

cityscapes

RE-THINKING **URBAN** THINGS

SEEING AND NOT BELIEVING

Dhaka is mired in
false liberalism and
anti-intellectualism

TALES AT A RED PUMP

Rohingya women refugees in
Delhi on their past lives
and current struggles

CINEMA, NOT SOFTWARE

Animator Gitanjali Rao
on filmmaking, Cannes and
a curious selfie project

WATCHING TRAFFIC

Kabul's roads tell a
distinctly Afghani story

THE CITY THAT ISN'T

How Hambantota became
a multi-million
dollar ghost town

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

Why the Nepalese magazine
Himal Southasian abruptly
stopped printing in 2016

ALSO INSIDE

- JOLYON LESLIE
- SHAHIDUL ALAM
- NIDA KIRMANI

8

Skate-Girls of Kabul,
Jessica Fulford-Dobson in association with Skateistan

CITYSCAPES 2017.1 #8



9 772227 400000

08





ENTER

Originally planned as a garden city, Dhaka's residential areas changed almost overnight in the 1990s as the now-ubiquitous apartment buildings rose up. Over time, reports architect Kashef Chowdhury Vast in this issue, residential districts began to lose their character. The situation was exacerbated by a near lack of complementary infrastructure. Dhaka is now a city of gridlock—and insecurity, as writer Ikhitsad Ahmed informs in his account of growing intolerance in Dhaka. But there are other tonalities to this city on the Ganges delta, as **Syed Latif Hossain's** photographs throughout this issue reveal. Hossain, a former art director and staff photographer of The Dhaka Tribune, has documented Dhaka's extraordinary growth with an insider's eye. His photographs particularise what it means to be living through immense change.



CONTRIBUTORS



Cover Photography: *The Skater-Girls of Kabul*
by **Jessica Fulford-Dobson**



Featured Photographer:
Dhaka Scenes by **Syed Latif Hossain**

Ikhtisad Ahmed is a journalist and writer based in Dhaka

Shahidul Alam is a photographer based in Dhaka

Maryam Azwer is a journalist and editor based in Colombo

Gautam Bhan is an activist/ researcher based in Bangalore

Rupleena Bose is a scholar based in Delhi

Kashef Chowdhury is an architect based in Dhaka

Arpita Das is a publisher based in Delhi

Neha Dixit is a journalist based in Dehli

Matias Echanove is an urbanist based in Mumbai

Musharraf Ali Farooqi is a novelist based in Karachi

Iftikhar Firdous is a journalist based in Peshawar

Jessica Fulford-Dobson is a photographer based in London

Taran N. Khan is a journalist based in Mumbai

Zeeshan Khan is a journalist based in Dhaka

Nida Kirmani is a sociologist and scholar based in Lahore

Jolyon Leslie is an architect and journalist based in Kabul

Amit Mehra is a photographer based in Delhi

Rekha Raghunathan is an editor and researcher based in Bangalore

Gitanjali Rao is an animator and artist based in Mumbai

Aun Raza is a photographer based in Venice

Puja Sen is a journalist based in Kathmandu

Rahul Srivastava is an urbanist based in Mumbai

Rajesh Vora is a photographer based in Delhi

FROM THE EDITORS

It’s been a while. When we set out to produce this issue in early 2016, we hadn’t quite anticipated what a journey it would be. Naively, we had thought it was a simple task: we would compile an issue on “urban Asia”. It quickly became apparent that this oversimplification was unproductive. Following a series of conversations with various colleagues in several cities from Jakarta to Delhi and Dhaka, it was clear that we were exhibiting the same misunderstanding of a continent that we have constantly fought against in this publication—generalisations in reference to “Africa”—as if an entire continent (let alone its cities) could be lumped into one category and be understood. Confronting our hypocrisy was liberating, and led to this issue, which we have produced in collaboration with the Indian Institute of Human Settlements’ WordLab Collective, a partnership we plan to continue. This issue focuses on cities in South Asia, not as a generic category but rather as a symbolic and political constellation loaded with complex histories and contemporary dynamics. The stories we selected illuminate a diverse region gripped by political and cultural upheavals, and bounded by stereotypes. South Asia is experiencing enormous shifts, particularly as its inhabitants become overridingly urban. The region exhibits a complexity that no single story can or should seek to capture. It is in the juxtaposition of this issue’s content that the full nature of relationships and life within and between the various cities profiled emerges. Highlights include Maryam Azwer’s fascinating piece on the multi-billion dollar remodelling of Hambantota in southern Sri Lanka. It tells a familiar story to many in various parts of the African continent: a politician’s hubris led to a white elephant development that serves little purpose other than as a monument to political folly. Ikhtisad Ahmed’s story from Dhaka grapples with Bangladeshi liberalism in a city jolted by cultural intolerance and anti-intellectualism. In Dhaka, this has had a direct bearing on how the city is developing and how people live and share space. The remarkable legacy of Kathmandu-based *Himal Southasian*, an independent news magazine that suddenly closed in November 2016, is assessed by Puja Sen. It’s not just about foreboding content in this issue. Rapuleena Bose writes about Calcutta’s post-independence musical heritage; it provides a glimpse into a period of intense cultural experimentation. Rekha Ragunathan looks at the reclamation of Bangalore’s lost waterways, and Zeeshan Khan chats to Shahidul Alam about his stellar career in photography, education and social activism. Good reading.

TEAMSCAPE

EDITORS
Tau Tavengwa & Arpita Das (IIHS)

CONTRIBUTING EDITOR
Sean O’Toole

CONSULTING EDITORS
Edgar Pieterse (ACC) & Gautam Bhan (IIHS)

CREATIVE DIRECTOR
Tau Tavengwa

DESIGN/LAYOUT
Uta Machekhan

ILLUSTRATION
Blain van Rooyen + Patrick Latimer

EDITORIAL SUPPORT
Nishta Vadehra (IIHS)

COPY EDITOR
Kim Gurney

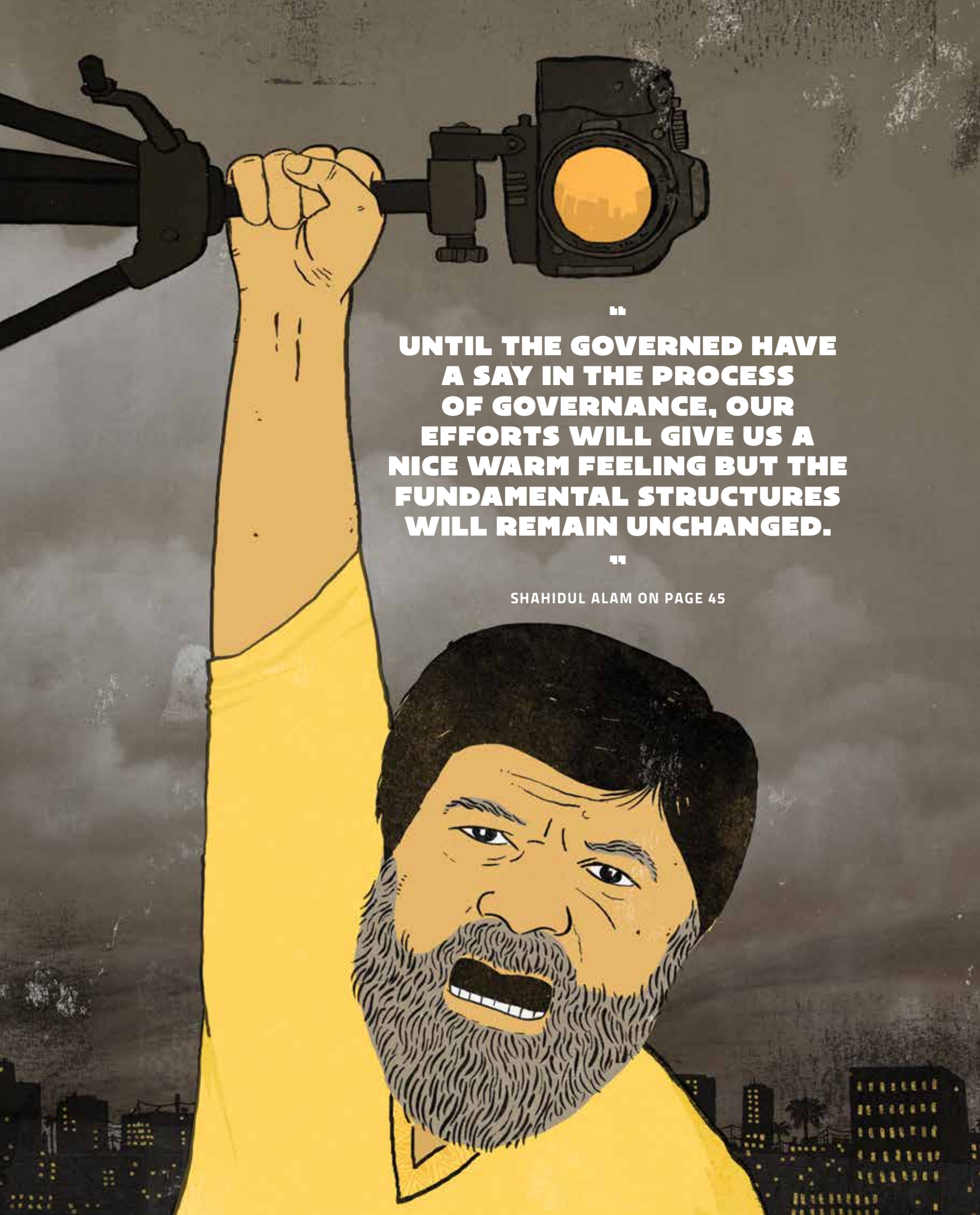


For back issues and general distribution queries, contact Terry Ayugi on info@chimurenga.co.za

cityscapesmag@gmail.com
2nd Floor, 48 Dorp Street, Bo Kaap.
City Bowl Cape Town
www.cityscapesdigital.net
www.cityscapescollective.com

PUBLISHED BY CITYSCAPES COLLECTIVE

This issue is made possible through the support of the African Centre for Cities (ACC);
Indian Institute of Human Settlements (IIHS) and National Research Foundation of South Africa (NRF)



“
**UNTIL THE GOVERNED HAVE
A SAY IN THE PROCESS
OF GOVERNANCE, OUR
EFFORTS WILL GIVE US A
NICE WARM FEELING BUT THE
FUNDAMENTAL STRUCTURES
WILL REMAIN UNCHANGED.**
”

SHAHIDUL ALAM ON PAGE 45

INSIDE

INTELLIGENCE

- 08

Matias Echanove & Rahul Srivastava
On words that fail in unequal cities
- 10

Gautam Bhan
On Delhi's state water utility
- 12

Jolyon Leslie
On urban resilience in Afghanistan
- 14

Nida Kirmani
On assertive Muslim women in Karachi

CITY REPORTS

- 18

Bangalore
Saving the city's life-sustaining lakes
Words: Rekha Raghunathan
- 20

Dhaka
When growth outpaces sustainability
Words: Kashef Chowdhury
- 21

Delhi
Xenophobia and violence against Africans
Words: Tau Tavengwa
- 22

Hambantota
A multi-million dollar ghost town
Words: Maryam Azwer
- 24

Peshawar
Conflict reshapes Pakistan's oldest city
Words: Iftikhar Firdous
- 26

Delhi & Hyderabad
India's higher education crisis
Words: Kavya Murthy

FEATURES

- 34

Watching Traffic
Kabul's gridlocked roads tell a distinctly Afghani story of violence and escape Words: Taran N. Khan
- 44

Majority World Image
Zeeshan Khan speaks to Shahidul Alam about photography, education and social activism
- 52

Tales At The Water Pump
Rohingya women from Myanmar talk about past lives and current struggles. Words: Neha Dixit
- 60

Seeing And Not Believing
Contemporary Bangladesh is mired in false liberalism and anti-intellectualism Words: Ikhtisad Ahmed
- 68

Shaggy Dog Stories
Reports on life, labour and dancing after dark at three Karachi graveyards Words: Musharraf Ali Farooqi

WIDE ANGLE

- 76

Rajesh Vora
Musclemen, airplanes, tanks and other sculptural embellishments in rural Punjab
- 84

Jessica Fulford-Dobson
A girls-only skate session at Skateistan's sport and education project in Kabul
- 90

Amit Mehra
Finding Kashmir's cadence of resilience, seeing the quiet faith that binds
- 96

Aun Raza
A ramble through Yangon, where life is marked by casual urgencies

ELSEWHERE

- 104

Cinema, Not Software
Animator Gitanjali Rao on filmmaking, Cannes and a curious selfie project. Words: Arpita Das
- 110

A Walk On The Wild Side Of Calcutta
Calcutta's musical history is a huge tree with many branches. Words: Rupleena Bose
- 116

A Death In The Family
Why the Nepalese magazine Himal Southasian abruptly stopped printing in 2016. Words: Puja Sen

INTELLIGENCE

08. Matias Echanove & Rahul Srivastava
On words that fail in unequal cities.

10. Gautam Bhan
On Delhi’s state water utility

12. Jolyon Leslie
On urban resilience in Afghanistan

14. Nida Kirmani
On women claiming space in Karachi



An alley in Old Dhaka in the evening. Unlike other days and evenings, a weekend evening is quiet in this place where homes mingle with small and shops and trading houses. **Syed Latif Hossain**

It is important to highlight the limitations of terms that have become euphemisms for other, equally problematic ones. Take, for instance, the terms ‘slums’ and ‘informal settlements’. The word slum seems intent on fixing its meaning permanently to its nineteenth-century English roots. A meaning that was actually part of a creative process, in which novels set in London’s East End counted as much as policy, came together to make sense of new modes of industrial urbanization. The Victorian slum was as much a site of fascination and fear based on class prejudices—a middle-class objection to ‘immoral’ activities—as it was about a genuine concern around over-crowding, poverty and hygiene.

Even though still widely in use, today a certain modicum of self-reflexivity has seen practitioners and policy-makers shift towards substitute terminologies. The use of the term ‘informal’ and ‘urban informality’ to identify various types of habitats, be they settlements, neighbourhoods or entire cities, is now commonplace. In reality, however, tagging specific geographical areas as ‘informal’ blurs things more than it reveals them. It distracts researchers and practitioners from the task of identifying the diversity of forms and the multiplicity of processes actually at work in a city or an economy.

Settlements emerging outside the regulatory framework and development plan are typically referred to as “unplanned”, “informal” and, sometimes, “illegal”. While the latter is a fairly straightforward notion evoking the non-respect of the rule of law (for instance, illegal construction on government land), the adjective ‘informal’ is much more ambiguous.

IN OTHER WORDS



**MATIAS ECHANOVE
& RAHUL SRIVASTAVA**

CO-FOUNDERS: THE INSTITUTE
OF URBANOLOGY; MUMBAI

Words like slum and informal settlement fail to communicate how power, space and resources are produced in unequal cities

Mike Davis and other academics see slums as expressions of capitalist oppression, with insurrectional—if not revolutionary—potential. Some anthropologists present them as hyper-competitive deregulated markets where only the strongest survive. International organizations and ambitious urban designers are counting and mapping ever-increasing numbers of precarious settlements, carelessly grouping all kinds of habitats under catchall terms like “slum” or “informal settlement”. In the collective imaginary, informal settlements are conceived as the opposite of formal settlements. What exactly constitutes the formal, however, is never questioned. Etymologically speaking, what is formal follows the rules of logic. When prefixed with ‘in’-, the meaning is inverted,

and by extension what is informal defies logic. ‘Illogical’ implies that something is irrational, unpredictable, and thus potentially dangerous. At the extreme, the informal denotes the uncivilized. Phantasmagorical, informal settlements are the anti-city—a contemporary avatar of the wild forests of the Middle Ages, or reminiscent of the colonial enterprise that justified itself as a civilizing mission.

The formal is then the space of top-down planning, form-giving that is controlled by a relatively small group of people, who may be following accepted norms and wisdom about what constitutes valid urban forms. What it hides is bottom-up planning, or the radical decentralization of that process—when the production of form is in the hands of a multiplicity of local actors, each involved in planning their own spaces and forced to coordinate with their neighbours, for better or worse. In both cases, form giving is subject to negotiations and pressure among stakeholders and authorities. Where the planning and development processes are not tightly controlled, end-users tend to be more autonomously involved in local production and the negotiation of space.

What produces the term informality then is the inability of professional urban planners, architects and policy-makers, along with academic institutions, to recognize any form other than the ones they themselves generate.

The anthropologist Keith Hart first used the term ‘informal economy’ at a conference on urban employment in Africa in 1971 to describe an economy previously invisible to economists. It seems that the concept allowed the bridging

of the divide between ground-level observations and the needs of development economists devising policies from a distance. However, that bridging came at the cost of over-simplifying a complex and diverse reality. He later reflected on the appeal of the concept, writing in *The Memory Bank* (2000): “The label ‘informal’ may be popular because it is both positive and negative. To act informally is to be free and flexible; but the term also says what people are not doing—not wearing conventional dress, not being regulated by the state.”

Hart justifies the creation of the term by the fact that development economists applying their categories to Third World countries were only able to account for jobs in state and corporate sectors, *de facto* making invisible all other forms of employment. Hart’s emphasis was thus on the fact that there was, in fact, an economy, and that people were not unemployed. What characterized this economy was the absence of bureaucracy.

What happened then is now history. Hart’s term ‘informal economy’ became hugely popular. Economists have been using it ever since to devise strategies and assess the potential impacts and risks associated with different kinds of loans and development schemes to poor countries. Quickly, the term ‘informal’ came to be used not only to describe certain kinds of economic transactions, but also entire geographical areas. Dharavi in Mumbai—and many other neighbourhoods in that city and around the world—are routinely called informal settlements by architects, development specialists, NGO workers and policy-makers, who prefer the more politically-correct ‘informal’ to ‘slum’.

Yet the ‘informal’ label makes invisible as much as it reveals. It reduces a complex and diverse reality to a notion that evokes the absence of a regulatory framework and, by extension, the lack of a recognizable built form shaped by planning regulations, codes and norms.

“
In a city like Mumbai, the line between the informal and formal economies is an imaginary one. It is not, as is often argued, that the two are deeply enmeshed but rather that the entire economy—including the public administration—are, so to say, informal
”

In a city like Mumbai, the line between the informal and formal economies is an imaginary one. It is not, as is often argued, that the two are deeply enmeshed but rather that the entire economy—including the public administration—are, so to say, informal. For instance, no building is erected in Mumbai without at least 50% compensation being paid in black. Accountants specialise in hiding profits by reporting fake losses, dummy consultant fees and offshore banking. The financial sector itself, which is supposed to be at the heart of the formal economy, is fully deregulated. A significant share of skilled employment comes from foreign companies that outsource services to avoid

having to pay higher salaries and employment benefits in their home countries. Land deals throughout the city are dependent on building permits delivered by the municipality and require kickbacks at all levels of administration. Such a portrait paints the city a bit differently. The slum-dwellers and city residents at large are cut from the same cloth now, and the designation of entire neighbourhoods as slums or informal zones makes no sense. Even when dealing with the issue of legality, lines become just as blurry and misleading since occupancy rights in Mumbai are often politically, rather than legally, granted. This is true not only in poor neighbourhoods, but also in the most established parts of the city, such as the historical colonial core. Here most buildings occupy land that is technically owned by the state since their leases expired. In Mumbai, examples of middle- and high-income residential or commercial structures encroaching on government land and other irregular construction of formal-looking buildings abound.

Giving up labels and euphemisms forces one to start engaging with the real forms and patterns of a city, and how they produce power, space and resources. Effective solutions to perceived and real problems will start to emerge, and there will be an expansion of what urbanist Patrick Geddes used to call “reality-vision”—the ability to see things as they are, rather than through prejudice, judgement or desire. Such a vision will bring out much needed nuances. The so-called slums of Mumbai are very diverse. Hyper-productive Dharavi in Sion is different from Konkan-dominated Utkarsh Nagar in Bhandup, which is a far cry from Shivaji Nagar in Govandi, a resettlement colony

that was always treated as a slum. In all of them, a fairly significant number of people live in houses made of brick, stone, concrete and steel. What makes some of these neighbourhoods difficult to live in is the lack of civic amenities, such as sewage infrastructure and access to water.

In spite of this, the market for housing is fairly competitive. There are networks of contractors, masons, artisans, carpenters and plumbers who are busy everyday making and improving homes. Against bureaucratic and political odds, many settlements have evolved complex ways of occupying space, through co-sharing and negotiations, through co-operative housing prototypes and voluntary building and

“
The formal is the space of top-down planning, form-giving that is controlled by a relatively small group of people
”

maintaining of common resources. A large part of life is dominated by local economies of construction, transport and services that respond to the needs of the locality and its residents. It is this social infrastructure that makes for dynamism and contributes to the realm of possibilities that each of them demonstrates. ✨

REACHING FOR THE UNIVERSE



GAUTAM BHAN

RESEARCHER/ACTIVIST; DELHI

Plans by Delhi’s state water utility to create universal access to water across the city highlights tensions between legislation, planning and social justice

The word ‘universal’ is a tricky adjective with enormous appeal. It proposes an unquestioned romance: universal human rights, universal access to basic services, housing for all. It is the barometer of inclusion done correctly. The dark side of this romance is that it is one of the hardest things to actually achieve. Often the universal is a vanishing horizon and, like all horizons, the mirage is what makes you lose sight of the very real trade-offs and constraints that are in your way.

In October 2016, the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), a state utility supplying potable water to India’s capital city, announced a new horizon towards the idea of universal access to water, a basic urban service and human need. The Jal Adhikar Connection promises to let households within Delhi’s slums to apply for legal, metered water connections,

“irrespective of the status of their residence”. The move follows the government of Delhi’s pledge to extend water and sanitation services to unauthorized colonies; it implies that legal, public and metered water could—like electricity—actually cover the city as it exists, rather than as it is imagined in plans and laws.

It is critical to emphasize its importance. In Indian cities, one of the biggest blocks to universal or inclusive development is not lack of money, land or technology; it is that a large number of our fellow urban residents are not considered urban residents at all—they are not part of the universe to be reached. The grounds of their exclusion are particular to the way our cities have been built. For multiple reasons, Indian cities are largely auto-constructed. Put simply: they have been built not by the intentions of planners or architects but by people themselves. From the slum to the unauthorized colony, the historical urban village trying to change its identity to the new peri-urban development, each neighbourhood has some kind of tension with law and planning. Only 24% of Delhi’s residents live in a ‘planned colony’, according to the last reliable finding, published in 2000. Everyone else—three-quarters of the city—lives at some distance from this legal and planned norm. It is argued that this illegality is not one that most of these residents perform to seek personal gains; it is simply the only way in the context of state and market failures to find a way to make a life in the city. As activists have long argued, when the vast majority of people find themselves in violation of the law, it is the law itself that is broken.

Spatial illegality has been a critical and deeply under-recognised factor preventing the possibility of universal access to basic services in our cities. As the rules have changed over time, utilities like the Delhi Jal Board have been prohibited from giving legal water connections in ‘illegal’ slums and ‘unauthorized’ colonies, leading to discretionary provision—the dreaded “may” rather than “shall” of public policy. In multiple legal challenges, courts have refused to acknowledge the urban right to water, citing spatial illegality, even if this leaves the basic needs of thousands unmet and their dignity denied.

The irony is that even those who defend such exclusions do not fully realise the cost they themselves pay for them. Partly as a result of spatial illegality, Delhi’s infrastructure is not a network or a system—it is a set of fragmented splinters. It struggles to move to its horizon of universal acces: reaching one colony but bypassing another; reaching one now and making the other wait; trying to navigate a geography of varied degrees of legality and legitimacy. Who gets infrastructure and when is linked to power and patronage, in effect reproducing social inequalities in the space of the city.

Not only does this mean that rights and entitlements are conditional on where you live in the city, it also means that DJB’s chairman Kapil Mishra is absolutely right when he says that without expanding access more universally, the DJB can build neither a scientific system nor an efficient one. Infrastructure systems are just that—systems. They need scale and connectivity to be economically viable and technically sound. The DJB’s financial health and self-sufficiency will gain

enormously when thousands of new households give revenue to the public utility, instead of to tankers and private suppliers. Its pipelines will map, connect and function. They will reach rather than bypass; connect rather than fragment. Wastage will reduce, and efficiencies will rise.

