

# SACH

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## Importance of Locating Subversion in and Through Mass Movements

**EMERGENCE** of International Working Women's Day can be traced back to labor movements around 20th century in North America and across Europe. It goes back to early 1900s when scores of women in New York marched to demand for voting rights and better pay. However, IWD wasn't recognized till 1911. IWD's celebration of working women and anti-capitalist vision need to be reiterated to underline its socialist origins. It is all the more important now, than ever, as the way capitalism has diluted its radical potential. Initial origins of the movement were to recognize women's exploitation under patriarchy and capitalism so as to transcend both. Mostly, all initial conferences which raised proletariat women's issues underscored the necessity of battling against capitalist exploitation as well. The demands did not only call for female suffrage but labor laws for working women, social assistance for mothers and children, provision for nurseries and kindergartens, equal treatment of single mothers as well as international solidarity.

Celebration of women's day was and still remains a day of assertion. It is a recognition of labor done by women, at home and outside, and their continuous exploitation in the name of love. When Silvia Federici calls for wages for household, she underlines work done by women at home as work and not only love. When Shulamith Firestone equates giving birth with shitting a pumpkin, she speaks of violence in the name idea of motherhood.

Scholarship/protests, which subvert or battle against patriarchal practices which have been normalized, make an essential part of the women's movement or any mass movement for that matter. Subversion, however, doesn't always need to be something grand. Everyday acts of rebellion are equally important and eventually help organize a mass movement. The necessity is to look for moments of solidarity and assertion in our everyday lives which rejuvenate our will to fight against systemic oppression.

Current issue of SACH is dedicated to feminist struggles- on roads or in our living rooms. The essays shared in this issue underline how laughter can be a form of subversion and mundane moments in our everyday lives can have a radical potential to turn into big events.

# The Law

By MAAZ BIN BILAL

*(An Ode for Habib Jalib)*

The law that constricts a woman to her home,  
turns her into a paid-for whore,  
prevents man from loving men,  
and obstructs their dietary regimen,  
such a law, on this murky dawn,  
I cannot accept.

Where my speech carries more hate  
than the worst, and won't abate  
come what I do, as prisons are filled  
with under-trial lovers, if not killed,  
such a law, on this murky dawn,  
I cannot accept.

You say the kites are in flight again,  
it is spring, the cold reign of the dark at an end,  
you say that we have prospered beyond count  
even as village trees are laden, with more than just fruit.  
such a lie, on this murky dawn,  
I won't accept.

I won't say that I am not scared of the prison,  
for it is no longer run by a power that would listen  
to reason, or believe in any dignity,  
but knows naked power, all cruelty,  
such a law, on this murky dawn,  
I won't accept.

You have plundered us for hundreds of years,  
put us in systems of margins, and gushing tears,  
where the mighty and many rule the weak and few,  
this evacuation of body and mind, to curfew,  
on this murky dawn, with its law,  
I won't accept.

(First published in Ghazalnama)

# The Art Of Resistance: When Imagination Meets Technology At Protests From India To Chile

By SUPRIYA ROYCHOUDHURY, INDIA

ON December 15, the Delhi Police brutally attacked Jamia Millia Islamia students protesting against the discriminatory Citizenship Amendment Act. Their targets included a young freelance journalist in a housing colony located near the university. As they rained blows on him with their lathis, five of his female friends formed a cocoon around him to shield him from these blows.

Within minutes, video footage of their bravery sped across the internet. By the next day, actor and painter Povannan had produced the now iconic image of the incident.

This image is a perfect example of the urgent new protest art that is being produced around the world, from Sudan to Chile, Lebanon to Hong Kong, and beyond. The agitations in these locations would be unimaginable without the poetry, music, craft, creative slogans, street theatre, murals and sartorial displays that have underpinned them.

A mature digital culture has brought together technology, social media and the internet in complex and interesting ways, revolutionising the way protest art is produced and consumed. It has enabled protest art to manifest in an almost guerilla-like manner, imbuing it with a distinctly spontaneous quality. It has democratised protest art by greatly expanding its reach and access. An advanced digital ecosystem has also exposed protest art to resistance motifs, tactics and

ideas from other geographies and cultures.

## PROTEST ART 2.0

As the Jamia image demonstrates, near-real-time access to news footage from the ground has dramatically reduced the time taken by artists to creatively respond to an incident. Smart phone and digital technologies allow moments to be easily recorded on-site and shared almost instantaneously across multiple channels of distribution.

Prompted by a proposed tax on the widely used internet-based calling service provided by Whatsapp, the people of Lebanon took to the streets on October 17 of last year to protest against what they considered to be a nepotistic, sectarian and corrupt political system that had failed to deliver basic services to its people. On that same day, a female protestor kicked a Minister's armed bodyguard when he fired a shot in the direction of the protestors. Within 24 hours, a London-based Lebanese graphic designer, Rami Kanso, produced this powerful digital image to immortalise that moment of defiance. It quickly went viral.

In some cases, news footage can itself be deftly edited to resemble a work of art. In Lebanon, a number of video editors and videographers are working directly with raw footage of protest-related violence, converting video clips into cinematographic works, complete with background scores and narrative arcs.

One popular video by Lebanese videographer, Ali Khalife, for instance, uses footage of the protests to present them in a theatrical and almost farcical way. As digital technology brings news and art closer together, protest art feels more pressing, timely and spontaneous.

Imagination is a powerful leveller. Of the many groups and communities that have engaged with protest art, one demographic has stood out in particular: women. From the songs of resistance sung by the women of Shaheen Bagh in Delhi, to the chants of *thawra*, meaning “revolution”, and the graceful moves of the now famous Sudanese protestor, Ala’a Salah, who was part of a nation-wide revolution that was triggered by an escalation in the price of bread and fuel and a deteriorating economic situation, women have been at the forefront of protest art initiatives.

In many cases, female artists have created protest art to honour the role of women in these resistance movements. This spectacular photograph of Ala’a Salah, for instance, was taken by Sudanese photographer, Lana Haroun, who states that when she first saw the image she had taken on her phone, she immediately thought, “This is my revolution and we are the future”.

They have also been re-appropriating traditional sartorial practices and transforming them into performative acts of resistance. In India, for example, revolutionary poetry has been inscribed in calligraphy on scarves and headscarves, while in Sudan, the popular revolutionary slogan *tasqut bas*, meaning “just fall, that’s all”, has appeared on the *toub*, the traditional robe worn by Sudanese women. Its political and cultural symbolism is amplified by the fact that Sudanese mothers and grandmothers had also worn the *toub* during their struggles against the military dictatorship in the sixties and the decades that followed.

As a low-cost form of expression, protest art is by default inclusive. Where access to materials is prohibitive or inaccessible, resources – pens, paper or yarn – are often

pooled together in protest locations. Delhi’s Shaheen Bagh and Beirut’s Martyrs’ Square have evolved into open-air art galleries and theatres, where protestors create street murals, perform songs of resistance and enact street plays. With the transformation of public spaces into hubs for artistic expression, ordinary people have morphed into creative visionaries and artists.

In Hong Kong, where protestors’ demands have evolved from a specific call to rescind the Extradition Law to demands for democratic reform and an independent investigation into alleged police brutality, more than a hundred “Lennon Walls” have spontaneously sprung up across the cityscape, lining walkways, underpasses and other public infrastructure.

Inspired by the original Lennon Walls in Prague on which anti-communist protestors of the 1980s painted messages and images of peace and freedom influenced by John Lennon’s work, the “Lennon Walls” of Hong Kong comprise an assemblage of colourful sticky notes with similar messages of peace and solidarity, creating an overall impression of a large colourful mosaic.

