Issue 23

Guftugu

Culture matters

Pushpamala N, from ‘Atlas of Rare and Lost Alphabets’ (2015-2018)

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

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

To sum up our vision:

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

Our Team

Consulting Editors
K. Satchidanandan
Githa Hariharan

Editor
Daniya Rahman

Site
Shweta Jain

Design, Art and Layout
Srujana K

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

Contents:

From the Editors

How do we grow our resistance everyday?

Pushpamala N, *from* 'Nara' (2020-2022), 8.5 x 10.5 inches

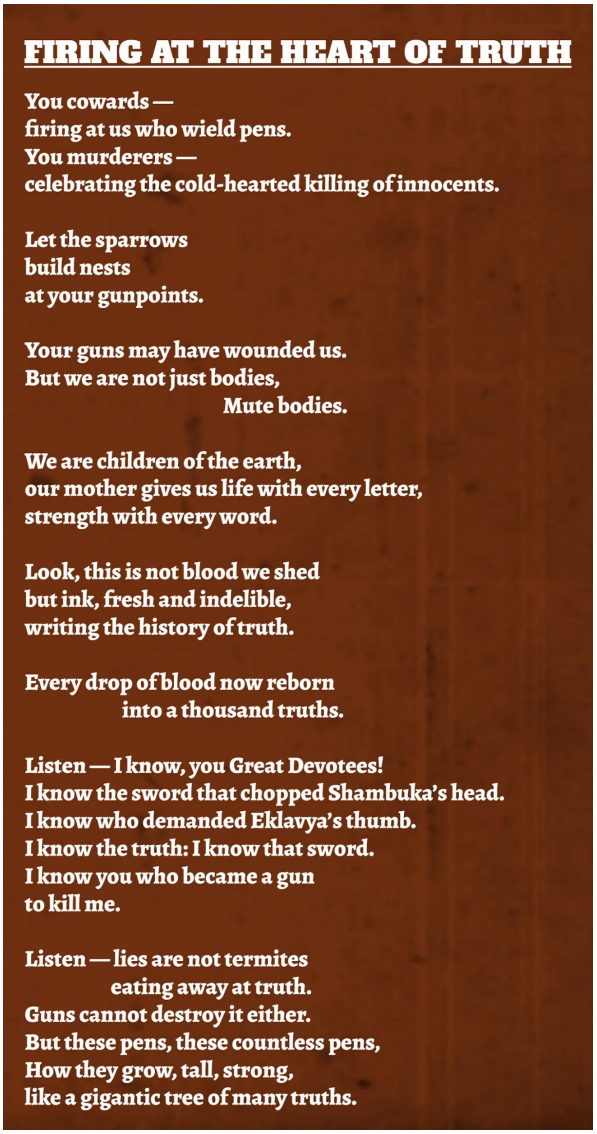
In October 2015, in the first issue of *Guftugu*, we described what we were up against:

If singing and dancing, poetry and prose, film and painting have all been possible even in the most brutal times history has witnessed, we can believe our situation today too cannot subdue what we can do with artistic practice of all sorts, as well as education. Every day we see new evidence of authoritarianism in India – the sort of tyranny that impinges on our cultural work, and on those who wish to partake of what we imagine for them. Even the day-to-day cultural practices by the wide range of people who make up India are vulnerable to the aggression of the "cultural police" in different guises. These policemen want to tell us all what to eat, wear, read, speak, pray, think. They want to tell us *how to live.*

A Kashmiri man stands near the concertina wires at Hazratbal, in Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir on 7 June 2018 | Image courtesy Sehar Qazi, *Guftugu* Issue 12

We made a promise to fight this:

Guftugu aims to reflect and critique present-day aggression against culture; to articulate creative resistance against the degeneration of democratic values and institutions; and to achieve this by freely doing what we do best: writing, painting, imagining, speculating and debating.



FIRING AT THE HEART OF TRUTH

You cowards —
firing at us who wield pens.
You murderers —
celebrating the cold-hearted killing of innocents.

Let the sparrows
build nests
at your gunpoints.

Your guns may have wounded us.
But we are not just bodies,
Mute bodies.

We are children of the earth,
our mother gives us life with every letter,
strength with every word.

Look, this is not blood we shed
but ink, fresh and indelible,
writing the history of truth.

Every drop of blood now reborn
into a thousand truths.

Listen — I know, you Great Devotees!
I know the sword that chopped Shambuka's head.
I know who demanded Eklavya's thumb.
I know the truth: I know that sword.
I know you who became a gun
to kill me.

Listen — lies are not termites
eating away at truth.
Guns cannot destroy it either.
But these pens, these countless pens,
How they grow, tall, strong,
like a gigantic tree of many truths.

Huchangi Prasad, Translated from Kannada by Ali Ahsan and Aniruddha Nagaraj, *Guftugu* Issue 16

The challenge has grown since then.

The question confronting us every day, in the classroom, the courts, on the streets, and even in our neighbourhoods and homes, is this: *How do we grow our resistance everyday?* How do we learn to hear, understand, and amplify, in solidarity, in word, image and gesture, the voices of all the people, young and old, in every nook and corner of the country, who are subject to discrimination, fear, hatred, poverty?

In other words: *What kind of India do we want?*

This is the kind of India our cultural community have asked for through *Guftugu*:

- A country bent on annihilating caste.
- A country where diverse communities mingle and thrive.

Image courtesy Gulammohammed Sheikh, *Guftugu* Issue 19

- A country where every person, whether Adivasi, woman, LGBTQ, organised or unorganised worker, can demand her rights to equality, dignity and a chance for a better life.

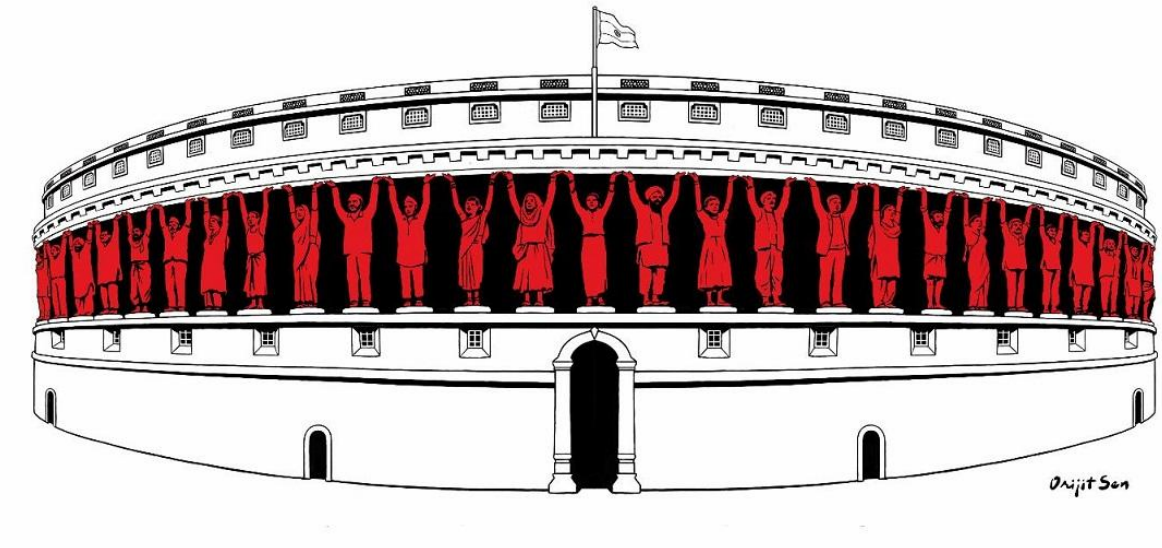


Image courtesy Orijit Sen, Farmers' Parliament, *Guftugu* Issue 14

- A rational, secular country in which people are free to think; to doubt; to speculate and imagine; and always, to ask sharp questions.

Image courtesy Riyas Komu, *Guftugu* Issue 20

The dream of remaking India remains alive in our hearts. So does the hope that fuels the dream, and promises us that it can be done. It gives us the courage, whether in the pages of *Guftugu* or elsewhere, to speak up in any way we can. *The only constant is resistance*.

Githa Hariharan
K Satchidanandan

May 2022

Posthumous Dialogues with F N Souza

Homage to a Goan Artist

As part of the ongoing Raza Centenary celebrations organised by The Raza Foundation, New Delhi, to commemorate S H Raza and his artist friends in the Progressive Artists' Group, Bombay, ***Posthumous Dialogues with F N Souza****, an exhibition of contemporary art to honour the legacy of the great Modernist Indian artist F N Souza, opened at the Museum of Goa, Pilerne, Goa, on 23rd April 2022.*

This exhibition, with both established and upcoming artists, curated by writer and critic ***Sabitha Satchi****, aims to showcase the artistic legacy of Souza's bold, brutal and often distorted figures, his innovative forms in contemporary art, and its significance in a world radically altered by a global pandemic and rising suffering and sectarian violence.*

A curatorial walkthrough of the exhibition by Sabitha Satchi | Image courtesy Museum of Goa

Curator's Note:

Brutally humanistic, unabashedly raw, aesthetically pitiless and violently alive, Francis Newton Souza's art has a renewed relevance today. F N Souza gave the figurative a radically new aesthetic language: bold, brutal, pained, intense, and often provocatively erotic Souza, along with S H Raza, M F Husain and K H Ara founded The Bombay Progressive Group in the 1940s and 5Os that later included Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta, V S Gaitonde, S K Bakre, and Krishen Khanna among other artists. Souza, who was a gifted writer, wrote the manifesto of the group which forged an international avant garde aesthetic style.

The relevance of Souza, who is a Catholic born in Saligao, Goa, India, and a black immigrant in the West, whose works intensely engaged with brutality and suffering in content; the irregular in form; and the distorted human figure in powerful lines and colours, cannot be emphasised enough in our world radically altered by a global pandemic and rising sectarian violence.

This exhibition of contemporary art is a homage to Souza, the internationally reputed artist who never received his due place in Indian art history while alive, even though his works sold for

millions of dollars after his death. The works of 26 artists — *Atul Dodiya, Chaitali Morajkar, Charudatt Pande, Harshada Kerkar, Julio D'Souza, K M Madhusudhanan, Kalidas Mhamal, Kedar Dhondu, Pradeep Naik, Pramod Prakash, Praneet Soi, Saba Hasan, Sachin Naik, Santosh Morajkar, Shailesh Dabholkar, Shripad Gurav, Siddharth Gosavi, Siddharth Kerkar, Siji Krishnan, Subodh Kerkar, Sudhir Patwardhan, Sweety Joshi, Uday Shanbhag, Viraj Naik, Vitesh Naik, Vivan Sundaram* — displayed in this exhibition engage with the lasting legacy of Francis Newton Souza, the master artist born in Goa.

Image courtesy Museum of Goa

The following are some of the works displayed at the exhibition with notes by Sabitha Satchi:

Atul Dodiya

Atul Dodiya's three works here are from a series that he has been doing since the beginning of the pandemic. These works, in a style and in colours that reference the early twentieth century painter Carlo Carrá, have elongated human figures in action. These paintings have an intermixed

sense of both contemplative stillness and of quiet movement. Dodiya's figures inhabit an earth-toned landscape, and evoke a feeling of solace in healing nature.

Fisherman

Householder

Woman drying herself (after Carlo Carra)

Pradeep Naik

Pradeep Naik's work combines several elements in a single harmonious pictorial frame. There is the landscape burning in war after a bombing, there is a grey sky-like patch that overhangs it, there is the image of industrial pollution, and a Souzaesque line-drawing. Naik masterfully composes these elements in tension with each other as well as in singular harmony of colour and form. This work speaks of our times – of war, climate change, disease, and violence. Yet there is human love and merciful nature in a sky laden with rainclouds.

Santosh Morajkar

Santosh Morajkar's work comes out of a decades-long engagement with Indian Modernist art that includes a deep study of F N Souza's paintings and drawings. In this sculpture, which is a creative animal form made almost like a collage of different elements, one sees a forceful power of violent erotic charge. It looks as if the beast is ready to attack – there is both defiance in its posture, and melancholy in its eyes. The colours used in the sculpture are earthy and the forceful form is a homage to Souza's powerful lines and the libidinal energy of his works.

Siji Krishnan

Siji Krishnan's portraits in watercolour explore radically new ways of engaging with the human figure. Her colour palette is faint earthy tones, almost suggesting a fading away, an impending absence that is lurking behind. Some of her male figures have prominent nipples, suggesting the inherent androgynous nature of the human, particularly of a paternal figure, radically altering a realist representation of the figure. Her works consistently engage with and interrogate gender categories and the idea of the family.

Siji Krishnan says of her own art, "I am fascinated by the idea of portraits — of people, other living beings and nature — delving into the inner depths of their personalities, inviting them to saturate my senses. They are mostly unclear images and are perceived by me in abstraction though they do have a figurative structure. I aim to capture the presence of all the qualities I

sense, using colour with restrained detailing, for an unchecked flow of consciousness. I am realizing that it is essential to move beyond physical boundaries. This will also help me to better understand the processes of my mind."

Lullaby

Papa

Sudhir Patwardhan

From 2006-07 onwards Patwardhan's art has had a constant engagement with street violence. The artist says that by 2012-13, when these works were created, political violence was no longer just lurking below the surface of the "normal", but had become an eruption into everyday life, a new "normal". Over the last two decades Patwardhan has studied images of bodies in violence in Renaissance Art, in Goya's works, as well as in Mughal miniature – such as the images of war in the paintings in the Mughal manuscript of the Persian translation of The Mahabharata*.*

The mutilated and brutalised human figure has been a sustained aesthetic meditation for Patwardhan. In 'Unclaimed Bodies' 1, 2 & 3, we see three inert figures one below the other, like in a narrow coffin, and arranged like the drawers of cadavers in a morgue. The work has a

reference to Hans Holbein's 'The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb'. The narrowness of the frame constricts the figure inside, and the colours used in acrylic are stark: black and white. The artist constricts himself inside self-imposed limitations of chromatic possibilities, identifying with the subject of the painting.

1, 2 and 3, acrylic on canvas, 6.5" x 29" (each), 2012

Subodh Kerkar

Subodh Kerkar has been engaged in a close study of F N Souza's art and creating works inspired by Souza continually over the last two years. Kerkar's innovation lies in the use of the medium of clay, and the materials he uses to create texture. And yet there are lines of figures drawn on clay in a fluid hand. In this set of three sculptures of a head with different faces on either side, Subodh Kerkar has given different treatments to the surface of the same form, referencing his own as well as Souza's compulsive artistic processes. The sculpture is profoundly Souzaesque

and to see the textured double-faced head, the viewer has to walk around it, thus inviting her to the movement of a pradakshina*.*

Subodh Kerkar says: "Souza never did a sculpture. This work is a sculpture of a head with faces on either side, both Souzaesque. These are extension of my works on clay hundreds of which I have drawn, where I used cycle tyres and other materials for texture on clay. What's interesting for me are the teeth in Souza's portraits. Dentures are most significant in Souza's drawings – he distorts the mouth and gives new shapes to the mouth and teeth. When doing clay, to bring out the texture of the dentures, I used the impression of tyres. I am secretly happy that Souza would have been pleased with what I have done in homage to his legacy."

Portraits of Souza

All images courtesy Museum of Goa.

Krishna Sobti, Partition and the Politics of Religious Identities

A Few Notes and a Conversation

Alok Bhalla

A Preview

'To India came caravans from all over the world/
Each found a home here and so India was made.'
– Firaq Gorakhpuri

I always found Krishna Sobti, (February 1925-January 2019) as a person and a novelist learned, gracious, witty and generous. As a writer, she had no anxiety about either the demands of literary conventions or the duller requirements of traditional morality. Her commitment to a life

of tolerance, fair play and justice was so fierce that she sometimes invited the charge of being merely 'disruptive' and even 'lewd' from both establishment writers and radical feminists. Much before we finally met at the Indian Institute of Advance Study in Shimla in 1996, she would sometimes call me very late at night to 'tell' me how to edit the translation of her novella, *Ai Ladki,* that was to appear in *Yatra: Writings from the Indian Subcontinent*. In those days, she was for many in the world of Hindi literature an icon—a distant, difficult and formidable presence—who was spoken about with awe and was beyond critical appraisal. Initially, I was nervous because I had the *chutzpah* to criticize her story about the partition, '*Meri Ma Kahan Hai*,' (*Where is my Mother*) included in my anthology, *Stories about the Partition of India* (1994). My critical judgment was that her tale of sorrow about an orphaned girl rescued in the days of common slaughter by a Pathan trucker was weak because, instead of confronting and debunking the communal fear of Hindus about a Pathan as Tagore had in *Kabuliwala*, she had merely used him to create a sentimental fission thereby leaving all our prejudices unquestioned—prejudices that were crucially responsible both for the partition and the religious carnage.

Krishna Sobti never once challenged my critical reading; it was as if, for her, my right to be skeptical was both inalienable and an important part of any democratic society.

She had the discipline to sit still and intently listen, alert to every nuance and inflection of speech, before joining in with her own thoughts so as to make an ever expanding and humane circle of ideas and emotions as a way of pushing away all dark temptations to humiliate and erase the other. I do not know if she had read *Civilisation and its Discontents*, but she would have agreed with Freud's analysis that impatience with the "small differences" of the self from others was the first sign of a dangerous "narcissism" that leads quickly from contempt and cruelty to genocide.

It is not surprising that the last critical essay Krishna Sobti published was a long and anguished protest against the arrogance with which, years after the partition, our present politics had begun, with deliberate calibration, to inflict pain and imprison dissenters. It is as if she was once again hearing, like a warning whisper (*ahat* she had called it in her interview with me), voices from the days of the partition telling her that the barbarism of those days was not an accident; that while she had, like a Gandhian acolyte, wistfully longed for *ahimsa*, violence was threatening to break the circle of words, friendships, marriages and communities; *it had happened once, she said; it was inevitable that it would happen again*.

***

In the last years of her life, she was rereading Aeschylus and the Greek tragedians. She wanted to understand, she told me, why and how the hard won harmony between force and freedom, faith and reason, was being cynically, cruelly and malevolently erased not by fate as in the case of Oedipus or Antigone, but by thoughtlessness and human malice.

After all she had spent her entire writing life against sectarian hatred, the noise of slogans and the mindless enthusiasm of crowds.

Even more significantly, she had crafted a unique lexicon and a rhythmic prose in which Hindi, Urdu, Persian, Punjabi, Pashto, the dialects of the region around the borders of western Punjab and Afghanistan where she grew up were so inextricably mingled that they defied all attempts at classifying them as the languages of the Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs or Pathans. The words she used were the words of community as a whole and gave to everyone a sense of cultural, political and moral belonging. Since Farid and Buleh Shah, Nanak and Kabir, she insisted, were her ancestral guides, her moral task as a writer in the present was to erase, from the place she called 'home', the taint of sectarian intolerance and moral bigotry; to make life trustworthy.

***

Krishna Sobti's most significant and enduring fictional work is about the partition of India. Once, she came to my room in the IIAS with great excitement to share with me her discovery of a book in the library about Greek coins excavated around the borders of Pakistan and Afghanistan.

It was as if the coins were for her allegories of home; they could be exchanged as counters, one by one, for anecdotes about soldiers, traders, monks, peasants, scholars, sufis, sculptures or singers on the Silk Road.

