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DASTAVEZI
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About Dastavezi

Dastavezi the Audio-Visual South Asia is an international peer-reviewed, open-access e-journal, which seeks to reposition the audio-visual as a central mode of knowing and thinking about South Asia. It is the first peer-reviewed journal connecting scholarly research from and about South Asia with audio-visual practices.

The journal is committed to promoting various modes of knowing by offering a platform for knowledge production and research on South Asia in audio, visual, audio-visual, and text forms. It is motivated by our desire to enhance the understanding of contemporary political, economic, and social developments in South Asia. Acknowledging the proliferation of audio-visual material in academic research, the abundance of camera-based research in ethnographic and regional scholarship, and the potential of documentary film to contribute to knowledge production, we consider the division between media practice and scholarly research to be mutually limiting. Instead, Dastavezi seeks to establish a platform for scholars and artists, to evolve new theoretical and practical epistemologies in their engagement with South Asia.

The journal incorporates audio, visual, audio-visual, and textual materials as equal outputs of academic research in order to nourish the various affordances emerging from the nexus between film production and academic writing. With its hybrid and open-access format, Dastavezi not only enables a dialogue between academics and audio-visual practitioners, but also provides an interested public with access to audio-visual productions on South Asia and the corresponding discussions.

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DASTAVEZI
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Witnessing in Solidarity.
Recording the Legacy of Shaheen Bagh through Visual Art

Fritzi-Marie Titzmann

Abstract

This article delves into the transformative power of art and media in shaping narratives of solidarity and resistance within the context of the historic Shaheen Bagh protests that unfolded in New Delhi during the winter of 2019/20. These protests, sparked by the contentious Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), witnessed a unique convergence of Muslim women as protest leaders. The gendered perception of the Muslim minority in India was subsequently redefined. The movement also introduced innovative forms of feminist solidarity and non-violent protest strategies, including the use of digital tools for transnational outreach. The article spotlights the artistic endeavors of two young women artists who utilized their creative talents to bear witness to the events and craft testimonials for posterity. Prarthna Singh's photo book, *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (2022), and Ita Mehrotra's graphic novel, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021), serve as case studies to investigate the processes of visually mediating the legacy of the Shaheen Bagh movement. Key aspects explored in this inquiry about witnessing and memory-making include the production and mediation of solidarity through art and media, the narratives conveyed by these visual works, prevalent visual tropes within works, the interplay of gender and resistance in their narratives, the new spaces opened up by these artistic interventions, and the positioning and framing of the artists themselves.

Keywords: Shaheen Bagh, solidarity, resistance, visual art, gender

Introduction

On December 15, 2019, residents of the neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh in New Delhi began an indefinite sit-in blockade on the Delhi-Noida highway. This followed the brutal police crackdown on peacefully protesting Jamia Millia University students. The ensuing 101 days of protest in the winter of 2019/20 against the new Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) were extraordinary in many ways. As documented by media reports and by a growing body of research literature, the movement featured Muslim women as protest leaders and thus contributed to a shift in the gendered perception of the Muslim minority in Indian and global media narratives (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020; Faisal 2020; Hashmi 2022; Kapoor 2022;). It also led to new forms of (feminist) solidarity and to the reappropriation of non-violent protest strategies (Bhatia 2021; Mitra 2023; Rai 2020; Sengupta 2021). These, in turn, made use of digital tools that facilitated the transnationalization of the movement (Basu 2021; Gajjala et al. 2023; Edwards et al. 2023; Edwards & Ford 2021). With its production of iconic images of students, veiled women, and grandmothers opposing a Hindu nationalist state apparatus, Shaheen Bagh became at once both a symbol of resistance and part of a counter-hegemonic national consciousness and memory for those who do not conform to the powerful Hindu nationalist political ideology in contemporary India.[1]

Art, especially street art and performances, came to be a distinct feature of the protest site. The art there was incorporated to communicate and build a collective identity (Ghosh 2020). Consequently, several artists took to documenting the events. This article introduces the works of two young women artists among the many who stood in solidarity on site. The two used their artistic capacities to bear witness and to produce testimonials for future generations. The question of how to remember and mediate the legacy of Shaheen Bhag is central for Prarthna Singh in her photo book *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (2022) and for Ita Mehrotra in her graphic novel *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021). Whereas photography is a classic visual medium, and hundreds of photographs of the events were published in the media, the graphic novel in question is situated in between literature, journalism, and visual art. It tells a story in the style of a report that includes interviews and features the artist herself on her quest to document what transpired in Shaheen Bagh. By means of these two examples, this article investigates practices of recording and representing the legacy of the

[1] I will not elaborate on the political background and timeline of the Shaheen Bagh protests as these are well documented elsewhere. For example, two detailed journalistic accounts were instantly published after the movement ended abruptly with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. See Mustafa (2020) and Salam (2020).

movement by examining the following questions: What is solidarity, and how can it be produced and mediated via art? Which narrative(s) of Shaheen Bhag do the respective works of Prarthna Singh and Ita Mehrotra communicate? What are the predominant visual tropes found in the two works? How do they link gender and resistance in their narratives? Which physical, affective, and discoursive spaces are opened up by their artistic intervention? How do the artists position themselves vis-à-vis their subjects and frame their work?

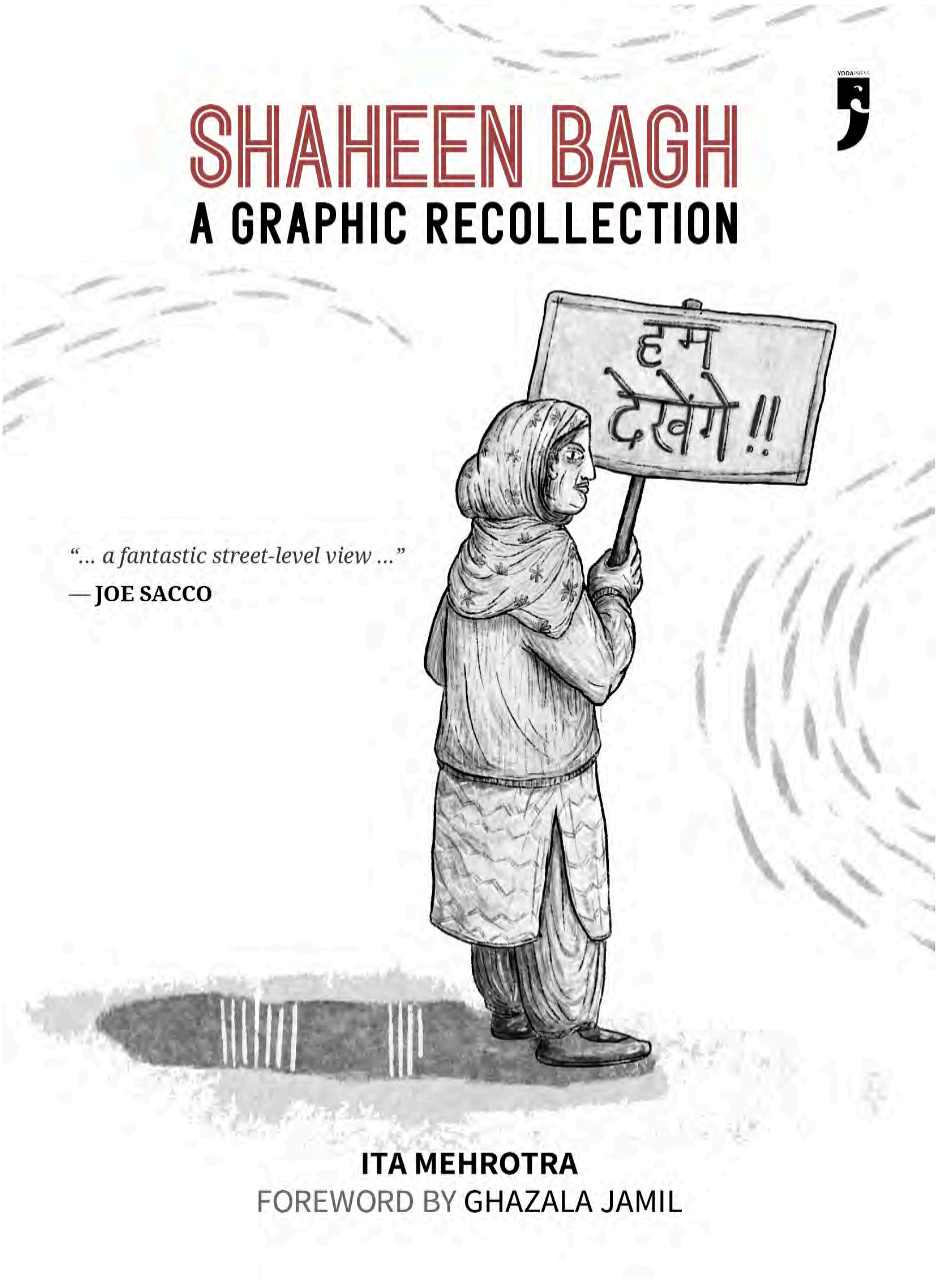

Figure 1: *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* by Ita Mehrotra (2021). © Yoda Press

Figure 2: *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh* (2022, 6-7) by Prarthna Singh. © Prarthna Singh

Methodologically, I carried out a visual and content analysis of the two works and conducted qualitative interviews with both artists (lasting about one hour each). These were enhanced by further in-person and email communication maintained in the process of furthering my analysis and writing.[2] With support of the software program MAXQDA,[3] I developed codes derived from my research questions and applied them in both the textual analysis of the interviews and in the visual analysis of the photographs and the graphic novel. I linked my own interpretation with the accounts offered by the artists and discussed those, while also consulting the existing research literature and considering central arguments contained therein.

Theoretical pretext: Solidarity, art, and collective remembering in social movements

McGarry et al. (2020, 16) state that the "performing of solidarity is created through different voices being heard." One way of making voices heard or protests seen is accomplished by means of protest aesthetics; these comprise the communicative,

[2] I especially want to thank Lara Kauter for her transcription of the interviews.

[3] MAXQDA is a software program designed for computer-assisted qualitative and mixed methods data, text, and multimedia analysis.

material, and performative culture of protests. These means of protest aesthetics create an alternative space for people to engage with politics (McGarry et al. 2020, 18f). In the past, mass media tended to shape almost exclusively the circulating representations of protest and protesters. In recent years, connected to the rise of social media and citizen journalism, the relevant research sought to shift its focus to the protesters themselves and, moreover, to how it is that they themselves document and produce their protest. This is done in a way that Cammaerts (2012, 125) terms "self-mediation" (see also: McGarry et al. 2020, 17; Bernárdez et al. 2019, Ahmed et al. 2017, Juris 2005, Dey 2018). Hence it enables more informed and widely circulated forms of "self-mediation." In the context of Shaheen Bagh, traditional protest media, such as leaflets, were used alongside digital tools for mobilization and documentation. Several scholars have examined strategies employed in digital activism and transnationalization of the anti-CAA movement (Bhatia & Gajjala 2020; Edwards et al. 2021; Edwards & Ford 2021; Basu 2021).

One of the central media spaces of resistance is visual activism (McGarry et al. 2020, 27). Visual activism refers to the use of visual elements, such as images, art, and multimedia as a means of promoting social and political change. It "works to record things, to represent, to signify, to make visible, to argue, to create affect, and the form can be frivolous or meaningless" (McGarry et al. 2020, 24). Visual culture can cut across language and "speak" about things that are not immediately visible. Writing specifically about the graphic narrative of protest, Salmi (2021) emphasizes that these narratives function as "intermedial texts": "[I]t is precisely when prose fails, or there are no words to be had, that the intermedial text bears witness to its failure and presents alternative avenues for confronting state force" (Salmi 2021, 171).

However, the two examples of the political artwork that emerged with the Shaheen Bagh protest movement at hand do feature textual components. The genre of the graphic novel usually combines text and images that together set the narrative. Unlike a conventional novel, the graphic storyline does not narrate everything in detail; certain passages remain purely visual. Singh's photos appear without captions but are integrated into a larger multimedia project, which includes writings. Singh is very active on social media and circulated some of the series' photographs prior to the book launch via her Instagram account (@prarthnasingh), adding text varying in length. Ita Mehrotra is also active on social media and regularly posted drawings from the protest site of Shaheen Bagh on her Instagram account (@ita_mehrotra) before the book was completed and published in 2021.

Figure 3: Instagram post by Ita Mehrotra during the ongoing protests in January 2020. Screenshot by author with permission by Ita Mehrotra.

Both productions are intended to make contributions toward shaping a collective memory of Shaheen Bagh. They were thoroughly and thoughtfully curated, embedded in the artists' narration of events, aesthetic choice, political and social position, as well as within the circulation of their media practices.

Collective memory of protest

Wertsch and Roediger understand collective memory as a space of contestation for control over the understanding of the past (2008, 319). The authors consider it more appropriate to speak of a collective remembering, a constant process that is intertwined with the present and tied to identity projects. The process of memory-

making occurs quasi simultaneously with the relevant events aided by the affordances of new media. Protestors film and photograph what they see and then post this on social networking platforms, sometimes in real-time, thereby producing an ever-expanding archive of images of protest events and of related self-representations (Cammaerts 2012, 125).