Protest art is not just being created or performed within the confines of the studio, gallery or theatre, but in public squares and on the streets – and, crucially, by people who do not necessarily identify as creative professionals or artists.

For their part, those who do identify as artists have rejected the comfort of their ivory towers and private studios. Artists and collectives across India, from Assam to Delhi to Chennai have taken to the streets to protest the Citizenship Amendment Act, creating and performing art for and also with, other individuals, communities and civil society groups.

For instance, in December 2019, actor Naseeruddin Shah and Carnatic musician T M Krishna collaborated with the civil society collective, Karwan-e-Mohabbat, to release a music video in which lines from the Indian Constitution are powerfully interwoven with



the lyrics of the Indian national anthem and juxtaposed against a montage of visuals, including images of the protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act.

When Bollywood personality Varun Grover produced the now-ubiquitous poem *Hum Kaagaz Nahi Dikhayenge* on 21 December, 2019, he did so with the objective of encouraging its adaptation by others: “There is no copyright on these words – feel free to use them, adapt, sing, modify, create”, Grover announced in a tweet.

### BLURRING THE LINES

Protest art has blurred the distinction between the artist as creator and the public as audience. As creative professionals deploy their craft to serve the public interest, and members of the public look to the arts as a medium for political self-expression, protest art has emerged as a tool for the many, not the few.

Part of what has enabled protest art to engage audiences at scale is the digital culture in which it is deeply ingrained. Digitally produced protest posters, such as those generated by the Kadak Collective, can be shared via social media channels as well as printed and taken to protest venues, creating new avenues for engagement with both online and offline audiences.

The anonymity offered by social media can also act as a powerful enabling condition for the distribution of protest art in more restrictive, political contexts. In Hong Kong, for instance, the LIHKG website resembles a Reddit-like forum on which citizens can anonymously exchange and share protest art, memes and even protest tactics.

It was here that a preliminary version of the now widely popular anthem *Glory to Hong Kong* was released by a local artist under a pseudonym. After receiving suggestions from the forum’s users, the lyrics were amended. A flourishing digital and social media culture has facilitated the generation of a creative commons of protest art: art that is to be created, shared and used by all.

In a globalised world, it is not unusual

for creative resistance in one location to draw on resistance iconography, symbols, ideas and motifs popular in other cultures. Artists from Lebanon and India, for example, have repurposed the iconic “We Can Do It” poster from the 1940s featuring a woman flexing her arm in a gesture of self-empowerment. In one of the many protest posters created in India, the image of this woman has been replaced by one in a hijab.

A likeness of the same image has also appeared in a digital protest poster produced by a Lebanese artist on Instagram, in which the English phrase “we can do it” is replaced with its Arabic translation: “The revolution is a woman”. A wall painting in Sudan features a crowd of screaming faces, in what appears to be a creative adaptation of Edvard Munch’s “The Scream”.

In Kolkata, demonstrators against the Citizenship Amendment Act have produced a Bengali adaptation of the nineteenth century Italian song of resistance, *Bella Ciao*. Inspired by the hardships faced by the female paddy field workers, the Mondina, of Northern Italy, *Bella Ciao* was eventually adopted to serve as an anthem for the anti-fascist resistance movements of the 1940s.

The localisation of cultural motifs from different geographies and historical epochs has characterised much of the protest art that has been generated, with the appropriation of feminist motifs and iconography being especially notable.

Creative resistance in the contemporary period has also been remarkably receptive to stories, symbols and themes drawn from global popular culture, particularly those that are centred around metaphors of good and evil. Marvel Comics’ villains, Thanos and the Joker, for instance, have appeared in protest art in several locations across the globe including Delhi, Lebanon and Hong Kong, serving to act as personifications of the governments whose policies and actions are being resisted.

Popular culture references have also been mobilised to express dissatisfaction in a

more tongue in cheek way: one poster in New Delhi, for example, read “this government doesn’t spark joy” in a reference to the central premise of a popular Netflix programme on housekeeping.

In some instances, popular culture motifs have emerged more organically to acquire symbolic and even near-iconic status. In Lebanon, the popular children’s song, *Baby Shark*, originally produced by a South Korean company, has evolved into something of an anthem for the Lebanese revolution after it was sung by protestors to a toddler during one of the protests to calm him down. In Hong Kong, *Do You Hear the People Sing?* from the musical *Les Misérables* has emerged as a song of protest.

Of course, not all works of protest art in the contemporary era draw on motifs derived from global popular culture: many rely explicitly on indigenous ideas and symbols, particularly in places and communities where resistance is intrinsically connected to the preservation of one’s culture, identity or heritage. In Assam, for instance, the gamosa has featured heavily in several protests against the Citizenship Amendment Act, enacting the very cultural indigeneity it seeks to protect.

In general, however, a more interconnected world has facilitated the transfer and exchange of ideas, motifs, iconography across borders for those who wish to draw upon multiple sources of inspiration.

### IN SEARCH OF A BETTER WORLD

Even as a culture of protest art flourishes, it provides only a glimpse into the larger story behind resistance more generally. More often than not, resistance exists outside the realm of the aesthetic. It involves bodily harm, abuse, torture, trauma, and even death. For its part, protest art often acknowledges this, and seeks to bring visibility to the structures, systems and institutions that abet violence. One especially graphic street mural in Chile, for example, displays a bloodied eye as a reference to the damage caused to more than 200 protestors’ eyes by rubber

bullets and tear gas cannisters used by the police in November of last year.

In India, a miniature replica of India Gate has been created to honour those who have died in protest-related violence in India. In Sudan, tear gas cannisters have been transformed into flower pots, pencil jars and electrical connectors. Protest art does not shy away from the violence of resistance but engages with it.

Despite its seeming ephemerality, protest art can provide a visual and aural vocabulary for a political vision or an alternate reality. Even as it draws upon the rhetoric of opposition, it seeks to articulate a vision for what could be.

Protest art is but one tactic in a broader strategy of creative resistance involving other tools such as public education campaigns, grassroots mobilisation and legal advocacy. Across India, for instance, a number of public information sessions led by prominent lawyers, advocates and activists have been taking place to educate people on issues relating to citizenship and constitutional rights. Open-air libraries have sprung up in Sudan, and India, featuring literature on politics, power and rights that has enabled deeper engagement with the issues that triggered these protests to begin with.

Protest art may not single-handedly overthrow regimes or “shift the world on its axis” as music writer Dorian Lynskey states in *33 Revolutions Per Minute*. But all protest art, at the end of the day, seeks to change a perspective, shift an opinion or illuminate a previously ignored angle. As performance artist Marina Abramovic so eloquently put it, “the function of the artist in a disturbed society is to give awareness of the universe, to ask the right questions, and to elevate the mind”. A shift in the way we perceive and imagine the world can go a long way in setting into motion the changes we wish to see.

Courtesy : [www.scroll.in](http://www.scroll.in)

# In The Sculptures of These Two Artists, You Can See The Burning Tragedy of Bastar

By NANCY ADAJANIA, INDIA

**“THE** art of storytelling is reaching its end because the epic side of truth, wisdom, is dying out.”

— Walter Benjamin, *‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’*

We live in the aftermath of the epic. The only way to approach the great universals – truth, beauty, wisdom – in a vexatious age, apparently, is through the micro-narrative, the little story, the intimate glimpse. And yet, these post-epic forms can articulate the courage and determination of their authors, especially when they have been able to claim authorial agency for the first time, by breaking through socially legislated codes of who may speak, how they may speak, and who they may address.