There are good models to learn from here. When the Bangalore Water Supply and Sewerage Board introduced a category of “shared taps” to open up water connections into slums, it saw its financial health improve alongside the improvements in overall indicators like health, work, housing quality and poverty.

“
Design has become a superficial exercise of cut-and-paste graphics along with copied text to give the impression there is a concern with more than just profit
”

When Ahmedabad, a large city in the western Indian state of Gujarat, gave networked infrastructure to its slums, overall indicators of access slowly rose for the city as a whole.

Yet, herein lies the first danger of taking an important move and losing ourselves in a mirage well before the horizon is near. Technical and economic efficiency are necessary and they

are pivotal reasons to want to make access to water universal, but they are not—and must not be—sufficient ones. In an auto-constructed city where spatial illegality breaks access to basic rights, expanding the right to water must be a part of a larger effort to expand the right to the city itself.

The social reformer B.R. Ambedkar once said that a Hindu’s public is just his caste. An Indian city’s public is too often just the legal, planned colony. The graded inequalities that follow between this imagined ideal and all other ways of inhabiting the city are real. The exclusions are simultaneously socially performed, legally enshrined and economically reproduced. Recognising the right to water must be the first step in tackling the spatial illegality that urban residents have been forced into and held accountable for. It must return to the Indian city its actual universal, its actual publics, to all of its residents. For this, we must begin at the most fundamental of all claims: the right to be recognized as a being in the city, to be acknowledged, and to be valued as workers, citizens and bearers of rights—not just as the ‘poor’, ‘slum dwellers’ or ‘encroachers’. What Delhi must do now is stand by the DJB, which has taken its first and important step towards truly being and becoming a public utility. ✨

A version of this article originally appeared in *The Hindu*.

CITIES IN TENSION



JOLYON LESLIE
ARCHITECT; KABUL

Towns and cities across Afghanistan reflect the resilience and dynamism of their inhabitants, but also highlight basic urban challenges

The historic quarters of Kabul and Herat, where I have worked in recent years, are testament to cycles of development, neglect and destruction. Traces of fine decorative work in Kabul’s crumbling merchant homes hint at the past prosperity of neighbourhoods that endured British invasions in the nineteenth century. Rural insurgents sacked the city in 1929 during the overthrow of King Amanullah, whose vision of a modern capital was of wide European-style boulevards rather than the narrow alleyways of its bustling bazaars.

This historic fabric was largely ignored during the ensuing decades, when Kabul and other cities saw significant development, as competing donors—the United States, Soviet Union and Germany, among others—attempted to make their mark on the ‘new’ Afghanistan. A cycle of destruction followed,

as the factions who took control of the country in 1992 battled for dominance, forcing urban communities from their homes while inflicting massive damage on property and infrastructure. In the process of recovery since, the focus has been on the future. An understanding of the history that shaped Afghan cities today remains important as it clarifies the political and ethnic fault-lines that persist in what remains a fragile environment.

This fragility, in part, stems from the breakneck pace at which Afghan towns and cities are growing. The annual rate of urbanisation is around 4% per annum, one of the fastest rates in the world. Since 2002, the bulk of returning refugees settled in urban centres, joined by those displaced from conflict-prone rural areas. In addition to the relative security, Afghanistan’s cities offer the prospect of jobs and access to public services. A third of the overall population now lives in the five primary city regions, which absorb some 300,000 additional people every year.

The pattern of urbanization is uneven. Kabul is seven times larger than the biggest provincial city, and is growing a staggering 10% annually. If this continues, half of the Afghan population will be urban by 2060. Among a people that still tends to identify itself with village of origin, this is an extraordinary transformation.

The physical transformation of the urban landscape is as dramatic. Many of the first-wave returnees and migrants settled on vacant government land originally populated in the 1980s. These informal settlements, to which officials tended to turn a blind eye, are now reportedly home to three out of four of Kabul’s residents,

but are less significant in other cities. Despite periodic threats by municipal officials to clear these slums, homeowners continue to make significant investments in property to which they are denied formal title deeds.

Similar levels of investment are being made in the fast-growing private developments on the outskirts of towns and cities, one of the few places in which new migrants can afford to live. With limited services and infrastructure, however, living conditions here are probably not much better than in the villages that migrant families left behind. An official poverty assessment in 2010 found that a third of urban households were under the poverty line, with nine out of ten living in conditions of “physical and environmental deprivation”. Unemployment is increasingly a factor in this deprivation.

Many urban households derive their livelihood from casual employment, which is low paid, sporadic and rarely offers the chance to develop new skills. This casual work tended in the past to be in the service and construction sectors, and relied on the huge international military and civilian presence. This was however drastically downsized after 2014. This prompted a slowdown in the wider economy that has reduced opportunities for urban employment, despite the portrayal by senior politicians of Afghan cities as “drivers of economic development”. If, as is claimed, levels of education are improving, young Afghans need better prospects for their future. As competition for jobs intensifies, so does the stranglehold of patronage that now dominates so many aspects of life. For young men without contacts, the choice is now between joining the security forces—with the very high risks

this entails—or emigration. Security is one of the few growth industries in Afghanistan today, and with it has come an increasingly militarized form of urbanism. The centres of all cities now house heavily fortified “green” zones where government officials, the business elite and foreign delegations live and work, but are off-limits to the general public. As recent events in Kabul show, the threat levels are real, but the creeping exclusion that many face adds to the sense of alienation, particularly among those who already feel economically or politically marginalized. Across the country, concrete blast-walls and tangles of razor wire now signal to Afghans the presence of their government as much as a flagstaff flying their national flag does.

“
At the core of this failure is the persistent belief among Afghan planners that master plans are the key to managing cities
”

Those moving around central urban areas do not only face physical barriers. They are also under intense surveillance: from armed guards, as well as cameras on the ground and in the sky, suspended from blimps. By contrast, the streets on the urban periphery remain largely unwatched, just as their sprawl is unregulated. On the one hand, this growth is testament to the settlers’ self-reliance, but it is also symptomatic of the failure of official efforts at urban management.

At the core of this failure is the persistent belief among Afghan planners that master plans are the key to managing cities. That no urban centre in the country remotely resembles its official plan indicates how urban management has relied more on wishful thinking rather than analysis. The absence of reliable data to inform analysis undermines efforts to develop urban policies in response to the reality on the ground, as part of a more coherent vision for an environment in which growing numbers of Afghans live.

As a consequence, this environment is today a place of tensions: between a political class beset by rivalry and the people they are meant to serve; between a prosperous elite and an underclass that struggle to survive; between the safety of fortified enclaves and the vulnerability of communities living on the urban margins; between the fantasy world of municipal master plans and a grim reality of life without safe water or proper sanitation. It will require political action, rather than mere rhetoric, to effectively address this disconnect. The process of urbanization has brought with it a shift in the balance of power. As a young man on the outskirts of Kabul observed to me during a recent interview: “The urban street is ours.” Afghan leaders ignore this new reality at their peril.✴



NIDA KIRMANI

SOCIOLOGIST; LAHORE

SOFT OBSTACLES IN A HARD CITY

Notwithstanding real threats and dangers, Muslim women in Karachi are daily asserting their right to the city

Lyari, an area of approximately 1.5 million people, is one of the oldest, diverse and most vibrant parts of Karachi. Made up of several densely populated neighbourhoods, each with its own unique character, it is also one of the most marginalized parts of this Pakistani port city and is often described as a “no-go area” by outsiders. For the better part of the last two decades, Lyari has been the site of an intense conflict between criminal gangs, political parties and state security forces.

Asifa, 26, was born and raised in the neighbourhood of Kalri, an area comprised mostly of people whose families migrated from the Kutch region of Gujarat before the Partition in 1947. Most of the women in her neighbourhood are caught in a cycle of low-paying and insecure work, such as domestic work, earning anywhere from 5,000 to 10,000 Pakistani rupees a month on average (\$50–\$100).

Asifa, on the other hand, seems to have managed to escape. She works as a salesperson in Hyperstar, one of the new multinational department stores located in Karachi’s glitziest shopping mall in the up-scale area of Clifton. She earns 45,000 rupees a month (\$450), which is more than four times what most of the women (and men) in her neighbourhood earn. I could see and feel the difference her earnings had made while sitting on the floor of her air-

conditioned bedroom in her family’s small but exceptionally well-furnished two-room apartment. Asifa explains how she and her sister got into the service sector by accompanying their mother when she was working as a door-to-door salesperson, and thereafter slowly working up their way up the ladder in the marketing field. Asifa tells me about the constant social and physical negotiation she has undertaken since then to professionally progress. Every time she leaves the house, Asifa undertakes a careful calculation of her bodily conduct in order to maintain an image of respectability and acceptability wherever she is in the city. In Lyari, Asifa wears an abaya, a long black gown covering her hair and body, which she says all young women in her neighbourhood have to wear in order to be considered respectable. However, when she gets to Clifton, she removes this to reveal a bright red polo shirt and jeans—the uniform of Hyperstar.

Wearing an abaya in Clifton marks her as working class in a context where she is pressured to appear upwardly mobile and modern. Not wearing it in Lyari raises questions about her character and might also make it seem like she is showing off amongst her neighbours and relatives, many of whom are already resentful of the fact that she is earning much more than them. She eagerly shows me selfies she has taken in the break room of Hyperstar and gives me beauty tips while her cousin tells me proudly that Asifa only uses foreign products. Asifa’s peers are clearly envious of her lifestyle. Asifa’s mobility, however, is a double-edged sword. While she moves around the city more easily than many others from her neighbourhood, she faces a great deal of stress and anxiety.

Much of the criticism is centred on her returning late at night and for working in a profession that is viewed suspiciously because it involves frequent contact with ghair (unrelated) men. Her brother, who works as a crane operator in Dubai, gets regular calls from her neighbours reporting Asifa’s comings and goings; they urge him to control his younger sister. In order to avoid being seen by her neighbours and extended family when she returns from work, Asifa uses narrow and dark side streets to get back to her house, where she can hide from prying eyes and loose tongues.

Asifa sees herself as a trailblazer, and wants other young women to follow in her and her sister’s footsteps. “I want other girls to come out of their houses like us,” she says. “Like we have faced our problems, I want them to come out as well so they can support their families.” Asifa’s relative freedom may not last for long. At the end of our discussion, she told me how she was engaged to a young man in her neighbourhood. He is currently unemployed. Both her fiancé and his family have made it very clear that Asifa will

“

Women like Asifa actively engage in challenging and reaffirming the gendered codes surrounding their mobility are central to the formation of the city itself

”

have to leave her job once she is married. Despite the fact that her earnings could greatly improve the wellbeing of the family, Asifa’s mobility poses too many dangers and risks. Asifa is trying to postpone the wedding for as long as possible.

Asifa’s story doesn’t just unsettle the network of relations in her neighbourhood but also our gaze on it from the outside. I went to Lyari to study gender and space, with a focus on how young men from the Baloch community experience urban conflict. For these men, whose regional identity is a source of marginalization, the violence in their neighbourhoods—and in the city as a whole—restricted where they could work, study or socialize. These men’s experiences stood out because their immobility seemed exceptional relative to other men. However, by neglecting women and taking it as common sense that they were anyways less mobile, I realized that I was myself inadvertently reinforcing the idea that men are mobile and women are static. When I turned my attention to women, I quickly realized that they were, in fact, on the move all the time. They were constantly pushing boundaries, both spatial and social, and taking risks in order to do so.

The ways in which women like Asifa actively engage in challenging and reaffirming the gendered codes surrounding their mobility are central to the formation of the city itself. Women are constantly challenging the restrictions placed on their mobility in order to fulfil their material needs. However, there is more to this movement. There is a growing sense of admiration for women who are mobile, which I heard when speaking to women in Lyari.



There is also a growing willingness among women to challenge spatial restrictions and to take greater risks. While much of this is tied to financial necessity—as it always has been—there is also an unabashed pleasure in moving around the city to hear in their stories.

Despite the challenges of sexual harassment, judgement and censure from their family and neighbours, and a lack of supportive infrastructure such as safe and affordable public transport, there is no doubt that women are pushing the boundaries in terms of their mobility on a daily basis. It is through these movements, which are tactical, creative, subtle and sometimes covert, that women in Karachi are actively redefining gender roles, and reshaping the city itself—starting from one if its own peripheries in Lyari. ✨

CITY REPORTS

18. **Bangalore**

Saving the city's life-sustaining lakes

20. **Dhaka**

When growth outpaces sustainability

21. **Delhi**

Xenophobic violence against Africans

22. **Hambantota**

A multi-million dollar ghost town

24. **Peshawar**

Conflict reshapes Pakistan's oldest city

26. **Delhi & Hyderabad**

India's higher education crisis



GIRL POWER

KASHMIR: 24 April, 2017

Female students throw rocks at police during clashes in Srinagar, the summer capital of Indian Kashmir. The students staged protests and clashed with the police following the re-opening of colleges after a week of closures. Kashmir has been experiencing sustained student protests following an April 15 military forces raid on a college in Pulwana. Fifteen students were reportedly arrested in the raid, setting off the protests in which female students have uncharacteristically joined their male counterparts. EPA/Farooq Khan

SAVING THE CITY OF LAKES

Communities in Bangalore are working together to restore its life-sustaining system of water reservoirs



van Rooyen

The Cauvery is Bangalore’s nearest river and lies about 165km southwest of this populous hub for India’s high-tech industries. Cognisant of its water problems, dynasties like the Cholas, Gangas and Hoysalas, which once ruled this city, built lakes to create alternate water sources for domestic and agricultural use. These water bodies—variously described as “lakes” and “tanks”, also “keres” in the regional language Kannada—shaped Bangalore’s biodiversity and ecology, and served as cultural spaces that brought local communities together. Renamed as Bengaluru in 2006, Bangalore has undergone massive change since transitioning from a “city of lakes” to the “Silicon Valley of India”. The city’s population has exploded from three million in 1981 to nine million in 2011, the year of the last census. This massive urbanization, and the resulting sprawl, has forced changes in land-use patterns and water availability, with peri-urban Bangalore shouldering the brunt due to the growth of the information technology (IT) sector.

The trees that once formed a lovely canopy to its roads have been felled to widen clogged arterial highways. Lakes and marshy wetlands have been drained and encroached upon by builders to feed this growing city’s insatiable appetite for housing. Worse still, untreated domestic and industrial wastewater—including raw sewage—is released directly into thriving water bodies. These actions have had far-reaching consequences. Endemic flora and fauna is disappearing. The city’s many water reservoirs are topped with scummy froth and have been known to catch fire. Water is becoming scarce in the summer months, and there is flooding during the monsoon season.

A 2013 report by the Centre for Science and Environment, a New Delhi research and advocacy group, states that of Bangalore’s 210 lakes, only ten have any water.

The extensive bad press around these water bodies, coupled with citizen-led awareness initiatives and protests marking their misuse, have resulted in a few lakes being rejuvenated with funding from the government.

Two lakes in particular, Kaikondrahalli and Jakkur— they located at opposite ends of Bangalore, in its south and northeast respectively— have become thriving urban commons. This is in large part due to an active local community working closely with the relevant government body, the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP). Continuous engagement by scientists, sociologists and ecologists with civil engineers from the BBMP has ensured an holistic plan that includes rejuvenation as part of development. A trust known as the Mahadevapura Parisara Samrakshane Mattu Abhivrudhi Samiti (MAPSAS) manages the chain of lakes to which Kaikondrahalli belongs. Priya Ramasubban, one of the founding trustees of MAPSAS, explained the trust’s approach: “The community’s intent was to keep it inclusive, not only in terms of affordability but also in a manner that respected the birds, fish and other water wildlife, as well as the local community that depended on it.”

Hence, the lakes were not turned into amusement parks or boating jetties, which often run the risk of becoming ticketed venues. Going the non-ticketed route isn’t easy, however, especially since the BBMP does not provide on-going monetary support for operations and maintenance.

“Government departments have limited budgets, and it’s always a toss-up between whether they should revive another lake, especially one that is in danger of being encroached upon, or spend money on maintaining ones already rejuvenated,” said Ramasubban. Meaningful community engagement

has not been easy. The demographics of the area around Kaikondrahalli include wealthy new migrants and poorer residents who have lived in the Sarjapur area for generations. These demographics key into how users associate with the lake, and the area around it. Newer residents are more interested in its lifestyle aspects, such as being able to walk or jog by the lake, while older residents often use it for fishing or grazing cattle, activities that are important to their livelihoods.

Jakkur, which is located in a different urban setting with a greater mix of urban and rural users, has achieved balance and manages these interactions better. Walkers, joggers and bird-watchers use the lake in conjunction with professional clothing washers and cattle herders.

“
It’s always a toss-up between whether they should revive another lake, especially one that is in danger of being encroached upon, or spend money on maintaining ones already rejuvenated
”

“These tanks are artificial constructs that were made for irrigation,” said Vishwanath Srikantaiah, aka Zenrainman, a civil engineer and well-known local water activist. “With the deterioration of lakes over time, the role of the tank in today’s setting needs to be defined, and this will vary from place to place. The variation needs to be understood rather than rushing to create ‘templatisations’. And communities must be persuaded to work together. That is the challenge.”

In her recent book *Nature in the City* (2016), Harini Nagendra, a professor of sustainability at Azim Premji University, chronicles the role of nature in Bangalore from the sixth century, when its early settlements emerged, until today. Having interacted with the city’s various lake groups, Nagendra is positive about how open each is and how effectively knowledge is shared to inspire those who want to begin even small, localised initiatives.

One example is the Save Bangalore Lakes Trust, which was created in 2013 to formalise this process of collaboration and information sharing among various communities. The rapid manner in which Bangalore is growing, however, calls for more than just people coming together. Nagendra believes that technology can play a substantial role in safeguarding the future of not only Bangalore’s lakes, but also its nature as a whole. “Access to archival information is horrendously hard to get,” said Nagendra, a recipient of the 2013 Elinor Ostrom Senior Scholar award for her research and practice on issues of the urban commons. “Digitised survey maps of the city, especially of common spaces in peri-urban areas would be helpful so they can continue to be community spaces that are planned in the interest of the larger community.”

This doesn’t seem like a tall order for India’s IT industry. But will the coming together of people and technology save Bangalore’s threatened lakes in the face of growing urbanization? Only if urban attitudes change. “Lakes are just one example of an urban commons,” said Nagendra. “The importance placed on commons in rural areas is much higher. They are not as recognised in urban areas across the world. This needs to be pushed in policy if we are to have liveable spaces in the future”.

REKHA RAGHUNATHAN
JOURNALIST; BANGALORE

RE-INVENTION, BUT TO WHAT END?

Once a garden city, Dhaka's growth has outpaced notions of order or sustainability



Dhaka has been built twice already. The first developments came in waves from the 1950s through to the 1980s, but the major surge began in the 1990s, when private real estate took over as a driving force. Originally planned as a garden city, with plots of single homes surrounded by gardens and orchards, the residential areas began to change overnight as the now-ubiquitous apartment buildings rose up.

Freehold homeowners had attractive financial options: to sell outright, or enter into a joint venture with a developer. Rising construction costs and the small number of small-scale professional contractors meant the developer route was the easier alternative; quickly, the single or double-storied houses began to vanish, and with them their abiding greenery. The city's building by-laws were ill-equipped to steer, let alone

control, this rush of building activity. Vast residential districts began to lose their character, morphing into a thick pudding of mid-rise buildings with few open areas, playfields or parks among them. The situation was exacerbated by a near lack of provisions for local schools and community facilities, limited or disconnected commercial areas, and a strange but severe dearth of roads and cross-connectors.

The result is a city where commuters spend hours in what feels like the worst traffic in the world. Children play in parking lots, slow-moving rickshaws jam the streets and sidewalks are choked with vendors. Sustainability, it would seem, has left the city. Dhaka, though, remains a very resistant city.

Culturally robust, the city has a vibrant arts scene in addition

to a busy music, theatre and raucous café culture. Month-long book fairs are difficult to get into and a five-night classical music festival fills up a stadium of 60,000. Whatever was missed in the urban planning, the city's urbanites make up for in their own ways. Dhaka's architectural design culture has benefitted from the legacies of masters like Louis Kahn, an American, and Muzharul Islam, a Yale-trained Bangladeshi architect whose influence persists.

Islam probably built one of the first modernist buildings in the subcontinent, when his College of Art and Crafts building for Dhaka University was completed in 1955. A pragmatic approach towards a sustainable building design, it marked the first time local bricks were custom-manufactured to an architect's detailed requirements. He even insisted on the bricks having a specific texture. One of the first modern pavilion forms in this part of the world, Islam's Art College holds many lessons for students of architecture and sustainable building designs. Islam's other Dhaka buildings, including the superb but incomplete Jahangirnagar University (1967-70), form part of an architectural legacy that includes work by Bangladeshi architects Bashirul Haq, Uttam Kumar Saha and Raziul Ahsan, as well as Greek architect Constantine Doxiadis and American Robert Boughey. But few buildings compete with the mystic and monumental rise of Louis Kahn's National

Assembly Building of Bangladesh, located in the Sher-e-Bangla Nagor district of Dhaka. Completed posthumously in 1983, Kahn demonstrated ingenuity in his approach and response to the local climate and terrain.

The main building brings all the parliamentary functions together, including the substantially sized mosque. Khan placed the building amid a new lake, thus dematerializing in the reflections of the waters. But the benefit of this dig-and-mound approach—a traditional and widely practised craft in this part of the world—becomes most apparent when the incessant rains of the monsoons drain into this basin, controlling flash floods in the nearly thousand-acre site. The water body also offers micro-climatic cooling for the necklace of attendant buildings of the complex during the long, hot summers. Kahn's design also took into account solar heat gain for all buildings and structures in the complex, including a lesser-known hospital placed some distance away. Even in this latter building, which faces west, a generously proportioned, circular aperture separates the naturally ventilated unglazed lobby space from the heat and glare of the tropical sun.

Whether these approaches to sustainable architectural design endure in contemporary Dhaka, a city imperilled by the onslaught of Dubai or Singapore's west-aping models, remains up for debate. What is not debatable is that there was a time when sense and deep thought prevailed above all else in Dhaka, a city where architecture flourished amid trees and flocks of birds.

KASHEF CHOWDHURY
ARCHITECT; DHAKA

AN UNFORTU- NATE SERIES OF EVENTS

Violence against Africans in Delhi is on the rise

No one can claim it was unexpected. On 27 March this year, hundreds of residents of Greater Noida, an industrial area southeast of India's capital city of New Delhi, went on a rampage. Their targets: African migrants, mostly young students from Nigeria. What began as a vigil for high schooler Manish Khari, who had died the previous day, quickly turned violent after word spread that five Nigerian students arrested for his murder had been released from police custody for lack of evidence. The Nigerian men had been fingered by neighbours, and were additionally accused of cannibalism. Ten people were injured in the attack and property damaged. Police advised Africans to remain indoors the following day for fear of further reprisals.

The xenophobic outburst capped a period of escalating tension and resentment, not only in this poor neighbourhood but other parts of Delhi too. In 2014, a video that circulated online showed a mob violently assaulting three African students in Delhi Metro using their fists and sticks. The reason for the attack remains unclear. Throughout the beating, some in the mob shouted "Bharat Mata Ki Jai" (Victory for Mother India). Violent assault, sometimes leading to death, and occasionally coupled with outlandish claims of cannibalism, are the darker side to pervasive prejudice against Africans resident in India.

It is widely believed that African men are drug dealers and their female counterparts prostitutes. Nigerian nationals disproportionately bear the brunt of this prejudice.

A well-known Delhi prosecutor and rising star in the Indian bureaucracy told me that 90% of drug cases in the city's courts in any week were against "Nigerians". Indian newspapers, especially its tabloids, tend to reinforce this stereotype. Articles detailing arrests of Nigerian drug dealers are commonplace. It is also not uncommon to read headlines telling of Nigerians "conning" and "duping" unsuspecting locals.

