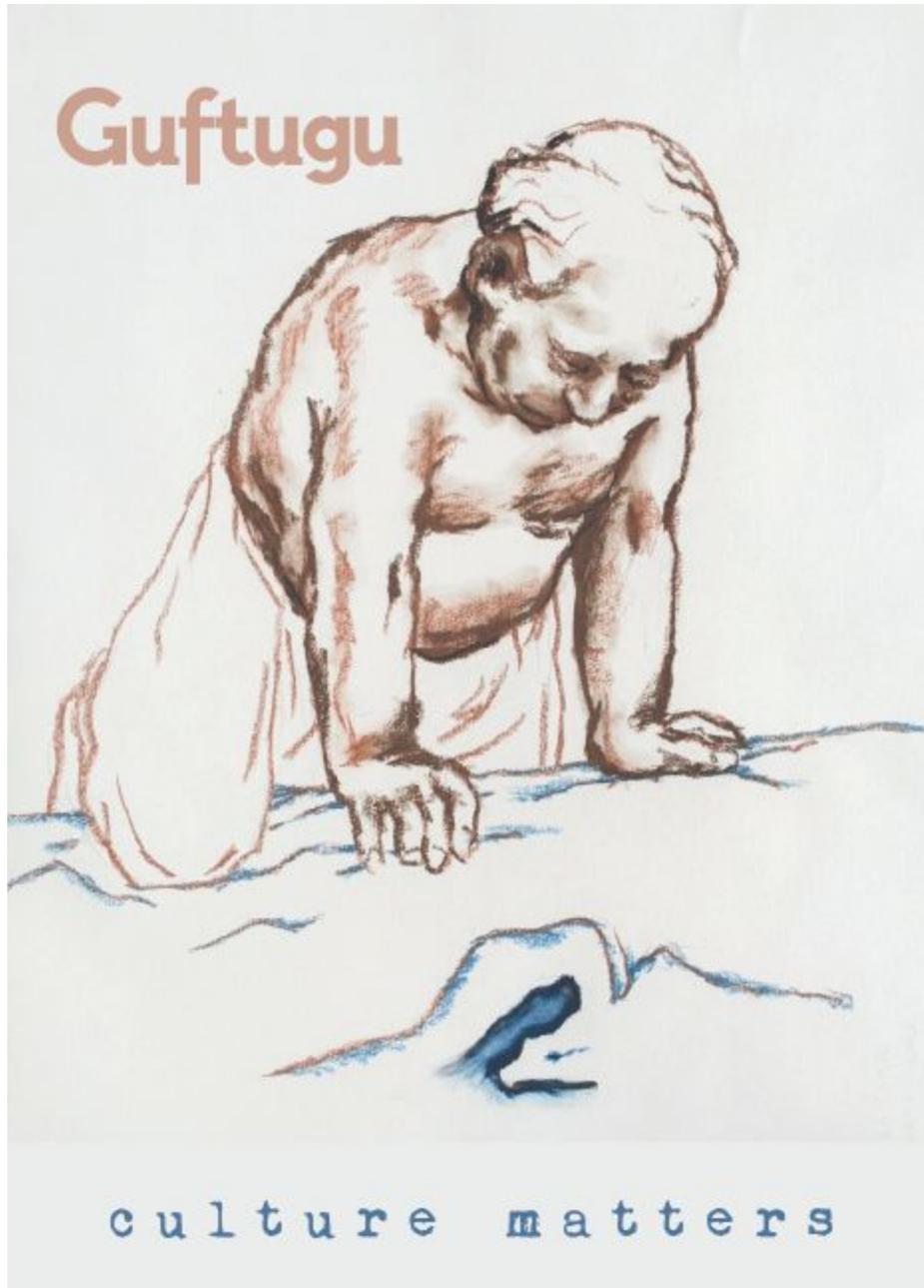


April 2020



Sudhir Patwardhan, 'The High Bed', Pastel on Paper, 30x22 inches, 2016

About Us

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

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

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

To sum up our vision:

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

Past issues of *Guftugu* can be downloaded as PDFs. Downloads of issues are for private reading only.

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From the Editors

Cultural Resistance from We the People



Arpana Caur, 'Do Ghaz Zameen', earth, painted canvas, lanterns and fibreglass cover on the grave, 6.5×3.5×2 ft, 2014

For years now, 71 years to be precise, the cultural community of India has spoken for equality among all citizens; has fought for freedom of speech; and practised, through language, poetry, song, novel, theatre and film, cultural diversity.

For the last few years, five years, since 2014 to be precise, our voices have had to work harder. We have had to be more insistent about our common legacy.



Video courtesy [Karwan-e-Mohabbat](#) and [Newsclick](#)

A gem from this common legacy: On 26 January, 1950, the Indian people — a diverse population that had fought for independence from colonial rule — decided what kind of Republic they wanted to build; what kind of national, collective life they wanted to live. They made promises to themselves through a constitution, and the most fundamental, of these promises made up the Preamble:

“WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens:

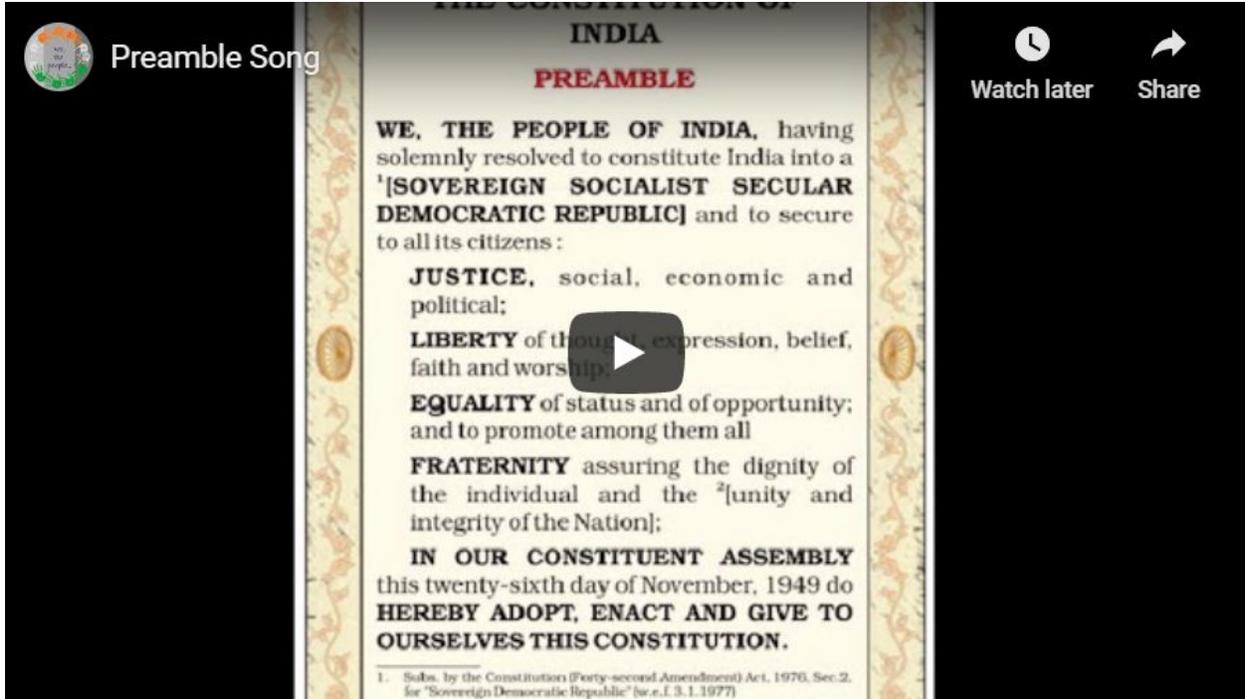
JUSTICE, social, economic and political;

LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith, and worship;

EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all

FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation;

IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this 26th day of November 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION”.



Video courtesy [We, The People Abhiyan](#)

The Preamble makes no compromises with the principles India lives by, and no Indian should. If there is a political party, or a government, or an ideology that makes a mockery of these principles, we have to resist. And this is what our brothers and sisters across the nation have done, every day. This is what they — we the people — continue to do.

Guftugu has been one eloquent drop in this powerful, surging ocean.

K. Satchidanandan

Githa Hariharan

January 2020

Singing in Dark Times

Shanta Gokhale



I have taken the title of my talk from Bertolt Brecht's 'Motto' to the poems he wrote while in exile in Denmark. Again, as we all know, there is more to the four-line 'Motto' than these four words. Brecht's idea is not only that there will be singing in dark times, but there will be singing about the dark times. But it is important to concentrate on the four words of the title first, because they remind us that, in our country where so many social ages and artistic practices live together side-by-side, much of the singing we hear is not about the dark times at all. The loudest songs we hear are often about how bright the times are.

Shubha Mudgal, who thinks the times are dark, has signed an open letter to the PM to say so. Consequently she, along with her 48 co-signatories, is likely to be charged with sedition. To underline how divisive the times are in which we live, let me return to 1999. That was the year Mudgal released an album of monsoon songs, titled 'Ab ke Saawan'. One of her three lyricists for the album was Prasoon Joshi, screenwriter, poet, advertising man and the chairperson of the Central Board of Film Certification.

So what was 1999 like that these two artists could make music together quite happily? It was a time when the shock of December 6, 1992 had settled into a grudging resignation to a future in which the RSS and the BJP would have a loud say in national matters. But the face of the two

organisations we saw at the time was Atal Bihari Vajpayee's. It was a moderate, reasonable, conciliatory face. Although as PM, he failed to rein in his younger colleague's supervision of the 2002 massacre in Gujarat, only mildly reminding him of Ramrajya, artistic expression was not more adversely impacted in his time than in any other before him. Nor had the word sedition entered the lexicon of public discourse. The social media revolution that allowed vicious trolls to roam free under assumed names was still 11 years away and private satellite TV news channels, were only six years old, and neither partisan nor viciously belligerent, at least partly because Vajpayee was not interested in deepening existing social fault lines and ideological differences into poison-filled chasms of hatred and division.

This was the time when Mudgal and Joshi created music together. The content of the lyrics Mudgal sang fell neatly into the traditional mould. They were about the rain, the wet chunariya, the drenched tann, mann, the gathering ghata and the pehli barkha of the pehla pyaar. This was familiar ground for Joshi. But it was something of a rebellion for Mudgal. While the album catapulted her to the top of the popularity charts and she became a celebrity, in Mumbai's vibrant classical music culture, a loud buzz of bigots arose, disapproving her lively foray into Indipop. It had taken courage and a strong belief in pluralism to make that foray. Through the album Mudgal had said loudly and clearly, that music was music. No form was high and none low. Her lyricist on the other hand had made no such statement in composing a song about the monsoon rain. So it comes as no surprise that today, when we are encouraged to look at one another with suspicion and the safest bet is to sing paeans of praise to the PM, Mudgal has been labelled seditious and Joshi has become famous, or infamous depending on how you look at it, as the obsequious interviewer of the nation's top honcho.

In 2003, the year in which Habib Tanvir had been attacked in Madhya Pradesh, and four years after Mudgal had cocked a snook at Hindustani music pundits, I attended the launch of a book of new bandishes, composed by one of our most loved and respected Hindustani classical vocalists. I bought the book eagerly and flipped through its pages only to find the usual suspects there — the blue god, Radha, gopis filling water by the Yamuna, the evil mother-in-law and sister-in-law, and the pardesi who neither returns home nor writes a single chitthi to his lovelorn beloved. Different raagas and different beats maybe, but the same language and the same themes. Around the time when this book of new compositions was launched with much fanfare in the hermetic world of Hindustani music, elsewhere in the city, Shubha Mudgal and Neela Bhagwat had sung the same song, on different platforms and on different days. The song was Kabir's 'Sadho dekho jag baurana'. For the author of the new bandishes, the world had not gone mad. And if it had, it was not her business to sing about it. That would be defiling the sacred performance space she occupied. Her listeners would have been shocked too if she had dared disturb their peace with news of the outside world. They were the paying majority, invested with the power to dictate terms to the artist. The mutually agreed terms of engagement here were simple: Tradition good, questioning bad.

As Emily Dickinson says in her short poem about the majority:

'Tis the majority / In this, as all, prevails. / Assent, and you are sane; / Demur, — you're straightway dangerous, / And handled with a chain."

TM Krishna has discovered the price of demurring. He has been barred from several platforms here and abroad. Krishna rang the first warning bell against the establishment of Karnatik music with his 560-page scholarly tome, *A Southern Music: The Karnatik Story*. It reminded me of Narayan Surve's poem addressed to the Marathi literary elite, 'I am not alone, the age is with me too / Beware! The storm is about to break over you / I am a worker, a flashing sword / High literature I'm planning a crime against your word.' Krishna's book challenges the total system of practice, performance and consumption in which Karnatik music operates. In chapter after chapter he shows us its claustrophobic nature, managed and dominated by the Brahmin cultural elite. The 'caging of art' as he calls it, begins in the classroom where students are taught that the music they are learning is not just music, but 'Hindu-Brahmin-music'. On the concert platform music is to be seen as faith and faith as music. Says Krishna scathingly, 'Listening to Karnatik music is not mere exposure to the music; it is a complete Brahmin brainwashing package.'

The Brahmins of Chennai naturally bristled when the book came out. The singer whom they had been used to speaking of as talented had suddenly sprouted contrary opinions and needed to be chastised. Perhaps he was not a talented singer at all. Perhaps he was a charlatan only looking for publicity. But what could this system do to an artist who was himself about to abandon it? In 2015 Krishna quit the December music season in Chennai, the platform on which musicians from home and abroad vie to perform. His reasons for doing so seemed strikingly similar to the ones that had made Badal Sircar move from the proscenium stage to community halls and parks. Sircar wanted to and did create a free un-ticketed theatre that he took directly to the people. His intent was political. It was to engage people in spaces where performers and audience were on one level, where theatre could be used to inform them of who their enemies were and how they operated. Sircar was doing what the revolutionary balladeer Sambhaji Bhagat was saying in his popular song:

'Inko dhyan se dekho re bhai / Inki surat pehchano re bhai'.

Four decades later, Krishna took Karnatik music to a fishing village. He won the Ramon Magsaysay award in recognition of 'his forceful commitment as artist and advocate to art's power to heal India's deep social divisions.' The Hindu Right spewed venom. One of its many bloggers wrote: 'Attempts by the likes of Krishna are divisive and these attempts get awarded by agencies with an ulterior motive of seeing India divided and broken.' This is a familiar tune. To say that an unjustly divided society is unjustly divided, is to divide the nation. To actually

divide the nation is to unite the nation. Unfortunately the Magsaysay award doesn't go to dividers, even when they erect a monumental statue and call it the statue of unity.

In theatre there was once Habib Tanvir who ruffled the same feathers that Krishna has done. To the best of my knowledge, so far Krishna has not been physically attacked. Habib saab was. We had heard the same tune then that was played when Krishna won the Magsaysay award. Uma Bharati, in full support of the right-wing fanatics responsible for the attack, accused Tanvir of spreading communalism through his plays, chiefly a folk play called 'Ponga Pandit'. How was the play supposed to be spreading communalism? By showing a jamadarin outwitting a temple priest. How dare she not know her place? Unfortunately, this concept of human rights has put the time out of joint for the Right. The trampled and the oppressed are no longer willing to just lie down and die. There is a documentary film titled *18 Feet*, scripted, directed and edited by filmmaker Renjith Kuzhur. It is about a band of dalit musicians in Kerala who are bringing back and popularising the traditional songs of their community. The title of the film, *18' Feet*, refers to the distance dalits were once expected to maintain from caste Hindus in order not to pollute them. The camera in this film is not brahminical. It mingles with the musicians on stage, in their homes and during rituals, on terms of unforced equality and warm affection. In the process, it tells a counter-story to the one told by the title of the film. While caste always gets brushed under the carpet today, it has shown up in many ways in the band members' lives. Caste is therefore never too far from their conversations with each other in the film. Remesh, a bus conductor and the co-founder and leader of the band, is the son of a man who was once bought by a local landlord along with many other dalits. Remesh asks his father, 'How can anybody buy human beings as if they were inanimate objects?' The father has a simple explanation. 'A landlord needs serfs to work on his land. He has the money. So he buys them.' The father belongs to a generation that didn't ask questions. Remesh asks many. Out of that questioning comes confidence. He tells the younger members of his band, 'Black is strength. Don't deny who you are. Hold your head high and say you are a Pariah.'

Uma Bharati would approve of Remesh's father. But she would call Remesh divisive.

Theatre in Maharashtra is riddled with those who believe that the times have at last passed from dark to bright. Unto us a son is born and we shall be saved, they sing. After two incidents in Mumbai and Pune designed to warn theatre people against transgression, Jayant Pawar, one of our leading playwrights and an award-winning short fiction writer, wrote an open letter addressed to his friends and colleagues in theatre, condemning the events. The first instance that he recorded happened when Jana Natya Manch performed 'Tathagat' at the Harkat Studio in Andheri. Two CID cops turned up there, took pictures of the set, made inquiries about Sudhanva Deshpande, asked about the nature of the play, asked the manager of the studio why he had permitted such a play to be performed at his venue, took pictures of the people waiting

to buy tickets, barged into the auditorium, stood at the door through the play and then left. The message was clear. You are suspects. We are watching you. So you better watch out.