With me at least, her conversation often began with her memories of a life prior to the partition, far removed from religion and politics and the trauma of migration, and ended with the assertion that her profoundest emotional and moral being was still haunted by the place left behind. Her earliest collection of stories was entitled, *Dar Se Bichchuri* (1958; Separated from the Flock) and the last work published in her lifetime was, *Gujarat Pakistan Se Gujarat Hindustan* (2017; From Gujarat in Pakistan to Gujarat in India). And her single most important text is the first part of *Zindaginama* (1979; Sobti refused to publish the second volume because, she told me, it was too painful for her to revise it).

In the novel, written on an epic scale, a haveli and a well, surrounded by fields that barely provide subsistence, are the home and the world of a people whose faith, profession, rituals and emotional politics are radically different from each other. It is, of course, not an idyllic community, nor is it peaceful and free from the petty crimes that the sometimes threaten the peace of every civil and political society. When they hear rumours of religious strife in other places and of the attempts to rupture their sense of '*Ishwar-Allah-Waheguru'* as composite protectors of all their life, they dismiss them as "*nirey, siyasi mamley*" (only matters of state) or as "*nirey jhagrey*" (only quarrels) that will play themselves out to a bitter and dirty end. Their historical memories, as well as, their daily experiences have taught them that they have nothing to fear; that the rituals of ordinary time ('*communitas*', as Martin Buber has called them) are more tolerant than any religious alliances and more enduring than brittle political coalitions elsewhere. Discussing the partition plan, one of the characters in *Zindaginama* says:

"*The truth is that this land has been invaded a thousand times, but at the end Lahore has remained with those who live in Lahore and Kabul with those who live in Kabul! What I mean to say is that kings and sultans have changed, kingdoms have changed, governments have changed…but the people who live here have never been driven out!"* (My translation)

***

Historically, the religious identities of members of the *basti* in the novel had never felt threatened by the presence of different modes of worship. Instead, their actions and thoughts suggested that they instinctively understood that their fate as ordinary moral agents could never be secured either by the collective *hubris* of the faithful or the humiliation of others.

This is not the right occasion for a detailed analysis of *Zindaginama*. Here, I only need to add that during all our conversations, Sobti refused to concede that the political division of the Indian subcontinent was inevitable because the Hindus and the Muslims belonged to radically different civilisational histories. It is unclear if she regarded herself as a religious person. She did, however, repeatedly express her deepest respect for Mahatma Gandhi because he never failed to refer to God as "*Khuda-Ishwar*" and maintained till the day he was assassinated by a Hindu fanatic, that the very notion of "warring creeds" was a blasphemy. *She never wavered from her Gandhian conviction that in a good society, whether based on secular principles or on theologically-derived ideals, it was obligatory for every believer and non-believer "not merely to respect all other religions" but also "to admire and assimilate whatever may be good in the other faiths" (Gandhi)*.

***

MEMORY AND HISTORY: AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISHNA SOBTI

(*Conducted on October 1, 1996 at the Indian Institute of Advance Studies, Shimla.* Some extracts)

Alok Bhalla [AB]: Most novelists, who have written about the partition, either draw upon their personal memories of those harrowing days or use stories told to them by others about their experiences. Novels about the partition, therefore, tend to be autobiographical. This raises a few interesting questions. Given the horror, how does one write about something that is indescribable? How does one write about something that escapes language and yet demands to be written about? What kind of language does one use so that what one writes is not merely a record of horror but an attempt to understand something about ourselves? Since most partition novels are written much after 1947 — Bhisham Sahni's *Tamas* was written about 25 years later, and you've still not published the second volume of *Zindaginama* — what are the memories that are left out of the narratives? How are memories used or manipulated to suit present-day concerns? In other words, how are memories recast imaginatively in a fictional text? And, finally, why do you think the partition occurred? I still don't understand the reasons for it. I have asked a variety of people. I haven't yet found anyone who is willing to assert that there was so much antagonism between the two communities, Hindus and Muslims, that they could not live with each other.

Krishna Sobti [KS]: The partition of India is three generations old. For my generation of writers, it was the most traumatic experience; a kind of encounter between man and reality; a collision between a political agenda and a long tradition of pluralism. Writers on both sides soon realised that after so much hatred, violence and killing, human values had to be affirmed and restored. As writers we had to reassert that in spite of the political and religious divisions, the two communities had lived for centuries in a workable harmony, almost like cousins. Fiction writers of the post-partition period have testified to this truth in novels such as *Jhootha Sach*, *Tamas*, *Aag Ka Daryia*, *Kale Kos* and *Udas Naslein*.

We are familiar with the coercive jargon of social scientists. Politicians also distort reality. Memory of those times can always be marked by ideological biases. That's why, I think, novelists waited till they got rid of their mental and psychological blinkers and could see the partition with clear sight.

When politics, religion and humanism are transmitted in literature, human faith is transformed. I feel in my inner recesses a certain richness that is part of our common heritage. Guru Nanak, Baba Farid, Amir Khusro, Jayasi, Bulle Shah, Waris Shah, and Shah Latif — can we divide this whole lot of poets into theirs and ours? No doubt we divided the territory — but tradition, music, art and literature are not like geographical areas; they continue to remain undivided and are indivisible.

A novelist uses experiences many years after the event. I'm surprised I didn't pay attention to this fact earlier. I didn't realise it even when I reread '*Sikka Badal Gaya*' recently. That puzzles me. Maybe, earlier, I was much too close to the events. I was a part of them. Now I wonder how I managed to write that story with a certain sense of detachment, even though I had experienced the horrors of the partition. I'm not sure if I still understand the creative process. Anyway, I was witness to a terrible event and I didn't have the skills to deal with it at that time. I did, however, sense even then that it was necessary to look beyond the immediate horror — to salvage something that was untouched by violence.

Fiction about the partition in India and Pakistan has made an attempt, despite the enormity of the horror it describes, to preserve essential human values. This attempt is remarkable because in 1947 because a lot of property was destroyed, thousands had to migrate and countless people were killed. Yet, writers were convinced that it was essential to preserve a sense of humanity

[…]

AB: A few days ago, when we were talking about the partition, you told me that you had heard the first *ahat* — the first whisper — about the partition in 1942. Could we go back to that story because it seems to me that what happened to Shahni in 1947 could have been predicted a few years earlier?

KS: Yes, of course. I was studying at Lahore. During the vacations I used to go back to my village. Once, I took the Frontier Mail to Gujarat. I got down at the station near my village and stopped to eat some food at a dhaba. Then I went to see a man called Hayyat who owned a huge furniture shop. Gujarat was famous for two things — crockery and fine furniture. I had a cold drink with him and then said, 'I must be on my way.' He asked me, 'Should I send someone with you?' I replied, 'No.' He used to help to look after the girls returning home from college during their vacations. I didn't feel I was doing anything special by travelling alone. I hired a tonga to a place called Jalarpur. I knew that a horse would be waiting for me there to take me home.

AB: Did Hayyat ever feel that he was helping a Hindu girl, or did he just help a girl returning home?

KS: Yes. He knew that it was necessary to look after them. Gujarat was known for its hooligans (laughs). Well, the horse sent for me was already at Jalarpur. Someone told me that Nawab Khan, the *sai*, who had accompanied the horse, had gone to visit a friend. I knew he wouldn't return for a while. In any case, he was to follow me on foot. I, therefore, decided to ride back home alone — yes, I can ride a horse! Our haveli was about seven miles away. I must have ridden for about five miles when I decided to stop and let the horse drink some water. I was firmly seated in the saddle. The moment the horse lowered his head to drink water, he saw the reflection of a mare. He got excited. Before I could control him, he galloped after her at such speed that all I could do was to hold on. I couldn't see anything. I thought I was done for! I managed to take one foot out of the stirrup. The horse was 'kind' enough to throw me down along with the saddle. I fainted. After some time, when I regained consciousness, I checked to see if I had broken any bones. Luckily, I was only bruised. I picked up the saddle. The horse, I knew, would head back home. Slowly, I dragged myself to a place where there was a cluster of huts. I recognised the place. Somehow, I got to the village well. I knew the chaudhary of the village. He saw that I was badly hurt. He helped me sit down, and sent for some warm milk with ghee for me to drink. He said, 'Take my horse. Send her back tomorrow.'

Instead of a saddle, the horse had a *pallana* made of cloth. I adjusted it. As I was about to mount it, a crowd gathered around me. That is usual in villages. I saw a new face among them. I hadn't seen him before. Or, maybe I had known him as a child and hadn't recognised him. Anyway, he came and stood in front of my horse. I was very offended. It went against all social norms of behaviour. He patted the horse and said, 'Go drop her home today. Later, she'll have to leave behind her bangles and earrings. Then we'll see…' A chill ran down my spine. There was something in his tone that frightened me. I left. When I reached home, I didn't share the incident with anyone. I did, however, feel that I had heard the first *ahat* of something strange and powerful. And, of course, a couple of years later it did happen.

[…]

AB: Were you as a child told by your parents, 'Don't play with that girl because she is a Muslim? Don't go to her house or eat food with her?'

KS: No, I was never forbidden to do so. In our houses in Delhi and Shimla there was no discrimination. Nor was there any discrimination in Gujarat. We addressed the Muslims who worked in our house as *mamus* (uncles). In the village, however, they were never allowed to

enter the kitchens of Hindu households. That's all. No one minded this till politics started playing it up as an example of Hindu arrogance. But whenever we went to the houses of our Muslim friends, we had no hesitation in eating food with them.

AB: There was, however, talk about 'Hindu *paani*' and 'Muslim *paani*'.

KS: Oh, yes! Dhabas used separate plates and glasses for Hindus and Muslims. However, the same dhabas served food to both communities. As children, we were not forbidden from going into Muslim areas, only we were not allowed to wear frocks or skirts. I suspect that social tensions increased once Punjab came under the influence of the Arya Samaj.

[…]

AB: I'd like to know a little more about why you think that the emergence of Pakistan was inevitable. Historians like I.H. Qureshi in Pakistan have maintained a similar position. They assert that historically Muslims were always distinct and separate from Hindus. Therefore, after independence, the formation of Pakistan was a foregone conclusion. Is that true? Is there sufficient historical evidence to suggest that the Muslims of India always saw themselves as distinct enough to form a separate nation-state? Weren't a majority of Indian Muslims converts? Further, do we have authentic records of communal riots before the 1880s? There were, of course, incidents of violence between the two communities. But there were also social mechanisms for containing communal tensions. Indeed, it's arguable that till about the 1890s there was a viable composite culture in India.

KS: I think that when a historian decides to take sides, he can justify anything (*laughs*). Memories of those times can always be falsified. In the histories of the partition, 'culture' is one word that has been abused constantly and mercilessly. 'Secular' is not a term I'd like to use for the way of life that existed before the partition. The weave of that common culture was so strong and dense that it still lingers, not as a memory, but as a source of inner strength.

In spite of political tensions, people lived in harmony with each other. Each respected the other's otherness. Both were wholly self-assured about the threads that held them together, threads like a common language, dialects and a way of life, none of which bore any reference to religious identities.

Let me tell you a story that I have recounted in greater detail in *Zindaginama*. In the 15th century, there was a Sufi named Miyan Meer Sahib. It's said that he laid the foundation of Amritsar. He was a great friend of a Hindu saint, Jaggu Bhagat. In those days Sufis and holy men

were highly respected. Anyway, Miyan Sahib and Jaggu Bhagat had great respect for each other. They were neighbours. Whenever Miyan Sahib called Jaggu Bhagat, he would leave everything and go to him at once. The same was true of Jaggu Bhagat. One day, however, it so happened that when Miyan Sahib called him, Jaggu Bhagat didn't go at once. Curious, Miyan Sahib walked across to his friend's house and saw that he was busy cooking in his kitchen. Jaggu Bhagat looked up but continued to stir the pot. Miyan Sahib waited for some time patiently. Each moment of silence, however, seemed to him to be unbearably long. Unable to contain himself, he finally said, 'Bhagatji, you have been cooking for a long time. Now please stop.' Jaggu Bhagat replied — and it's possible there is some truth in this story — 'You came to my house and didn't hug me.' Miyan Sahib said, 'And you think that your kitchen is more important than I am. From now on, even if we continue to live in this neighbourhood, we shall never speak to each other again.' It's said that the two continued to live in the same town, and in the same neighbourhood, but they never met each other again. As you can see, there is always the possibility of a profound misunderstanding between people. So, while it's true to say that Hindus and Muslims lived with each other peacefully it's not true to say that they also didn't see themselves as distinct and separate from each other.

[…]

AB: When I interviewed Intizar Husain a few years ago, he said two important things in this context. First, that he sees himself as a Shia who still had one foot in Karbala and another in Ayodhya. Second, that he always feels there is a Hindu sitting inside him. It's because of this kinship with Hindu traditions that when he thinks about questions of tradition and history, he insists that both Hindus and Muslims talk about Meera Bai and Kabir, Amir Khusro and Tulsi Das as a part of the same heritage. He is sure that we can still learn from Hindu and Muslim traditions of the Indian subcontinent. If he's right in asserting that historically there was so much give and take between Hindus and Muslims that they could exchange ideas at the profoundest philosophical level, then it's difficult to talk about the emergence of Pakistan as inevitable. There seems to be a contradiction between Intizar Husain's version of India's composite culture and Qureshi's history of Muslim separatism.

KS: I think there is some truth in both versions — or rather that they are both partially true. Indeed, Intizar Sahib is right when he invokes Kabir and Tulsi Das, Meera Bai, Bulle Shah or Baba Farid to talk about our cultural complexity in such a beautiful way. Both Hindus and Muslims regarded Sakhi Sarvar as holy, but they didn't make concessions to each other even when they lived as neighbours.

You must remember that once people become conscious of their separate identities, their modes of living and expectations change. The same thing happened to the relations between Muslims and Hindus. Now that there is talk of granting women 30% reservation in various spheres, their status at home is bound to change. Don't you think that I'll assert myself if I know that I will always get a job (*laughs*)! The same thing happened to the relations between Hindus and Muslims. Once upon a time there was an accepted and traditional way of defining relations with each other. New political awareness brought with it new expectations — raised new questions about our inherited assumptions. In this respect Punjab was different. Consider, for example, our accepted notion that brahmins exercise a great social influence on our social life. In Punjab they were never very important. The 'best' brahmins joined the police force — the Majahans, for instance, were listed amongst the martial communities. A brahmin too had to prove his might! (*laughs*)

It's true, however, that in many areas of life Hindus and Muslims were close to each other. Yet, they were also distinct from each other in many respects. It's a mistake to assume that they were completely integrated. Besides, when people get educated, they also become conscious of their identities. This process had begun to happen amongst the Muslims. Their educated sections had begun to inculcate a new consciousness of their political identity. If we go back in time, we find the National Congress and the Muslim League moving in contrary directions. The Muslim League was working for a separate state for Muslims, and the Hindus in the Congress, with their defensive psyche, were protecting some of their cherished ideals. Whatever their political strategies, their symbols, too, were different. This sense of a separate Muslim identity had begun to be felt fairly early in the twentieth century — in Punjab, at least.

[…]

AB: Do you really believe that the national movement was an assertion of Hindu nationalism?

KS: Yes, to a great extent, it was Hindu nationalism. Consider works like *Anandmath* or songs like 'Bande Mataram'. The Hindus were upset by the partition of Bengal, but the reorganisation of states was not a new thing. The North-West Frontier Province had been carved out of Punjab by the British. Surely, there was nothing particularly wrong with the division of Bengal. It would have been accepted had there not been such a fierce, and almost hysterical, opposition to it. The partition was repealed. That certainly upset the Muslims. It gave them a reason to feel that the Hindus were likely to oppose any move that favoured them. If the partition of Bengal had not been repealed, it's possible that the Muslims wouldn't have demanded Pakistan.

AB: You must have known many Muslims who felt that this was their land as much as it was the land of the Hindus.

KS: Yes, indeed. Even Jinnah felt that Bengal or Punjab could never be divided. I'm merely trying to suggest that at the political level there was a growing distance between the Hindus and the Muslims. But at the social and cultural level the two communities were very close. The moment we started to play the politics of separate electorates, however, the British seized the chance to aggravate the rift between the two communities.

Let me tell you about Khwaja Khizar of Punjab. He was the *pir* of the rivers. It was said that his eternal boat, though invisible, always floated on the rivers and helped people to go across. Hindus and Muslims both had faith in Khwaja Khizar.

Our family had great faith in the powers of Baba Farid. There was one corner for him in our house and nothing was done without first invoking his blessings — no wedding or *mundan* was performed without praying to him. We also visited his *mazar*. Neither Hindus nor Muslims hesitated to name their sons Farid. It was, of course, a Muslim name. It was the same with Bulle Shah. Both were part of our cultural tradition. No one asked if they were Hindu or Muslim.

AB: Recently, I met Sant Singh Sekhon, who told me something startling. He said that in rural Punjab *no* Muslim was allowed to read the *azan* publicly. Is that true?

KS: Certainly not. My novel, *Zindaginama,* opens with the *azan*. It was an important part of village life. There was no hostility towards the practice. We respected it. Absolutely. Remember that the Hindus always went to the holy places of the Muslims to receive blessings. Pregnant women visited the *mazars* of the *pirs* etc.

AB: Did Muslims visit Hindu shrines?

KS: Yes. I have seen Muslims in gurudwaras. They used to sit along with others wearing red Turkish caps. No one coerced them into going there. This was not an unusual sight, but it created curiosity and interest among us children. It was their otherness that fascinated me. Even today I feel that the texture of life of the two communities was so strong in the past that despite the politics of the partition it's still a subject of interest.

The Muslims fascinated me. When I was growing up, I was always told that if I wanted to learn how to behave I should observe their manners. They were a sophisticated people. The Hindus

were intelligent and hard working, but the Muslims were lively and gracious. They didn't engage in unnecessary hair-splitting like we did. Their sternness attracted me.

These days, when we want to feel good, we tell ourselves that Pakistan has failed to establish a democracy – that, compared to them, we haven't done so badly. I feel very uncomfortable with that kind of talk. Let me share something with you. During the first Indo-Pakistan war, I was taken to a *thana* that had been captured by Indian soldiers. There were papers scattered everywhere and the Indians were busy cleaning up the place. I was profoundly disturbed when I saw two army caps belonging to soldiers of the Baluch regiment on the floor. I picked them up because I couldn't bear to see them lying there. Temperamentally, I like army people. I like to think about different regiments, and seeing those army caps lying on the floor upset me. I knew they belonged to Pakistani soldiers, yet I felt they were my people, they belonged to our side.

This idea that people across the border are a part of us can never be erased from our memories. I remember seeing a photograph of a few Pakistani soldiers who had been captured during the war. It was published on the front page of a newspaper. The men were six feet tall. I felt they were people I knew. They reminded me of the men I used to call *mammu*. *It didn't occur to me that they were Muslims or Pakistanis.*

First published in *The Beacon*.