There is, however, increasing pushback to this racism. After the events of 27 March in Noida, some progressive NGOs organized protests against the escalating violence and prejudice targeting Africans in Delhi. "Stop The Racism" a poster admonished. African ambassadors also released a statement condemning the attacks and demanding swift action. Nigeria's foreign affairs ministry summoned the Indian envoy to the country's capital, Abuja.

As India attempts to position itself as a competitor and rival to China in Africa, its government is coming under increasing pressure to deal with the rising perception that the country is unfriendly to black people. International news coverage of the Noida incident has forced India to contend with how the country and its citizens deal with race. Five people were arrested for the attacks in Noida, with the local state government promising a "fair investigation" of the incident.

TAU TAVENGWA

van Rooyen



THE CITY THAT ISN'T

After a flurry of multi-million dollar projects, Hambantota’s ambition to become a key Sri Lankan city has stalled. What went wrong?

It is sunset, and at the Hambantota fisheries harbour in southern Sri Lanka, the fishermen are wrapping up for the day. Their boats line the beach, as they put away their nets. Mohamed Thajudeen, 45, shakes his head gravely as he points to the harbour’s breakwater—which was one among many development projects that have been taking place in Hambantota over the past decade.

“Look at that—that was built to make things easier for us, but they did it with no proper planning. They should have consulted us. We’ve been fishing here for years; we’d have been able to offer some opinions,” says Thajudeen. “This ‘development’ wasn’t done properly, and as a result, a number of boats have capsized around here in recent times.”

Thajudeen belongs to a community that, for generations, has depended on fishing for a livelihood. As he explains the series of issues that the community faces, it is evident that,

for fishermen like Thajudeen, the fact that their hometown was once one of the poorest districts in the nation and now has an international airport and the second-largest stadium in the country is of little relevance to daily life. Sri Lanka is not a nation of cities. Truth be told, the island only has one ‘proper’ city—the commercial capital, Colombo. Since the country’s nearly three-decade long civil conflict ended in May 2009, Colombo and its outskirts have undergone significant changes. Simultaneously, there was also a very determined, even ruthless, effort to create a second commercial and industrial hub, in the southern coastal district of Hambantota.

Hambantota is now home to a port, an airport, cricket stadium, expansive administrative complex and convention centre, among other infrastructures. The city’s roads are some of the best in the country. Recently, the international luxury hotel chain, Shangri-La, opened a resort and spa not far from the

airport. Over the last few years, Hambantota has also played host to international events, including the South Asian Beach Games in 2011, and the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in 2013.

For one of the worst affected districts during the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, Hambantota has recovered amazingly well. In fact, it has nearly all the markings of a modern-day metropolis—except, it hasn’t quite become one.

The development frenzy that was ultimately a failed attempt to create a well-developed city from one of Sri Lanka’s poorest districts all ties back to the politics of the country’s last government—or more specifically, the Rajapaksa regime.

Despite his popularity for presiding over an end to the civil war during his ten-year rule, former President Mahinda Rajapaksa was also accused of war crimes, dictatorship, corruption, nepotism and a blatant show of favouritism for Hambantota—his home district. Strategies for developing the city were underway long before the war ended in 2009. In 2011, the Greater Hambantota Development Plan was made public. Critics raised concerns about the viability of the proposed projects. Objections ranged from financial to environmental concerns. There was uproar over the location of the airport, which was built in the midst of forestland. A November 2014 report in Sri Lanka’s *Sunday Times* revealed that over US\$4 billion was earmarked for various projects in Hambantota—a significant portion of the resources of a country still recovering from a drawn-out civil war.

Rajapaksa’s government pushed ahead with what remains to date one of the fastest development projects Sri Lanka has witnessed. Funding and labour was provided by the Chinese government, a close ally of the administration. Hambantota, home to farmers and fisher folk,

soon boasted the Magampura Mahinda Rajapaksa Port, the Mattala Rajapaksa International Airport and the Mahinda Rajapaksa International Cricket Stadium.

Following Rajapaksa’s loss of the country’s 2015 presidential election, much of Hambantota’s development drive has come to a halt. The current government has been struggling to deal with a disgruntled populace, billions of dollars of foreign debt, and overall damage control. Ironically, the large-scale

“
Ironically, the large-scale developments in Hambantota did not seem to have alleviated the city’s major challenges: poverty and unemployment remain high
”

developments in Hambantota did not seem to have alleviated the city’s major challenges: poverty and unemployment remain high. So what went wrong? To begin with, Hambantota was not the ideal choice to build an airport and a seaport. According to Muttukrishna Sarvananthan, a prominent Sri Lankan development economist, much of the development in Hambantota was an “artificial effort” carried out on political and idealistic grounds.

“In my opinion, Hambantota cannot qualify as a city, because the population is dispersed,” said Sarvananthan. “The population density has to be high to attract investment, local or foreign.” Nine-tenths of Hambantota’s population of around 600,000 is still considered

rural. The Greater Hambantota Development Plan depended heavily on inflows of migrants and investment, both of which did not transpire.

Forbes recently declared Hambantota’s flight hub “the world’s emptiest international airport”, and no wonder. The airport would be lucky to have more than one flight a day; international flights, for the most part, prefer to use the old airport in Colombo. The airport now exists primarily as a tourist attraction. The roads leading to it are in very good condition, if eerily deserted. As for the cricket stadium, it too now lies mostly empty, after having hosted only a handful of international tournaments.

A short drive away from all this, the people of Hambantota live the same lives they’ve been living for decades. “What development?” asked Thajudeen. He was preparing to leave the harbour. “For us, the only change is that we now have better roads. They haven’t really done much. Life is still difficult for the people. And that port is actually a problem for us fishermen. The navy won’t let us fish near those areas anymore.”

Complaints notwithstanding, the expensive infrastructure is here to stay. Krishanthi Weerasinghe, president of the Hambantota District Chamber of Commerce, believes that something can still be done to further development. “The infrastructure is in place,” she said. “It is up to the authorities to take it forward without any personal or political agendas. If done correctly, we can bring in investors.” In the meantime, occasional groups of tourists will continue to make their way south, past the paddy fields and electric fences erected to keep elephants away, past the signboards warning of stray peacocks, all the way to the empty airport.

MARYAM AZWER
WRITER; COLOMBO

REFUGE CITY

Decades of conflict in Afghanistan have reshaped the character of Pakistan's oldest city

Peshawar, in north-western Pakistan, was historically an international staging post for crossing into Asia. The Kushan emperor Kanishka (c. AD 127–150) made it the capital of his empire, which stretched from the Caspian Sea to the mouth of the Ganges. Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims have all left their mark on the city, some more visible than others. The architecture of Peshawar is a pastiche of historical styles left by the city’s former overseers, including Mughal red bricks and curved rooftops from the English colonial era.

“We speak Persian because our ancestors came from Marv, Iran,” says Peshawar-resident Ghulam Nabi Qazalbash. The Persian-speaking community here has shrunk, in part due to the targeted attacks against it, but also because of wealthy and desperate buyers looking for property in this congested city.

The Sikhs who had to migrate from the tribal areas—there are seven, semi-autonomous tribal areas on Pakistan’s border with Afghanistan, known at Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA)—also moved to the heart of Peshawar. The Pakistani government had to reopen a gurudwara for Sikh worshippers, 60 years after partition. “Although my ancestors came from Punjab we’ve lived in Khyber Agency since I can remember,” says Titu Singh, who moved with his family to Peshawar from the tribal area after threats from militant groups and subsequent military operations. “We only speak



Pashto and are now trying to learn Punjabi.”

International conflict and wars have stretched the city’s boundaries. The wall that once enclosed the old city had 16 gates; it is now a case study for archaeologists and historians.

Although the monuments remain, they are defaced by large incongruous structures. The new city is an ever-expanding, uncontrolled concrete jungle where gates have been replaced by checkpoints.

In 1979 the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Millions fled into

Pakistan. By 1985 there were around 3.5 million refugees living in Pakistan, of whom about half a million had settled in Peshawar. This was the first phase of enforced migration caused by war. Most of these refugees were from rural Afghanistan where the conflict was more intense in the predominantly Pashtun areas of the south and east. The Pakistani government established hundreds of camps across the country, with more than 200 in the province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (formerly North West Frontier Province).

Following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, funds dried up and civil war broke out between

warring Afghan factions. This spurred another wave of migration. An estimated 166,000 Afghanis relocated to Pakistan in the early 1990s. This second wave of migrants was made up of refugees from urban areas, some of who were supportive of the Soviets and feared possible reprisals. Because of their comparative wealth, these refugees settled in urban areas around Peshawar. They were no longer restricted to camps.

The influx continued until 1996, when the Taliban captured Kabul and established their government. The refugees were mostly non-Pashtun ethnic minorities who had escaped persecution at the hands of the Taliban. It is estimated that 80% of the women in Kabul city fled to Peshawar at this time.

In 2001, the Taliban regime fell. However, for many, returning home after three decades was a difficult adjustment, with economic conditions unsuitable and violence still widespread. All the same, 3.5 million were repatriated—the number was 500,000 more than the Pakistani authorities had estimated.

“Even people from a certain class that could afford a good living found it difficult to sustain themselves when we returned to Afghanistan,” says Muzammil Jan, a wealthy businessman with a degree from a European university. He invested in coalmines in Helmand, a province in the south of Afghanistan, but they were taken over by warlords. “I barely made it out of the area alive with my family.”

Jan bought a luxury home in Hayatabad, a wealthy suburb on the south-western edge of Peshawar. After the December 2014 attack on the Army Public School in Peshawar by the

Pakistani Taliban, Pakistanis tolerant attitude to Afghan refugees has waned. The Pakistani government has asked all Afghans to leave Peshawar. Jan had to sell his home.

With growing security concerns in Pakistan’s own tribal areas and more than a dozen military operations against Al-Qaeda and the Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in tribal areas, there were 3.5 million internally displaced people by 2009 and the numbers kept growing. Official estimates show that there were around 1.6 million internally displaced people living in Peshawar at this time. The city’s population has grown from 982,816 in 1998 to an estimated 3.6 million—there has not been a census in 18 years—and is expected to grow to five million by 2030. The impact of this population surge on the urban structure of Peshawar has been considerable. The city has 18 informal settlements, two located on government land. The refugee camps have now been replaced by housing schemes on private land with little or no sanitation. Erum Khan, a lecturer from Orakzai Agency in the tribal areas, says his family endured extreme poverty when they fled the area because of the growing militancy in 2010.

The Khan family lived in a camp for three months while they waited for the cut-price sale of their property back home to go through. “We built a house and then our relatives bought a piece of land close to ours,” says Khan. The family now has seven houses in the locality, with little or no access to water, gas or electricity. However, over a period of time, the slums (most of which are centrally located) have developed a functional relationship with the city, providing informal labour at cheap costs. A study conducted by the government in the 1990s

showed that the first wave of migration, which accounted for almost 80% of the total Afghan refugees, resulted in 30% less being paid to construction workers in wages compared to the prior decade.

Peshawar’s informal settlements are literally excluded from the formal economic narrative of the city. The government denies their existence, partly due to previous policy failures, but also because of larger regional realities. This denial not only undermines the development of these settlements, but the city as a whole.

The city’s waves of migration have resulted in a class divide that remains a significant factor in the future of Peshawar’s social landscape. Even in the only planned area of Peshawar, Hayatabad, the work force is largely drawn from the informal settlement on the boundary of the planned locality. The rising economic divide has seen crime rates increase in Hayatabad. The local government’s response is scattershot: there is no housing policy, nor is there a plan to control urbanization. Instead, there has been a focus on short-term measures like cracking down on informal settlements and demonising Afghan refugees. A large number of internally displaced Pakistanis who belong to areas that have been rid of terrorists have also refused to go home. The lack of both real-time data and a realistic policy with pragmatic measures is nowhere to be seen. The result is a never-ending tautology.

IFTIKHAR FIRDOUS
JOURNALIST; PESHAWAR



DISPATCH

WE ARE STU- DENTS NOT CUSTOM- ERS

India has the youngest population in the world and faces the challenge of educating its youth. Are its universities up to the challenge?

WORDS: KAVYA MURTHY
RESEARCHER; NEW DELHI

Walking past Delhi's ITO metro station earlier this year, I was pleased to find residual graffiti for #OccupyUGC, a three-month urban occupation by research scholars motivated to think together about the threat to the political economy of higher education in India. The occupation was prompted by an administrative decision. In October 2015, the University Grants Commission (UGC) at Delhi—a central body that maintains and disburses funds for higher education—decided to roll back funds for scholarships to doctoral research students. The decision directly affected an already tenuous economy.

Doctoral research in India varies across the liberal arts and sciences, with gradations of scholarships contingent upon the location of scholars in central or state universities. Students are vetted by a standardised exam known as the National Entrance Test (NET). Given the nature of this exam, a substantive scholarship is often out of reach and doctoral students must negotiate a subsistence economy that relies on stipends mandated for those who do not fare sufficiently on the NET exam. Instituted in 2005, the stipend system notionally offers a living wage for intellectual work. But without money for hostels, living expenses and reading materials, higher education is simply inaccessible to most aspiring students.

In 2015, a review committee appointed by the government, which is on a drive to increase institutes focussed on technology, management and the technical sciences, decided that 35,000 liberal arts scholars did not need money to study. The living-wage scholarship was reduced to a meagre sum of US\$75–125, nearly

half the minimum wage for semi-skilled labour. Rather unhelpfully, a member of parliament justified this move by stating that students used the money for shopping, not study. The claim did not endear him to the many students affected by this decision. However, the Ministry of Human Resource Development (MHRD), formerly Ministry of Education, concurred with the parliamentarian's assessment: in October 2015 it said it was concerned about the "irresponsible" use of scholarships.

“
The living-wage scholarship was reduced to a meagre sum of US\$75–125, nearly half the minimum wage for semi-skilled labour
”

Student protests followed, and were met with heavy-handed police action, including the use of long wooden batons known as *lathis*. Students responded by establishing a camp on the lawns of the UGC building, located at the intersection of Delhi's old city and the unfurling postcolonial city with buildings of the press, income tax office, museums and Supreme Court. The action also generated a hashtag: #OccupyUGC. The occupation movement comprised a loose body of unaffiliated researchers who had come together to think about the structure of higher education. Their disaffection was summarised in a graffiti statement: “We are students, not customers.”

Students from across the country began to show up at UGC. At the heart of their demand was the desire to study. The threat that India's higher education might be privatised loomed large over the occupation: the country was poised to pledge its higher education to the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATTs) at a December meeting of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Nairobi, Kenya.

The occupy movement benefited from its urban setting, with roadside restaurants known locally as *dhaba* offering convenient luncheon spots. A nearby mosque took an active interest in the students and as Delhi grew wintry ensured a constant supply of tea and weekly helping of biryani; it also offered clean toilets and a safe-haven during police charges. While the streets were generally friendly, the authorities were not. The occupation prompted constant provocation, sometimes by proxies—mostly rowdy men on motorbikes—but often directly by *lathi*-wielding police accompanied by right-wing student groups.

Threatened with displacement, the students found legitimacy by simply digging in. “The idea of occupying a city became a powerful idea,” says Avipsha Das, a doctoral student and social-media manager of the struggle. As the occupation continued, its participants organised open classrooms with faculty from universities across Delhi, cultural programmes that included song and dance, and nocturnal vigils and discussions. By the end of October, a key topic of discussion was the pending WTO–GATTs conference in Nairobi. A new slogan showed up on the walls of the Delhi metro: “Education had a value, and now it has a price”. India was one of the few countries willing to pledge its higher

education sector to international trade; a precarious foothold to affordable public education was threatened by education's listing as a service. On 9 December, as India negotiated the future of its education in Kenya, students from Gujarat, Telengana, Maharastra and West Bengal descended on Delhi. Chaos ensued.



Acting on orders of the MHRD, police used tear gas, water cannons and baton charges on the student marchers. Some 500 students were arrested, and countless more threatened with police brutality. The arrested students were subjected to beatings, female students also reporting instances of sexual harassment. This violent public encounter foretold what was to follow in the coming months. The violent suppression of the student march did, however, generate a vague and conciliatory communiqué from the UGC, via the MHRD: a promise to look into student demands.

As the physical occupation of 2015 dispersed, students harnessed social media and direct-messaging apps to galvanize and maintain solidarity. What had started out as a conversation about scholarships and living allowances in 2016 morphed into a broad-based disquisition on the threat of privatisation in higher education. A whole subset of questions were discussed, ranging from the economic underpinnings of

the public university and social composition of the classroom to lapses between pedagogy and student experience, the productive challenging of knowledge and freedoms of individuals.

Many of these issues gained renewed urgency when a Dalit scholar from the University of Hyderabad (HCU) died by his own hand. Rohith Vemula, a 26-year-old science doctoral candidate at HCU, was one of five Dalit scholars who had been suspended from their positions in a university with a notoriously high suicide rate among scholars from this oppressed caste. Active in the anti-caste struggle, Vemula was a member of the Ambedkar Student Association (ASA) that drew in this work upon the legacy of B.R. Ambedkar, a social reformer and leader of the Dalit Buddhist Movement.

In 2015, ASA members demonstrated solidarity with students at the Film and Technology Institute of India, a neighbouring university in Pune and another institution threatened by privatisation and the undermining of academic autonomy. Their outreach followed right-wing students protesting the screening of a documentary exploring the causes and aftermath of the September 2013 clashes between Hindu and Muslim communities in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh, and an unrelated programme of events about capital punishment in India. Right-wing political groups broke up these events and accused their progressive organisers of promoting “anti-national” and “casteist” activity.

As a result of these events Vemula and four other Dalit students were suspended. They were also disbarred from their hostel



1. Members of National Students' Union (NSU) of India hold images of Rohith Vemula's in protest
2. NSU Members clash with police
3. Indian Human Resource and Development (HRD) Minister Smriti Irani, addresses a press conference on Hyderabad student's suicide case, in New Delhi, India, 20 January 2016
4. Activists from various organisations participate in a protest march in support of Rohith Vemula
5. Members of the NSU of India are detained by police

1-5. EPA/Rajat Gupta

rooms and university facilities. In response, they occupied a corner of the university's shopping complex, creating a corner of radical resistance and steadfast anti-caste solidarity that included images of Ambedkar.

In December 2015, Vemula wrote an impassioned letter to the university's vice-chancellor about his predicament. Titled "Solution for the Dalit Problem" and written from the corners of the makeshift Dalit occupation, Vemula's letter contained detailed instructions: "1. Please serve 10mg Sodium Azide to all the Dalit students at the time of admission. With direction to use when they feel like reading Ambedkar. 2. Supply a nice rope to the rooms of all Dalit students from your companion, the great Chief Warden."

Vemula's satirical letter also suggested remedies to dispose of more advanced scholars, including doctoral students "with no easy exit" such as himself: "I request your highness to make preparations for the facility 'EUTHANASIA' for students like me. And I wish you and the campus rest in peace forever." A month later Vemula took his own life.

Unpublished before his death, Vemula's letter was not all sarcasm. It included stirring passages that spoke directly to a predicament that still haunts India's stratified society, of which its education system is a reflection: "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. As a glorious thing made up of star dust. In every field, in studies, in streets, in politics, and in dying and living."

Vemula's death is a stark example of the ills facing India's higher education system. The landscape of higher education in India is spread across 757 institutes of learning, only 43 of which are designated central universities. With significant internal variation, both in subject and geography, half of these universities are privately run. Data on student enrolment reveals that more than half of students in higher education do not belong to the categories of scheduled caste, tribe or other backward classes, as the government defines the lower castes of Hindu India. Higher education is overwhelmingly dominated by upper-caste Brahmins, who comprise only a fifth of the general population.

India's gross enrolment ratio in higher education was 23.6% in 2014-15, with 33.3 million students between 18-23 years enrolled. Over 47 million students drop out of secondary education at class 10-12. India spends only 0.7% of its GDP on higher education. With India touting privatisation and drafting loan-driven finance structures for educational institutions in its latest Union Budget, students will be transformed into paying clients who have little say in what they pay for. Notwithstanding this, the public university in India has until recently remained a singular space for democratic autonomy. But, as Vemula's death revealed, the structure of higher education and its punitive forces places even the brightest minds at serious risk.

On 18 January 2016, hundreds of students marched to the MHRD in an outpouring of rage against the institutional machinations that had led to Vemula's suicide. Students stood at the police barricades calling for the arrest of HCU's politically connected vice-chancellor, Appa Rao Podile, as well as a labour minister. In a

disproportionate show of force, the police detained more than a hundred students. Despite official pushback, questions to do with social exclusion and political economy were now firmly on the agenda. Despite the introduction of affirmative action in the 1990s and new opportunities for Dalit students this opened up, Vemula's death pointed to the gap between empirical data and raw experience. His letter was a strident reminder of the exclusions shaping Indian academic life.

“
As the occupation continued, its participants organised open classrooms with faculty from universities across Delhi, cultural programmes that included song and dance, and nocturnal vigils and discussions
”

A collation of young scholars from HCU called the Joint Action Committee for Justice for Rohith (JAC) sustained his memory. The JAC was also unrelenting in its struggle. "We do not want to save universities. We want to question, first and foremost, what makes the university unequal, and challenge the Brahminical patriarchy that dictates it," says Arpita Jaya, a JAC member. In March 2016, HCU's vice-chancellor resumed charge of the university after a period of

leave prompted by the crisis around Vemula's death. Students responded by ransacking his official residence. Tensions escalated. A sit-in was violently broken up by police. Electricity and internet services were suspended. Hostel canteens stopped serving students with food. These actions prompted activists and civil society to march on the university. Thirty-six students and three staff were detained and taken to a remote part of the city. Criminal charges were laid. Students made counter claims of assault and sexual harassment by the police. A university circular declared that media, political groups and external student organisations were prohibited from the campus. Weeks of civil-society protest were followed by a fragile order.

The ensuing summer months were marked by constant antagonism between students and the university's administration. A memorial for Vemula was vandalized. No legal action was taken against the vice-chancellor. In March this year, Radhika Vemula, the mother of the dead student, announced she had taken charge of the movement seeking justice for her son. A March 2017 edition of the *Hindustan Times* reported that she is seeking the sacking of HCU's vice-chancellor, his prosecution under a 1989 act of parliament aimed at preventing atrocities against scheduled castes and tribes, and legislative protection for students from marginalised communities in higher educational institutions in the form of a "Rohith Act". As it stands, though, justice for Vemula remains elusive.

FEATURES

34. Watching Traffic

Understanding Kabul through its clogged streets

44. Majority World Image

interview with Shahidul Amal

52. Round The Water Pump

Rohingya refugees eke out a hard living on the edges of a South Delhi river

60. Seeing And Not Believing

Dhaka reckons with increasing religious extremism and violence

68. Shaggy Dog Stories

Ghost stories from Karachi's cemeteries



Lovers meet beside Hatirjheel, a newly paved lake inside the city of Dhaka at midnight.
Syed Latif Hossain, 2014



FEATURE

WATCHING TRAFFIC

In a country whose story is dominated by traders, clerics, soldiers and development bureaucrats, Kabul's gridlocked roads offer a new way to retell a distinctly Afghani history

WORDS: TARAN N. KHAN
JOURNALIST AND WRITER; MUMBAI

Some things you expect to find in a city defined by war. When I first travelled to Kabul in the winter of 2006, I was primed for certain sights—like the torn facades of buildings, the bullet marks on the walls of homes, the snow-capped mountains on the horizon. But I was entirely unprepared for the traffic –the scale and persistence of the snarls, the number of cars on the streets each morning and evening, the sheer fatigue at the end of the gruelling, inch-by-inch journey. I worked at a small government-run TV and radio station in Karte Seh. I lived in a guesthouse across town. The commute took an hour, sometimes longer. In hindsight the massive pileups and delays that formed a part of my routine were an indication both of Kabul’s fragility – its lack of capacity to cope with the number of people swelling it – as well as an indication of its international significance, at least as a symbol. Because a large part of the traffic was composed of LandCruisers, emblazoned with the logos of different UN agencies and many other aid organizations. Packed bumper to bumper, their radio antennae waving like irritable tentacles, they stood snarling the narrow veins of the city that their passengers had come to develop.