A similar message was sent out in the second incident. The group Qissa Kothi was scheduled to perform its play 'Ravidas Romeo and Juliet Devi' in Pune. Two policemen visited their hotel in the early hours of the morning looking for Yash Khan, a member of the group. They examined his ID proof, wanted to know how the other members of the group knew him, searched through their belongings and properties and left. They did not have a search warrant. As a result of this targeting, Pawar says, 'An ordinary youngster who manages the backstage operations of a small theatre group as well as his family will forever live in terror.'

I asked Pawar how his colleagues had responded to his letter. He said with silence. He then told me that the celebrated actor Vikram Gokhale's response to the news of the open letter written to the PM on July 29 by 49 celebrities was to write an article titled "They should be soundly thrashed". However, Gokhale was rather disturbed by Pawar's letter and vowed to take it up immediately with the concerned minister. That happened to be Maharashtra's CM. So Gokhale did nothing except maintain a judicious silence. Pawar who comes from a textile mill background has taken on the mafia of politicians-builders-corporates in his own work. He has felt empowered to do so at least partly I think because he is a caste Hindu and therefore not a born target of the Right.

This does not hold true for another fine Marathi playwright-director, Shafaat Khan. He is a Muslim and therefore fundamentally suspect. He has written a long article about the years when he fell silent, unable to write. 'Sadho dekho jag baurana' is exactly how he saw the absurdities of the late eighties when leaders carried swords, wore crowns and rode automobiles converted into raths. Khan wrote in the article, 'When the Babri Masjid was demolished, my heart sank. I felt the first intimations of something drastic and terrible that was about to happen. It depressed me to realise that I had not been aware enough of the rehearsals that had preceded the tragic scenes of burnings and killings that were being staged on the streets of Mumbai. We had known riots earlier but what was happening now was on a different scale altogether. I locked myself up at home and tried to write. I wrote in bits and pieces that would not cohere into a play. I found myself unable to write about what was happening outside, and unable to write about anything else. So I decided to give up on theatre. I simply stopped writing.'

It was only three years later, in 1995 that Khan saw a glimmer of hope for himself. He was persuaded by a director friend to do what he had been avoiding doing for all these years. He attended a play-reading. The play was Asghar Wajahat's *Jis Lahore Nahi Dekhya*. Somehow, listening to the play released all the knots in Khan's writing process and he found himself writing. He wrote *Rahile Door Ghar Majhe* (My home is left far behind), an adaptation of Wajahat's play, which went on to become a hit on the Marathi stage.

Artists have often suffered this kind of despair in dark times and contemplated putting a full stop to their singing. Poets in particular have questioned the efficacy of their work when action rather than words seem to be called for. Often they have found reassurance in what other poets have said. Some poets have recorded their debt to the lines in Auden's tribute to WB Yeats. The lines which end the tribute are,

'For poetry makes nothing happen: it survives / A way of happening, a mouth.'

Even to survive in dark times is to win. And a mouth that is ready to speak out is as important as hands that act. Brecht's poem 'To Those Born Later' poses a question that troubles many of us in repressive times:

'What kinds of time are they, when / A talk about trees is almost a crime / Because it implies silence about so many horrors?'

Brecht himself answers the question in his poem, 'In Dark Times'. It is a clever poem in which he intersperses the lyric poet's usual themes about trees and children, rivers and women with lines referring to the horrors of the time. At the end he says, referring to future generations,

'They won't say times were dark / Rather, why were their poets silent?'

In my Marathi novel *Tya Varshi*, translated in English as *Crowfall*, I had wanted to explore how art could respond to the violence that had gripped the country and the world. This novel was written two years after the 2002 Gujarat bloodbath. Two pieces of writing guided me then — an article by an Iraqi ceramicist Nuha al-Radi and Mathew Arnold's poem 'Dover Beach'. In her article al-Radi says that she had expected her well-known book, *Baghdad Diaries*, to make some difference to America's attitude towards her country and its citizens. But that did not happen. America attacked Iraq a second time. This time around she says, she simply put her head down, did her work, hoped that she would survive the bombing while attempting to preserve some shreds of humanity in herself. 'Dover Beach' told me how this could be done. Arnold speaks of his despair at the ebbing of faith in the world. He means of course religious faith. But to me it was faith in the principles of equality, liberty and brotherhood. The lines from 'Dover Beach' that I related to most were:

'Ah, love, let us be true / To one another! for the world, which seems / To lie before us like a land of dreams, / So various, so beautiful, so new, / Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light, / Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain; / And we are here as on a darkling plain / Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight, / Where ignorant armies clash by night.'

And so, my novel revolves around a group of artist friends, unsentimental, truth-seeking, bound by mutual respect and affection, working out their individual ways to respond to the surrounding violence.

However overwhelmed the writer is by despair, her choice can never be between writing and not writing. Perumal Murugan tried to stop writing, but could not help composing 40 poems during his self-imposed exile. Writers write because they must. They have no way of shedding their lifelong habit of working with words. So the question is not whether to write, but how to write, particularly when times are dark. One way perhaps is to strike the enemy from within. One of the cheekiest plays on the Marathi stage, *Shivaji Underground in Bhimnagar Mohalla*, has done precisely that.

In Maharashtra, the political party that has named itself after Shivaji the warrior king, has ignored every other quality of that wise and generous ruler except his campaigns against Aurangzeb, turning them ahistorically into a Hindu-Muslim battle aimed at establishing a Hindu rajya. Three men from disparate backgrounds came together to write this play that challenged this narrative and liberated Shivaji from his devotees' clutches. The three men who made the play were Sambhaji Bhagat, a dalit activist and revolutionary balladeer, Rajkumar Tangde a farmer from Jalna, one of Maharashtra's most backward districts and Nandu Madhav, the actor who discovered Tangde when he saw his play *Aakda* on the State drama competition circuit and brought it to Mumbai. *Aakda* was about farmers being compelled to steal power in order to survive, sometimes at risk to their lives. The play was performed in near darkness to give the urban audience a taste of the villagers' lives.

Shivaji Underground in Bhimnagar Mohalla had a hilarious cover story about Yama being sent down to earth to fetch Shivaji along with his ideas. Shivaji forgets to bring his ideas, so he is allowed to go back to earth to get them, leaving his turban behind with Yama as surety. But Shivaji hoodwinks Yama and goes underground in Bhimnagar. Yama comes down with the turban looking for him. The head that the turban will fit is Shivaji's. The turban fits nobody. This forms a running gag in the play. The play ends with a sawal-jawab competition between the dalit shahir and the Shivaji bhakt party's shahir. Both sides are to sing Shivaji's praises. The bhakts have nothing more to say than how brave he was and how the corn was plentiful and golden in his time. The dalit shahir on the other hand extols Shivaji's policies regarding women, caste, religion, agriculture and revenue. It is a contest between myth and history in which the Bhimnagar shahir wins hands down. On the day of the first show of the play, Sambhaji Bhagat and his boys were positioned outside the theatre, all set to face disruption by the police and/or political hoods. After all, the play was about Shivaji, the holiest of holy cows in Maharashtra. But nothing happened. Strategy had won. For who could object to a play in which Shivaji was lauded for virtues nobody had ever even heard of?

A complex work of art stumps Rightist regimes. Complexity requires subtle thinking. Their way is to win by appealing to people's sentiments. And nothing is more sentimental than the idea of patriotism. Patriotism is love for the land, never for its people. In our country, love is slyly turned into worship. Worship is made concrete with a symbol. The symbol is a goddess, white skinned, wearing white or orange and bearing the national flag. With such a beautiful goddess,

what a divine thing patriotism becomes. It puts into your hands a powerful trishul to stab doubters with.

Shaw has something scathing to say about patriotism in his play, *O'Flaherty V. C.* 'You'll never have a quiet world till you knock the patriotism out of the human race.' The play subverts the whole notion of courage in war by depicting its protagonist O'Flaherty as a slob of a soldier more afraid of running away from the battlefield than staying on and fighting.

The battle of reason against unreason cannot be fought with simple answers. Artists repeatedly assert that it is not their job to offer solutions but to raise questions. The finest writers also attempt to raise such questions as will allow their work to cross the boundaries of time and space and make sense to future generations. Chilean playwright Ariel Dorfman's harrowing play *Death and the Maiden*, was written a few years after Pinochet's rule had ended. During the terrible 17 years of that rule, Chileans had been mercilessly tortured and punished for the slightest hint of rebellious expression. Dorfman's protagonist Paulina has also been tortured and raped by a doctor. Only her husband knows about this. Although those dark times have passed, she is still gripped by fear. A man, whose car has accidentally broken down, comes to their door in the night seeking shelter. She hears his voice and is instantly convinced that he was her tormentor. Sentiment would require that she be allowed to have her revenge. People who have bayed for the blood of rapists in our country, have been unable and unwilling to consider capital punishment in its larger implications. Dorfman stands back from this demand for revenge and looks at the problem in the context of his country's future. He makes Paulina's husband a lawyer in charge of investigating the deaths of dissidents under Pinochet's regime. The husband must therefore defend the man in his living room against his wife's anger and need for revenge. Dorfman says in an article written on the occasion of the play's revival in London 20 years later, 'The husband had to do this because, without the rule of law, the transition to democracy would be compromised.' Then he adds, 'But one does not create such a transgressive play in a country still reeling from many years of pain without suffering the consequences oneself. My compatriots hated what I had done and reviled it.'

Consequences come with transgressive action. Abhishek Majumdar's play *The Djinn of Eidgah* is complex and layered like all his plays. But for the police who stopped its staging in Jaipur recently, its complexity was the artist's business. As far as they were concerned, his play was about not Kashmir alone but the people of Kashmir. Now that was transgression because he not only treated the people with sympathy but to add insult to injury, he examines the attitudes and actions of Indian security personnel in Kashmir. For this and other such transgressions, the Bengaluru police have prepared a dossier on him and occasionally call him in for a friendly chat.

I once questioned Habib saab about not providing solutions to the questions he raised in his plays. His answer was, 'The moment you say things out clearly and produce answers your

audience says thank you, nice evening, goes home, has dinner and sleeps. Also there is no single answer to a question. If you incite them with a disturbing question, there may be more answers than you thought of.' In street theatre you take immediate problems and produce answers, because there are answers. But even street theatre can be artistic. Safdar Hashmi went back to straight theatre to make his nukkad natak more stimulating; also to get his actors to give more rounded performances. He was a rare fellow, imaginative, open-minded, always ready to learn. He was the only person who wrote a sensitive critical appreciation of my play *Hirma ki Amar Kahani*.

I asked Habib saab about this problematic play in which he seemed to suggest that feudalism was a good thing. He said, 'Safdar talked to me at length about this dilemma. He came on several evenings to watch the rehearsals and saw the show at least three times before he wrote about it.' He said the play does present a dilemma with no solution. My dilemma was this — that democracy, though desirable, has a propensity to turn into fascism. And yet democracy is more acceptable than dictatorship. But feudalism, no matter how condemnable and exploitative, has its own silver lining. It has supported the arts, not just classical but folk arts. It can teach us something even about administration. So there is a dilemma, and I have left it at that in *Hirma....*

I told Habib saab that many artists in troubled times feel there is no point in writing poetry or fiction or plays. Artists wish their work could be seen to change society to make it worthwhile. In this context I wanted to know from him if he felt his work had changed anything at all. He said, 'Yes and no. Art never changes society. It cannot be the vehicle of change. But art, particularly theatre, does something very precious. It paves the way for change, it affects opinions, it opens up minds. I think my work has had its effect in the sense that I have revived some dying arts and caused ripples to spread.'

Finally he had this to say about singing in dark times about dark times: 'The worst society often produces the best of art,' he said. 'Art is always anti-establishment. It is like the hilsa of Dacca. The Bangladeshis are proud of theirs. They say it is better than the Hooghly hilsa. I ask them why — it is the same hilsa. They say no. The Hooghly hilsa goes with the current. Ours goes against the current so it is tougher and sweeter. Art goes against the current to flourish.' At this point he took a light drag on his pipe and said very thoughtfully, 'You almost wish for a bad society if you want art to flourish!'

This is the text of the 26th Safdar Hashmi Memorial Lecture delivered by Shanta Gokhale at New Delhi's Studio Safdar at Shadi Khampur.

Text © Shanta Gokhale.

The Black Panther

Zai Whitaker



Photograph by David Raju | Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

It is the monsoon time of year and stiff sharp winds shoot through the Grass Hills, eastern offshoot of the Highway mountain chain in the Western Ghats. Like arrows they pierce the waist-high grass, bending the silky tassels and making neat furrows like carefully parted hair. Bending and straightening as the wind dies down or suddenly surges forth, the gyrating grass brings life into the rock promontories which keep quiet watch on the dungeon of mist and fog hovering over the froth of a stormy river.

The boy takes his fishing rod and walks down to the stream which skirts his cabin. It is a simple bamboo rod: he has an iconoclast's distaste for the fibreglass ones which are widely advertised. Reaching the rushing white water, he hides behind a tall grass clump and with a gentle flick, casts upstream into the epicentre of the current. The swift billows of water take the line just past the big boulder where the fish like to crouch with stealthy patience. Flicking their tails to keep their balance in the swirling water, they wait for a grasshopper dislodged from the bank, or crabs drifting by. The boy, huddled over his knees, feels a tug at the bait. A fat rainbow trout

hesitates, then darts forward and is hooked; Stephen will not be able to land it where he is because of the boulders and overhanging vines so he steps into the shallows. He pulls in the line, hands working like pistons: and jumps on the fish which is flopping about on the grass. He dislodges the hook and jabs his thumb down the trout's throat — avoiding the sharp teeth — and jerks the head up. He hears the crack of the vertebrae, Krrk. The fish shivers once and is dead.

Wet shoes and jeans ooze water. He takes his pocket knife and slices the fish open, pulls out the guts in one adroit movement of thumb and forefinger. Stripping a frond of silver-green bracken he stuffs it into the empty cavity to prevent rot. He leaves the fish in the shade, tail in the water for coolness, and continues to fish.

An hour later he is back in his cabin, picking the flaky white meat off the fine ivory skeleton with the serrated contraption on his pocket knife. He pumps the brass primus stove to make a cup of black coffee, changes into dry jeans stiffened by rain and sun. He lifts from an open tin trunk a pair of earphones, arcs them around his head and plugs the jack into the beeping receiver which he carries to the door. Turning away from the wind, he pulls out the antenna, cues in the receiver. He listens. High-pitched, peevisish shreds of sound prick the air and Stephen's eyes soften with gentleness. He speaks to the wind. "Evita. She's back. Thank God." Returning the tracking device to its tin home, slinging binoculars around his back, scooping up a weather-proof notebook, he's off.

He follows the curved, bracken-fringed path which loops in and out along the stream, then strikes off into a grove of gnarled rhododendrons. Behind him on the eastern frill of ridges the sun is hurling yellow and orange beams on the grasslands but early clouds block the colour. This is the season of high rushing streams and thick ground fog, the only time of year when elephants come to the mountain grasslands. The cloud cover gives them safety and thrice, Stephen has suddenly come upon one as a cloud bank moved, startling both boy and animal.

Evita's den faces the east and she sits in the entrance immobile as black stone. The sun lights up her ebony jacket with sequins of fire. There are gold nuggets in her eyes, a look of deep dreams as her two kittens draw milk with kneading caresses of their soft small paws. Now and then she looks up into the hide where Stephen is writing his notes, green arrows flashing in her eyes. He has almost finished his PhD field work and is the only biologist in the world who has been able to study the rare, melanistic form of leopard in this remote highland habitat. He may also be the last because poachers are after them for the almost unbelievable price of their skin. Apart from the regular fashion industry, rich and powerful African tribal leaders covet them as part of their ceremonial attire.

Stephen has hundreds of hours of observations, many of them about Evita's life as it is now, when she is raising her second litter. One, a runt, has died and he watched her carry the scrawny rough corpse to a depression behind the cave, drape it gently over a grass patch and roar her mourning into the afternoon winds.

Watching her, and feeling her watching him, he feels ennobled, touched with grace. He reads in Evita's eyes messages of comfort, imagines she is directing him from the depths of her panther soul, core of one being to the core of another. Writing his notes, working his stop-watch, raising and lowering binoculars, his mind re-creates its usual triangle of connection between Evita, the child Stephen, and his mother as she sat in their Springfield home twenty years ago.

Dad had left him and driven away with Juliet, Mother's best friend. This was called divorce, he learned. He'd waved but Stephen, sensing perfidy, fisted his hands in his pockets. Mother wouldn't leave the kitchen and wept for days before they took her to the sanatorium. When she came home again her eyes had changed, transmogrified to hard stones set in skin the colour of fading newspaper. Dad had left him and taken away, in a sense, Mother as well.

But Evita's eyes are mother-eyes.