In the wooden sculptures, paintings and photographs made over half a decade by Shantibai and Rajkumar, two exceptional artists from Bastar in Chhattisgarh, we find the expression of an emancipatory energy. Marginalised by a feudal society and for years barely recognised by a metropolitan and Western-dictated art history, Shantibai and Rajkumar have reclaimed their biographies from an exploitative system that alienates people like themselves, who belong to the tribal community, from their land, their labour, their livelihood, and indeed, even their ability to lead a life of their choice.

This assertion of the right to reclaim one’s own biography imparts a distinctive quality of animation to the work of these two practitioners, as they narrate their quest as artists and as citizens. They have borrowed the form of the pillar from the carved memorial pillars or Maria Khambhas, which have traditionally communicated the hagiographic narratives of the elite within the tribal community. But Shantibai and Rajkumar’s wooden sculptures are not memorials to the past. Rather, they are testimonies to the burning present. Theirs is a history of the Now told from a subaltern perspective. Here, they relate the plight of a people caught in the crossfire between Maoists fighting an armed revolution in their name and a heavily militarised State that treats its own people as collateral damage while fighting its enemies. They refer, also, to the State’s collusion with multinational corporations to profit from a forest belt rich in minerals.

Both for Shantibai and Rajkumar, their political and aesthetic quests are braided together. In a diary note about one of his carved pillars, Rajkumar points to a transition in the sculpted tale, which shifts from a scene showing the people’s resistance against the Tatas, who are forcing them to sell their land, to a moment when “after these discussions, we go to see the Maria Khambhas”, to

research these artefacts. Both these artists began as apprentices and assistants working with a master craftsperson, doing commissioned work. The transition in their lives and art was catalysed by the artist Navjot Altaf, who has lovingly curated the present show, appropriately titling it, “Not under great law. Not under sacred law” at The Guild in Alibaug, near Mumbai.

In the course of a collaboration that began in the late 1990s, Altaf has championed their practice. Together, they have built the Dialogue Centre in Kondagaon, Bastar, where they conduct their respective studio practices and also host discussions on the political economy of art, on the marginalisation of gender, and other pressing political and ecological urgencies of the day.

Shantibai and Rajkumar have engaged in a slow but sure process of political socialisation. In the process, we see that they have had to contend with critically important questions of equity, representation and justice. What does it mean to be excluded from the conversation of the mainstream art world? And by corollary, what does it mean to live in a country that treats its tribal communities as expendable citizens, who can be shot, raped and robbed with impunity?

### CARVING TEARS

Shantibai’s artistic journey has been one of quiet resilience. She has transformed herself from someone who was only allowed to carve out figures drawn by her late husband, the master craftsperson Raituram, to becoming an artist in her own right. Her sculptures express a deep empathy for women and children. She sculpted the trauma of a woman raped by the police in Bastar by depicting her as a sacrificial goat. During her research into this specific outrage, Shantibai found out that “the police laughed at the woman and her parents and told them to go home, else they will rape her again”. This columnar synoptic narrative is made up of

many interlocking episodes, but it is the detail that strikes us. Shantibai depicts the raped woman’s tears as furrows in her cheeks; this could well stand in the great artistic tradition of the *lachrymae*, the holy tears.

### BLOOD IS NOT THICKER THAN WATER

The autodidact’s hard-won wisdom and humility have shaped Shantibai’s sculptural language. She is deeply committed to the act of learning and sharing knowledge through the workshops she conducts at the Dialogue Centre. Children often occupy a liminal condition in her sculptures, being shown in the process of becoming gods or goddesses. The figure of the child is carved as a tender caress, but this nurturing quality should not be read simply as a mothering impulse. Along with Rajkumar and the other artists at the centre, Shantibai has produced a community that does not have a name. Some relationships are not reducible to family, kinship or census records. They are produced through the gesture of art, a provisional, ever-renewed and -renewing gesture.

### THE MUSEUM OF GUNS

Rajkumar’s sculptures are more expressionistic in tone and full of zest. He invents forms spontaneously, such as the masked figures with holes for eyes, to portray Maoists hiding from the police. Or he might show the bunched-up hands of the oppressed as a rope of firecrackers about to burst. He asserts his subjectivity with the words: “As an artist I believe...”

One of his sculptures proposes that the representatives of various countries should come together and find a solution to the violence that has wracked Bastar. He believes that weapons should be banned, that they should be collected and donated to a museum. The pinnacle of a traditional Maria Khambha is where the soul finds its release – at the top of his sculpture, Rajkumar carves a stack of guns. By replacing the soul-bird with an



armistice, he secularises the sacred convention with a here-and-now urgency. Release is here and possible, if only we have the patience to listen to those who are never heard.

### THE ABORTED PRAYER

Open to the views of different shades on the political spectrum, whether Communist or Gandhian, these artists are equally inspired by the Communist Party of India leader Manish Kunjam, who has been advocating the right to *sva-sashan* or self-governance among the adivasi communities, as well as the selfless work of the Gandhian human-rights activist Himanshu Kumar, whose ashram in Dantewada was bulldozed because he had dared to help the local community file complaints against the police.

In a surprise move, one of the narratives which unfolds at Himanshu

Kumar's ashram – portrayed as an oasis with mahua flowers, fluttering sparrows and children learning yoga – culminates in an empty meditation structure. Its façade resembles the railing of the famous Sanchi Stupa, which Rajkumar had visited during his study tour. In place of the dome, where the Buddha's relics were believed to be preserved, we see a gentle wave pattern that rises and falls, a form suggestive of the children's slides at the ashram.

Does the empty structure at the top of the pillar signify a call to transcendence? Or are the children's slides modern-day reliquaries of aborted prayer and thwarted hope? Or is this a shrine built on a site that the State systematically erased, although it could not purge the fragrance of love and freedom?

Courtesy : [www.scroll.in](http://www.scroll.in)



# Dario Fo's Politics of Subversive Laughter

By JAVED MALICK, INDIA

**VERY** few people will dispute that Dario Fo was the most significant figure in the history of political theatre since Meyerhold, Piscator and Brecht. Like them, he worked closely with revolutionary groups and movements and devised productions to further their cause.

The theatre that he practised was at once hilarious and provocative, full of theatricality, sharp political commentary and, as such, one of the finest examples of contemporary radical theatre.

Fo was an uncompromisingly political artist, who endeavoured throughout to use his art and serve specific political purposes. He sought to develop a kind of theatre which would reflect, document and actively participated in the collective life and struggles of its audience. Thereby, it became a form of collaborative political action.

Working not from some liberal, populist viewpoint but from what Brecht called a "fighting conception of people and popularity", Fo recognised that to be able to reach out to large masses and to speak to them directly, it is not enough to merely put their problems and concerns on stage but that one must also try to do so in the idiom of people's own traditions.

With this objective, Fo retrieved traditional forms of plebeian culture from centuries of feudal and bourgeois suppression, neglect and scorn – in particular, the socially subversive traditions of the strolling players (guillari or jongleurs) and the story tellers (the fabulatori). He refashioned these forms for contemporary usage and modelled his

performance based on them. Fo closely identified with the strolling players of the middle ages drawing his own views of theatre from their example. He said:

"The jongleur went from place to place, clowning in the square in pieces which were grotesque attacks on the powerful....[He] was a figure who came from the people, and who from the people drew anger and transmitted it through the medium of the grotesque. For the people, the theatre has always been the chief medium of expression, of communication, but also of provocation and agitation through ideas. The theatre is the spoken newspaper of the people in dramatic form."