The streets of Kabul have been shaped and reshaped often. In the 1830s when the English traveller Charles Masson recorded his impressions of the city, he appeared to be struck by the seclusion that could be embraced at will in its streets. “In occasion of war or tumult the entrance gates are built up, and the city contains as many different fortresses as there are kuchas

(sections) in it,” he wrote. Amir Abdur Rahman Khan, who reigned from 1880 to 1901, prompted the shift of the capital north of the river. The ‘Iron Amir’ was also a builder, and he transformed the capital, ruined after wars with the British, by creating palaces, workshops, public buildings and parks. The construction of the Arg (royal compound) and various royal villas marked an outward spread from the historical core of the old city (Sheh e Kohna) to the new suburbs of Kabul that haven’t stopped growing.

In the 1950’s, under Mohammad Zahir Shah, the last king of Afghanistan, the old city was linked to the new by the Jada-e-Maiwand, a wide boulevard conceived along the lines of Oxford Street. It was paved and widened with Soviet assistance in 1953, and had four-storey commercial and office buildings lining its sides. In the 1960s, Kabul got its first Master Plan. New neighbourhoods were organized not by traditional factors like ethnicity or language, but by income. By the close of the 1970’s, the Afghan capital was home to about half a million residents, and bracing to grow. This trajectory changed with the Saur (April) revolution of 1978,

“
Residents included internally displaced people, migrants from the countryside and returning refugees from Pakistan or Iran
”

2



and the onset of decades of war. Much of the infrastructure of the city was destroyed during the civil war in the 1990s, including the roads. Their rebuilding in the years after 2001 was part of the design of a new Afghanistan: smooth and developed, efficient. The idea of building roads in Kabul tells us something about how the city is imagined, and imagines itself.

The early years of Hamid Karzai’s presidential term (2004–2014) saw the city boom in many ways. By 2006, the official estimate pegged its population at 3.5 million residents, already overstretching the facilities of the unevenly developing city. These included internally displaced people, migrants from the countryside

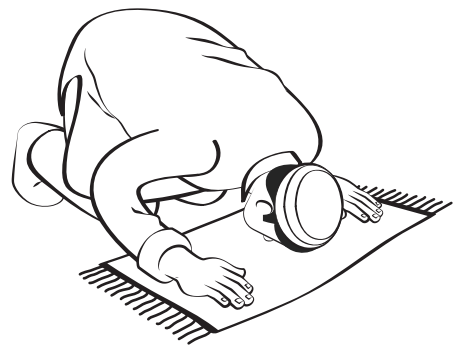
or returning refugees from Pakistan or Iran. Often they set up homes wherever they could find space, living in informal settlements across the mountains and hillsides that encircle the city. Over my time in Kabul, I saw these colonies spreading and growing, putting down firmer roots in the dusty terrain. Children climbed up the narrow mud streets carrying plastic containers of water. Others rode up and down the pathways on the backs of mules, laden with brightly coloured vessels, like moving pipelines. Sometimes these homes came up on the edges of areas that were still to be cleared of the notorious landmines and unexploded ordnance embedded in the hills. On a visit to a home in one such area, I followed my guide down a

narrow path marked with white stones—indicating the passage safe to walk on-- even as a de-mining crew worked nearby. But not all the houses on the hill were new. I went to visit a colleague at her home in Ju-e-Sheer, a neighbourhood that rose behind a large book market, and spread up to clusters of houses. We walked to her home using a broken but wide street. The name Ju-e-Sheer translates to ‘river (stream) of milk’. One version of how it got its name, I was told, was perhaps from a small stream that flowed through it, in turn named for the clear reflection of the moon you could see in its waters. Inside the house, I walked barefoot on wooden boards that tilted with the curve of the mountain.

Kabul’s choked streets also serve as venues for performances and spectacles, playing out in an arena that occupies so much of the public’s time. The spaces on the backs of large buses and the small private vans called Town Aces (or Tunis, as they were referred to) offered an insight into the popular culture and shifting tastes of Kabulis. The wild popularity of the US produced TV show *24* (dubbed in Dari) was reflected in the digital typeface of its title, seen on virtually every taxi in town. Other vehicles doled out philosophy (“Life is a moving grave”) and poetry. Large private cars offered bold promises (“Don’t cry girls I will be back”), life lessons (“No Girls No Tension”) and a crimson hued dictum emblazoned within a heart: “Love is not a Sin”.

Some areas had their own particular characters who were part of the cityscape. At Sherpur crossing there was a traffic policeman who became something of a celebrity for his enthusiastic and rigorous regulation of the chaotic morning rush traffic. His reported incorruptibility led to him being featured in the international press. Afghan American artist Aman Mojadidi also teased out the theme of corruption in the streets in 2009, by donning a fake uniform (bought in a local bazaar) and stopping cars at a fake checkpoint. As a hidden camera filmed him discreetly, he examined the documents of drivers, and then “apologized” to them for having been harassed and having had to pay bribes to corrupt officials. As part of the gesture, he offered the commuters a ‘reverse bribe’ of 100 Afghanis (about US\$2). While some drivers protested or politely refused the handout, others smiled and accepted the bakhshish, bemused at the reversal of the norm.

The islands of cars and their travellers marooned on the streets also came with their own economy, one familiar to me from Mumbai’s clogged streets, where enterprising hawkers woo every commuter. In Kabul these were often members of the small army of fiercely competitive, heartbreakingly tough street children. In 2008, their numbers were estimated to be around 60 000 to 70 000. Many had lost their parents and were bread-winners for their families. The more lucrative routes were those that led out from residential areas favoured by NGOs, contractors and aid agencies , and these children diligently worked the convoys and crossroads. Their goods included chewing gum, plastic bags, maps of Kabul and Afghanistan, dictionaries and copies of *Afghan Scene*, a glossy magazine targeted at expats. Kabul’s roads also became a



staging area for ingenious cons. In 2006, on the corner of a busy crossroads in Shahr e Nau, a little boy would sometimes be seen crying over a tray of broken eggs. Soft-hearted commuters would listen to his story of how he had broken them by accident and would be thrashed by his mother in retribution. Some would give him money to replace them. Perhaps they knew it was a ruse, perhaps not. But the memory of that naïve trickery is what rushes to my mind when I read of suicide blasts on one of the

crowded crossroads of Kabul. Among the injured have been such street children, engaged in their daily hustle of making a living.

In Kabul, the streets reflect seasons. During the winter months, women navigate busy crossroads in their high-heeled boots, their bright scarves a rebuke to the grey skies and slushy roads. Come spring and the roads turn dense with uniformed children returning to school after the long winter vacation, following the festival of Nauroz. There is a sudden flood of figures trudging along, holding hands and eating ice cream, kicking pebbles along the path. Last spring, there were news reports of roads in several parts of Kabul being flooded, making it impossible for residents to venture out, and causing many vehicles to get stuck. For many, it was yet another instance of the city’s uneven growth, that had left residents struggling.

The streets also reflected the increasingly precarious security situation. In 2009, the European Police Mission in Afghanistan (EUPOL Afghanistan) helped set up a ‘ring of steel’ across Kabul—a series of 25 checkpoints across the city to protect it from attack. Around 900 sentries manned these posts at the arterial roads of the capital as a first line of defence against attacks and suicide bombings. They stopped cars and checked documents, and examined the boots – taxis with women passengers were often waved ahead.

Despite the motions followed or ignored by the men in uniform, the defence barrier was governed by an unpalatable but firm truth: that if a suicide bomber wanted to explode his vest, there was very little the police could do about it.



“It’s very challenging to stop someone who is willing to kill himself,” a commander told the Washington Post in 2015. “When we put on this uniform each day, our family prays for us.” If they ever encountered a suicide bomber , the report added, all the officers can do is take cover and pray.

The ‘improvement’ of Kabul’s streets has a history, and the streets have fables attached to them. Some of these are strikingly similar to tales heard across the subcontinent, like the story about the king and the saint. During the 1920s, King Amanullah, known for his zeal for modernization, undertook the expansion of the city’s roads. But the project reportedly stalled in the heart of the city, by the ziyarat (shrine) of Shahe-du-Shamshera, dedicated to a warrior-saint who was martyred holding swords in both his hands. As the king tried to move the shrine to accommodate the road, goes the story, work kept getting stalled.

There were injuries and omens and machines broke down. Eventually, the modernizing king accommodated the fussy saint’s diktats from the afterlife, and ordered that the road be laid out to bypass the shrine. The beautiful mosque across the road, constructed in the Italian Baroque style, was also built during his reign. The area is the closest thing Kabul has to a central plaza. Many roads meet here, at a spot where the old city abuts the new, and the river lies between them.

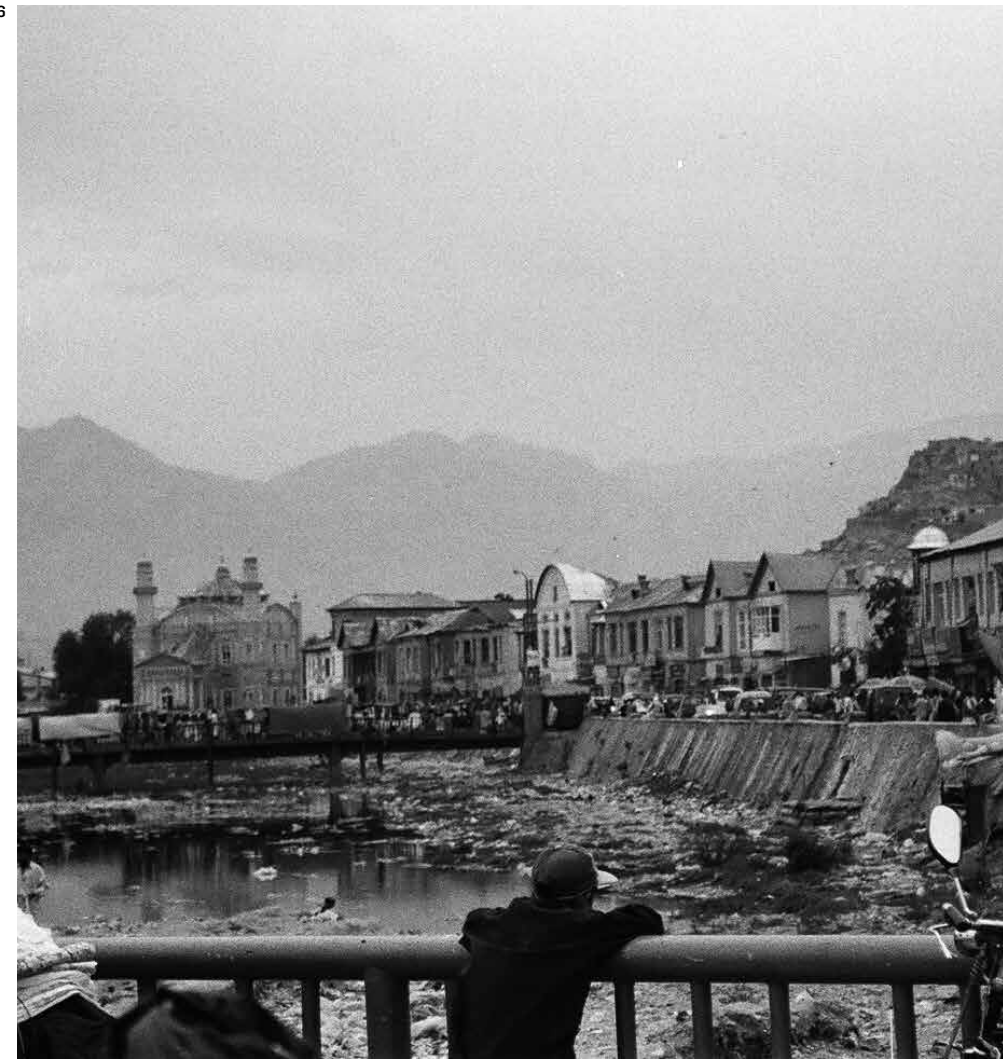
It was here, on a street just outside the shrine, that 27-year old Farkhunda Malikzada was murdered by a mob in March 2015. She was accused of burning the Quran, a claim that was later refuted. She was beaten on the streets that bustle with crowds on a routine day, her body was set alight and dumped into the empty channel of the Kabul river, then run over by a car. Policemen watched, passers-by took videos on their smartphones. It was a murder that came to define a generation, an event that will haunt the collective memory of the city.

“

Kabul's choked streets also serve as venues for performances and spectacles, playing out in an arena that occupies so much of the public's time... For a large number of expats, what they see of the city is what passes by the windows of their cars, or catches their gaze while stuck in traffic

”





1-7 Various scenes of Kabul. Photos: Taran Khan

6

The apparent apathy of the mob that watched Malikzada die was followed by an uprising of outrage and anger. At her funeral, women broke with tradition and carried Malikzada’s coffin through the streets, creating an iconic image of resistance. In the early days after her death, many said they felt uneasy passing the spot of her murder. The street where she was killed is now named after her. In March 2016, a memorial was inaugurated there. By that time, several of her killers had been spared the death penalty, in a widely watched trial.

In many such ways, Kabul’s streets are embedded with violence, and memories of violence. They are also edged with history, filled with mysticism and raffish fun, like the now fading aura around kucha e Kharabat. This musician’s quarter dates back to the 1860s, when Amir Sher Khan brought Indian classically trained musicians to his court, presumably after his two-year exile in India. Many of these performers came from Kashmir and Punjab and mingled with the Afghan musicians in Kharabat. The neighbourhood lies in the shadow of the Bala Hissar fort, easily accessible for the king to enjoy its music and revelries. The term kharabat literally means “ruin” and one version of the neighbourhood’s name carries the connotation of a place of illicit pleasures.

However, residents favour a different reading, linking it to the Sufi reference to kharabat as a metaphor for the destruction of the self, or the ego, necessary to gain spiritual enlightenment. For many Kabuli families, I was told, Kharabat was considered hallowed ground and visitors would remove their shoes here as they walked to the ziyarat of Hazrat Tamim

wa Jabar-e-Ansar, one of the holiest shrines in the city. Kabulis who remember an era before war cherish memories of the musicians quarter, the fountainhead of artistes in the city.

The same streets are marked by memories of escapes, and now, vanishings, that underlie the hustle and chaos of the city. In Kharabat I met Ustad Hamahang, whose name means “in harmony”. He had told me about his youth as a well known Kharabati performer. When the civil war entered Kabul in 1992, his street witnessed heavy fighting..

“
It was here, on a street just outside the shrine, that 27-year old Farkhunda Malikzada was murdered by a mob in March 2015. She was accused of burning the Quran, a claim that was later refuted
”

Ustad Hamahang was trapped with his family in their home, forced to live in the cellar. They lived on potatoes for a week, he told me.

When they ran out of food, he had ventured out to forage for his family, only to find the entire street deserted.

They had taken a decision to leave then, he told me. Despite being on familiar turf, their

journey was perilous: different factions held different parts of the city. With great care, he recalled, he moved his wife and children out of Kharabat and across Jada-e-Maiwand, crossing their battle-scarred neighbourhood to Shor Bazar, on the other side of the avenue. From there, they made their way to Pakistan, only returning to Kabul after 2001.

When I think of Kabul now, from the distance of my home in Mumbai, I think of the streets where my friends lived, the view from a home perched on a mountain where we watched the dawn break.

I think of the houses I lived in and the streets where I went to buy bread, where I walked with friends in the rain and saw new neighbourhoods being built, streets where I heard the monotonous jingle of the ice cream cart on Friday afternoons. I think of the many friends who have left over the last few years. Some have moved to towns and cities in Europe and the US, others to Pakistan or India. Some travelled taking airplanes and using passports, while others took more difficult routes.

In my mind I stand at the summit of a hill in Kabul and see the road stretch towards the horizon. The roads of Kabul lead to the sea.



INTERVIEW

MAJORITY-WORLD IMAGE

After returning to Bangladesh in 1984, Shahidul Alam forged a stellar career in photography, education and social activism that is shifting the way South Asian countries are portrayed

WORDS: ZEESHAN KHAN

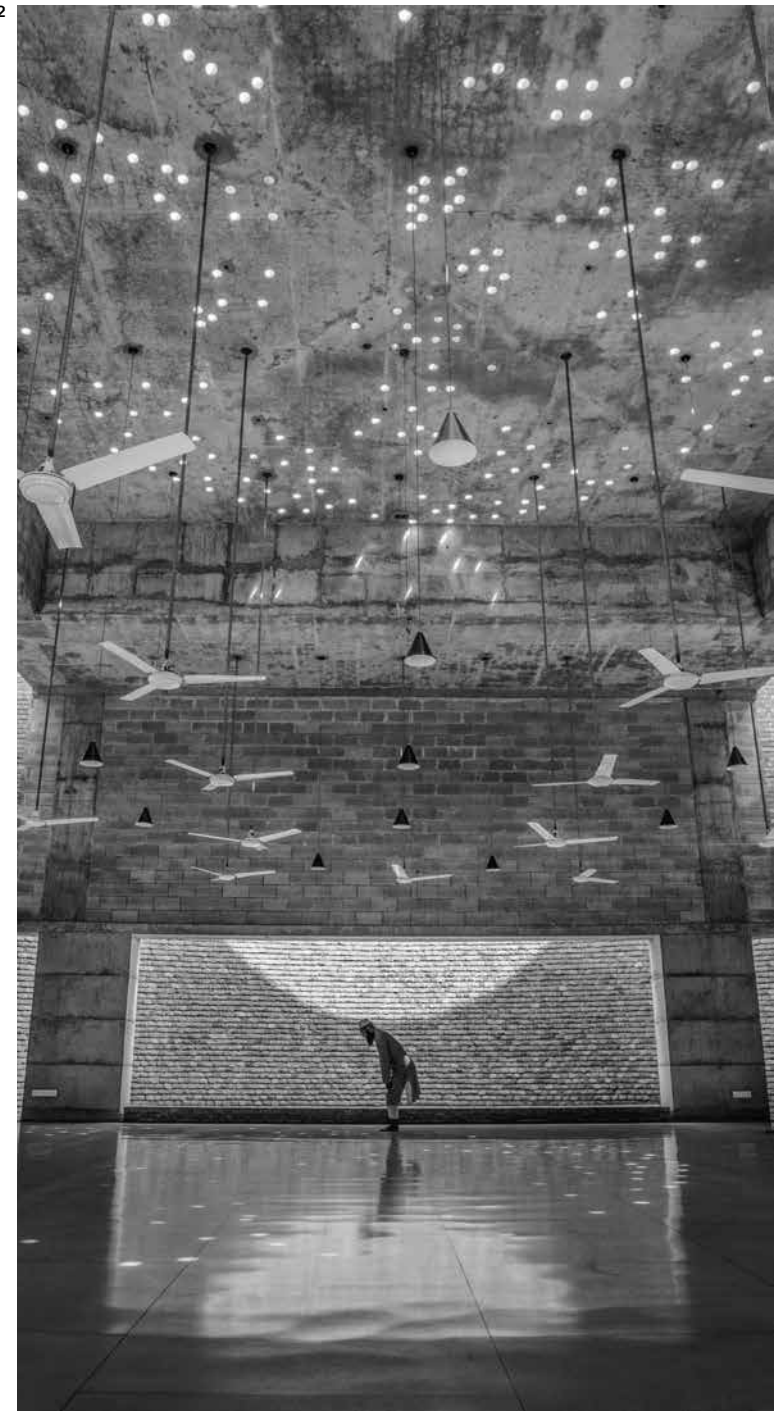
WRITER; ISLAMABAD

Shahidul Alam is a photographer, journalist, curator, human rights activist, media teacher, cultural entrepreneur and lapsed chemist based in Dhaka. But he is far more than this aggregation of nouns suggests. Driven and forthright, Alam has wed his diverse artistic interests, notably in photography, to a socially minded approach to doing things. In 1989, he cofounded the photo agency Drik Picture Library with his life partner, the writer and anthropologist Rahnuma Ahmed. His aim was simple: to create a forum that would enable South

Asian photographers to narrate stories of underdevelopment from among and between, rather than outside and above. There are obvious risks to working in Bangladesh, which retains its repressive political culture of earlier decades. As recent news reports attest, it is also struggling with Islamic extremism. “If enabling social change is measured, it is in Bangladesh that one can get the maximum returns for one’s efforts,” maintains Alam.

Much-lauded for his own output as a photographer, Alam’s activities with Drik led to follow-on initiatives like Pathshala, a Dhaka-based school of photography, and

Chobi Mela, an international festival of photography held in Bangladesh. Underlying all these activities is a plucky, can-do spirit that is responsive to changing media economics and horizontal politics in formalising economies. British photographer Gary Knight, co-founder of the VII Photo Agency and a past chair of the World Press Photo, in 2014 summed up Alam’s impressive legacy as follows: “We can follow the lead of people like Alam, who has created an economic infrastructure that supports and sustains photography.” Zeeshan Khan spoke to Alam about his life’s work and the role of photography in shifting his career focus.



Opening spread A portrait of Shahidul Alam. Photo: Tom Hatlestad
2. Bait Ur Rouf Mosque, Dhaka, Bangladesh
3. *Floating Forest*, 1983
4. A mural on the walls of Jahangirnagar University shows the portrait of Skira Noor Hossai, a protester killed during protests to oust General Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1987
5. Police going after protestors during pro-democracy protestors in Dhaka, Bangladesh. November 10, 1987
6. Ilish fishing on the river Brahmaputra, Bangladesh
7. A paddy field in which the suspected extra-judicial killing of a suspect by the notorious Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), an elite anti-corruption division of the police force. The photograph was shown as part of Shahidul Alam's “*Crossfire*” exhibition which dealt with extra-judicial killings in Bangladesh

2 – 7: Photos: Shahidul Alam/Drik/Majority World



Zeeshan Khan: How does a teacher with a doctorate in chemistry choose writing and photography, and more specifically social activism, as a lifelong pursuit?

Shahidul Alam: If I had a degree in photography and had chosen a career as a chemist, I don't think you would have asked this question. The question is raised because being a chemist has greater respectability in society than being a photographer. I was born in Azimpur in the old part of Dhaka. In 1972, when I was 17, I left the country for the United Kingdom where I worked as a construction labourer to pay my way through university. I had a casual interest in photography then, but remember being impressed by a photographer friend of my brother who used a handkerchief to soften his flash at my sister's wedding. This photographer also introduced me to high-speed film, which I used to take indoor photos in low light without a flash.

My interest in photography evolved through my involvement with left politics in the UK. I felt I needed a tool to address racism and social inequality, and photography seemed the best weapon at hand. After graduating in biochemistry and genetics at Liverpool University, I got a job as an assistant teacher at London University, which allowed me to read for a doctorate in organic chemistry. It was during this period that I seriously took on photography. Doing all the printing and processing myself allowed me to experiment at relatively low cost. I love kids and got a job in London as a children's photographer, which I gave up in 1984 to return to Bangladesh. I set up a company called FotoWorld on Elephant Road, but soon gave it up to work as a freelance photographer.

“
Having worked with international agencies and being aware of what they looked for when representing Bangladesh, it became clear that we could only combat it by controlling the narrative
”

I do have an interest in science, and enjoyed doing the doctorate, but I think a degree should be a liberating force, not a limiting one. I don't think people with doctorates necessarily know much more than people without them. Doctorates have value in that they train people about certain processes. There is a rigour and a methodology that applies to many situations. Without a doubt, though, my knowledge of photography far exceeds my knowledge of chemistry, but it is chemistry that I have a doctorate in, and that is what people recognize and value. That is just the way society operates.

ZK: What was the inspiration behind the launch of Drik in 1989, and how difficult was it to get your photo agency off the ground?