She is waiting for Raol to come with meat; by now her flanks show in sharp angles from weeks of hunger: and were there marks of tabefaction in the crinkles of her forehead? Still looking into the mind of the boy she moves away from the kittens who have finished their meal. The boy is beginning to resent the dilettante ways of her mate, who comes and goes with the careless freedom of a truck-driver. She deserves better. Now she hears him coming, points her ears forward: Stephen moves in his hide and snatches the camera trigger in readiness to record the encounter. She moves forward on her haunches, waiting, and Raol appears but his worst macho tendencies surface and dropping the barking deer, he springs up on a stubby rhododendron and sharpens his claws on the deeply fissured bark. She dare not go for the meat but must wait for him to offer it.

His mind remembers the times after the abandoning with the clarity of a film strip. "You're the man of the family now, you'll look after me won't you?" She asked this again and again with sobs in her voice and eyes. He knew he had to, because it was all his fault, he knew it from the way Dad had looked at him. He'd wanted so many times to ask her this, clarify the guilt once for all, but never had the courage.

When Raol enters the den she crawls to him submissively, licks his face, purring, nudges at the meat in his mouth. But he pushes her away, turns to face Stephen's hide and stares thoughtfully ahead as if trying to remember something. It takes Evita a long time to cajole and humour him into surrendering the meat and the boy, sharing her humiliation, wishes to punish him. The anger of many years has seeped into his bones like bitter resin.

The monsoon leaves the High wadies, and the elephants leave the high hills to return to their deciduous habitat in the plains where flowering bamboo awaits them. Soft new tahr fawns wobble jerkily after their mothers as the big males — saddlebacks — keep their eyes rooted to the high boulders where a leopard may be hiding, waiting for the right moment to strike.

Just after the last big thunderstorm they get Raol; an agent is paying huge sums for black panther skins. They have been exterminated everywhere else and even here in the Highwadies only three or four remain. Their obsessive loyalty to one den makes them easy targets.

No more subservient purring and begging for Evita. She hunts on her own now and brings back wild boar, tahr and spotted deer for the cubs, who are growing fast. But a vicious attack by a saddleback unnerves her, makes her timid and skittish; there's also the hint of a limp in her front right leg. In a month she becomes a cripple, dragging the useless limb like a trailing branch.

From his hide the boy watches her return to the hungry waiting cubs with smaller and smaller prey; crabs and lizards: and cuff them for fighting over the pittance. Finally he cannot bear to see the hoping eyes as the mother comes in again and again with her feeble offerings, or her helpless gestures of appeasement. He breaks the naturalist's code and interferes.

In college he was a 3-Star archer and has brought his bow with him. With it he sets out on a hunt for Evita. A slow but tireless walker, he cannot hope to carry back sambar or tahr and on the afternoon of the second day, begins stalking a displaced family of wild boar. A smallish sow is gravid and her heavy, slow, hopeless gallop shows promise of success. As the mid-afternoon sun begins to slide slowly into the western valley she lumbers up a rise with two young males and prepares to rest while they snuffle around for tubers. Stephen sees her clearly in the twin orbs of his binocs, notes the bloated stomach pulsating with the wriggling unborn puppies and, keeping downwind, walks towards his prey. He stoops low to shorten the elongated shadow loping ahead of him and finds himself hugging a clump of bracken within a few feet of the sow; he has miscalculated the angle of his descent.

Her long kind eyes look ahead unseeing and every now and then she shifts to re-position her litter. Around her are patches of flattened grass and bracken; perhaps she has started making her den though it seems to Stephen to be too exposed. With a pang at the thought that she will not need it now, he positions his hands on the bow. Feeling the sureness of his purpose slipping away he makes a clean sideways leap to a boulder on his right and crouches behind it. Catching the movement in the far corner of her vision the sow squeals softly in alarm but only half turns her head, breathing hard so a jet of light dry soil arcs upwards. Stephen knows that this lethargy means she will drop her litter soon. He avoids the soft mother eyes and chooses from his quiver a metal-tipped broad-head arrow, places it across the bow, takes aim, pulls back, aligns it again, and fires. A horrid shriek cuts the whistles of the wind and the sow stumbles to her feet as ruby blood shoots out of the hole above her left shoulder. But her slow movements give him enough time to re-load his bow and the next shot only leaves the agitated turmoil of the imprisoned litter.

It's almost sundown by the time he has trussed the carcass and dragged it to Evita's cave. It is empty; now the cubs hunt with her. He watches from his hide, knowing that the human smell may make her reject the food. But she has got used to his presence; perhaps she'll allow him to provide meat and he is already planning different carrying techniques, choosing good hunting places.

She returns hungry, the she-panther, cubs whimpering by her side. The boy holds his breath, looks on with pleading in his eyes. She lets out a loud wail of confusion and clouts the cubs as,

mad with hunger, they pounce on the meat. Howling and whining with Valkyrian grief she nudges the meat with head and paws until it falls into the ravine outside the cave. The boy can hardly hold up the binoculars and in any case he can't see through them, they are misty.

A fortnight later the cubs have starved to death. Evita is once again the lonely wanderer of the windy grasses.

With Raol and the cubs gone she is his once more and Stephen, spending more and more time in the hide, revels in the possession of this exclusive relationship among the lonely mountain meadows. For a while despair eats at the happiness growing deep in his gut; he begins to feel her days are numbered: the infected paw has got much worse. Then there is a sudden, dramatic improvement and her leg strengthens, the limp is gone. But regardless, and breaking the naturalist's code again, Stephen decides to offer her meat once more. It works: she slurps delicately at the barking deer fawn he has found, like a child exploring ice cream with curling tongue-tip. Then she takes it away inside and he hears the crackle of bones. His heart lurches painfully with pride.

By the time the next monsoon brought greenness to the grasslands, his field work was done, and almost time for him to leave. Evita was hunting successfully and also enjoying Stephen's occasional offerings. She looked sleek and content, her black velvet shining like a newly brushed carpet. She looked straight into the bigger look-out he'd made in the hide, watching him with quiet interest. Once, wanting to get closer, meet her on her own terms, he tried to take the meat to her instead of leaving it when she was out. He walked slowly towards the steep descent down to her home.

But she notices the movement immediately and retreats into the den. The confused sawing wails unnerve him and he returns to his hide. Perhaps it is too soon. He will try again and one day it will happen. One day he will crouch at arm's length from the mother panther and slowly, very slowly, reach out to touch the satin folds of her back. He knows this must remain a vision, for her sake; he has already crossed the holy boundary. But he dreams about it.

The boy turns in his sleep, hair sprayed on the pillow like a fan. The shrill creaks of the camp-cot hinges bring him into a state of half wakefulness. Fingers flip on a torch and a yellow cone of light falls on a watch enclosed in a fluorescent orange sphere which continues to glow brightly even after it is dark again. Then the moon, a perfect gold coin climbing the crags of the clouds, sends a shower of light into the cabin and as a few drops fall on him the boy covers his eyes with an arm heavy with sleep. It is midnight.

The beams of moonlight squeeze through the spatter of rat nibbles on the curtains and settle on the few objects strewn about the spare cabin. The wind, picking up speed, gently claps on the wooden walls, the clouds re-group quietly around the smooth-sailing moon. Inside, the light shifts, picks out the big petromax lamp suspended in mid-air like a bird of prey. In the improvised sink of bent metal sheets a frying pan collects drops from a leak in the hollow bamboo pipe which is the only piece of plumbing in this jungle habitation.

The cabin returns to darkness as the moon floats away, veiled and unveiled by the swift cloud masses. The moon-gold washes the air, settles softly on a tuft of grass, a still pool, or perfect living bouquet of orchid blooms.

The low, despairing You-two, You-two of a night bird wakes a troop of langurs and there's a brief treetop commotion. A silence sweeps the high hills once more, filling the patches of riparian forest, the few wind-stunted rhododendrons, the ferny tresses bordering secret streams. Then suddenly the world cracks with a sound so sharp that the animals don't respond; a sound that drives the silence deeper into the earth. The gunshot hits cliff after cliff and the echoes ricochet off escarpments to fall, spent, into the depths below.

The boy has been pushed into waking. He blinks away disbelief and peels off the warm sleeping bag, pulls on gloves and woolen cap. He knows that sound; in his two years here the night has thrice been wounded by this net of fear. And now fear and the fear of loss lacerate his drumming heart as he stoops for the ear-phones and arcs them over his head. Picking up the receiver, he steps outside and into the icy wind.

The pitch and frequency of the beeps tell him again what he already knows and he raises an arm in a gesture of helpless pain, trying to shield his mind from the knowledge. He returns to the cabin, knowing he must wait till sunrise, giving time for the poachers to leave, but then stumbles out anyway to wade through the moonlight and darkness towards Evita. He knows the way like the back of his hand, knows also how to walk noiselessly, knows a ledge from where he can see the den.

Evita has been shot at the den entrance and at first Stephen stands rooted in surprise, she looks so alive; but then he sees death in her shoulders. There's no knowing when the poacher's armed men will arrive, to remove and take away the skin; but he spends an hour under the great round mourning moon which is now shocked into stillness and sits suspended over the boy and the panther.

As the sun rises he sits on the fishing rock, very still and quiet. An eagle owl shrieks on a neighbouring plateau and the echo meanders. Then his sadness breaks loose, silencing the birds as the forest makes space for his grief. In the days ahead his heart feels both heavy and light at the same time, and he will understand later, how Evita's end was his beginning. He begins to clean and pack his study equipment for the journey out of these grasslands, his hell and heaven for the past two years.

Songs of Nanak

Translated by Sarabjeet Garcha



Merlin Moli, 'Animalistic', acrylic on paper, 1×1.5ft, 2019

1.

The Guru Granth Sahib, p. 155

ਅਵਰਿ ਪੰਚ ਹਮ ਏਕ ਜਨਾ ਕਿਉ ਰਾਖਉ ਘਰ ਬਾਰੁ ਮਨਾ ॥

ਅਕਰਿ ਪੰਚ ਹਮ ਏਕ ਜਨਾ ਕਿਤ ਰਾਖਤ ਘਰ ਬਾਰੁ ਮਨਾ ॥

ਮਾਰਹਿ ਲੂਟਹਿ ਨੀਤ ਨੀਤ ਕਿਸੁ ਆਗੈ ਕਰੀ ਪੁਕਾਰ ਜਨਾ ॥੧॥

ਸਾਰਹਿ ਲੂਟਹਿ ਨੀਤ ਨੀਤ ਕਿਸੁ ਆਗੈ ਕਰੀ ਪੁਕਾਰ ਜਨਾ ॥੧॥

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਰਾਮ ਨਾਮਾ ਉਚਰੁ ਮਨਾ ॥

ਸ੍ਰੀ ਰਾਮ ਨਾਮਾ ਤਚਰੁ ਮਨਾ ॥

ਆਗੈ ਜਮ ਦਲੁ ਬਿਖਮੁ ਘਨਾ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਉ ॥

ਆਗੈ ਜਮ ਦਲੁ ਬਿਖਮੁ ਘਨਾ ॥੧॥ ਰਹਾਤ ॥

ਉਸਾਰਿ ਮੜੋਲੀ ਰਾਖੈ ਦੁਆਰਾ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਬੈਠੀ ਸਾ ਧਨਾ ॥

ਤਸਾਰਿ ਸੜੋਲੀ ਰਾਖੈ ਦੁਆਰਾ ਭੀਤਰਿ ਬੈਠੀ ਸਾ ਧਨਾ ॥

ਅੰਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਕੇਲ ਕਰੇ ਨਿਤ ਕਾਮਣਿ ਅਵਰਿ ਲੁਟੇਨਿ ਸੁ ਪੰਚ ਜਨਾ ॥੨॥

ਅਮ੍ਰਿਤ ਕੇਲ ਕਰੇ ਨਿਤ ਕਾਮਣਿ ਅਵਰਿ ਲੁਟੇਨਿ ਸੁ ਪੰਚ ਜਨਾ ॥੨॥

ਢਾਹਿ ਮੜੋਲੀ ਲੂਟਿਆ ਦੇਹੁਰਾ ਸਾ ਧਨ ਪਕੜੀ ਏਕ ਜਨਾ ॥

ਢਾਹਿ ਸੜੋਲੀ ਲੂਟਿਆ ਦੇਹੁਰਾ ਸਾ ਧਨ ਪਕੜੀ ਏਕ ਜਨਾ ॥

ਜਮ ਡੰਡਾ ਗਲਿ ਸੰਗਲੁ ਪੜਿਆ ਭਾਗਿ ਗਏ ਸੇ ਪੰਚ ਜਨਾ ॥੩॥

ਜਮ ਡੰਡਾ ਗਲਿ ਸੰਗਲੁ ਪੜਿਆ ਭਾਗਿ ਗਏ ਸੇ ਪੰਚ ਜਨਾ ॥੩॥

ਕਾਮਣਿ ਲੋੜੈ ਸੁਇਨਾ ਰੁਪਾ ਮਿਤ੍ਰ ਲੁੜੇਨਿ ਸੁ ਖਾਧਾਤਾ ॥

ਕਾਮਣਿ ਲੋੜੈ ਸੁਇਨਾ ਰੁਪਾ ਮਿਤ੍ਰ ਲੁੜੇਨਿ ਸੁ ਖਾਧਾਤਾ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਪਾਪ ਕਰੇ ਤਿਨ ਕਾਰਣਿ ਜਾਸੀ ਜਮਪੁਰਿ ਬਾਧਾਤਾ ॥੪॥੨॥੧੪॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਪਾਪ ਕਰੇ ਤਿਨ ਕਾਰਣਿ ਜਾਸੀ ਜਮਪੁਰਿ ਬਾਧਾਤਾ ॥੪॥੨॥੧੪॥

They are five.

I am one.

How do I save my house,

O my mind?

They beat and plunder

over and over.

Who should I look to

for rescue?

Be mindful

of the One,

O my mind.

Yama's alarming army,

dense and mighty,

is coming for you.

As the edifice rose,

so did its doors.

Inside sits

a seductress.

Thinking herself immortal,

she keeps cavorting

while the five go about

their business of looting.

At last, razing the edifice,
they sack the shrine
and seize the bride.

But as soon as Yama's rod
clubs the head
and the noose
tightens around the throat,
the five vamoose.

The bride yearns
for gold and silver,
and friends
for things to consume.

Nanak says, it's for them
that one lapses,
unmindful of being dragged
straight to the city of death.

2.

The Guru Granth Sahib, pp. 142-43

ਵੇਖੁ ਜਿ ਮਿਠਾ ਕਟਿਆ ਕਟਿ ਕੁਟਿ ਬਧਾ ਪਾਇ ॥
ਵੇਖੁ ਜਿ ਮਿਠਾ ਕਟਿਆ ਕਟਿ ਕੁਟਿ ਬਧਾ ਪਾਝੁ ॥

ਖੁੰਢਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਰਖਿ ਕੈ ਦੇਨਿ ਸੁ ਮਲ ਸਜਾਇ ॥
ਖੁੰਢਾ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਰਖਿ ਕੈ ਦੇਨਿ ਸੁ ਮਲ ਸਜਾਏ ॥

ਰਸੁ ਕਸੁ ਟਟਰਿ ਪਾਈਐ ਤਪੈ ਤੈ ਵਿਲਲਾਇ ॥
ਰਸੁ ਕਸੁ ਟਟਰਿ ਪਾਏ ਤਪੈ ਤੈ ਵਿਲਲਾਏ ॥

ਭੀ ਸੇ ਫੇਗੁ ਸਮਾਲੀਐ ਦਿਚੈ ਅਗਿ ਜਾਲਾਇ ॥
ਭੀ ਸੇ ਫੇਗੁ ਸਮਾਲੀਐ ਦਿਚੈ ਅਗਿ ਜਾਲਾਏ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਮਿਠੈ ਪਤਰੀਐ ਵੇਖਹੁ ਲੋਕਾ ਆਇ ॥੨॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਮਿਠੈ ਪਤਰੀਐ ਵੇਖਹੁ ਲੋਕਾ ਆਏ ॥੨॥

Look how sugarcane is cut.
Look how, stripped
of leaves, it is bundled.

Thrusting it between
cylinders, the landowner
punishes it. Poured in

a cauldron and brought to
a boil, the juice
screams in anguish.

Even the pulp is saved
to intensify the fire
under the same cauldron.

Nanak says,
Folks, come and see
how sugarcane is deceived.

3.