What I Learned from Gandhi's Autobiography

Five poems by Prakalpa Ranjan Bhagawati

Translated into English by Ananda Bormudoi

Riyas Komu, 'On International Workers' Day, Gandhi from Kochi', oil on canvas; 183 cms x 137 cms (each); 2015

The Cause

I found reasons enough not to write about you
And I didn't write.
I found reasons not to argue in your favour
And I didn't argue.
There were reasons not to pay you a visit
And so I didn't visit you.
I found a cause not to die for you
And I didn't lay down my life.
I found reasons not to support you
And I didn't extend support.
With the causes between you and me

I have shaped a magic glass.
From my side everything is transparent
And you can never look through at me
From your side.

What I Learned from Gandhi's Autobiography

I looked for the father of the nation in Gandhi's Autobiography
And found Mohan
I looked for the half naked fakir
And found Mohan
I looked for the Mahatma
And found Mohan
I looked for myself
And found Mohan
Because Mohan was not within me
The person who lent me the book
Asked me to re-read the book
And I did that
I found the father of the nation, naked fakir, the Mahatma and also myself.
By that time Mohan built a home within me.

An Anti-Poem

Keeping the country for yourself
You gave us patriotism
That burns the body with restlessness
And ignites the mind.
But it's no flame on the burner
To cook my meal.
It can burn only the country.
Keep this also to yourself
It might help in the election campaign.

The Warfront and a Poem

A distressed poem accosted me and said, “You equipped me with gunpowder and sent me to the Warfront and are you not a timid poet to confine yourself in an air conditioned apartment?” Arrogantly the poet answered, “I entrust on you the duty of welcoming the soldiers who have returned safely from the front and I am now going to the Warfront myself.”

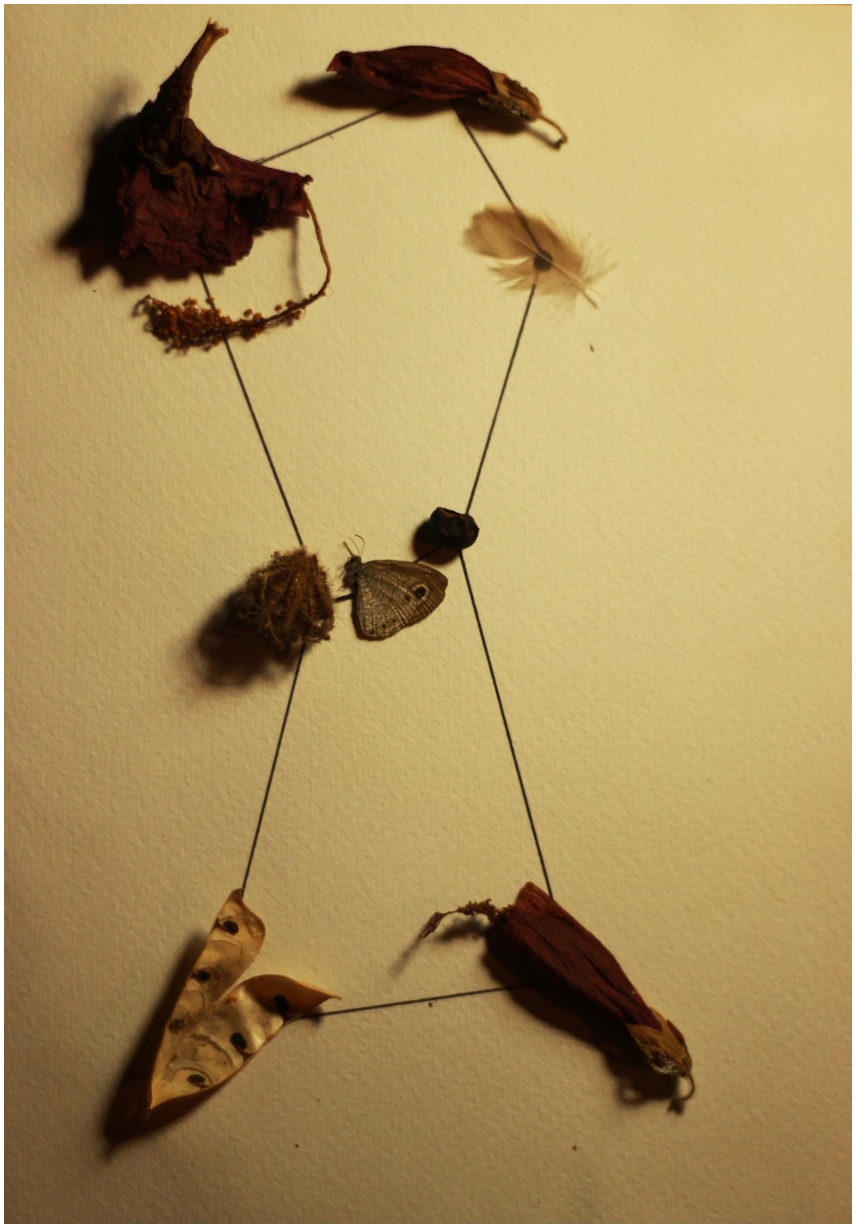
Alive

The young doctor gave a certificate with his signature and seal to the sixty five years old man stating that he was alive. The aged man himself submitted the certificate at the pension office. After receiving the medical certificate the office was convinced that the man was alive and the pension continued. The aged man was also convinced that he was certainly alive for some more days.

Two Object Poems

MP Pratheesh

‘It contains entire beginning of the summer’, 2022



‘An Orion Poem (in memory of Shirly Mary Joseph)’, 2022

Mulling over Miller: The common man's crucible

Sudeep Ghosh

I have the salt of tears in the roots of my eyelashes.

They taunt me for being homeless in a storm.

-Mirza Ghalib

To (re)think Arthur Miller, the common man bearing the brunt of being 'common', clamours for a conscious and patient hearing. To understand the contemporary affairs of Indian democracy, Miller's critique of and commitment to moral and social malaise calls for mindful deliberation. To read Miller is to precipitate an inquiry into a self-destructive system of reprehensible repression, reconcile aspirations of successes and assaults on the rights of the common man, and reveal the fractured sense of belonging of the common man, marginalised and mauled by the *domineering* man trumpeting around unabashedly the dominant political ideology and the inflated ego of the *powers* that be. To re-read Miller in the post-CAA scenario in India is to recognise the 'faceless' retreat into the futility of existence; to re-read Miller is to set right the pendulum of human conscience which has swung too far to the other end of phoney capitalism; to re-read Miller is to retrieve the echoes of the Millerian *'common man'* making bold strides and edging closer to eternity in the mindscape of Indian writers and beyond.

Can the *common man* be redeemed? YES! Miller had this in mind when he wrote his classic essay 'The Tragedy of the Common Man'. But where is the common man these days? What is the common man doing? What is the common man reduced to? What is in store for the common man struggling to make ends meet in a politically-coloured world, the world that speaks the language of profit/vote-bank with impunity, the world which pulls the rug from under the feet of the common man? How is the common man buffeted by the whims and fancies of the politics of identity? What is the *common man* searching for, searching *ad nauseam*? How is the common man caught in a perpetual spiral of desire and disillusionment? How is the common man crushed between illusions and doubts? How is the common man negotiating the strait that lies between hope and despair? To read Miller is to stem the tide of majoritarianism and its intense lobbying against the 'common man'. What induces the *tragedy* of the common man? What elevates the marginal status of the common man? What accounts for the common man's incredible centripetal pull?

A parallel can be drawn between Aasa Khosa in eminent Indian poet CP Surendran's poem *Aasa Khosa* and Willy Loman in American playwright Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Where do they meet as kindred spirits? Are they *only* doomed to despair? Do they, by virtue of their

singularity and their tragic grandeur, transform into a universal symbol? Why is Aasa Khosa forced to leave his house in Kashmir, seen walking on the shores of Mumbai's Marine Drive in sleeping clothes and eyes gazing unblinkingly at the sea? Does it not strike a chord? Are we not jolted out of stupor when the poet C P Surendran captures the inner speech of trauma laconically following the '*house*' lost: *'It exploded.'* He further writes: *'There was a garden too, / That hissed down like a match in water. /Just flared and was gone in the war.'* Aasa Khosa, the persona, loses his wife and two sons to mindless violence in Kashmir. When asked what his watery gaze peers into the sea, Aasa Khosa confesses with a twinge of disbelief: *'remembering everything/ Behind his eyes, it's hard to believe/ Your life's your own.'* Bereft of a house, a symbol of personal memory and cultural memory, Aasa Khosa is a drifter armed with naïve realism to fight off the ignominy of being an 'outsider'. The house metaphor recalls Agha Shahid Ali's poignant lines in 'The Country Without a Post Office': *Now every night we bury / our houses – and theirs, the ones left empty.'* However, the poet is unerringly optimistic: *'Someone soaks the wicks of clay lamps / in mustard oil, each night climbs its steps / to read messages scratched on planets.*

Aurodeep Ray, *Floating by the Evening Light*

Against the backdrop of forced displacement, the common man's wishful thinking, courtesy the Hindi writer-poet Vinod Kumar Shukla, translated by the eminent English poet Arvind Kumar Mehrotra in 'This Year Too in the Plains' is audible, albeit feebly: *'All places should be displaced/ And brought near all other places/ So that every place is near every other place /And not a single person is displaced.'* When the common man is ravaged by the monstrous capitalism invading the indigenous space, the anguish of the common man, drawing upon the soil for sustenance, recalls the Oriya poet Brajnath Rai : *'But, today, suddenly,/ covetous eyes of a power-mad hunter/has fallen on your green body/ To cut it to pieces,/ to drink to heart's content/ fresh red blood./A damned hunter/has indiscreetly taken aim/ at your heart/ To launch a fiery missile.'*

The common man unravels the oppositional discourses where the vulnerability of the common man is appropriated. Sudama Pandey Dhoomil's poetic judgement and caustic offering, where the common man is bedeviled by lopsided interpretation, reek of makeshift identity in an exploitative system of democracy. Playing second fiddle to Orwellian demagoguery of sly opportunism, the poet unveils with a snarky cynicism: *'lo, yeh tumhara chehra/ yeh julus ke peeche gir pada tha.'* (Take this, your face/ It was left behind the procession). Besides this inner conversation to restore sanity comes the common man unstoppable as a seasoned conjurer, the common man sings the unsung glory that reverberates in the corridors of time. No poet other than Gulzar Saab can capture this pulse in his lyric in *Slumdog Millionaire*: *'Come, O beloved / come step with me under this canopy / this azure canopy of a sky / filigreed with the light of the stars'* (translated by Sunjoy Shekhar).

The common man springs from the tradition of the troubadour wandering amid the ravages of time. The common man's tour is a tale of the detritus of memory. The common man is a breed apart, wearing his Kabir's folksy philosophy of *fakiri* on his sleeve. The common man's touchstone is the undying spirit of journey. The common man walks the road oft-travelled; from where to where? With the progressive narrowing of the road, the common man hits the no man's land. However, his journey to nowhere raises pertinent questions to stir up our consciousness. This sense of nowhere is a romantic doggedness the common man unleashes with a panache. One cannot help but recall the Bangla poet Sakti Chattopadhyay spinning a tender sensibility of attachment in his iconic poem 'Jete Pari Kintu Keno Jabo' *(I can, but why should I go)*, translated by the illustrious Indian poet Jayanta Mahapatra. The common man gives not a damn for the final exit. In the poem, the common man's rebellious romanticism is caught between *'The moon calls out: Come!'* and *'The wood of the pyre calls: Come!'* How does the common man respond? The common man clinches the deal with a redeeming sense of love, *'I can go / I can go any way I want to/ But why should I? / I shall plant a kiss on my child's face.'* This love binds the humanity as the boundaries of personal narrative become boundless. For

those hapless souls, forced to flee their homes in Kashmir, the *moon* in the present poem will be bloody and gory. Remember Rahul Pandita's *Our Moon Has Blood Clots*?

The common man is brought up on a diet of agonising exclusion. Yet the common man is rich enough as a foreteller of future and as a figment of poet's imagination. Poets find the common man integral, not incidental or accidental. It is ironic that the common man in democratic India can't sing/recite Faiz Ahmed Faiz's nazm *Hum Dekhenge*. The dissent of the common man is considered seditious, he is to be booed and treated like a doormat till a searing sense of guilt tears the common man apart. However, the Miya poets of Assam stand undaunted as they challenge the legitimacy of citizenship, the hidden agenda of territorialisation wedded to power-mongering, the evils of cultural biases that break bonds and build walls! Further, no democratic soul can deny the legitimacy of the subversive voice of Aamir Aziz who gives *nationalism* a pluralistic configuration as his poetic zeal flares up: *'Aasman pe inquilab likha jayega.'* The protest by the common man is a metaphoric representation besides a cultural specificity against the essentialist way of interpreting cultural identity.

Dear readers, lest you think I am going to write an elegy for the 'common man', here comes the prophetic lines of St.Paul in one of his Epistles: *'Thus passes away the glory of the world.'* What does it mean? It means that everything, no matter how valuable, will pass away; what remains or will remain is the longing or desire for search. The common man's anchor is search, the common man ceases to exist if the search fades away into oblivion. This search is, to quote Paulo Coelho, the impulse for the meaning of life! Aasa Khosa can redeem himself, so can Willy Loman. The common man is the flowing river. This metaphor is pronounced in Hoshang Merchant's 'Partitions of Memory': *'Our bodies/ This little box, this little chest of secrets/ O set it afloat on the floating water/ Do let it go'*; it assumes a prophetic tone: *'All rivers end / You have died many time before and rebirthed'*. I wonder if both Aasa Khosa and Willy Loman are in search of an alternative way to sustain the consciousness of humanity. Their banalities breed a bizarre sense of imaginative indulgence besides their relationship with life's mystery. Let me quote from Nissim Ezekiel's poem 'In Emptiness': *'Broken by excesses or by / Lack of them, let me always feel / The presence of the golden mean…'*. I would call it the common man's emancipatory manifesto to humanise the world. No wonder, the common man, embodying personal democracy, is more than just *common*! The common man exudes the intriguing beauty of, to quote Joy Goswami's eloquent phrase for the poetry of Sakti Chattopadhyay, *'the ever-wondrous search'*. Miller's Willy, who is haunted by the elusive flute, is as common as the clerk Haripada in Tagore's 'Bansi'. However, like Willy Loman, what elevates the humble Haripada is the magic of Sindhu-Baroya raag that endows him not only with the 'eternal pangs of separation' but also lifts 'the sad music of a flute/ Towards one heaven.'

This unending, dogged search for meaning and existence is the common man's gallant, the redeeming spirit that can blow away the chilling whiff of fatalism or defeatism. The common

man seems to have the intimate knowledge of what it means to 'search' in the face of relentless oppression. This knowing of the value of search redeems the common man who is otherwise reduced to a 'faceless' non-entity as the whole world seems to conspire against the common man. Miller's common man is organically close to the Indian sensibilities. Indian adapters of Miller have always been drawn to the common man. The notable productions include by Ashim Chakraborty's 'Janaiker Mrityu', Rudra Prasad Sengupta's 'Feriwalar Mrityu' , Rama Prasad 'Aagsudhi', Anjan Dutta's 'Salesman er Songsar' in Bangla, Feroz Khan's 'Salesman Ramlal' in Hindi, Alyque Padamsee's 'Death of a Salesman' in English and Bhanu Bharati's 'Ek Salesman ki Maut' in Hindi.

The common man, the victim of facelessness, is still searching…May the tribe of the common man grow! The common man flits across the celebrated Indian artist Raza's *Bindu*, the majestic geometric space and touches eternity in search for *meaning*! Isn't it the common man's claim to immortality?

Excavating a Letter

Sabitha Satchi

Rihard Jakopič, Sipina II | Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

What do we tell you when we awake tomorrow, little one?

That there once was a dawn that burst upon us with birdsong

That there was a colour we called green, oh so many shades of it

in the forest near the river that used to shimmer with fish tails

That the water would chime to us in eternal ebb and flow
high and low notes splashed by the thin oars of a sharp boat
carrying fishnets at daybreak, ferrying children in the dusk
That we broke bread with our neighbours and uttered
a prayer that came easy on our purple lips that would pucker
up for a kiss as we held each other and the night sighed
and we thought we would never die.

The Present

Romila Thapar

Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons

Celebrating 75 years as an independent nation is a moment to pause and consider whether we have achieved what we had set out to do in 1947, the point at which we converted ourselves from a colony of the British empire to a free nation-state. India was no longer the collection of kingdoms it had been before being colonised, nor were the people of India any longer subjects of the British crown. We were now a sovereign democratic state whose population consisted of free and autonomous citizens, subject to none.

Secular nationalism had brought Indians together in the demand for freedom, generating the most momentous change in our history. What we wanted politically, and as a new society, was a democratic, secular nation-state. This was embedded in the Constitution that was agreed upon by all, the acceptance of which we remember and celebrate on Republic Day. The question today is whether the structure the Constitution envisaged as foundational to our nation has been put into practice. The Constitution is what every government swears to uphold; we have

to ask what of it is being upheld. This is a crucial question because the Constitution – if respected – can provide us with substantial protection from attempts to deny the democratic and secular structure of our state and society.

What does the Constitution require of us and to what extent do we abide by it? The Constitution requires three essentials: that we be a democratic nation-state; that we guard against attempts to weaken our democratic functioning; and that we give authority to three basic institutions – the legislature, the executive and the judiciary, the agencies through which democracy is practised, which is why we must ensure their autonomy.

Universal adult franchise was a remarkable act of foresight and courage by the Nehru government. It enabled us to be a democracy. Legislation was extensively debated in both the Lok Sabha and the Rajya Sabha before being passed. Representing the views of citizens in the process of governance was new to our history. As long as people are subjects, they are recipients of government orders. But when they mutate into citizens, they have a say in what is to be ordered and why.

Over the years, this aspect has undergone change. The formal procedure of one person, one vote continues. But it is accompanied by a variety of opaque arrangements at different levels between candidates and political parties, as well as the crossing over of defectors on the eve of elections. We should also enquire into why the financial outlays of each party increase enormously with every election. It is becoming routine to rush Bills through both houses, almost like a formality, with little debate. This again demands correction.

For centuries, the executive – more specifically the administrative services and the police – have been the steel-frame of all state systems in India. Early texts discussing the state have mentioned as its seven limbs the ruler, the ministers or administration, the force to protect sovereignty, the collection of taxes to fill the treasury, friendly allies, fortifications, and territory. From the Mauryas to the Cholas and the Mughals, the emphasis in practice was on maintaining a force, on adequate finance and on a reasonable administration. Ashoka Maurya was remarkable because he proclaimed that his governance was directed to the well-being of his subjects. Most other rulers whom we hold up as role models – the Guptas, Cholas, Mughals – made few specific references to this. Governance routinely rested on the functioning of the executive.

In pre-modern times, only a few complained about the manner in which the administration and the policing force treated the monarch's subjects, sometimes asserting ruthless power against them. With the coming of the nation-state, this was meant to change. Technically, the citizen

now has the right to object to injustice or ill-treatment by the agencies of the executive. It is another matter that, because of the low-caste status and impoverishment of half the population, executive institutions continue to be feared by most people.

In earlier times, kingdoms had judicial officers. Their primary function was to ensure that government orders were carried out, and those who disobeyed them were punished. Judicial officers had to settle disputes, largely linked to crimes, and, to a lesser extent, to the breaking of civil laws – such laws were anyway few in number, since civil rights were limited. The right to question or oppose authority broke with this past, as the free citizen replaced the subject, and again with the institution of legal equality for all citizens, which is basic to social justice. The civil law is, today, a significant feature of judicial activity. Both the citizen and the judiciary need to be fully aware of what this means to governance.