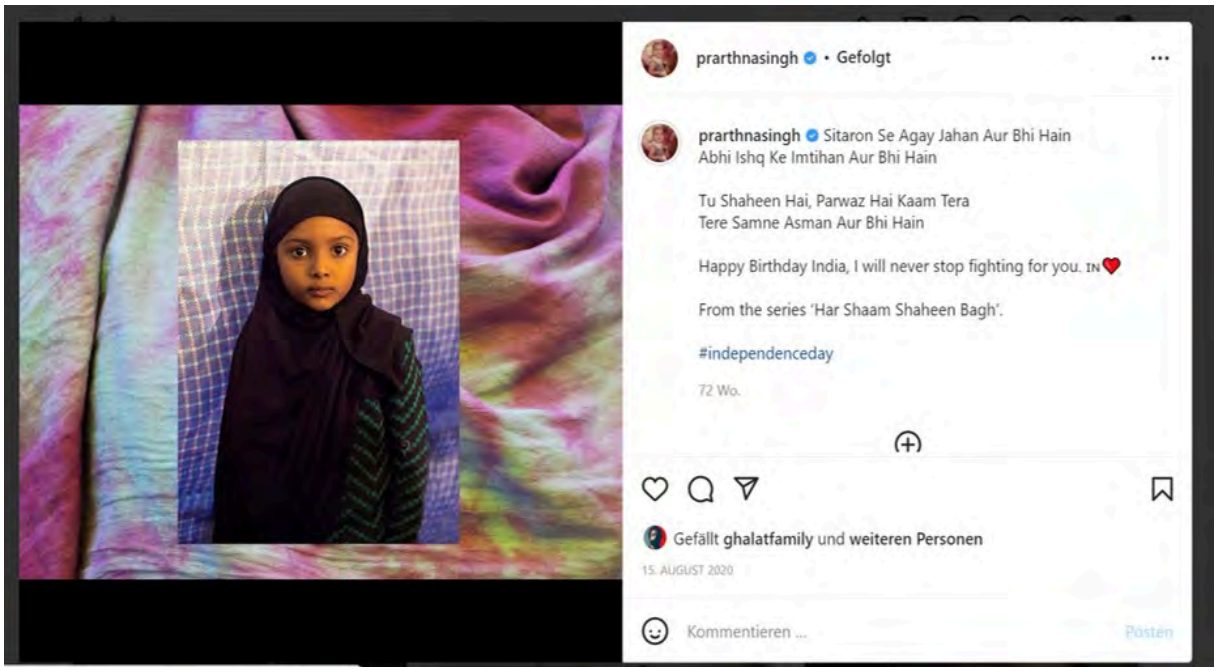

Figure 4: Instagram post by Prarthna Singh on Independence Day 2020, almost five months after the protest was dissolved. Screenshot by author with permission by Prarthna Singh.

In a recently edited volume, Merrill et al. (2020) examine the digital practices of social movements' memory work, focusing on curating, circulating, and claiming memories. Memory work refers to a process of exploring and reflecting on personal or collective memories, often with the aim of uncovering hidden or marginalized histories. In this context, the term "claiming" refers to a way of appropriating spaces—in particular digital—for suggesting counter-histories (Merrill et al. 2020, 17). The two artists discussed in this article engage in exactly these tactics, though not exclusively digital, of curating a living archive, circulating and also remediating a narrative that they would like to preserve as cultural memory. They are determined to shape the collective remembering with their own attempt to establish a counter version of the official state narrative about Shaheen Bagh.

Protest and witnessing: Two women–two books

Selected photographs from Prarthna Singh's photo series *Har Shaam Shaheen Bhag* were first published in the US-American photography magazine *Aperture* (summer 2021), where they appeared with an accompanying article by Kamayani Sharma. After some of her photos had circulated previously and repeatedly on Instagram, she herself finally published her photo book in 2022, in collaboration with the designers Sameer Kulavoor and Zeenat Kulavoor. It is a multi-media portrait with photographs, drawings, songs, letters, and other memorabilia.

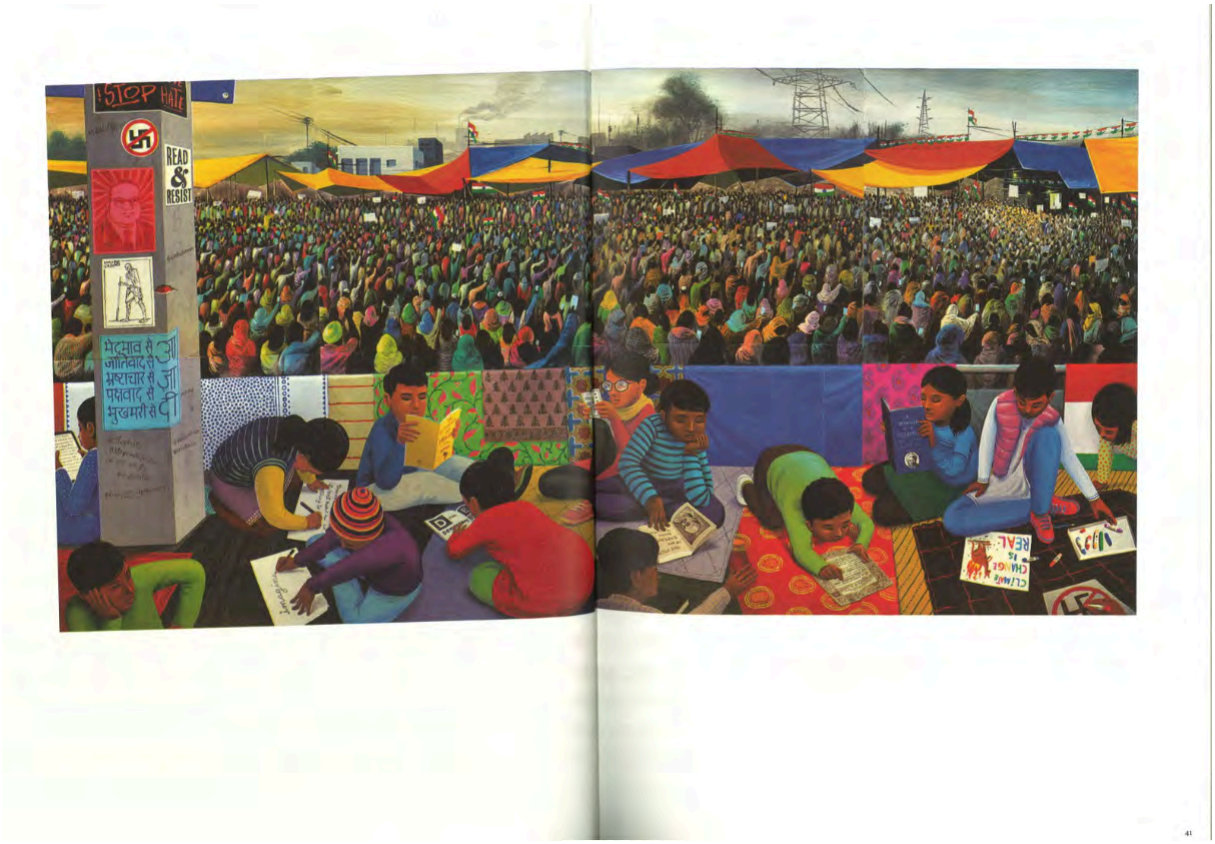

Figure 5: Drawing by Sameer Kulavoor titled "Read & Resist" (2020) in Singh (2022, 40-41). © Prarthna Singh

While portraits of women protesting are the core of Prarthna Singh's series, the book also features a comprehensive appendix with English, Hindi, and Urdu translations and with further information on the movement. Upon its launch, the book received very positive reviews in the press, including in *The Indian Express* (Fernando 2022) and in the *British Journal of Photography* (Fletcher 2022). At one point, Singh describes her motivations as such:

> *Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh is my attempt to resist the active erasure of a political moment, one that was brought to an abrupt halt with the onset of the pandemic and one that is scarcely addressed in popular discourse even two years later. This book bears witness to friendship, to love, to the possibility of joy in the face of violence.* (Singh 2022, appendix)

The photo series results from Singh's regular visits to the protest site and her interaction with the protesting women of all ages. Several women were involved in the book's creation by contributing their own writings or drawings.

Figure 6: Instagram story by Prarthna Singh: Book launch with the ladies of Shaheen Bagh, 2022. Screenshot by author with permission by Prarthna Singh.

As the book happened to be published during Ramadan 2022, Prarthna Singh, as seen in the company of this group of women, celebrated its launch with an *iftar*[4] in New Delhi. Forms of reciprocity are integral to Singh's work. The artist writes on the last pages of her book:

[4] The meal in which Muslims break their fast at sunset.

In the first week of January[,] I joined the Shaheen Bagh movement as a protestor. As friendships were struck, and meals were shared, I gradually began to make images. This growing intimacy soon took on a tactile form. For every portrait I made, I created an identical Polaroid or "jadoo ka kaagaz" ('magic paper') as they were playfully renamed, to give the women and children I photographed. A few days in, we had set up an impromptu photo studio, as my documentation became a community exercise. […] Har Shaam Shaheen Bagh was made across several days and nights, over innumerable meals of biryani, warm embraces and tender exchanges. Some of the portraits made onsite have been layered with images of shawls and burqas worn by fellow protestors, to evoke the camaraderie and kinship that formed the essence of the protest. (Singh 2022, appendix)

Figure 7: Prarthna Singh with two girls holding the polaroid pictures that they took at the impromptu photo studio in Shaheen Bagh. From harshaamshaheenbagh.com © Prarthna Singh

She explained how, in the process of producing the photographs included in the book, she used different mediums; these range from a Polaroid, a disposable camera, a medium format film camera, and a digital camera to her iPhone: “I also had to be often not visible, because as soon as you have a camera in your hand and you’re a woman, people also ask you questions. I want to make sure that I’m able to be there, not get caught and taken away somewhere” (Prarthna Singh, personal interview, 21.07.2021). Considering theories of media strategies of social movements, I would like to highlight two aspects of this project in particular. First, the act of self-publishing corresponds to the processes of curation, circulation, and of claiming memories that Merrill et al. (2020) describe. This act also produces a counternarrative in the very sense that Cammaerts (2012) understands self-mediation. Second, the act of witnessing precedes the process of self-publishing and corresponds to one of the three distinct (but not mutually exclusive) logics that activists ascribe to their protest actions. The logic of bearing witness to injustice operates through tactics that knowingly break what are considered unjust laws or tactics that cause symbolic provocation (Cammaerts 2012). While the book was still in progress, the project website explained:

> *This book will serve as evidence to the revolutionary spirit of the women of our country, an urgent and necessary document that celebrates the very core of our now endangered secular, democratic values. Two years in the making, our project is now in its final stages. Given today’s political climate, as independent artists we have decided to self-publish this body of work to retain complete creative and editorial control.*
> (harshaamshaheenbagh.com, accessed January 11, 2022)

Ita Mehrotra faced similar obstacles in finding a publisher for her graphic novel *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection*, which was finally published by the independent Yoda Press in 2021. Her highly acclaimed graphic novel tells the story of the Muslim women who started the protest at Shaheen Bagh.[5] It is based on conversations, interviews, and drawings that the artist made during her own participation in the protest.

[5] See reviews, i.e.: Raina (2022); Ht Weekend (2021); Khalid (2021).

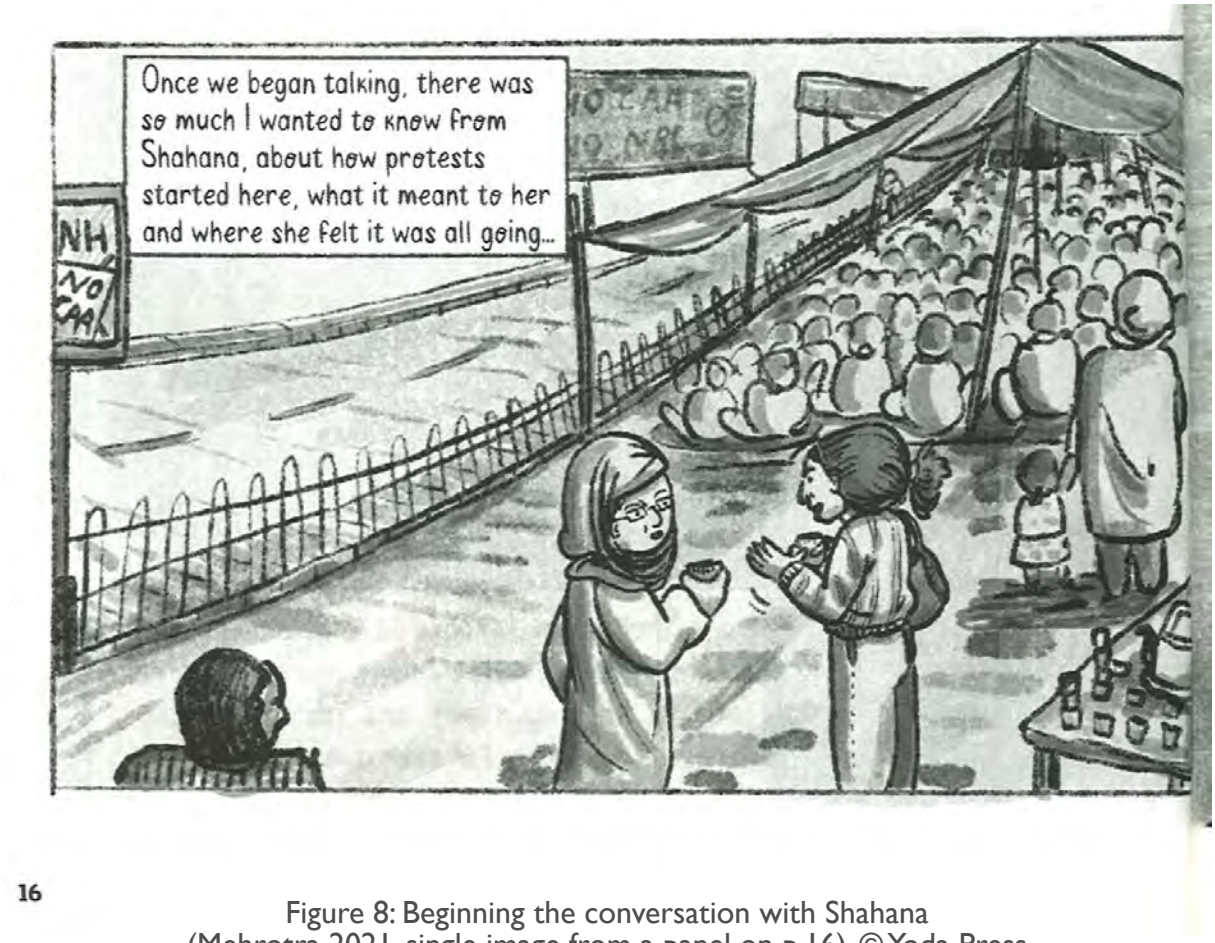

Figure 8: Beginning the conversation with Shahana
(Mehrotra 2021, single image from a panel on p.16). © Yoda Press

Mehrotra's book appears journalistic in its retelling of the story of the protest. Mitra refers to Salmi's (2021) conception of graphic novels as intermedial texts, (2023, 3) explaining that "in utilising a graphic medium for memorialising such protest, the affects used for carrying out resistance through the protest could be portrayed more effectively through using this 'intermedial text' rather than through solely prose or the spoken word." Mehrotra depicts strategies that produce affects of safety and emotional solidarity through sharing food, songs, and artwork. In her excellent analysis of those, Mitra (2023) explores the interplay between collectivity, mobilizing emotions, and political effectiveness in depth.