SA: Drik was born out of a need to shake off the ‘poverty’ tag that Bangladesh seemed to have. Having worked with international agencies and being aware of what they looked for when representing

Bangladesh, it became clear that we could only combat it by controlling the narrative. That required setting up a platform for local storytellers. At that time there was no photo agency in Bangladesh so one had to be created. It was financially difficult, but I lived with my parents and was able to convert my bedroom into an office and my bathroom into a darkroom. I was the cleaner, the darkroom operator, the photographer and the deliveryman. So we could do things inexpensively, and still maintain good quality. That helped. Our calendars and postcards stood out from other productions and soon made a mark. It was never easy, but we survived.

ZK: Were there frustrations bringing something that might be considered an expensive profession into a central part of Dhaka's creative and intellectual community?

SA: When we began, photography was not being valued or understood. The fine art community had little respect for photography, and there was no appreciation of copyright, even among photographers themselves. So we drew up contracts, issued delivery notes and insisted on being credited. It rubbed a lot of people the wrong way. They had become used to getting pictures for free, and crediting photographers had never been a practice. We were the upstarts in town; we upset the appcart.

ZK: You are no stranger to controversy. On some occasions, exhibitions hosted at Drik's gallery have caused diplomatic incidents, prompted heavy-handedness by the police and even led to closures of the gallery. Can you tell us about a few of them?

SA: It started in 1989, when all the leading galleries in the country turned down my show documenting the democratic struggle to bring down former Bangladeshi military ruler General Hussain M. Ershad. After Ershad stepped down we showed the work, which almost caused riots. The queue to the show was over a mile long. In 1996, when Drik was the seat of protest against the government, which was using the military to round up opposition activists before a rigged election, I got attacked. My camera, films, computer and PDA were all taken away. I received eight knife wounds. In 2000, we organised an exhibition on 1971—the year of the Bangladeshi war for independence—collecting photographs from photographers from all across the globe. Some of the greats of photography were involved. It was meant to have been at the Bangladesh National Museum. The government, however, wanted to censor the show. We refused, took down the show and displayed it in our own gallery at Drik.

The following year we published an article in our human rights portal Banglarights, critiquing the military for its handling of the kidnapping of two Danish and one British engineer in the Chittagong Hill Tracts. The government responded by closing down Drik’s telephone lines for two-and-a-half years. The police shut down a show on Tibet in 2009. Armed police shut a 2010 exhibition called *Crossfire*—it derived its title from the euphemism used by the Rapid Action Battalion for extra-judicial killings—on the opening day.

Renowned Bengali author and activist Mahasweta Devi, who had come over to open the show, and Nurul Kabir, Bangladesh’s



most outspoken editor, opened the exhibition in the street outside. We took the government to court and had the show reopened.

Interestingly, some of my most controversial shows, the last three exhibitions on Kalpana

Chakma, the indigenous activist of the Hill Women’s Federation in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who was ‘disappeared’ by the military, are critical of the biggest taboo subject in the country—the military. Yet, while we know we are being observed, our shows have not been closed down.

It appears that the government recognizes, that we can fight back, and for the moment at least, finds it a better strategy to ignore us than to try and shut us up. I suppose we have created a space for ourselves. They also try slander, but people are intelligent enough to see through it.

ZK: In 1998 you launched Pathshala, a Dhaka-based school of photography that offers various short- and long-term educational programmes. Your graduates have been widely acknowledged and awarded. Take Sarker Protick, who caught the eye of British Journal of

Photography’s editors in 2014, the same year he was selected for the Joop Swart Masterclass. In 2015, he went on to win a World Press Photo award for his story “*What Remains*” and was listed in PDN’s 30 Emerging Photographers of the Year. He is currently a member of the photo agency VII and also teaches at Pathshala. Is there a secret formula to Pathshala’s teaching?

SA: In 2015 the *British Journal of Photography* launched its annual special issue devoted to photography education. For its second special issue, published in July 2016, it decided to profile two of the world’s “most influential” and “sharply contrasting” institutions—the Royal College of Art in London, and Pathshala. Our pedagogic process involves unlearning the practice of studying by repetition that is prevalent in the Bangladeshi education system. We push our students to develop critical thinking skills. It goes without saying that hard work is key.

ZK: Have Pathshala students been able to affect the focus of news coverage, no pun intended, with their cameras? Do you see the values of your institutions reflected back?

SA: Nearly 50% of staff photographers in several major Bangladeshi newspapers are Pathshala alumni but the work they produce is shaped by the priorities of the organisations they work for. Whether they will be able to preserve the values we have tried to imbue, remains to be seen.

ZK: Can you tell us something about the DrikNews initiative? What are your thoughts on citizen journalism?

7



SA: DrikNews was initially student-led. Two students of the first batch of Pathshala—Azizur Rahim Peu and Abir Abdullah—suggested that we launch a news service where the contributors would be Pathshala alumni. It would provide experience for the alumni and eventually lead to a full-fledged news service, which would uphold the philosophy and ethos of Drik. However, while major publications appreciated the quality of our work, they were not prepared to pay for the costs of doing quality reporting. Despite their rhetoric about quality, they went for cheap, unverified photos instead. The culture of plagiarism also made it difficult, as we did not have the resources to take legal action against people who simply stole our photos, rather than investing in well-researched quality

images. It became impossible to run it as a long-term initiative, and the agency was eventually taken over by Drik. This created the opportunity to set up a completely new service drawing on rural reporters. We chose, trained and equipped rural correspondents to produce short multimedia stories from their locations using an iPod touch. They even edited their movies on the device and sent us complete programmes ready for transmission. Germany’s public international broadcaster *Deutsche Welle* transmits one story every week.

ZK: In 2000 Drik created *Chobi Mela*, a biennial festival of photography now in its ninth instalment. What has its reception been, both locally and internationally?

SA: My friend Abbas Kiarostami passed away recently. When I met him last in Tehran on his birthday, he said—not knowing the end was so close—that not visiting me at *Chobi Mela* was one his big regrets. In Bangladesh, it was interesting that despite our critique of the establishment, the president of Bangladesh opened *Chobi Mela VIII*.

ZK: Do you feel art and exposure, especially the sort that film and photography brings, can be weapons in the on-going fight against extremism?

SA: Film and photography are powerful tools. Our choice of media was based on this understanding. Sadly, they are equally effective in the hands of those who promote bigotry and hatred. So our training involves

not only developing production skills, but also learning to deal with spin, propaganda and developing strategies for intervention. We are also alert to the changes taking place within media. For instance, we now place a lot of emphasis on online presence and intelligent use of social media. You use whatever tools work best at any moment.

ZK: How do you feel about the role art plays in the social consciousness and the spiritual health of our country, and particularly our cities?

SA: Art and artists had always played an important part in our social structure. We used to sing songs and go door-to-door to raise money for flood victims when I was a child. Later, in the build-up to 1971 and again prior to the fall of Ershad, artists took to the streets and actively questioned the oppressive forces. Sadly, today, art is much more confined to galleries, and established artists, often being better paid, cling to their comfort zones. Too easily do artists prefer subservient acquiescence to provocative resistance. There are no longer meaningful protests, and social movements receive support from artists only when they are backed by corporate money. I keep hoping artists will regain the space they have lost.

ZK: From what you’ve said earlier, though, powerful images still pose a challenge to those in power. They can shake kings on their thrones so to speak. How can this ability be expanded?

SA: We have a long way to go. Until the governed have a say in the process of governance, our efforts will give us a nice warm feeling, but the fundamental structures will remain unchanged. Our work will need to have a catalytic effect and others will need to be mobilized

if any lasting change is to take place.

ZK: There is a diminished space for writers and artists in contemporary Bangladesh, and for people with different faiths and points of views. This is worrying. Drik has also been subject to threats and I think you personally have been subjected as well. How have you responded to these?

“
Until the governed have a say in the process of governance, our efforts will give us a nice warm feeling, but the fundamental structures will remain unchanged.
”

SA: I personally am now part of a group of individuals that includes, lawyers, writers, journalists and other civil society actors who, acting in their personal capacities, have taken it upon themselves to campaign for freedom of expression and other fundamental rights. We each use different tools, but our collective strength and capability will hopefully create some space for dissenting voices.

ZK: Have you had to make any special arrangements with the authorities to ensure your security?

SA: We have our own security measures. But there are, for instance, foreign students at

Pathshala. We have kept the government informed and provide regular updates. We are also providing security training, which involves developing rapid-action responses and linking up with key people in government in times of crises.

ZK: Drik has enabled a generation of South Asian documentary photographers to flourish. What are your thoughts on the future of documentary film-making in Bangladesh? Do you anticipate the emergence of world-class cinematographers and film-makers from the country?

SA: This is an area where we’ve had limited success, partly because I myself am less skilled in this sector, but also because it is more resource intensive and one is more dependent on corporate media houses for uptake. Until we are able to build a low-cost, but robust and effective distribution mechanism, we’ll continue to struggle. On the other hand, many photographers are now taking on multimedia and video, and with the technological shifts taking place, perhaps the photographers of today will become the film-makers of tomorrow.



FEATURE

TALES AT THE PUMP

Muslim refugees from Myanmar live in slum settlements scattered across South Asia. We profile one precarious community of mostly women, who survive along a riverbank in south Delhi

WORDS: NEHA DIXIT
JOURNALIST; DELHI

1. A Rohingya refugee woman heads home after washing her clothes in a makeshift bathroom. EPA/Rajat Gupta

The Rohingyas are one of the most persecuted minorities in the world. Largely concentrated in Myanmar, this stateless Muslim people represent about seven per cent of Myanmar’s population of 55–60 million. Yet the Myanmar government continues to deny the Rohingyas any legal status or rights, insisting that they are Bengalis illegally in the country. Neighbouring Bangladesh, however, does not claim them. In the last four years, in an effort to “purify” the nation, Buddhist supremacists in Myanmar have perpetrated widespread acts of rape, arson and murder. Land has also been confiscated.

Thousands of Rohingyas struggle to survive in camps for internally displaced persons (IDP). Worse still, they are denied freedom of movement, marriage rights, jobs and access to schooling. It has prompted many Rohingya to flee the country. To date an estimated 140 000 Rohingyas have been displaced from Myanmar. Untold numbers have drowned, while slave traffickers have captured others. The luckier among them live as second-class residents in Malaysia, Thailand, Bangladesh and India, often at risk of expulsion.

India is home to roughly 36 000 Rohingyas. Ismat is one of them. Ismat comes Maungdaw, a temperate coastal town on Myanmar’s western border with Bangladesh, and lives in a Rohingya ghetto opposite a Hindu crematorium bordering on Jamia Nagar, an overwhelmingly Muslim area in south Delhi. Life is different here. For one thing, it is far colder. I watched Ismat pour hot water in a recycled paint tin on the indoor mud stove. “Why are you lighting a fire

again?” Amina’s angry voice intruded from a shanty next door. “It is the third time today, I am choking.”

Understanding Amina’s complaint takes some explanation.

Delhi’s Rohingya ghetto was established three years ago on a plot of land measuring 185 square metres. The Zakat Foundation of India, an offshoot of a Chicago-based Muslim non-profit, owns the land. The 46 shanties on this small plot have walls of bamboo, scrap wood and metal sheets; a double layer of tarpaulin and woollen blankets serves as roofing. Since their arrival in Delhi, Rohingya men have transitioned from being farmers and boatmen to rickshaw drivers and construction workers. They have learnt the local lingo and even developed a taste for bread and kebabs, forsaking their traditional dish of rice and fish. They leave home early and return late.

Life for Rohingya women living on the riverbanks of Jamia Nagar is very different. In the last three years, the ghetto’s married women have only left their neighbourhood once: when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees organised a trip for them to see Delhi’s famous Red Fort. It is women like Ismat and Amina who built their Burmese-style shanties with high-triangle roofs, and they who added steps in between for storage or for sleeping when the water for the nearby drain swells. (The last monsoon saw two children, aged three and five months, die from snakebites.) The indoor kitchens are a reflection of Rohingya culture; an outdoor scullery would require women to wear a veil (burqa) when cooking. There is, however, a downside to cooking indoors: the congested homes are a conduit for smoke from cooking fires.

Jamia Nagar is one of the largest Muslim ghettos in Delhi, India’s capital. Located in Okhla, a suburban colony in south Delhi, it borders Noida, an industrial city in the state of Uttar Pradesh. “Jamia” is an Urdu word and loosely translates as university. In October 1920, when India was still under British rule, several teachers of the Aligarh Muslim University, founded in 1875, responded to Mahatma Gandhi’s call to boycott pro-colonial educational institutes and established the Jamia Millia Islamia University. It initially operated out of Aligarh, later Karol Bagh, a mixed-use area in central Delhi; its foundation stone in Okhla was laid in 1935. Settlement around the university was initially slow. Okhla, then a nondescript village bordering the Yamuna River, was known as a hub for students and teachers. Shortly after independence, in 1952, the Indian government established 12 industrial estates across the country, including Okhla, to encourage small-scale industries. It is now a major production and trade centre in the capital. Okhla’s population has grown considerably, in part due to its proximity to the industrial estate and university.

Ismat did not respond to Amina’s complaint. After finishing her chores in the kitchen she returned to a communal hand pump with her son, Yusuf. Muslims from the neighbouring Rohingya and Muzaffarnagar settlements share the pump, which is painted red. The pump is a contact point for various displaced Muslims. In the last two decades, since Hindu right-wing nationalist brought down an ancient mosque in the Ayodhya, a town in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, Muslim ghettos have been growing in size across India. The September 2008 Delhi bombings by the

Indian Mujahideen further heightened anti-Muslim sentiment. Delhi police shot two bombing suspects in Jamia Nagar. In 2013, clashes between Hindu and Muslim communities in Muzaffarnagar and Shamli left over 60 people dead and more than one million displaced, most of them Muslims. Twenty families from Muzaffarnagar settled near the Rohingya ghetto in Jamia Nagar.

Shabnam is from Muzaffarnagar. Like Ismat, she relies on the pump for potable water. After filling three plastic containers, Humaira, Shabnam’s seven-year-old daughter, lost her balance as she lifted one of the buckets. She fell and started crying. Ismat rushed over to help. “Don’t cry,” Ismat consoled Humaira in Rohingya. “It’s fine. Go and change clothes.” Humaira didn’t understand a word Ismat was saying. The only Hindi phrase that the culturally isolated Rohingya women in the Jamia Nagar ghetto seem know is *thoda-thoda* (little-little). By contrast, the men have learnt functional Hindustani, a mix of Hindi and Urdu, and a bit of English. “They work, so they need to know the languages,” says Ismat. “We don’t.”

After Shabnam and her daughter had left, Ismat bathed Yusuf with cups of water drawn from a bucket of cold water. The toddler yelped at the cold. To calm him down, Ismat took out an old loofah she had found in a scrap shop. Yusuf giggled at its touch. Ismat preferred using the loofah as it caused less pain to his swollen face and boil-scarred body. Boils are commonplace in the ghetto. They are a result of contaminated water drawn up by the pump according to a doctor from the Zakat Foundation of India. A 2012 audit by the Municipal Corporation of Delhi found that roughly 70% of water

supplied by the city’s water utility, Delhi Jal Board (DJB), failed a purity test conducted. The DJB recently contested these findings. In a recent *Hindustan Times* article, it claimed much of Delhi’s supplied water is potable. It has argued that most of the contamination can be traced to “old rusted service pipe connections of the consumers”, which also affects the main supply line. Following an earlier audit the DJB also flagged contaminated water sources by painting pumps red.

“
India is home to roughly 36 000 Rohingyas
”

Jamia Nagar was built on low-lying land on the Yamuna River. In the last three decades, since the rise of communal politics in India, a growing insecurity has led to a surge of Muslim settlements in the area. The area caters to various classes of resident. There are sought-after apartments for middle-class office workers and university staff; studio apartments and two-room sets for students whose rent depends on the width of the narrow alleys of Jamia Nagar; and unregulated residential colonies and slum settlements on the banks of the Yamuna River. There is a thriving business centre with a number of hole-in-the-wall eateries serving kebabs, fried chicken and ancient Mughlai cuisine. Despite all this enterprize, the area’s infrastructure is poor. Water and electricity are in short supply. Rather than rely on water from the DJB, locals extract water from the river using wells.

The water is poorly filtered and contains sewerage waste. The ground water that Shabnam and Ismat draw from the condemned red pump has an unpalatable yellow hue.

Yusuf has a brain tumour that requires urgent medical attention. Ismat is, however, reluctant to proceed. She blames the swelling on jealousy. Her son, she says, is “the prettiest of all children”. In 2008, when Ismat was 16, she moved from her village of Khanda Para to Bohmu Para in Maungdaw. She had to wait a year for permission from the Burmese government to marry her second cousin, Mohd Ayub, a practice common among Rohingyas. Her father and uncle paid the enormous marriage tax imposed by the state—she does not remember the amount. The only two things that excited her about her wedding were the new mango-coloured *thami* (a long skirt) that she was given to wear for her wedding day, and seeing the hundred-year-old railway tunnel connecting Maungdaw with Buthidaung on the other side of the May Yu Mountains.

Ismat asks if I know what a *thami* is. An elderly woman sunning herself nearby, she has matted silver hair and crimson-stained teeth, has been listening to our conversation. “A *thami* is a like a skirt,” she interjects. “It is easy to lift and urinate anywhere. Not like this one.” She points to her salwar, loose-fitting pants worn by many South-Asian women, adding: “Tying and untying all the time.” There is hearty laughter.

Ayub, Ismat’s deceased husband, was a skilled boatman in Myanmar. His muscular body was the product of many years of rowing. The incessant storms in the Bay of Bengal never stopped

2



3



2. Rohingya refugee Kala Miya (R), a scrap dealer, taking a rest outside his house in a makeshift settlement in New Delhi
3. Rohingya refugee children studying in a madarsa, an Islamic school

Photos: EPA/ Rajat Gupta

him from fishing or ferrying people up the Kaladan River, a long watercourse that remains free of catchment dams. Ayub had silver hair, a long crooked nose and small eyes. He was five years older than Ismat. As a child he had a reputation as an introvert, as someone who would not play but rather read books. Ismat did not complete her schooling due to restrictions by the Burmese government.

“He said that he was most happy that I didn’t look like a *kalar*,” says Ismat, who is fair skinned. *Kalar* is a pejorative word used to describe Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar; they are typically identified by their darker skin complexions. Ayub’s legs were marked with rashes from the polluted waters of the Kaladan River.

Ismat smiles when she recalls a story from their wedding night. Ayub asked her about the relevance of water in their lives. “You are a fisherman and your father, a farmer,” he told him. “How will you earn if there is no water?”

“I was a child then,” she now says. She remembers Ayub quoting a verse from the Qur’an to her: “The Almighty made from water every living thing. It is he who gives sweet water to the people, and it is he who can just as easily withhold it.”

Ismat says that there is no difference between the Yamuna River in Delhi and Kaladan River in Maungdaw. “They are the same now—toxic, polluted killers. Kaladan marked Ayub and Yamuna has marked Yusuf.” She points to the riverbank on the far side of the main road. Its stench is a perennial reality in Jamia Nagar, Shaheen Bagh and other neighbouring areas. The Yamuna River is Delhi’s most important water source, supplying 70% of Delhi’s potable water. Roughly 3200 litres of industrial waste and sewage gets dumped into the river daily. Only half of it is treated.

In the year Ismat got married, Essar, a Mumbai-based oil company, started exploring a natural gas option in Sittwe and Maungdaw. The area falls under what is called L Block, an oil exploration circle. As part of an agreement signed in 2005, Essar, along with state-run Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise, would drill test wells in the area. In the Indian state of Chhattisgarh, the local tribal population has for several years accused Essar of exploiting their natural resources. Over two million acres have been seized from minorities in Burma for such projects by Indian and Chinese businesses. Ayub’s small patch

of land was also taken away and they were relocated to a camp. As Essar expanded its oil operations in Maungdaw, more and more exclusive zones were created. They included fishing grounds plied by locals like Ayub. Ayub was provided neither compensation nor alternative areas to pursue his fishing activities.

“
In the last three years, the ghetto’s married women have only left their neighbourhood once:
”

Ismat and Amina were neighbours in Myanmar. In 2012, Amina’s husband, Khalid, was conscripted by the military to work as a porter—he had to carry their ammunition and other belongings to the hills, to fight local “terrorists”. Amina was a few months pregnant then. Forced labour by the military in Myanmar is a common practice and for the next four months Amina heard nothing of Khalid. On 28 May 2012, news spread that three Rohingya Muslim men had raped a Buddhist woman in Rakhine state, prompting a major backlash against the Rohingyas. The riots first broke out in Ismat’s village, Bohmu. Houses were burnt down. The violence continued for months. Some 2 500 houses were eventually destroyed and 30 000 displaced, some to the 37 IDP camps set up by the Burmese government across Rakhine state.

The camps restricted free movement and so, after a few months, Ismat, Ayub and Amina

decided to flee. There were other women like Amina, whose husbands had disappeared; they formed a strong support networks. Ismat, Ayub and Amina first fled to Teknaf, a Bangladeshi border town opposite Maungdaw, where the boarded overcrowded boats headed for Malaysia. A cyclone capsized their boat. “Ayub dissolved in what the Qur’an said he was made of,” says Ismat in a matter of fact tone.

The Rohingya women—Ismat and Amina—returned to Teknaf, where they opted for a land crossing into India with other villagers. Their route took them through West Bengal and ended at this ghetto in Delhi.

Yusuf’s bath done, the youngster is all smiles again. Ismat applies mustard oil to his body. As she recalls details of her past, Amina and her daughter Noor Shahida join us at the red pump. Noor Shahida is three but looks far younger. Malnourishment. “There is some milk in my shanty, feed her that,” says Ismat.

Shabnam returns to the pump with a pile of clothes to wash. She laments the shared lot of Muslims in South Asia. The site where the pump is situated is the only part of the ghetto that has any sunlight. “Thank God that it is at the back of the ghetto,” says Amina. “Us women would not have been allowed to use it otherwise.” Shabnam waits for a translation of Amina’s statement, and then offers her own memory. “When we moved to a relief camp in Shamli after the riots, the clergy there too told us that the Muslims were affected by the violence because the women did not cover their faces properly. Allah got upset and punished us.”

Seema, another woman from Shabnam’s camp, joins in.

“That’s true. They said that we did not offer *namaz* (prayer) five times a day and watched television. And that is why our women were raped. At least no one tells us that in this city.”

Ismat and Amina rely on Rukhsat, a teenage Rohingya girl who has picked up the local Hindustani language, to explain in Rohingya what Shabnam and Seema have just said. Despite battling poverty, displacement and trauma, the women from the Rohingya and Muzaffarnagar settlements in Delhi are still not allowed to go out to work.

“We don’t practice the custom of working in our community,” says Saleem, Ismat’s neighbour. Despite having found safety in this new country, the women, many of them widows, have lost their freedom due to the proscriptions of a radicalized faith. Confined to the ghetto, they have no means to secure square meals for themselves and their children, and are entirely reliant on the benevolence of the same community that restricts them from earning a living. The widows especially are completely dependent on the local community to provide them with meals and things of necessity. Donations of money happen on Eid and during Ramadan.

“We save it for the rest of the year,” Amina says. “I want to work. Maybe start selling bamboo chicken soup, a Rakhine speciality here. But our Islamic donors say women are keepers of tradition wherever we go. If I defy them, who knows, they may no longer let us stay here.”

Amina gives free haircuts to all children and does odd jobs within the ghetto for daily meals. Ismat likens their predicament to the time Burmese politician Aung San

Suu Kyi was placed under extended house arrest. “She could at least hope that one day she would be freed. Women like us have no such hope.”

Growing religious polarisation in South Asia, characterized by rising Buddhist militancy in Myanmar and rabid Hindutva nationalism in India, has contributed to a growing sense of insecurity among Muslims in the region. The most direct repercussion of this insecurity has been the curtailment of women’s sexuality and autonomy. Nonetheless, girls can attend school. Jamia Nagar has several primary schools, a number of them privately run. Rukhsat and many other young girls from the local slums (or “colonies” as they are referred to in local newspapers) now go to school.