Colonial rule introduced a judicial system to facilitate the governance of the colony. But in important aspects, such as the freedom to criticise authority, rights were curtailed by other laws, such as the law of sedition. This law was linked to the political domain in colonial times and continues to be so linked today. It limits the rights of the citizen, hence the legitimate demand for its removal.

Are these three institutions answerable to those in authority or the citizens whose rights they are required to protect? These are pertinent questions for our times when citizens can be arrested and jailed indefinitely, without a trial. Where there is no appeal to habeas corpus, state repression becomes all too common. Consider the Bhima-Koregaon case. Citizens were arrested more than three years ago, yet there has been no trial. From an initial six arrests the number has gone up to sixteen. One wonders if the case has become just a convenient hold-all of charges and arrests.

These three institutions have to ensure the well-being of society in accordance with the Constitution. Their functioning obviously becomes more effective when citizens from all levels of society acquire a clear understanding of their rights under the Constitution, and of their implementation. This is something that we should have done at all levels of our society over the last seventy-five years.

What are the rights and obligations of the free citizen?

The rights are to be guaranteed by the state. The obligation to observe the laws of the state is met by the citizens, provided these laws do not contradict their rights. Priority should be given to ensuring that every citizen has access to food, water and shelter. To make this more effective

the citizen should also have the right to healthcare, education and employment. The economy has to be planned so as to make these rights feasible. It is not enough to use them as election slogans or claim them as programmes of benevolence. Their implementation is essential to acceptable governance. The awareness of these rights and their implementation should be the concern of both the legislature and the executive.

The judiciary is central to the set of rights relating to the social equality of all citizens, to the freedom of expression, and to social justice. These are crucial to the good relations between the citizen and the state. Fundamental to the functioning of these rights is the right to information. Citizens must know what actions and decisions are being taken in their name. Such information ensures their well-being. Proposals made by the government have to be widely discussed. This requires a free media, whatever the form of expression. Critical opinion on government actions cannot automatically be regarded as anti-national; the government is not the nation. Dissenting ideas and actions have been a part of the Indian tradition throughout history. What is recent is their formulation as rights, particularly the right to free speech and expression – a feature essential to modern society, as the Constitution makes evident. If we claim to be a democracy, every citizen must not only have these rights but also understand them. This is something we still have to do, starting perhaps with familiarising high school students with their rights as given in the Constitution.

The existence of a democratic nation is not limited to the functioning of the three institutions I have mentioned. Democracy demands the equality of all citizens. No category of citizens can have priority over the others, irrespective of historical practice, or what is projected as cultural heritage, or described as the religion of the majority. Moreover, there is no such thing as a single unchanging identity that refers to the same community and their descendants over millennia. When historians study the creation of past and present identities of a nation over many centuries, two obvious facts emerge: one, that identities are an amalgam of many features; and two, that they change over time.

The ancestors of those living in the Indian subcontinent today belonged to a range of varied identities from earliest times. We don't know what the Harappans called themselves as their language has not been deciphered so far. Genetic evidence based on DNA analyses from skeletons tells us that they were a mix of elements, some local to northern India and some east Iranian.

Subsequently, the Vedic texts refer to the elite groups as aryas, distinct from the many others whom they call *dasas.* The texts emphasise the linguistic, religious and cultural difference between the two. DNA sources provide evidence of a genetic strain from Central Asia, dating to

about four thousand years before the present, entering north India. This would be the first of many continuous migrations from Central Asia into north India up to recent times. Ancient texts mention the arrival of the Shakas /Scythians, Kushans, Hunas /Huns, and Turushkas / Turks. Some came in small groups as pastoralists or as traders. Later, they were part of an invading army, or came together with the Sufi missions. They settled in different parts of the subcontinent. This gave rise to new religious sects, languages, and communities. Some of these grew from inter-marriage and the evolving of new castes, giving rise to new identities.

In the early first millennium CE, the prominent religion was Buddhism. By the late first millennium, it was gradually replaced by Puranic Hinduism. Islam entered in slow stages, brought by the Arabs from the west and the Central Asian Turks from the north, and by various groups of people from the east. The population that emerged out of this major interface was genetically mixed, spoke varying languages and followed diverse religions, many of which evolved from this inter-mixture.

The Arabs were initially called Yavana, the term Indians had used for the early Hellenistic people, but later for anyone from the West. They were also called Tajiks in Sanskrit sources. They came in larger numbers as traders across the Arabian Sea and settled all along the coast of western India. The settlements gave rise to a variety of Indo-Arab cultures and religious sects, variously called Khojas, Bohras, Navayathas, Mapillas and such like. When trade on the Indian Ocean opened up in other areas with India playing a major role, there was further interaction between locals and migrants. Eventually the Europeans arrived to trade and the British colonised India, but did not settle here. They were unaware of our multiple ancestry and the resulting rich culture of India. They imposed on us the erroneous history that Indian society has consisted of two monolithic religious groups – the Hindu and the Muslim – and that Indian history is the narrative of the continuous hostility between the two. In fact, it was the reverse. There were multiple groups, constantly interacting and evolving, and this multiplicity accounted for the richness of Indian culture.

The term Hindu comes from the Iranian *hendu* which became *al-hind in Arabic*. In origin, it is a geographical term linked to the river Indus. It is only in the fifteenth century CE that it came to refer to the religions – other than Islam – practiced in India. Sanskrit texts of the time do not refer to the Hindu religion. They refer to two belief systems as they also did from earlier times – that is, the Brahmana and the Nastika – referring to those that believed in a deity and those that did not. These were said to be the prevailing two systems where the Nastika consisted of all who did not conform to Puranic Hinduism. This dichotomy goes back to Mauryan times, but the constituents of the Nastika category changed. Earlier it included the Buddhists and Jainas, both of whom rejected deity. Now the Turushkas were added. This referred to the Turks who were

Muslims, who did believe in a deity – Allah – but not in a Puranic deity. Thus they are included with the non-believers.

In looking afresh at sources of Indian history from a non-colonial perspective, as many historians have been doing in the last fifty years, the shape of Indian society takes a very different form from that of the colonial definition. Religions were not unitary and monolithic. They consisted largely of a juxtaposition of communities and sects, which had, as with other societies, periods of co-existence and of local conflict. They sorted out their relationships at this level. There were no all-India organisations in pre-modern times. It was neither a society that tolerated every difference in a non-violent way, nor one given to constant violent confrontations. Like all complex pre-modern societies, it had contradictions, some leading to intolerance, and some that were settled harmoniously. But these relations were in and among various communities in diverse regions.

This intermixing of peoples, languages and cultures has been the historical experience of most parts of the world. We all have multiple ancestries. Their importance changes from time to time. In current times we are aware of this, so we have to work out a pattern that enables us to live together, embracing this multiplicity. It is rational and logical to choose a democratic pattern of life, since majoritarianism of any kind is opposed to democracy – as indeed to the ethos of India when viewed historically.

The identity we worked out for ourselves through the national movement was that we were Indians above all else. Every citizen was an Indian and had equal rights. This is our contemporary identity. The Hindus disowned the *mleccha* and the Muslims disowned the *kafir*, but the Indian includes every citizen as Indian. This is one absolute difference between pre-modern times and our times.

We have to understand and honour our identity of being Indian. This identity should come with its component of the ethical values of tolerance and refraining from violence against others. This inclusiveness is an essential of citizenship and is required by our Constitution. Every Indian citizen has the same rights. We cannot allow one group of Indians to call for the murder and annihilation of another group of Indians who are fellow citizens, quite irrespective of their religion, language, or caste. It is only when we understand the real meaning of citizenship and implement it, that we can be free citizens of an independent nation.

To what extent

S Vijayaraghavan

Artist's note:

From an innate private space, I strived to exploit the potential of socio-political, personal and emotional expressions raised over self-ideology and consciousness through my artworks. My work evolves around variety, complexity, beauty and expression; juxtaposing the realm of new media technologies that brings abbreviation to an artistic expression dealing with the reality of mundane human life experiences.

I try to articulate these experiences in a more implicit, allegorical and symbolical way. In these selective body of artworks I have used single channel stop-motion animation video, mixed media on canvas evolve through our unconscious being, colonized by motorization, violence, mechanization and urbanization, deforming the habitual and the mundane. I have attempted to externalize the schizophrenia of the contemporary life facing the situation of intolerance of violation act, freedom of speech/expression and injustice against peace and Nature.

It is our inner-voice to regenerate, re-create, re-question the human ethos for positive changes in today's democratic context.

'To What Extent', single channel animated video projection with no sound, 2019

‘We are Not Alone!’,mixed media on canvas, 2022

‘Remains’, acrylic with rice paper on canvas (polyptych), 40×160 cm, 2021

‘Wake Up’, acrylic on canvas (diptych), 60×120 cm, 2021

Home and Bulldozers

Azhar Uddin Sahaji

Representational image

I'm more resilient than your bulldozers
My memory is older than your State.
You may crush ten thousand homes at one go
Yet I'm like a Sparrow
I'll build my homes again and again
In the gaps and holes of your grand vista
With hays and thrown away Adhar Cards
into the heaps of rags
Does not matter how many times you crush them!

Nara (2020-2022)

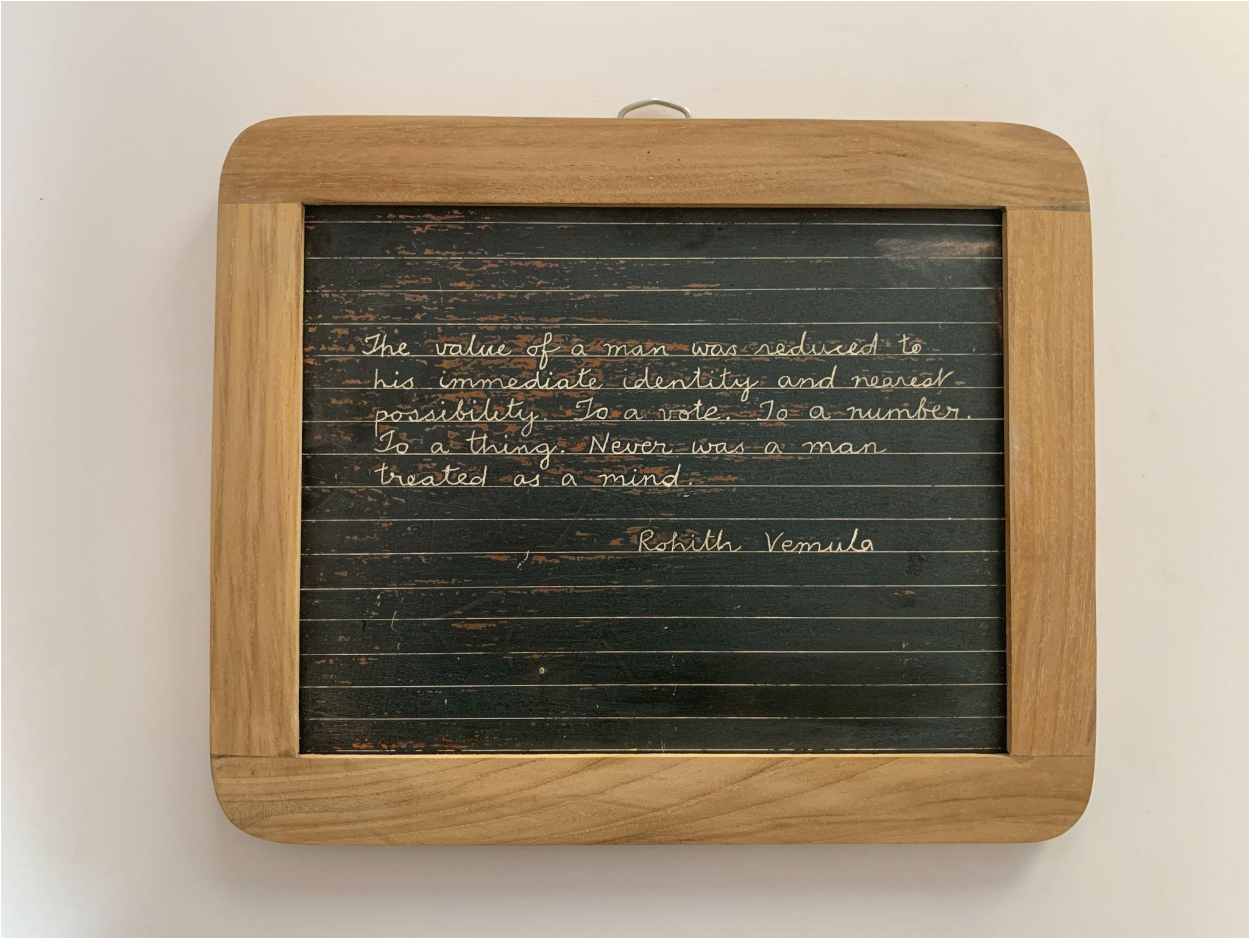
Pushpamala N

Artist's note:

Nara (Slogans), a set of fifty works, commemorates the slogans and poems of recent popular protests in India in three languages: Kannada, Hindi and English. While the Atlas works celebrate the history and diversity of the languages and scripts of the subcontinent but are unreadable like codes, the *Nara* works literally replicate the protest material. Words and images are etched onto copper plates, treated with patinas and framed to look like school slates. The ephemeral materials of the street are turned into contemporary inscriptions and objects of pedagogy.

In the process of making these works, the artist was reminded of her early exercises as an art student designing words and forms with rulers, set squares and compasses. She has taken inspiration from Russian constructivist posters, nationalist font books, exercise books and other pedagogical materials to design the slates.

The following are some of the works from the Nara *series, a set of 50 works with slogans and poems etched onto copper plates, coloured with patinas with incisions filled with chalk powder, framed to look like school slates. Size of each work: 8.5 x 10.5 inches.*


The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing. Never was a man treated as a mind.
Rohith Vemula


Ideas are bulletproof
I AM
GAURI
29.1.1962 - 5.9.2017


DALIT
Lives
matter


NO FARMER
NO FOOD

Images © Pushpamala N.

At the Age of 33

Arya Gopi

Kanchan Chander, ‘Drawing 40’, Acrylic and pen on paper, 4×6 inches, 2018

33 is an acute age; it is half of 66
and one-third of 99; I don’t want
to live a century here, anyhow.
It detectably has no relation to 3.

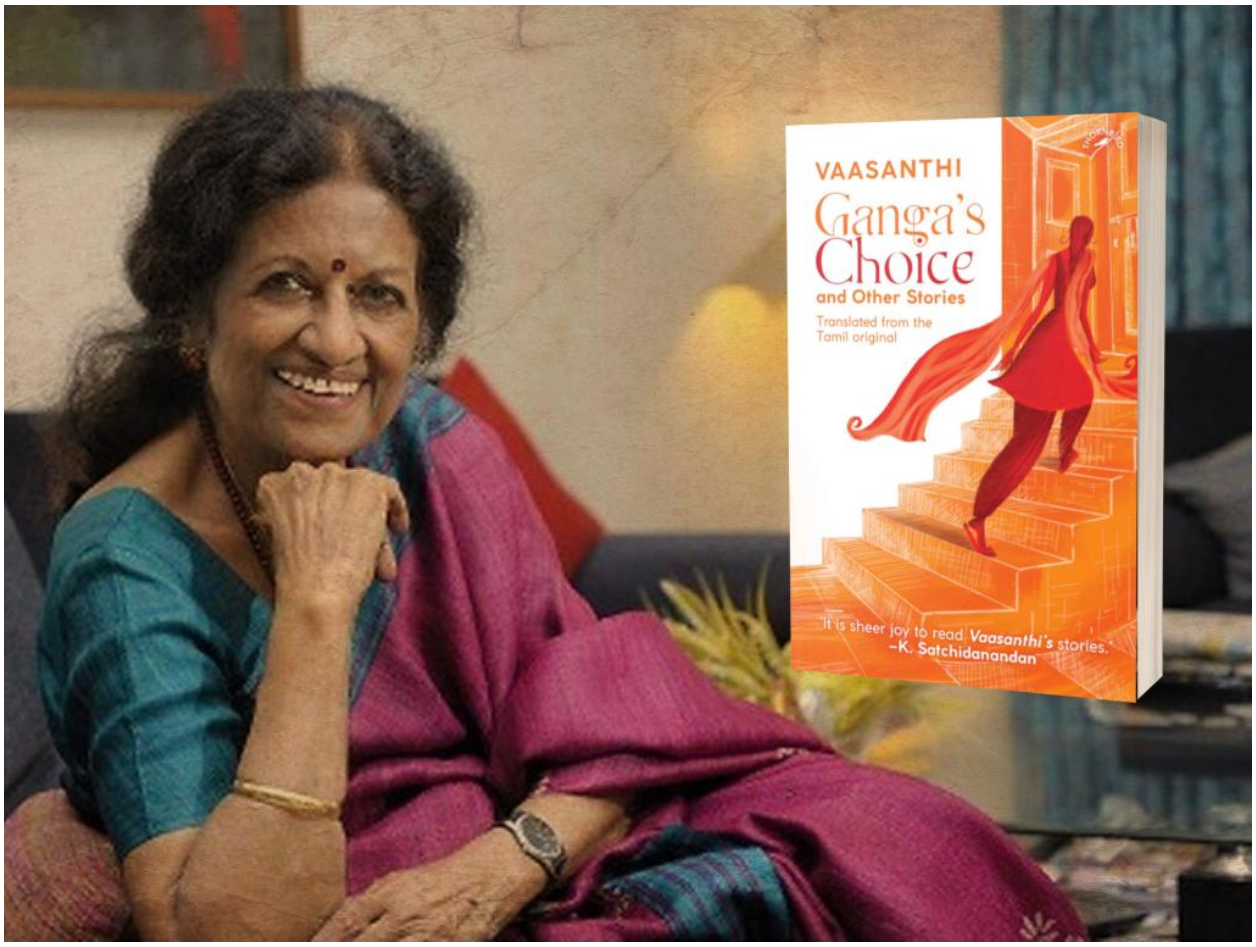
Fervent dreams restored on the
eve of my thirty-third birthday ;
Obsessed responsibilities took
amoebic shapes but the old wine
bottles preserved them airtight.
I read white was an ocular mirage;
and 33 years of reality was dark.
My coyness is no more taciturn;
I draw maps of menstrual timidity
and start for a beguiling jaunt.

33 is the feral age; you pretend to
be matured and your saturations
inundate islands of silences; It is
modestly connected to 3 merely.

***Idaiveli* (Gap)**

A story by Vaasanthi

Translated from Tamil by Sukanya Venkataraman



The dream engulfed him until he was prodded awake with a stick. He was still smiling from the memory of his dream. He was sitting like a dot, a point in the center of a long row of flower shops. She was standing beyond mountains of flowers, like a flower herself. Like her name. Gulabi. Rose.

Garlands of yellow marigolds and red roses hung in chains, swinging when people jostled them. He gazed at her silken face amidst them, unashamed. Her beetle-dark eyes eagerly scanned the mountains of flowers. Her pomegranate lips smiled in awe. Was there ever such a wonder in Allah's creations? How would it be if he touched her? He extended his hand.

‘Hey, wake up. Are you dreaming?’