The Guru Granth Sahib, p. 143

ਮਛੀ ਤਾਰੂ ਕਿਆ ਕਰੇ ਪੰਖੀ ਕਿਆ ਆਕਾਸੁ ॥

ਸਢੀ ਤਾਰੂ ਕਿਆ ਕਰੇ ਪੰਖੀ ਕਿਆ ਆਕਾਸੁ ॥

ਪਥਰ ਪਾਲਾ ਕਿਆ ਕਰੇ ਖੁਸਰੇ ਕਿਆ ਘਰ ਵਾਸੁ ॥

ਪਥਰ ਪਾਲਾ ਕਿਆ ਕਰੇ ਖੁਸਰੇ ਕਿਆ ਘਰ ਵਾਸੁ ॥

ਰੁਤੇ ਚੰਦਨੁ ਲਾਈਐ ਭੀ ਸੇ ਰੁਤੀ ਧਾਤੁ ॥

ਕੁਤੇ ਚੰਦਨੁ ਲਾਈਐ ਭੀ ਸੋ ਕੁਤੀ ਧਾਤੁ ॥

ਬੋਲਾ ਜੇ ਸਮਝਾਈਐ ਪੜੀਅਹਿ ਸਿੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਿ ਪਾਠ ॥

ਬੋਲਾ ਜੇ ਸਮਝਾਈਐ ਪੜੀਅਹਿ ਸਿੰਮ੍ਰਿਤਿ ਪਾਠ ॥

ਅੰਧਾ ਚਾਨਣਿ ਰਖੀਐ ਦੀਵੇ ਬਲਹਿ ਪਚਾਸ ॥

ਅੰਧਾ ਚਾਨਣਿ ਰਖੀਐ ਦੀਵੇ ਬਲਹਿ ਪਚਾਸ ॥

ਚਉਣੇ ਸੁਇਨਾ ਪਾਈਐ ਚੁਣਿ ਚੁਣਿ ਖਾਵੈ ਘਾਸੁ ॥

ਚਤਯੋ ਸੁਝਨਾ ਪਾਝੈ ਚੁਯਿ ਚੁਯਿ ਖਾਥੈ ਘਾਸੁ ॥

ਲੇਹਾ ਮਾਰਣਿ ਪਾਈਐ ਢਹੈ ਨ ਹੋਇ ਕਪਾਸ ॥

ਲੋਹਾ ਮਾਰਣਿ ਪਾਝੈ ਢਹੈ ਨ ਹੋਝ ਕਪਾਸ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਮੂਰਖ ਏਹਿ ਗੁਣ ਬੋਲੇ ਸਦਾ ਵਿਣਾਸੁ ॥੧॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਮੂਰਖ ਏਹਿ ਗੁਣ ਬੋਲੇ ਸਦਾ ਵਿਣਾਸੁ ॥੧॥

How can deep waters

bother a fish?

How can the vast sky

pester a bird?

What can dew

do to a rock?

What's marital bliss

to a eunuch?

No matter how much

a dog is rubbed

with sandalwood,

it can't give up

its doghood.

Try reading out

scriptures to one

who is deaf.

Try bringing one

who is blind
into the light
of fifty lamps.

Scatter gold in front of
a grazing animal.
It still chooses
and eats grass.

Even when pulverized
to the finest powder,
iron doesn't
become cotton.

Nanak says, these are
qualities of the fool,
who brings only ruin
the moment he opens
his mouth.

4.

The Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1286

बुलचां देंते घादले लैंदे वडे निलज ॥
कुलहां देंदे बावले लैंदे वडे निलज ॥

ਚੂਹਾ ਖਡ ਨ ਮਾਵਈ ਤਿਕਲਿ ਬੰਨ੍ਹੈ ਛਜ ॥
ਚੂਹਾ ਖਡ ਨ ਮਾਵਈ ਤਿਕਲਿ ਬੰਨ੍ਹੈ ਛਜ ॥

ਦੇਨ੍ਹਿਹ ਦੁਆਈ ਸੇ ਮਰਹਿ ਜਿਨ ਕਉ ਦੇਨਿ ਸਿ ਜਾਹਿ ॥
ਦੇਨ੍ਹਿਹ ਦੁਆਈ ਸੇ ਮਰਹਿ ਜਿਨ ਕਤ ਦੇਨਿ ਸਿ ਜਾਹਿ ॥

ਨਾਨਕ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਨ ਜਾਪਈ ਕਿਥੈ ਜਾਇ ਸਮਾਹਿ ॥
ਨਾਨਕ ਹੁਕਮੁ ਨ ਜਾਪਈ ਕਿਥੈ ਜਾਇ ਸਮਾਹਿ ॥

ਫਸਲਿ ਅਹਾੜੀ ਏਕੁ ਨਾਮੁ ਸਾਵਈ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਉ ॥
ਫਸਲਿ ਅਹਾੜੀ ਏਕੁ ਨਾਮੁ ਸਾਵਈ ਸਚੁ ਨਾਉ ॥

ਮੈ ਮਹਦੂਦੁ ਲਿਖਾਇਆ ਖਸਮੈ ਕੈ ਦਰਿ ਜਾਇ ॥
ਮੈ ਮਹਦੂਦੁ ਲਿਖਾਇਆ ਖਸਮੈ ਕੈ ਦਰਿ ਜਾਇ ॥

ਦੁਨੀਆ ਕੇ ਦਰ ਕੇਤੜੇ ਕੇਤੇ ਆਵਹਿ ਜਾਂਹਿ ॥
ਦੁਨੀਆ ਕੇ ਦਰ ਕੇਤੜੇ ਕੇਤੇ ਆਵਹਿ ਜਾਂਹਿ ॥

ਕੇਤੇ ਮੰਗਹਿ ਮੰਗਤੇ ਕੇਤੇ ਮੰਗਿ ਮੰਗਿ ਜਾਹਿ ॥੧॥
ਕੇਤੇ ਮੰਗਹਿ ਮੰਗਤੇ ਕੇਤੇ ਮੰਗਿ ਮੰਗਿ ਜਾਹਿ ॥੧॥

The brainless
confer titles.
The shameless
accept them.

A basket tied
to the waist,
a rat cannot
squeeze into
the burrow.

Blessers die.
The blessed, too.
His command's abstruse,
says Nanak.
Who knows
where the dead land up?

The spring crop for me
is One Name only.
So too what comes
to me in autumn.

Ending up at his door,
I made the lord
write a decree
absolving me.

The world's a carnival
of doorways.
Countless sway
into and out of it.
Countless keep begging

till they go extinct.

5.

The Guru Granth Sahib, p. 468

ਕੂੜੁ ਰਾਜਾ ਕੂੜੁ ਪਰਜਾ ਕੂੜੁ ਸਭੁ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥

ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਰਾਜਾ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਪਰਜਾ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਸਭੁ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥

ਕੂੜੁ ਮੰਡਪ ਕੂੜੁ ਮਾੜੀ ਕੂੜੁ ਬੈਸਣਹਾਰੁ ॥

ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਮੰਡਪ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਮਾੜੀ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਬੈਸਣਹਾਰੁ ॥

ਕੂੜੁ ਸੁਇਨਾ ਕੂੜੁ ਰੁਪਾ ਕੂੜੁ ਪੈਨ੍ਹਣਹਾਰੁ ॥

ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਸੁਇਨਾ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਰੁਪਾ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਪੈਨ੍ਹਣਹਾਰੁ ॥

ਕੂੜੁ ਕਾਇਆ ਕੂੜੁ ਕਪੜੁ ਕੂੜੁ ਰੂਪੁ ਅਪਾਰੁ ॥

ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਕਾਇਆ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਕਪੜੁ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਰੂਪੁ ਅਪਾਰੁ ॥

ਕੂੜੁ ਮੀਆ ਕੂੜੁ ਬੀਬੀ ਖਪਿ ਹੋਏ ਖਾਰੁ ॥

ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਮੀਆ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੁ ਬੀਬੀ ਖਪਿ ਹੋਏ ਖਾਰੁ ॥

ਕੂੜਿ ਕੂੜੈ ਨੇਹੁ ਲਗਾ ਵਿਸਰਿਆ ਕਰਤਾਰੁ ॥

ਕ੍ਰੂੜਿ ਕ੍ਰੂੜੈ ਨੇਹੁ ਲਗਾ ਵਿਸਰਿਆ ਕਰਤਾਰੁ ॥

ਕਿਸੁ ਨਾਲਿ ਕੀਚੈ ਦੇਸਤੀ ਸਭੁ ਜਗੁ ਚਲਣਹਾਰੁ ॥
ਕਿਸੁ ਨਾਲਿ ਕੀਚੈ ਦੋਸਤੀ ਸਭੁ ਜਗੁ ਚਲਣਹਾਰੁ ॥

ਕੂੜੁ ਮਿਠਾ ਕੂੜੁ ਮਾਖਿਉ ਕੂੜੁ ਡੋਬੇ ਪੂਰੁ ॥
ਕੂੜੁ ਮਿਠਾ ਕੂੜੁ ਮਾਖਿਤ ਕੂੜੁ ਡੋਬੇ ਪੂਰੁ ॥

ਨਾਨਕੁ ਵਖਾਣੈ ਬੇਨਤੀ ਤੁਧੁ ਬਾਝੁ ਕੂੜੇ ਕੂੜੁ ॥੧॥
ਨਾਨਕੁ ਵਖਾਣੈ ਬੇਨਤੀ ਤੁਧੁ ਬਾਝੁ ਕੂੜੇ ਕੂੜੁ ॥੧॥

The king is an illusion.

So too the subjects.

And the whole world?

An illusion, yes.

So too tents

and mansions

as well as those

who live in them.

So too gold and silver

and those wearing either.

So too the body and clothes,

and looks thought limitless.

Wife or husband, each is a figment.

Used up, both feel slighted.

The duped, in love with what isn't,

have forgotten the creator.

Who should you befriend
in a world that's evanescent?
The sugary illusion
drowns everyone.

Nanak has this much
to say humbly:
Without you, all there is
is mere trickery.

6.

The Guru Granth Sahib, p. 141

ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਇਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਉਸੁ ਸੁਅਰ ਉਸੁ ਗਾਇ ॥
ਹਕੁ ਪਰਾਝਆ ਨਾਨਕਾ ਤਸੁ ਸੁਅਰ ਤਸੁ ਗਾਝ ॥

ਗੁਰੁ ਪੀਰੁ ਹਾਮਾ ਤਾ ਭਰੇ ਜਾ ਮੁਰਦਾਰੁ ਨ ਖਾਇ ॥
ਗੁਰੁ ਪੀਰੁ ਹਾਮਾ ਤਾ ਭਰੇ ਜਾ ਮੁਰਦਾਰੁ ਨ ਖਾਝ ॥

ਗਲੀ ਭਿਸਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਈਐ ਛੁਟੈ ਸਚੁ ਕਮਾਇ ॥
ਗਲੀ ਭਿਸਤਿ ਨ ਜਾਝੈਏ ਛੁਟੈ ਸਚੁ ਕਮਾਝ ॥

ਮਾਰਣ ਪਾਹਿ ਹਰਾਮ ਮਹਿ ਹੋਇ ਹਲਾਲੁ ਨ ਜਾਇ ॥

मारण पाहि हराम महि होइ हलालु न जाइ ॥

ठाठव गली वुञ्जीष्टी वुञ्जे पलै पाष्टि ॥२॥

नानक गली कूड़ीई कूड़ो पलै पाइ ॥२॥

What's another's by right is like
pork to a Muslim,
beef to a Hindu.

The pir or guru
says yes to only those
who won't feed on carrion.

Prattle doesn't propel you
to heaven. Liberation happens
when the truth is earned.

No matter how spiced up,
the forbidden does not
become palatable.

Nonsense,
Nanak says,
attracts nonsense.

7.

The Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1288

ਹਰਣਾਂ ਬਾਜਾਂ ਤੈ ਸਿਕਦਾਰਾਂ ਏਨ੍ਹਹਾ ਪੜ੍ਹਿਆ ਨਾਉ ॥
ਹਰਣਾਂ ਬਾਜਾਂ ਤੈ ਸਿਕਦਾਰਾਂ ਏਨ੍ਹਾ ਪੜ੍ਹਿਆ ਨਾਤ ॥

ਫਾਂਧੀ ਲਗੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਫਹਾਇਨਿ ਅਗੈ ਨਾਹੀ ਥਾਉ ॥
ਫਾਂਧੀ ਲਗੀ ਜਾਤਿ ਫਹਾਇਨਿ ਅਗੈ ਨਾਹੀ ਥਾਤ ॥

ਸੇ ਪੜ੍ਹਿਆ ਸੇ ਪੰਡਿਤੁ ਬੀਨਾ ਜਿਨ੍ਹਹੀ ਕਮਾਣਾ ਨਾਉ ॥
ਸੋ ਪੜ੍ਹਿਆ ਸੋ ਪੰਡਿਤੁ ਬੀਨਾ ਜਿਨ੍ਹਹੀ ਕਮਾਣਾ ਨਾਤ ॥

ਪਹਿਲੇ ਦੇ ਜੜ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਜੰਮੈ ਤਾ ਉਪਰਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਛਾਂਉ ॥
ਪਹਿਲੋ ਦੇ ਜੜ ਅੰਦਰਿ ਜੰਮੈ ਤਾ ਤਪਰਿ ਹੋਵੈ ਛਾਂਤ ॥

ਰਾਜੇ ਸੀਹ ਮੁਕਦਮ ਰੁਤੇ ॥
ਰਾਜੇ ਸੀਹ ਮੁਕਦਮ ਕੁਤੇ ॥

ਜਾਇ ਜਗਾਇਨ੍ਹਿ ਬੈਠੇ ਸੁਤੇ ॥
ਜਾਝ ਜਗਾਇਨ੍ਹਿ ਬੈਠੇ ਸੁਤੇ ॥

ਚਾਕਰ ਨਹਦਾ ਪਾਇਨ੍ਹਿ ਘਾਉ ॥
ਚਾਕਰ ਨਹਦਾ ਪਾਇਨ੍ਹਿ ਘਾਤ ॥

ਰਤੁ ਪਿਤੁ ਕੁਤਿਹੋ ਚਟਿ ਜਾਹੁ ॥
ਰਤੁ ਪਿਤੁ ਕੁਤਿਹੋ ਚਟਿ ਜਾਹੁ ॥

ਜਿਥੈ ਜੀਆਂ ਹੋਸੀ ਸਾਰ ॥
ਜਿਥੈ ਜੀਆਂ ਹੋਸੀ ਸਾਰ ॥

ਨਕੀਂ ਵਢੀਂ ਲਾਇਤਬਾਰ ॥੨॥
ਨਕੀਂ ਵਢੀਂ ਲਾਇਤਬਾਰ ॥੨॥

Hawks, deer and officers
are deemed skilled
but they get their own
ensnared and so don't

find room in the next realm.
Only those who've
earned enlightenment
are pundits indeed.

First the roots go deep.
Only then does
the shade above
spread.

Kings are lions,
their ministers dogs.
They wake those

lying in peace.

The officials tear
with their nails.

The hounds lick
the spilt blood and guts.

But where humans are judged,
there the treacherous
are like those
with a severed nose.

Topography of a Stitched Landscape

Gopika Nath

with an introduction by Ina Puri

Tracing the history of textiles in India it is interesting to see how practices gradually broke away from the traditional space, to occupy centre stage for some contemporary artists. The needle became the brush, seeking to illuminate, provoke and create an identity (for itself) that, went beyond the feminine domain.

Needlework, associated for long with the feminine and domestic embroidery, now became experimental and contemporary – a genre recognised for its unique place in the art scene. As one of the leading practitioners, Gopika strikes out in a new direction which is both provocative and innovative. She uses photography, digital printing on fabric, alongside techniques that involve burning, layering, shredding, as well as embroidering, on cotton voile, silk organza and other ephemeral fabrics.

She re-contextualises the notions of stitching as an art, once meant to showcase the skills of a marriageable girl, into a wholly new space. Deeply autobiographical, her technique is to use the cross-stitch and running stitch [Kantha] to add texture to the fabric that is stained with tea. She stitches in delicate cursive hand, 'Bitch/Liar/Slob'. Hurtful insults hurled, heard and ignored are transformed into motifs elegantly embroidered on her cloth fragments.