Fo's grotesque farces and satirical comedies on serious political themes ensured that his audience kept laughing while also making them see – ideally with a sense of indignation – the injustices and hypocrisies of the system. In terms of his performance skills, Fo was often described – and, indeed, described himself – as a clown. But he was a subversive clown who irreverently mocked the sanctimonious seriousness of the existing institutions and values.

In one of his several statements about the nature of his own theatre, Fo said:

"I do the same thing as a clown. I just put some drops of absurdity in this calm and tranquil liquid which is society, and the reactions reveal things that were hidden before the absurdity brought them into the open."

That is why most of his plays centrally involve clown-like characters whom he



obviously created for himself. These clown-figures – among whom the madman of *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, is perhaps the best-known example – make us laugh at figures of authority and by representing the exercise of power as a grotesque farce, demolish their supposed sacredness.

Fo's brilliance in combining urgent political concerns with elements of storytelling, pantomime and grotesque farce, made his plays simultaneously provocative and highly entertaining. It allowed them to embody and communicate what Terry Eagleton describes in another context as "the vulgar cheerfulness of social hope."

This kind of theatre encourages the spectators to an objective and active contemplation of serious issues. According to Fo, his theatre, like traditional, sub-cultural forms, uses grotesque farces because satirical laughter helps avoid the danger of catharsis." He did not want the anger and outrage at the injustices of the system to be purged from his audiences but wanted them to remain there inside the spectators, "free and ready to act without hesitation, as the time of fight arrives."

It is for this reason that Fo, for example, constructed *Anarchist* – a play which arose out of the real tragedy of the custodial death of an innocent person – as an open-ended "tragic farce." True to this paradoxical categorisation, the play offers a hilarious but nonetheless disturbing experience. It is through the grotesque antics of a madman (who is a quick-change artist, indeed a 'hysteromaniac,' a clown), that the hypocrisy and the brutality of a police state are so scathingly exposed.

"The non-illusionism of the form prevents any easy, self-righteous and moralistic response just as the absence of a neatly defined or rounded conclusion to the dramatised action makes it necessary that the performance is completed by what Fo called a "third act" of discussion among the audience and the performers."

## PERSECUTION

It is not surprising that theatre as radical as this has also been the target of hostility.

Besides the fact that his theatre upset the settled conventional notions of what art should or should not be, they also felt threatened by his powerful characterization of class and of the "sacred" institutions of bourgeois society – the police, the judiciary, the media and religion. Fo had begun his career in the theatre at a time when the Italian state was trying to brutally suppress all left-wing dissent. This was the period when, in the wake of the cold war between the capitalist west and the communist east in Europe, the Left in Italy was constantly under attack.

Fo and his associates, too, were subjected to constant harassment and attacks from the censors, the police, the clergy and the fascists. During the 1960s, their scripts and performances were severely scrutinised by the censors and, during tours, invited hostile responses from the local police chiefs and the clergy who urged their parishioners to boycott the shows.

Persecution and harassment continued through the subsequent decades as well: Fo's group was removed from their theatre in Milan, Fo was arrested, performances were picketed and stoned, and so on. However, the most outrageous of attempts at intimidation was in 1973 when Franca Rame, Fo's wife and professional collaborator, was kidnapped from a Milan street, subjected to physical violence and gangraped by a group of neo-fascists.

It is a measure of her and Fo's commitment that they continued to write and perform incisively political plays. Rame even scripted and performed an immensely moving and powerful one-woman autobiographical monologue on her traumatic experience called *I Don't Move, I Don't Scream, My Voice is Gone*.

Fo's career in theatre began soon after the war as a mainstream theatre artist. By the mid-1960s, he was established as one of the most frequently produced and commercially successful living playwrights in all of Europe. Fo and Rame were at the height of their popularity when Italy, like other countries of Western Europe and North America, was going through a politically turbulent period. The state

was becoming more repressive in the wake of an increasingly militant anti-authoritarian movements by students, intellectuals and workers.

Fo's plays and revues from this period, written and performed with his characteristic profusion of humour and irony, reflected the political conditions of the time. He was writing for the conventional circuit and for middle-class audiences. But his theatre was growing more political. Fo described his plays from this period as "the most paradoxical contradictions of the Christian Democrat state". They were poignant and unsparing in their satirisation of contemporary politics and society.

### **THEATRE OF THE PROLETARIAT**

However, despite the massive popularity of their shows and the material prosperity that it brought them, Fo and Rame had begun to feel increasingly uncomfortable about the contradiction between their political views and their professional location within the bourgeois entertainment circuit. This location, they now realised, inhibited the full and frank expression of their political views and made it difficult for them, as Fo described it,

"to perform in theatres where everything including seating arrangements reflected class divisions.... Above all, staying in bourgeois theatre became more and more contradictory in terms of what was starting to be understood in that period. The most coherent choice for intellectuals was to leave their gilded ghetto and put themselves at the service of the movement."

Resolving that they will no longer act as minstrels of the bourgeoisie" but serve as "minstrels of the working class," Fo and Rame withdrew from the conventional theatre circuit.

It is significant that the first public presentation that Fo undertook after his break with the bourgeois theatre was his celebrated one-man show, *Mistero Buffo*. He offered it at the State University of Milan in support of the massive student and working-class upheaval known as the Hot Autumn of 1969. All alone on a bare stage, he was able to bring a whole range of characters and situations to life through his

performance. After that first show in Milan, which was more in the nature of a public reading, Fo gave hundreds of performances of this play in Italy and abroad. It is estimated that in Italy alone more than three million people saw it. The play's title, which can be translated as 'comic mystery', harks back, on the one hand, to the dramatic representations of Biblical stories as performed by itinerant plebeian performers of the middle ages, and on the other, to Mayakovsky's *Mysteriya Buf*, a morality play ridiculing capitalism.

Fo's text seeks to reclaim some of the materials and artistic strategies of the medieval players from centuries of scorn and mystification. This loosely structured text strings together a variety of stories and songs drawn from diverse traditional sources. These are interspersed with Fo's satirical comments, analytical speeches and sacrilegious jokes. In performing it, Fo adapted it to new situations, adding new materials and contemporary political reference.

As Rame once remarked, "Besides being a play, *Mistero Buffo* is also a living newspaper, continuously incorporating current news events and political and cultural satire into performances." However, despite fresh improvisations and additions, its basic text comprises a set of "sacred" stories which become highly subvert orthodox religion in Fo's irreverent re-telling of them. It is primarily for this reason that the production upset many. It attracted vicious criticism from the right-wingers, fascists and the Roman Catholic Church. The Vatican denounced it as "the most blasphemous show in the history of the world television."

In late 1968, Fo and Rame founded a theatre collective called the New Scene, which was formally described in a resolution as "a collective of militants who put themselves at the service of revolutionary forces." Fo and Rame began to use their art as a political weapon to be wielded by and in favour of political struggles. They devised plays and shows for specific political occasions and took them to wherever the struggle was. These they

called “intervention” shows. In order to be able to perform anywhere and under any condition – occupied factories, market squares, factory gates, sports stadia, and so on – they developed a simple production style which eschewed all trappings of a conventional, naturalistic stage production.

