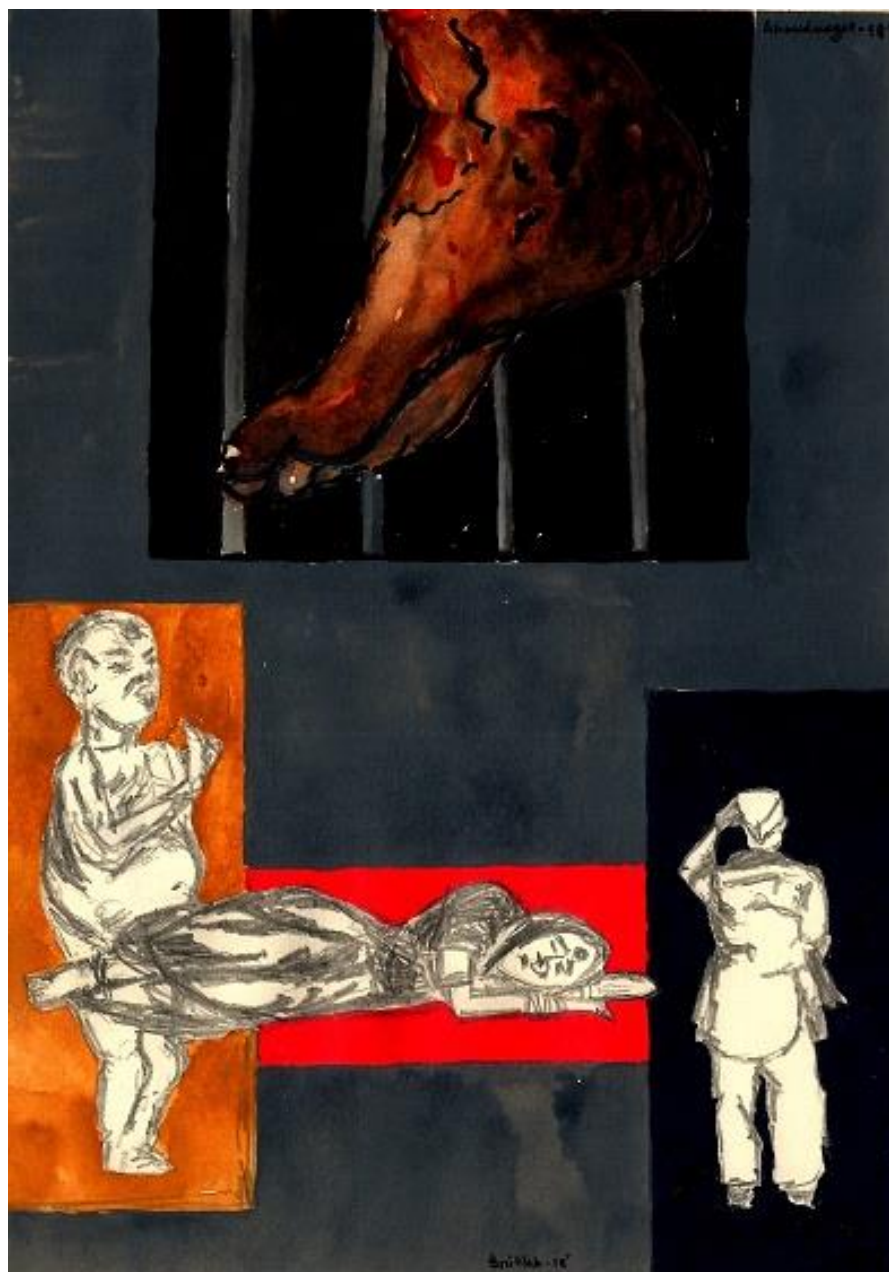
**Drought in the Conscience**  
With an excerpt from *Battling for India*

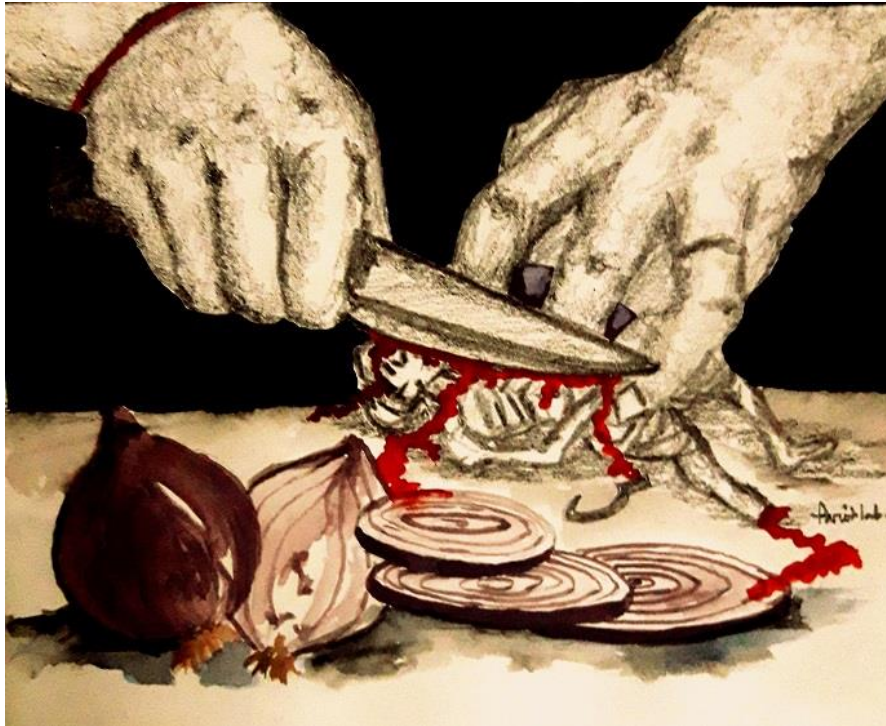
*Pariplab Chakraborty*











### ***The how and why of the farmers' long march to Mumbai***

Over the past six days, India has slowly woken up to farmers' distress—and their resistance. On 6 March, about 20,000 farmers from various parts of the state mobilized by the CPI (M) affiliated All India Kisan Sabha gathered at Nashik in north-western Maharashtra to begin a 200-km march to Mumbai, the state capital. The plan was to indefinitely gherao the Assembly while the Budget session was on and demand immediate resolution of the life-and-death issues facing farmers. By the time the march entered Mumbai on 12 March morning, it had swelled to over 50,000 people, the government was scrambling to deal with the red tide sweeping in, political parties were falling over each other to show support, and residents of the commercial capital of India were wondering what they had been missing all this while.

Like everywhere else in India, farmers in Maharashtra are reeling under the double whammy of falling incomes and rising indebtedness. In 2017–18, agricultural economy of the state shrank by 8.3 per cent, according to the state's Economic Survey tabled in the Assembly on 9 March [2018]. The Survey predicted that cereal production will dip by four per cent, pulses by 46 per cent, oilseeds by 15 per cent and cotton by a whopping 44 per cent in the current year's kharif season. Cotton is a major crop in the state, but a massive infestation of the standing cotton crop by the pink bollworm has destroyed crop worth Rs 15,000 crore, affecting nearly 20.36 lakh hectares—that's 50 per cent of the area under cotton. The Economic Survey also had a dire prediction for the forthcoming rabi crop—acreage is down by 31 per cent, and production is expected to fall by 39 per cent for cereals, six per cent for pulses and 60 per cent for oilseeds.

All this is just the current calamity. Distress of the farmers has been building up over the years because of rising input prices and falling returns as they fail to get remunerative prices. Indebtedness is another dimension of the same problem. Last year, the BJP government had announced a farm debt waiver worth Rs 34,022 crores to supposedly benefit 70 lakh farmers. But



the finance minister admitted in his budget speech that just Rs 23,102.19 crores have actually been sanctioned for 46.4 lakh farm households, and further, that only Rs 13,782 crores have actually been disbursed to 35.7 lakh farmers' accounts.

But the core of the farming crisis lies in the fact that farmers' incomes are not at par with what they are spending to raise their crops. A Niti Aayog paper admitted that according to a government committee on agricultural prices, farming output prices have increased by just 6.88 per cent between 2011–12 and 2015–16, while the prices they pay for goods and services have increased by 10.52 per cent.

Another factor is the steady decline in landholding size over the years. In 1971, the average landholding size in Maharashtra was 4.28 hectares owned by 49 lakh landholders. This has slipped to 1.44 hectares owned by 137 lakh landholding farmers. About 78 per cent of these farmers are "small and marginal", that is, they own less than 2 hectares of land.

Despite it being considered an advanced and rich state, Maharashtra has just 25 per cent of its cultivable area under irrigation. Thus, with three-fourths of farmed area dependent on rains, and the increasingly erratic monsoon, farmers are constantly facing a water crisis that destroys their budget. A bizarre feature of this crisis is that sugarcane, which covers just 4 per cent of the state's sown area consumes 71.5 per cent of the water consumed for irrigation.

Another key factor fuelling the farming crisis is the refusal of the state government to speedily implement the Forest Rights Act (FRA) that gives tribal farmers land rights over forest lands that they have cultivated for years. Maharashtra is lagging behind several other states in such distribution of land right deeds (pattas). This has angered tribals in the Thane belt in north-west Maharashtra and the Vidarbha region.

Faced with this immense crisis, Maharashtra has seen a spate of farmers' suicides over the years. Just last year, 2,414 farmers reportedly committed suicide despite the state government's debt waiver. But, that's just one way the hapless farmers found escape from harsh life. All over the state, thousands of farmers found new strength and hope in the collective protests organized mainly by Left organisations, led by the AIKS.