Ita Mehrotra situates herself in a feminist political trajectory. She does so via the graphic novel genre, which is new in the Indian art world, having emanated from Europe to become an elite subculture in India. Mehrotra classifies it as being both an English speaking, urban niche with a limited readership and a new and flexible genre that allows for experimentation:

> *That's exciting also as artists. […] Some comic makers say it is that because there's no long legacy of like a hundred years of comics here, it's open to a lot of flexibility of what we want to do at the moment.*
> (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15.10.2023)

She sees comic makers also as digital art pioneers who have been at the forefront in using these social media platforms as radical art tools. Her act of illustrating the women's testimonies and conversations, like Singh's photographs, relates to the strategy of self-mediation. For it creates space for the voices of those who intitiate, carry out, and represent a protest; it sustains a counter-narrative; and it follows—like Singh's work—a logic of bearing witness.

Telling a story of hope and solidarity: A contextualized visual analysis

At the center of the visual imagery in both works are images of protesting women.

By foregrounding not only students but mothers, grandmothers, and children, the visual imagery emphasizes women of all ages as active agents. The gendered particularity of women in the act of leading a protest centered around the question of who can claim citizenship has additional symbolic value. For they are visible making politics in a way that counters structural processes that render women invisible and that fail to circulate their contributions and voices in political movements and in history in general (Rai 2020; Sengupta 2021; Hashmi 2022; Kapoor 2022; Günther 2023). During one of our conversations, Ita Mehrotra referred to earlier movements like the Chipko Andolan.[6] There, women led the protests, before the names of only male leaders began appearing in history books. Both works intervene exactly at this juncture by making minority women visible and audible in their resistance and efforts to document the empowering dynamics of this historical moment. In her written introduction to Prarthna Singh's photo series in *Aperture*, Sharma observes the "reciprocal gaze" of Singh's photo subjects.

[6] The Chipko Andolan (movement) of the 1970s and 1980s has presented a leading example of a nonviolent social and ecological movement by rural villagers in the sub-Himalayan region, particularly women, aimed at protecting trees and forests slated for government-backed logging.

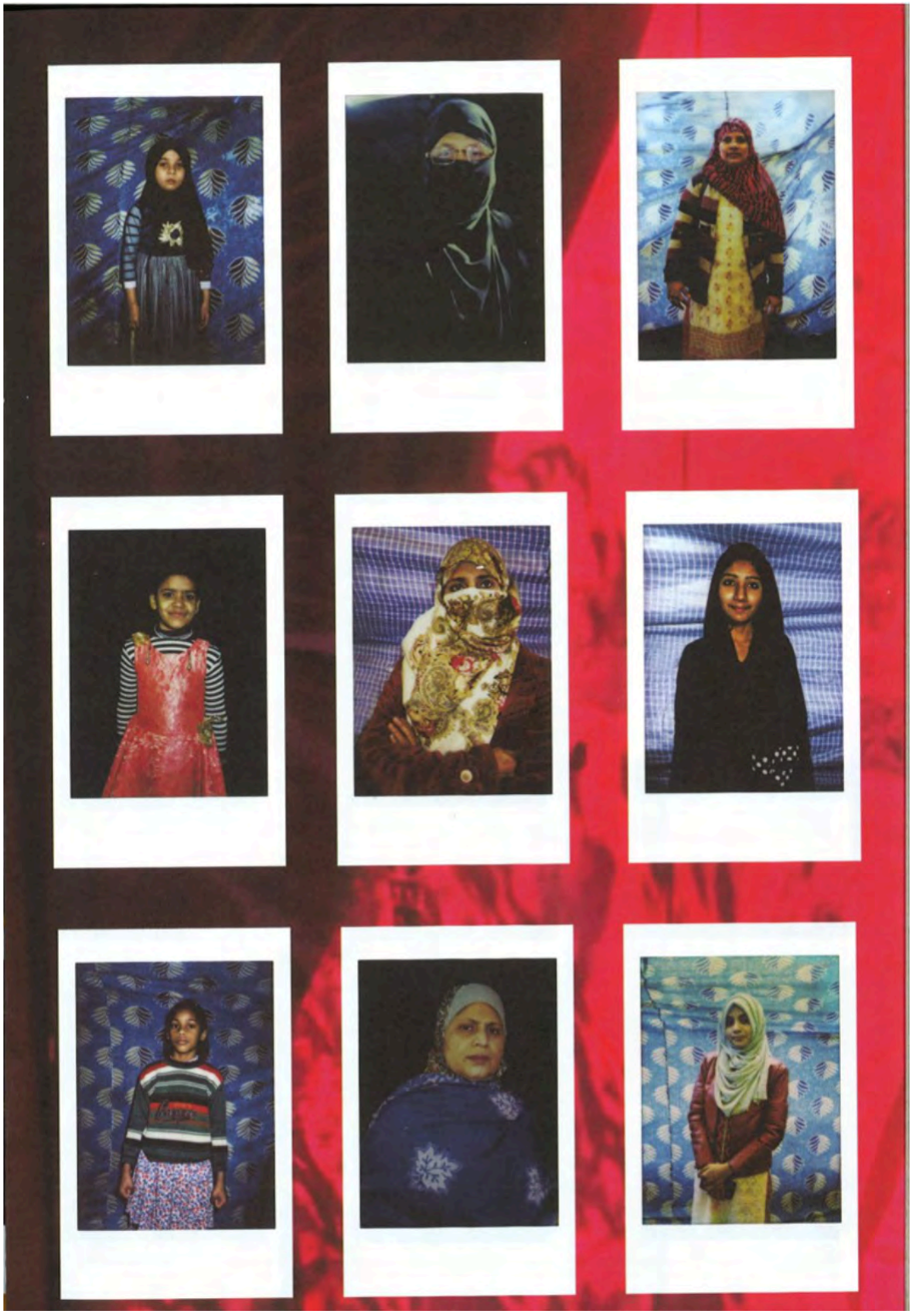

Figure 9: Polaroid images in Singh (2022, 26). © Prarthna Singh

Figure 10: Discussing the evolution of muslim women's political agency in Mehrotra (2021, 106). © Yoda Press

In both photographic and political terms, Sharma describes this gaze as being quite familiar, as one that is characteristic of average women. She adds that "Singh's medium-shot compositions emphasize how radical is the very presence of these oft-marginalized, singular bodies on camera, and by extension, as a collective in the agora" (Sharma 2021, 126).

Figure 11: Singh (2022, 78-79). © Prarthna Singh

Visualized solidarity

Mitra discusses what she calls "anti-individualistic tactics," including hospitality, female bonding, confidentiality, defiance (of gender roles), empathy, love, and comradeship. She considers these as affects that are in circulation at the protest site and that are represented in Mehrotra's graphic recollection (Mitra 2023, 4). Not only Mehrotra visualizes solidarity with the reference to sharing clothes, food, and responsibilities for providing care. In Singh's portraits, too, the background of shawls used during the protest refers to the cold winter nights. For those posed an additional challenge to the perseverance of the protestors. But this background also suggests an ethics of care and reciprocal solidarity among the women protesters.

Figure 12 (left): Singh (2022, 13)
© Prarthna Singh

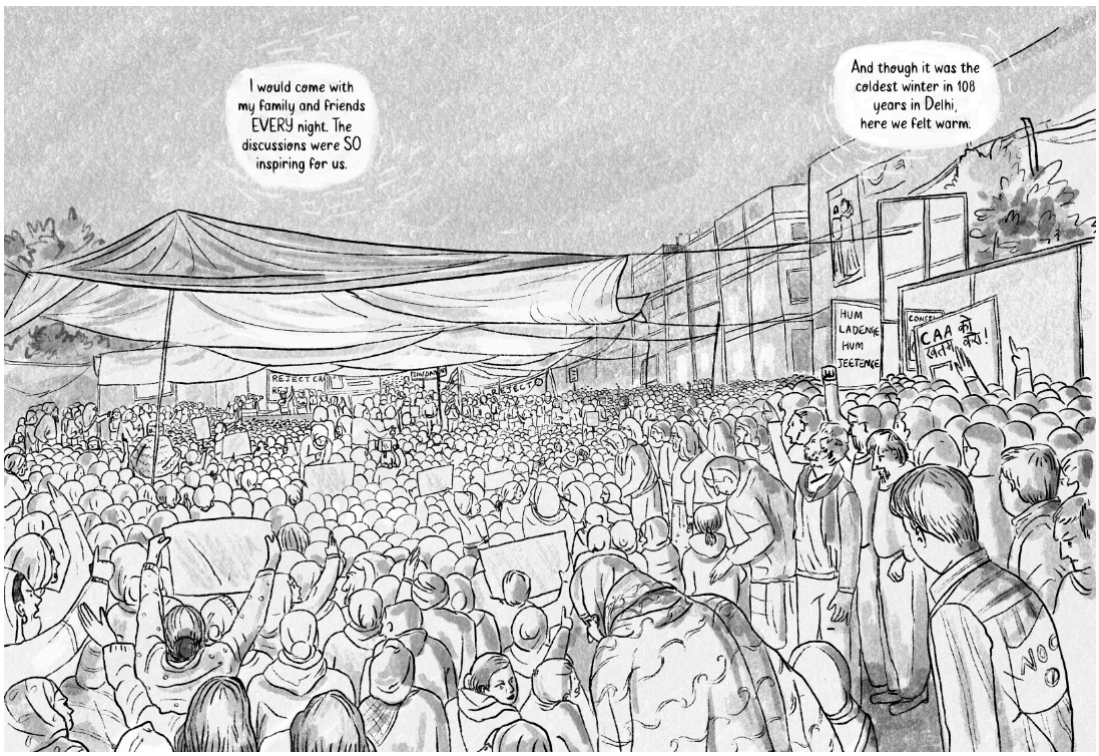

Figure 13: Mehrotra (2021, 52-53)
© Yoda Press

Mehrotra draws images of protesting masses and includes their accounts of how it was that people felt "warm" despite the cold, indicating the affective ties that kept the protestors together and their spirits up. What Mitra (2023) terms "anti-individualistic tactics," Bhatia and Gajjala refer to as an "ethics of care." These, they argue, are closely linked to certain practices of "organic" solidarity that is constituted through the sharing of food, care, and organizational responsibilities.

The protest strategy of mobilizing affects through food has its roots in the Sikh religious tradition of *langar*. In several of Mehrotra's images, it is men who are depicted as preparing tea or food to support the protesting women. "The use of langar by Muslim and Sikh men and women to combat Muslim persecution under Hindu fanaticism recontextualizes *langar* in a unique expression of secularism. At the same time," observes Mitra, "it challenges gender roles in both communities, underlining the importance of seeing Shaheen Bagh as a feminist radical social protest" (2023, 7). Rakopoulos (2016) described such strategies of mutual care as a re-contextualisation of village-hood in times of crisis.

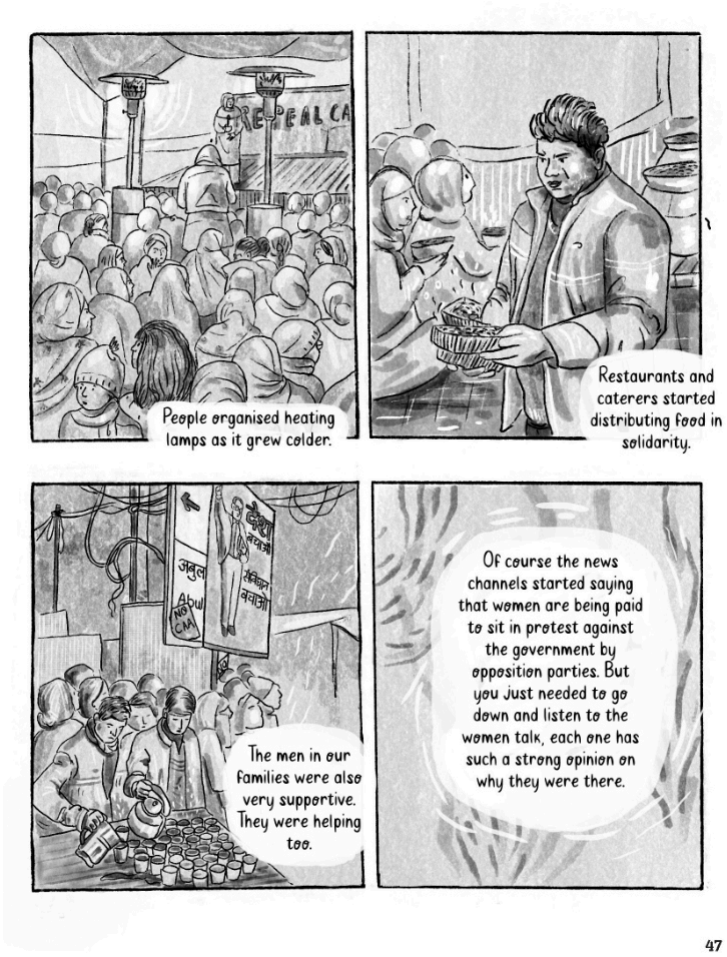

Figure 14: Practices of solidarity and resistance to counter attempts to malign the movement by government and mainstream media. In: Mehrotra (2021, 47). © Yoda Press

Understanding the ethics of care as a decisively female way of resistance brings with it some problematic connotations. Günther (2023) discusses how "body politics" have emerged as a gendered way of protesting against the background of patriarchal regulations of female bodies worldwide. Nevertheless, the emphasis on an ethics of care, i.e., on food-sharing, childcare, and organizing in female-led protests, speaks to an essentialized notion of femininity that is associated with these practices and that romanticizes care without reflecting on the problematic linking of (unpaid) care work and femininity.

Challenges to gendered (in)visibility and religious stereotypes

The way the women of Shaheen Bagh challenged both the gendered organization of their own community and their own gendered visibility and mobility in public space deserves special attention (Chopra and Sanyal 2023; Ray 2022; Bhatia 2021). The emergence of "body politics" (Günther 2023) as a decisively gendered way of staging resistance has its roots in the image of women and their fixed social roles that locate the female body in the private sphere.