Perhaps the most important and politically significant innovation dating from this period was what Fo calls the “third act” – that is, a discussion with the audience following a performance. Fo and Rame now performed to huge audiences of workers, political activists and students. Everywhere at the end of the show, they would talk directly to the spectators and invite them to voice their views on the show. Usually impassioned and polemical, these discussions and debates sometimes lasted until the small hours of the morning and turned every theatrical show into a veritable public meeting. These discussions often led to substantial modification of the script.

#### MOVING FURTHER TO THE LEFT

One of the features of new radicalism in the 1960s was the split within the Left between pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese (or Maoist) ideological line, usually termed, respectively, as “revisionist” and “revolutionary”. By 1970, Fo and Rame’s relationship with the “revisionist” Italian Communist Party (PCI) had begun to decline. Influenced by the ideas of the “revolutionary” left, they had been attacking the political positions of the party frequently in their productions and post-performance discussions. The breaking point came in 1970 when the party denounced them and prohibited them the use of the working-class cultural venues that it controlled.

This break with the PCI also caused an ideological rift within the New Scene and eventually the company split into two. While the majority of members chose to continue with the New Scene, a minority, led by Fo and Rame, broke off in 1972 and formed a new collective called La Commune.

This change also meant a change in the political and social composition of their audience. Their audience now was no longer

exclusively working class but a mixed one which included intellectuals, students, middle-class theatre enthusiasts, activists of the “revolutionary” left, as well as workers. Aided by the organised groups of Italy’s far-left as well as by Fo’s fame and popularity, the Commune, which had begun as a small cultural collective rapidly grew in strength and soon became a popular movement of nationwide influence. With local branches coming up in different towns and cities, it also helped something like an alternative theatre circuit to emerge.

Rame and Fo continued to write and produce “intervention” shows on burning national and international questions. Among the best known “intervention” shows were *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (1970) and the internationally acclaimed and performed play *Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay!* (1974).

The *Anarchist* was a response to the state’s attempt to blame Lotta Continua (a far-left group) for a right-wing terrorist bombing and to the cover up of custodial death of an innocent man. During the court trial of the case, Fo’s theatre functioned not only as a form of political action but also as a “living newspaper” which countered the official propaganda. Describing the process of its evolution, Fo stated:

“The play was commissioned by our audience which wanted to investigate the event. While we performed it, the framed trial against Lotta Continua was taking place. The defence lawyers would come to us with daily updates on the proceedings and each night we incorporated that news into the show. In fact, we always try to give space to the sort of facts that ordinary media channels neglect to mention.”

It is for this reason that Fo’s theatre can also be described as what is called “documentary clowning”, the tradition of which goes back to the famous Russian clown Vladimir Durov and continues through Charlie Chaplin.

The other famous “intervention” play *Can’t Pay, Won’t Pay!* was written and performed all over Italy in the wake of a spate of what came to be known as “proletarian

shopping.” By the end of 1973, Italy was in the grip of severe economic crisis with acute recession, widespread unemployment and galloping inflation. This caused lower-income consumers to resort to what was called *autoridizioni* (self-reduction) and to refuse to pay more than what they felt was the right price for things. Beginning in Turin, the *autoridizioni* movement grew in strength and popularity and spread to other parts of Italy. This inspired Fo’s play. Based on a hilariously farcical plot, the play concerns a group of working-class women who, faced with a hike in prices of food items, help themselves to whatever they want from the supermarket. To hide the fact from their “moralistic” husbands, they conceal the stolen things inside their skirts and pretend to be ‘suddenly’ pregnant. The play, thus, deals with a form of civil disobedience and has therefore been adapted to many different situations throughout the world.

By the mid-1970s the massive explosion of radical activism which had overtaken Western Europe and North America had waned and Italy’s “revolutionary left” had begun to decline and disintegrate. The prospects of a revolution that had seemed to loom so prominently on the political horizons during the late 1960s had receded significantly and the left-wing ideas seemed to have become less popular. Fo and Rame were also obliged to return to the conventional theatre circuit because, by the end of the 1970s, the alternative theatre circuit that they had helped develop had virtually disappeared.

Fo’s most important work was done in (and sustained by) a climate of euphoric revolutionism and struggle. With the waning of that period and the advent of an unmistakably right-wing tilt in the political balance in Europe, his drama too seemed to lose some of its political edge, its immediacy and militancy. For, some of his subsequent plays, although still politically significant, seem to lack the urgency and the sense of militant activism of his earlier plays.

Nonetheless, Fo and Rame were not seasonal artists and neither were they seasonal Marxists. They could not possibly stop writing

or performing politically meaningful plays just because history had taken a sharp turn to the Right. It is remarkable how they continued to fight against the general condition of despair and to seek urgent political subjects for their work. Fo’s *The Tiger* (1978), an allegorical monologue based on a Chinese fable, reflected his unflinching optimism at a time when all seemed lost. The play takes a fresh and critical look at the revolutionary left, even Maoism, with its moral that unthinking loyalty to anything, even to a political party, is the enemy of reason and of revolution. Similarly, the farcical comedy *Trumpets and Raspberries* (1981) was written in response to the Aldo Moro murder. It satirised both left-wing adventurism and the anti-people character of the capitalist state that causes terrorism to come in to being in the first place.

Remarkably, the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1997 did not make any difference to Fo’s political commitment. He continued to use his art to serve and respond to political causes. Fo was ardently committed to a politics of social change. His quest was for a politically significant and genuinely contemporary form of people’s theatre, which he tried to achieve by building upon the artistic vitality of the forms and traditions of pre-bourgeois sub-culture. His endeavour throughout was to give voice to the lived experiences, aspirations, and concerns of the oppressed sections of the society. The particular phase of radical ferment which produced Fo is over. Leftwing resistance is no longer trendy. If one were to believe the postmodern prophets of the “end of history,” “end of ideology,” and the consequent death of the “transgressive” kind of political art, Fo’s could well be the last great example of his kind in the West. However, the radical political theatre has often been pronounced dead in the past too.

Equally often, it has risen, phoenix-like, from the ashes during periods of intense political struggle and protest. The growing awareness of the inequities and contradictions inherent in the new, unipolar world order could be a hopeful sign in this respect.

*Courtesy : [www.scroll.in](http://www.scroll.in)*

# I SING

By INDER SALIM, INDIA

I sing.....  
Kabadi, Kabadi, Kabadi, Kabadi, Kabadi,  
I am French .....Kabadi, Kabadi  
I am Indian.....Kabadi, Kabadi.  
Kabadi, Kabadi,  
I am French and Indian together,  
I am American as well,  
I am Iraqi too  
Kabadi, Kabadi, ..... Kabadi, Kabadi.  
I am both, caught in the NO MAN'S LAND  
Lake a penguin drenched in oil slick,  
So Kabadi, Kabadi  
Saying Kabadi – Indian - Kabadi – Pakistani  
Who is Pakistani, who is Indian  
Doing Kabadi, Kabadi,  
I am a soldier too doing kabadi kabadi  
And while doing kabadi kabadi the lungs have come out  
And fallen in the enemy's territory  
But the corpse has returned to the base  
To narrate the game :kabadi kabaddi  
How Kabadi goes on and on in  
No Man's Land between the fences.  
Let them watch and enjoy.  
So kabadi kabadi  
I am Indian Hindu  
I am Bangladeshi Muslim too  
I am a snake charmer too  
I am a Hindu Kashmiri and a Kashmiri Muslim too,  
Doing Kabadi kabadi in Delhi,  
home of Kabadi player is here there, everywhere.  
I am one two and many more, together,  
Mixing light and air  
And water, to become water which gushes out  
To do Kabadi Kabadi  
On the earth  
So Kabadi, Kabadi  
All the time.....  
I have been doing kabadi kabadi  
While demolishing the stupid wall between Germany's East and West  
Now I don't do kabadi kabadi there, but I do kabadi kabadi  
between Korea's North and Korea's South,  
though they don't play this game anymore  
unlike India's Kashmir and Pakistan's Kashmir,  
So watch....  
I am a Tibetan as well doing kabadi kabadi  
While crossing the Chinese line...  
So kabadi kabadi  
I Sing.... Will you ?