Two years ago, on March 29 and 30, 2016, the AIKS had led an unprecedented one lakh-strong peasant siege for two days and two nights at the central CBS square in the heart of Nashik, which had paralysed the city. Maharashtra's BJP Chief Minister Devendra Fadnavis gave assurances to AIKS, but since these were not fulfilled, the AIKS-led a 10,000-strong 'coffin march' in Thane city in May 2016 to focus on the issue of peasant suicides.

Then, in October 2016, over 50,000 adivasi peasants gheraoed the house of the Adivasi Development Minister at Wada in Palghar district for two days and nights. Written assurances on issues like FRA and malnutrition-related deaths of adivasi children were given. Meanwhile, AIKS held protest actions at Aurangabad in the Marathwada region in May 2016, and at Khamgaon in the Vidarbha region in May 2017 on issues of drought, loan waiver and remunerative prices.

A historic united peasant strike was held from June 1–11, 2017, led by a coordination committee of farmers' organisations. On June 11, the state government was forced to hold talks with the Coordination Committee and agreed to give a complete loan waiver to the peasantry. But the deceptive loan waiver package of Rs 34,000 crores that was announced imposed several onerous conditions that would prevent a great majority of farmers from getting any relief. This betrayal

sparked massive joint protests—fifteen large district conventions in July, in which over 40,000 farmers participated, followed by a state-wide chakkajaam (road blockade) on August 14 in which over two lakh farmers blocked national and state highways at over 200 centres in thirty-one districts of the state. Finally, on 16 February 2018, at an extended meeting of the AIKS Maharashtra State Council at Sangli on February 16, attended by over 150 leading activists from twenty-five districts, the decision to hold the Long March on 6–12 March [2018] was taken. A vigorous campaign was carried out throughout the state and it received enthusiastic response all over.

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*This is an article by Subodh Varma, excerpted from Battling For India: A Citizen's Reader edited by Githa Hariharan and Salim Yusufji and published by Speaking Tiger Books.*

Images © Pariplab Chakraborty.

## The Silvered Back of the Mirror

On writing speculative fiction

*Priya Sarukkai Chabria*

Speculative fiction is, for me, the silvered back of the mirror; its mercury melts unless you peer into it. For it is of the imagination. Its terrors, beauty and rapture require you, the reader, to recognise its private world, enter and make it your own.

Its mythic, mirage-like quality gifts the writer unconstrained freedom to invent entire universes teeming with life of all sorts. This freedom is the quality I most cherish about sci-fi and cli-fi (climate change fiction). To shine the light of a dark sun into mysteries that reveal more wonder while critiquing social structures that we *homo sapiens*, the wise ones, have created. Speculative fiction can be a morphing, hold-all genre; it is frequently the literature of metaphor and metonym.

This often plays out as subversive, irreverent, rebellious stories. Though set in the 24<sup>th</sup> century, my novel *Clone*'s narrative reflects current concerns about India, and elsewhere. For instance, the suppression of plural histories and disregarding a long-standing Indic tradition of debate that is foundational for a democracy.

For me this is a genre of hope — even when it projects dystopian futures which are early warnings. Speculative fiction is, consequently, a narrative of contemplation and creative questioning. In every sense of the word.

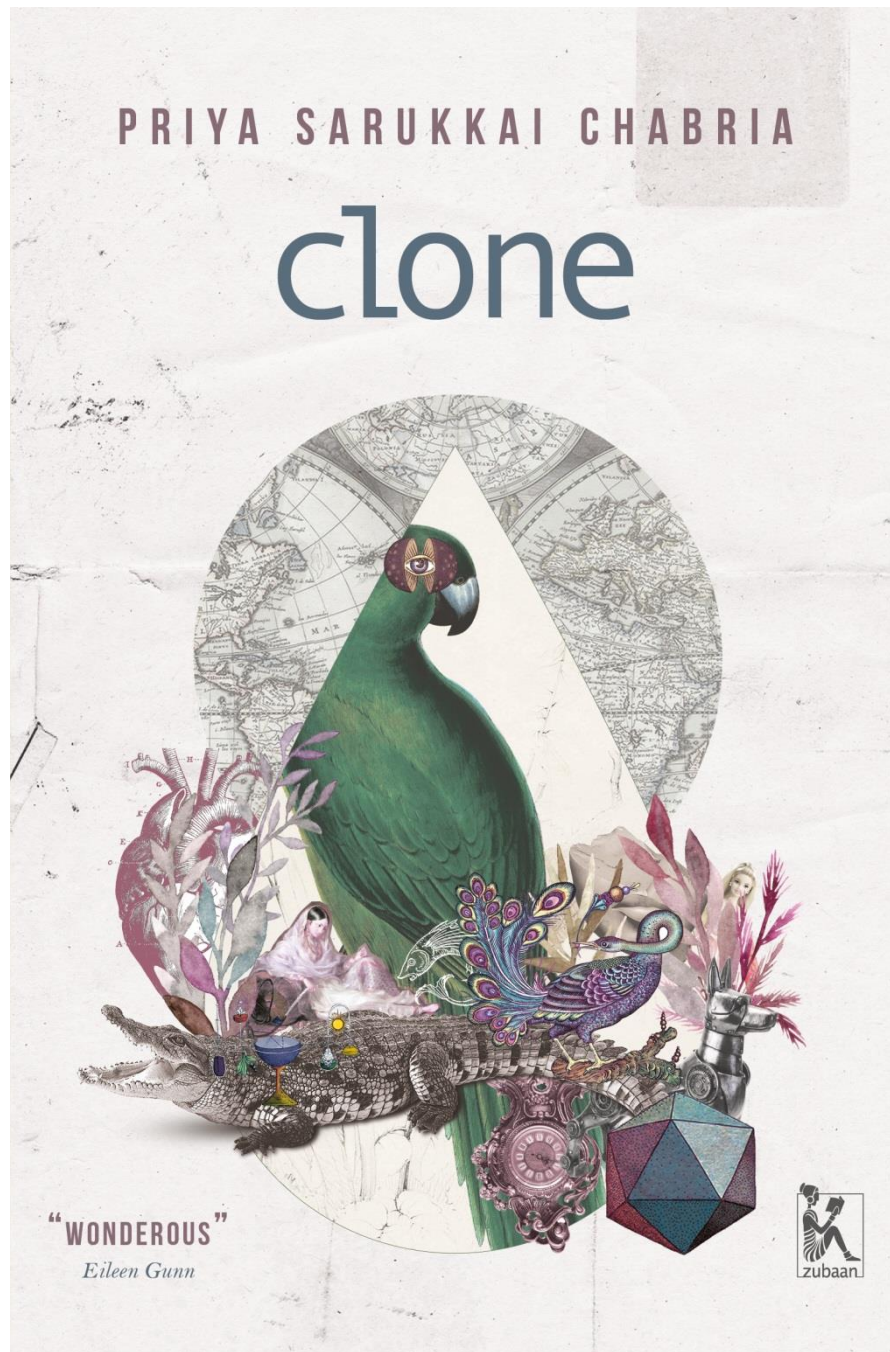
Here's where the fun comes in — and the challenge for both writer and reader. The genre demands deciphering made-up words, portmanteau words and worlds through scattered clues. This militates against passive reading. For instance: What's a flitting glass butterfly? What are pirouetting rainbows? Easy to imagine. A fritjith crocodile? A siffreen pond? The Drug? Perhaps a trifle more challenging. More inviting is how I see it, more spacious for the reader's imagination to inhabit.

My novel ruminates over selfhood, sexuality and creativity. The Clone lives in a future where sex is forbidden for the majority, which, I guess in retrospect, can be read as a sliding metaphor for the silencing of female desire and violence towards women. Then she awakens, a startled flower, to experience volatile emotions and desire. As questions stream forth: Do the shaming patterns of the present penetrate her mind? How does the erotic experience manifest in her song of selfhood? Is possessiveness an inevitable part of pleasure?

*Clone* ranges over time too, from an inset story set in 1500 BC during an early phase of Indo-Aryan migration to our protagonist, the Clone's life spiraling in the 24<sup>th</sup> century. I deploy this ambitious scape to question what it means to be human. Where are we heading? What rights do we have over the resources of this planet and the lives of countless other creatures? Hopefully, our impulse against ecocide, towards transhumanism — which is defined as 'an intensification of humanism' — moves us in the direction of compassion.

Simultaneously, we are moving towards more dependency on and implants of Artificial Intelligence, AI. Speculative fiction opens us to querying posthumanism, which promotes the idea of the human increasingly embodying and embedded in a technological universe. We are slowly but surely morphing from *homo sapiens* to *homo digitalis* — to borrow the term from AI guru, Toby Walsh. We

already inhabit a world that includes cloned sheep and simians, humans with legs of carbon fiber and remote-controlled limbs. What does this mean for us as a species? Scenarios unfold from the terrifying to the illuminating.



## Prologue

I am a fourteenth generation Clone and something has gone wrong with me. Not that my DNA is altered, not that I am a mutant. Not that any function need be eliminated. It's nothing obvious. It's terminal, and secret.

Let me put it this way: I remember.

My consciousness is morphing in an unplanned way. I'm also very lonely. It's not pleasant to have so much memory and no one to share it with. I don't dare. Which is why I've decided to keep a diary hidden as a cellchip in my system. So far undetected; so far, so good.

The first strange thought I had was of a dodo. It was the last dodo and I was it. This thought-experience rushed with adrenaline. I was feathered, flightless and fleeing.