Secondly, Günther (2023, 209) argues that rigid sexual policies to control the population of modern states contributed to the female body being objectified and labeled as something that must be treated and policed by the state. By physically confronting state forces, the women of Shaheen Bagh embodied resistance to state control on various levels. Bhatia and Gajjala (2020) note that public space in India is not only patriarchal, but also Hindu dominated. And the predominantly Muslim women protesting in Shaheen Bagh used their bodies to break through this logic of visibility. Therefore, it is particularly noteworthy that Muslim women were appropriating the "hostile" public space and reconfiguring it as an inclusive and democratic place of participation, changing the meaning of public spaces and making them accessible to marginalized people. To be sure, the visibility of women in protest movements is not unique. However, the visibility of Muslim women in this particular scenario suggests a show of bravery and represents an attempt to counter global stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women whose men are easily viewed as being terrorists (Bhatia and Gajjala 2020, 6293).

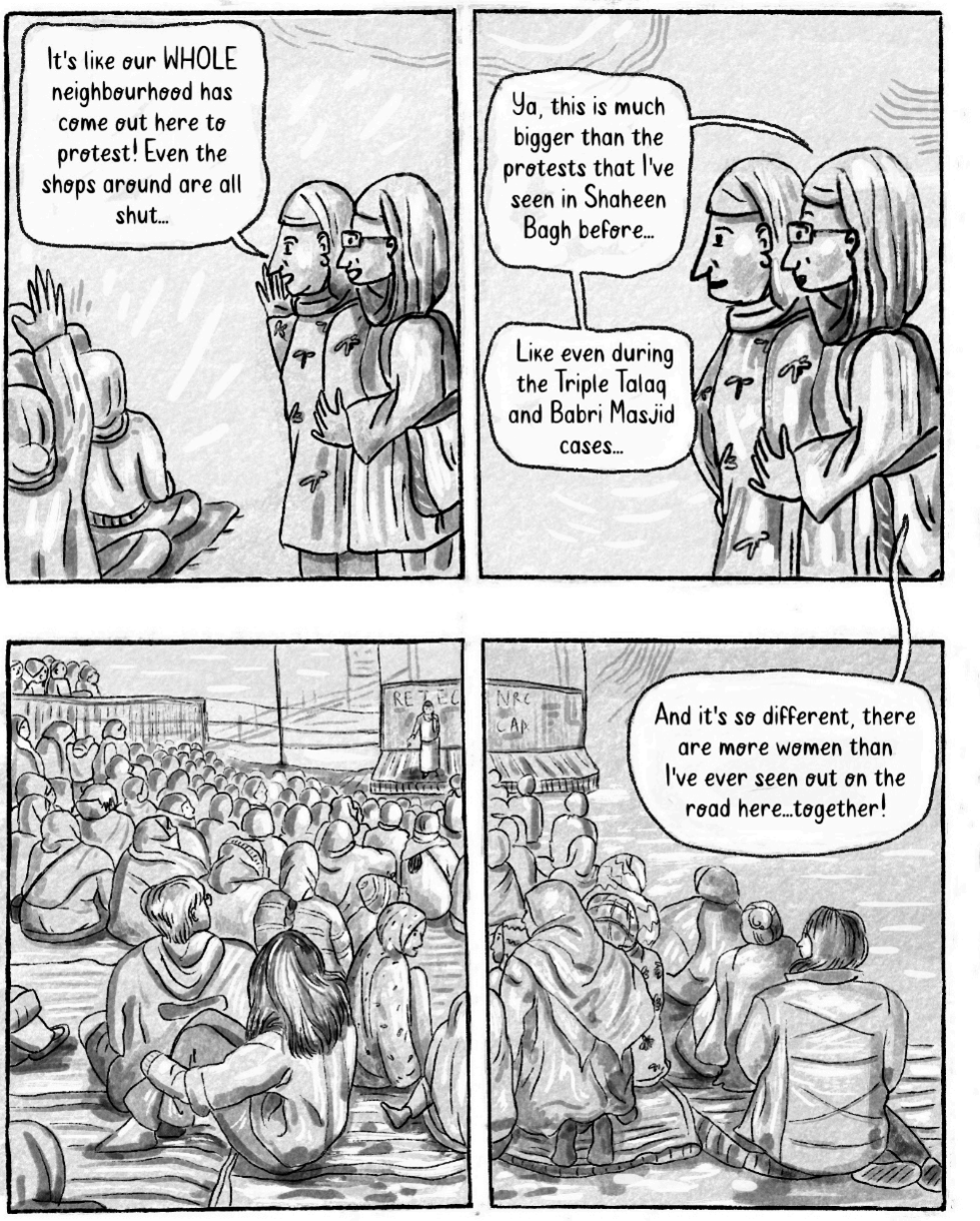

Figure 15: Mehrotra (2021, 45). © Yoda Press 45

Singh's work itself is a testimony of her own solidarity towards the women of Shaheen Bagh. And Mehrotra's graphic account includes several passages that deal with such expressions of solidarity from all over India and across communities, especially among different minorities (Mehrotra 2021, 83), often through the preparation and sharing of food (Mehrotra 2021, 60, 61). These and other forms of solidarity can be seen as opening up new physical and discursive spaces.

Figure 16: Singh (2022, 71).
© Prarthna Singh

New spaces

As argued above, the sheer physical presence of Muslim women changed the public space. Shahana, Mehrotra's main interlocutor in the graphic novel, is depicted as saying: "From a place of protest, it grew into a space for democratic dialogue. People from across the country were coming to speak and sit with US!" (capitalized in original; Mehrotra 2021, 51). The artist herself remembered "that kind of inverting of public space, I might never see that again. It's almost like this other world opened up for some time, and it allowed for a very rich, democratic dialogue then" (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15.10.2021). Singh's work contributes to this opening of an "other world" by showing in her artistic process the self-expression of the women in Shaheen Bagh through acts of reciprocity. She also commits to sustaining these effects by maintaining new friendships and cooperation beyond the actual temporality of the protest and by reclaiming the public sphere through a pop-up exhibition from the photo series in Delhi in December 2021.

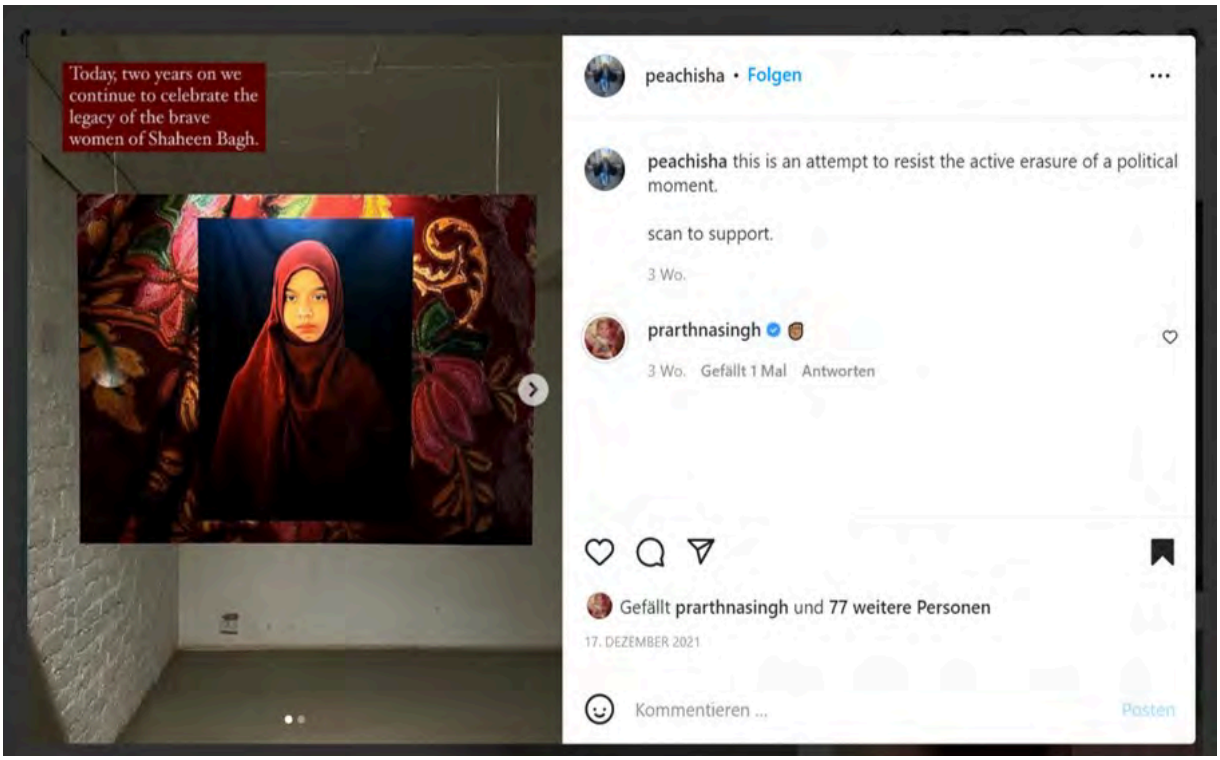

Figure 17: Pop-up display in Delhi of one portrait from Singh's series marking two years since the protest. Screenshot by author with permission by Prarthna Singh.

Circulation is one of the three key digital practices in the memory work of social movements, according to Merrill et al. (2020). It keeps the counter-narrative alive and visible. Circulation is also similar to that which Ita Mehrotra aims, for it contributes to creating space for the diverse voices of the protestors, to providing historical and political context to the multi-layered story of Shaheen Bagh, and to documenting sisterhood. In a similar vein, Shalimar Books, a London-based South Asian bookstore and distributor, launched Ita Mehrotra's graphic novel in the UK in February 2022 and thus kept the conversation going.[7]

The medium of comics and graphic narratives itself can be understood as opening up new spaces as well. Mehrotra added to Salmi's (2021) conceptualization of "intermedial texts" the appearance of blank spaces on pages of comics and graphic novels, where those represent an important aspect of the medium. They allow readers

[7] Book launch organized by The Rights Collective and Shalimar Books via Zoom, 23.02.2022. https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/shaheen-bagh-a-graphic-recollection-launch-discussion-tickets-265061444917

to “enter the frames” and imagine what might have happened in between. She further stressed that many recent Indian comics on social media are personal narratives that would otherwise not appear as artwork.[8] They invite dialogue on social media in that they respond to the political situation very vocally (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15.10.2021). She confirms Mitra’s (2023) analysis of art as a locator of emotions and affects by stressing that “methods of creative expression provide locators for people to remember what they experienced, maybe why they still feel so strongly to have these kinds of online discussions that happen around the book. Or people sharing something about it on social media and hundred others would say what they feel” (Ita Mehrotra, personal interview, 15.10.2021). Thus, her book created a memory of feelings. Mehrotra sees an urgent need for more such spaces and an infrastructure of bold publishing houses and courageous academic and intellectual spaces that allow these works to circulate and amplify critical voices.

Positionality and framing: Towards conclusions

A feminist-inspired notion of solidarity plays a central role both in artistic processes and in the artists’ framing. bell hooks (1986) defines sisterhood as political solidarity between women. In the Indian context, however, these “women” mostly turned out to be from the urban middle class, if not rich, and mainly English speaking. They thus represented and suppressed the voices of village women, poor women, Dalit women, Adivasi women, OBC women, and marginalized Muslim women who came from a political orientation that required the naming of one’s social location (Patil 2017). Both artists position themselves partly as outsiders owing to their privileged position in Indian society (i.e., to their not being a minority, and to their being educated and living in a good urban neighborhood). Despite the relatively low book price of INR 499 ($6), Mehrotra is aware of the possible inaccessibility of her work to a wider audience, since it was published in English. The audience is therefore limited to a more educated, English-speaking class in India and to a global audience. A Hindi version is in progress and there are plans to publish the book in other regional languages to overcome these barriers. Given her privileged background, Singh emphasized the importance for her of the collaboration she experienced with women from Shaheen Bagh, who are firmly located in the the social context of this Muslim neighborhood.

[8] For further examples of protest comics from India see: *Protest Art Around the World #4: India’s Protests and Web Comics*. Ruya Maps, 06.03.2020. (accessed 04.09.2023). https://www.ruyamaps.org/2protest-art/2020/2/13/protest-art-around-the-world-india

Nevertheless, Singh and Mehrotra see themselves as part of a continuum of transnational female solidarity across communities, one that stands united against the current government and, beyond that, in a global resistance to racism, ecological destruction, and gender inequality. Singh dedicates her books with the following words: "For the women of Standing Rock and Black Lives Matter, the women of the Dandi March and the Chipko Movement, for those at the frontlines of India's non-violent protests, this book is an act of remembrance, to preserve the powerful legacy of women at the forefront of historic revolutions" (harshaamshaheenbagh.com). Similarly, Mitra observes that "Mehrotra's graphic memoir participates in this feminist collective struggle [of nonviolent resistance] as a postcolonial narrative" (Mitra 2023, 13). In her introduction to Singh's series, Sharma concludes: "Viewing these images is a sort of 'being there' too, it mimics the act of witnessing as a civic imperative (2021, 126). The anti-CAA protests that took root across India and included secular-minded Indians of all faiths became a national witnessing of the suffering the government inflicted on its citizens."

To be sure, Ghazala Jamil's foreword to Mehrotra's book ends by stating that Mehrotra "does not claim to capture all that Shaheen Bagh was. What she achieves instead is to effectively conjure a channel through which we can partake of the rich legacy of Shaheen Bagh that is now our national heritage" (Mehrotra 2021, 9). One of the last images in Mehrotra's book shows a woman knitting, as a symbol for weaving a narrative and creating memory.

In documenting and mediating solidarity by means of aesthetic witnessing, Ita Mehrotra and Prarthna Singh keep alive a particular narrative of Shaheen Bagh, which is represented through visual tropes of female agency, multigenerational and cross-community solidarity, and care. This narrative views gender and resistance as linked insofar as they can be observed as being mutually reinforcing. Their own respective visual art and the accompanying narratives testify that other ways of living together, i.e., in harmony and solidarity are possible, and contribute to an opening up of new spaces through artistic intervention.

Figure 18: Knitting as a symbol for memory creation (Mehrotra 2021, 104). © Yoda Press

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DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL SOUTH ASIA

Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express: Accessing and Remembering a Mythical City

Fahad Naveed

Abstract

As a Pakistani who grew up watching pirated Bollywood cinema, I have an intimate but distant relationship with Mumbai on screen. I have been watching fewer Bollywood films lately and am also starting to forget the narratives of the ones I watched growing up. But I still remember certain details of my mythical Mumbai, as constructed by the Hindi films I consumed as a child and teenager. In my video *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (2023), I use Hindi film imagery of Mumbai's local railways as a means of transportation to this mythical city. The video is a comment on my relationship with this city, its trains, and the films that feature them. Intended to be played as a loop, much like imagery being replayed in one's mind, the video makes use of fragmented, glitchy footage from *Saathiya* ("Companion," Ali 2002) and *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* ("The Last Local of 1:40," Khanduri 2007), two films that feature the city and its railway system. In this essay, I reflect on the process of making the video loop and build on scholarship and works that explore how films depict and construct spaces, how they bypass bans and barriers, how they travel and transport viewers, and how they are remembered and forgotten.