# Locating Subversion In the Mundane

By RAVNEET PARAM, (ISD) INDIA

**SUBVERSION** is often perceived as something grand; huge rallies, scores of protestors with flags of varying ideological hues, chanting songs, slogans while walking across roads, crossing every obstacle which come their way. However, subversive practices can be seen as something that is all around us, and is expressed in various ways in our day to day life. For example, wearing a sleeveless blouse can be equally transgressive as marrying a person from another caste/religion. Rolling one's eyes at someone's distasteful comment is a way to show one's resentment. Our lives are marked by various battles at multiple levels. It doesn't, however, always need to be chaotic. It is this mundanity and everydayness of subversive practices that this article will explore in details.

Durga, during our morning ritual of chatting while sipping a cup of tea, made a comment which stuck with me. *Society walon ko kaaten* she said laughingly, while we were discussing how stray dogs in a residential complex where I stay have been attacking people. She mentioned that dogs are attacking domestic workers disproportionately and how the dogs should instead attack residents of the complex. Durga, as some of you may know, helps me with household chores, hails from Bihar and lives with her children and husband in Delhi. She has been with me for more than a year and we often spend early mornings talking about our respective worlds- our desires and a melancholic acceptance of our struggles as women in a society marked by the patriarchy.

An ethnographic engagement with

stray dogs may be out of my reach, however I do want to refer to Durga's prompt retort. A witty undercurrent lies in her statement. It is not merely resentment towards a group of people but a resentment towards an oppressor class. I, however, am aware of the danger of imposing my own understanding of class dynamic on Durga, especially given separate as well as hierarchical class locations that we respectively come from. My year-long association with her enables me to understand a presence of resentment and the underlined meaning of her wit. Her resentment towards her *oppressors* is often expressed through remarks filled with humor. When I say oppressor, I do not mean any one individual but the oppressor class which thrives professionally and personally at the backs of migrant labourers forced to work for meagre wages.

It is her refusal to be coerced by the domination of authority. Authority can have various manifestations, ranging from a guard who sits at the gate of a residential complex to the State which requires one to constantly prove legitimacy of their identity. It becomes all the more difficult for people working for daily wages as standing in a queue to get an Aadhar Card or Ration Card, BPL Card, Voter ID, Bank Account and so on, entails losing out on a day's wage.

James Scott in his ethnographic work on peasants in Malaysia, underlines how the *weak*, more often than not, do not unite to violently overthrow structural oppression or they do not come in a direct conflict with the State. They, Scott argues, use small



invisible tactics to not get subsumed by domination. Some of the examples he gives are foot dragging, non-compliance, shoddy work etc.

I want to use Scott's deliberation on *subversion* to unpack Durga's statement. Subversion, or being subversive, in common parlance is usually understood as a head on conflict with the authority. As long as it is not a direct clash, it is not subversive *enough*. Vanguard of most mass movements have this tendency to quantify a protest according to an imagined parameter of hubbub. I don't, however, intend to say that it isn't important but to limit the definition of subversion is what I, and a vast scholarship I adhere to, have a problem with. An incessant and almost compulsive desire to view subversion from a narrow lens discourages a thorough engagement with everyday contexts which create myriad forms of subversions every minute.

Durga's statement is mundane enough to not warrant any attention but again, it is precisely the mundanity which makes it important. It is a recognition of one's location within the system of hierarchies and a simultaneous assertion of not getting tied

down by its limited definition. When she makes this statement, she is not only speaking as a working woman but a woman belonging to a specific class location. She chooses where to vent, stays quiet when is needed. Her silence, however, is not a marker of subservience but a path she chooses to navigate an unjust world. She recognizes unjustness and she neither justifies nor accepts it.

She makes fun of her employers, of their lifestyle, of their eating habits, of their inability to keep their houses clean. It could be interpreted as mere gossip but a deep exploration of subversive practices compels us to not circumscribe its potential. 'Gossip' also happens within a realm where there is mutual recognition of unjustness of the world. It also follows certain rules. It does not happen everywhere or with everyone.

To me these moments- no matter how fractured or abrupt they may be- underline that subversive practices are not always magnificently visible. They are around us, all the time. The responsibility lies with us to engage with them, take inspiration from them and keep moving to create a world of our dreams.



# How Pink Became The Colour of Resistance

By HARRIET FLETCHER

**FROM** the blush pink of royal mistresses to the hot pink of tabloid party girls, pink has gained a reputation for being a provocative colour for those who dare to wear it.

Despite its various shades and the complexities of its cultural significance, it is a colour that is often branded with the same connotations of feminine frivolity and excess – whether girlish and innocent or womanly and erotic.

So much so that worshippers at a North London church were ordered to remove pink chairs after an ecclesiastical judge claimed that the choice of colour scheme could “cause puzzlement”.

This pink panic invites the question: why is pink so controversial?

A brief glimpse at its rather colourful history in the Western world reveals associations that both shape and challenge what pink means.

## PINK'S PAST

According to historian Valerie Steele, the birth of pink in modern fashion began in the 18th century. By this period, pink had become the colour of choice among courtly elites of the Western world, including royalty and aristocrats.

Developments in dye making and the French court's penchant for cutting-edge garments provided the perfect pairing to begin pink's success as an emerging fashion staple.

Perhaps the most instrumental influence on pink's power was Madame de Pompadour – the mistress of King Louis XV. She was often portrayed by the painter François Boucher sporting her signature pink gowns and shoes,

most notably in his 1759 piece *Madame de Pompadour*.

In his 1758 painting, *Madame de Pompadour at Her Toilette*, she is shown applying rouge from a box of cosmetics – the blushed cheeks implying female sexuality. For Steele, the colour pink in this period becomes attached to both the frivolity of French high fashion and the eroticising of white femininity.

From the 18th century court to the 20th century home, pink gained further traction in the 1950s. As British professor of design history Penny Sparke writes: “Linked with the idea of female childhood, [pink] represented the emphasis on distinctive gendering that underpinned 1950s society, ensuring that women were women and men were men.”

Whether adorning first ladies, Hollywood stars or housewives, pink in this era represented a traditional femininity grounded in fixed gender roles.

Marilyn Monroe's iconic pink gown in *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* (1953) paired with her typecast “dumb blonde” film roles and her pin-up pastwork together to reinforce the star as a sex symbol to be desired by audiences. As film scholar Richard Dyer argues, Monroe represented the epitome of sex in conservative 1950s American society.

On the other end of the scale, the first lady of the United States Mamie Eisenhower – wife of President Dwight D Eisenhower (1953-1961) – cultivated an image of the ideal housewife through her famous “First Lady Pink” looks.

Her stunning 1953 inaugural outfit was a sparkling pink gown embroidered with more

than 2,000 rhinestones. She was well-known for her love of all things pink and transformed the White House with this colourful décor, so much so that the household staff called it a “Pink Palace”.

### PUNK AND PROTEST

Beyond the 1950s, pink moved away from its associations of conformity and took on a new purpose: resistance.