The thought passed. Others followed. Each disconcerting, each more detailed. I thought I was going insane. I went to check out with my Elder, the thirteenth generation Clone. But I was late. My Elder was a saintly member of our community who had recently signed up for the Exhaustive Organ Transplant Scheme. I reached a liver, one eye, two feet, three metres of skin and perfect clavicles.

The only option left was to research my Original, to check out if these visitations have something to do with transmutations in her neurological circuitry. Or maybe something was overlooked in the cloning process. This is not supposed to occur. But neither are we to carry memory traces or epigenetic information beyond the second cloning. We are replicated by Soft Coral Code transmission, as more and more of the same.

Ours is an open society. Everyone—Originals, Superior Zombies, Firehearts and Clones—has equal right to access information. Nothing is prohibited, but there are consequences. However, I have decided to take the risk. Initial investigations suggest my Original was a writer living in the late twenty-first century. Maybe she should never have been cloned.

It's curious. I'm getting into what I suspect was the Original's life, or possibly her writing life, depending on how one wants to view it. These are strange ideas for a Clone. But strangest of all: I remember.

My consciousness has morphed.

[...]

## From *The Sentence*, set in the Vijayanagar Empire

*...How many months ago did I first lay eyes on the wench? When I have so little time before me that each breath chokes, how is it that time past runs before my eyes like a swollen stream, and all I can remember are moments? I remember clearly: my duty was over, the second shift was to begin. I was standing at the Muslim-style watchtower, the one to the west, and I looked down.*

*The richest and most famous courtesans were sporting in the bathing tank that lies to the northwest, and we guards always look at meat meant for the immortals. Why not? Being a palace guard has advantages. That day our Monarch had wished for pleasures other than those provided by His zenana, and these public women were summoned. He was late. The courtesans were in the water, playing ball, singing, vying for the best position, and there she stood on the steps of the bathing ghat, holding the umbrella, not deigning to get wet though it was obvious that her mistress was bathing. To tell the truth, I didn't notice her till after our Monarch made his choice for the night: Gangadevi, renowned for her expertise in the four kinds of poetry and playing of the veena. For it is well known*

*that He is a scholar and poet Himself. On His way up the steps of the bathing tank He noticed her standing aloof and playfully threw a handful of water at her. My eye followed His action. The handmaiden He had singled out for an instant, she I wanted.*

*By the time the third watch was over I found out to whom she was bound. We guards have a way of sharing information. She was Gangadevi's umbrella-carrier. I gathered my money, put on my best clothes, had myself massaged with sesame oil and perfumed with a pod of sandal paste before I strolled down Soolai Bazaar Street, where the courtesans and rich merchants live, their grand houses separated by walls of plastered rubble. Gangadevi's establishment is well known. Her house front is covered with paintings of panthers, tigers, lions and peacocks. Gangadevi's velvet-draped couch placed on the street side was empty: she was busy. But Vanithamma was there, leaning against the couch, chewing betel nut, and looking at the sky.*

*On the very first night, she told me about the Monarch's bedchamber, for we male guards are not allowed beyond the fourth enclosure; eunuchs and women warriors protect the interiors. She had escorted Gangadevi into the palace interior just recently. The bedroom's dome is gold-plated, gems in heart-shaped designs encrust the walls, around the pillars wind streams of emeralds and diamonds, the lion-paw legs of the bed are of gold, seed pearls run as railings a span high, the mattress is covered with black satin, and overhead hangs a canopy of embossed gold. For His feet are four cushions of black Mecca velvet, tasselled with pearls; His mosquito net is framed by rods of carved silver; His spittoon is made of gold. She spoke of such opulence that I felt dizzy and my bones seem to drip.*

*The wench said that one day she will sleep on that bed; she told all this to me even as we were shifting positions. After I finished, I twirled my moustache and told her not to get grand ideas just because one of the Monarch's junior queens was a courtesan he knew in his earliest youth. She laughed. She was disregarding me, a second-level guard. I left my mark on her shoulder. She would not agree to see me for three weeks though I agreed to raise her fees. By now they should know who is to behead me at dawn tomorrow...*

---

*These are excerpts from Clone, written by Priya Sarukkai Chabria and published by Zubaan books. Republished here with permission from the publisher.*

Text © Priya Sarukkai Chabria.



## Kandakarnan

Gita Jayaraj



Teyyam artist Dil Raj Panicker | Image Courtesy Pradeep T

As I hobble towards the *kaavu*, I can see from a distance, hectic preparation for the evening's Teyyam already underway. My left *chappal* broke on the way here and I'm carrying my *chappals*, instead of wearing them. It's just my luck I think. I might have stepped on a patch of *paramullu* or some such thorny weed. The ball of my right foot that pressed down on something prickly has begun to throb slightly.

I recognise Balan and Krishnan bare-torsoed, strutting in white *mundus* supervising the unloading of the wood for the pyre on which the *Thee Chamundi Teyyam* will throw herself over and over 108 times later this week.

Soman in his *kavi mundu*, Kuttan, and Chandran in their white ones are working furiously on the long 20-foot headgear for the *Kandakarnan Teyyam*. They're attaching the smaller torches (*pandhams*) to it. Their fingers fly nimbly as they fix the little *pandhams*. They are squatting on their heels as they work hunched over the *mudi*, shoulders tensed and head bent, focused intensely on their ritual labour. "Almost done?" I greet them as I pass. Soman looks up and grins widely "aaanh..." The others merely nod as they adjust their weight and scuttle sideways to reach the next length. Beside them I notice the larger *pandhams* (8×2 – 16) that will be attached to the Teyyam's skirt. Do they look bulkier and larger than usual, I wonder?

I can see the villagers already straggling in slowly, and stand around watching the various activities of each of these groups. The little girls in their oily braids, and the younger ones in their *kuli-pinnals* all have heavily-kohled eyes. The little girls stare in wide-eyed excitement. Some of the

younger ones shoot shy fluttering glances towards the bare-bodied men, who smile silently and resume their artistic labour with renewed vigour, sweat streaming in small rivulets down their backs. There are young men too in *mundus* and trousers hanging around eyeing the young women with interest. A few of them converse loudly trying to attract attention. A tea stall is being set up on the far corner and Murugan is unpacking some *masala vadas* and *pazham poris*. The sight and smells are so familiar, and I realise that these are the evenings that I yearn for all year.

—

The *vellattam* is over. Despite the slight discomfort, the Kandakarnan's *uraiyal* was achieved with remarkable speed. Soman, Balan, and Chandran held Karnan as he swayed and twitched and shivered as the *chendas* and *maddalams* kept a steady rhythm. I see Kuttan with his uncle and his friends. He has changed into a fresh *mundu* around his waist and a *veshti* with an English colour (rose) border hangs down his scrawny shoulder and chest on one side, as he claps and keeps time with the *elathalams*. His uncle and friends are dressed similarly but they are a little more portly. The muscles on their arms ripple as they drum. Karnan looks like he might be in his mid to late-thirties and is of medium build, with a slight belly emerging – the core muscles losing tautness. Physically, in his *vellattam* costume, he does not appear to be a model of strength and muscularity, but there is sinewiness to the feet, ankles, and legs and an intensity in the eyes and a firmness to the set of the mouth. Kandakarnan *vellattam* catches the eye and holds the gaze of some of the devotees. His eyebrows rise and his eyes widen as his shoulders tremble. There are some people here that I don't recognise. I know almost all the people in the village and many of them devoutly come to watch the *Kandakarnan Teyyam*. It's a spectacular Teyyam with lots of *pandhams*, fire, and drama. Kandakarnan seems to look at and beyond the persons whom he has fixed with his stare. The persons that he thus paralyses find it impossible to look away and feel the beginnings of a shudder deep down in their bodies. I feel a twinge of regret. As Karnan's movements get stronger and stronger, the tempo of the music increases, and more young men move in to help Soman, Balan, and Chandran. They create a tunnel with their bodies cutting off the throng of supplicant devotees as Karnan's body trembles and shudders in ecstatic being. I can no longer see what is going on.

I feel that the throbbing in my leg has now turned into an intense shooting pain. I can no longer stand or move. I sway and lose balance. Even as I try to steady myself, Kandakarnan erupts in flames. My whole body is on fire as I sink down to the ground. I can hear faintly the screams and the dying music but all I am aware of is the smell of singed hair, burning skin and flesh, mixed with the smells of burning coconut oil, and coconut fronds. As the first bucket of water rains on me I wonder what I am doing in the Kandakarnan costume. More buckets of water follow but the flames lick my body and caress my skin, loathe to let go. Karnan is after all the son of the Sun god. The flames embrace and curl around protectively enveloping him. But Karnan is gone, leaving me in the fiery embrace of his father. My body screams in pain and my mouth is dry. No sound emanates from my throat or lips. The fire is put out and I'm led to conclude a hasty ritual before being taken to the casualty ward at the hospital. I feel bare bodies and hands against my raw flesh, but I have no voice. As each item of Karnan's costume is removed, it takes with it a piece of singed skin, hair, or flesh. Karnan is a greedy god, in love with my body, I think. But my body is so ordinary, Karna! I plead. You, on the other hand, are spectacular! Karnan smiles from the corner in my hospital room, I need your body Panikkar, to be magnificent, but hush now, you must rest!