Keywords: Pakistan, India, Bollywood, Hindi cinema, Mumbai, Bombay, trains

Film: https://hasp.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/dasta/article/view/22810/22397

Introduction

Films are able to traverse borders and boundaries in ways that few objects can. I grew up in Karachi, Pakistan, where films from India were banned. Yet, as was the case for millions across Pakistan, Bollywood was the first cinema I was introduced to. When I was growing up in the 1990s, we watched pirated films on VHS tapes at home, later switching to VCDs and then DVDs. In 2006 the Bollywood ban was lifted, only to be enforced again in 2019. Despite this, viewers can today watch Hindi films on streaming platforms. One way or another, movies have always managed to travel from India to Pakistan. I no longer watch many Bollywood films, but the ones I watched as a child and teenager continue to live and evolve in my mind.

Films transport viewers temporally and geographically. When watching Hindi films in Karachi, I would often find myself transported to Mumbai. These expeditions had no visa requirements. I could visit as often as I liked, for as long as I wanted. Years later, even as I have forgotten the plots of many films, I remember details of the mythical city[1] I have spent countless hours visiting. The prominent presence of the Mumbai Suburban Railways is one such detail about this mythical city—a carefully curated Mumbai constructed by the "family films" I watched growing up—that has lingered in my mind.

I use the Hindi film imagery of these trains as a means of transportation to the mythical city in my video *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (2023). The video, intended to be played as a loop, comments on my relationship with this mythical city and builds on my previous collaborative visual essay *Duur Pass* ("Near Far," Naveed and Drabu 2022). It primarily comprises glitchy, fragmented footage from two Hindi films that prominently feature Mumbai's local railways. These are *Saathiya* ("Companion," Ali 2002) and *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* ("The Last Local of 1:40," Khanduri 2007). Through the video, I comment on the way in which films travel and transport viewers, how they are remembered and forgotten, and how they construct spaces.

I begin this essay by drawing from Ranjani Mazumdar's work on Bombay cinema, as an archive of the city and urban subjectivities. I then define what I mean by my mythical Mumbai, and reflect on the disparity between this and the "real" city. In the next

[1] I use the term "mythical city" as Wim Wenders does in his documentary *Tokyo-Ga* (1985), to refer to an "ordered" city one knows from cinema, which is at odds with the "reality" of said city. Wenders says, "The more the reality of Tokyo struck me as a tour of impersonal, unkind, threatening, yes, even inhuman images, the greater and more powerful became in my mind the images of the loving and ordered world of the mythical city of Tokyo that I knew from the films of Yasujiro Ozu" (20:00).

section, I engage with Victor Burgin and Cormac Donnelly's work on memory, film, and alternative narratives. I then examine glitch imagery's role in the video and how artists have used this technique to deconstruct media texts. I conclude the section by detailing why I chose to distort the image and soundscape, and what is achieved by deemphasizing a linear narrative. In the third section, I analyze *Tokyo-Ga* (Wenders 1985)—one filmmaker's loving attempt to find Yasujiro Ozu's Tokyo, two decades after the latter filmmaker's death. I also revisit the ideas of imagined cities I previously explored with Onaiza Drabu. In the final section, I analyze the two Hindi films, focusing on the role trains play in them and on how the movies construct Mumbai.

The changing city

In her book *Bombay Cinema*, Mazumdar argues that cinema is "the most innovative archive of the city in India" (2007, xxxi). Bombay has seen rapid expansion over the past three decades, and this construction and restructuring has transformed the city on-screen too. The "cinematic city" also continues to evolve with technological advancements, and with changes in filmmaking conventions and trends. Mazumdar cites multiple examples from low-budget fringe cinema films from the early 2000s that create a "refreshingly different" cinematic archive through their inventive use of the urban space (2007, 210).

My yearning for my mythical Mumbai, on the other hand, is an emotional response, resistant to change. I acknowledge the changing face of the cinematic city in *Duur Paas* (Naveed and Drabu 2022), complaining like one does to a loved one who now seems like a stranger. Addressing the city, I write, "Tum badl gayeh ho; Kabhi aesa lagta hai main tumhe janta hee nahin hoon [You have changed; sometimes I feel like I don't even know you]." I then ask, "Bombay, Mumbai; Tumhe kis naam se pukaroon? [Bombay, Mumbai; what name should I call you by?]" I reference the city's name change to highlight how it is constantly evolving.

But the mythical Mumbai in my mind is stuck in time, struggling to remain unchanged. It is informed by the city that I witnessed and experienced in films in the 1990s and early 2000s. These were not films that I chose to watch myself. The decision-making fell on the elders in my family, who would usually allow us children to watch non-violent

love stories and family films.[2] Mazumdar notes that there was an "intriguing dislocation of the 'real' and the virtual city" in family films, which presented a sanitized Mumbai for Indian and diasporic audiences (2007, 110). While films such as *Satya* ("Truth," Varma 1998) showed a grimmer Mumbai during the same time period, these were not accessible to me as a child and did not complicate my view of the mythical city.

Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express (2023) also explores my changing relationship with the mythical city and my inability to access this space with the ease that I could as a child. While *Saathiya* (Ali 2002) is the sort of family film I grew up watching, *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007), which I watched during my rebellious teenage years, is decidedly not. Both films are comedy dramas that center around a middle class heterosexual couple's love story, but the latter has crude sexual humor and is set in a more violent city. While *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007) presents Mumbai as a space where all of one's dreams can come true overnight, it also attempts to construct a more "real" version of the city. The film even references actual events such as the 2002 Mumbai bus bombing.

By juxtaposing imagery from these films, I highlight the instability of the mythical city. As the content and concerns explored in Bollywood films have evolved, so has the city on-screen. The mythical city I experienced growing up now struggles to persist in memory.

The remembered city

In the video essay *Can I Remember It Differently* (2022), Donnelly explores how the audiences' relationship with film plots changes over the years. He revisits a plot point from *Minority Report* (Spielberg 2002), a film he first reviewed as a budding critic for a small online magazine. Donnelly says that at the time, he wrote only four words about the protagonist, John Anderton (Tom Cruise), losing his son. But, he notes, the scene has "subsequently hit me hard" (2022, 1:23). This "fractured memory of a scene" has gained new meaning, "grafted onto the memory of a real event" (Donnelly 2022, 3:01). The actual event he describes is "a breathless 90 seconds" he spent searching for his son after losing him at the zoo (2022, 3:18). As a father, Donnelly can understand Anderton's parental fears and helplessness.

[2] By family films I mean both films that depict families and "traditional" family values, and films that are considered appropriate viewing for the whole family.

The Mumbai local trains I watched in films growing up have similarly become more significant to me of late. I believe this may stem from a desire to be transported to a city that is not only difficult to access for me as a Pakistani, but one that does not exist at all.

Donnelly quotes from *The Remembered Film* (Burgin 2004, 67-68):

> *The more the film is distanced in memory, the more the binding effect of the narrative is loosened. The sequence breaks apart. The fragments go adrift and enter into new combinations, more or less transitory, in the eddies of memory: memories of other films, and memories of real events.*

The idea of fragments melding into new, transitory combinations informs the visual structure of *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (Naveed 2023). While visualizing the project, I overlayed fragmented imagery from two films. The multilayered, multiscreen image took the form of glitchy, corrupt footage. I also changed the speed of the clips to deemphasize a linear narrative. But an alternative narrative appeared. The figure of a man—originally Aditya (Vivek Oberoi) from *Saathiya* (Ali 2002)—seems to be searching for something, yet what he is searching for is unclear. I arrived at this imagery after experimenting with various sequences. Perhaps the image of a figure stuck in a loop reminded me of my own search for an elusive mythical city.

With the imagery, I attempt to visualize the glitches in memory. This approach draws inspiration from the works of early video artists such as Joan Jonas, who used glitch imagery in her video *Vertical Roll* (1972), and Dara Birnbaum, who reedited footage from the famous superhero show *Wonder Woman* (Cramer and Baumes 1975-1979) for her video *Technology Transformation/Wonder Woman* (1978-1979). I must also mention here the Pakistani installation artist Rashid Rana. His work *All Eyes Skywards During the Annual Parade* (Rana 2004) forms a large, pixelated image of a crowd excitedly observing a Pakistani military parade. Upon closer inspection, the viewer discovers that this image of nationalist fervor is constructed entirely of imagery from Bollywood films.

Much like the visuals, the soundscape of *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (Naveed 2023) has multiple layers. Mechanical train sounds play on repeatedly. These sounds continue, only briefly making way for a dialogue taken from *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007), as featured in the song *Laree Chootee* (“Missed the Train,” Call 2007) by the Pakistani band “Call”. This is a rare moment of clarity in the video, where the noise makes way for narrative cohesion. This is because, even before I revisited the film for this essay and rediscovered the dialogue there, I had clearly remembered it

from the song "*Laree Chootee*." The song would repeatedly play on television in Pakistan; the Bollywood ban was not in place at the time.

Burgin writes, "Films are today dislocated and dismantled even without intervention by the spectator," (2004, 8-9). Nowadays, a "film" can be "encountered" through marketing materials, reviews, etc. (2004, 9). Years later, as the plot of *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007) eluded me, the marketing material, in the form of a song, was the clearest source of narrative information in my mind. The dialogue in the song (and film) goes as follows:

> *Mumbai, I had heard that a man here spends his entire life attempting to bring his destiny from the slow track to the fast track, but I never thought that in only 2.5 hours my destiny will go from the slow track to the fast track like this.*[3]
>
> (Call 2007, 1:35)

The dialogue highlights an outsider's perspective about the city. Even before arriving, he already knew it to be a space full of possibilities.

The mythical city

Tokyo-Ga (Wenders 1985) starts with the opening credits and first scene from *Tokyo Story* (Ozu 1953). We first see shots of Onomichi, a city in Western Japan. We see the port. We see children walking by. And, finally, we see shots of a train. An extreme-long shot (ELS) shows the train moving through a mountainous area. The shot features some house roofs and an electricity pole in the foreground, the train and more houses in the middle ground, and expansive green mountains, with the sky peering from the side, in the background. After another shot of the train, we see a retired couple sitting in their home, packing up for a trip. They tell a neighbor that they are going to visit their children in Tokyo. After the scene, Wenders interjects with a voiceover about his own trip to Tokyo, in search of the mythical city he has seen in Ozu's films (1985, 4:30):

> *And such a sacred treasure of the cinema could only reside in the realm of the imagination. And so, my trip to Tokyo was in no way a pilgrimage. I was curious if I still could track down something from this time. Whether there was still anything left of this work. Images, perhaps. Or even people. Or whether so much would've changed in Tokyo in the 20 years since Ozu's*

[3] I reference the song here rather than the film because it's the song from which I first remembered the dialogue.

death that nothing would be left to find.

The first visuals we see from Wender's Tokyo footage is a low-angle shot of a newer bullet train in Tokyo. This is a visual very different from the trains in Ozu's films. A menacing music plays as the seemingly never-ending train continues to pass. Wenders cuts before we see the end of the train, effectively elongating it further. He then cuts to a busy cityscape that a train is moving across. We see tall buildings with billboards in the shot. We see more construction happening. And we see cars rushing along wide roads and across another overhead bridge. The image is chaotic. At one point, the traffic and three trains go in different directions. This is not Ozu's Tokyo.

Wenders describes not having the slightest recollection of his time in Tokyo. He says that he knows he was there during the spring of 1983 and he has footage to prove it. "These images now exist and they have become my memory," he says (Wenders 1985, 5:37). He wonders if he would better remember his trip had he been there without his camera. Throughout the film, Wenders tries to find Ozu's Tokyo. He also questions what is real and what is not.

In the essay *Duur Paas* (Naveed and Drabu 2022), like Wenders, I questioned how real a city is that I have experienced through films. This essay was where I first started working with glitch imagery and approaching the Mumbai in my mind as a construct. I briefly discussed two train scenes: one from *Saathiya* (Ali 2002) and another from *Life in a… Metro* (Basu 2007). *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007) appeared in that essay only as a footnote.

Drabu, who grew up in Srinagar and Delhi, responded by reconstructing her Lahore. She used archival photographs and memories from the city as she had experienced it from poetry and literature before ever visiting it. We intimately knew these cities while growing up. Although the "real" cities were difficult to access, we would be transported to the mythical cities by words and imagery that transcended borders.

The accessible city

I will conclude this essay with an analysis of the films *Saathiya* (Ali 2002) and *Ek Chalis Ki Last Local* (Khanduri 2007). Specifically, I will focus on the different roles trains play in the two Bollywood films and in my video.

Ek Chalis Ki Last Local (Khanduri 2007) tells the story of Nilesh (Abhay Deol), a young

man working at a call center in Mumbai. He misses the last train at 1:40 am after a night of drinking with his friends. A police constable tells him that he cannot stay at the train station. Nilesh then tries to catch a rickshaw back home, but the drivers are on strike to protest the arrest of a fellow rickshaw driver in relation to a bombing. Nilesh ends up wandering around the city with Madhu (Neha Dhupia), a young woman returning from her friend's engagement party, who is also trying to find her way back home.

Nilesh is an outsider in Mumbai. He is from Delhi. He complains about the 1:40 am train being the last. "That's why Delhi is Delhi," he says. "Not like here. The last local at 1:40, the first local at 4:10. If you walk on the roads, then this is the condition. And they want to make Mumbai Shanghai" (Khanduri 2007, 16:48).

The fact that Nilesh is an outsider is underscored multiple times. When it momentarily rains and then subsequently stops, he comments on the unpredictability of Bombay weather. When a car speeds down the road, almost running him and Madhu over, he claims that if they were in Delhi, he would have beaten the driver up. When dogs bark at him and Madhu, he points out that these are Mumbai dogs. "And if they were from Delhi, you would've gone into the alley and beaten them up, right?" Madhu jokes (Khanduri 2007, 17:22).