“We have to start from the scratch because whatever little we learnt back home was in our local language,” explains Rukhsat. “I want to learn everything in English now.” Her desire to learn the language is based on strategic foresight. “What if we have to move from India to some other country?” She wants to be a teacher but her marriage has already been arranged within the ghetto.

At 16, Tasmeeda is roughly the same age as Rukhsat. She fled Myanmar with her family when she was six. The refugee family initially settled in Bangladesh, but later relocated to Delhi. They have lived here for eight years. She has picked up the local Hindi and understands the complexities of local Indian customs. However, she retains a sense of her ethnic identity. “Back home in our village the houses are constructed like this,” she says of the triangular-roofed homes in the ghetto.

“How do you know?” I ask. “You were very young when you left.” “I have heard from people.” Tasmeeda is one of the most outspoken girls in the Rohingya slum settlement. She is the community’s representative whenever a journalist or activist aid worker visits. She is knowledgeable about the prejudices that confront her community, like the government’s exclusion of Rohingya from a refugee stipend that extends to citizens from Somalia, Afghanistan and Iran. Crisis has emboldened her to keep a tab on her own refugee status but also the political developments in Myanmar. For women like Ismat and Amina she has become their window to the outside world. Zohra walks up to the pump as Tasmeeda is speaking.

Now in her sixties, she worked as a farm labourer all her life in Rakhine. Her husband passed away when their daughter was just one. Being a single mom was tough, but she persevered and married off her daughter. She looked forward to taking it easy. The violence in Maungdaw, Buthidaung and neighbouring districts in Rakhine put paid to her retirement plans. She fled with her daughter, son-in-law and two granddaughters. There are many old women like Zohra living along the banks of the Yamuna River in slum conditions. They are ill-equipped for survival. The language is unfamiliar and their age generally makes it hard to negotiate the difficulties of their surroundings.

“I am praying for my death,” says Zohra.

Even death offers no dignity. Tasmeeda recently told Zohra that the local Muslim graveyard still does not allow burials of Rohingya bodies.

Delhi is an alien city for Rohingya and other Muslim outcasts, but for now at least it is a provisional home. For women like Ismat and Zohra the condemned red pump is more than simply a precarious water source, it is also a place of comfort and solidarity for a community of women who have been uprooted from their rural existence. Its contingent status is, however, plainly visible. With no formal infrastructure servicing the slum settlements that have grown in this part of Delhi, raw sewage is abundant. Local eateries and meat shops add to the contamination by dumping animal carcasses and leftover food here. The area is home to a large number of stray dogs and pigs, not to mention mosquitoes and bacteria.

“Why doesn’t the government clean it?” Zohra asks. Tasmeeda is quick to respond. “What are you thinking? That India is heaven? Politicians only come to the Muslim areas during elections.”

Rampant Hindu nationalism in India has entrenched deep sectarian divisions. Muslims account for 13% of India’s population. The rise of conservative politics has seen Muslims actively marginalised. Delhi’s Muslim ghettos offer a stark reminder of the divisions and prejudices that undergird this country.

Manera is in her mid-thirties. Like all the other women I speak to, I meet her at the red pump. She arrives accompanied by her six-year-old daughter, Afsa, a necessity dictated by the fact that Manera is blind. Manera also grew up in the Buthidaung district of Rakhine. Her father, Zaheer, was a shopkeeper and volunteered for the National League for Democracy (NLD), the

Burmese party led by Suu Kyi. In 1990 the NLD won the national ballot. But the Burmese military nullified the vote. Sui Kyi was placed under house arrest and a witch-hunt was orchestrated against the military’s opponents. One night, Zaheer, Manera’s father, received a tipoff that a militia was on its way to the village. He fled to Bangladesh with his eldest son, Haroon. The militia exacted revenge anyway, killing Zaheer’s uncle. They also raped his cousin, Ashiya, setting her alight her afterward.

“
When we moved to a relief camp in Shamli after the riots, the clergy there too told us that the Muslims were affected by the violence because the women did not cover their faces properly
”

Manera and her younger brother, Taufeeq, were brutally assaulted; it initiated a gradual process of blindness.

Five years after he fled Myanmar with son, Zaheer rescued the remainder of his family. Life in their new home, a Bangladeshi refugee camp, was oppressive. Zaheer took the decision to move his family to India.

Daily life along Jamia Nagar’s riverbanks involves relentless competition. Over the last two years particularly, inhabitants of the neighbouring Rohingya

and Muzaffarnagar settlements have found themselves bidding for relief from charities and aid agencies like the UNHCR. Resentments are easily stoked. When local politicians make an infrequent appearance to present Muzaffarnagar refugees with goodies, there is naturally talk between Rohingya.

“It’s because they have votes,” speculates Amina.

Votes are potential deferred, thinks Manera. She has quietly been listening to our conversation at the red pump. “Our party,” she offers, referring to NLD, “has now come to power in Myanmar. Aung San Sui Kyi has come to power.” Amina, however, believes that real power will only accrue to Sui Kyi over time, perhaps over four or five years. “Maybe then she will change the law and accept Rohingyas as citizens of Myanmar,” says Amina. “We will have to wait until then.” Ismat is unconvinced by Amina’s speculations and hopes. She summons the watery wisdom of her drowned husband, Ayub. “Like he said, Allah has withheld that sweet water from Rohingya women.”



Latimer

FEATURE

SEEING AND NOT BELIEVEING

Bangladesh is officially a secular nation but has a state religion. This contradiction feeds into its turbulent politics, which has made life in the capital Dhaka far less certain and social

WORDS: IKHTISAD AHMED
JOURNALIST AND WRITER; DHAKA

“
Dhakha-ites, desperate
for a semblance of
normality and respite,
create oases in unlikely
places; the wealthier
the neighbourhood,
the more lavish
and prevalent these
sanctuaries.
”

The Dhaka-Mymensingh highway is a four-lane motorway that runs through the Bangladeshi capital Dhaka to the northern city of Mymensingh. The road, which passes the national airport, connects rich and poor. It is the blocked aorta of a spectacularly unhealthy heart that defies science to keep beating, and supplies the myriad tarmac arteries that branch from it with an uninterrupted stream of people, all twisting, turning and manoeuvring their way through the notoriously congested capital.

Dhakha-ites, desperate for a semblance of normality and respite, create oases in unlikely places; the wealthier the neighbourhood, the more lavish and prevalent these sanctuaries. Cul-de-sacs are rare on the streets of Dhaka, rarer still in the wealthy neighbourhoods. Road 79 in Gulshan, the capital’s prime Potemkin village, has one. The street numbering here, as throughout the capital, is not immediately decipherable. Cars crawl under Road 79’s concrete canopy, towards the sliver of light that becomes a swathe at the end of the street. Tucked between a hospital and lake is a former two-storey residence that has been converted into an atmospheric cafe and bakery.

On 1 July 2016, gunfire shattered the usually convivial mood at the Holey Artisan Bakery. The single largest terrorist attack in Bangladesh’s history, it lasted throughout the night and claimed 29 lives, including 20 hostages (18 foreigners and 2 locals), two bakery staff, two police officers and the five Bangladeshi’s with links to Islamic State (IS). Dhaka’s oases have been ailing since.

Returning to Dhaka after an absence, I am greeted by the ever-worsening problem, and a very real fear. Restaurant or bar tables with patrons are scarce now, scarcer still in the more expensive establishments. “Going out to eat is not worth it if it will be your last meal. I know that sounds melodramatic, but previously there was no risk of that happening,” says Fahim,* a friend with whom I used to have a standing weekly dining appointment. We have skipped eating out and are seated in a mutual friend’s flat a few streets from Road 79 for dinner. Flats like this one now outnumber houses in Dhaka. A pre-occupation with security—here manifested in windows with metal bars to keep out robbers and political muscle—has also become a fixation for Dhaka-ites. As with all the other residences in the capital, Fahim’s home near the zero point, and my home near the airport, are both equipped with similar countermeasures, as well as wire mesh to keep out mosquitoes. Sufficient at giving a sense of security against bloodsuckers, the counter-measures are woefully inadequate in keeping at bay the darkness that seems to be consuming Dhaka. Stories abound of bloody incursions targeting residents across the city.

Niladri Chattopadhyay Niloy, organiser of the Science and Rationalist Association, the LGBTQ+ activists Xulhaz Mannan and Tonoy Majumder, were hacked to death with machetes inside their homes in the city, on 7 August 2015 and 25 April 2016 respectively. Faisal Arefin Dipan, a Muslim publisher who promoted free thinking, lost his life in a similarly brutal attack in his Dhaka office, on 31 October 2015. No safety efforts undertaken by private citizens seem enough.

Until the horror of July 2016, Dhaka-ites, though aware of the looming threat of fundamentalism, had convinced themselves that they were immune. “Security is an illusion,” says Asha, our dinner host. When people considered non-conformist were attacked, she says, no one thought it would never happen to us. “We should have woken up when they killed them on the streets. Maybe then we would have kept them out of our homes and chased them out of town. Now there is no safe place.” Asha is a lawyer. She tells us about her struggles to adapt to a corrupt and politicised judicial system since returning to Dhaka after studying and living abroad for over a decade. Happy to be home and determined to stay when she returned, Asha says she is now considering packing up and leaving the country.

Preserving the spirit of its British colonial past, Dhaka is the epicentre of everything and the lifeblood of the Bangladesh. Money, power, history, culture and social norms flow from Dhaka. It is at once a poor representative of the rest of Bangladesh, and a microcosm of its soul. The Dhaka dream is a capitalist one: own a house and a car, and then move on to chasing after bigger houses and faster cars. There is nothing standing in the way of owning sprawling fiefdoms within a hedonistic kingdom.

I grew up in a northern suburb of this city called Uttara. The journey home once involved navigating one’s way around a lake. Across the water, it was green. But years of development have encroached on the lake from both banks. Dhaka’s cleaners, household employees and garments workers initially built temporary dwellings along the lake’s shorelines and out over onto the water.

These growing slums became self-governing towns within this city. They were, however, cleared-up overnight by the authorities, without a thought being spared for their inhabitants, making way for affluent residential real estates. The lake shrank to a third of its size as landfills converted its southern part into a thriving new neighbourhood. Where once there was water now stands five and six-storey residential buildings, and sprinkled among these buildings are three supermarkets; seven restaurants; a hospital and two clinics, five banks and endless informal corner shops.

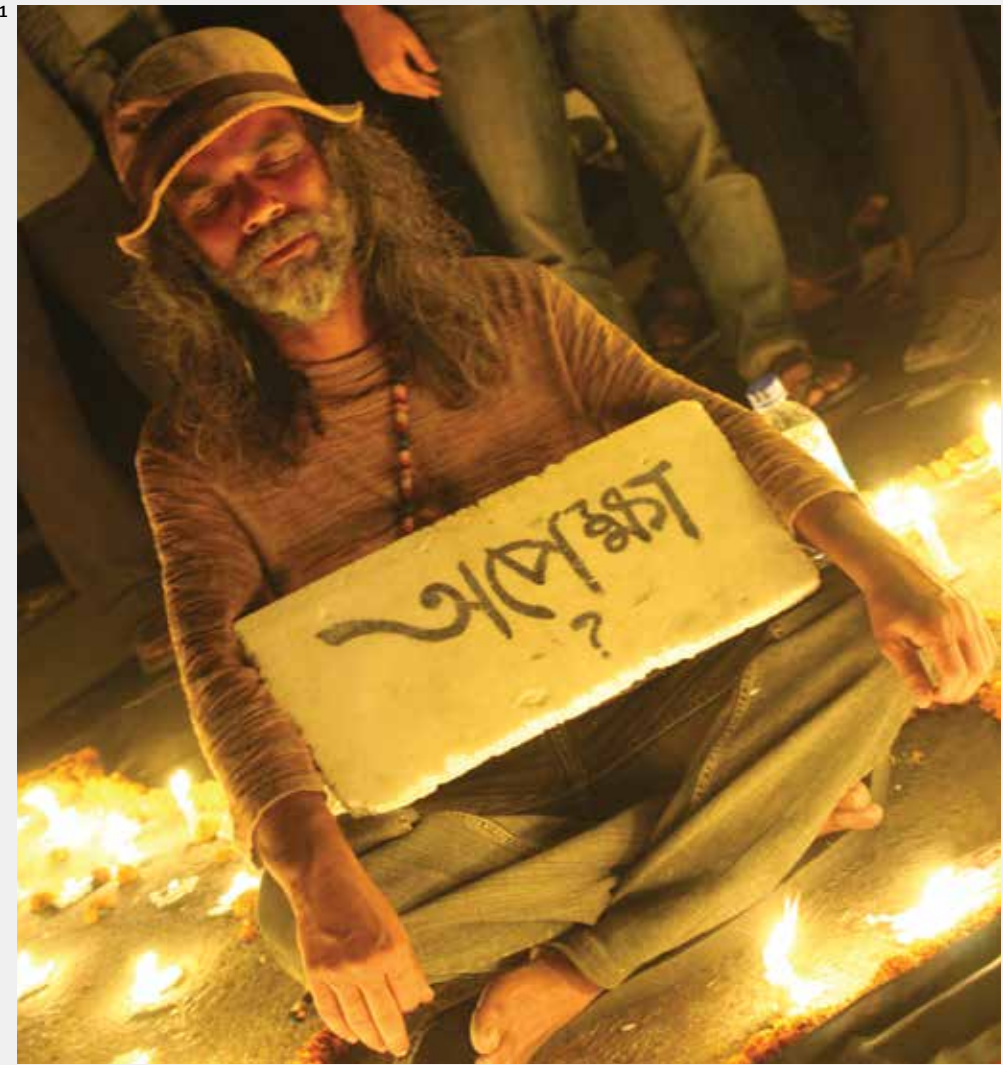


Caught in the mêlée of individualism and inflating bank and under-the-mattress balances, affluent locals are at best apathetic when it comes to dealing with this social decay. At worst, they are complicit in it. Their attitude has enabled the spread of fundamentalist Islam. The city’s upper and upper-middle classes have produced a ruling class that believes its population consists entirely of non-partisan, conscientious citizens. It concocted the lie that it is a moderate Muslim country, secular and progressive in its outlook, and then believed it. But, behind that façade,

moderate or liberal Muslims have become elusive, almost endangered. These non-conformists have been labelled “atheists”, a derogatory, catch-all phrase that, in these intolerant times, carries a death sentence.

The University of Dhaka is located near the zero point. The intellectual heartbeat emanating from Bangladesh’s oldest university has weakened as the surrounding areas have fallen into disrepair. As wealth has flowed northwards, to Gulshan and Baridhara, the historic centre of Motijheel, along with the university and southern parts of the city, have become increasingly overpopulated. An air of neglect hangs over the working-class neighbourhoods in the older part of the city. While the interconnected main roads stir with motorised three-wheelers powered by compressed natural gas and creaking buses showing more rust than paint, the streets diverging from them are valleys that can barely accommodate two battered rickshaws passing each other.

The *Ekushey Boi Mela* is an annual month-long festival of books held in February to commemorate the Language Movement. Held in a city where bookshops are almost mythical entities, the festival is hosted by the historic Bangla Academy, established as the national language authority in 1954 and serving as the country’s pre-eminent literary and cultural organisation. During this year’s iteration, 73-year-old publisher Shamsuzzoha Manik was arrested after a religious extremist group known as Khelefat Andolon (Caliphate Movement) claimed that one of his books—an edited volume titled *Islam Bitorko*, or Debate on Islam—was offensive to Islam, and they threatened violent protest. Manik faces trial



and imprisonment for up to 14 years. His arrest is the latest on these charges. Extremist fervour has made stall closures and book bannings two constants of *Ekushey Boi Mela*.

Bangladesh finds itself in a spiral that sees people who fail to be conventional—in thought and word, sometimes in their very existence—butchered. The justifications offered for these crimes have become acceptable to a significant portion of the population.

“There are things we cannot discuss—not in public, and even at home,” says Naomi*, as we drink tea at a local coffee chain. “We are constantly being judged. Everything we say, what we do, things we wear ... there is no respite. It is suffocating, but at least we stay alive if we follow the rules. Then the rules change, and we have to adapt.”

On 26 February 2015, extremists murdered Avijit Roy, a prominent writer and activist with well-known political opinions, near the university. Roy and his wife were attacked with machetes after leaving the *Ekushey Boi Mela*. The targeted killings of individuals who espoused a broad, secular perspective had been sporadic until then, but following this incident became increasingly regular. Their spiritual ancestry lies in the systematic massacre of the Bengali intelligentsia and religious minorities who refused to prescribe to an overbearing ideology during the Liberation War of 1971. A Pakistani military operation against the Bengali nationalist movement in East Pakistan initiated the war, which was marked by widespread brutality at the hands of radical Islamist militias supported by the Pakistan Army. The war, which ended in late 1971, became a referendum on secular



“
Until the horror of July 2016, Dhakaites, though aware of the looming threat of fundamentalism, had convinced themselves that they were immune
”

and socialist values, with Bangladeshi’s opposed by the military regimes that governed the country throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Bangladesh’s independence on 16 December 1971 was a rejection of Pakistani oppression and Islamist intolerance.

After its independence, Bangladesh failed to replenish the depleted ranks of liberal thinkers. Secularism, free expression and religion were not allowed to take root and become prevailing ideals. Instead, Dhaka began appeasing conflicting ideologies. The Bangladesh Awami League’s politics of compromise gave way to the politics of religion after the assassination of the country’s founding leader, the Bengali socialist Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, in 1975.

Bangladesh’s leaders have sought to use religious fundamentalism to further their own cause, believing that it can be controlled and honed so that they may control and rule. “Being on the throne is everyone’s

agenda. Fixing this is not,” says Amer*, a political analyst. “Our fear is the threat of Islamism. Their fear is public perception, being seen as anti-Islam if they fight Islamism.” At the same time, the leaders and parties have exercised revisionism to remove blame from themselves and lay it at the feet of their opponents, thus securing a fluid history and a malleable culture, at the mercy of political whims.

The Supreme Court of Bangladesh, the country’s highest court of law, is housed in a white colonial-era building opposite the university. In 2011, the court passed an order querying the government’s 1988 constitutional amendment, which introduced a new



1-5 Various scenes of life in Dhaka. Photos: Ikhtisad Ahmed

provision about Islam as the state religion. The Awami League, Bangladesh’s notionally secular ruling party, amended the law to reflect the principle of secularism, while retaining a provision about Islam as the state religion. This contradiction is emblematic of the nation’s current malaise. A 2016 petition to the court that it consider this contradiction was summarily dismissed. Intolerance has become institutionalized in Bangladesh.

In addition to this constitutional inconsistency, the Penal Code, first promulgated in 1860 as the Indian Penal Code, is virtually unchanged since instigation.

The law criminalizes any deliberate and malicious acts intended to outrage religious feelings of any class by insulting its religion or religious beliefs. Little surprise, then, that police response to threats from fundamentalists is to tell the vulnerable party to flee the country and watch what they say so as not to fall foul of the law, instead of providing protection. Politicians, including the Prime Minister, have similarly and repeatedly advised people against indulging in the perversity of hurting religious sentiments, a line that appeases the criminals and blames the victims. Sunni Islam—specifically its Salafi and Wahhabi strains—is apparently shielded from this criticism.

In the past two years, extremists have desecrated Hindu temples, attacked Shia shrines and mosques, and killed Sufi, Hindu and Christian priests with regularity and impunity, while the body count of liberal thinkers and foreigners has risen exponentially. Since the religious right, replete with extremism and driving fundamentalism, is the preserve of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and Jamaat-e-Islami, the largest Islamist political party in Bangladesh, the governing Awami League has actively appeased Islamism as a populist strategy. This is evidently to also ward off any domestic and international political reprisals.

The political right has been successful in labelling the views of liberals as morally and ideologically unforgivable. The masses have been whipped into a frenzy—unwittingly at first, but now consciously and compliantly so. “The politics of hate and use of fear tactics are evident,” says Amer, of the political rallies that regularly gridlock Dhaka roads. The centralisation of political activity in the capital means that any rallies against the legislature, judiciary or executive inevitably take place here. Amer continues: “The attendees are in a trance, inspired by being told they are right and everyone else is wrong. Imagine this happening time and time again, multiple times a day, over many years. We are taught to fear the other, to hate them.” Political parties are like cults. They demand sycophancy, zealotry and complete submission to the great leader. Their resemblance in Bangladesh to the hierarchical structure of organised religion is not merely fortuitous. Faith is top-down, and cannot be questioned.



The July 2016 attack at the bakery on Road 79 forced the elites of Dhaka to reassess their inaction. For the government, this has meant a series of raids on Islamists and mass arrests. Street corners in Dhaka spontaneously turn into temporary battlefields as law enforcement raids on flats result in standoffs with extremists before they are killed. “Extrajudicial killings and a lack of due process have become mainstays, particularly since the 2001-06 BNP-Jamaat tenure,” says Zaman*, a local journalist.

His office plunges into darkness as we talk. Power-cuts are a persistent feature of Dhaka life, part of a failing energy policy that seeks to conserve and redistribute electricity, to keep the city alive. A back-up

generator kicks-in loudly and the lights are back. Zaman continues unfazed: “This government is following those traditions. They used to quash political opposition. Now they are populist actions ‘in the interest of public safety and national security’. The majority of the people in Dhaka, especially the upper and upper-middle classes, are relieved that action is being taken against terrorists. Those who see the wider autocratic implications are afraid to voice their opinions.” When I eventually reach him on a secure line, Tariq Reza*, a humanist living in exile after receiving death threats from Islamists, says: “The root causes of Islamism are not being addressed. He adds, just as they cannot kill our ideas by killing us, their ideology cannot be killed by attacking them. It is a superficial measure that will only

swell their numbers, increase their hatred and intolerance, and strengthen their resolve.”

Dhaka is now a city that lives in fear and no longer recognizes itself. The capital has pushed the country towards the edge of an all-consuming abyss. Liberal Dhaka-ites cling to a delusional hope that the city will deliver on the promise of Bangladesh at independence in 1971 and the resolve of its inhabitants. But contemporary Bangladesh is mired in false liberalism and anti-intellectualism. Free thought and secularism are being slaughtered. Faith here is neither religion nor an idea, but a lethal, radicalized political weapon promising deliverance. We are sheep, and our shepherd is a butcher.

* Not their real names



GHOST STORIES

Shaggy Dog Stories From The Grave

A series of reports on life, labour and dancing after dark
at three Karachi graveyards

WORDS: MUSHARRAF ALI FAROOQI

NOVELIST; TORONTO / KARACHI

For a period in 2012, the Urdu-language daily *Ummat* ran a series of articles on mysterious sightings and goings-on in Karachi’s roughly 182 graveyards. These stories appeared without a byline as “Ummat Report”. The following three stories are drawn from these stories and are reproduced without significant embellishment. My only regret is that because of a daily newspaper’s space constraints these stories, set in a city of 27 million, were often too short, leaving much to the imagination. I am sure the author (or authors) of these reports, which offer some of the finest examples of the shaggy dog story genre, shared my disappointment.