Paul Simonon, bassist for English punk band The Clash, famously said that “pink is the only true rock and roll colour”.

We can certainly see this in the way that punk musicians reappropriate the sweet and girlish connotations of pink to create subversive performances.

For her 1999 performance at Glastonbury, Hole’s Courtney Love – notorious for her raw and raucous vocals – unexpectedly swapped her rebellious grunge girl look for a pink costume of ballet slippers and fairy wings.

Pink is also the colour of feminist activism. The 2017 women’s march saw protesters taking to streets in pink “pussy hats”.

They were responding to a recording of then president Donald Trump, in which he boasted about grabbing women “by the pussy”.

This explicit connection between pink, female genitalia and activism is a feminist statement that emphasises women’s lack of autonomy over their own bodies in a patriarchal society.

### PINK RECLAIMED

The connotations of pink are not fixed, but malleable. Whether worn by film stars, musicians or celebrities, the colour takes on new meanings through irony and reclamation.

The 2001 film *Legally Blonde* subverts the gendered “dumb blonde” stereotypes associated with wearing pink by following the successes of a sorority girl who goes to law school.

When Madonna donned her pink *Material Girl* look, she positioned herself as the new Marilyn Monroe: a blonde bombshell for the era of Second Wave Feminism. She reworked Monroe’s tragic stardom into a narrative about female empowerment and survival.

On TikTok, the #Bimbo trend involves feminine-presenting content creators finding inspiration in the once derogatory “bimbo” label. Their videos reclaim the label as a playful aesthetic and a new feminist lifestyle.

Despite its longstanding associations with feminine frivolity and excess, pink consistently proves itself to be a transgressive colour. It moves with the times and does not shy away from parodying its own past.

If Paris Hilton’s surprise runway appearance earlier this year in sparkling pink Versace bridal wear tells us anything, it’s that pink should never be underestimated. It still has the power to shock, fascinate and make a statement.

*Courtesy : [www.scroll.in](http://www.scroll.in)*



# What The Burqa and The Bindi (And The Hijab) Stand For in Our Books, and in Our Current Lives

By TRISHA GUPTA, INDIA

**THERE'S** a scene in Prayaag Akbar's 2017 novel *Leila* that never made it to the Netflix adaptation. In a not-too-distant dystopian future of water shortage, Riz and Shalini throw a grand poolside party for Leila's third birthday. The children get their fill of inflatable slides, the parents of champagne. It's a posh, Westernised crowd, where the women are comfortable leaving a shirt slightly unbuttoned, or showing some leg through the slit in a long dress. So Shalini's sister-in-law Gazala stands out by being "sheathed in a flowing single-pleat abaya... with a dusty-pink silk hijab that brings out her alabaster complexion."

"Cheeks glowing with rouge," Akbar's description continues. "This is probably as much sun as she ever gets." The bitchiness is explainable as Shalini's, not the author's. But given Akbar's otherwise nuanced characterisations, Gazala seems an easy stand-in for tradition-bound Muslim femininity. She is somehow both decorative and covered up, and never gets to speak. Her burqa does the talking.

Earlier, Shalini's reluctance to live in the Muslim sector with her husband's family is also routed through the veil. "Look, no disrespect to Gazala..." she tells her brother-in-law Naz. "But I don't want my daughter in a burqa." In response, Naz shames Shalini – for offering him a

beer, for not knowing that her maid has taken her child out. And Gazala, his hijab-wearing wife, gets held up as the contrast to the liberated, cosmopolitan Shalini: "She might not know as much about the world as you. But she knows our culture."

## TYPECASTING THE BURQA

The fact that Gazala's burqa stands in for her is disappointing, but not surprising. No matter where one looks, it seems that the burqa comes to us always already loaded with meaning – and rarely a positive one. In Indian popular culture, it has long been trotted out either as a comic disguise worn by the Hindi film hero, from Shammi Kapoor and Rishi Kapoor to the three musketeers in *Delhi Belly*, or as a symbol of women's oppression. Sometimes, as in the dubious Islamicate subplot of the recent Ayushmann Khurrana starrer *Dream Girl*, it is both.

Feminists don't necessarily do better: even a thoughtful film like Alankrita Srivastava's *Lipstick Under My Burkha* can only see the burqa as the agent of the teenaged Rehana's oppression. Zoya Akhtar's *Gully Boy* is a welcome exception, giving us in Alia Bhatt's lovely Safeena a headscarf-wearing Muslim girl who is neither a prude nor a pushover. Bhatt is also burqa-clad in Meghna Gulzar's superb *Raazi*, where her fetching coloured hijab does fascinating triple duty as good



Muslim, good daughter-in-law – and spy.

In Alice Albinia's 2011 novel *Leela's Book*, too, the burqa has the quality of subterfuge. First, an upper class Hindu woman purchases it secretly, hiding it from her liberal Muslim husband. Then her young Muslim maid Aisha takes it from its hiding place, wearing it to walk through her own neighbourhood unrecognised. It is an "Arab-style burqa", heavy and black "with some gauzy thin material over the eyes", writes Albinia, such as "some women in the basti [Nizamuddin] now wore".

It allows Aisha to rescue the man she loves from unjust police custody, but Albinia the author cannot resist describing her character's experience of wearing it as a limiting one. The burqa is too big for Aisha; the tree canopy seems denser and darker through it; her lover does not recognise her in it: "he peered at her, disturbed by the distance this... fabric put between them: it was as if they were seeing each other through a crowd of people". The liberal non-burqa-wearer, it seems, can only attribute to the burqa-wearer a sense of alienation from herself and the world

### A SIGN OF UNFREEDOM

One way to normalise the burqa's existence is not to dwell on it. In Altaf Tyrewala's whipsmart novel *No God In Sight* (2005), we meet multiple Muslim female characters without being told if they veil. And when someone does, that doesn't become the important thing about them. Jeyna-Bi's burqa attracts attention because it is fluorescent orange, not simply because she's got one. In the accepting cultural mix of Tyrewala's Mumbai, a burqa can be a topic of banter, it can get sadly soiled when poor Jeyna-Bi throws up her portion of a wedding feast. It can be, in effect, just another piece of clothing.

But the space for such a perspective is steadily narrowing. Since mid-December 2019, as unprecedented numbers of Indian

Muslim women have emerged into public space to protest against the discriminatory religious basis of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), the burqa has become even more heavily charged with meaning. Not all the women protesting in Shaheen Bagh (or the many female-led sit-ins it inspired nationwide) wore a veil or headscarf. But the fact that so many did seems to have caused great bafflement and unease.

Because the burqa has become, for anyone who does not wear one, a sign of unfreedom. And if you aren't free, how can you possibly be out on the streets, resisting an oppressive state? How can you be the living embodiment of oppressed Muslim womanhood that the Hindu right claims to be saving from Muslim men, and simultaneously be leading a political protest?

And so, according to the Sangh's Whatsapp factory, the lakhs of women who sat out in the wind and weather for three months, while braving police lathis, abusive goons and horrific communal violence, were not doing it to claim their threatened rights as Indian citizens, but for Rs 500 a day and free biryani. What is chilling is that so many other Indians want to believe that canard.

We saw another glimpse of that suspicion and ill-will on March 23, when the mainstream media reported the police destruction of the gloriously democratic art-filled protest sites at Shaheen Bagh and elsewhere as some sort of desperate public health measure – as though the women had not already vacated the sites.