By the end of the film, Nilesh has a car, a Rolex watch, and an apartment. He also ends up with the girl. He is grateful that Mumbai didn't become Shanghai; missing the train was the best thing that ever happened to him. The city may appear unforgiving, but it can make dreams come true. As Mazumdar writes, the cinematic city is "an archive that is deeply saturated with urban dreams, desires, and fears" (2007, xxxv).

Saathiya (Ali 2002) takes a slightly different approach. The local trains play a big role in the union of Aditya and Suhani (Rani Mukherji) in this story too, but the film doesn't end after the romantic connection. The couple elopes after their fathers disapprove of their match, only to find that married life is full of struggles.

The film begins at the end. Aditya is biking through the city, on a high from having received some good news, when the police stop him and tell him to turn around. There's a diversion because of a hit-and-run near the railway station. It is revealed only towards the end of the film that it is Suhani who was hit.

When Suhani does not return home, Aditya, later joined by his friends, runs around the station. They check train after train in hope of finding her. These are the same local trains where Aditya first started flirting with Suhani; this is where he expressed his love

to her. It is at the train station that Suhani first broke up with Aditya after his father met her father in the way that "[Pakistani President] Musharraf met [Indian Prime Minister] Vajpayee Ji," (Ali 2002, 39:53). And it is on the Kennedy Bridge, named after a British railway engineer, where Suhani is hit by a car.

The train has a prominent presence in the film. One of its key functions is that of a narrative device. As we cut between Aditya and Suhani's love story, and Aditya's search for Suhani after she goes missing, the train is used to transport the audience from one timeline to the other. Even in scenes where the transition happens without the visual presence of trains, we hear the non-diegetic sound of drums being played like a moving train (Ali 2002, 1:12:53).

I too employ the train as a means of jumping between memories of films in my video *Karachi to Mumbai via Bollywood Express* (2023). Similarly, as an outsider myself, who has accessed the city through cinema, I am drawn to Nilesh's story even more after revisiting the film's narrative. Nilesh, the proud owner of a brand new car, probably stops taking the locals after the fateful night portrayed in the film. Suhani and Aditya's relationships, with each other and with the local trains, must also have evolved over the years. But, in the films, these characters, the mythical city they inhabit, and the local trains they take remain unchanged, frozen in time.

In a few years, I may again start forgetting the stories of Nilesh, Madhu, Suhani, and Aditya. Mumbai will continue to change, and so will its depictions in Hindi films. But, I suspect, my memories of the mythical city, accessible through the films I watched while growing up, and the power of a cinematic railway network that can transcend borders and bypass bans, will continue to stay and evolve in my mind for many years to come.

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DASTAVEZI
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Siddha Photography.
Making the Invisible Visible in Siddha Pharmacology

Justus Weiss

Abstract

This photo essay explores the intricate practices of Siddha pharmacology in Tamil Nadu, India, as documented during field research conducted at the Puttu Maharishi Ashram in Vellore. The essay also examines the role of photography as a research tool, one that is used here to capture moments and processes in Siddha medicine that extend beyond the reach of textual description. The focus is directed toward two significant practices: Pudam, a detailed calcination process integral to medicine making, and Velvi, a full moon fire ritual symbolizing the spiritual dimension of Siddha practice. These practices serve as vital components in the construction and expression of the Siddha medical tradition, highlighting the unique interplay between material and spiritual elements. The photo essay serves as a window into the world of Siddha pharmacology, allowing for an immersive experience of its aesthetic and transformative aspects. Photography is employed not merely as a documentary tool but as a medium for intersubjectivity, inviting readers to engage with the subtle intricacies of this ancient healing tradition. The essay aims to render the invisible spiritual dimensions of Siddha medicine visible.

Keywords: Siddha medicine, pharmaceutical anthropology, Tamil Nadu, Pudam, Velvi

Introduction: From photographing Siddha medicine to Siddha photography

In this essay, I aim to draw parallels between photography and medicine making, with a particular focus on traditional Siddha pharmacology. During my fieldwork in Tamil Nadu, I used photography to extensively document the medicinal practices for preparing Tamil Siddha medicine. I sought to capture the aesthetics of this earthly alchemy and the transformation of materials into powders imbued with life forces (Tamil: *uyirsattu*).

In applying the Siddha *vaidyas* (healers) perspective on medicines to my own photographic practice, I produce what I call "Siddha photography," with the aim of making the invisible spiritual dimension in their pharmaceutic practice visible. My broader aim is to use photography as a tool for intersubjectivity, by making the research process tangible while engaging the reader with ethnographic photography and visual anthropology.

In the following pages I will describe my journey to understand Siddha pharmacology and to reveal its perspective. My goal is to demonstrate using by photographic means the specific Siddha approach to substances and processes. Furthermore, I will depict the wider spiritual practice of Siddha medicine-makers and healers, which is central to their craft. For a general overview over Siddha medicine in Tamil Nadu the works of Sebastia (2015), Sujatha (2003), and Sieler (2015) can be recommended.

As my understanding of Siddha medicine progressed, I began to apply its principles to my own photography. Visual anthropology seeks to capture the subtleties of daily life and cultural context, making the invisible visible and transporting the viewer into the field. The challenge was to transmit the essence of these specific practices and transform the viewer's perspective through my photography. Taking inspiration from Tomas, who has connected the study of rituals with the concept of photography, I will apply both the process of medicine making in Siddha medicine and also its wider cultural context to my own photography and photographs (Tomas 1982).

Furthermore, I set out to demonstrate that Siddha medicine encompasses both an earthly aesthetic and a subtle spiritual dimension that are present in its artisanal craft of medicine making.

In a first step, "Siddha photography" uses photography to convey the esoteric dimension of Siddha pharmacology. In a second step, the essay draws parallels between photography's capacity to capture and protect essences, and what it is that Siddha healers do when accessing spiritual and life forces in their medicine making processes. My essay highlights that both practices are dedicated to the capturing, transmission, and protection of the subtle essences of the world.

The photographs in this essay aim to capture the subtle essences of the world of the Siddha *vaidyas* and to transmit the essence of Siddha pharmacology to the reader.

Introducing the field site

The field site is the Puttu Maharishi Ashram in Vellore. *Puttu* is the Tamil term for an empty termite hill in which a snake (often a poisonous cobra) has taken refuge. The termite hill represents a powerful space for worship in contemporary Shaivite Tamil temple scapes. The "ascetic in the termite hill" is a repeated narrative in ascetic yogic stories. It refers to a deep state of meditation that cannot be interrupted by outside influences—for example, by the annoying tickling of flies, ants, or termites. This state, however, is not only deep but also long in duration so that termites can build a termite hill surrounding the yogi without disturbing him.

Image 1: A termite hill at a Shiva temple close to the Puttu Maharishi Ashram in Vellore
© Justus Weiss

Puttu Maharishi was a Siddha who is said to have lived in Vellore around the 16th century, having emerged from such a termite hill out of his deep state of meditation. He was not only an enlightened ascetic, but also a practitioner of medicine. In Vellore, several Siddha family traditions trace their lineages back to the teachings of this Siddha.

The Puttu Maharishi Ashram was established by the Siddha Vaidya K.P. Arjunan. He is the eldest son in a family of eight brothers, of whom six were involved in the practice of Siddha medicine since their childhood.

The area that compromises the Ashram is located at the outskirts of Vellore, enshrined by several hills. It entails a temple devoted to the Siddha Puttu Maharishi, a teaching center, a meditation hall, a treatment room, a medicinal preparation unit, a documentation center, and a meeting place where food can be served to guests. Vaidya Arjunan continuously hosts many students of Siddha medicine at this compound and has devoted it completely to the teaching of Siddha medicine and particularly to the lineage of Puttu Maharishi.

Image 2: The Puttu Maharishi Ashram © Justus Weiss

During my fieldwork, I was welcomed as a regular guest at this Ashram, where I was able to interact not only with Vaidya Arjunan, but also with his brothers in their day-to-day activities. These included for the most part the treatment of patients and the preparation of medicines. Large amounts of time, however, were devoted to regularly discussing various topics. Vaidya Arjunan was referred by all of those close to him in a respectful way, simply as Periaiya or Aiya, which means “the elder one;” these names refer to his position as eldest brother or his being a senior in terms of his acquired knowledge in general. Getting to know him and his brothers meant being introduced to a fascinating Siddha tradition in the making. In the course of making their acquaintance, I became integrated into a family project that is dedicated to the development of Siddha medicine for which Arjunan was the center. During our stay, Arjunan’s two younger brothers, Dhambachari and Raja, were regularly working at the Ashrams.

Image 3: Arjunan while teaching Siddha medicine, seated at the feet of the family guru Puttu Maharishi © Justus Weiss

Dhambachari was involved with the religious and spiritual teachings at the Ashram as well as with the treatment of patients in the evening, most of whom were coming for bone-setting. It was mainly with Dhambachari that we were engaging on a regular basis since he came every evening to the Ashram and we could put the time between his medical consultations to good use for our discussions.

Raja was responsible for preparing the medicines needed for the day-to-day practice. He could usually be found working steadily on the preparation of medicines in his medicinal workshop.

Image 4: Dhambachari, his son Bhasker, and my research assistant Chakravarthy at one of our regular discussions in the evening © Justus Weiss

Staying and learning at the Ashram, I was captivated by the earthly dimension of Siddha medicine making.

With a background in both anthropology and pharmacology, I am accustomed to modern laboratories with their glass vessels and high-tech equipment, as well as to naturalist ways of thinking about medicinal efficacy. I typically rely on the logic of chemistry and biology to understand medicinal plants and other concepts of healing

efficacy in natural science. However, in Siddha medicine, the laboratory often exists under the open sky, where it utilizes clay tools, stone mortars, and pestles. The labor-intensive process involves grinding repetitively, adding juices, and, using cow dung cakes, firing substances in sealed clay pots.

Image 5: A workspace at the Ashram © Justus Weiss

Siddha medicine is practiced in the Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Within India's medical pluralism, it competes for significance against other medicinal systems like Ayurveda. A key question that arises when studying Siddha medicine pertains to its defining feature or essence since it shares many epistemological bases with Ayurveda. Local healing practices in India share epistemological bases regarding how the body and medicine are understood. Local medicinal systems vary according to their use of the *materia medica*, which is specific to the regions where those systems are practiced.

India and South Asia are incredibly diverse regions; local cultures and flora heavily influence these medicinal systems. Siddha medicine is influenced by Tamil local culture. Throughout its history, ascetic movements have impacted all of the medicinal systems

comprising India's system of medical pluralism. In Tamil Nadu, these ascetic groups were dominant during the medieval period and they used specific substances in their tantric alchemical practices for spiritual goals. They understood these substances through the lens of their yogic worldview.

Image 6: Depiction of the Siddha body image, influenced by tantric philosophy © Justus Weiss

The term "Siddha" refers to a tantric Yogi who developed spiritual knowledge and powers, using elixirs alongside meditation and rituals. In Tamil Nadu, this yogic tantric knowledge amalgamated with local healing practices and classical Tamil medicine to form a system that highly values the spiritual dimensions of medicine making. Sujatha has called Siddha medicine a yogic offshoot that developed into the fully formed medicinal practice it still is today (Sujatha 2003).

Siddhas remain enigmatic figures in Tamil culture. Their medicinal system traces back to Siddha Agastya, a famous Indian sage. In this essay, I argue that within the context of family traditions these yogic dimensions are very much alive and essential to understanding what makes Siddha medicine unique. During my fieldwork, I was

fascinated to gain access to a family tradition that showcased these spiritual dimensions in contemporary Indian medicine. However, these traditional practices are framed by a modernized counterpart of Siddha medicine that is taught at universities and practiced in dedicated hospitals. This post-colonial, modernized Siddha system has undergone in Latour's term a purification and separation (Latour 1994) of many spiritual and tantric practices that are still essential, something that has been analyzed and described by Sax and Nair in the context of the local healing practices of Kerala (Sax and Nair 2014, 232). The spiritual aspect of this medicinal practice is predominantly preserved and maintained within family traditions. Throughout my fieldwork, I encountered numerous students from government-affiliated Siddha colleges who expressed a keen interest in exploring these spiritual dimensions that were notably absent from their academic curriculum. Furthermore, Marten Bode (Bode 2018) describes the asymmetrical charge of the contemporary Indian medical pluralism, in which biomedicine and Ayurveda take center stage against the other medical systems. This is something which is mirrored in the asymmetrical relation between state-approved, modern Siddha doctors and their colleagues who were trained as part of a more oral and experience-based context.

Image 7: Raja praying before lighting the cow dung cakes © Justus Weiss

In this context, it was crucial for me to examine the current state of yogic elements within contemporary Siddha medicine. This investigation commenced when I first engaged with my teacher, Dhambachari, and delved into the intricacies of Siddha medicine. While participating in the preparation of various remedies, I gradually learned to recognize the esoteric dimension that is interwoven with the physical alchemy that I was observing.

Image 8: Raja collecting medicinal plants on the outskirts of Vellore
© Justus Weiss

Ethnopharmacological approaches toward Siddha medicine: The example of Pudam

My experiences in the field transformed my understanding of pharmacology, prompting questions about what makes a medicine effective and what heals in different cultural contexts.

Ethnopharmacology researches a culture's specific understanding of medicinal efficacy and how that understanding is manifest in pharmaceutical practices. Pharmaceutical practices often focus on the identification of efficacious principles, furthermore, on their proper extraction, storage, and the ideal ways for applying them to the patient. Whereas medical anthropology focuses, among many other things, on cultural dimensions of a specific understanding of the human body and of healer-patient interactions, ethnopharmacology scrutinizes the meeting point between an understanding of the world and the human body. How are the elements of the world mediated in relation to the body to aid its healing?

These essential steps of medicine making are expressed in Siddha medicine, where they are found in yogic tantric metaphors like *uyirsattu* or life force (one of the Tamil terms for efficacy), in the purification of substances (*sutti*), in the transmission of essences, and in the protection and control of substances and the enhancement of their respective life span. By further examination, these concepts resemble a vocabulary and imagery of yogic bodily transformation and perfection. This is something that has also been described in detail by Dagmar Wujastyk, citing the example of Ayurvedic texts, and that can clearly be found in contemporary Siddha healing practices (Wujastyk 2013).