The cane prodded his waist painfully. He woke up with a start. He saw the cane first. Like an unravelling film reel, the dim light revealed Javdekar in his police uniform with his sharp eyes and a mocking smile beneath his moustache. He sat up on his side, fearfully. What was Javdekar here for today? Would his antics start early in the day?

Didn’t I tell you to get up?

The others in the room were still asleep.

He held onto his long shorts, which were slipping, and tied them. The tie-up cord was frayed at the ends. Before he could stand upright, he felt a sting on his knee. The same place that he had been struck yesterday.

‘Come on. Got the news last night that you are being freed today.’

He looked around, bewildered. Was this being told to him or was it meant for someone else? The others were curled up, eyes closed.

‘What are you gaping for? Are you happy hearing this or not? You must give me something for telling you this good news. Ok, now move…’

He walked as if in a dream. When would the news have been transmitted? Before he was hit or after? He felt like taking a pee.

‘I’ll take a pee and be back,’ he said, his head bent as if he was mortified to say so.

‘Ok, go and then come to the office room.’

He could not see the path to the restroom in the dawning light but walked swiftly towards it on instinct. Initially the smell would turn his stomach. Now nothing bothered his senses. He opened the tap in the lavatory and washed his face. The cold water felt good. It seemed to penetrate his brain and move aside the cobwebs there ever so slightly. The sky was turning grey when he walked out and looked up.

What did Javdekar say?

‘You are being freed today.’

Was it the truth? Or was it another trick to beat him up further?

He hesitantly went and lingered by the office room door. The warden was sitting at his table. His face seemed less harsh today.

‘Come, Ayub Khan. Come in and sign your name. You can go home today.’

‘Why now, out of the blue?’ he wanted to ask, but did not. He signed where they asked him to. He saw the picture of an adolescent boy on the form. It seemed like someone else. He bent down and peered at it. Javdekar and the warden looked at each other, smiled and shook

their heads.

‘Here is the money you earned here.’

He accepted the money and counted it. Two thousand and eight rupees. It seemed like a lot of money. All new notes. He was afraid to even touch it.

Javdekar held out a small package. ‘Your clothes. See if they still fit you.’

He went aside and tried to wear his clothes. The shirt was tight. His waist was too big for his shorts. He pulled the rope from his long shorts and wound it around his waist.

Javdekar laughed.

‘Go get yourself a lungi. Or you’ll find one at home. Your house is here, right?’

He shook his head to indicate no.

‘Then where is it?’

He did not respond. That was his private business.

Instead, he shrugged. The warden looked at his file. ‘Mysore,’ he said with some surprise.

‘Great! Then buy a lungi here,’ said Javdekar. ‘Many buses go to Bangalore. Take a bus from there and go home.’

‘Who is there at home?’

He turned around, stunned. Yes, it was the warden who had asked him. He had never experienced anything but harshness in that man.

He thought for a bit. It seemed like the cobwebs were suffocating his brain again. He closed his eyes in thought. He saw a big inner courtyard. He saw every face, dull like an old family photo. The courtyard was bright. As if the sun was resting there…

‘Well, go on then. Don’t get into any trouble from now on.’

He started again, wondering how to respond. He moved to leave the room in silence, still doubting his freedom.

‘Ayub! Do you know why they freed you?’ asked the warden.

He shook his head to indicate no.

‘The court decided that you were not guilty.’

Ayub looked at the warden in surprise.

‘Today is August 15th. Independence Day. You are also free and independent. Aren’t you happy?’

He did not know. It seemed like they were mocking him. He felt unreasonably agitated. His heart palpitated. His blood rushed to the nape of his neck and his face grew warm.

How does happiness feel?

‘Go on now. Go home. Make an honest living and survive.’

He came out. He had seen similar scenes in many Hindi movies. A girlfriend or friend would be waiting to welcome the prisoner. The entrance was devoid of life and there was no one.

His shorts hurt his waist since they were too tight. He would have to wait until the shops opened. Footpath shops could be cheaper.

Mumbai was not yet awake. He was surprised to see so little traffic. The Mumbai he remembered had been bustling, crowded and dirty. The opposite of Mysore. The streets of Mysore were wide with cooling trees on either side. The streets were clean. It was a quiet town with gentle folk. But he had liked Mumbai. He had been awestruck by its speed. It seemed like yesterday when he had stared with an open mouth at everything, like a villager who comes to a city for the first time. Gaping at the sea. At the massive cinema posters. At the urchins standing outside the sky-high walls of movie star bungalows waiting for a glimpse of them. At multi-storey buildings and the wealthy residing in them. Streets with buried secrets. The pav bhaji**1** in street side shops…the filth piled in corners. Dogs and cows hovering around plastic bottles and bags…the casual indifference of people who always seemed to be in a hurry…the celebratory laugh of the frothing ocean…

Nothing registered today. A sleepy Mumbai seemed strange. Like a dull piece of art, its paint faded and peeling.

He walked where his feet led him. The sea breeze wafted in. He saw smoke in a corner tea shop. There were two others when he reached it. He got a paper cup of tea, along with some change, for ten rupees. Masala tea. The fragrance wafted into his very being. He savoured its heat with closed eyes as it penetrated his body. The shopkeeper laughed when Ayub opened his eyes.

‘Do you need another chai?’ he asked in Marathi.

He thought about it but decided to have one at breakfast instead and continued walking. The ocean seemed to come closer as he walked on. Mumbai started to bustle again as more pedestrians and vehicles began plying the streets. He noticed that the seaside street shops were open and walked towards them. Jeans and tee shirts were in huge piles.

‘Get yourself a lungi,’ Javdekar had said. He was not used to wearing a lungi. The boy at the street shop selected a pair of jeans and a tee that would fit him. The boy sold them for 80 rupees after intense bargaining. ‘Ok, you are my first sale of the day,’ he reasoned. Ayub felt new energy inside him after changing into his new outfit in a fairly private space.

He discarded his old clothes in a street corner trash pile and moved forward. He sat on the parapet wall near the sea and gazed at it. The horizon glittered like diamonds, as if the sun was

sitting on the waves. Those closer to the shore seemed a darker blue. He stared at them vacantly for a while.

He felt stunned. It seemed as if he and the universe were standing still. Gulabi came floating on the waves. 'Do you remember me, Gulabi?' She laughed her tinkling laugh.

'How can I remember you when I never knew you?'

He felt cheated and buried his head in his knees. His memories lengthened, like a long list. They expanded with those he had seen in the sun-lit inner courtyard. They would remember him for sure. Vappa, Amma-*jaan*, Bhai-*jaan*… would they remember him? The courtyard spun

below his head. The aroma of Amma-*jaan*'s kothu parotta beckoned him.

'Come Ayub, I have made *kurma*2 just the way you like it. With coconut milk…'

Tears flooded his eyes and spilled over. Will you recognize me now? Will you make parotta with kurma for me?

He wondered where all these tears had been before today. He allowed it to flow and ebb on its own. Sunlight stung his neck. He stroked it, looking up. He wiped his face and eyes.

A boy was sitting in the vicinity. He laughed at Ayub.

'Why are you crying? If you need a job, I can get one for you.'

Ayub got up hurriedly and walked on without replying.

'Hey, are you deaf or dumb?'

That boy reminded Ayub of himself. He turned around and looked at the boy who was wearing Ayub's discarded shirt and shorts. He felt like giving a resounding slap on the boy's back.

In truth, it seemed like he had forgotten how to use words. He felt like he could not utter even a single sentence. It had been days since he had spoken…He had forgotten if it had been days or years. He vowed to never open his mouth until he left Mumbai.

He joined the long queue at the bus stop. He understood that the arriving bus was going to Dadar railway station. He boarded it. It felt like an invisible hand was shoving him.

His body and brain worked like a machine. The crowd inside the railway station left him breathless. Waves of unstopping humanity flowed forward like a deluge. He reached the ticket counter, floating on that wave. The man at the counter must be a robot. He took the money and issued tickets in silence. His speed, heavy silence, and his betel-leaf chewing mouth agitated Ayub. After asking several times and getting scolded, he got a ticket to Mysore.

Sweat poured down his forehead as if he had run a mile. The train departed only in the evening. He came out and started eating the pav bhaji at the corner shop with relish. His stomach shamelessly asked for more, regardless of how much he ate. Mango juice –Aam ras. His mind was saturated with happiness.

'Are you happy now?'

It seemed like this was happiness. It seemed like a new invention. He could not believe it. No fear of Javdekar's cane or the mockery of others…No need to try and hide from their unbridled atrocities…How had this become possible? 'The court has decided that you are not guilty.'

You bastards…Climbing up and down endless steps of wandering, onlookers spitting on him and lowering his head because he was unable to digest it…the countless ups and downs of that rutted, rough path were branded in his brain… That walk had aged him inside and out…It was a scene out of a movie. An absurd, unbelievable story. He was the loser hero of that story.

He wanted to laugh out loud till he shook. It could have been that he wanted to cry too. He got up when he saw some young men at the next table staring at him. They would laugh if he told them his story. They would not believe him.

'Do you think we are fools?' they would ask.

This was his private humiliation. There was no need to tell anyone. Everyone would ask when he went home. What should he say? The truth?

'Is that you Ayub? Where did you disappear to? Everyone thought you were dead…' This was more or less like death.

‘Are you Ayub’s ghost?’ they would laugh. ‘Yes, I am a ghost,’ he told himself. The old Ayub is dead. He had carried him and thrown himself away. Like discarding that old shirt and shorts. Now there is a different person inside. He was worried if they would accept him. Amma-jaan came to mind. His stomach churned and his eyes filled. She would need to believe him. She would believe him even if no one else did, he consoled himself.

He rose and searched for a tap to wash his hands. There was a tiny wash basin in an isolated area with a mirror hanging above it. The face in that mirror was that of a stranger. He washed his face thoroughly and arranged his hair using his wet hand. He felt stronger after wiping his face with the handkerchief he had bought in a street shop. He did not know how to spend his time until evening. There was a park a short distance away. He sat on a bench there. He could see a school opposite it. The national flag was visible above its walls. He could hear students singing the national anthem. What was it today? Oh, August 15th. The warden would hoist a flag too.

He buried his head in his knees. ‘*Jhanda ooncha rahe hamara…*’3 He was running carrying the flag, like in A.R. Rehman’s ‘*Maa tujhe salaam*’ music video. His heart rose higher and higher.

‘*Maa tujhe salaam…*’ He was wearing a Gandhi cap. His friend Basavappa was running with him. Basavappa would always wear vibhuthi (holy ash) on his forehead. His family would buy flowers for divine offerings from Vappa’s shop. Their fathers were dear friends. And so were he and Basavappa, always together, used to sit next to each other in school.

Would Basavappa recognize him now? Would he hug Ayub like in the old days? An entire eon had slipped by since then. Beliefs and relationships would have disappeared along the way too. He felt like crying again for no reason. As if weeping for someone who was dead.

He composed himself and rose. Children in uniform were emerging from the school laughing and chittering. He looked at them eagerly for a while and then started walking back towards the railway station. He remembered how he had been unable to leave for Mysore earlier. Now, he would have to ensure he left before anything similar happened again.

The railway coach bound for Mysore was empty. He had got a nice window seat with a sleeper. He bought a meal packet for dinner, returned to his seat, and leaned against it. It seemed strange that he had been unaware of this fact—of sitting on a train to Mysore—until early this morning.

The coach started filling up. These people lived defined lives. They knew what they would do tomorrow. He was impatient for the train to leave. Every delay meant his departure was doubtful. A khaki uniform might ask him to leave, press the nape of his neck and order 'Walk to the station.' Thank God, the train moved. Finally. He looked at the receding outer world for a while. Mysore was at the end of this journey.

He ate and lay down. Sleep made his eyes heavy, but he was afraid to sleep. Ghosts would surround him as soon as he closed his eyes. They would threaten him, whip in hand. 'Who are you, Ayub Khan? Tell us! Which gang do you belong to? Who are you?'

Blood would pour out of his cracked back. He would forget who he was in his hazy consciousness as they repeated that question. He would even forget his name. He once said his name was Basavappa. 'Are you lying, you rascal!' Oh God! The beatings made him feel like his hands, legs, and back had been ripped apart.

Hometown streets came chasing the ghosts today. Vappa and Amma came running towards him. Devaraj market expanded without end. Vappa was sitting amidst a pile of flowers and hollering in Kannada. 'Quarter kg *malligae4* is 20 rupees! Quarter kg rose is 10 rupees! Come! Come!' His elder brother Ahmed was dragging him along. 'Come on, we need to string many garlands. Tomorrow is Lord Ganesha's festival.' Buyers were grabbing garlands even as he strung them. He waited. Gulabi came. She was not smiling. She shrugged.

'Al Qaeda or Indian Mujahudeen? Who are you? Tell us!' *Saare jahan se achaa…Hindustan hamara. Janda ooncha rahe hamara…*He was holding a flag like in A.R. Rehman's song.

It was bright when he opened his eyes. He sat up with a start. 'Did we pass Bangalore?' he asked the old man sitting opposite him.

'Sure, half an hour ago. Do you need to go there?' 'No, Mysore.'

'How come you slept like a person who has never slept for years?'

He went to the lavatory without responding. His very blood cells seemed jolted awake as they neared Mysore. His mind was restless. The climate had changed considerably. There was a strong, cool breeze. His palms sweated despite that.

He looked around with yearning when the train arrived in Mysore. It seemed as if there was no connection between the bursting Mumbai station and this calmer one. He was overcome with emotion and his eyes filled when he stepped onto the ground. Which demon had lured him there?

He emerged from the station and took a deep breath. The palace was a short distance away. Beautiful, like a pearl. Krishna Devaraja Wadiyar's statue was at the crossroads. Devaraj Ars Road was in the vicinity. Devaraj market was beyond that. The place where his Vappa and Ahmad sold flowers. They would be there now. He wanted to see them. He would understand the situation more if he went home first.

Ayub felt an unusual thrill and sense of safety among the bustling market crowds. He realized his manic hunger and that he was standing in front of a hotel only when the smell of puri and masala wafted towards him. He was unaware if breakfast would be ready at home at this time. He entered the hotel, which seemed new, and ordered a cup of coffee along with dosa. He looked around sharply but did not see any familiar face. Or maybe no one recognized him.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the chair. He was back in town. His birthplace. Among familiar, simple people. He was the son of respected flower seller Mehboob Khan. The prodigal had returned. Like a lamb returning to its fold. Someone touched his shoulder. His shoulders tensed in involuntary fear. He opened his eyes, startled.

'Ayub?'

A man with holy ash on his forehead was standing in front of him. Recognition hit.

'Basavappa?'

Ayub got up swiftly, stretching forward to hug him. The outstretched hands stopped. It was many days since he had bathed. The man standing opposite him was the epitome of cleanliness.

Basavappa laid his hands on Ayub's shoulders and laughed as if he could not believe himself. 'Where did you run away without telling anyone? How many years has it been? Where were you, what are you doing?'

Ayub's eyes dimmed with tears. 'Did you even recognize me? I am amazed. I cannot recognize you. You have become very fat.'

Basavappa burst out laughing. ‘This is what happens when you eat dosa every day. You look like a scarecrow. Your face is unchanged but slightly older. What happened? Why didn’t you even write a letter? These days, even the rickshaw man and those who launder our clothes have cell phones. Why are you like this?’

‘That is a story, Basavappa. A horrifying story. Maybe you will believe it. Maybe you won’t. But after hearing it, you will not even touch or speak to me.’

Basavappa looked at him thoughtfully. ‘Did you think I might have changed? Will the mind change like our appearance does? Can I forget our friendship?’ He laughed and sang ‘*Janda ooncha rahe hamara*’, beating the table in rhythm.

Ayub laughed, nodding his head. Something rose like a ball from the pit of his stomach and constricted his throat. ‘Basavappa, would you believe it if I say I get tears in my eyes every time I hear this song?’

‘Definitely. I feel that way too. My kids think I’m crazy.’ Tiffin and coffee arrived.

‘Why don’t you eat too?’ Ayub asked Basavappa.

‘The first offering here is for me. This is my hotel. Is dosa enough? Eat idlis too. Hey, this man is our guest,’ Basavappa replied.

Ayub’s stomach was full. He had even forgotten all these tastes.

‘Now tell me your story.’

Ayub felt embarrassed. ‘First let me go home, Basavaa.’

‘Ok, go home. Your mother will be happy. Poor thing, how she cried. She thinks you are dead, but I refused to believe that. Thank God you are alive. Why did you run away like that? Doesn’t anyone else fail in their exams? Don’t their parents scold them?’

Ayub bowed his head. He had forgotten his father’s angry face, his spanking and his own anger long ago. ‘Yes, I made a great mistake, Basavaa. Do you believe in fate?’

Basavappa looked at him steadily. ‘If you had stayed here, fate could not have done anything to you. Come on, I’ll walk with you until you reach home. Let us catch up as we walk.’

‘Not now, Basavaa. I will tell you another day.’

‘As you wish. You need not tell me anything. I’m so happy to see you. I am going to open a hotel in Srirangapatnam. Tipu Sultan’s town. So I am going to call it Tipu’s Café.’ He winked and laughed. ‘I need someone to help me. You can supervise it. Now look here, you should not keep crying so often.’ Basavappa patted his back. ‘Let’s meet this evening. Let’s go to the Krishnaraja Sagar dam. There’s been a lot of rain this year. So there’s a lot of water there. Will look amazing,’ he said.

Ayub smiled, nodded his head, and walked towards his house. His felt at ease. He could not believe that Basavappa had never changed. What would he say if he knew my story?

‘You need not tell me anything.’

How come? Hadn’t anything changed around here?

The streets were the same. He could not yet see any multi-storey buildings like in Mumbai. There were no glittering malls. Mysore was at peace, as if meditating on itself. The street he lived. The dusty ground in which he had played till he was 16 years old. The place where he had played cricket. The school he had studied in with Basavappa was in the next street. His father had not sent Ayub and his elder brother to the Madrasa school. ‘You should study in the same school as other Indian children. We are not different. Education is your weapon,’ he would say. ‘Are you going to live your life selling flowers like your illiterate father?’ he had asked on the day he beat Ayub, but Ayub did not feel like it was below his dignity to sell flowers. He could see Gulabi only there.

His feet halted abruptly. His house. Vappa and Ahmad would have gone to the flower shop. He stood outside the front door and pressed the bell.

‘Who is it?’ an old lady asked as she came to the door. His throat constricted. His eyes flooded. Her hair was white, her eyes dull.

‘Ammi!’ he said in a low voice.

She was shocked. She stared at him for a while. ‘Who? Ayub? Have you returned?’ she said and wept as she hugged him. ‘I knew you would return one day. That you were alive. I was so angry because you were the stone-hearted boy who rejected us all and left.’

He broke down. Her warm embrace was cathartic, his tears washing away all the sorrow and humiliations of the past decades. He wept as if his heart would break. He was unable to speak.

‘Don’t cry. Come in. You ran away in anger. Do you understand how we suffered these past 20 years, not knowing if you were alive or dead? Did you remember home only now, all of a sudden?’

He shook his head firmly. He wiped his face and composed himself.

‘There was never a minute when I didn’t think of you these past 20 years. You must believe me.’

‘Couldn’t you call or write a letter?’