RINGTONE REMIX

In the Geedar Colony graveyard, located in the eastern industrial region of Landhi, young men from the area gather at night in a small clearing close to the graves. Their loud conversations are followed by music played on their cellphones. Sometimes, a few of them will dance to Pashto, Punjabi or Urdu songs on their phones. One night, as they played their music and danced, they noticed a young man dancing a few steps away. He danced expertly, without

stopping between the songs, and did not converse with anyone gathered there. In the darkness they could not make out his features. Everyone who saw him thought he must be someone they knew, someone from their group. His dancing enthralled them, but nobody addressed him, even though every now and then a few of them joined him for a dance. A few hours before dawn, as their cellphone batteries died and the music stopped, the dancing man disappeared before their eyes. (*Ummat*, 24 April 2012)

DONKEY PUNCH

Pappoo worked as a gravedigger at the Purana Golimar graveyard, which was known for its mysterious sightings. One day, after a long day of work, Pappoo saw a man walking ahead of him by the road adjacent to the graveyard. Despite the dark, he noticed something strange about the man’s head. Curious to learn more, he sped up to better see the man. When Pappoo reached him, he saw that the man had the head of a donkey. Pappoo was struck unconscious. When he gained his senses he told his friends about the strange sight he had witnessed. (*Ummat*, 29 April 2012)



DECEPTION IN BEAUTY

The Mewa Shah graveyard is Karachi’s oldest cemetery. The Mosque of the Jinn stands in a corner of the graveyard, beyond which is an old Jewish burial ground. Close to the graveyard’s entrance was Shahji’s marble shop. He made the gravestone and decorated graves in marble upon order. Shahji’s friend Dosu sometimes helped him with the work of fitting the slabs. Dosu had a weakness for women, and Shahji often warned him to stop casting lustful glances

at them. One day Shahji was commissioned to decorate a grave near the Mosque of the Jinn. According to Shahji’s account, he called Dosu to help him. They arrived at the grave around zuhr prayers carrying their materials and implements, and worked until late afternoon. At Dosu’s insistence Shahji agreed to work past maghrib prayers, and get as much work done as possible that day. The area of the graveyard where they worked had become deserted when they resumed work after

“
They heard the sound of bells and looked up to see seven beautiful girls, fully made up and decked out in finery including ankle-bells, emerge from the back of the Mosque of the Jinn. Dosu was awestruck
”

saying their maghrib prayers. They heard the sound of bells and looked up to see seven beautiful girls, fully made up and decked out in finery including ankle-bells, emerge from the back of the Mosque of the Jinn. Dosu was awestruck.

He put down his implements and stared at the girls as they approached the labourers. The sight of the girls, all dressed up in their fine clothes, at that hour, alarmed Shahji. He told Dosu to take his eyes off the girls and focus on his work. But Dosu continued staring at them like a man possessed. When Shahji nudged him with his elbow, Dosu returned to his senses for a few moments, but then he returned to gazing at the seven girls. Dosu told Shahji that one of the girls was calling him, that he would return shortly, but after taking a few steps turned back. Dosu told Shahji that the girls were coming towards them. He invited Shahji to accompany him.

Have them all to yourself, a nettled Shahji said to Dosu, and

began gathering his implements. When he was done, Shahji looked up. He cried in terror. All the girls surrounding Dosu had transformed into frightening creatures. They were the very image of the churails (a female ghost with back-turned feet in Hindu folklore). Oblivious to their transformation, Dosu spoke with the girls as if he were consorting with a bevy of lovelies. “Open your eyes, Dosu, and regard carefully”, shouted Shahji. “May God have mercy upon you!”. Dosu, distracted by Shahji’s cries, briefly turned to his friend, and then returned his gaze to the girls – who now revealed their true identities.

Shahji ran toward Dosu reciting the Ayat al-Kursi, a verse from the Qur’an. Upon hearing the words of the powerful prayer, the churails ran away. Shahji managed to catch Dosu as he fell, unconscious with terror. Shahji carried Dosu on his shoulders to a nearby clinic where he was restored to consciousness. According Shahji, since being revived Dosu now avoids women like a poisonous snake.

(Ummat, 1 May 2012)

“

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST HAS ALWAYS BEEN A WASTE OF TIME, AND WHAT'S THE POINT OF TEARS? I DON'T KNOW. I'VE ALWAYS BEEN FOCUSSED ON TODAY. YESTERDAY AND TOMORROW HOLD NO INTEREST FOR ME. WHAT HAD TO HAPPEN, DID, AND WHAT WILL HAPPEN, WILL

”

SAADAT HASAN MANTO
WRITER, PLAYWRIGHT AND AUTHOR

WIDEANGLE

76. Rajesh Vora

Musclemen, airplanes, tanks and other sculptural embellishments in rural Punjab

84. Jessica Fulford-Dobson

A girls-only skate session at Skateistan's sport and education project in Kabul

90. Amit Mehra

Finding Kashmir's cadence of resilience, seeing the quiet faith that binds

96. Aun Raza

A ramble through Yangon, where life is marked by casual urgencies



A groom and his horse waiting for passengers. A small group of people still rear horses and maintain old-fashioned horse carts as carriages transporting passengers alongside modern vehicles. The are mainly active in Old Dhaka – the place still showing remains of once regal lifestyle of British Raj and local Zemindars. Photos: Syed Latif Hossain, 2014



EVERYDAY BAROQUE

Photos: **Rajesh Vora**

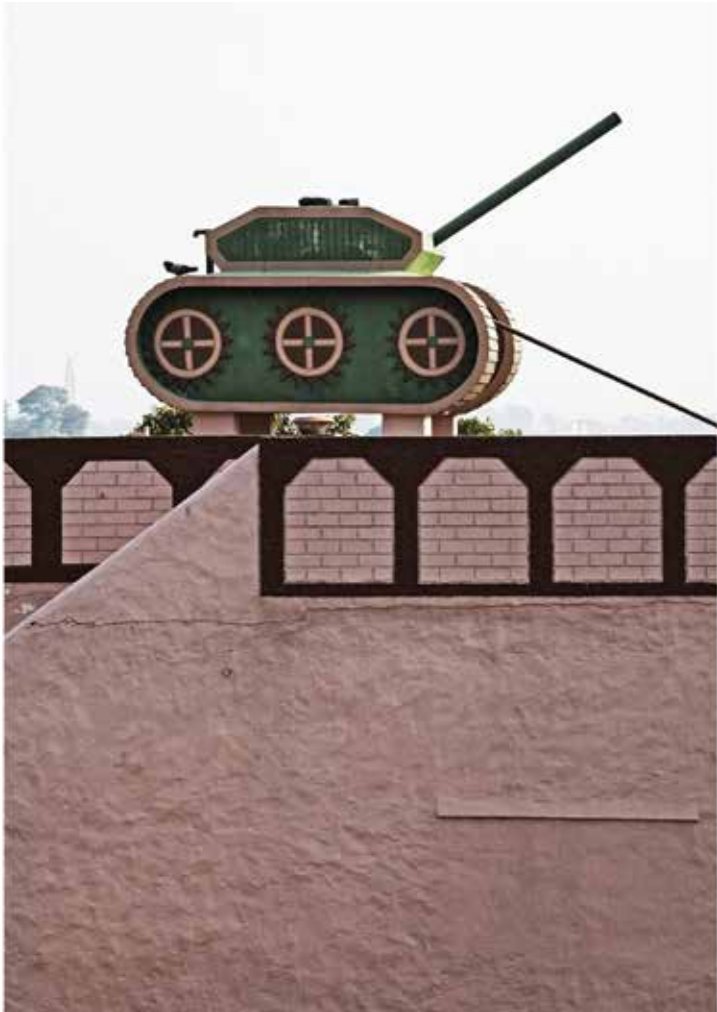
In 2014, Rajesh Vora (b. 1954, Delhi) began a 6000km journey photographing the painted sculptural embellishments that adorn rural homesteads in India's northern Punjab state. Undertaken in phases, his photographic odyssey lasted two years. During this time, Vora, a documentary photographer with a liking for architectural subjects, learnt that in the 1970s immigrants to the region began adding these decorations as a way of memorialising aspects of their personal history. Of course, it helped that Punjab has a rich heritage of figurative sculpture. First exhibited in Delhi in 2016, Vora's photographs record how personal idiosyncrasy has been transformed into something approaching a vernacular style.



2



3





5



6



1-6. *Untitled*. Courtesy of Amit Mehra and PHOTOINK

A GIRLS-ONLY SKATE SESSION IN KABUL

Photos: **Jessica Fulford-Dobson**

In 2007, Australian social entrepreneur and skateboarder Oliver Percovich moved to Kabul when his girlfriend took a job there. In his free time, he skated, which attracted the attention of the city's many orphans—a lingering social problem in the impoverished and war-racked Afghanistan capital. Committed to doing something, he founded Skateistan, a sport and education charity that uses skateboarding to gain the attention of marginalised children. These portraits (1-5) by Jessica Fulford-Dobson were made between 2012 and 2014 and cast a spotlight on Skateistan's flagship Skate School in Kabul, which includes girls-only sport days. Skateistan now also runs projects in Cambodia and South Africa. www.skateistan.org



2



1-5. Skate-Girls of Kabul. Courtesy of Jessica Fulford-Davies, Skateistan and Cloud Productions

3





1



2



CADENCE OF RESILIENCE

Photos: **Amit Mehra**

Amit Mehra (b. 1967, Delhi) first visited Kashmir in 2006. He was initially seized by the “dramatically paradoxical experiences” of this extensive highland region in the northern Indian subcontinent, writes critic Ranjit Hoskote in *Kashmir (2012)*. An amalgam of portraits, streetscapes and landscapes, Mehra’s photobook was the product of 25 trips undertaken between 2006 and 2011. These journeys, which lasted between five days and two weeks each, enabled Mehra to recognise something beyond its cinematic natural landscapes and the violent strife that is ritually depicted in the news. His photos describe the region’s “cadence of resilience,” writes Hoskote, and also the quiet faith that binds the community.



4



1. Srinagar, 2010
2. Old Srinagar, 2009
3. Foreshore Road, Srinagar, 2010
4. Srinagar, 2009
5. Hazratbal, Srinagar, 2010

1-5. Courtesy of Amit Mehra and PHOTOINK

5



CASUAL URGENCIES OF THE EVERYDAY

Photos: **Aun Raza**

In 2005, Myanmar’s ruling generals moved their capital from Yangon (formerly Rangoon), a metropolitan region of some seven million people, to Naypyidaw. It has hardly alleviated the crush; Yangon’s population has tripled since 1983. Traffic congestion and smog, by-products of 7% annual growth, are common facets of daily life. Not that such hard statistics are what attracted Aun Raza (b. 1983, Lahore) to this brash Southeast Asian metropolis. Trained as an artist at the National College of Arts in Lahore, Raza’s essay on Yangon focuses on the visible ambiguities, its “roughness” and “tenderness”. Everyday life here, remarks Raza, is marked by “casual urgencies”.

1



2



3



4



1-5. From the series *Yangon, Rough & Tender*. Courtesy of Aun Raza

5



ELSEWHERE

104. Cinema, Not Software

Animator Gitanjali Rao on filmmaking, Cannes and a curious selfie project. Words: Arpita Das & Gitanjali Rao

110. A Walk On The Wild Side Of Calcutta

Calcutta's musical history is a huge tree with many branches. Words: Rupleena Bose

116. A Death In The Family

Why the Nepalese magazine *Himal Southasian* abruptly stopped printing in 2016. Words Puja Sen



Late night commuters in Dhaka.
Photos: Syed Latif Hossain





INTERVIEW

CINEMA, NOT SOFTWARE

Big wins at Cannes changed the game for animation filmmaker **Gitanjali Rao**, but also didn't

WORDS: ARPITA DAS

PUBLISHER; DELHI

A self-taught animator, filmmaker and theatre artist, Mumbai-born Gitanjali Rao’s debut animation short *Printed Rainbow* premiered at Cannes in 2006 as part of Critics’ Week. The film tells the story of a housebound old woman and her cat through the fantastical world of matchbox covers and was the first Indian film to be selected in the short films category in the critics’ section at the Cannes Film Festival. *Printed Rainbow* won three awards at Cannes that year and was later shortlisted for a 2008 Academy Award. Rao’s fourth film, the animated short *True Love Story* (2014), was also premiered at Cannes. In 2016, Rao surprised and delighted her Facebook followers with “*Wishfies*,” a disarming project in which she dressed up as iconic personalities, including Indian painter Amrita Shergill, Argentine revolutionary Ernesto “Che” Guevara and iconic Bollywood actress Madhubala whose photoshoot with James Burke for *Life* magazine in 1951 shifted perceptions of the modern Indian female. Arpita Das spoke to Rao in Delhi.

Arpita Das: The idea of finding a quiet haven in the middle of the big city seems to be something that you revisit in a lot of your work. Yet there is a lot of the flâneuse-film-maker in you. You obviously love the colours and sounds of your city, which also figure in your films in unique ways. How does a film-maker resolve this dualism?

Gitanjali Rao: I am born and brought up in Bombay so as a kid when others would visit their native places, which epitomized the quiet havens, I learnt to find my own within the heart of the city. I grew up finding maximum privacy in thought and imagination right in Churchgate railway station

[in south Mumbai] during peak hour. I learnt to use this expression in my films. In a city you learn to value one because of the relentless existence of the other. So yes, silence and noise, colour and the lack of it, crowd and loneliness, all complement each other in my films. One cannot exist without the other. To me that is the city and the city dweller. The silence, the loneliness and the colourlessness exist in the psyche of my protagonists. They build it

“
Silence and noise,
colour and the
lack of it, crowd
and loneliness, all
complement each other
in my films. One cannot
exist without the other
”

from nothing. Through dreams, fantasies, emotional states, etc. Therefore, even if there is noise in my films, the space for silence is immense.

It’s like being stuck in a traffic jam. There are two ways of dealing with urban clutter. One is when you shut your car window, put on the AC and play your favourite music. That’s what Bollywood does. The other is to be in its midst and search for the quiet haven, like those without cars do. I am interested in the second. My stories are about those people.

AD: Amid the beauty of all your animation films, there is the frightening thought that the big city routinely crushes its more

vulnerable citizens. Either with loneliness, as in *Printed Rainbow*, or more literally, as happens in *True Love Story*. How much is this a thought that remains uppermost in your mind as you make your films?

GR: Having never studied film-making or animation formally, I have tried to learn storytelling through observation. Mostly folk tales and mythology, which have used narrative structures to tell tales. The presence of a villain therefore becomes necessary to complete the stories of heroism. Yet if one was to set this convention in reality, it gives you a very large space to pick and choose your heroes and villains. Invariably, the city for me makes the invincible villain. An omnipresent one. My heroes—real, vulnerable people, not success stories—may get crushed in the process, just as happens in reality to people. But their spirit invariably wins. For me, coming to terms with a situation, and managing to still dream through it, is the victory. Not a conventional victory but a more real one. So although the city is the villain, it is also the home, the provider, the support, the lover, all at the same time. The theme of urban migration has been uppermost in almost all my stories because that is something I live with, am sensitive and react to most easily. Also since I deal in fiction through animation, I revel in recreating the real world through paintings. The medium itself allows for the real to become poetic. Why then not make use of this poetry to tell a harsher truth than live action can?

AD: Would you say that a lot of what you do with your work now had its seeds in your years of study at Sir J.J. Institute of Applied Art in Mumbai? With animation, does a formal training matter? Is India on par



Opening spread (clockwise): Gitanjali Rao alongside Satyajit Ray; Che Guevara; a caricature of the artist next to a fictional superhero; with iconic actress Madhubala and a still from *True Love Story*, an award winning animation made in 2012
02: A still from *Girgit* (work in progress)
03: A still from *Orange*, 2006
04: A still from *Printed Rainbow*, 2006

with countries where you feel standards are being set for this field?

GR: I did not study animation. In those days there was no real animation course except at the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad. I was clueless about what to do in life after graduating. I knew what I didn’t want to do and that was to join an advertising agency. Somehow, in spite of studying for five years, I did not want to go the agency way. I was interested in film. And I loved painting. So somebody told me about Ram Mohan Studios in Bombay where they were hiring and training artists to

become animators. I joined and learnt on the job.

It’s the least easy or luxurious way of learning a skill, and certainly the most demanding and strenuous. I am someone who believes more in hard work than talent. Pedagogy is a privilege of the few. Even when I teach animation, I place emphasis on developing the skill to tell your story, not thought so much. Thought and ideas are what life teaches you. You do that outside of college. In India, in most animation courses like Aptech, Arena and Maya, animation is not really taught as an art—it is viewed as an employment opportunity. Software not cinema, sometimes with a bit of story and filmmaking basics thrown in. What we are creating is a manual workforce for big foreign productions. Whereas in countries with a longer tradition of animation, study begins with an appreciation of animation itself—like cinema. Unless we change this approach, we are never going to be teaching artists to become animation film-makers, only animators.

AD: How tough was it to get people to take your work seriously? Was it a gendered reception initially?

GR: It took a while. More than gender, it was the unconventionality of my style and subject that people did not take seriously. Not making funny films, children’s films, not copying the Disney style, not using star voices, are still issues that lead to you not being taken seriously. But Cannes did the trick.

I would like to stress that gender in animation works quite differently. It’s true that the world over has more men in higher positions in studios that

do commercial work. But in the case of auteur animation with a personal style, there are as many women as men. This being essentially a time-consuming and patience-requiring work, more women take to it—and are greatly successful on the international scene. I have known of women using their pregnancy months to complete animation films. But this is restricted to small and individual films. Not the real business of feature films, an industry still very biased against female directors.

AD: Cannes has been particularly good to you. How was that experience?

GR: It changed my life, like it is supposed to. I was taken seriously only because of winning three awards at Cannes. It was overwhelming. I had only once been outside of India before that, to Poland, to do an animation workshop. So Cannes was like a revelation. It made me happy because I belonged there more than in the cartoon world. I

“
Having never studied film-making or animation formally, I have tried to learn storytelling through observation
”

was exposed to a cinema-literate audience for the first time. Even the people who served you coffee or your cab driver had an opinion about cinema. Not entertainment but cinema.

Cannes is very tough to get into but once you are in, they adopt you. They look forward to your next film; they critique you ruthlessly but also forgive your mistakes. It’s your journey as a film-maker that they invest in, not just your films. That was refreshingly different



coming from a land of weekend collections that make or break directors.

AD: Independent film-makers often say that winning an award helps as leverage to get better opportunities. Did it work like that for you as well?

GR: Winning a big award is probably the only way for independent filmmaker to get noticed. Every year at the National Awards we see the emergence of a crop of independent film-makers, actors and technicians. International awards get you noticed even more. However, whether this results in better opportunities is subjective. In my case, it didn’t. But there are reasons for this. I work with two-dimensional animation films that are very laborious, time-consuming and expensive to make. For financiers it means taking a bigger risk with a debut film-maker.

The conventional way of recouping investment capital in animation films is by making children’s films that are highly entertaining, feature star voices and have plenty of merchandise potential. Since my films do not cater to any of these conventions, I have found it very difficult to finance my feature film. Animation features in India do not enjoy any kind of government funding if they are not for children. While awards haven’t worked for me, at least in terms of leveraging production money, I know they work better for live-action and documentary film-makers. It also helps in international co-production, which is becoming more common in the industry.

AD: Your recent project of identifying yourself with iconic photos of well-known personalities, of inserting yourself into iconic works of art—

did this begin playfully and turn into something more determined, or were you setting out with a narrative in mind? The project has since gone viral. Did that surprise you?

GR: It began as most time-passing creative work does for me: I often make sketches, illustrations or bits of animation that I upload onto Facebook to gauge audience reaction. This was just one of those instances. After much resistance, I got my first smartphone a few months before I began this project. I shot my first selfie and found it devoid of any interest. I thought of who I would want to shoot myself with, who I would like to be seen with. Frieda Kahlo and Amrita Shergill came to mind instantly, both being artists, and I began to explore the possibility of looking like them in their times and places.

I tire easily of repeating themes. After these personalities, I decided to change to more impossible things like animated characters, paintings and iconic photographs.

The reaction of course took me completely by surprise. I also got a little tired of the attention it received. I didn’t feel it deserved

“
Animation features in India do not enjoy any kind of government funding if they are not for children
”

so much, so I stopped it at that point. That’s the fun of these projects: you can do them without taking them seriously!

AD: Your contribution to the graphic-novel anthology *First Hand* (2016) is an interesting attempt at something different. Was it much like creating a storyboard for a film? And is your contribution ‘Akhtari’ the start of a storyboard for your next film?

GR: Graphic novels are a very different medium to animation films. It was a big struggle for me to wean myself from looking at time in sequence as in film and not in arrangement as in graphic novels. That is why ‘Akhtari’ looks like a storyboard more than a designed page. I need to devote more time to graphic novels in order to immerse myself in the medium. So no, it was not an easy experience at all, much more of a struggle than making a storyboard. In film one is thinking also of sound and dialogues as layers that leave the space for visuals alone, which is not the case in graphic novels. To direct the reader in a certain direction is very different from directing the viewer of a film. The pace of storytelling depends on design and layout, not the timing of scenes. I learnt to appreciate these differences through this attempt. I do wish to make an anima-doc on *Akhtari* some day, but it would be very different from this rendition. This particular graphic narrative is, I am hoping, a precursor to a full-length novel on Begum Akhtar, a well-known Indian singer of Hindustani classical music.

Let’s see how it turns out.



A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE OF CALCUTTA

Bengali music has played an increasingly prominent role in Calcutta's musical history since India's independence in 1947

WORDS: RUPLEENA BOSE

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR; DELHI

The year is 1982. The Indian Institute of Technology in Delhi is hosting the final day of its annual cultural festival. The crowd—"high heads" as they were called at the time—is expectant. The excitement grows, and soon spills over into chaos. The rock band *High* has an argument to win. They have come all the way from Calcutta to perform. The evening is reserved for *High*, although the event's organizers have included a warm-up act, *White Fang*, a young college band from Delhi. Rock shows are rare; it is only fair that a local band from the college circuit be a part of the concert. *High*, though, are disappointed. This is meant to be their show, and anyway Delhi bands have the rest of the year to play. The concert is also a rare chance for the band's members, who hold regular day jobs, to play outside Calcutta. Dilip Balakrishnan, *High*'s charismatic founder, who works at the corporation Exide, has told his bosses that his band have been shortlisted for a contest to select bands for the Asiad Games. In early 1980s India, rock music was heard and sung in rebellion

and protest. Rock was a secret that young people carried in their minds, out of view of the larger public's moral gaze. Rock was their secret city. In the history of Indian rock, *High*'s concert at IIT in Delhi remains legendary. The escalating tensions at the concert forms part of this mythology. "The night was rushing towards anarchy and disruption," a musician present that night would remember years later. It was a strange experience for *High*, all so different from home. Concerts were a regular occurrence in Calcutta. Various musical strains—mainstream, traditional, popular film tunes,

adhunik songs and modern genres like jazz and rock—competed for audiences. In Calcutta, people remembered the Bengali poet and Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore, who bound the nation in a song, and whose songs represented ritual and tradition. In Calcutta, musical gathering did not plunge into aggression and disorder.

Founded in the early 1970s by Balakrishnan, Nondon Bagchi, Adi Irani and Lew Hilt, all veterans of Calcutta's rich musical scene, *High* distinguished itself by playing original compositions. The band drew its inspiration from rebellious western rock bands like *The Band*, *Allman Brothers*, *Grateful Dead* and *Cream*. "Dilip, in my mind, is in the same league, maybe not lyrics-wise but melody-wise, as the Lennons and Dylans, and I'm fairly certain that people who get to know the music won't argue with me," Bagchi, *High*'s drummer, told *The Sunday Guardian* in 2014, nearly a quarter century since *High*'s demise. *High* folded in 1990 following the death of Balakrishnan. Incidentally, he

“
Rock was a secret that young people carried in their minds, out of view of the larger public's moral gaze
”

had reportedly complained about his inability to grow his hair because of his job as a chartered accountant.

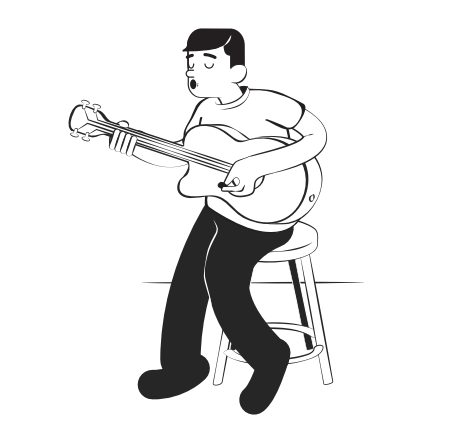
The epithets “pioneering” and “legendary” are now dutifully rolled out in any appraisal of *High*. But to really understand this band and its place in music history it is necessary to revisit the story of post-independence Calcutta, a city steeped in music.