Creatively interpreting the 18th century tailor-saint and mystic Dariya Sahib of Bihar, she says:

'Only when, these marks left by pain,

have faded in the knowing light, will love

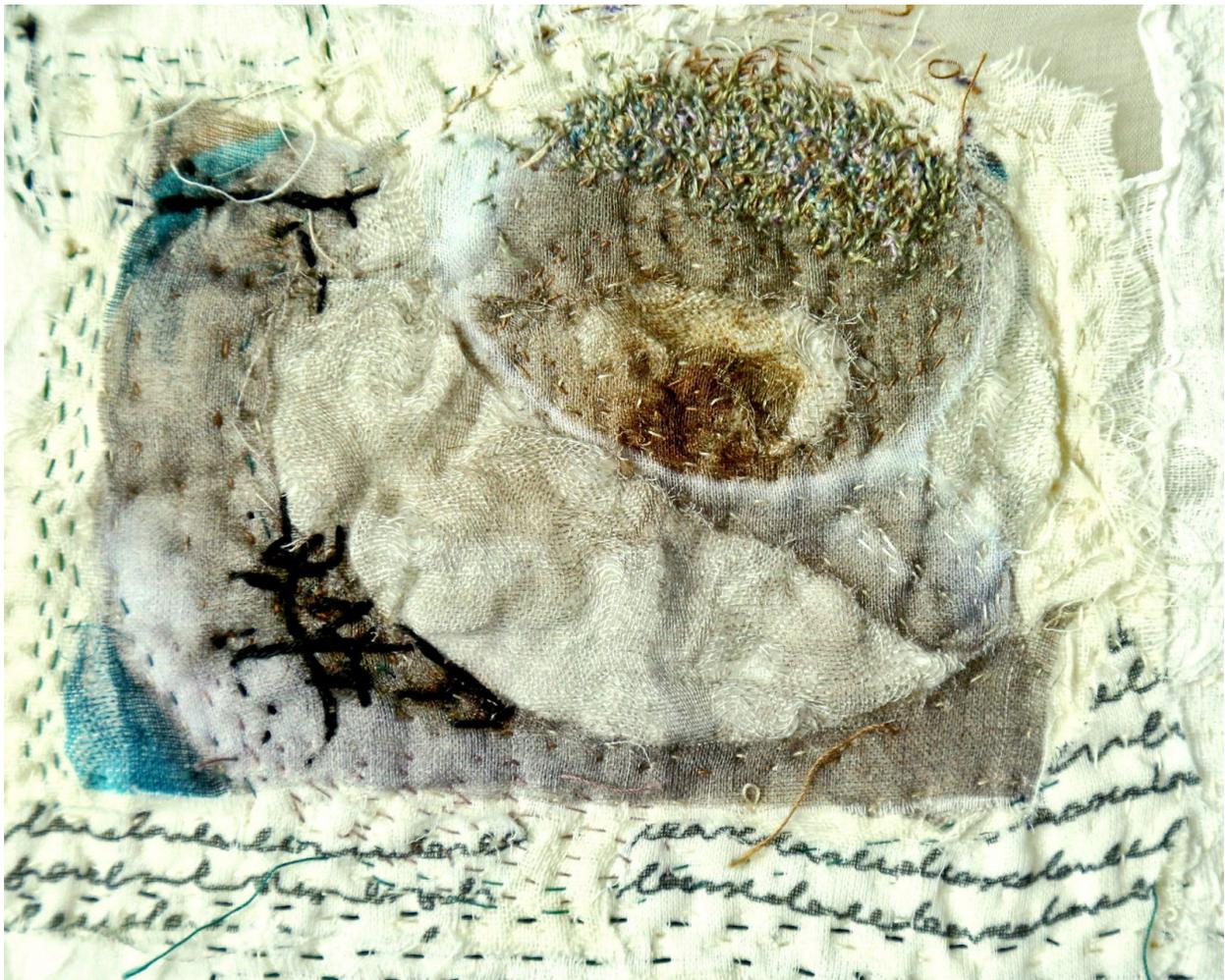
shine forth to share the secret of it to gain'

[from the verse फरे मन सुमिरे ले सतनाम के फिरि औसर टरी।]

In Gopika's artistic practice, through her stitched narrative, both traditions of craft and contemporary conceptual undertakings meld fluidly. Her compositions, layered and delicate combine sutures, colour, texture, and a surface detailing that make the work appear both as a fragment of detail and an overall map of definition.

Deeply autobiographical, her work presents art as cathartic and healing through searing honesty in the microscopic examination of self. In sharing the textures of her wounds, she reaches out towards healing macro dimensions of the universe.

Through her art, she inhabits, as it were, the diverse pluralism of a lyrical elsewhere and the earthiness of the immediate and now. The layers of fabric bind memories and metaphors. The ascetic severities of her medium notwithstanding, you get a glimpse of an inner romantic self. Unbidden, these words by Louise Bourgeois come to mind: "If you hold a naked child against your naked breast, it is not the end of softness, it is the beginning of softness, life itself".



Dregs In Your Tea-cup – III, 7 X 7 Inches – unframed, 2010

Material: cotton voile, gauze bandage, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread

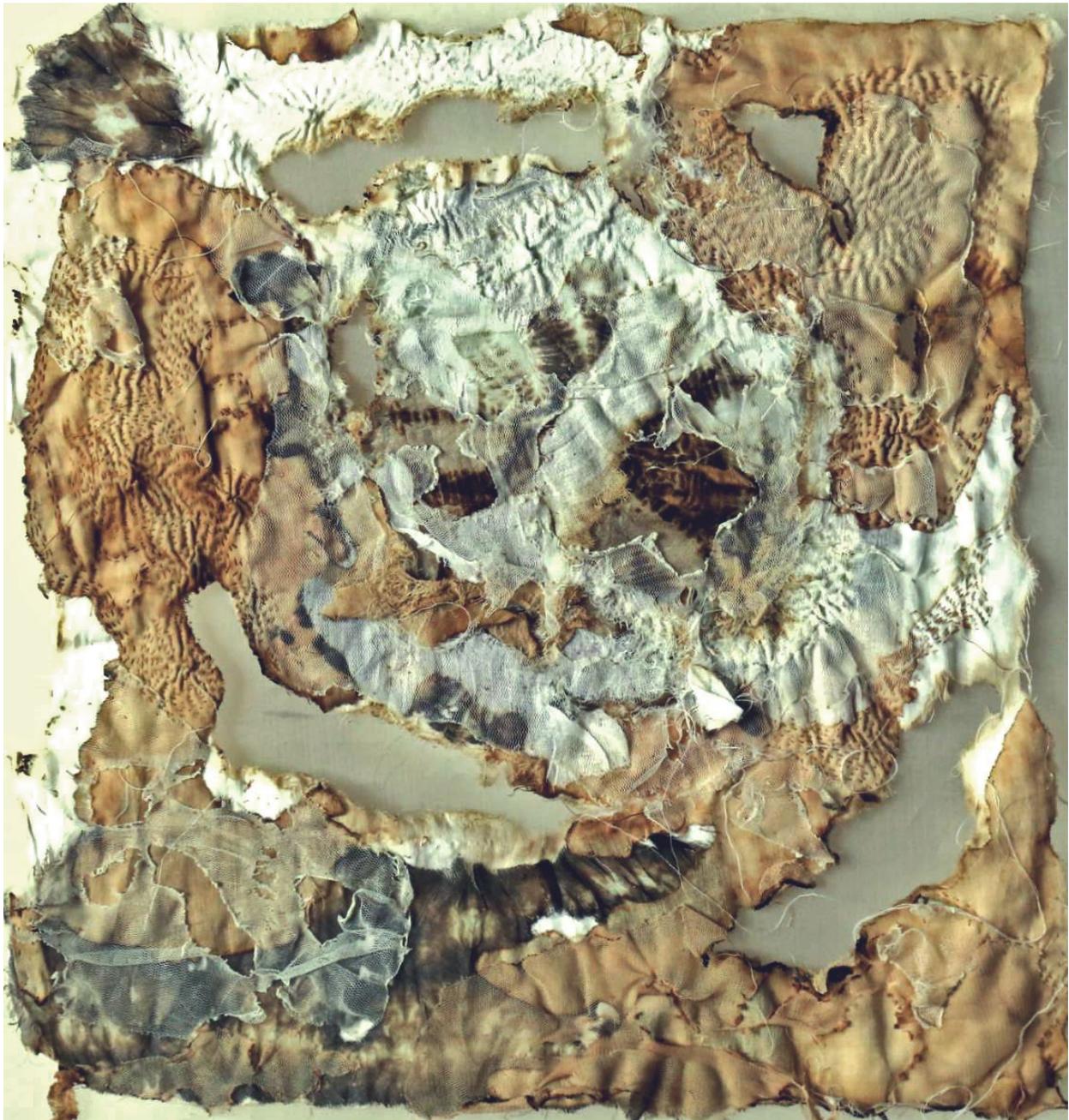
Technique: photography, digital printing, tearing, layering, stitching, embroidery



Again and Again II, 6.6 x 8.8 inches – unframed, 2011

Material: Cotton voile, polyester-cotton thread

Technique: photography, digital print, layering, stitching, embroidery



Fragments of the Whole, 14 x 15 inches – unframed, 2013

Materials: cotton voile, nylon net, silk, cotton-polyester thread

Technique: shibori, kantha, burning, stitching, staining with chai and potassium permanganate dyes



Mapping Mindstains, 15.5 x 17.75 inches – unframed, 2013

Material: cotton fabrics, nylon net, silk, cotton floss, cotton-polyester thread

Technique: layering, tearing, pulling, stitching, staining with tea-leaves.



Memory Footprint, 12 x 15 inches – unframed, 2015

Materials: cotton fabrics, photo paper, cotton floss, silk, cotton-polyester thread.

Technique: pen and ink drawing, burning, layering, hand and machine embroidery, staining with tea -leaves

All photographs by Amitabha Bhattacharya.

Text © Ina Puri; images © Gopika Nath.

I Am a Hindu

Asgar Wajahat

translated by Alok Bhalla



Saba Hasan, photograph from her *Haqeeqat* series, 2018

That scream would have woken the dead. It seemed to pierce ones ears. I was terrified...I sat up on my cot with a start...There were still stars in the sky...It must have been around three in the morning. Abbajan had also woken up. Saiffu was lying in his bed and screaming. The courtyard was lined with cots from one end to the other.

'Lahaulwillaquwatt,' Abbajan mumbled.

'Allah knows why he screams in his sleep?' Amma said.

'Ammi, the boys tease him every night...' I replied.

'Those idiots have nothing better to do...People are scared for their lives and all they can think of is mischief,' Ammi said.

Sofiya removed the bed-sheet from her face and said, 'Maybe, he should sleep on the terrace.'

Saiffu was still not awake. I went near his bed and saw that his face was covered with sweat. He was breathing heavily and his body was trembling. His hair was wet and a few strands had stuck to his forehead. As I looked at his face, I felt growing anger at the boys who frightened him every day.

The communal riots in those days were not as vicious as they now are. There has been a considerable change in the reasons, politics, rioters and intensity of the violence. Twenty-five years ago, people were not burnt alive and villages were not left desolate. Nor did the rioters have the blessings of the Prime Minister, the Home Minister and the Chief Minister. Riots were instigated by small-time politicians for their petty gains in their own localities. Their aim was to trouble small businesses, grab a piece of land and force Hindus or Muslims to vote for their candidates in local elections. But now, the aim of communal violence is to capture the durbar in Delhi. In fact, the world over, only the one who spreads hate and fills rivers with blood can establish his own authority.

We shook Saiffu awake. He looked around like an innocent lamb searching for his mother. Saiffuddin or Saiffu was the son of my father's step-brother. When Saiffu saw the entire family around his bed, he got up with a start.

I still remember the post-card with a snipped corner announcing the death of Saiffu's father, Kaussar Chacha. The villagers had not only informed us about Kaussar Chacha's death, but had also mentioned that his youngest son, Saiffu, was now completely alone in the world. Saiffu's elder brother had refused to take him to Mumbai. He simply declared that he could do nothing for Saiffu. There was no one other than Abbajan who could look after him. Abba sat quietly for a long time holding the post-card with a torn corner. After many arguments with Amma, he went to his ancestral village, sold his remaining land and returned with Saiffu. We all laughed when we met Saiffu who looked like a village boor. What else could we, who were studying in the school attached to the Aligarh Muslim University or Sofiya who was a student in the school

attached to the Abdullah Girls College, have done? It was evident from the very first day that Saiffu was not only a boor, he was also either an idiot or a simpleton. We used to tease him or make fun of him. One consequence of all the teasing was that Saiffu won the hearts of Abbajan and Amma. Saiffu could put in a hard day's labour without ever getting tired. Amma liked him very much for his devotion to work. 'So what if he eats two roties extra? He also works till his back breaks.' Years and years passed; Saiffu became part of our lives. We began to treat him more gently. Now, I beat up anyone in the neighbourhood who called him a fool. 'He is our brother, how you dare you call him a fool!' Only the family knew what his real condition was.

The cause of the riot in the town? It was the usual one. A bundle of meat was found in the mosque and it was assumed, without even opening it, that it contained pork because it had been found in a mosque. In retaliation a cow was slaughtered in Mughal Tola resulting in communal violence. A few shops were burnt and many were looted. Seven-eight people were knifed to death. But, unlike the old days, the present government did not immediately impose a curfew. Nor did the Chief Minister, twirl his moustache and boast, that the slaughter of a few thousand people was somehow justified.

The curfew had been extended because the violence had spread to the villages surrounding the town. We lived in Mughalpura, a Muslim dominated area, where the atmosphere was especially tense because of the curfew and the calls for 'Jihad'. The streets in the neighbourhood were narrow and labyrinthine. Past riots had taught the people how to make their way from one end to the next by passing through a neighbour's door, across a terrace and over a wall. The locality was always prepared for war. The people who lived there believed that even if the curfew lasted for a month everything required for their survival was available.

The riots were always an occasion for the young to show their enthusiasm and courage. 'Arrey, what do the Hindus think of themselves, we shall make them eat dirt...what can the dhotiwalas do...arrey, they are cowards...one Muslim is equal to ten Hindus...We laughed and won Pakistan; we'll fight and conquer Hindustan...' They boasted to each other, but were terrified of stepping outside the locality because there was a police cordon all around. Since many still recalled being beaten with rifle butts by the police, their verbal boasts were fine, but they didn't dare...

Danger unites people. Unity organises them and organisation produces discipline. It was decided that one boy from each home shall stand on guard. In our house, I was no longer considered a boy since I was above twenty-five years of age. Therefore, Saiffu, who was younger, had to stand on night-duty on the terraces. Since Mughalpura was built on a high ground, one could see the entire city from there. Saiffu used to keep watch with the other boys at night. My father, mother and Sofiya were happy with the arrangement; otherwise, I would have had to

endure staying up all night. In return, Saiffu was allowed some relief from doing the daily house work; he could sleep till eight in the morning and was not required to sweep the house. That work was entrusted to Sofiya who disliked doing it intensely.

There were nights when I too went up to the terraces. The boys on duty ruled the terraces. They had collected a large number of lathis, spears and mounds of stones to defend themselves. A few boys had locally made swords and nearly all of them carried knives. Many of the boys worked in small workshops which manufactured locks. A few were tailors or carpenters. At present, they were all unemployed because the markets were closed. Most of their families were burdened with debts and had little to eat. But they were happy. They sat on the terraces and either analysed the latest news about the riots or cursed the Hindus...but abused the police more. They played Radio Lahore softly and could recite its programmes by heart. The reputation of a few of the boys who had been to Pakistan was higher than many Hajis. They narrated stories of the Pakistani train, 'Tejgam', and praised the colony, 'Gulshan-e-Iqbal', with such enthusiasm that it seemed as if Pakistan was paradise on earth. When the boys needed a diversion from these stories, they mocked Saiffu. One day, after listening to stories about the glories of Pakistan again and again, Saiffu asked, 'Where is Pakistan?' After that the boys teased and taunted him mercilessly. Saiffu, however, was bewildered. He didn't understand anything and never found out where Pakistan was.

Out of a sense of fun, the boys began to quietly tease Saiffu, 'Listen Saiffu, if the Hindus catch you, do you know what they will do? They will first strip you naked.' They boys knew that Saiffu thought it was a sin to be naked. 'Then the Hindus will rub oil on your body.'

'Why will they rub oil on my body?'

'So that your skin peels easily when they beat you with lathis. After that they will burn you with hot iron rods...'

'No!' Saiffu screamed in disbelief.

Every night, the boys frightened Saiffu by telling him gory stories of murder and violence. They also filled his head with strange and stupid information about Pakistan. I would get irritated and calm Saiffu, but could never satisfy his curiosity about Pakistan.

One day he asked me, 'Bade Bhai, is there soil in Pakistan?'

'Why, why shouldn't there be soil in Pakistan?'

'Is it not paved with roads and roads?...You can buy terylene over there...everything is very cheap over there...'

'Listen, don't pay attention to all the fantastic tales Altaf and others tell you,'

'Bade Bhai, do the Hindus pluck out your eyes...'

'Rubbish...who told you that?'

'Bacchan.'

'It's not true.'

'They don't skin you alive too...?'

'Uff...why are you carrying on...?'

He was silent for a while, but I could see a thousand questions in his eyes. After I left, he continued to talk to Sofiya.

The curfew was extended. The boys, along with Saiffu, continued to keep watch on the terraces. After a few days, Saiffu began to scream in his sleep. We were worried, but understood that he had been very frightened by the boys. Abbajan was annoyed and did talk to a few of the elders around, but failed to persuade the boys, especially the boys of our locality, to leave Saiffu alone.

I did not realise how serious the matter was till one day Saiffu asked me all earnestness, 'Bade Bhai, should I become a Hindu?'

I replied, 'Why do you want to become a Hindu?'

'I'll be safe,' Saiffu answered.

'That means I'll not be safe?' I asked.

'Then why don't you also become a Hindu?' He asked.

'What about your Taya Abba?' I asked about my father.

'No...let him...' he was puzzled. He was perhaps confused by my father's long white beard.

'Listen, the boys talk a lot of nonsense to tease you. They tell you lies. Do you remember Mahesh?'

'The one who comes on his scooter...?' He asked with a smile.