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*Gita Jayaraj has dedicated this story to Teyyam artist Rajeevan Panickar.*

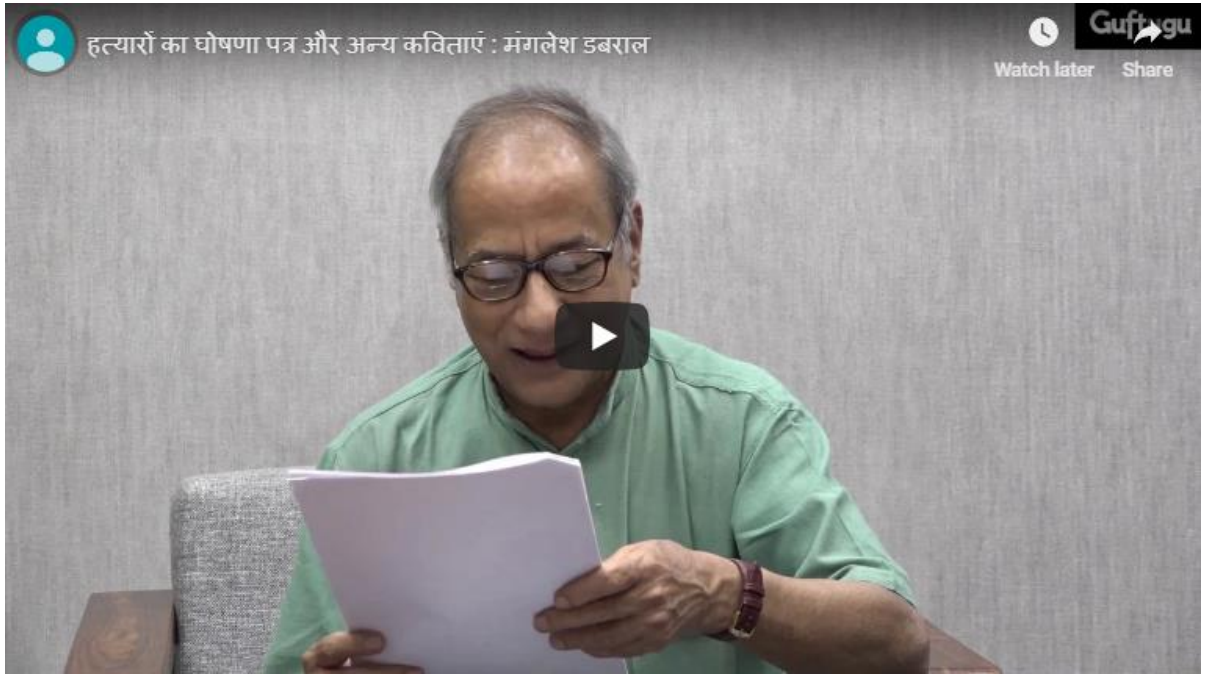
Story © Gita Jayaraj; image © Pradeep T.



## हत्यारों का घोषणा पत्र और अन्य कविताएं

मंगलेश डबराल

मंगलेश डबराल समकालीन हिन्दी कवियों में सबसे चर्चित नाम हैं। उनकी कविताओं में सामंती बोध एवं पूँजीवादी छल-छद्म दोनों का प्रतिकार है। भारतीय भाषाओं के अतिरिक्त, डबराल की कविताएँ कई और भाषाओं में अनुवादित और प्रकाशित हो चुकी हैं। कविता के अतिरिक्त वे साहित्य, सिनेमा, संचार माध्यम और संस्कृति के विषयों पर नियमित लेखन भी करते हैं। नीचे दिए वीडियो में मंगलेश डबराल अपनी कुछ कविताओं का पाठ करते हैं।



**Poetry in the Times of Darkness**  
The Khwaab Tanha Collective and its poster art

*Sarover Zaidi | Shiraz Hussain*

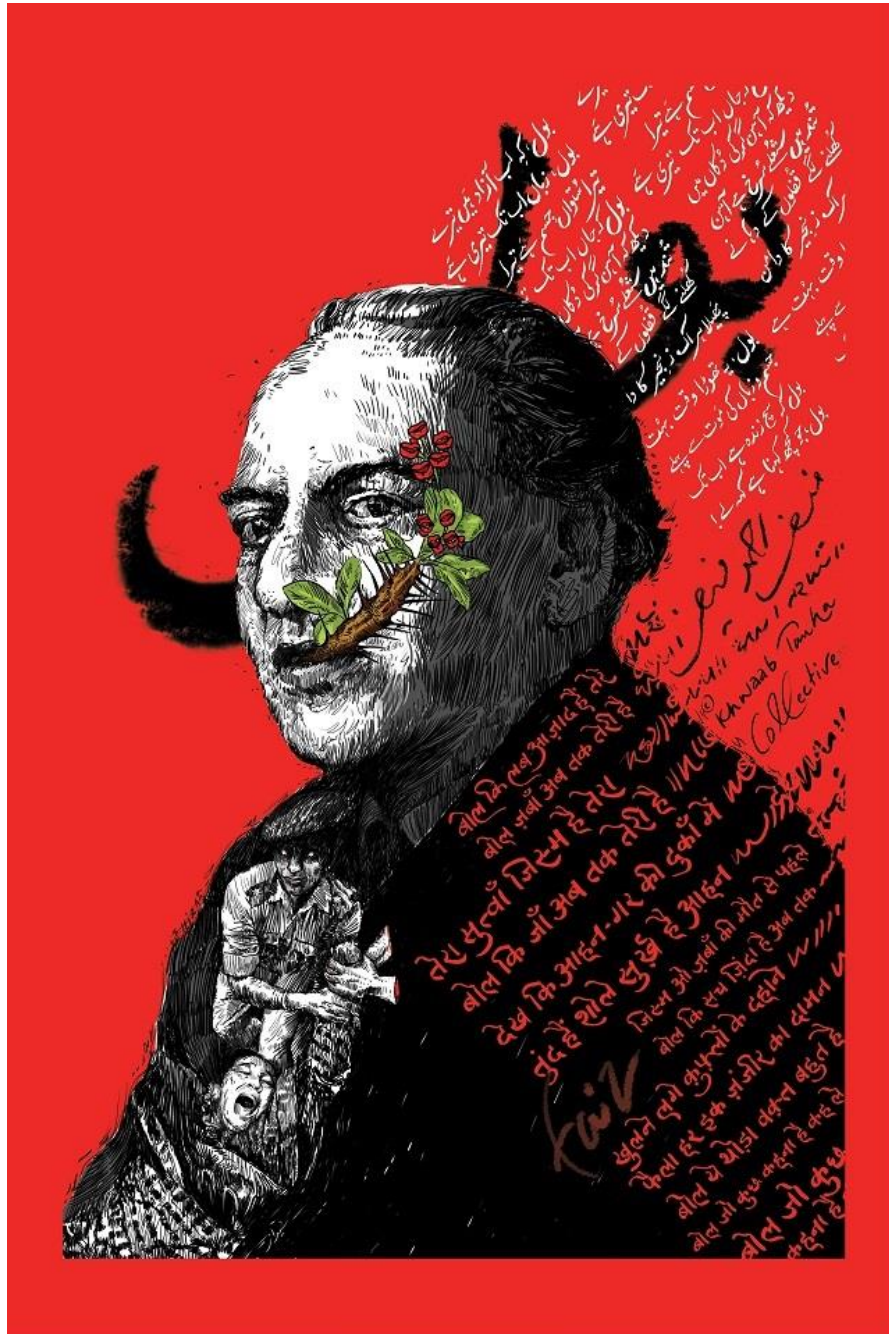
A popular graffiti that emerged in the streets of Sorbonne, Paris, in May 1968, was ‘Structures don’t take to the streets!’— an attempted corollary to this could be that poetry eventually does. Shiraz Husain’s attempts to create a public sphere through the Khwaab Tanha Collective and its political posters come from similar intentions. Working with Hindi, Urdu, and even Punjabi writers, and their revolutionary poems, songs and sentences, Husain grafts them into a poster art format and takes them to people across classes and age groups. Mechanical reproduction in the eras of high capitalism in art could draw a lesson from his poster art production and his anti-individualism stance.

‘I do not wish for my art to hang on a rich man’s walls’, he once explained.

Inspired in equal measure by artists like Andy Warhol and Roman Cieřlewicz amongst others, Shiraz has drawn, produced, and printed, hundreds of posters of literary figures from the sub-continent and taken their political work to a new generation. Whether it is his poster of Faiz’s ‘*bol ke lab azaad hein tere*’ juxtaposed with Najeeb’s mother being dragged by the police, his brutally hard hitting posters of Habib Jalib’s poetry, or the existential politics of Pash, Shiraz has single-handedly created a genre of political poster art in the country.

Today one encounters them in the hostel rooms of universities like Jamia, JNU, DU, on the walls of several homes, and in many small self-funded cafe’s across the country. Some of his posters have even been used in artistic and social campaigns against right wing politics. These posters live many lives, bought and sold at student festivals, cultural festivals and other events at extremely reasonable rates. Shiraz takes a personal interest in explaining the poets, their poetry and the contexts of their times to young enthusiasts. Irrespective of whether they have an interest in Urdu and Hindi poetry or not, many people get drawn to the posters for their alluring images, all drawn by Shiraz himself.

The following are ten amongst hundreds of the posters he has produced as part of the Khwaab Tanha Collective.