### WEARING AN IDENTITY

This tarring of burqa-clad women as not being legitimate citizens with legitimate concerns dovetailed perfectly with the Prime Minister's statement in December that those protesting against the CAA-NRC "can be recognised by their clothes". That shamelessly partisan taunting of a community fighting its own legal

marginalisation has sparked a new kind of battle, with people turning their marked bodies into sites of symbolic display.

Refusing to be shamed for wearing burqas, caps or other identifiable markers of their community, many Muslim protesters have instead responded by embracing them. But histories of religious populism elsewhere suggest that such a move can be a double bind. In Meena Kandasamy's recent novel *Exquisite Cadavers*, a Tunisian film-school student in London finds his white British teachers pushing him to tell his country's history through the hijab.

A French-influenced secular diktat banned headscarves in Tunisia in 1981 – so when the dictatorship was unseated, wearing the hijab became a form of community identity. The Islamic right exploited people's desire to reclaim their religion, and a country where a hijab-wearing "Arabian Barbie" had once caused a liberal outcry, Kandasamy writes, became one that provided the largest number of foreign fighters to the dreaded Daesh.

Closer home, as the recent violence in North East Delhi makes clear, such defiant wearing of religious identity on the body reaches its tragic, terrifying limits when social fissures widen into the abyss of communal violence. Symbols have power: they can mark us or unmark us, divide or unite. In Leela's *Book*, the same Hindu woman once buys a packet of gold-embossed bindis for the maid Aisha, only to have her Muslim husband tell her, "They don't wear bindis".

### FEAR AND LOATHING

Among the fascinating ways in which women have chosen to express cross-community solidarities these last few months is the interlacing of burqas and bindis. The young poet Nabiya Khan's words that rang out across many anti-CAA-NRC posters: "Aayega Inqilab, Pehen Ke Burqa Bindi Aur Hijab".

Optimists of various stripes are bringing bindis and burqas together. But those whose minds are filled with poison can only see conquest, not mingling. To such commentators, like the virulently anti-Muslim "Katyayani" on hindupost.in, a poster saying "Women Will Destroy Hindu Rashtra" with a fierce female face wearing both a bindi and a headscarf, with sunglasses on her head and her tongue out, looks like a "demonised" Kali "surrendering" to the Islamic veil.

Another anti-CAA-NRC poster, of three women wearing both bindis and burqas, underscored by Faiz Ahmed Faiz's now-viral poetic challenge to all dictatorships "Hum Dekhenge" ("We shall see"), seems to the same writer a call to "to 'free' bindi-sporting Hindu women by converting them into burqa-clad ones".

Communal polarisation now involves a repeated insistence that the way people look is who they are – and yet when what is on display doesn't fit the entrenched majoritarian narrative, then suddenly it is dismissed. "Bharatiya women of non-sanatani faith are also sometimes seen sporting the bindi, but that is just how a demography raised in mixed-culture behaves," declares Katyayani when faced with the sociological fact of non-Hindu bindi-wearers.

No God In Sight contains a biting scene in which a young (upper middle class Hindu) wife must report her missing (Muslim) husband to the police. She wears her most saffron-like nylon sari, and borrows a mangalsutra and a bindi from her maid Gangu-bai, hoping that the Mumbai police will treat her complaint more seriously if she looks like a practising Hindu. They tell her to go to Pakistan.

*Courtesy : [www.scroll.in](http://www.scroll.in)*



# THE ORGANISATION OF THE ARTS

By **CHRISTOPHER CAUDWELL**



....Continued from previous  
issue

**THE** emotional attitude of the neurotic or the psychotic towards reality is permanent. That of the poet in creation, or the reader in experiencing, is temporary. The essence of genuine illusion is that it is non-symbolic and plastic. The neurotic is deluded because the complex is in his unconscious; he is unfree. The artist is only illuded because the complex is in his conscious; he is free. We take up the attitude when reading a poem, and experience the emotions, and then when the poem has been experienced the attitude is thrown away. The attitude was released by the conscious emotions; as the neurotic attitude may be unfrozen if he becomes conscious of the complex; as the sleeper wakes if the stimulus demands willed-action. The artist releases the autonomous complex in a work of art and “forgets” it, goes on to create anew, to experiment again with the eternal adaptation of the genotype to its eternally changing environment. If poetry becomes religion, if the non-symbolic is taken to be symbolic, the emotional attitude becomes frozen like the neurotic attitude. Thus the value of poetry’s illusions in securing catharsis, as compared to religion’s, is that they are known for illusion, and as compared to dream, that they are social.

If poetry’s emotional attitudes pass,

what is their value? It is this; experience leaves behind it a trace in memory. It is stored by the organism and modifies its action. The Universe to-day is not what it was a million years ago, because it is that much more full of experience, and that much more *historic*. Society is not what it was two thousand years ago, because its culture has lived through much and experienced much. So too a wise man, in the course of his life, has endured and experienced.. He has not acquired knowledge of external reality only, for such a man we call merely “learned,” and think of his learning as something arid, devoid of richness. The wise man has also learned about *himself*. He has had emotional experience. It is because of this double experience that we call him wise, with a ripeness, a poise, a sagacity given to him by all his history. Of course neither science nor art are substitutes for concrete living: they are guide-books to it.

The wisdom of a culture, our social heritage, inheres both in its science and its art. Either alone is one-sided wisdom, but both together give ripe sagacity, the vigour and serenity of an organism sure of itself in the face of external reality.

What, then, is the illusion of art? In what does it consist? Not in the affective element, for artistic emotion is consciously experienced, and is therefore real and true. Real and true as applied to emotion mean, simply: Has it existed in reality? – Has it been present in a psyche? The emotion of

poetry is certainly real in this sense. The illusion of poetry must therefore inhere in the piece of external reality to which the emotion is attached – in poetry to the meaning, in novel to the story. The purpose of this piece of external reality was to provide a subject for the affect, because an affect is a conscious judgment, and must therefore be a judgment of something. Art is therefore affective experimenting with selected pieces of external reality. The situation corresponds to a scientific experiment. In this a selected piece of external reality is set up in the laboratory. It is a mock world, an imitation of that part of external reality in which the experimenter is interested. It may be an animal's heart in a physiological salt solution, a shower of electrified droplets between two plates, or an aerofoil in a wind tunnel. In each case there is a "fake" piece of the world, detached so as to be handled conveniently, and illusory in this much, that it is not actually what we meet in real life, but a selection from external reality arranged for our own purposes. It is an "as if." In the same way the external reality symbolised in scientific reasoning is never all external reality, or a simple chunk of it, but a selection from it. The difference between art's piece of reality and science's is that science is only interested in the relation of that selected piece to the world from which it is drawn, whereas art is interested

in the relation between the genotype and the selected piece of reality, and therefore ignores the whole world standing behind the part. If by the words "mock world," we denote the illusory piece of external reality, the symbolical part alike of poetry and science, we get this relation:

Hence it is just "illusion" that art and science have in common. The distinctive concern of science is the world of external reality; art is occupied with the world of internal reality. The ordering or logical manifold characteristic of scientific language is that internal structure in its mock world projected from the relationships of external reality. The ordering or affective manifold characteristic of artistic language is that internal structure in its mock world projected from the relationships of internal reality. Hence another schematic representation:

But since the genotype is itself a part of external reality, we can also represent it thus:

Hence science and art together are able to symbolise a complete universe which includes the genotype itself. Each alone is partial, but the two halves together make a whole, not as fitted together, but as they interpenetrate man's struggle with Nature in the process of

*to be continued...*

*Courtesy : Illusion and Reality*

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