'Yes, yes, the same one.'

'Is he a Hindu?'

'Yes, he's a Hindu,' I replied. Shades of sadness spread across his face and he fell silent.

'These riots are the work of hooligans...Hindus and Muslims do not fight each other...only the goondas do...Do you understand?'

The riots continued like an evil story that has no end. The people were fed up. 'Yaar, what would be the total number of Hindu and Muslim goondas in the town? No more than a thousand...maybe two thousand...Two thousand people have made the lives of lakhs of us miserable and we hide in our homes like cowards...It's like the days when ten thousand British soldiers ruled over crores of people and all the kings used to grovel before them...Who benefits from these riots...Benefit...Arrey, these riots help Haji Abdul Karim win all the Muslim votes and Pundit Yogeshwar to win all the Hindu votes for a seat in the tax department...Then, who the hell are we...You are the voters...Hindu voters, Muslim voters, Dalit voters, Kayasth voters, Sunni voters, Shia voters...And will this always be the case in our country...Yes. Why not?...The people are vile...they hire killers...when politicians instigate riots to get votes, what else can you expect?...Do you think they can't educate us?...Make us understand?...Ha!...Who are you to educate the people?...The government will educate us, if it wants to...And shall we remain uneducated, if the government doesn't want to?...Yes...That's what the British taught us...We are used to that...Okay, suppose all the Muslims of India become Hindus...Lahulvillakuvat, how can you say that?...Alright, let's assume that all the Muslims of the country become Hindus?...Subhan Allah...what a wonderful idea...Wah, wah!... Will there be no more riots then?...Let's think about that...In Pakistan, Shias and Sunnis are bitter enemies of each other...So, human beings are bloody fools who only want to fight each other...But, see, Jumman and Mayku are the best of friends...Why shouldn't we become Jumman and Mayku?...Wow!...What an idea...Meaning...meaning...meaning...'

I was turning the knobs of the radio early in the morning and Sofiya was sweeping the house when Raja's younger brother, Akram, came running. He was panting badly. He stuttered and said, 'The police are beating Saiffu.'

'What? What are you saying?'

'The police are beating Saiffu.' He repeated after he regained his breath.

'Why are they beating him? What has happened?'

'I don't know...at the street corner...'

'You mean where the police station is?'

'Yes.'

'But why...?' I knew that since the curfew had been relaxed between eight and ten in the morning, Amma had sent Saiffu to buy milk. Even an idiot like Saiffu knew that he had to come back as quickly as possible. It was now after ten.

'Let's go.' Without turning off the radio, I went to look for Saiffu. Why was the police beating a mad man like Saiffu? What grievous crime could he have committed? He couldn't have? He is always so frightened, why beat him?...What could he have done?...Money?...Arrey, Amma had given him only two rupees. Why would the police beat him for two rupees?

A small crowd had gathered at the corner of the main road. Saiffu was standing before the policemen and screaming loudly, 'Why did you beat me...I am a Hindu...Hindu...I am a Hindu...'

I walked up to talk to him. Even after seeing me, Saiffu continued to scream, 'Yes...yes...I am a Hindu...' He was staggering. A drop of blood had trickled down from the corner of his mouth to his chin.

'Why did you beat me...I am a Hindu...'

'Saiffu, what is all this...let's go home...'

'I...I am a Hindu...'

I was astonished...I didn't recognise Saiffu...He had changed completely...What's wrong with him...

'Saiffu, calm down; control yourself,' I scolded him.

The people of the neighbourhood were sniggering. Damn them. Don't they know he is mad?

'How is he related to you?' A policeman asked me.

'He is my brother. He has a mental problem.'

'Take him home,' the second policeman said.

'Come Saiffu...let's go home. The curfew has been re-imposed...curfew...'

'No, I won't go. I am a Hindu...Hindu...They...they...'

He began to weep bitterly, 'They...they beat me...I am a Hindu...I am...' He fell to the ground and fainted.

Now it was easier to carry him back home.

'Unbind me' and other poems

Irom Sharmila



Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist, 2013

victorious worm

since death hasn't embraced me, I'm able to
see!

kanglei, the mirror of my vision
on the new page of history
so written in red ink
in the battle between god and worm
worm has killed god
man of integrity
is revered as god himself,
a dirty worm like me
detests those as enemies
who won by sinning against the almighty

for them darkness prevails everywhere in the end

unbind me

unbind me
from this chain of thorns
that binds me in this narrow room
for no fault of mine
a caged bird
in this sinister prison cell
myriad voices cascade
no, not the garrulous chatter of birds
nor the crescendo of merry laughter
never a sweet song of lullaby
but the wailing of mothers
their children ripped from their breasts
women separated from their men
the widows' lament of despair
drawn by hands lads clad in olive green
i see a flaming ball
a terrible face of holocaust following
kindled by the spectacle of knowledge
in the path of experiment
they turned to lotus-eaters
slaves of hedon
intoxicated
their mind and intellect
nipped in the bud
while floating submissive in their revelry

time and tide
sweep away their wealth and honour
far beyond
the nine lofty ranges
it's a boon for others far away
smiling they reap the harvest
helplessly watched by the impotent souls

life is precious
only to depart too soon
like a light which illumines darkness
let me plant the immortal tree
sow the seed of ambrosia like a bird

let me wing to earth's every corner
to reach the proximity
where meets the living with the dead
and sing the carol of humanity

unbind me
remove this chain of thorns
let me not deflect my course
do not fault me
this is the only desire of a caged bird

when the curtains go up

how thrilling the sound of clapping
long had I derived pleasure
by reproaching fate
i who am blind and unsightly
had been deafened
by the mocking of many
ah, how this refreshing wind
washes my impure heart
in my dark world I remained
besieged by regret and despair
but now a change has come over me
i have suddenly developed a desire
to embark upon a new voyage
and live for a hundred years
in the course of my life's journey
i have always done something or other
slowly but surely
being conscious of the inexorable passage of

time to a blind person like me
there is no day and night
pride, I have not

a re-making of our jaded history
has metamorphosed all for me
like a snake slipping out of its old skin.
today, hope imbues my life anew
beacons from a brighter future beckon me
in my mind's eye I picture
the frail mingling free with the mighty

at this promising hour
a spirit of love and tolerance
reinforced by a sense of equality
infuses the ambience
and an explosion of hope, as it were,
greet everyone
when the curtains go up

These poems were first published in Irom Sharmila's collection of poems titled *Fragrance of Peace*, published in 2014 by Zubaan Books. They have been translated from Manipuri by Tayenjam Bijoy Kumar Singh, Longjam Joychandra Singh, and Kshetrimayum Chetan.

Poems © Irom Sharmila; translation © Tayenjam Bijoy Kumar Singh, Longjam Joychandra Singh, Kshetrimayum Chetan; image © Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist.

Ambedkar and Panchi Devi

Two Sculptures by Hiralal Rajasthani

BR Ambedkar without specs, Fiberglass, Life size portrait, 2014-15







Panchi Devi, Fiberglass, Life size portrait, 2010-11









The last pair of Kolhapuri chappals in the known universe

Three poems by Mustansir Dalvi



Franz Kline, 'Black, White, and Gray', Oil on canvas, 105 x 78 inches, 1959 | Image courtesy [The Metropolitan Museum of Art](#)

Baackwateraa illa!

The concrete soffit of the bridge
screeches over the dome

of the No. 4 kettuvallam
like a cormorant denied shallows.
The boat barely makes it
under the Venattukaddu Bridge
connecting the Manimala to the canal.

The Vembanad is a drop of mercury
on a glass pane, wobblytumescentgray
seeking fission from the nimbostratus
bulging uncertainly over it. I realize
I have stretched the metaphor but,
for Verghese, captain of the houseboat
it does not go far enough:

The lake's surface is new, upraised—
a mezzanine on dodgy supports
rising over unpunctuated horizon.
Gestalts of land/water no longer apply.
Monochrome makes even GPS unreliable.
I abandon it; place my trust entirely
on Verghese's hand memory.
He does so too. His eyes useless
to differentiate grey from gray.

Crows make pitstops on the bow.
There are no other perches on offer.
The boatman waves them off,
reluctantly. Bramhinish vie with kingfishers
for measly pickings. Familiar fishing pools

are obscured, the currents too fast
for victuals to remain in one place.

I ask Verghese about home.
He looks at me, our eyes meet
then he turns back to his wheel.
'Baackwaateraa illa! Only waater...'
his voice fades but he stays
on the straight and narrow,
port and starboard equidistant
between drowned paddy fields.

Hamam Soap

The municipal tap burbles
like a didgeridoo
for a full half hour,
before showing the slightest
signs of incontinence.

Cued to rattling pipes,
the building shakes itself awake;
all rise as one, reach for buckets.
Taps are tapped, vigils formed.

With each drip, hearts flutter.
Righteousness is played out
in a synesthesia of lather and foam,
of head baths and bowel movements.

In passages, toranas of towels align,
fresh with familiar green exhalations
deep from within the armpit
of Manilal Mansion.

The last pair of Kolhapuri chappals in the known universe

On the turning of Dimtimkar Street into Temkar Mohalla, a mobile repair store flourishes. Every new customer, while praising the proprietor's acumen, remarks on an odour almost sublimated, passed off almost, as a whiff of imagination. For forty-seven years, Mhamdu chopped meat with the finesse of a mobile repairman on a trunk of seesham inherited from his father, along with meat cleavers and a sharpening strop. For forty-seven years the trunk, steadfast like granite, stood right there in the shop where sim-cards are now arrayed. Mhamdu sits on the stoop across the street, finding in the eyes of every punter a former customer of trotters, kidneys or testicles. Once in a while he plays contrapuntal tunes in his head, chopchopchop a-chopchop, backbeats he once composed while reducing muscle to mince. Twice a day, every day, he tweaks his skullcap, puts down his lungi for modesty and airs a grilled vest as he enters Iqbal Restaurant (Pride of Nagpada). He is granted moong daal and rice, a largesse that bleeds him internally, as he swirls scraps of gourd in his bowl. The owner of the Iqbal eyes him cursorily, satisfied Mhamdu still walks on something promised to him for the two square meals. The sole may have worn down but the leatherwork remains burnish'd. Angtha and karangali are wound into exquisite veins, like the braided knee-length tresses of Tamil heroines in old Hindi films. The kapshi patta across the foot is adorned with a die-punched floret, topped off with a fluffy gonda, red as a cherry on black forest cake. Each stitch identifies the mochi who made it. Mhamdu is aware he is being inspected as he rises to wash his hands. Under the tap, he opens out his gnarled palms; digits rise like crags in the Deccan Traps, metamorphic remnants of the furnace of eruption, denuded of all vegetation. In contrast, the soles of his feet are as soft as a healthy liver, protected port and starboard by side flaps of leather. He turns his back on the longing gaze and walks to resume his vigil on the stoop. Mid-street, he is accosted by a posse of cattle on whom no one has the gotis to claim ownership. Like a believer, he touches the rump of the one nearest, his fingers meet bone instead of loin. It sears his soul to let them scavenge detritus on Dimtimkar Street, chewing plastic instead of cud. As the malnourished horde moves on, he recites a fatiha under his breath. He no longer visits the Sangetras Mosque on Hujara Street, not a hundred feet away. His promise has made him a heathen. He can never leave his footwear outside a place of

worship, an agreement is an agreement. Owner of the last pair of Kolhapuri chappals in the known universe, Mhamdu has set down his twinkling knives, conceding defeat to a vegetarian city. He burnt this bridge himself, handing over keys and location to a boy whose skills lie in shuffling printed circuits. In the years he has left, he looks back at the times he made it out (between his chopchopchop a-chopchop) alive, in 1969, in 1984, in 1992 and again in 1993, using his bulk and his blades to intimidate his way out of conflict, flying rather than fighting, letting his trusty Kolhapuris snatch him out of harm's way even as, successively in 1969, 1984, 1992 and 1993, they burnt his shop down. For nearly a year after, every passer-by salivated unselfconsciously, assailed by the almost sublimated, almost imaginary whiff of burnt meat.

Baackwateraa illé!: No more backwaters

Kolhapuri Chappals: Exquisitely crafted leather slippers, made in the western Indian city of Kolhapur, known for fanciful ornaments and durability. The Kohapuri chappal trade has lately been decimated by various proscriptions on cattle slaughter throughout the country.

Sheesham: A deciduous Indian rosewood, also known as *dalbergia sisso*.

Lungi: Wrap-around outerwear, like a sarong, worn by men. Can be folded up halfway to the knees or lowered to the ankles, as required.

Angtha; karangali; kapshi-patta; gonda: Toe-piece; stay for the little toe; strap around the upper foot; and tassel respectively, all parts of a Kolhapuri chappal.

Veni: Braided hair

Mochi: Shoe-maker

Gotis: Balls, cojones

Fatiha: An Islamic prayer/invocation to the dead

The poem 'The last pair of Kolhapuri chappals in the known universe' was first published in the journal Speak The Magazine (2019).

Poems © Mustanir Dalvi.

Detritus Mundi

Bina Shah



Sukanya Ghosh, from Vanishing Point, 'Wood for the Trees', digital photo collage, 20x30", 2018.

Standing in the kitchen as I make a cup of tea, I hear it before I see it: a large black fly, plump as a raisin, banging against the windowpane. Its inkspot body stands out against the clean white walls of the kitchen, a grey shadow following it in the fluorescent wash of the energy-saving lights.

The fly is trying to burst through what it doesn't understand is a solid piece of glass; it only perceives the blurred shapes of trees in a jumbled mosaic, the world as seen through a kaleidoscope. Still, instinctively, outside into that mess is where it wants to go. It must have

come in through the kitchen door, attracted by the smell of cooking, seeking shelter from the clean cold air of an early autumn morning.

I always feel slightly astonished when I see a fly in England. It seems so out of place, so wrong to see this interloper, a harbinger of disease and decay buzzing around a spotless window, or crawling across a lemony-smelling countertop. A tiny alien has come here by mistake, to a country of legendary cleanliness, where the streets are regularly washed and people extol the virtues of running and hiking barefoot in the countryside.

The last time I walked barefoot in Pakistan, hookworms laid their eggs in the top of my foot, from where the larvae hatched and began to crawl their way up my leg in thin red ribbons. I went to the doctor and got a course of medication to get rid of the infection, but I was left with a score of unsightly bruises on the tender skin of my foot and ankle. I still shudder to look at them. I swore I would never walk barefoot again, but there aren't enough shoes for all the children in all the villages of my country who tend the cattle and romp at the side of the canal without protection.

The experience, which shamed me to the core when it happened, now makes me feel oddly close to the fly, as if she and I have something in common. We occupy a lower status in the world, different from those who will never know what it feels like to host larvae in their bodies. This is natural for a fly but taints a human, sets her apart from those for whom cleanliness and good health are national aspirations. I can never join their ranks, tattooed as I am with third world afflictions.

As children, most of us harbor parasites in our intestines without even knowing it: roundworms and flatworms, amoebae, blastocysts. Sometimes we even bring these parasites with us to different countries. When we fall ill in foreign lands, the English doctors shake their heads and order exotic blood tests for something that our doctors at home could identify in probably twenty minutes.

Pakistani children are routinely dewormed, although I've read Western scientific studies that say having a tapeworm can help certain types of inflammatory bowel diseases; they boost the immune system by provoking inflammation in the body. A famed Italian opera singer apparently swallowed tapeworms to help her maintain her figure. Our children are so thin, so thin, Maria Callas would have been jealous of their emaciated frames, their collarbones jutting out atop their concave chests. Our afflictions are others' aspirations: our tanned skin, our thin bodies, our submissiveness, our ever-present smiles in the face of calamity.

Watching the fly, I feel a few moments of solidarity with this ugly, unwanted thing, before my natural third world instincts take over and I search for a way to let her out, or kill her. Either would be equally merciful where I come from. Escape or death, they're the same thing if you strip yourself of squeamishness and religious compunction.

When people in my country commit suicide, the holy men refuse to pray for them or bury them with the correct religious rites. I read recently of a man who spent his life in a graveyard, washing and burying the bodies of prostitutes who committed suicide in the brothels of Hyderabad. If humanity is the highest religion, he would have been its highest priest, but daring to suggest this is a form of blasphemy where I come from.

We humans are strange: grateful for escape and ungrateful for death. But when someone delivers either of them to you without you even asking for it, what's the use in being dissatisfied? Flies cannot feel gratitude, but they find beauty in what we think of as ugliness. Maybe if we had five eyes instead of two, we'd see what they see: extra colors, more movement, a thrilling complexity that pulls us into an alternate, inside-out world, where shit is a feast and garbage smells divine.

I saw a pigeon carcass earlier in the day as I was walking around the town square. It looked as if someone had laid a down-filled cushion in the street and smashed it with a cricket bat. There was a suggestion of grey feathers around the circumference of the dead object — no longer a bird in its corporeal form, its outlines transformed from bird-shaped into an unidentifiable mass. In the middle of the flattened blob, a meaty, dull pink mince.