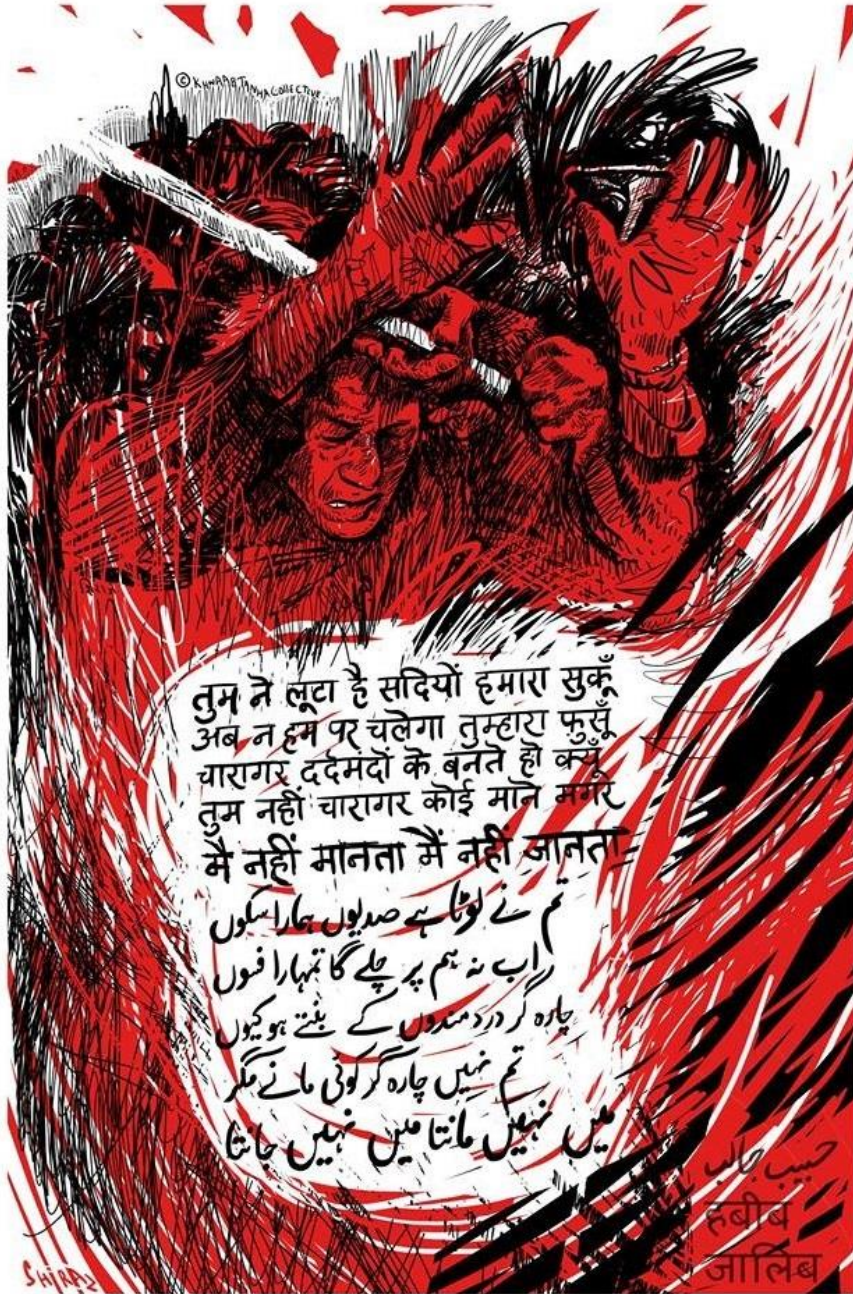


**Faiz Ahmed Faiz**



Irtiza Nishat





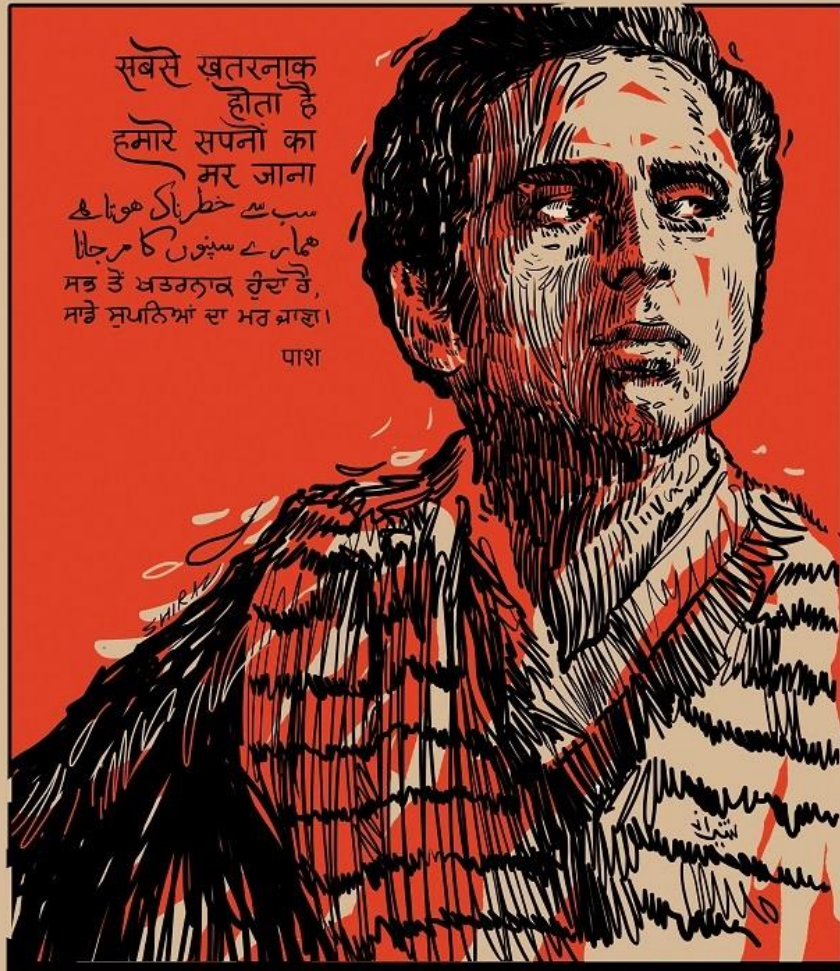
Habib Jalib: Arrested under Zia-ul-Haq's regime

सबसे खतरनाक वो दिशा होती है  
जिसमें आत्मा का सूरज डूब जाए  
और जिसकी मुर्दा धूप को कोई टुकड़ा  
आपके जिस्म के पूरब में चुभ जाए

पाश

सबसे खतरनाक  
होता है  
हमारे सपनों का  
मर जाना  
सब से खतरनाक होता है  
हमारे सपनों का मर जाना  
मड्ड के खतरनाक वृद्धों के,  
मड्डे सपनों का मर जाना।

पाश



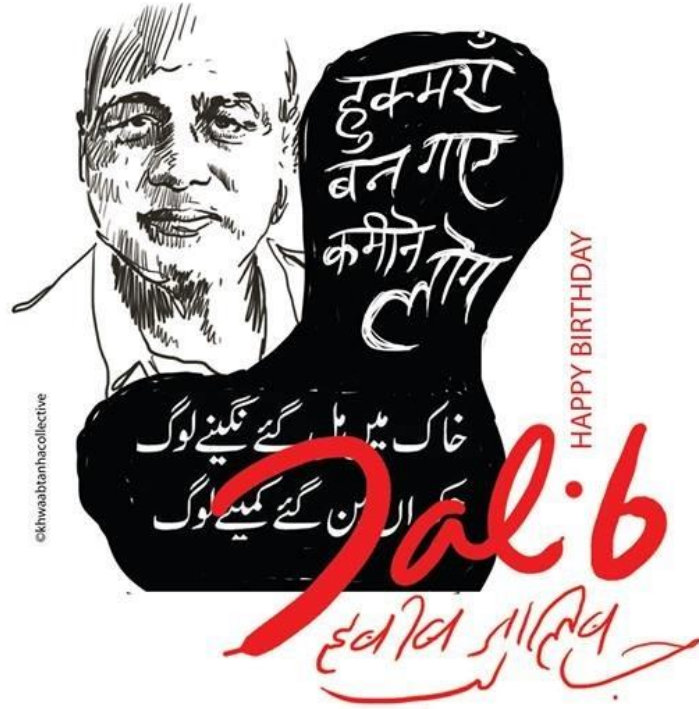
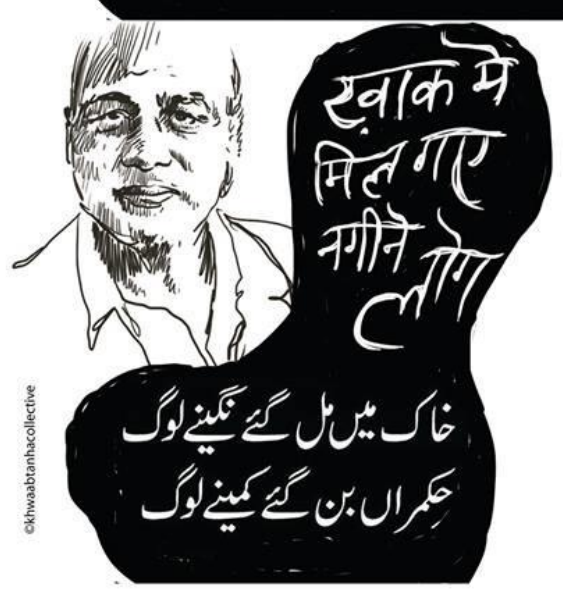
©khwaabtanhacollective