‘I couldn’t. I was the victim of a strange situation, Ammi. It is a horrifying story.’

His mother’s eyes widened in fear. ‘Did you do something wrong like some other idiot boys that would spoil our name? If so, leave immediately before Vappa returns.’

He was stunned at her intense expression. ‘No, no. You must believe what I say.’

‘Come in and tell me.’

The hall was dim as always. They both sat down on the old sofa there. Amma-*jaan* looked at him with tenderness.

She stroked his jaws. He felt despair when he saw tears flowing from her eyes. He wanted to dissolve his sorrows by hugging her.

‘Did you have breakfast, my dear? Do you want coffee? Let me bring some,’ she said getting up. He stopped her.

‘No need, Ammi. I just had my breakfast.’

He grasped her hands. ‘Ammi, every word I say is the truth. I will never lie.’

‘Tell me. My daughter-in-law has gone to have her bath. There is no one at home.”

‘Ammi, can I lie down on your lap?’ ‘Yes dear.’

Her thigh felt like a cushion. Its soft warmth seemed to heal all his wounds. It seemed that he had lived for this very moment, waiting for it. He closed his eyes. He felt like a fourteen-year-old again.

How it rained that day! Ayub was lying on his bed in intense thought. He was unreasonably angry. Didn’t anyone fail their exams? Should he have been beaten so brutally for that? He was sad that he had failed but even sadder that Vappa, who had never laid a hand on him, had belted him, and humiliated him with awful words. He found that unbearable. It created an unreasonable rage against Vappa. The place where Vappa had whipped him on the back stung like fire. Vappa had angrily pushed Ammi away when she had approached Ayub with some soothing balm. Everyone went to sleep that night as if nothing had happened. He could not sleep. He could not even cry through his anger. It was raining heavily outside.

He left after everyone was asleep. He had to go somewhere without telling anyone. Not even Basavaa. He would let Basavaa know later. He ran blindly, getting drenched in the rain.

He boarded a train in the station. He felt a strange freedom and agitation when it started moving. He had never gone anywhere alone. He had no money. He had never even thought about what his plans were. He hid from the ticket collector in the lavatory. He got down in the final stop. In Dadar, Mumbai. He had heard that Mumbai was a huge city. He would survive doing some job here. He only knew how to string flowers. What job would he get as a person who had failed his tenth standard? He was hungry.

He saw a jewellery shop. Ayub showed his gold ring to the person at the counter and told him he wished to sell it. Ayub had seen the white cap on the shopkeeper’s head and realized he was a Muslim. So, he spoke to him in Urdu.

The shopkeeper looked at him keenly. ‘Did you run away from home?’ he asked.

Ayub lowered his head without replying. ‘What is your name?’

‘Ayub Khan.’

The shopkeeper weighed the ring, counted the money, put it in an envelope, and gave it to him. ‘Keep it carefully. Mumbai is a dangerous place. Where are you going to stay?’

Ayub looked bewildered.

The shopkeeper smiled and took a woven white cap from a nearby shelf.

‘Wear this on your head. You must not wander around without anything to identify you as a Muslim.’

He waited until Ayub had donned the cap. The boy wore it. In Mysore, he wore it only when he went to the mosque.

‘You are my boy from now on. You can stay and eat in my house.’

Ayub was disbelieving. How many good people lived in Mumbai! He felt that reaching this place signalled a victory in some way. He would write to Ammi soon.

‘Please let Vappa know that I am very happy here. I will soon earn on my own and show that I can become a big man.’ Yasin Mubarak seemed to be someone respected by all in that locality. There were four other boys like Ayub in his house. They spoke to Ayub kindly. He got three meals a day. They prayed five times a day. More than 50 people gathered during prayer time. He did his errands cheerfully.

Ayub had never expected to get such an easy life in a strange town and his heart filled with gratitude. He was wonderstruck at how good Yasin Mubarak, the man everyone called *Bade Bhai* (elder brother), was.

That day dawned as usual. Yasin Mubarak had risen early and was talking continuously on the phone with various people. In a change to the usual routine, Ayub was alone during prayer time.

The women of the house had disappeared. He was told that they had gone out of town. Breakfast came from a hotel. Yasin Mubarak did not go to his shop that day. Bhai had sent away everyone except Ayub and was sitting in front of the television.

News started trickling in. There had been blasts in several places in Mumbai. Ayub gasped as he watched from a corner. People died. Panicked crowds scattered, screaming. The hurt wailed. TV reporters were shouting in loud, anxious voices. He could not understand what they were saying. He froze in terror. He heard '*Aatankwadi* attacks' repeated several times. 'What is the meaning of *Aatankwadi*?' he asked in a loud voice. Yasin Mubarak looked at him, startled. 'It means terrorists,' he said, slightly irritated.

'They are murderers. Devils. Why should they kill innocent people on the street? Are they our enemies? Are they Pakistanis?' Ayub asked, agitated.

'Shut up. Don't talk like a big man. Go do your errands,' said Mubarak with an anger Ayub had never seen before.

He got up and went to the room allocated to him. His heart was still beating in fear. What was happening in this city? He had never seen anything like it in Mysore. It was surprising that Bade Bhai had not gone to work today.

He wanted to bid farewell to Bade Bhai and leave for Mysore as soon as things calmed down. The street seemed deserted outside his window. Everyone was locked inside in fear. They stayed at home for the next two days. Bade Bhai did not go to his shop since the entire market street was closed. He seemed ready to leave for some place on the third day. The police came when he was trying to slip away through the back door.

Ayub was stunned. They pushed him and the other boys by the nape of their necks into a police van, even while he was observing these happenings with wide eyes. They were sent to jail straightaway. The crime he had committed and the reason he had been in jail remained a mystery to Ayub. He spent 20 years in isolation, unaware of what was going on in the outside world. The horrors he had experienced during that time…

He stopped. He could not bring himself to tell her the atrocities he had suffered. The beatings, kicking, and electric shock to his privates. The sexual perversities of guards and fellow prisoners. How could he tell all this to his mother?

''Ammi, I cannot describe to you what it was, the last twenty years. I suffered very much without understanding why. The day before, out of the blue, I was told that the court had decided that I was free and not guilty.'

‘Did it take them 20 years to say that?’ his mother asked, her eyes brimming with tears. She was silent for a long time, as if in deep thought. The warmth of her body made him sleepy. He felt relieved after having unburdened himself to her.

‘Ayub, tell me the truth,’ said Ammi softly. ‘You didn’t do anything wrong, did you?’

He was traumatized and got up with a start. ‘Ammi, don’t you believe in me? I told you the truth, Ammi.’

Ammi’s eyes were full. It was obvious that she found it difficult to speak. She spoke without meeting his eyes, looking into the distance. ‘Times are not good, Ayub. Many among our people are not even aware of what their kids are doing. Others look at us with suspicion if we even utter our name. We die with fear every time there is a blast in this country. Children disappear. Vappa will die of humiliation if the police ever come to our house.’

He looked at her, stricken. He seemed to see new worry lines in her face, already wrinkled and aged beyond her years. They seemed to increase like a netted web, transforming her face. He wanted to tear them away in his panic. How? On what should he swear to make her believe him? His stomach trembled. A nameless fear and confusion engulfed him. It was unbearable to recognize that Ammi would never believe him even if he explained it to her several times or swore on the holy Quran.

‘Ammi,’ he started, but she covered his mouth and grasped his hands.

‘Ayub, please don’t misunderstand me. Please go somewhere else, make a living, and survive. But please don’t come back here,’ she said in a low, furtive voice with tears in her eyes.

He stood looking at her in disbelief. Panic seemed to be compressing her. Ammi, it appeared, was waiting for him to leave quickly. Words came exploding from within him. ‘Even the court has declared me innocent. I want to live a normal life too, Ammi. I want to work. I want to marry a girl I like. I will help father and support Ahmad. I have been waiting 20 years for this moment.’

‘You leave, dear. If my daughter-in-law Gulabi knows, she will make a scene,’ Ammi said, as he was wondering whether to say all this to her.

He was stunned and taken aback. ‘Who?’

‘Gulabi. She used to come to the flower shop. Ahmad liked her. They got married 10 years ago.’

Ayub took a few seconds to absorb what he had heard. The dream castles he had built crumbled in front of his eyes. They scattered into infinite pieces that could not be scooped up and blocked his heart.

It seemed like Ammi had been buried among those pieces. After a few seconds, he reverently placed her hands against his eyes and smiled slowly. He felt like there had never been a more insane person than himself. ‘I’m going, Ammi,’ he said and walked away without looking back.

His mind was blank. He walked to the bus terminus, stupefied. He quickly walked past Basavappa’s hotel, boarded a bus at the terminal and sat near the window. The wind blew strong and cool. Dried leaves danced lightly above the ground, as if to signal that it was going to rain.

Published by Niyogi Books, Vaasanthi’s *Ganga’s Choice and Other Stories* (2022), is translated by Sukanya Venkataraman, Gomathi Narayan and Vaasanthi herself.

Poetry Against Violence

An essay and two poems

K Satchidanandan

SH Raza, Gorbio, unknown medium, 120 x 200 cm, 1962

Ocatvio Paz, the great Mexican poet, diplomat and thinker wrote in his introduction to *Poesía en Movimiento* (Poetry in Motion) an anthology of contemporary Mexican poetry: 'There can be no poetry without history, but poetry has no other mission than to transmute history. And therefore the only true revolutionary poetry is apocalyptic poetry. 'Later he adds: 'The poet is a man whose very being becomes one with his words. Therefore only the poet can make possible a new dialogue.'

Pablo Neruda, another great poet of our times, advocated 'impure poetry' in his 1935 manifesto, *Towards an Impure Poetry*, a poetry that carries the dust of distances and smells of lilies and urine: 'The used surfaces of things, the wear that hands have given to things, the air, tragic at times, pathetic at others, of such things, all lend a curious attractiveness to reality that

we should not underestimate…' He had said in that manifesto. In 1966, again he wrote, 'I have always wanted the hands of people to be seen in poetry,' and added, 'I have always preferred a poetry where the fingerprints show. A poetry of loam where the water can sing. A poetry of bread where everyone may eat.' We know how this intuitive connection to the masses remained a feature of his oeuvre right from his *Residence on Earth* and became more intense as he grew turning him into a biblical prophet of sorts, the voice of the voiceless, reminding us of another great poet of our time, Czeslaw Milosz the Polish poet to whom poetry was 'a participation in the humanly modulated time' and who believed that the poetry that does not address the destiny of nations is useless. And that 'in a room where people unanimously maintain a conspiracy of silence, one word of truth sounds like a pistol shot'. He warned the wrong-doers: 'You who have wronged a simple man/ Bursting into laughter at his suffering…/Do not feel safe. The poet remembers./You may kill him — a new one will be born./Deeds and talks will be recorded' (You Who Have Wronged).

The greatest poets of our time, from Paz, Neruda, Brecht and Mahmoud Darwish to Tagore, Nazrul Islam and Faiz Ahmed Faiz are united by what Paz calls the apocalyptic element — that one finds in the poets we have cited besides a range of poets from William Blake, Alexander Pushkin, Alexander Blok, Paul Celan and Cesar Vallejo to Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, Leopold Senghor, Aime Cesaire, Nazim Hikmet, Kim Chi-ha and Bei Dao. Their texts instantly make visible the now obscure links between mantic practices and poetry, between magic, shamanism, possession and oracle on the one hand and poetic vision, inspiration, power and incantation on the other. The poet thus re-enchants the disenchanted world by turning poetry into a symbolic act intended to transform the world.

This apocalyptic and symbolic function of poetry has assumed a new urgency in our time that, to me, has been marked primarily by violence in its diverse incarnations. Theodor Adorno, the well- known thinker from Frankfurt once said that poetry is impossible after Auschwitz. The statement, clearly, was not meant to be literal; it was an intense comment on the violence of our times that works against creativity of every kind. Indeed the Holocaust produced its own variety of great poetry — remember Nelly Sachs, Abba Kovner, Paul Celan and several others who still remind us of those ominous days of the genocidal mania. It was about such poetry that the Polish poet Tadeusz Różewicz had said in his introduction to the anthology of post-War Polish poetry, '…a poetry for the horror-stricken, for those abandoned to butchery, for survivors, created out of a remnant of words, salvaged words, out of uninteresting words from the great rubbish dump.'

The history of poetry in our time has also been a history of censorship, exile and martyrdom. We have the examples of Lorca and Neruda, Nazim Hikmet and Ossip Mandelstam, Vladimir

Mayakovsky and Ai Qing, Shamsur Rahman and Taslima Nasrin, Benjamin Moloise and Ken Saro-Wiwa, Cherabanda Raju and Saroj Dutta, Subbarao Panigrahi and Safdar Hashmi who had all raised their voice against some form of dictatorship, discrimination and injustice for which they had to suffer insult, imprisonment, life in a labour camp, exile or death. Plato, who had kept poets out of his ideal republic should be pleased that he has had several followers in our time: Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, Franco, Pinochet, Id-i-Ameen, Sani Abacha, Ayatollah Khomeini, Saddam Husain and many other champions of totalitarianism and fundamentalism of diverse hues, at times even avowed democrats eager to defend the status-quo. James Joyce once said of writers, 'Squeeze us, we are olives', meaning the writers yield their best under oppressive environments. While it is true that various forms of oppression have produced some of the most passionate poetic works of our time, it is equally true that they have also silenced a lot of real and potential poets. Brecht was right when he asked, 'Will there be poetry in dark times?', and answered, 'Yes, poetry about dark times'. Remember, in his poem 'To the Posterity' he had bemoaned the cruel times when a talk about trees could be a crime since it also carried a silence about so many crimes.

It is impossible for the genuine writer today to ignore the violence that threatens to drown our beautiful world. Blood floods our bedrooms and our drawing rooms are strewn with corpses and that is often the blood and corpses of those who have neither drawing rooms nor bedrooms. Even the ivory towers of pure aesthetes are being swept by the winds of violence and change. Poets can no more be comfortable with ahistoricity, even if they transmute it, as Paz says, into apocalyptic visions. Violence in our time springs from so many sources. Indeed there are the big and small wars often engineered by divisive forces and imperialist agencies, we have seen, from Vietnam to Iraq how wars can be conjured up by hegemonic nation states. Another form of violence springs from social inequalities: of class, caste, race and gender. Capitalist violence that emanates from greed and consequent exploitation — 'capitalism comes into the world dripping blood', said Karl Marx. Upper caste violence based on discrimination, denial of opportunities and silencing of historical memory, the violence of the White races against the Blacks and Browns and non-tribals against tribal populations, and patriarchal violence that takes several forms from linguistic and emotional violence to the physical one, inevitably produce counter-violence from the victims who try to resist the violence from above; but even counter-violence, however sympathetic we are towards it, is also violence and as Brecht says, even anger against injustice contorts our human features. By now any intelligent student of history knows that violence cannot end violence and 'an eye for an eye only turns the whole world blind', to recall the words of the greatest spokesman of non-violence in our times. We have seen this dark logic at work in the countries that sought to change their destiny through violence. They had to employ greater violence to sustain their regimes until some of them collapsed for lack of any means to know the truth, why, to know even their own people's

thoughts, as they had silenced all opposition by brute force- which is blindness of the worst kind.

Another is communal violence, of which we have seen some rabid outbursts in India recently. This happens when religion gets divorced entirely from ethics, from God, if you want, gets congealed into dogma and fanaticism and begins to create a scapegoat, an 'other' in its own image held responsible for every suffering that one endures. It shows patriarchal proclivities, manufactures an artificial tradition and a distorted history dismissing elements that do not suit its design and uses racial symbols and archetypes to appeal to the popular unconscious. Thus it is also a form of cultural and historical violence. This communalism shares with fascism its basic features, what Umberto Eco calls ur-Fascism in his book , *Five Moral Pieces*, a fascism that sees dissent as betrayal, defines nation negatively to the exclusion of minorities thus promoting xenophobia, fears difference, advocates action for the sake of action, rejects modernism, looks at pacifism as collusion with the enemy, scorns the weak, appeals to the middle classes, encourages the cult of death, upholds machismo as a value and opposes all non-conformist sexual behaviour, treats people as a monolith, deride parliamentary governments, promotes what George Orwell would call 'new speak' that sees everything as black and white , and avoids any kind of intellectual complexity, limits the tools available to critical thinking and creates a cult of tradition taking truth to be already known.

Techno-fascism too is a form of corrupt power as it ruins our physical and spiritual environment, exploits the natural resources with no consideration for posterity, pollutes our air , earth and water and imposes on everything the tyranny of the rational, measuring everything in numbers and quantities and rejects all that is incalculable, immeasurable and unsayable — which is the very substance of poetry — as they are impossible to digitalise. It also produces speed that Milan Kundera in his *Slowness* calls the 'ecstasy of technology'. The speed of modern life leaves little room for meditation or even the pleasure of reading and writing. He speaks about the need to retrieve that lost joy of slowness, of lying on the meadow, 'idly gazing at God's windows', a joy getting lost in the louder and faster entertainment provided by the machines.

Another kind of violence comes from the market that forces the writer to be loud and to join the bidding in the culture market while art demands subtlety, suggestion and understatement — it is like a subterranean current that slowly works on the foundations, uproots the status-quoist values and creates new ones. Market is the new Midas turning everything it touches not into gold, but into commodity and artists who answer its temptations are sure to sell their soul to this Mephistophelean spirit.

Baudrillard spoke of globalisation as the 'greatest violence of our times' as it imposes cultural amnesia on its victims, forcing them to forget their indigenous traditions in art, culture and knowledge and turning them increasingly into unthinking mimics of the West. Local cultures are the repositories of culturally learned responses built up over thousands of years from which poetry often draws its sustenance. Its loss is no less dangerous than the loss of genetic diversity. Western universalism is trying to drown the pluralistic and polyphonic cultural mosaic of countries like India. The agenda of globalisation is mono-acculturation, that is, to homogenise and standardise cultures whereas difference and diversity are the very soul of many cultures in the East. Globalisation kills languages both through jargonisation and the selling of the monolingual idea. It is more a command from above than a decision from below; it anthropologises culture by reducing ethnicity into a brand name. It is a form of recolonisation that brings back colonial imaginaries.

Genuine poetry has always opposed violence in its direct and oblique, tangible as well as intangible, forms, and more than ever it needs today to raise its profoundly human voice against all forms of violence, the ones we spoke of and the ones we may have overlooked. Paz had foreseen the contemporary situation: 'Reality has cast aside all disguises and contemporary society is seen for what it is — a heterogeneous collection of things 'homogenised' by the whip or by propagandas, directed by groups distinguishable from one another only by their degree of brutality. In these circumstances, poetic creation goes into hiding.' Poetry, even with its element of play, is no mere combinatorial game that a machine can play. It is more than a mere permutation of a restricted number of elements and functions. It always tries to say what it cannot say and its power comes from its willingness to give a voice to what is voiceless and a name to what is nameless. It advances on the blank page as Nicanor Parra would say. Poetry becomes important, as Italo Calvino says of literature in general, not when it reproduces established values, given truths or ready-made slogans .It is an ear that hears beyond the understanding of common sociology, an eye that sees beyond the colour spectrum of everyday politics. It promotes self-awareness through a criticism of the status quo and the cultural and material violence it perpetrates. The truth it discovers may not necessarily be of immediate use, but it is sure to gradually become part of social consciousness. It is the undeclared mission of poetry today to retrieve the past without being atavistic, to disentangle the effects of power from representations, to re-establish the almost-lost connections between man and nature, to redefine the boundaries between the self and the other and the self and nature in the context of man's species- arrogance that cripples the environment as well as his own moral and spiritual life, to re-sensitise man to suffering, alienation and solitude and to give positive non-violence and love which is its greatest expression the central place it ought to have in all human discourse.