I don't know how it died, but I suppose it had been run over by a bright green bus, with a proud proclamation on its side that the bus ran on green energy. I was the only person to stop and look at the dead bird, to hiss through my clenched teeth the way we do back home when we see something that reminds us of the intransigence of life. Nobody else seemed to have noticed the dead pigeon's existence. They politely looked away, as if giving the bird some dignity in death.

Standing at the window of this beautiful, comfortable house, I think about how, if I set it free, the fly would wander around the rows of immaculate flowers in the English garden, then go straight and true until she found that pigeon carcass, squashed flat in the street, to bother over. I can't reach the window, though; it's too high. The fly continues to assault the windowpane fruitlessly and I continue to watch her, unable to deliver either death or escape to my little sister today.

But even if I could let her go, she would be disappointed, because by the afternoon, when I was on my way back home, the dead pigeon had vanished. A passerby must have noticed, and called the council, who sent a cleaner with special tools, clad in a yellow high-visibility jacket, to scrape it off. It's possible the road had even been washed, to make it look as though the pigeon had never been there in the first place.

The fly should have been in orbit around that dead pigeon, not banging herself against a window that was made immaculate just this morning by a Romanian cleaner. That pigeon should never have been walking in the street where the bus came and crushed it. By our willpower, we humans can unmake actions, undo intent, unroll nature. When we close our eyes, the past unravels and ceases to exist. We defy death with our insistence on hygiene. If we keep the world around us clean enough, we will never, ever die.

I can't blame the fly for losing her bearings, though, nor the pigeon, poor soul. My customs don't match the place in which I find myself. I too had done the wrong thing by standing and staring at its carcass, wanting to point it out to everyone that passed by — look! Look! Isn't it terrible? But they deliberately did not look in my direction. In this country, it's more polite not to meet anyone with more than a nod, or a brief, tight-lipped smile. Decay does not exist if you do not look at it. I felt robbed of the solidarity of grief, even over something as mundane as a pigeon run over by a bus.

Later that day, I crowded onto a tube during rush hour and found myself saying sorry to everyone, which was correct. But as more and more people pushed into me, and the temperature in the carriage began to rise, it took me a moment to realise that my lips were moving, my mouth humming with Arabic prayers for the dead. It's a habit ingrained in me whenever I feel an impending sense of doom. When I got off the train, I stood for a moment on the platform, watching everyone scurry away into tunnels, up escalators, shrugging into or out of black jackets, shiny exoskeletons guarding their fragile insides, keeping them in place. The heels of their boots clicked as they marched quickly in formation, going to places by instinct: school, work, home.

Pakistan was cleaner when I was a child. All we had in those days, a good forty years ago, was dust. Dust is clean. It comes from the desert; it's blown in from the beach. Our holy book instructs us that if you can't find clean water with which to purify yourself before the prayer, you can find good, clean sand or dust, tap your hands on it, and rub your face and arms three times. This you can also do if your skin is inflamed, and water is a curse rather than a blessing.

The lepers in my country would have benefited greatly from this knowledge, if they had been thinking about their prayers. But that's probably why they were afflicted with their disease in the first place, if you listened to what the holy men say. Those men have all the answers for our problems, but none of the solutions. They spend many minutes in their day performing their ablutions, instructing us all how to clean our ears and wash between our toes, while the ground around the mosques are always the dirtiest, strewn with dirt, crawling with flies.

Here in England, I feel as if I have more in common with the fly, the maggot, the common cockroach, than I do with the people that live here, who smell fresh like fabric softener and speak in soft tones, every second word out of their mouth an apology for an uncommitted offense. They put their garbage in separate bins: black for refuse, green for recycling, blue for bottles and plastic. Uniformed men come to their quiet streets and pull the bins out, empty them into the backs of giant mechanical garbage trucks, take them away to treatment plants and recycling factories in a neat and industrial operation that takes place every Tuesdays and Saturdays at eight in the morning.

In Pakistan, I saw Afghan children put their hands in stinking sewers to pull out plastic bottles and empty them of black sewage water before recapping them and throwing them into the sacks they carry on their backs, hoping to sell them for a few dozen rupees so their families could eat in the evening. There was a drive to return these people to their home, across the porous border, to a country they had never seen. We like to imagine that ridding ourselves of vermin will make us clean again.

I carry the stench of detritus with me everywhere I go, layers of dirt and despair that no bath can take off me, no amount of fabric softener or gentility can erase. When I tell people where I come from and what I have witnessed, their eyes widen and they lay sympathetic hands on my arm to express their solidarity. But in their soft blue eyes, I see a dullness that signals the absence of understanding.

How can I explain to these clean people that only last month, we slaughtered animals to celebrate God, then skinned them and eviscerated the carcasses, throwing the offal into the street? The bodies bled into standing rainwater where the mosquitoes laid their larvae with

almost bureaucratic efficiency. Entire neighborhoods erupted in dengue and dysentery in the aftermath.

Only the fly understands this stench, is excited by its promises, feeds on its largesse. The fly and her kind are intimately acquainted with death in all its forms. She does not judge anyone for the dirt and the filth, the bombings, the target killings, the lynchings, the honor killings. She sees only opportunity in all the ways people can tear each other apart. In countries like mine, we kill each other for sport, or money, or conviction, and we all die knowing we are careless and replaceable. The fly knows this and loves us for it. It's a symbiotic relationship: we die so her kind can live.

I watch the fly buzz against the windowpane, turn and circle back, again, again, again. Her entrapment is the song of the world; I know that I am helpless to change it in any way. I turn away and walk into the next room, where the television is buzzing with news of a man found dead after hiding himself in the wheel well of an aircraft's landing gear. He froze to death somewhere above the Mediterranean; as the plane descended toward Heathrow, the compartment opened and his body plummeted to earth, without any wings to help him fly away.

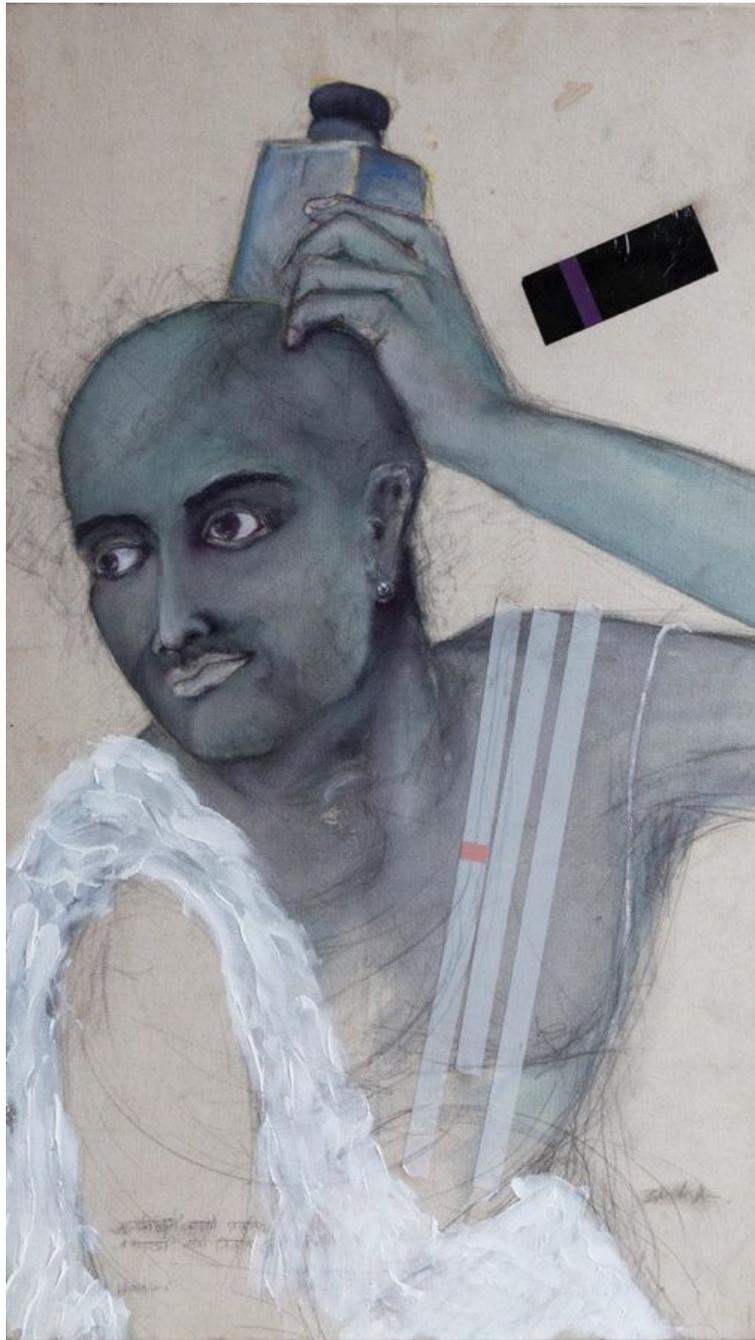
Two news anchors are discussing this as a segue into the latest rhetoric about immigrants, the language the right wing uses to describe them, the dehumanisation of people in order to serve political agendas. They're too polite to discuss how the names of insects and animals are used to describe the people who wash up on these pure shores.

Do we get to be human only after we die? I ask the fly.

To my surprise, she replies, speaking slowly and clearly enough so I can understand: *Sic transit detritus mundi*.

The Last Brahmin

Shailesh B.R.



'Untitled', Ink, water color, gum tape, acrylic on raw canvas, 51x90cms, 2011-2020

What is an inheritance?

Who inherits tradition?

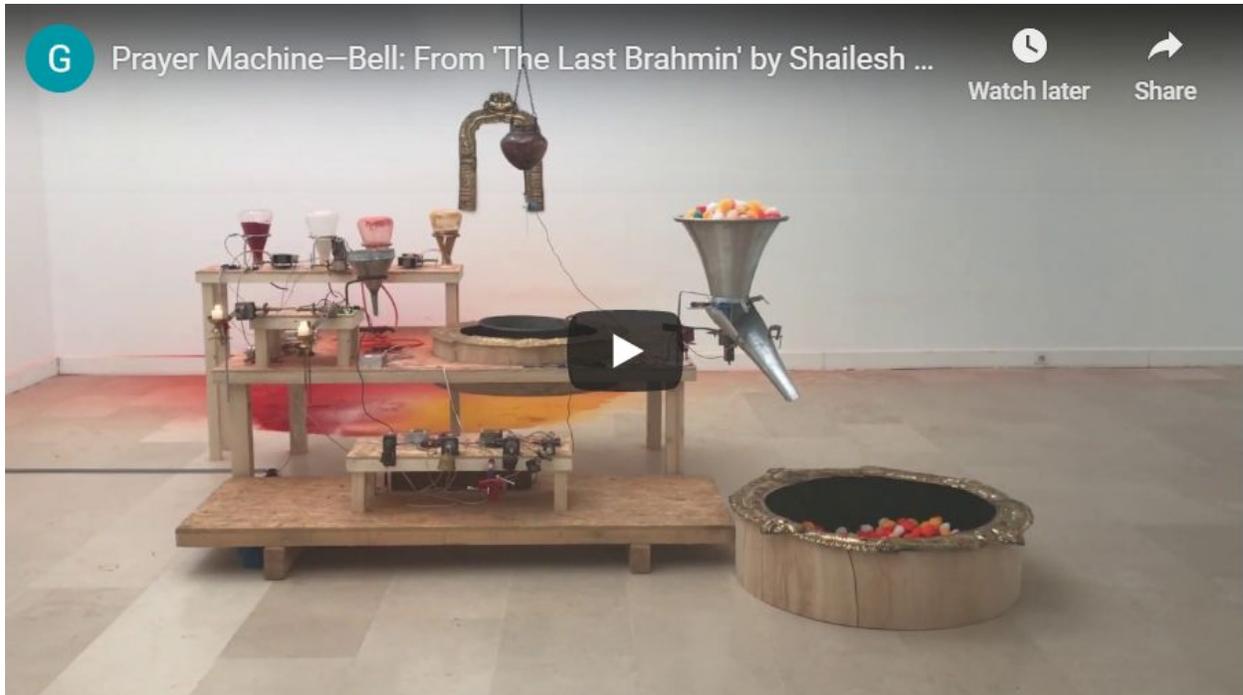
How may one inherit a tradition?

What are the conditions and consequences of such inheritance?

The Last Brahmin is a multimedia installation art project conceived by Shailesh B.R. as he critically revisited and analysed his cultural and social inheritance as someone born into a brahmin community. Through this project, he endeavors to unravel various layers of caste practices revisiting its core structure, decoding the idea of inheritance, formation and deformation.



Approximately 10,000 holy sticks placed in front of a funeral ceremony photograph



The title of this project is taken from a book called *The Last Brahmin: Life and Reflections of a Modern-Day Sankarit Pandit* (2012) by Rani Siva Sankara Sarma.

Images and videos © Shailesh B.R.

Plucking sunsets from the water

Five poems by Ranjit Hoskote



Photograph by Daniya

Sovereign

Plucking sunsets from the water

the horned sovereign
half stamps half slides across
the beach
stopping
to dig claw rake

What washes up

is drilled shale lost static parsed from gulf to strait
plastic whorls in whose wake gagged dolphins trail
scarred humpback whales whose shadows
will drift unmoored up thawing glaciers

What washes up
 is news of the cracked ice

across which a shivering fox is making her way
from Svalbard to Nunavut
 leaving her pawprints on frozen currents
to a shore stippled with burst nebulae
 a shore
 that on a compass dizzy with wind-scattered directions
she can and can't call home

Cave

Ask yourself how
 you'd breathe through swaddling skins of light
and reach for the faint reeds waving above
 when what you'd really like
is to swim upstream

 to where the cave still pulses
 with lines you'd sketched
and yes if you must know
 the patient rocks were crushed
in a mudslide

and something has been moved
 something no longer
than a strip of raw silk or a croton leaf
 no wider than the gap in a shutter
through which

 you saw the vine snake
green-whipping across the steps
the hawk swooping down on the chicken coop
 the grooves in red earth glistening
jewel-quick with early rain

through which you heard Varaha say:
What is it Earth
 shall I lift you
from the roaring waters
 on my tusks?

Could you breathe if they trapped us
 in a net of myths?

Ape

The key body part can be downloaded on demand
tear the banner
 darn the shroud

Try making a man Ghalib says out loud
let him walk blindfold on a gunpowder track
 that snakes through a crowd

One last suture to get this buttonholed skin in shape
try making a man of the speaking ape

Bonesetter

You mend what's snagged
 fix what's gone out of true:
the bulging knuckle the scuffed runaway shoe
 that hides a spur the cracked femur
 the twisted knee

Stoic, you repair us for combat
 we go out again and again
at the emperor's pleasure
 but in the end the arena
takes no prisoners

We walk out holding our heads high

in our stiff raised hands
your sutures
an embroidery
of carbon dust

Musk

for Ranbir Kaleka

The fire spreads from mouth to cup
eye to spoor it's tracking
ear to storm that's drumming through cloud reefs
rumour glistens and drips
from leaf to leaf

Behind the surveyor a peacock dances
on an orange tree
its branches withering in the gale
he hears it whistle and whirl and grits his teeth
his eyes remain trained

on a golden deer that prances
from one burning forest to the next
it's forgotten the voice that said
Don't set foot in the third forest
it cannot escape the flaming musk it carries

Exodus

Madhusudhanan and Sabitha Satchi



Self-Imposed Isolation in the Studio

Madhusudhanan

February-March-April 2020

The heat kept getting more and more intense. The coronavirus had arrived in Kerala and was multiplying.

Nothing is lucid in the early morning light. All I can see is my studio in low light in the semi-dark. Here there is a little coolness, books, ink, pigments, and pens. Here wait Ozu and Bresson and Tarkovsky to share visual stories. The best time in the studio is between four and seven in the morning.

As Paul Klee said, the time when lines can be taken for a walk.

As sunlight filled the studio, a drawing had been done.

Exhibitions in galleries have gone still; who will see the drawings?

After taking an image of the drawing, I sent it to my most intimate friends by Whatsapp – KGS, Sanil, Bose, Sabitha, Satchidanandan.

The next morning when I got up to start drawing, there were replies to the Whatsapp messages. From Sabitha, poet and curator, it was in the form of a poem: 'Artist's Fingers.'

The Lamp and Five Loaves of Bread.

The morning walk of fingers and lines into the full exposure of the sun...

More poems from Sabitha in reply to each drawing, and more yet to come...

Outside the studio I can see the first summer rain through the window.

When men and women withdraw into their houses in fear of viruses, the inheritors of the earth who come in search can be heard humming— like the background score in a motion-picture.



Away from Home

Sabitha Satchi

There is a sense of urgency about these times. One feels one is living on the edge of a precipice. The world is restless, there is untold suffering of millions of people living precarious lives.

Even while being locked down in the writer's studio I came to stay in only for ten days in Goa on curation work, the photographs from Delhi reach me—of labourers on the Yamuna river bed foraging amongst rotten bananas; of workers walking home hundreds of miles so that they can then safely “Stay Home” as the PM urged the privileged classes; of Muslims being cruelly hated upon, attacked and denied rations.