In 1947, the time of independence, the neighbourhood of Chowringhee, particularly around Park Street (renamed Mother Teresa Sarani), was where the best clubs were located. Remnants of an elite culture left by the British, the clubs boasted the best vocalists, pianists and violinists, all schooled in western classical music. The ballrooms at the Grand and Great Eastern hotels hosted live jazz bands. The bebop jazz guitarist Carlton, who still performs at the Grand Hotel on Saturday evenings, is a reminder of the early post-independence sound.

Mocambo is a restaurant and storied landmark on Park Street. In 1955 it was a nightclub in search of a live act. Pam Crain was a 17-year-old Anglo-Indian jazz singer gigging at a nondescript restaurant in Chowringhee. The owners of Mocambo signed her up as the venue’s first songstress. She went on to collaborate with jazz legend and film composer Louis Banks, with whom she formed *The Louis Banks Brotherhood*. The band famously played a residency at the Blue Fox Restaurant, a popular local nightclub. At the time of her death in 2013, Crain was hailed as the “Queen of Park Street”.

Park Street was unlike any other nightlife spot in India. It was dotted with nightclubs and

restaurants in tune with the latest international trends. They included high-ceilinged Trincas, which introduced newer pop- and rock-inflected music to the district. In 1969, Usha Iyer, a gorgeous sari-clad woman with a voice that could draw even the most disinterested passer-by, started performing at Trincas. The extent of Park Street’s embrace of the swinging sixties was, however, limited to the clubs frequented by the English-educated elite.



Outside, in the narrow streets and decrepit alleys of Calcutta, it was very different. The Naxalite movement, an offshoot of the Communist Party of India espousing a far-left Maoist ideology, had begun to flood the dim hostel rooms and smoke-lit cafeterias of Presidency College in North Calcutta. University students across the city started discussing the movement’s land policies and leftist radical Charu Majumdar’s writings about the 1967 peasant revolt in Naxalbari, West Bengal. Enthused, some even left the city to participate in insurgencies, prompting violent retaliation by the state.

The glass doors of the red-leathered nightclubs separated the words of Frank Sinatra and Betty Carter from the rising noise of a disenchanted city—but only provisionally. After the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War, the geography of the city was

changed by the massive influx of refugees. Calcutta spread further south. The growing city now included encampments of hurriedly built shanties occupied mainly by Bengalis, who vied for a place and voice in the erstwhile colonial city with Sahibs, Anglo-Indians, Jews and Parsis.

An entertainment tax introduced by city authorities muffled the sound of live jazz in Calcutta. Soon many musicians left the city to work in Bombay. It was clear that Calcutta needed a new song. The Bengali band *Mohiner Ghoraguli* offered just that. “The runway lies empty spreading only nothingness,” they sang. Inspired by the protest music of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez, the band was founded and led by vocalist Gautam Chatterjee. The band’s name translates as “Sea’s Horses” and invokes a phrase from a poem by Jibanananda Das. Active from 1977 until 1981, *Mohiner Ghoraguli* released three studio albums. The title of their debut release, *Shongbigno Pakhikul O Kolkata Bishayak* (1977), translates as “About Calcutta and anxious flights”.

Influenced by Bengali mystics and folk traditions, *Mohiner Ghoraguli*’s debut was marked by its existential lyrics, which spoke of the band’s disenchantment with communist politics and alienation from Calcutta, their songs conjured images of an anxious city criss-crossed by tramlines and misty uncertain mornings. After the band’s dissolution, its memory was kept alive through bootlegged copies of studio albums and personal recordings of their live concerts. The band greatly influenced the future of Bengali music, largely because it made clear what musicians had to be in order to connect with Calcutta’s new musical audience.



01. Mohiner Ghoraguli in concert at Rabindra Sadan, 1979.
02. Bengali songstress Usha Uthup’s disco-infused *24 Carats* album from 1981
03. Entrance to Trincas Restaurant and Bar, a popular Park Street venue for live music performances
04. Album cover of popular band Nagar Philomel released in 1970

In 1982, during the height of *High*’s acclaim, the celebrated musician and Hindi film composer Prabuddha Banerjee was still a student at Jadavpur University. It was at this public state university in Calcutta that he first heard *Mohiner Ghoraguli*, not an abnormal occurrence since the band’s LPs were scarce. Brought up on the mixed sound of Calcutta radio stations, he liked to attend the Hindu autumn festival of Durga Puja. The city’s most important cultural festival, music plays an important role during the September festivities. New albums are released to coincide with the festival. Loudspeakers blast evergreen Hindi and Bengali film songs, as well as adunik songs talking about love and lovers. The entire city throbs in celebration. Despite the festive mood, Banerjee sensed something was missing in the mix. Something about the music being played in 1982 was out of sync with the urban experience. Calcuttans needed a different sound, something that better represented their everyday reality in song.

Banerjee’s earliest contribution to the city’s musical heritage was as a member of the band *Nagor Philomel* (The town nightingale). The band’s music was a bridge between the radical folk music of the past, represented by *Mohiner Ghoraguli*, and the future represented by a denim-clad guitarist called Kabir Suman (aka Suman Chattopadhyay), who, in the 1990s created a new audience in a language that resonated with his Bengali listeners. Suman wrote songs that came to be popularly referred to as “Jibonmukhi gaan” (songs of everyday modern existence): “*I am a city minstrel/ I follow the dharma of the song/ They think Suman writes this song/ I say it is Lalon.*”

Born in Calcutta, he left after graduating from university,



initially settling in Germany and later the United States. He worked as a radio journalist, which enabled him to meet folk music icon Pete Seeger. He also covered the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua during the mid-1980s. Initially a part of the band *Nagorik*, he debuted as a solo artist in 1992 with the album *Tomake Chai* (I want you): “On the walk to a forgotten Calcutta/ Old new faces buildings homes monuments/ In the tired procession of the crowd of humanity/ Your touch like an unfamiliar holiday/ In the fatigue of the city I want you/ In a drop of peace I want you/ At the other end of my walk I want you.”

The locality of the city merged with a global modernity as Suman wrote about everything around him. The song ‘Dosh Foot by Dosh Foot’ (Ten feet by ten feet) on his debut album was about Calcutta’s teeming millions living in tiny houses where dreams were crushed. His lyrics spoke of the mundane reality of everyday people, and lamented the rapidly changing geography of the city. Suman rekindled in the citizens of Calcutta something they had forgotten over the years: desire for their city. Like the flâneurs of his songs, his listeners vicariously experienced the city anew. Suman’s cassettes were everywhere in the 1980s. His voice and personality filled the city. He was responsible for a renewed interest in

urban folk music, which still endured thanks to composer Salil Choudhury (aka Salilda), a member of pro-left Indian People’s Theatre Association.

A new era in the music of Calcutta emerged with the arrival of cassette. It was akin to HMV’s release of its first film song recording in the early twentieth century, which changed the dynamics between film and music industries and their audience. In his book *Cassette Culture: Popular Music and Technology in North India* (1993), ethnomusicologist Peter Manual notes how cassettes created an increase in the listening audience and consumers as more people could afford cassettes. This revolution “fundamentally restructured the commercial music industry and the nature of Indian popular music”, argues Manual.

The popularity of Suman’s first album opened up a hitherto unavailable space for the revival of urban protest sound. In 1995 the label Asha Audio issued cassette compilations of *Mohiner Ghoraguli*’s work.

Cassettes played a major role in the bootlegging, circulation, sharing and distribution of new wave music from Bengal. The sound of the 1970s, with its narrative of urban protest, circulated rapidly and *Mohiner Ghoraguli* band members became cult figures with a new and adulatory fan base. At the same time, cassette culture promoted ideas of musical ‘choice’ and ‘taste’. Cassette technology created private audiences bound together by the Bengali language. The low cost of cassette production led to the emergence of new labels and newer talent experimenting with sound and lyrics in their own native language. The new wave of music released via cassette gave voice

to widespread disenchantment, resentment and alienation at the political stasis—much in the way folk rock had done in the 1970s. The late 1990s in Calcutta belonged to the subculture founded by Suman. Local bands like *Cactus*, *Paraspathar* (Philosopher’s Stone), *Chandrabindu* (Full Stop) and *Fossils* sang in Bengali at venues like Someplace Else, based in the Park Hotel. Opened in the mid-1990s, the venue was the idea of the hotel’s manager, Abhijit Bose. He wanted to revive live music in Park Street and decided to dedicate the latter part of the night in his nightclub to live bands. The first band to perform was *Hip Pocket*, former *High* drummer and food critic Nondon Bagchhi’s new band.

The music nights at Someplace Else quickly found a popular audience. The sound was different. For one, the language was English, not Bengali. As in the 1950s and 60s, Calcutta’s music scene was split between Park Street and the rest of the city, which thought in Bengali. A few years before Bengali poet Shakti Chattopadhyay died in 1995, he and folk singer Paban Das Baul were refused entry into a Park Street pub. Chattopadhyay was not an easy man to turn away and he somehow gained entry. Once inside, he quietened the live musicians and introduced Baul, who sings in the baul tradition, a folk music style derived from the mystic minstrels from Bengal. Chattopadhyay insisted Baul sing his folk songs while the band accompanied him. While the setting was urban and cosmopolitan, Baul’s songs were implicitly understood. The train between Bolpur, Shantiniketan and Calcutta, which connects rural and urban Bengal, still resounds with baul music. The train is also the medium that carries baul songs of the outland into

the city. Formulated in the rural landscape of Bengal in the sixteenth century and kept alive by mystic saints, baul music is a marginalised oral and performance culture that defies the mores of established religion and its moral codes. It transcends caste-based, regional, linguistic and religious boundaries.

“
**Musicians once rejected
in their own time are
now lionised**
”

From Tagore to Suman, folk music has always been a dominant influence on the sound of Calcutta, which has never forgotten the provinces. Bengali folk music has periodically been lovingly adapted to the demands of urban modernity. Confronted by the overwhelming experience of urban angst and squalor, nostalgia for folk music has made cults of counterculture movements. Musicians once rejected in their own time are now lionised. Urban folk music using traditional lyrics and the imagery of the uncorrupted rural landscape was very popular in Calcutta in the late 1990s. The music had the air of authenticity, and a tradition. *Bhoomi* (The land beneath) is a 1990s folk rock band that gained hugely popularity, both among young cosmopolitans and an older audience familiar with their fusion of folk and popular genres. Much has changed since the 1990s. Calcutta has radio

channels with dedicated slots for alternative music. Bengali film songs, which sound a lot like their Bollywood counterparts, can be heard everywhere. Digital technology, home studios and YouTube channels are, as in any other big Indian city, pervasive. Nobody buys music anymore; everything is downloadable. Calcutta is no longer its own little world anymore. Calcutta wants to be something else, again.

“The future of music is bleak,” Prabuddha Banerjee told me when we recently met. “Look at us, we don’t even have the patience beyond the three minutes of our smartphone music library. Who listens to albums? Who experiences the real city?” And yet, there are bands everywhere in Calcutta. They play jazz, funk, Bangla rock, rap, baul, jazz. Basements have live acts, and pubs showcase live music and literature festivals. There are reunions and promotional events. Music videos are shot with handheld cameras and uploaded to social media. Calcutta, though, seems to have disappeared from the sounds emerging from it.

POSTSCRIPT

A DEATH IN THE FAMILY

A beacon for regional solidarity and critical thought for more than a quarter century, the Nepal-based magazine *Himal Southasian* abruptly stopped printing in late 2016

WORDS: PUJA SEN
JOURNALIST; KATHMANDU



Print journalism is fighting for survival everywhere. The story of *Himal Southasian*, whose operations from Kathmandu was suspended in November 2016, is a tale of how independent long-form journalism has had to shape-shift in the face of rapid economic and political transformations over the last three decades in order to survive in a competitive market-driven media industry. Founded in May 1987 as a magazine for “environment and development” by Nepali editor and writer Kanak Mani Dixit, the editorial in the first issue—or “prototype” as Dixit called it—set forth the agenda. *Himal* was to be “an independent and unofficial forum to facilitate constructive dialogue among individuals engaged in Himalayan development”.

Spread across Bhutan, India, Nepal, China and Pakistan, the Himalayan mountain range has given these countries in the northern region of the subcontinent a shared border. *Himal*’s key interest in this early phase lay in “furthering communications between one Himalayan valley and the next,” and to cover issues pertaining to “population, migration, family life, agriculture, industry, conservation, wildlife, mountaineering, forestry [and] tourism”. The magazine was initially pitched at a “sample target audience, advertisers and prospective funders,” until advertisers and subscribers would set the ball rolling. The magazine was published in English, an interesting strategy in a multi-lingual region at a time when the English-language media was not as ubiquitous and powerful as it is now.

Conceived by Dixit in New York, the printing and design of the magazine was handled in the

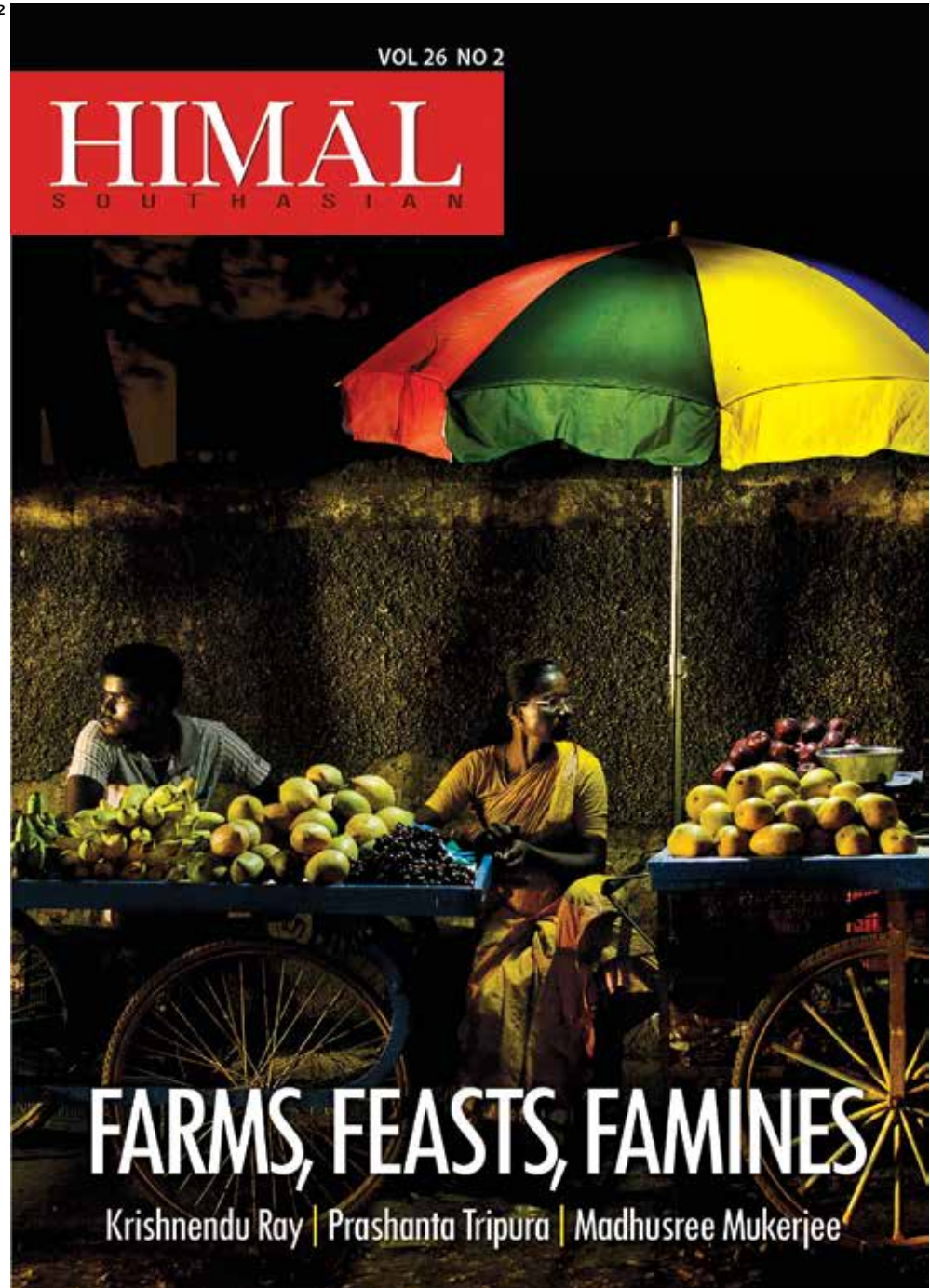
Sri Lankan capital of Colombo as Nepal did not have the necessary resources at the time. *Himal* later shifted its base of operations to Kathmandu, a multi-ethnic urban agglomeration of five million in the Kathmandu Valley, that enabled the kind of pan-regionalism the magazine came to represent. The location in the capital of Nepal was convenient because the city allowed for relatively freer movement of citizens of different nationalities in the region to enter and mingle. On the other hand, visa regimes in India and Pakistan are famously difficult to negotiate, making cross-border movement of people extremely restrictive.

“
Himal purposefully attempted to steer clear of a naïve sense of “southasian-ness”; it also rejected cynicism about such a project
”

From its base in Kathmandu, *Himal* suggested the possibility of a genuine alternative to the dominance of India and Pakistan in defining “southasian-ness”. Initially published a bi-monthly and known simply as *Himal*, in 1996 it shifted to a monthly cycle with an adapted masthead that included the word “South Asian” (later “Southasian”) in its title. Its editorial focus also shifted from a tight focus on the Himalaya region to encompass the regions of Afghanistan to Burma and Tibet to the Maldives. The magazine had by this time developed a biting and satirical style. Often polemical, it gathered a steady stream of

well-known and influential contributors and a growing list of subscribers. At its peak, *Himal* was the only South Asian publication that enjoyed steady contributions from writers, intellectuals and journalists from across the region, including Bangladesh, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Burma and the Maldives. “An imprecise, but very South Asian identity extends from Sri Lanka’s coconut plantations to the Nepali mid-hills, and from Manipur’s jungles to the rugged Baluchi terrain. Afghanistan, the Tibetan plateau and Burma, too, are more part of this region than any other,” offered *Himal* in its first. Its contributing editors expanded to include contributors from Dhaka, Colombo, Lahore and New Delhi. *Himal*’s covered a wide range of topics, including politics, sports, literature and urban issues. The magazine continuously returned to the subject of the South Asian city under neoliberalism.

H*imal* purposefully attempted to steer clear of a naïve sense of “southasian-ness”; it also rejected cynicism about such a project. In January 2002, *Himal* published an inverted map of the subcontinent on its cover. Designed by the Kathmandu artist Subhas Rai, the map showed Sri Lanka on the top and south India at the centre. It became a trademark image associated with the magazine. Rai’s graphic clarified the underlying impulse that guided the magazine in its editorial ambitions until its end. The January 2002 included excerpts from roundtable talks organized by *Himal* in November 2001 to coincide with the 11th South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) Summit in Kathmandu. Among other things, the roundtable interrogated the idea of South Asia and regionalism itself, and



1–2. Himal SouthAsia magazine covers

the difficulties it presented. Discourse on modern-day South Asia has largely been determined by the history of the 1947 Partition of India, a moment that signalled the formation of independent nation states following an anti-colonial movement that overthrew the British Raj. The period unleashed the trauma of civil war and the largest mass migration of people in history. Partition not only saw the drawing of geographical boundaries along the Radcliffe line between India and Pakistan (and later India and Bangladesh), it inadvertently produced a framework for how to think of the region. *Himal* sought to break out of this mould, providing an early imperative to think through a regional perspective, while critically interrogating the bilateral partnerships that occurred under the aegis of a global neoliberal economic restructuring.

Many felt that the kind of tenuous re-imagined regionalism that was being proposed would be curtailed because of India’s size, and political and economic power. There can be no South Asian regionalism that would not first have to reckon with the inevitability of India’s clout and influence. At the SAARC Summit, the Indian historian Ramachandra Guha’s response to what he called “the *Himal* school of thought” was that it was precisely because of India’s relative strength as a federal democracy, in comparison to its neighbouring countries, that it could not lend itself to such a project.

Drawing a parallel with the US, Guha argued that there was an “organic link between democracy at home and hegemony abroad” that could not be easily supplanted with a wishful idea of region-wide federalism. India’s strong democratic roots

were the source of its cultural arrogance. Similarly, Ashis Nandy, a renowned Indian political psychologist, sociologist and cultural critic, called any imposed idea of a South Asian identity altogether “artificial”. However, *Himal*’s endeavour was never to promote an uncomplicated valorisation of the regional. Its aim was to try and work out precisely the nuances involved in regionalism: a vision of South Asia that is not a picture of oversimplified cohesiveness, but a reflection on the region as a more layered and complex system of relations. In the 2001 *Himal* roundtable, the Pakistani social scientist Haris Gazdar argued that the period between the end of the cold war and the recent September 11 attacks in New York was the time when South Asia as an idea could have made a lasting argument for its own viability. However, September 11 dramatically brought back the focus on the nation, even as it was imagined that globalization had successfully diluted the tenacity of the nation state as the primary political institution. With the war against terror, Gazdar argued, “Overnight the US presidency became the foremost enemy of the globalization ideology of the 1990s—an ideology that called for the erosion of the nation-state, and the elevation of the individual, the market, and the corporation.” Whole nations, in this imaginary, became deserving of punishment, largely determined by whether they “harboured” terrorists.

In 2013, *Himal* underwent another change and refashioned itself as a quarterly under editor Aunohita Mojumdar. It now came in a book format fashioned after *Granta*. Each issue featured articles around a core theme and attempted to present a region-wide understanding of

these core issues, finding both commonalities and differences between the countries. This format capitalized on the archival potential of *Himal*, allowing for a longer shelf life than news dailies and weeklies for the magazine’s critical engagement with contemporary issues. Operating under the Southasia Trust, the magazine sustained itself primarily on funding from the Norwegian Embassy. In 2016, Nepal’s government initiated a series of unprecedented attacks on the magazine. In April, Kanak Mani Dixit, *Himal*’s founder, was arrested on trumped-up charges of financial corruption.

“
Himal managed to prosper for 30 years. Its demise directly keys into political shifts in the great region it covered
”

The magazine was further denied access to pledged funds for six months, making it impossible to sustain *Himal*’s print operations. The magazine’s editor, Aunohita Mojumdar, described the state’s tactics as “strangulation by bureaucracy” to the New Yorker. *Himal* published its last issue, titled “*Fact and Fiction*”, in November 2016. It remains to be seen whether Mojumdar and Dixit can manage to re-launch the magazine after a planned re-location.

“Little magazines are born quickly and die easily”, wrote American critic and editor Irving Howe in 1963, looking back at

the half-decade life span of the influential US literary magazine *Partisan Review*. Founded in 1934, the magazine had been central in gathering together a core of writers aligned to the “independent” left—mostly elite Jewish New Englanders who took a firm political anti-Stalinist line. In the world of magazines, it commanded immense influence despite claims it may have been funded by the Central Intelligence Agency to shape public opinion during the Cold War in the 1950s and 60s. But its endurance for nearly five decades is considered an exception to an overall sense that serious small magazines do not, indeed are perhaps not even meant to, last long.

Himal managed to prosper for 30 years. Its demise directly keys into political shifts in the great region it covered, notably the rise of nationalist movements in neighboring countries and the ham-fisted response of the Nepali government. As *Himal*’s demise suggests, we have entered a moment where any argument for regionalism is met with scepticism, if not downright derision. Right-wing nationalism is entrenching the nation-state more than ever, not only in South Asia by noticeably in Europe too. Yet, in this historical moment, an idea that transcends the hypernationalisms that we see throughout the world can perhaps best be undercut by emphasising solidarities across nation states, when we draw common cause on issues such as the vast informalisation of labour, the refugee crises, failure in health systems, and use of the military to suppress minorities. A re-emergent *Himal* could continue to be an important platform for intellectuals from all countries to come together to think through these pitfalls of a world teetering on a precipice.

EXIT





WWW.IIHS.CO.IN

IIHS



ACEE

WWW.AFRICANCENTREFORCITIES.NET