Reality has cast aside all disguises and contemporary society is seen for what it is: a heterogeneous collection of things 'homogenised' by the whip or by propagandas, directed by groups distinguishable from one another only by their degree of brutality. In these circumstances, poetic creation goes into hiding.' Globalisation kills languages J. Swaminathan, an admirer and friend of Paz, had seen how in tribal art nature and its creation envelope each other. Lorca who spoke of the 'duende', that sudden epiphany , the vision of godhead, the intangible mystery in the context of Arabic music, also was speaking of the thrill and terror of what Paz calls the apocalypse. But this is not a moment of ignorance , but of awareness of the highest kind, an awareness filled with deep concern for all living things that the Buddha, that great pioneer of the philosophy of non-violence, would have qualified as 'karuna' or compassion. Let me conclude with Paz's own inspired words: 'We must find the lost word, dream inwardly and also outwardly,/ decipher the night's tattooing and look face to face at the noon day and tear off the mask' so that finally we can say, 'I am history/ A memory inventing itself/I am never alone/ I speak with you always/ You speak with me always/ I move in the dark/ I plant signs.'

(Originally delivered as the inaugural talk at the Mumbai Poetry Festival, TISS, Bombay, 2020.)

Letter From a Soldier

– K Satchidanandan

(On watching the letters sent by the soldiers from Punjab in the First World War forming part of an installation, 'The Memorial for Lost Words' by Bani Abidi at Khoj, Delhi)

Dear Ma,

Kindly send me the following items by return post:

1. *The song of the sparrow on our courtyard to sweeten my ears as I cross the desert on my tank*
2. *A parrot and a rainbow in the sky while hiding in a bush*

1. *A few Gurbanis to warm me as I shiver in the cold*
2. *A matchstick to set fire to the heap of the General's abuses*
3. *A spinach leaf from my mother's kitchen to lull my infinite hunger*
4. *A cloud floating over Panipat to squeeze out the rain-juice to quench my thirst*
5. *A woof of Jagtar, our pet, so that I can tell east from west*
6. *A chain to bind my feet together to stop me from running to Samira*
7. *A kiss from my unborn daughter as I fall to the bullet of my helpless comrade across the border*
8. *A quilt woven with my little sister Jugnu's tears to shroud my brother and me as the last breath leaves our flesh*

P.S. Don't forget to tell my brothers in arms not to cover my coffin with the flag and not offer a gun salute at my burial. Don't ever let the children at home wear a uniform.

Yours,

Surjit

Questions from the Dead: An Essay on Nationalism

– K Satchidanandan

Which country's border was Hiuen Tsang crossing
when, on a donkey, he crossed the Himalayan pass
with a sack full of Buddhist texts?
Whence came the races that spoke
Dravidian and Aryan tongues? Was there no one in India
when they landed here? Not even a tribal?
Where did the Bharatvarsha of Mahabharat and Meghdoot
begin, where did it end? Did Bhasa and Kapilar
belong to the same country?
Where were the borders of the India of Fahien

and of Al-Biruni? Where was Taxila? Which was
the India Alexander set out to conquer? Which
country did Ashoka and Akbar rule?
Who created India: the East India Company
Or Mountbatten? Or was it Gandhi? When
Did 'Hindu' become the name of a religion?
When did Earth come to be in the history
of the universe? When did nations come to be
in the history of Earth? How many nations
make a human body? What is the kinship between
human soul and nations' maps? Did all the births of
Bodhisattva take place in India? How many oceans
are there in each language? How many skies
in winds? How many seasons for love?
I had been guarding the borders till yesterday. All
my life I had arguments about borders. My living flesh
bled, caught in their barbed wire fencing. I went
to court in their name, killed many times, died many times.
They said I would become a martyr if I died
for the cause, that it would secure Heaven for me.
My land, I do not loathe you, nor do I worship you.
Had I been born elsewhere I would have lived another
life; I would have needed a passport to enter you.
Today at last I am going to cross all the borders
and become part of the Earth. Do not cover me with flags.
Today I know, we are a creation of coincidences,
like our body, like the Solar System. We have
no scope for pride, and war does not have even
that scope. Bury me deep without an anthem.

No one ceases to ask questions

just because one is dead.

(Translated from Malayalam by the poet)

The Side Entrance

Tripurari Sharma

Representational image | Courtesy Wikimedia Commons

The eleven O' clock meeting had been shifted by half an hour giving me ample time to reach well prepared for the presentation. Then for lunch, I was going to see Rita, a college friend, who had a boutique and enjoyed discussing design. And then…

As the car came to a stop at the red light, a message flashed from Pamela asking if I would write a piece for her magazine on popular motifs in North Indian textiles.

‘Of course,’ I quickly typed back, biting into my morning toast and taking a sip of tea from my flask. Then with a jolt, as the light changed, I moved ahead, spilling the tea on my saree.

‘Just the omen before a meeting’, I muttered and shrugged it off.

‘Thanks’, Pamela’s message flashed back, ‘Can you give it within a month?’

It was quite possible, I thought, considering I gave an article no more than two days — I would park the car in a corner and scribble something. But this subject was close to my heart…

As a child in Panipat, I saw a peacock come alive on a weaver’s loom. I was mesmerised by the process that brought forth a peacock on cloth. It stayed with me. I embroidered one on a Matty cloth and kept it safely. Peacock… swan… mango leaf… fish… champa… marigold… endless images floated before me. Motifs resounding around us are like the replaying of film songs on a car system. To talk about a song is easy, but to write about the connections and layers it evokes within, is another matter. You have to discover those threads, trace their trajectories and then find the right words.

The article kept me mentally preoccupied; it would get formulated in patches — suddenly between signing files, returning to my cabin after reprimanding a junior colleague, scraping an omelette from the nonstick pan, and placing it in a tiffin box. I could explore more if I gave it time and had a space where the time could be mine.

I yearned to be in a library — a place where I could sit comfortably, open my notebook and feel the flow of uninterrupted thoughts. But many tracks intertwined — job, home, friends, the newspaper, wise conversations, the car ahead, and a billion distracting signboards, vying for attention.

Turning toward Jor Bagh, I went past the exotic cake shop where we placed orders for children’s birthdays, the flower nursery known for rare plants, and the gift shop for all occasions.

As I stopped at a red light, admiring the spacious houses on either side, a small ‘To Let’ sign on the side entrance of a large bungalow caught my attention. It was on brown cardboard handwritten in indigo. It seemed old and faded like a forgotten memento. This was the first time my eye had chanced upon it. There was a huge iron gate at the main entrance and next to it on the wall, the majestic letters ‘Joshi Mansion’ were set in marble. I saw the sign again the next day I saw it every day for many days.

The sign's shabbiness was also incongruous with the grandeur of the house. Once I also moved the car in reverse gear and checked — it belonged to the house alright. Maybe it was for an attic on the first floor, not deserving much attention.

The sign kept teasing me, even when not in sight. Perhaps because I wanted to ink something on paper; something born of solitude, as real writers do. The location was ideal, midway between my office and home. A little room all to myself where I could stop, breathe and have a personal moment. Maybe I could skip the office and read all day, write deep into the sunset and let the stars gently rouse me from my solace. A beautiful sensation of joy and peace crept within as I fancied the room to mark the beginning of a distinctly new phase. It had no name, but several elements. Space, freedom, personal connect, expression, writers studio… Even the notion of such an actuality filled me with a thrill. Our residence was fairly large but it was designed for a family to sit, eat, cook, sleep and entertain guests.

Every morning, I would glance sideways at the sign and see that the room was available, daydreaming about it. Then I decided to take a step further, to step into the mansion and enquire more. But each time I would slow down near the Joshi mansion, hesitate and drive away. To be honest, the iron gate intimidated me. I imagined a pushed button inside sliding it open and a grating sound greeting me.

Then one day, just as I was nearing the house, the gate opened on its own accord and a huge car with a gentleman sitting upright in the backseat went past. Maybe that was Mr Joshi — on his day out.

I parked my car at the side of the house and entered through the now open gate. Three steps led to the porch. A neat woman in a moss green saree was bending over a rubber plant, trimming off the extra leaves with gardening scissors. It was only when she sat down to pick the fallen leaves that she caught sight of my shadow and said, 'Yes…?'

'I'm Avantika', I introduced myself, 'I work at the handloom cooperative'.

She stood up gracefully, without support, acquiring the form of a shapely tree. Her hair was dyed black, parted in the middle, and tightly tied. She nodded for me to continue.

'I noticed that you have a to-let sign on your side entrance.'

'Oh that,' she smiled evasively, 'You talk to my husband about it. He has just left for a university council meeting.'

‘Yes, I saw the car go by.’

‘He will be back by lunchtime. You can come at 4.30 and discuss this with him.’

‘Can I come at 5?’, I replied, ‘My office closes then.’

‘That is his teatime. Then he goes to the library.’

‘I will of course try,' I said, ‘although 4:30 is an awkward time to leave office.’

She merely nodded again — this time in assent.

‘Could I see the room now, so I will be better placed to discuss the matter?’, I asked.

‘You can see it in the evening’, she said politely, ‘It is a small room.’

‘Even so… a room…,’ I paused tentatively and looked at her.

She seemed to understand, but was also reluctant. Perhaps she was not used to strangers entering the house in her husband’s absence.

‘Maybe a glimpse — just a moment, Mrs Joshi, if you could …’, I extended my request.

It seemed to have no effect. So I turned to go.

Then as I reached the gate, she said, ‘You can come from the side entrance. There is a staircase that goes to the room. I’ll bring the key.’

I went along the outer wall to the side entrance. Some twenty steps led to a locked room. There was also an entrance from the house that met the steps. Mrs Joshi came in from there, more relaxed as her agile footsteps led me up to the room. She opened the door and stood to the side, allowing me to enter.

It was a tiny room, with broad windows facing the street. I could not help but notice the light coming in.

‘You can put curtains’, Mrs Joshi made a helpful suggestion.

‘Yes, I could of course. Pleated folds of golden jute.’

There was a small washroom, but no kitchen.

‘We didn’t plan for a family’, she was apologetic, ‘just once in a while, the occasional relatives stayed here.’

‘No. Not a family, we have government accommodation’, I assured her.

‘And for an electric kettle that switches there in the wall is enough.’

‘But an office won’t do either, She was explaining the limited options.

‘No, not an office,’ I tried to explain, ‘I have a cabin there.’

‘Then why do you want this room?’, She enquired.

‘Well, you know, I write, Mrs Joshi’, I tried to explain, ‘and then there are some designs I need to look at, so it’s to be a sort of ‘my’ space — not family, not office.’

‘I see,’ said Mrs Joshi, her eyes measuring the space and voice sounding distant.

Maybe I had confused her. But at least a negotiation had begun with the lady of the house. She would pass this on to Mr Joshi and I could follow it up in the meeting with him.

I thanked her and moved to the steps. She did not follow me but remained in the room. Probably checking out a few things before closing the door.

I waited for a few minutes for her at the lower end of the steps. Then I left. To cover a day’s work at the office and a possible return to the Joshi mansion.

And sure enough, flushed with unabated excitement I was back at the house by 4:30. An elderly gentleman, Mr Joshi, entered from the inner door. He was meticulously dressed and his agile gait matched his wife’s, though his overall temperament was boisterous.

‘Well Madam, how is the handloom cooperative?’, he asked as he signalled me to be seated on the sofa. It was a gesture of a cordial effusive bureaucrat I was so familiar with.

‘I hope well, sir,’ I replied.

‘My friend Bhatnagar does not think so, he chuckled, ‘do you happen to know him?’

‘Of course,’ I beamed. ‘He sits in the next cabin.’

If he was checking my credentials this ought to settle it, I thought.

‘So Madam, what can I do for you ?’, he moved the conversation forward.

‘Well, it’s about the to-let room…’

‘Yes, my wife mentioned it’, he nodded to let me know that he had taken note of it.

‘But seriously, when would you have the time to use the room?’, he asked, ‘I mean between your office and home, as I understand you have both.’

‘Between them — as you said,’ I answered cheerfully, ‘weekends and evenings and some afternoons…’

‘That’s quite unlikely,’ he commented, ‘considering you and your husband have other engagements, young friends and so on…’

Well, the point was to avoid some of that. But it would sound rude. So I skipped this one.

‘Let’s try it for six months and if it doesn’t seem to be working right, we can call it off,’ I suggested.

He was pensive for a moment. Then he said, ‘You know, we don’t allow guests.’

Why did he say that? What was he thinking? ‘Guests? No, not at all sir!’, I blurted out.

He was listening, Expecting more. So I went on, ‘It is to be away from them — from work and daily chores, to have some time to read or write or just a space to think. Like earlier, big homes had libraries — my grandfather had one, largely to be by himself.’

‘A space for oneself,’ he mused thoughtfully, ‘Yes, every creative mind wants one such space. And it is quite a struggle. You know, people go to the Art Centre or a café or library, but for me ultimately, it is the back seat of my car which is this space. I can relax there, even though of course, the chauffeur is with me.’

‘I am the driver of my car’, I mentioned.

‘But I am sure, your husband keeps a chauffeur,’ he retorted sharply.

‘Yes, he does,’ I admitted.

‘Wise men generally do,’ he made a cryptic remark, ‘It’s the one time they can let go of the wheel.’

‘While women try wheeling it about,’ I laughed at the irony.

‘But it is a nuisance,’ he continued with his view, ‘You cannot relax then.’

‘Exactly sir!’ I came back to my case, ‘That is why I have come for the room.’

‘Next time you come, bring your husband too. It is my invitation,’ he said amicably.

Of course, I could ask him, I thought, and he would come too, I was sure. But why… this was a room I was looking for, something I wanted to negotiate for myself… It was my deal!

I tried to push it further. ‘The rent, sir….?’ I asked.

‘Knowing where you are placed, it’s no issue, we’ll resolve it. Let the time come.’

And with a smile, he stood up. It was time for me to leave. The meeting was over. I could hear the soft clink and clatter of tea cups in the distance. Mrs Joshi was on time as per the evening schedule.

‘Your tea time, sir,’ I said, picking up my bag.

‘Why don’t you join us for a cup of tea?’ His tone was polite and the manner was formal.

‘I have mine from a flask in the car and I always keep it full!’ I said cheekily.

He burst out laughing, turning into the house.

And I moved to my car that was parked outside.

His hearty laughter rankled in my ears for some time. Maybe he missed the sarcasm or read it too well.

Months passed. I could not go back. Something had dissipated within and the idea seemed to have soured. Rudimentary routine matters took over. Initially, my husband had to leave the city for an official meeting and that took up a week. Then the handloom cooperative had an exhibition and then some relatives came to Delhi to straighten out some matters with Shastri Bhawan. All in all, rumbling and grumbling, life rolled on, cluttering the pathways.

It was during the exhibition installation that the mention of the house flashed up. A bit accidentally, I mean for me, though Bhatnagar who broached the subject seemed well prepared and was perhaps waiting for the right timing. After the inauguration as we all heaved with relief into our teacups, Mr Bhatnagar, who was sitting across the table leaned towards me and said in a low voice, ‘Madam, I believe you are looking for a room somewhere…’

‘Yes, I was.’ I politely replied, ‘For my cousin from Brussels who was doing a book on Indian Textiles. But she preferred staying at our house,’ I quickly made up a story.

‘If ever a room is required, he continued, ‘just drop a hint and it can be arranged. My mother-in-law has a house in Vasant Vihar and many rooms to spare. Close to your house as well.’

‘Yes. Many rooms. Near my house. Certainly worth considering. Maybe next time.’ I filled the pauses with sips of tea. So Mr Joshi had passed on the word to Mr Bhatnagar. The gossip had set moving.

I continued to drive past Jor Bagh but avoided looking in the direction of the Joshi Mansion. I kept my eyes on the road ahead and my hands firmly on the wheel. The view of vehicles, trees and the crossing lights in all the mirrors of the cars obliterated the ‘To Let’ sign and my journey became more focused and unidirectional. The preoccupation with the world led to enhanced responsibilities and to some extent professional satisfaction.

However, during the summer, an electrical breakdown clamped down the activity in the office one day, and I left much before the closing time. The afternoon sun made the streets appear wide and empty while bleaching the colour off the buildings, trees and roads, giving the daily path an odd unsettling ambience of the unfamiliar. It was then that my wayward gaze floundered on the Joshi mansion. Even though it took a while to re-establish the house as the one etched in my mind, the side entrance caught my attention. Not because it was as had been retained by the carbon copy of memory, but quite the opposite.

The windows of the upstairs room had curtains. Not of the golden jute texture that I had envisaged, but a velvety, chrysanthemum blended with shy coral. Someone was up there! The room was no longer empty, it was finally occupied. For months it lay abandoned and then dressed-up windows filled it with their hue! Who could have taken this room — the one I had so desired once? How did it look now, I wondered. Curiosity provoked me to act, and with a long afternoon ahead, I gave in to the impulse.

I parked my car and moved swiftly to the side entrance, which I remembered well. The staircase was the same. It had not been touched by fresh paint nor adorned by pictures or flower pots. Step by step, I climbed up. The door was bolted from inside. There was no nameplate.

I stood there for a minute, unsure whether to knock or just sense the presence and leave.

Maybe a sound would give an indication. But it seemed to be quiet within. No feet moving about, no hands opening or closing cupboards, no conversation on phone. The inside was gripped with stillness, concentrated energy buzzing softly. A hum… or was it a lullaby? The rocking of a baby? So a family had moved in.. or maybe a mother and child.. a maidservant for Mrs Joshi, who could be in the room and help in household chores. The lullaby stopped and I felt someone turn. Maybe towards the door. Perhaps my breathing sent forth some vibration.

I knocked. Softly. So that the stillness may not quiver. The knock, resounding the stillness, the sound of the stillness. I felt a hush set in, an alert straightening of muscles. It was in my body too. Like the alert stillness in the spine of a cat on the prowl, defensive and inquisitive.

I sensed a waiting, a wait to confirm the knock and readiness in the feet… Could be a preparation to greet or to withdraw….A moment imbued in stealth. I let it pass, and another ten counts, in blankness. Then I knocked again. The second knock was cautious and evenly paced. Not more intrusive than the act itself perhaps. Somewhat more persuasive. Yet its reverberation, if any, seemed to peter out close to the door itself, leaving the occupant unmoved. Not a footfall could be heard nor a scratch from any piece of furniture.

The concentrated silence grew thick with every moment that heaved in my wrist. I had, in haste, placed my hand too close to the door. And yet the wood bore no dent. My move was to withdraw, letting my hand slide down on the vertical surface as I shifted my eye to the end of the staircase.