Instagram Facebook Twitter

**Pash: Assassinated in 1988**

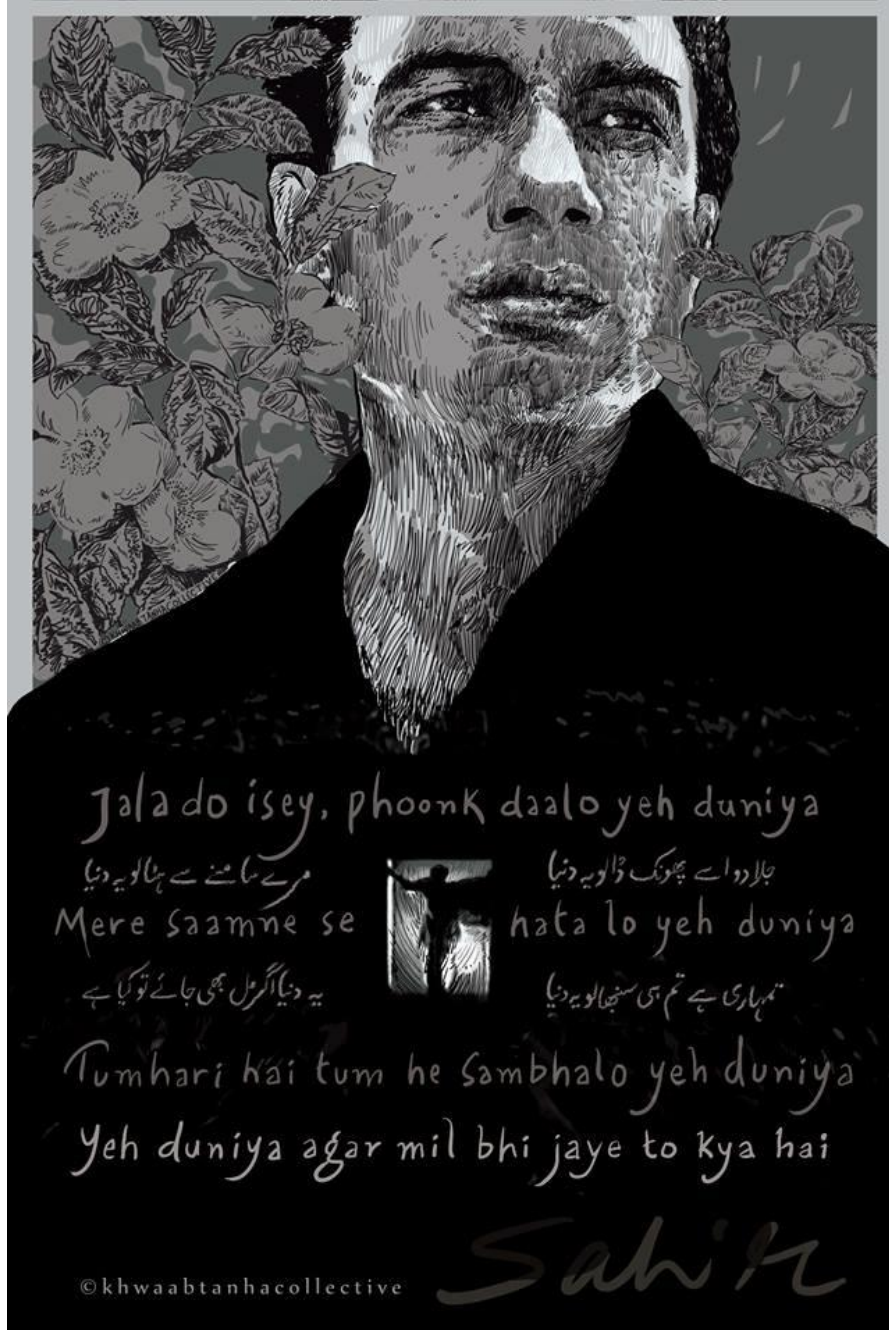






**Habib Jalib: Arrested under Zia-ul-Haq's regime**

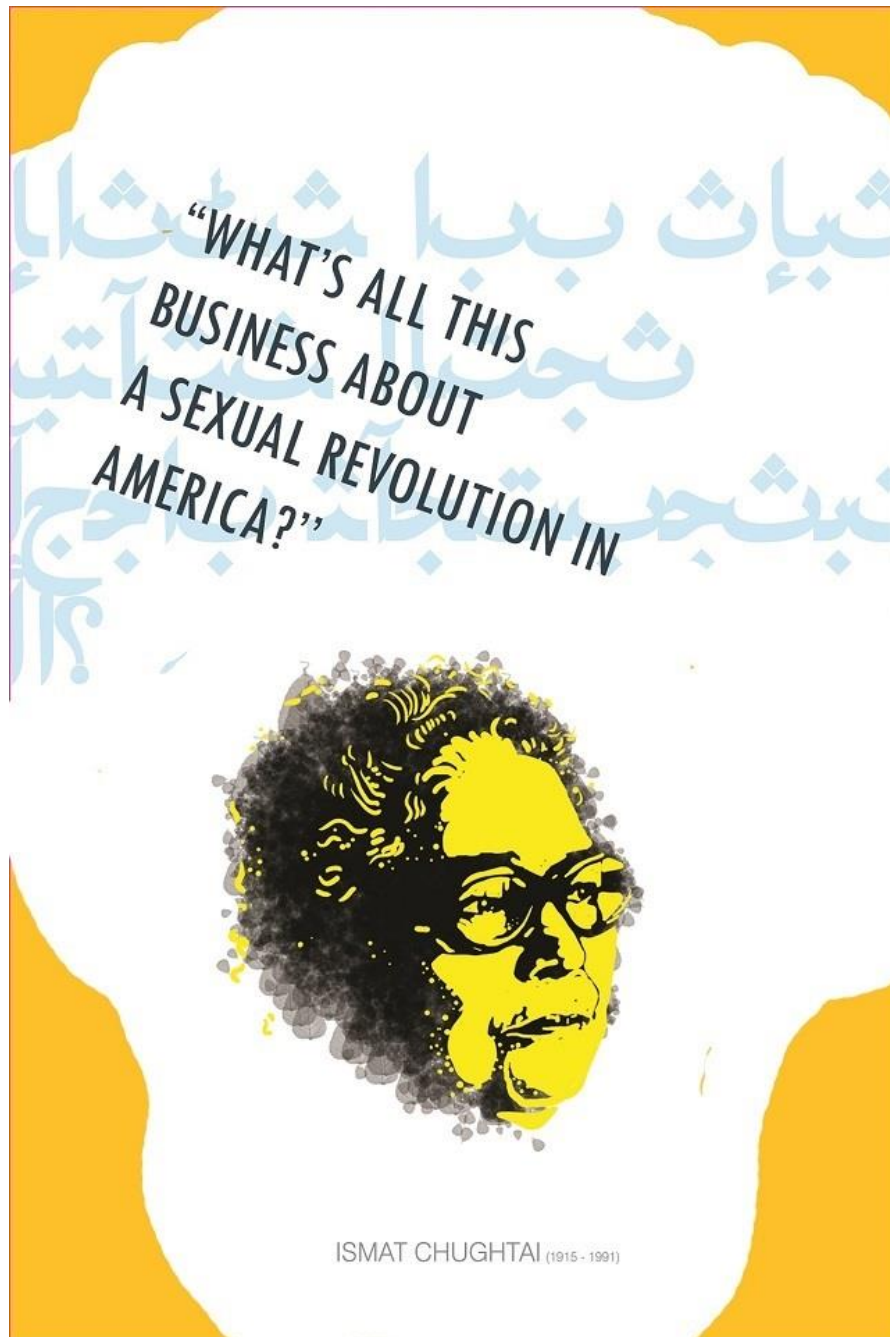




**Sahir Ludhianvi**

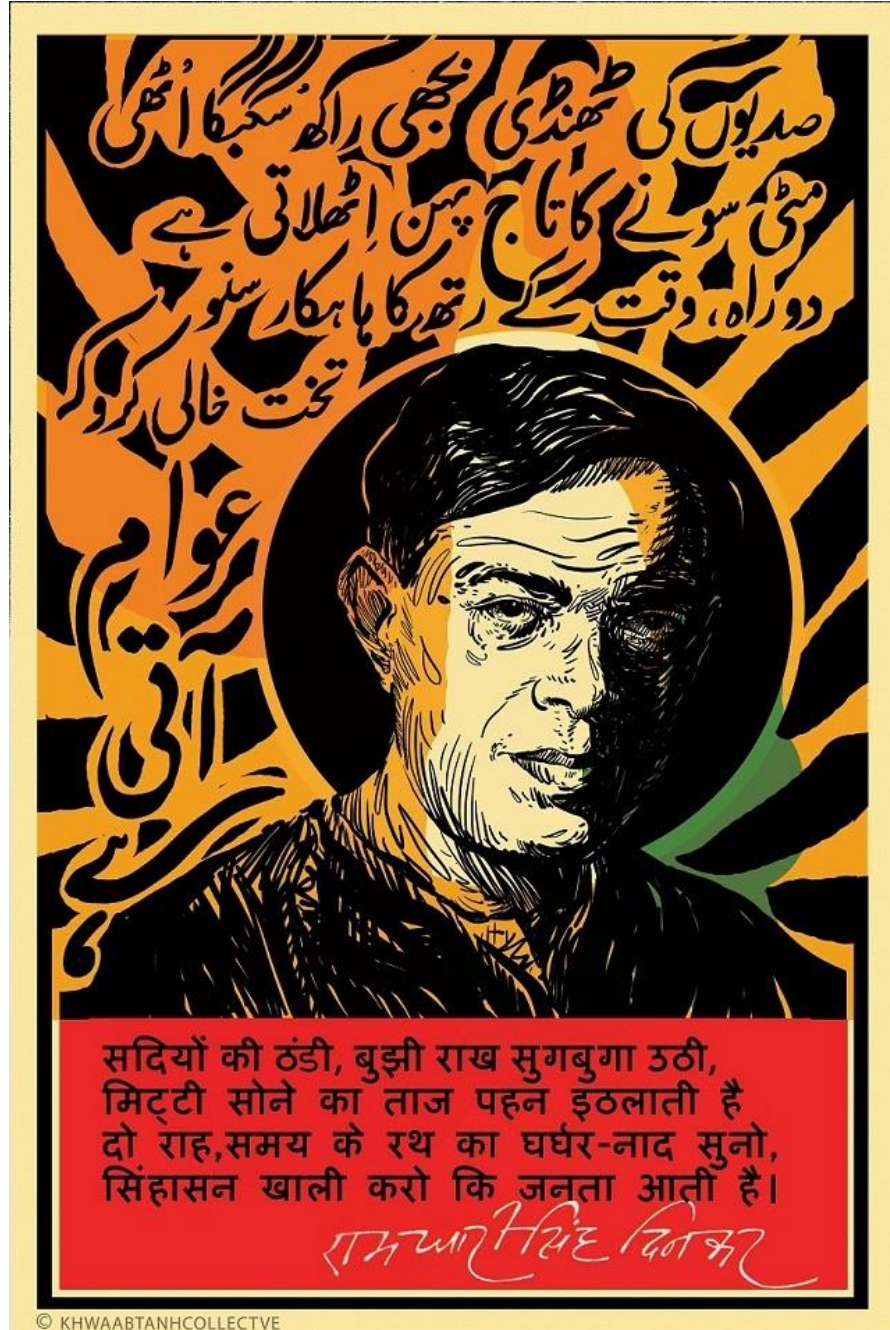


Allama Iqbal



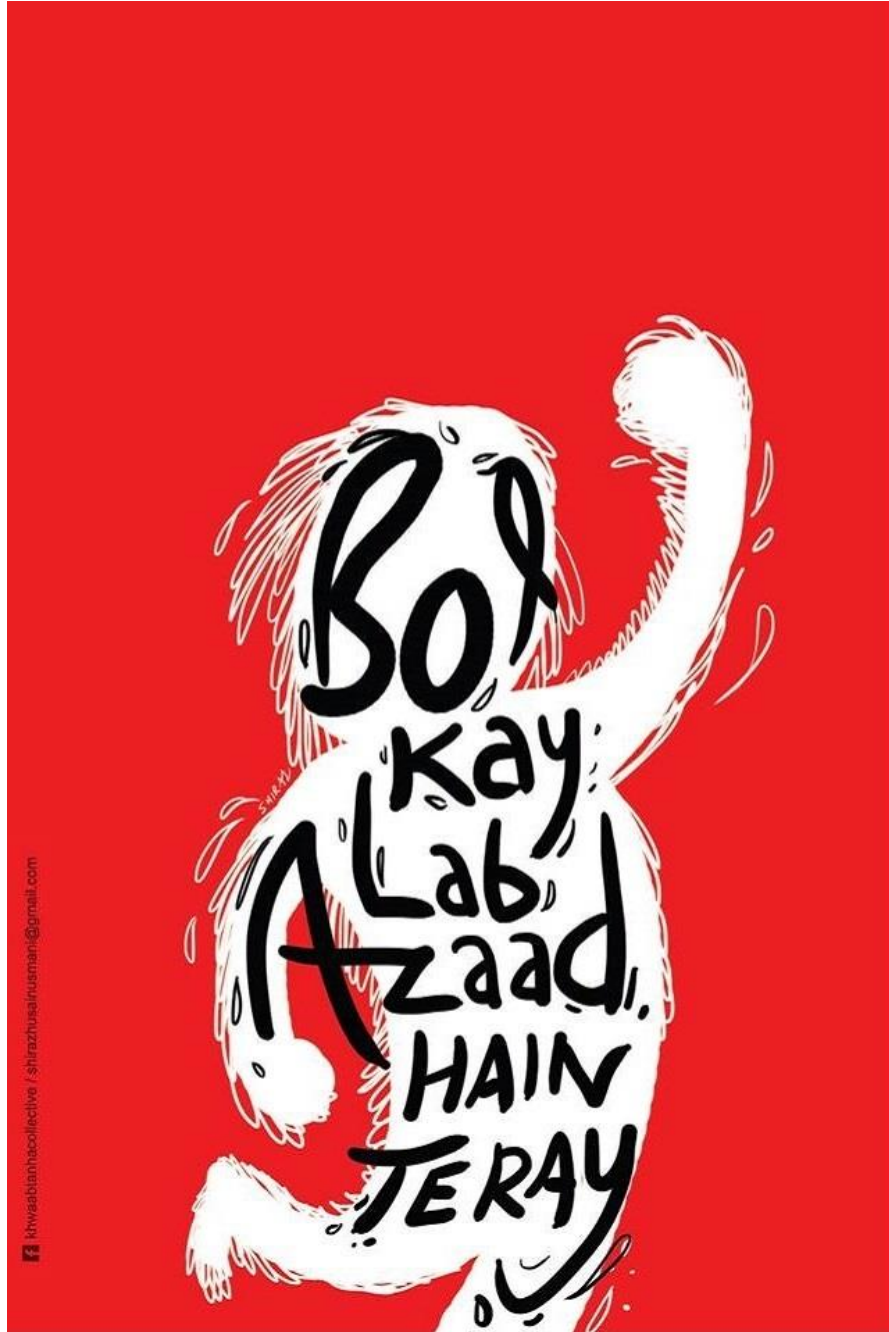
**Ismat Chughtai: Faced a court trial for 'obscenity' in her writings**



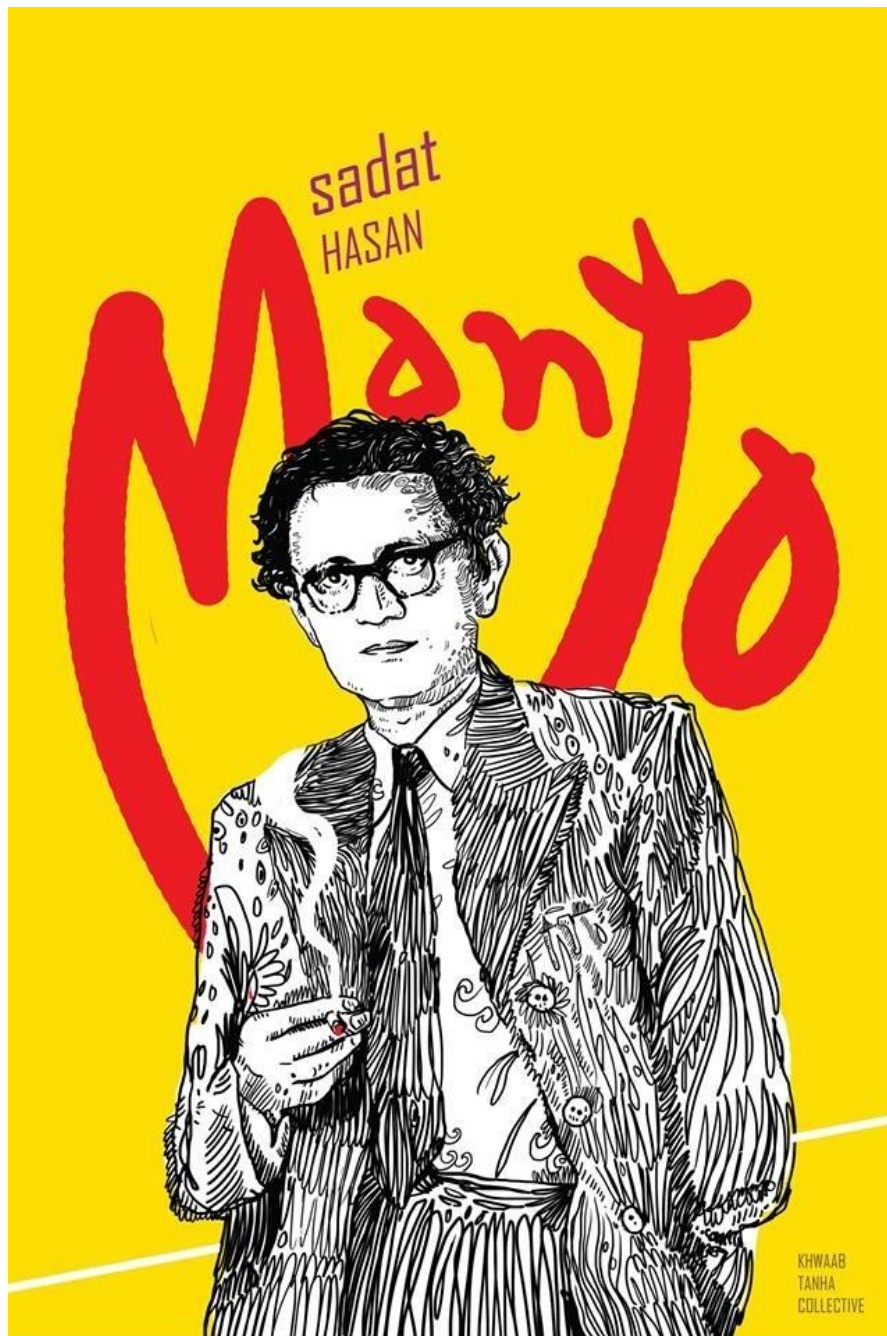


© KHWAABTANHCOLLECTIVE

Ramdhari Singh Dinkar



'Ecl', Nazm by Faiz Ahmed Faiz



**Saadat Hasan Manto: Arrested 6 times for 'obscenity' in Pakistan**



## Gender Through the Lens of the Arts

India Foundation for the Arts

*Four unique arts projects supported by India Foundation for the Arts (IFA) explore how power dynamics around gender play out in India. Through multimedia, dance, music and performance, these projects expand and disrupt the gender discourse through critical enquiries in myriad artistic forms. They fill some gaps and reveal voices from the margins that were lost, silenced or ignored.*



### Sultana's Reality by Afrah Shafiq

A multimedia artwork



In a series of videos, a fictional girl goes back in time to understand the early relationship between women and books. This artwork traces how middle-class women were introduced to books and how they avoided, read, hated, loved and eventually began to write in late colonial India. Afrah elicited these stories through her research at the archives of the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC).