Siddha pharmacology as practiced at the Puttu Maharishi Ashram mirrors many concepts of a yogic and tantric worldview. During my research at the Ashram, I found that subtle spiritual life forces and essences, mostly accessible by practicing Siddha *vaidyas*, are essential to medicine making in Siddha medicine. Local Tamil Siddha healers perceive an interconnectedness between matter and spirit. Through spiritual practice, essences can be transmitted from one substance to another, creating a fluid development between medicinal materials. The pharmaceutical process mirrors the ideal spiritual path of a Siddha practitioner. This process focuses on the purification of the human body and on concentrating spiritual forces within it, thus resulting in a medicinal form that contains concentrated within itself imperishable life forces that cure diseases and restore vitality. Seen in an ecological context, the Siddha transmits essences from perishable plants to the protective matrix of mineral-metallic complexes.

Image 9: Raja purifying Sulphur with milk © Justus Weiss

Image 10: Raja adding plant juice to a formulation in between calcination steps © Justus Weiss

In the alchemical realm of Siddha medicine, the practice of Pudam serves as a cornerstone, embodying the intricate process of medicine making.

Pudam involves a complex, repetitive process of calcination in cow dung fires using mineral-metallic substances in clay vessels. This practice, though grounded in physical elements like clay and cow dung cakes, transcends mere materiality. Each stage of calcination and mixing with specific plant juices is meticulously carried out, imbuing the final medicine with potent life forces and healing properties. Pudam, while seemingly grounded in its earthiness, is a reflection of the Siddha philosophy of interweaving the tangible with the spiritual.

The clay vessel serves as a protected space in which the essences of substances can be safely transmitted from one to another without interference and disturbance. The Pudam is like a microcosm, like a yogic body, in which the substances can be purified, and their essences exhaled and inhaled.

Image 11: Raja taking care that the Pudam is properly enclosed, sealing it with clay.

The Siddha pharmaceutical process can be seen as a foolproof way to extract essences through repetitive calcination and grinding. However, this is only one aspect of the medicinal practice. The other aspect involves the pharmacist's initiation into the spiritual practices that grant them access to subtle powers within their own body and that enable them to extend that spiritual life force into the prepared medicinal substances.

Dhambachari explained in one of our interviews that after undergoing initiation he began to experience the essence of the rules of medicine making in a new way. From then on, he experienced firsthand how the traditional rules of medicine making were structured to work correctly with substances deeply imbued with life forces and to guarantee their protection throughout the entire process. Accessing and safeguarding these life forces in medicine making is only possible through spiritual practice, which profoundly influences the creation of effective medicines.

Spiritual practices at the Ashram: The example of Velvi

In contrast to the earthy nature of Pudam, Velvi, a full moon fire ritual, unveils the spiritual matrix within which Siddha pharmacology is enmeshed. This elaborate ritual, performed under the luminescence of a full moon, involves chanting, offerings, and a large, enduring fire. It connects the participants to the celestial forces, bringing forth the spiritual dimensions typically invisible in our daily lives. Velvi's vibrant decorations and symbols resonate with the cosmic energies and essences pivotal in Siddha medicine, making the invisible spiritual aspects palpably visible.

The Velvi ritual begins at nightfall with the lighting of the fire in the central ceremonial firepit, accompanied by the chanting of mantras. Participants of the Velvi ritual gather around a large open fire that burns for hours. The fire is continuously fed oil, wood, fruits, and offerings, nearly smothering its flames. As the ritual progresses through hours of chanting and feeding the fire, participants experience an intoxicating mix of scents, brightness, and trance-like states.

Image 12: Careful decoration of the ritual space in preparation of the Velvi © Justus Weiss

Image 13: The k*alasam*, a metal vessel that concentrates and protects the essence of the ritual and the full moon © Justus Weiss

At its core, the Velvi serves to make visible the spiritual dimensions invisible to us. Symbols and elements within the ritual represent and celebrate the cosmological powers, essences, and qualities that are integral to Siddha medicine. The vibrant decorations, including flowers, incense, oil lamps, and sacred symbols, combine with chanting by Dhambachary at the fire pit to create an atmosphere that simultaneously illuminates the Siddha cosmos and makes it palpable. The full moon serves as a role model for perfection within this context, appreciated as embodying desirable qualities such as purity, nourishment, and an increased power of meditation.

Image 14: Dhambachary is the ceremonial master, organizing and enabling the powerful Velvi © Justus Weiss

While Pudam grounds the medicinal practice in its physical and transformative processes, Velvi elevates it to a cosmic level, illuminating the spiritual underpinnings of Siddha pharmacology.

Velvi and Pudam exist in the same Siddha cosmos, and spiritual practitioners amplify the practice of the Pudam through the rules and effects of the Velvi. Seeing both practices side by side with the help of photography illuminates the hidden essence of the Pudam visible through the bright fire of the Velvi.

Conclusion: Siddha photography—combining Siddha pharmacology and pharmacology

To summarize, what are the parallels and intersecting fields between ethnographic photography and Siddha pharmacology? In Siddha medicine, the transmission and protection of essences are central. This is achieved by repetitive firing to purify and transform substances and to transmit essences between them.

In the rituals of Pudam and Velvi, fire acts as a transformative agent—both in the material sense, whereby raw ingredients are alchemically changed into medicines, and in the spiritual sense, whereby offerings are consumed and messages are conveyed to the divine realms. In the modern photo camera, however, fire is replaced with electricity, and clay with silica chips, enabling the process of capturing and transmitting an essence.

Making medicines is also about capturing, freezing, and protecting rare moments, for example, in the vegetational cycle of a year, when specific plants can be found. Especially in Siddha medicine, the yogic frame of thought has enabled a low-tech pharmacology that conserves perishable plant substances in imperishable mineral substances.

Plant juices are the most perishable of all plant products. They need to be consumed immediately so as not to spoil quickly. However, when added to a mineral metallic preparation, as part of the Pudam processes, their essence is transferred to the imperishable matrix of the formulation and maintained for years or even decades.

Photography follows the same way in the sense that it is able to collect and protect highly specific moments in time, such as the fire ritual, which is celebrated only during full moon. The same can be said for personalities, for glimpses of moments in a life dedicated to healing, a life protected and remembered by means of pixels–just like the life of the late Vaidya Arjunan who left this earth recently but can still be remembered and experienced through my photographs.

Like the repetitive firing in the Pudam, which interweaves material qualities and spiritual essences, ethnographic photography condenses essences of daily life and everyday culture that are experienced by the photographer over an extended period of research.

By capturing the right moments in the right frames, deep social relations, friendships, experiences, and research are all condensed by the photographer to transmit his core

findings and realizations. He wants to create images that speak for themselves—that have a heightened agency to influence and transform the viewer, like the Siddha medicines themselves.

Nevertheless, the most important parallels between photography and Siddha pharmacology are the topics, themes, and persons—indeed, the one thousand things, the multispecies, and actant networks of the Siddha cosmos—that are portrayed in these photos. Their essence is captured and conveyed in these pictures.

As for the skilled Siddha *vaidyas*: Their daily life and ambition is to heal people, to work on themselves in the tradition of medieval alchemists, and to become better healers. Their skill and dedication to creating contemporary healing Siddha elixirs is transmitted in these photographs; for these are imbued with their message, their work, and their gift of healing and transformation.

This work was made possible by the strong bond of friendship that I was able forge with Vaidya Arjunan and his family during my fieldwork. I express my heartfelt thanks to them all and especially to my dedicated research assistant D. T. Chakravarthy for his unwavering support and contributions throughout this journey.

I will be forever grateful to Arjunan, Dhambachary, and their whole family for sharing their knowledge with me and letting me come close—close in heart and close in framing the photographs I was allowed to take.

Their wisdom and guidance have illuminated my path, making this journey of discovery possible. I extend my profound gratitude to these living Siddhas, each with their own unique contribution to the tapestry of my research.

Image 15: The statue of Puttu Maharishi decorated for a celebration, holding his hand in the gesture of a blessing © Justus Weiss

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Himalayan Youth Resist through Art: Debunking "Development" in Kinnaur

Pramiti Negi[+] and Hanna Werner[+] [++]

Abstract

This photo essay outlines our reflections on the role of art as a means of protest and, in particular, as an expression of the identity struggle that drives resistance. "Artivism" as a form of protest seems to be (re)gaining traction, especially in youth mobilizations worldwide. Our case study is from the Kinnaur district in the western Indian Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh. Launched as a mobilization against the negative impacts of hydropower projects in the region, the No Means No campaign is likely on its way to becoming a broader socioecological movement that confronts the adversities of state-led development policies and mobilizes cultural identity in creative ways. Art in various forms, from paintings and rock graffiti to poems and songs, plays a significant role. Against the backdrop of current debates on environmentalism, identity politics, and political aesthetics, the primary aim of this essay is to situate the selected artifacts in relation to the campaign and give their creators a voice—or an image.

Keywords: art, resistance, space, identity, Kinnaur, India

Introduction

This essay has been inspired by the creative use of art in the current No Means No campaign, originating in Himachal Pradesh's Kinnaur district in the western Indian Himalayas. Cognizant of the fact that people in all societal situations and places have expressed their resistance through aesthetic means, our case study offers a contemporary regional and generational perspective on questions prompted by the convergence of art and protest. These include: What role does art or aesthetics play in resistance? Where is the dividing line between art and politics? Does such a line even exist? How is art as protest or the art of protest—or both—reflected in individual

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cases? What is the role of the artists, and their respective spatial and generational belonging?

Drawing on artifacts related to the campaign, we hope to offer some food for thought here.[1] Launched as a mobilization against the adverse impacts of hydropower projects in the region, and likely on its way to becoming a broader socioecological movement, No Means No makes for an interesting case study in several respects. First, it reflects a current generation environmentalism that is only slowly garnering attention in social movement studies and related fields. As a youth-led mobilization, it lends a dynamic of its own to the contemporary moment.[2] Due to its location, positionality, and resources, it also has the potential to put western-centric approaches in perspective and to add a decolonial angle, which will be explored in the course of this essay. In this respect, it also serves as a case in point for the importance of spatiality and "cultural identity" in socioecological mobilizations (and their study), arguably gaining renewed momentum in recent times.

Secondly, it draws attention to the specific generational background of those involved and raises important questions about the space for social movements today, particularly with regard to the provenance of and possible changes in narratives and means.[3] At this point, a small note on the legacy of No Means No seems in order. In conversations with campaigners, frequent references are made to environmental movements outside the district and state, as well as the history of protest in the area. It is worth noting how the current participants are growing into their activism and drawing inspiration from previous protests in Kinnaur.[4] Networking and learning from peers seems as important as listening and learning from those who have lived through it all years ago. This is evident not only from the fact that the youth and the "old guard" appear side by side at many public events, but also in the campaigners' regular visits to

[1] The name of the campaign appears in several variations. For instance, NO MEANS NO can be seen on posters, banners, and graffiti, while the campaigners use #nomeansno, #no_means_no, No means No, and No Means No in captions and comments on social media.

[2] A brief note on the use of the term "youth": The campaign originated from the local youth clubs and the networking of their (male) members. Age plays a lesser role than status (e.g., being a bachelor), and extends into their thirties. In distinction to the previous generation, the cut seems to be relatively clear though.

[3] Incidentally, this could also provide an insightful perspective for the debate on global youth environmental movements such as Fridays for Future or Extinction Rebellion, readily dismissed as "spoiled angry kids" by mainstream feuilletons or opinionated academics, see, e.g., TalkTV 2021.

[4] The ecologically and geologically sensitive Kinnaur region has a long history of struggle against the construction of hydroelectric power plants. Prior to No Means No, there have already been a number of longstanding groups, e.g., Him Lok Jagriti Manch (literally translated: Himalayan people awareness platform) and Hangrang Sangarsh Samiti (Hangrang [valley] struggle committee), resisting the unconsenting and excessive realization of hydroelectric projects in the region. In contrast to the Kinnaur-wide approach adopted by No Means No, however, previous struggles were often localized (e.g., the struggle in the village of Lippa, see Pardikar 2020).

their predecessors in the various villages to discuss with them current events, difficulties, and strategies.[5] Two aspects seem to be decisive regarding the legacy and possibly the transformation of protest in the region: the way in which space is recognized and/or appropriated, and the ways in which cultural identity is brought to bear as political resource.

Given the focus of this essay, the very use of art as a means of addressing the current historical moment is as crucial as the choice of specific forms and forums of expression. With No Means No, the use of art as a means of protest acquires an intriguing form. The engagement of art in the campaign goes far beyond the traditional use of songs, poems, and crafts to express affect and aversion. What is striking is the synchronicity with which different art forms emerge and appear as almost "organic" parts of the same cause. Most telling, however, is that although the events seem well-nigh orchestrated, there is no recognizable "conductor." The artists perform their roles without being "led," without necessarily conceiving of themselves as "activists" or "artivists,"[6] and without necessarily being part of a larger whole with a specific goal. And yet the artifacts produced align with the general protest, and everyone is playing their part.

A final aspect to be mentioned in this introduction concerns the visibility or rather accessibility of the artifacts in question. The role of social media is decisive in this context.[7] It has changed how art is displayed as a means of protest and how it is received. This touches upon the role of space, which will be discussed in the last section of this essay. The cases presented here are characterized by the creative use and synergy of different spaces, in particular through the interplay of online and offline spaces.

[5] There is a continuity of protest across generations, even if the means and narratives may differ. The younger generation seems willing to learn from the past, just as their elders appreciate and support their struggles. See, e.g., this video in which Roshan Lal Negi, an expert on Tibetan language and Buddhism from Jangi and a frequent critic of hydropower development plans for the region, can be seen alongside the youth, lending his voice to the struggle: https://www.facebook.com/Savekinnaurcompaign/videos/4175529005847365/.

[6] The neologism "artivism" used here does not refer to a self-designation, but to a term coined by scholarship. Claims about its origin vary, and often it is not referenced at all. Sandoval and Latorre's article on "Chicana/o Artivism" (2008) seems to be the likely source. Drawing on Judy Baca's work, they define "digital artivism" as a "convergence between 'activism' and digital 'artistic' production" (ibid. 81). With its emphasis on the critical role of youth, identity, and empowerment, this approach is quite instructive here.

[7] We have not made a detailed distinction between the various social media in this essay. Here, it suffices to say that the role of social media for the campaign is primarily in using it as a platform for the presentation of events, which often takes the form of video artworks. The coordination of real-time events via X (formerly Twitter), as happened with Occupy or the Arab Spring, for example, plays no role in No Means No.