Sunlight trapped the lower steps in its bright rectangle, while the higher dark steps seemed to hang in another zone elsewhere. As my glance diverted its axis, someone inside picked that up. With feline steps, a presence approached the door. I could hear a rhythmical flow of soft breathing close to mine, maybe gauging the intruder, apprehensive of the stranger. I paused. The regular beat on the other side of the door seemed to blend with the pace I tried to hold. My wrist shifted a knuckle to the door; a single knock, almost a whisper of haunted anticipation. Beseeching a slight glimpse, even through an inquisitively open half door. But it was not to be. I gave up the elusive shade of the higher corner and moved towards the rectangle of light.

For some reason, I did not rush down but pressed my toes gingerly on each step. Somewhat self-conscious, as if being watched. I could sense it. From behind the wooden door, a pair of eyes was noticing my every step. Maybe through a crack or the hinge joint or an invisible slit. A watchful eye was following me. I almost stumbled. And then stopped. A sensation of light touched my back. I glanced sideways. The highest two steps were chalked in a strip of light. Through the windows, the filtering sun had filled the room and that light touched the steps. The door had opened! A figure stood in the doorway. A woman in floating contours of brightness and shade, some of the light and some of her draping lined with shimmering tinsel.

‘Oh it is you,’ she said. ‘I thought as much.’ It was Mrs Joshi, clad differently.

I stood between two blocks of light. In an elusive square.’

Come in, if you please.’ She invited me to the room.

I followed her gesture and came back to the door, now open. But I did not step in. It was her space, personal, precious.

‘These days I use the room,’ she said in a merry tone. ‘Of course, it’s your idea — a room for a moment. I took it from you.’

I smiled. ‘A room is a room. A space to be in.’

‘I realised it slowly. Once I started coming in. First just do the room. Then to read a book, listen to music, then other things…’

We stood in the doorway, either side of the frame, looking into each other’s eyes. Easily, in a simple, straightforward way. She flowed, plump and blooming in a loose Kurta with brocade and peach motifs lined with maroon.

‘You look different,’ I said politely.

‘Oh it’s the dress,’ she laughed. ‘It came in my dowry. I was just a village lass when I got married… Mr Joshi was in a government job and so…’

Her eyes moved into the room and returned to her dress. The marriage had meant brocade. She touched the golden motifs with nostalgia and delight.

‘They are pretty,’ I mumbled.

She did not answer. It did not matter, for they were crystals of a time she remembered and recognised as herself. They were meant not to adorn, but to touch the cells of her body, the cells layered beneath the skin, the cells that had craved and even tried to forget the nature of that craving, the aching to connect with something that was once a desire, a familiar notion to extend oneself. The numbness dwindled and she was in blossom. With moist eyes. The waiting had taken a lifetime.

‘Come on in,’ she invited me again, into her world. I peeped in but could not step in. A chair, a stool covered by a Phulkari sheet — replete with flowers and leaves, a few slim books in Punjabi, a tape recorder, balls of wool scattered about, an embroidered hand fan, clay saucer and glass, a pack of cards. The belongings of a woman in her sacred grove.

‘All from my maiden days,’ she explained shyly.

‘I thought there was some humming, like a lullaby,’ I mentioned in passing.

‘Oh, I sing now and then. When a village strain comes by. Not too often though.’ Apprehending that I may ask her to repeat the refrain, she hastily added, ‘And only for myself.’

She began picking up and rolling a ball of wool. I watched in silence as the elements were tucked away. Out of bounds for questions.

And yet I asked offhand, “when do you take out time for the room?”

‘Oh there’s time and time, one must take it — that’s all.’

She laughed and tossed the wool in a basket kept under the stool covered by the Phulkari. She drew out the basket and held it in one hand as she put in the cards and other trinkets as well.

‘Mr. Joshi goes to work and I climb up the stairs to my room.’ She said with a mischievous grin.

‘But when he’s away you have the whole house to yourself!’

I had no business to say this, but standing outside the room, I felt I had been cast as the perpetual outsider.

‘Yes, the house,’ Mrs Joshi stopped filling her basket and stood still. Then she looked towards me and added pensively, ‘But the house, you know, it pulls and pulls — in every direction, each nook and corner, it drags you into itself, everything demands your attention, where is the space for yourself? How can it be as it is here?’

And with a movement of her arms, she flung the wool on the floor, letting the threads tangle. Building patterns on their own. Then she disentangled and rolled them again. She seemed deft at it — a ritual of unwinding. Seeing her thus engaged in a personal preoccupation, I turned to leave.

The sunlight had mellowed into a pale scarlet, the rectangle had turned into a thin slant at the edge.

It was still sultry outside, but the afternoon starkness melted into the silver-grey evening sky. And through it flashed the orange glare of the setting sun — fiery and yet its trappings were pastel in shades of peach and pink. The transparent metal of my car, bathed in amethyst, sparkled like a gem on the side street. It was my chariot to anywhere, elsewhere and maybe nowhere. My hands were on the steering wheel, a familiar groove held with habituated ease. And I drove on, thinking of Mrs Joshi.

The traffic snare was yet to come and the sleepy roads widened into the horizon. It stretched endlessly into the golden arc cradled by the flaming clouds in a sky powdered by feathery white. The summer sunset, so full in its glory, impassioned in its every step, so gentle and yet so sure, its mingling hues, raining gold on the trees, the leaves, the fluttering birds, and rims of balconies. The glass panes of buildings blazed up in shimmering circles of light, echoing the splendour of this choreography. It reflected in the mirrors of the car that surrounded me. The sliding sun was not melancholy, it was a spectacle celebrating its presence. Inviting, pulling, enthralling. But not letting go of its mystery. Even so, as is well known, the interplay of elements arouses the latent well of energies.

I took a turn, and the horizon switched sides. Suddenly I was in the middle of traffic. The sun had set for the day, but the sky had lapped up its light and its brimming hues flashed in maddening streaks of altering angles teasing into twilight. It followed me — an elastic roof above the city lights.

A red orb ahead compelled me to pull the brake. The car stopped. My hands rested away from the wheel. I paused. In quietness, I could hear the rhythm of my heart. In my wrist, alive in my knuckles. A knocking within, a knock to an inner core within. From within to within — a space. But one must wait for it to open. Each time one learns to practice waiting.

The light ahead turned orange and then green. The car moved and with it, my attention shifted gear. I focused on the road.

Mrs Joshi had found a room to meet herself, and I had this car all to myself, with steering in my hand and a flask of tea, gone cold.

The writer acknowledges Kabir Sharma for his critical inputs.

Contributors

Alok Bhalla is a literary critic, poet, translator and editor based in New Delhi.

Ananda Bormudoi is a literary critic, translator and retired Head of the English Department, Dibrugarh University, Assam.

Arya Gopi is a bilingual poet who works both in English and Malayalam with more than half a dozen published books including five Malayalam poetry collections. She has received several prestigious awards which includes the Kerala State Sahitya Akademi Kanakasree Award. A PhD Holder in English literature, she currently teaches literature at Calicut University.

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

Aurodeep Ray is a student of Azim Premji University, Bangalore.

Azhar Uddin Sahaji teaches English at Zakir Husain Delhi College (M), University Delhi. He writes in Bangla and English.

Githa Hariharan has written fiction, essays and columns over the last three decades. For more on the author and her work, see githahariharan.com

Gulammohammed Sheikh (born 1937) is a painter, poet and art critic from Gujarat. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1983 and the Padmabhushan in 2014 for his contribution to the field of art.

Huchangi Prasad is a Karnataka-based writer and activist.

K Satchidanandan is a widely translated Malayalam poet, bilingual writer, translator and editor. He received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 2012 for his collection of poems, *Marannu Vecha Vasthukkal*. He also received the Poet Laureate award at The Tata Literature Live, 2019.

Krishna Sobti is a prominent Hindi novelist. She was born in West Punjab (present-day Pakistan) in 1925. She received the Sahitya Akademi Award for her novel Zindaginama. She also received the Shiromani Award in 1981 and the Hindi Academy Award in 1982. Her well-known novels and

short stories include *Dara se Bichuri, Mitro Marajani, Surajmukhi Andhere Ke, 'Nafisa', 'Sikka Badal Gaya',* and *'Badalom Ke Ghere'.*

MP Pratheesh is a Kerala based poet and photographer. He has published four collections of poetry in Malayalam. His poems have appeared in several places including Kavya Bharati, The Bombay Review, Kerala Kavitha, and Indian Literature.

Musuem of Goa is a contemporary arts institution founded in 2015 by artist Subodh Kerkar and has been running events such as exhibitions, lectures and dialogues, apart from initiatives to support local craftspersons.

Orijit Sen is a graphic artist, cartoonist, muralist and designer. He is author of the graphic novel *River of Stories* as well as many other works of graphic fiction and non-fiction. He is one of the founders of People Tree, a collaborative studio and store for artists, designers and craftspeople.

Pradeep Naik is a Mandrem-born artist.

Prakalpa Ranjan Bhagawati is an Assamese poet, translator and writer. His latest work, a collection of poems titled *Baladharohi Aru Anyanya Kabita* (The Bullock Rider and Other Poems), was published in 2021. He is currently working as Publication Officer, Dibrugarh University, Assam.

Pushpamala N has been called 'the most entertaining artist-iconoclast of contemporary Indian art'. She seeks to subvert the dominant discourse through her sharp and witty work as a photo and video artist, sculptor, writer, curator and provocateur. She lives in Bengaluru.

Riyas Komu was born in 1971 in Kerala, and moved to Mumbai in 1992 to study literature. Dropping out during his final year, Komu eventually obtained his Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Fine Art from Sir J. J. School of Art in 1997 and 1999 respectively. The artist's oeuvre, spanning several different media and genres, is particularly noted for its strong political overtones. His paintings, to put it in his own words, carry a protest symbol one way or the other.

Romila Thapar (born in 1931) is an Indian historian whose principal area of study is ancient India. She is the author of several books including the most recent, *Voices of Dissent: An Essay* (2021).

S Vijayaraghavan holds an M.F.A. degree with a major in painting from the College of Art in New Delhi. He has participated in various shows, festivals and residency programmes in India and elsewhere.

Sabitha Satchi is a poet, writer and art curator. Her essays on literature, art, and cultural theory have been published in several anthologies and journals.

Artist **Santosh Morajkar**'s work comes out of a decades-long engagement with Indian Modernist art that includes a deep study of F N Souza's paintings and drawings.

Sehar Qazi hails from Srinagar, Kashmir. She completed her postgraduate degree in Convergent Journalism from the Central University of Kashmir. Her first assignment was to report and write on the 2014 September flood in Kashmir. In 2016, she started her career as a photojournalist in New Delhi.

Artist **Siji Krishnan**'s portraits in watercolour explore radically new ways of engaging with the human figure. Her colour palette is faint earthy tones, almost suggesting a fading away, an impending absence that is lurking behind. Her works consistently engage with and interrogate gender categories and the idea of the family.

Artist **Subodh Kerkar** is the founder of the Museum of Goa, a contemporary art institution. He has been engaged in a close study of F N Souza's art and creating works inspired by Souza continually over the last two years. Kerkar's innovation lies in the use of the medium of clay, and the materials he uses to create texture.

Sudeep Ghosh teaches at The Aga Khan Academy, Hyderabad.

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. 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.

Sangeet Natak Akademi award winner **Tripurari Sharma** has worked with street theatre and performers of folk theatre in different parts of the country. She was also a faculty member of the National School of Drama, Delhi. She has written several plays in Hindustani including 'Bahu', 'Kath ki gadi' and 'Aadha Chand'. This is her first short story in English.

Vaasanthi is a leading writer, journalist and columnist in Tamil and English. She has published 30 novels, 6 short story collections, 4 volumes of journalistic articles and 4 travelogues in Tamil in the last 40 years. She was the Editor of the Tamil edition of *India Today* for 10 years.

Terms and Conditions

1. Use of this website is governed by the following Terms and Conditions, which include the Privacy Policy, and Copyright Terms.

2. The website is designed, developed and maintained for and on behalf of the Indian Writers' Forum Trust (IWF), Delhi, India – indianwritersforum@gmail.com. For a list of board members of the Trust, see About us on www.indianculturalforum.in.

3. Your continued use of this website (www.guftugu.in) constitutes acceptance of the Terms and Conditions of this website, from the time you first began use of the website. If you do not agree to the Terms and Conditions (including the Privacy Policy and Copyright Terms) please navigate away from this website or close your browser window.

4. *Guftugu* reserves the right to change these Terms and Conditions at any time by posting changes online. You may not receive a personal notification to this effect. Your continued use of this site after the changes are posted constitutes your acceptance of this agreement as modified.

5. You agree to use this website (and the content provided therein) only for lawful purposes (i.e. purposes that are not fraudulent, illegal, unauthorised or harmful in any manner), and in a manner which does not infringe the rights, or restrict, or inhibit the use and enjoyment of the site by any third party. In particular, you agree to follow relevant copyright laws as applicable domestically and/or internationally and as specified more particularly in the Copyright Terms. In particular, by continuing to use this website you agree not to utilise any of the content available on this website without the prior permission of *Guftugu*. For more information on the use of content from this website please refer to the Copyright Terms.

6. To provide notice of material alleged to infringe a copyright or any other rights please refer to the Copyright Terms and, in particular, the form for Notice of Infringing Material.

7. The websites www.indianculturalforum.in and www.guftgu.in constitute two distinct and separate websites. The Terms and Conditions of Use, copyright terms and notices are accordingly separate and distinct for each of the two websites. Please refer to the relevant legal documents on each individual website for further details.

8. *Guftugu* reserves the right to moderate any user generated content on the website including comments, suggestions, etc.

9. *Guftugu* reserves the right to suspend, or discontinue the provision of any individual service on this website or indeed suspend or discontinue this website all together without any notice or liability on its part.

10. This site and the information, names, images, videos, pictures, logos regarding or relating to *Guftugu*/the ICF website are provided "as is" without any representation or endorsement made and without warranty of any kind whether express or implied. In no event will *Guftugu* be liable for any damages including, without limitation, indirect or consequential damages, or any damages whatsoever arising from the use or in connection with such use or loss of use of thesite, whether in contract or in negligence. *Guftugu* does not warrant that the functionality of this site will be uninterrupted or error free, that defects will be corrected, or that this site or the server that makes it available are free of viruses or bugs.

11. The website uses cookies and reserves the right to collect your information for the purpose of processing payments as well as to analyse traffic, as more particularly described in the Privacy Policy.

12. You may create a link to this website, though should you do so, the same is at your own risk and the terms of this agreement will apply to your use of this website by linking to it.

13. The content on the *Guftugu* website is provided for educational and informational purposes only. *Guftugu* makes no representations about the content and suitability of the information presented online for any purpose.

14. *Guftugu* uses reasonable endeavours to ensure the information on this web site is current and accurate. To the extent permitted by law, *Guftugu* makes no representations or warranties as to the accuracy, reliability, completeness or currency of the information within this website.

15. The use of the website and any information contained on the site is at your own risk. *Guftugu*, its employees, agents, consultants and representatives do not accept any responsibility whatsoever, including responsibility for negligence, physical damage, personal injury, economic loss, costs or expenses of any kind, or any other loss or damage suffered or

incurred by anyone as a direct or indirect consequence of errors in or omissions from the site, or related action or inaction taken in reliance upon the contents of the website.

16. The views expressed in, and the information and materials published on the *Guftugu* website, are those of their authors (or as indicated) and not of *Guftugu*. The inclusion of any links on the website does not necessarily imply *Guftugu* endorses the views expressed within them.

17. The *Guftugu* web site may contain information sourced from third party blogs, external systems and social media platforms. As *Guftugu* does not moderate such blogs, systems and platforms, it does not take responsibility for that content, which must adhere to the terms of use of the relevant blog, system or platform. On occasions *Guftugu* provides links to other sites on the Internet. You should be aware that third party sites are not under the control of *Guftugu*. Therefore, *Guftugu* is not responsible for what appears on other (third party) sites and makes no representations concerning the content of these sites.

18. Breach of any of the Terms and Conditions, in any way, gives *Guftugu* the right to take any lawful actions to deal with such breach, including, but not limited to, suspending your access to the website, prohibiting you from accessing the website, blocking computers using your IP address from accessing the website, contacting your internet service provider to request that they block your access to the website and/or bringing court proceedings against you. Failure by *Guftugu* to strictly enforce any of the provisions set out in this agreement or failure to exercise an option to remedy a breach shall not be construed as waiver of such provisions and shall not affect the validity of the Terms and Conditions or of any part thereof or the right to enforce the whole or any part thereof. No waiver of any of the provisions of this agreement shall be effective unless expressly stated to be the case in a written document signed by both parties.

19. You hereby indemnify *Guftugu* and undertake to keep *Guftugu* indemnified against any and all losses, damages, costs, liabilities and expenses (including without limitation legal expenses and any amounts paid by *Guftugu* to a third party in settlement of a claim or dispute on the advice of *Guftugu*'s legal advisers) incurred or suffered by *Guftugu* arising out of any breach by you of any provision of these Terms and Conditions (or other illicit or unlawful use of this website), or arising out of any claim that you have breached any provision of these terms and conditions.

20. This website and the Terms and Conditions are governed by and are to be construed and interpreted in accordance with the laws of India.

21. In the event of any dispute arising out of the use of this Website or interpretation of these Terms and Conditions, the Parties shall attempt to mutually resolve the matter through negotiations. In the event no resolution is possible, the Parties shall proceed to arbitration, before a single arbitrator, to be appointed by *Guftugu*. *Guftugu* shall make the appointment of the sole arbitrator within two weeks of notice of the failure of negotiations (which may be given by either party). The decision of the sole arbitrator shall be final and binding on the parties. The arbitral seat shall be in Delhi and the Indian law, as applicable, shall govern proceedings.

22. The Courts at New Delhi, India shall have exclusive jurisdiction to adjudicate any dispute arising under, out of or in connection with these Terms and Conditions or any usage of the *Guftugu* website.

23. If any part of the Terms and Conditions is found unlawful and/or unenforceable the rest of the Terms and Conditions, to the extent separable, shall continue to be valid. IWF, which is the owner and administrator of the *Guftugu* website, is registered as a trust under the Indian Trusts Act, 1882. IWF may be contacted through its administrative office at Khasra No. 275, West End Marg, Saidulajab, Near Saket Metro New Delhi 110030, India.

Privacy Policy

24. *Guftugu* does not collect personal information for any purpose other than to respond to your queries and to process payments (subscriptions and donations). Personal information may be provided to third parties in the normal course of business (such as our bankers, for the purpose of processing payments) but shall otherwise remain confidential except for any disclosures required by law.

25. The *Guftugu* website uses cookies. By continuing to use this website you consent to *Guftugu*'s use of session cookies. *Guftugu* may record ongoing access and use of the website(for the purpose of improving content). The cookies used by *Guftugu* will collate non-personally identifiable information for analytics purposes i.e., to examine the number of views received by any content, to collect log in details, length of session, etc. *Guftugu* may also track your IP address and browser type.

26. *Guftugu* does not collect information or create individual profiles for commercial marketing. Your details will not be passed on or sold to any third party for any commercial reason whatsoever.

27. Any communication or material that you transmit to, or post on, any public area of the site including any data, questions, comments, suggestions, or the like, is, and will be treated as, non-confidential and non-proprietary information. This website contains links to third party sources and sites. These are provided solely for information purposes. When you select a link to a third party website, you are leaving the *Guftugu* website and are subject to the privacy policies of the third party website.

Copyright