কলকাতার নাচ ০ঃ সমকালীন নগরনৃত্য (Kolkata's Dance: Contemporary Urban Dance) by Aishika Chakraborty

A monograph



*She Said*, the last work of Ranjabati Sircar (Image Courtesy: Dancers' Guild, Image Credit: Rupam Gupta)

In the monograph 'কলকাতার নাচ ০ঃ সমকালীন নগরনৃত্য' (Kolkata's Dance: Contemporary Urban Dance), the histories of dancers Manjusri Chaki Sircar and Ranjabati Sircar are scripted to showcase the story of contemporary dance in Bengal. Their interventions initiated debates and re-examined issues of gender, the body and the idea of the nation, and critiqued patriarchy and the Natyashastra.

## Vithu Mazha—Songs of the Women Warikari Poets by Shruthi Vishwanath

### Compositions and performance



The lost abhangs of women warikari saints are unearthed, musically interpreted and rendered into performance by Shruthi Vishwanath. Abhangs are spiritual poems usually dedicated to the deity Vithoba or Vittala of Pandharpur, and sung in the regions of Maharashtra and north Karnataka. They are integral to the warikari pilgrimage and the warikari movement, which began in the late 13th century with the poet and saint Gnyaneshwar and continues to the present day. The poems, sung by composer and musician Shruthi Vishwanath in collaboration with other musicians, range in tone from absolute devotion to fierce rebellion.

## Akshayambara by Sharanya Ramprakash

A performance



*Akshayambara by Sharanya Ramprakash (Image Courtesy: Serendipity Arts Festival 2018)*

Drawing from research and personal experience, the performance Akshayambara imagines a reversal of roles in the popular Yakshagana plot of 'Draupadi Vastrapaharana'. A male artist in stree-vesha (female costume) plays the virtuous Draupadi and espouses the cause of women, while a woman, in a tradition-defying move, is attired in the pradhana purusha-vesha (masculine form) of Kaurava (a legendary king from the Mahabharata) who is driven by lust and power. Directed and performed by theatre practitioner Sharanya Ramprakash, this experimental play seeks to explore the conflicts around tradition, gender, power and morality inherent in the form of Yakshagana.

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This film is made by India Foundation for the Arts (IFA). IFA would like to acknowledge the support of grantees and their collaborators towards the making of this film.

Video courtesy: Artists, Scholars and IFA.

Music score: 'Fugdi' by Sakhubai.

Composed and sung by Shruthi Vishwanath.

Tabla: Shruteendra Katagade.

Recording, Mixing, Mastering: Vedanth Bharadwaj at SaMa Studios, Chennai.

## Contributors

**Afra Shafiq** received an Archival Fellowship from India Foundation for the Arts, in collaboration with the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC), made possible with support from Voltas Limited. Find more information on this IFA Fellowship [here](#).

**Aishika Chakraborty** received an Arts Research grant from India Foundation for the Arts, made possible with support from the Sir Ratan Tata Trusts. Find more information on this IFA grant [here](#).

**Ananya Vajpeyi** is an Indian academic and writer. She is Fellow and Associate Professor at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies, New Delhi. Read her full bio [here](#).

**Ayona Datta** is currently Reader in Urban Futures in King's College, London. Her research interests lie in the politics of urban transformations in the global south, with a particular focus on gender and citizenship in India. She is the author of *The Illegal City: Space, Law and Gender in a Delhi Squatter Settlement* (2012) and co-editor of *Translocal Geographies: Spaces, Places, Connections* (Ashgate, 2011) and *Mega-Urbanization in the Global South: Fast Cities and New Urban Utopias of the Postcolonial State* (Routledge, 2017). Ayona has authored over 30 articles in peer reviewed journals and produced/directed two films *City bypassed* and *City forgotten*. She maintains a personal blog, '[The city inside out](#)'. Prior to entering academia, Ayona worked as an architect in Delhi and London.

**Gita Jayaraj** is a freelance writer and editor with an interest in ritual, theatre, society, culture and gender. She is currently a PhD research scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at IIT-Madras and has an MPhil from the Centre of Linguistics and English, JNU, New Delhi. Some of her writings have been published in the *Outlook Magazine*, *Kafila*, *The Hindu*, *Times of India* and *The Wire*.

**Jhila Chattaraj** is an educator, poet and author. She works as an Assistant Professor at R.B.V.R.R Women's College, Department of English, Hyderabad. Jhila has authored two books: *Corporate Fiction: Popular Culture and the New Writers* (2018) by Prestige Books International and a poetry collection *When Lovers Leave and Poetry Stays* (2018), Authorspress, New Delhi. She is currently working on a book of interviews of young Indian poets.

**Kalpna Swaminathan's** detective Lalli has appeared in 8 novels including her most recent novel *Murder in Seven Acts* (Speaking Tiger, 2018).

**मंगलेश डबराल** एक प्रमुख हिंदी कवी हैं। वह कई कविता संग्रहों के लेखक हैं जिनमें *पहाड़ पर लालटेन*, *हम जो देखते हैं*, *आवाज भी एक जगह है* और *नये युग में शत्रु* शामिल हैं। इसके अतिरिक्त इनके दो गद्य संग्रह *लेखक की रोटी* और *कवि का अकेलापन* भी प्रकाशित हो चुके हैं। दिल्ली हिन्दी अकादमी के साहित्यकार सम्मान, कुमार विकल स्मृति पुरस्कार और अपनी सर्वश्रेष्ठ रचना *हम जो देखते हैं* के लिए साहित्य अकादमी द्वारा सन् २००० में साहित्य अकादमी पुरस्कार से सम्मानित मंगलेश डबराल की ख्याति अनुवादक के रूप में भी है।

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



**Michelle D’costa** has poems published in *Visual Verse*, *The Madras Courier*, *The Sunflower Collective*, *The Bombay Literary Magazine*, *The Bangalore Review* and more. Her debut collection of poems is forthcoming from Curato this year.

**Orijit Sen** is a graphic artist, cartoonist, muralist and designer. He is the author of several works of graphic fiction and non-fiction including the graphic novel *River of Stories*. 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.

**Pariplab Chakraborty** is a Delhi-based independent artist and documentary filmmaker. He is a media graduate from the University of Calcutta. Recently he painted portraits of women farmers during the Kisan Mukti March and made a series of paintings on the trauma of the Babri Masjid Demolition. Previously he worked on two independent documentaries on the forced migration of Malhar community in Jharkhand and the geopolitical crisis of Dukpa community of Buxa-Tiger reserve located in North Bengal’s Indo-Bhutan Border region. He is currently working with *The Wire* as a cartoonist/illustrator.

**Priya Sarukkai Chabria** is a poet, writer and translator. Her books include speculative fiction, cross-genre non-fiction, a novel, two poetry collections and translations of Tamil mystic Andal’s songs and an anthology of translated poems edited by her.

**Saheli Khastagir** is a Delhi-based painter, writer and development/ research professional.

**Saikat Majumdar** is the author of two novels: *Silverfish* (2007) and the widely acclaimed *The Firebird* (2015). He has also published a book of non-fiction, *College: Pathways of Possibility* (2018) and a book of literary criticism, *Prose of the World* (2013). He lives in Delhi and teaches literature and creative writing at the Ashoka University.

**Salil Chaturvedi** writes short fiction and poetry in English and Hindi. He was the winner of the Wordweavers Poetry Contest 2015, the Asian region winner of the Commonwealth Short Story Competition, 2008, and the Unisun/British Council Short Story Competition 2007. He has brought out two poetry collections—*In The Sanctuary Of A Poem*, and *Ya Ra La Va Sha Sa Ha* (in Hindi), both available on Amazon.

**Sanaaz Davood Zadeh Far** is an Iranian poet and artist. She began her artistic career with theatre and has received many awards in this field. Her first poetry collection *I walk on dead words* has been translated into Arabic, French, Spanish, and English. Zadeh’s poems have also been published in several Iranian, Arab and other international newspapers.

**Sarover Zaidi** has studied philosophy & social anthropology. She has extensively worked on religious architecture and urban space in the cities of Bombay and Delhi. She has previously worked on rural public health, women’s rights and poverty issues across India, and currently works on material cultures, Islamic iconography, and modernist architecture. Besides this she curates an interdisciplinary forum on art, architecture and anthropology, ‘Elementary forms and the city’ and also co-runs a blog on Delhi called Chiragh Dilli (<https://chiraghdilli.wordpress.com>). She has taught at the School of Planning and Architecture, and currently teaches at the Jindal School of Art and Architecture, Sonapat.

**Sharanya Ramprakash** received an Arts Practice grant from India Foundation for the Arts, made possible with part support from Voltas Limited. Find more information on this IFA grant [here](#).

**Shiraz Husain** is a multidisciplinary visual artist. He is a musician and a practitioner of free-hand drawing and graphic design. Husain is also a founder member of the Khwaab Tanha Collective which celebrates Urdu/Hindi literature through visual cultures. He is currently working on a children's book on Mirza Ghalib. Shiraz had also taught in the department of Applied Arts, Jamia Millia Islamia and curates the Saiyidain Manzil Sessions.

**Shruthi Vishwanath** received an Arts Practice grant from India Foundation for the Arts. Find more information on this IFA grant [here](#).

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