There were images too of Cuban doctors travelling thousands of miles to attend to the Covid-19 crisis in Iran and Syria; of gallons of milk being poured down the drain in the U.S. even as it records millions of people newly registering as unemployed.

In such an unequal and restless world where everyone is just fighting for survival, how does the writer in her studio in isolation, far away from home and her beloved books, respond to the crisis?

It is in these circumstances that Madhusudhanan, artist and friend of over two decades, sends me a drawing from *his* self-isolation in his studio in Kerala. More drawings come. There is restlessness in the drawings, as there is a longing for home; there is the pain of the exiled and the abandoned. And there are references to other contexts of exile and abandonment—Paul Celan’s poetry and Charles Baudelaire’s lines; there is Paul Klee’s Angelus Novus spreading its wings; there is the sound of the nail being driven into the cross.

There are also lamps and bread and shoots of green. There are tents of refuge. There is the precarious boat of the refugee. Behind us both stands Anna Akhmatova in a line for bread; in front of us are Tarkovsky and Ritwik Ghatak and FN Souza. Leonard Cohen sings of the dark in grainy lament somewhere.

The poems kept coming, one in response to each drawing and to a common vision and time. We each planted seeds in our studios and there were birds and squirrels in the forest my windows overlook.

In this temporary home, in the absence of the companionship of my books, I found solace in the trees, the birds, the clear starry sky, and the artist’s lines that responded to the restlessness in the world with their luminiscent fluidity.

There was fire and earth and water. There were angels in the sky and fallen angels on earth. A project was born—**Exodus**.





Poet's Head - 2
Madhusudhanan-2020

Artist's Fingers - I

Exodus

Sabitha Satchi

Dragon fly-wings darken the sky and the swell
breaks the banks and rushes into walls and doors
In his sky-studio the metal smith sculpts a church-bell
Thunder beats its frenzied drums, everything sways
and fragments of idols cover the altar of earth's floor
and confessionals quake with hollow men's ways

Your finger lit up and flickered, a lighthouse
shone forth amidst roiling butterfly wings
The ship's shadow comes ashore, near near—
They're coming in search of home, the refugees.



"GOD IS THE ONLY BEING WHO, IN ORDER TO REIGN
DOESN'T EVEN NEED TO EXIST." SIGHT GROWS DIM
MADHUSUDHANAN. 2020

Artist's Fingers - II

The Lamp and Five Loaves of Bread

Sabitha Satchi

Mottled smoke hangs over the lamp and forest-
green turns sepia as they scatter on the sky, birds,
birds, looking to nest, everywhere they wander:
the abandoned, the homeless, migrating words
fly off looking for a palm leaf on the empty sea
The boat is unmoored in the sky for two fish
The farmer sows his last sack of seeds and awaits

a miracle, a leaf shoots up, the wick-finger rises
up and sings a grainy Hallelujah, the neighbour
strums litanies on the door and on the holy page—
five loaves of bread arise in evensong



"THE HEART HID STILL IN THE DARK,
HARD AS THE PHILOSOPHERS STONE...."

The Tent of Wings
MAHUSUDHANAN-2020

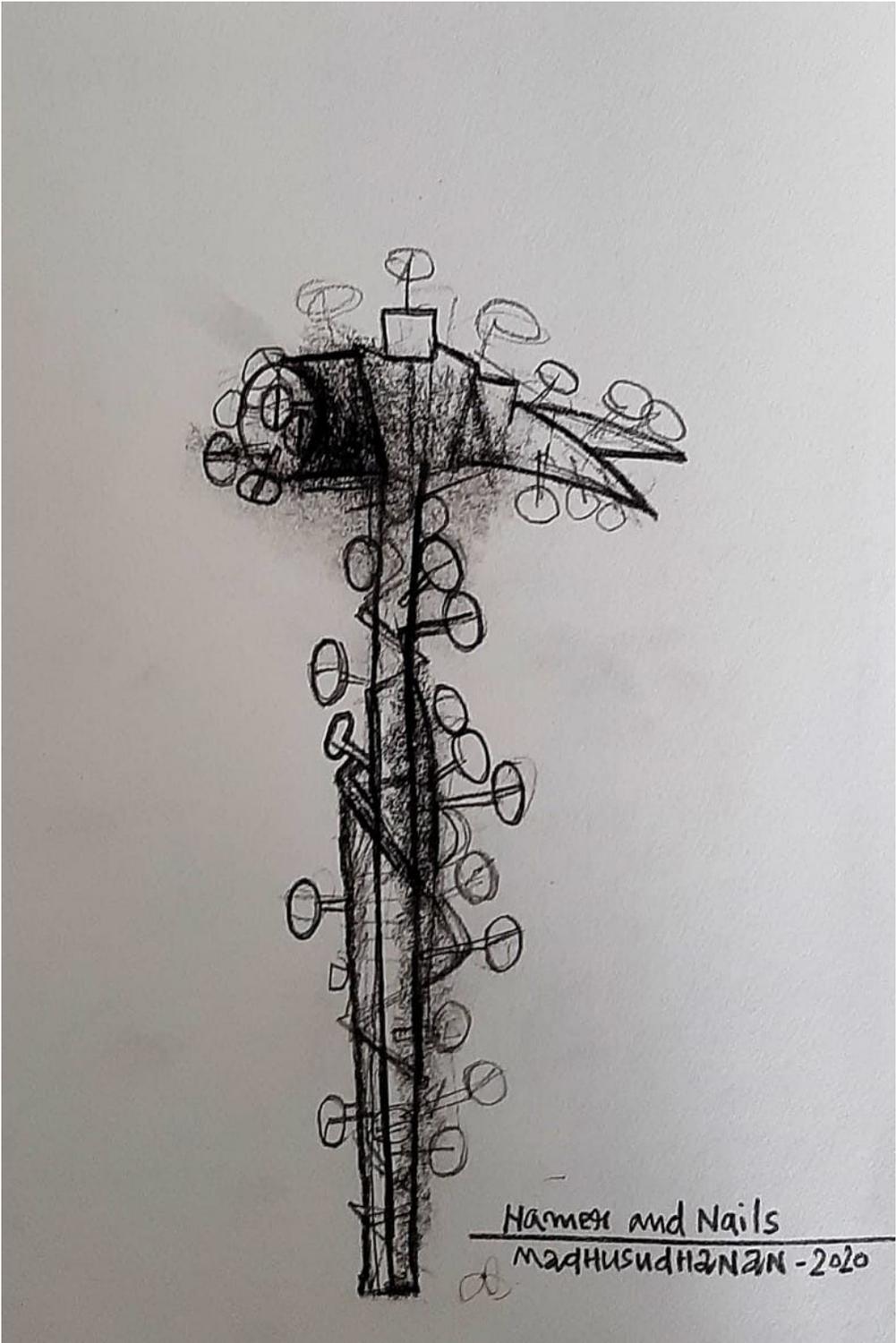
Artist's Fingers - III

The Tent of Wings

Sabitha Satchi

As the tents, tents in the open multiply
an eagle overhead surveys the huddled
baking bread on open fires, drying the sky
on the clothesline, hanging the curtain
to dry behind the stage, shadows move
in the motion-picture, now still, now darting
to the frenzied beat of chenda drums

They cover their ears, the ground trembles
and all are drenched in the thunder-clap
Wet is the sky, the fire, the earth – all are now water, a green tent shoots up—
wings of Mercy gather the dark, the fallen.



Hammer and Nails

MADHUSUDHANAN - 2020

Artist's Fingers - IV

Hammer and Nail/Scream

Sabitha Satchi

The carpenter hammers in a nail, brings
the twisted feet together, drip by drip
sees carpenter-blood drop in strings
Startled, he loosens the fourth nail 's grip
Sweat wets his brows, wet is the soil, wounds
spread on the wood in contagious rings

Thunder rolls, the parched earth opens her jaws
For a single drop of water He screams, the way
of the cross is exposed by blinding light—
Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?

Contributors

Alok Bhalla is a visiting professor of English at Jamia Millia Islamia. He is the author of *Stories About the Partition of India*. He has also translated Dharamvir Bharati's *Andha Yug*, Intizar Husain's *A Chronicle of the Peacocks* and Ram Kumar's *The Sea and Other Stories* into English.

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

Asghar Wajahat is a Hindi scholar, fiction writer, novelist, playwright, an independent documentary filmmaker and a television scriptwriter, who is most known for his work, *Saat Aasmaan* and his acclaimed play, *Jis Lahore Nai Dekhya, O Jamyai Nai*.

Bina Shah is a Karachi-based author of five novels and two collections of short stories including the critically acclaimed novel *A Season for Martyrs* (2014) and the feminist dystopian novel *Before She Sleeps* (2018). She is currently the president of the Alliance Francaise de Karachi and works on issues of women's rights and female empowerment in Pakistan and across Muslim countries.

Daniya Rahman is a member of the editorial collective of the Indian Writers Forum.

Gopika Nath works with needle and thread. A Fulbright Scholar and an alumna of Central St. Martins, London, U.K, her association with textiles began in 1976. She is a fibre artist, textile designer, writer and teacher. She also initiated the 'Art for Wear' movement in India in the early 1990's with her range of exclusive hand-painted sarees and scarves.

कला साहित्य के क्षेत्र में अपनी अलग पहचान बना चुके दिल्ली प्रशासन में कलाध्यापक के पद पर कार्यरत, सुप्रसिद्ध मूर्तिकार व दलित लेखक संघ के अध्यक्ष **हीरालाल राजस्थानी** का जन्म 9 जून 1968 प्रसाद नगर दिल्ली में हुआ। इनको राजस्थान ललित कला अकादमी से 'कोल्डड्रिम' नामक मूर्तिशिल्प में राष्ट्रीय पुरस्कार (बैनाले अवॉर्ड) 1997, फैकल्टी ऑफ फाइन आर्ट, जामिया मिल्लिया इस्लामिया दिल्ली से बेस्ट परफॉर्मेंस इन स्कल्प्चर अवॉर्ड 1993, साहित्य कला परिषद दिल्ली से युवा महोत्सव में भागीदारी पुरस्कार 1993 और 1994 में, एन्टी करप्शन फाउंडेशन ऑफ इंडिया करनाल हरियाणा की ओर से कला व साहित्य में उत्कृष्ट योगदान हेतु राष्ट्रीय गौरव सम्मान और ग्लोबल ब्रिलियन्स अवॉर्ड 2018 में तथा एक काव्य संग्रह 'मैं साधु नहीं' कदम प्रकाशन से 2017 में प्रकाशित हो चुका है।

Ian Thomas Jansen-Lonnquist graduated from the University of Vermont with a B.S. in Natural Resource Planning and minor studies in Community and International Development. Ian worked for a variety of non-profits before pursuing photography full-time. Since 2009 Ian has been a constant contributor to the Burlington Free Press, Vermont's largest daily.

Ina Puri is a writer, biographer, art curator and collector. She is the author of several books, including *Faces of Indian Art* and *Journey with a Hundred Strings*.

Irom Chanu Sharmila, also known as the “Iron Lady” is a civil rights activist from Manipur. She has been called as “the world’s longest hunger striker” for her hunger strike beginning November 2000 till August 2016 as a protest against Armed Forces Special Power Act (AFSPA), 1958. Amnesty International has declared her a Prisoner of Conscience.

Madhusudhanan is a leading artist and filmmaker based in India. He is a founder-member of the Indian Radical Group of Painters and Sculptors. Born in Alappuzha, Kerala, Madhusudhanan studied Painting from the Fine Arts College, Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala, and Print Making at the Faculty of Fine Arts, MS University of Baroda. His artistic practice flows seamlessly across various mediums in art and cinema, including video art and narrative feature film. Madhusudhanan’s installation of 90 charcoal drawings titled *The Logic of Disappearance – A Marx Archive* has been shown at the Kochi Muziris Biennale: ‘Whorled Explorations’ 2014-15, curated by Jitish Kallat. His works have been exhibited in venues including the Venice Biennale 2015, Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, Vadehra Gallery, New Delhi and 1+1 Gallery, Dubai. As a filmmaker he has made films in English and Indian regional languages, as well as two silent short fictions. His feature film *Bioscope* won several awards including the NETPC Award for Best Asian Film, Osian, Special Jury Award at the National Awards and Kerala State Films Special Jury Award. Other notable films include *Self Portrait* (Short Fiction, Hindi, 2001) and *History is a Silent Film* (Short Fiction, Silent, 2006), which were recognised as Outstanding Films from International Festivals, by MoMA.

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.

Mustansir Dalvi is an anglophone poet, translator and editor. His poems have been translated into French, Croatian and Marathi. He is the author of two collections of poetry titled *Brouhahas of Cocks* (Poetrywala, 2013) and *Cosmopolitan* (Poetrywala, 2018). Dalvi is also the editor of *Man without a Navel*, a collection of translations of Marathi poet Hemant Divate’s poems (Poetrywala, 2018). He currently teaches architecture in Mumbai.

Ranjit Hoskote is a poet, cultural theorist and curator. His collections of poems include *Vanishing Acts: New & Selected Poems 1985-2005* (2006), *Central Time* (2014), and *Jonahwhale* (2018). His translation of the fourteenth-century Kashmiri mystic Lal Ded’s *vaakhs* has appeared as *I, Lalla: The Poems of Lal Ded* (2011). He is the editor of *Dom Moraes: Selected Poems*, the first annotated critical edition of a major Anglophone Indian poet’s work.

Saba Hasan is an Indian contemporary artist who is based in Goa and New Delhi.

Sabitha Satchi is an art and literature critic, art curator and poet. After teaching English literature at the University of Delhi for 12 years, she was a researcher in London for six years. She has been the recipient of awards including the Commonwealth Research Scholarship, U.K.;

Paul Mellon Fellowship, Yale University, U.S.A.; Graduate Student Award, UCL, London; Sarai-CSDS Independent Fellowship, New Delhi; and the Vyloppilli Sreerekha Award for Malayalam Poetry. Her poems in English and Malayalam have been published in several journals and anthologies. Her articles have appeared in journals and anthologies of literature, art, and the humanities; and she has presented papers at many conferences, including at Columbia University, New York; Warwick University, U.K., Leeds University U.K., the University of Oxford; CSDS, Delhi, and Goa University. She has been invited to read her poetry at venues including Poetry Africa, Durban, London House, London, Prakriti Poetry Festival Chennai, University of Srinagar, Kashmir, KLF, Kozhikode, and Pakistan-India People's Forum for Democracy, Delhi. Her book of poems, *Hereafter*, is coming out from Poetrywala in May, 2020.

Sarabjeet Garcha is a bilingual poet, editor, translator and publisher. He is the author of four books of poems including *A Clock in the Far Past* and a collection of poems in Hindi. He has translated many American poets into Hindi, including W.S. Merwin, and many Indian poets into English, including Mangalesh Dabral. He is also the founder and editorial director of Copper Coin, a multilingual publishing enterprise.

Shailesh B.R. received his P.G Diploma in Painting from the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S University, Baroda. He participated in the Atelier Mondial Residency/ Pro Helvetia – Swiss Art Council, Switzerland in the year 2016 and exhibited his work at the Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, in 2017. He was also the winner of the FICA Emerging Artist Award in 2015. *The Last Brahmin* is his current project exhibited at Villa Arson, Nice.

Shanta Gokhale is a playwright, novelist, translator and theatre scholar. She has written two novels, a few plays and a scatter of short stories including *Crowfall* (2013), *The Engaged Observer: The Selected Writings of Shanta Gokhale* (2018) and *One Foot on the Ground: A Life Told Through the Body* (2019). Besides essays, short fiction, novels and autobiographies, she has translated Jerry Pinto's novel *Em and the Big Hoom* from English into Marathi and several plays from Marathi into English. In 2019, Gokhale received a lifetime achievement award at the Tata Literature Live.

Sudhir Patwardhan is an Indian contemporary painter. His first one person show was held by Ebrahim Alkazi's Art Heritage Gallery in New Delhi in 1979. Since then his work has been seen regularly in exhibitions in India and abroad. In 2008- 2009 Patwardhan curated an exhibition of Indian Contemporary Art 'Vistarnari Kshitije' / 'Expanding Horizons' which travelled to eight cities in Maharashtra. His second curatorial project, in 2011, was an exhibition of the drawings of ten artists, shown in The Guild Art Gallery, Mumbai and Sudarshan Art Gallery, Pune. Patwardhan's works are in the permanent collection of National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi and Mumbai; Roopankar Museum, Bhopal; Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, New Delhi, Jehangir Nicholson Collection, Mumbai; the Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, USA and other prominent private and public collections. The artist lives and works in Thane.

Zai Whitaker is an author and conservationist. Her books include *Cobra in my Kitchen* (2005), *Salim Ali for Schools* (2003), *Andamans Boy* (1998) and *Kali and the Rat Snake* (2006) among others. She has studied and worked with people of the Irula community, who are snake catchers and is a director of the Irula Tribal Women's Welfare Society. She lived and taught in Kodaikanal for thirteen years and was also the principal of Outreach School, Bangalore.

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