The reader will notice that the images presented in this essay are of varying pictorial language. There are photographs and posts of artworks, but also images of artist performances and their representation, as part of videography created and formatted for social media. As such, there are also different artists involved in performing different roles. The blend of art forms and cultural repertoires discussed below shows two things in particular. First, it acknowledges that "tradition" is fluid and changes at different paces, not least depending on the person who mobilizes it for different purposes. Secondly, it shows that art's mode of display is a crucial part of its reception, which is influenced not only by the background and concerns of the artists, but also by those of the viewers. This is also reflected in the format of this essay. We have provided the images with context and commentary, but there is room for interpretation, both for the recipients and in terms of the artists' own intentions. As such, it is ultimately up to the reader to make sense of the images and imagery used.

No Means No

On August 11, 2021, while the world was still recovering from the devastation unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic, Kinnaur, the easternmost district of the western Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh, was struck by another tragedy. It was a disaster that many had warned about. A landslide near the village of Nigulasari on the National Highway-5 claimed the lives of 28 people who were traveling that day (Bodh 2021). On August 26, 2021, a huge rally was organized in the district capital, Reckong Peo. The message was clear: The protesters, presumably representing the views of the vast majority of the local population, did not want any more disaster-enhancing hydropower projects that ignore the vulnerability of the region and are considered key contributors to the increase in landslides in the area (Bisht 2021).

Kinnaur, located on the border with Tibet, is one of the 12 districts of Himachal Pradesh. Covering an area of 6,401 km², it is sparsely populated with a density of approximately thirteen people per km² (Department of Economics and Statistics, Govt of HP 2022, 9). Land distribution is a major problem in the region, predominantly dependent on agriculture, as only 1.6 percent of the total area is arable (ibid., 38). The district is located on the upper reaches of the Sutlej river basin. The Sutlej is revered by the locals as Zangti Kulang, with *zang* meaning gold, *ti* meaning water, and *kulang* meaning river. Sutlej has the largest catchment area of the five rivers in Himachal Pradesh. It is also the most utilized river when it comes to harnessing its hydropower

potential. Being declared the "power hub" of the state, Kinnaur generates more than a quarter of Himachal Pradesh's total energy production, which is estimated to be nearly 16,751 MW (Directorate of Energy, Himachal Pradesh n.d.). In their 2023 report, Asher et al. highlight that the energy harnessed by the region's small and large hydropower projects exceeds 4,000 MW (2023, 44).

The geological and climatic conditions of the region make it susceptible to earthquakes, landslides, floods, and droughts (Himachal Pradesh State Disaster Management Authority 2017, 53-54). The tragedy that occurred at Nigulsari in 2021 was by no means a one-off event. Disasters of varying scope and severity have hit the region in the years that followed. 2023 was a particularly challenging year for the whole of Himachal Pradesh, as heavy rainfalls during the monsoon season triggered a series of flash floods and landslides. In Kinnaur, the disasters continued even after the monsoon season. Several landslides occurred on NH5, close to the previously affected stretch, cutting Kinnaur off from the rest of the world (Bhandari 2023; New Indian Express 2023). Residents were severely impacted by the roadblocks for several days as they were transporting their apple harvest for sale. The local livelihood, today primarily based on apple growing and tourism, is existentially threatened by the continuous expansion of infrastructure, project-enhanced or even -induced disasters, and climate change.[8]

To reach the villages of Rarang, Khadra, and Akpa, about 45 minutes from the district capital Reckong Peo, one has to take a turn off the National Highway after Akpa checkpost and drive a good distance on a semi-paved road. Along the road, one can see huge boulders with colorful graffiti and catchy slogans referring to the campaign. Notably, the rock art was placed in the landscape surrounding the villages where the campaign emerged but also disseminated as photographs on social media and online news.

[8] See also this video by Narender Kavil Kirti Negi, demanding accountability and investigation after the repeated landslides: https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cy-ntN0rfLD/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiN_WFlZA== (last accessed 22.12.2023). Through his video work and constant support, Kavil Kirti has created space for the campaign from the very beginning; the campaigners refer to him as *atey*, the Kinnauri word for "elder brother."

Figure 1: Rock graffiti near Akpa village: *Aj himalay jagega lutne wala bhagega* | #No Means No (The Himalaya will rise today and the plunderers will have to flee. #No Means No). Photograph by HW

It was in Akpa village that the catchphrase "No Means No" rang out for the first time on July 23, 2021, during a meeting on the proposed 804 MW Jangi Thopan Powari Hydroelectricity Project. The event turned public when people from the nearby villages mobilized and marched to the venue.[9] Under the constitution, Kinnaur is recognized as a Fifth Scheduled Area and is governed by the Panchayat (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA Act), 1996, and the Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, commonly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA). Section 3(2) of the FRA stipulates that conversion of forest land for development projects such as schools, hospitals, roads, and transmission lines must be approved by the concerned *gram sabha* (village council).[10] However, dysfunctional administration

[9] See https://fb.watch/otDNfi93ft/?mibextid=Nif5oz (last accessed 21.12.2023). Originally, it was to be a closed meeting of the members of the Monitoring Committee appointed by the district administration, with only selected representatives of the affected villages.

[10] The *gram sabha* is the forum of eligible voters (18 years and above) living in the village. It deliberates on matters pertaining to village development and governance.

and poor implementation of the FRA in Kinnaur has repeatedly undermined the rights of the local people (Kumar 2020). Earlier approval processes for hydropower projects in Kinnaur, where attempts were made to influence and/or subvert the will of the *gram sabha*, were still well-remembered, and this time they rejected all negotiations and conditions loud and clear.

Figure 2 and 3: Rock graffiti on the road from Akpa checkpost to Rarang. Photographs by HW

There are various stories about the origin of the campaign's name, some of which differ and some of which overlap, not least depending on whom you ask. A key aspect is certainly the aforementioned general dissatisfaction with the earlier approval processes. The companies involved have often sought to procure conditional consent, e.g., to exchange promises of jobs or infrastructure facilities in return for approval. It is in the nature of the beast that the costs of conditional consent are typically recognized when it is too late. In light of these experiences, the meeting on July 23, 2021, was met with collective rejection—*nahin* (Hindi for "no")—of all the company's assurances and promises. A few utterances of "No Means No" were also heard. Subsequently, the campaigners strategically deployed and amplified the slogan "No Means No" to achieve a wider reach. One of the ideas that eventually emerged was the analogy to the feminist campaign "No Means No." The idea of consent (project approval by the *gram sabha*) and exploitation (of the Sutlej) was seen as running parallel to the core tenets of the global movement.[11]

[11] By insisting on consent as a process and not as a one-off instance for obtaining a No Objection Certificate (NOC) by the *gram sabha*, the FRA aims at strengthening local governance. For a "feminist critique of consent," see, for instance, Loick 2020.

Two things are particularly worth mentioning here. First, although No Means No was ultimately coined as an English campaign name, there is no discrepancy, but rather a continuum with *nahin* as a general expression of resistance in the local languages. As such, it contains both local and global references and has acquired a quasi-translingual meaning. Secondly, the references—such as the link to global feminism—are not necessarily known or affirmed by all or else these are attributed to different provenances. The active *nahin* upheld by local women's organizations or *mahila mandals* is frequently stressed and seen as an important source of resistance, corroborating both the feminist link and a local story of origin.

Creating spaces for protest

The widespread publicity achieved by No Means No has forced the average citizen in Kinnaur and even beyond the district to take note of the current situation.

Figure 4: No Means No campaign. Courtesy of The Pahari Zone, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tcWEw85qw2w (last accessed 22.12.2023)

What characterized the campaign from the very beginning has been the use of offline and online spaces, sometimes alternating, often simultaneously. In addition to rallies such as the one mentioned above, which certainly had a major impact as an initial spark, the use of digital space has proven crucial from the outset. It may be somewhat redundant to speculate about the original reasons for the unfolding of the campaign on

social media; the COVID-19 pandemic and the increased accessibility of the internet arguably played an important role, but so did the routines and skills of the campaigners. What is important here is to shed light on the implications this has had on the shape and reach of the campaign.

Since its inception, No Means No has made a mark through images and songs, and through their creative representation on social media. This offers an interesting angle on the use of art in resistance movements. In the case of Kinnaur, while the artistic expressions clearly refer to the indigenous epistemologies of the region, the way they are used by the young campaigners is informed by a creative, one could perhaps say "syncretic" view of "cultural identity." The potential of this "artivism" seems to lie in particular in the dynamic synthesis between "traditional" and "new" art forms—a dynamism that debunks the dichotomy itself. The demands for impact, reach, and connectivity thrive on the use of means that are "global" by default. And yet, what is at stake globally is distinctly localized.

Figure 5: Rock graffiti near Akpa village: *Chilgoja bachao, paryavaran bachao, sanskrti bachao* | #No Means No (Save Chilgoza pine, save the environment, save culture. #No Means No). Photograph by HW

The emphasis on indigeneity plays a major role in this respect. It is about the recognition of cultural and political autonomy. Decades of exploitation of the local population's *jal, jungle, jameen* (water, forest, and land) in the name of development has challenged people and left them feeling dejected, but also compelled them to engage in dialogue and to take a stand. Adding to the history of protest in the region, the No Means No campaign has mounted a strong response in this regard in recent times, especially in terms of its reach, visibility, and Kinnaur-wide approach. It has attracted people who share the same critique and created lasting solidarities and relationships that ultimately form the basis for any nascent movement to have a future.[12] The (self-)perception as "tribal" plays at least two roles in this context. On the one hand, it serves as a reminder that the region and its inhabitants are endowed with constitutional rights that ought to be upheld—or effectively gained in the first place. On the other, it serves as a cultural signifier representing both a demarcation from the "mainstream" and a link, a potential solidarity, to other indigenous peoples facing similar threats.

Figure 6: Rock graffiti near Rarang village. Photograph by HW

[12] The campaigners have always made an attempt to forge friendships and pursue new avenues within and outside the region, as evidenced by a recent exploratory trip to Lahaul and Spiti, and by visits both to Kinnaur students' associations across Himachal Pradesh, and to villages affected by previous projects. It is also noteworthy that many of the campaigners, although they are related to each other and come from neighboring villages, did not know each other before the joint campaign, but gradually grew into firm network and relations. For the Lahaul Spiti visit, see https://www.instagram.com/reel/CttNlhmO4Xn/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&_igshid=%20MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D (last accessed 22.12.2023).

It is interesting to observe how notions of Kinnaura identity are elicited in the art sites of resistance.[13] This relates to the artistic appropriation of space, as with the rock graffiti above (see also section 4). It visualizes the relationship of the protest to the landscape in which it is taking place, as is also reflected in the narratives evoked in stories and songs.

On roots and means: Seeking answers beyond "glocalism"

Kinnaur has a rich linguistic diversity. The district is home to several languages, most of which are classified as Tibeto-Burman or Indo-Aryan; many are endangered today (Negi 2022). Most of the languages of Kinnaur have no script. Evidence of the literary tradition is therefore rather sparse. However, the region has a rich oral culture, reflected in folklore and songs through which knowledge and information is passed on from generation to generation. Notably, folk songs are not only repositories of knowledge, but have themselves created space to talk about marginalization. Stories of despair, hardships, and inequalities frequently feature in old folk songs (see Negi 2022).[14]

Numerous young singers from Kinnaur have taken up this legacy in various ways and supported the campaign in song with their own contributions. One of them is Deep Poet.[15] The musician chooses hip-hop and rap to express himself—formats that have not been part of the region's cultural repertoire to date. Particularly remarkable is that he performs in his mother tongue, Kinnauri.[16] Deep's lyrics evoke a strong emotional attachment to Kinnaura identity and land, and call for unity in the region. At the same time, he reflects on the fractures within society and does not hesitate to take a stance on regional politics.

[13] Kinnaura is the name of the predominant group living in Kinnaur. Different spellings are prevalent, such as Kinnaura, Kinnora, Kanaura.

[14] Additional information and songs can be found at zedtells.com/folksong (last accessed 22.12.2023), and https://www.zedtells.com/ archive (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[15] https://tribegang.online/deep-poet/ (last accessed 22.12.2023). For the song "No Means No", see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jhaRWQnCDCM (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[16] More precisely, he raps in Hamskad, the "standard Kinnauri," a language that is today endangered and spoken by ever fewer people. Younger people in particular no longer learn the language, not least because it is not part of the school and higher education curriculum.

Figure 7: Deep Poet performing at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur" on August 26, 2023, in Reckong Peo. Photograph by PN

Deep recently composed a song for No Means No, which was released in December 2023. Throughout the song, the word *phayul* (that occurs several times) is used as a synonym for Kinnaur. *Phayul* is an interesting word that is frequently employed within the songs of Kinnaur. In Bhoti Kinnauri, from which the term originates, *phayul* literally translates to fatherland and is used to mean "place of origin."[17] In older songs, *phayul* was used to denote a person's village or a place to which they belong. Interestingly, this belonging is relative to spatial context. Within Kinnaur, *phayul* is used for the village to which one belongs, as can be seen from lyrics that are encountered in many old songs: "*Namsha hamch dugyosh? Namsha ta lonana phayulo bairang*, or, *namsha ta lonna phayulo komo." "*Where is the daughter-in-law from? The daughter-in-law comes from outside the *phayul* (she hails from a different village), or the daughter-in-law comes from inside the *phayul* (the same village as the son)." When people leave Kinnaur, however, *phayul* refers to the entire region, as is common in modern day parlance. As more and more young people move to cities outside of Kinnaur to study and work, the strong attachment to their place of origin is reflected in a (diasporic) sense of community; they navigate the perceived alienation and tensions in the cities, acting as "reminders that belonging is elsewhere" (Smith and Gergan 2015, 123). No Means No

[17] There are different names for the language, reflecting locally varied external or self-designations, among them, Navakat, Nyamkat/d, and Bud-Kat. See Saxena 2022: 169-271; 407.

has successfully evoked this identity as a community, as seen reflected in the slogan: "*Ek Kinnaur, ek awaz*" ("one Kinnaur, one voice").

Deep Poet's lyrics speak to this sentiment. The recurring bridge in his song tells of the "*phayul*" rising up and jointly saying "No means no:" "*Ang ju fayul ringo no means no, ringo bodhi kera aakha hun no means no, toshim byased damaro hala hacho çhat hun çaiki eke hachis lonniseya* no means no" (My *fayul* says: No means No. They say the pain is unbearable now. No means No. Accustomed to sitting in the dark, how will there be light. Everyone must unite and say: No means No).[18] The remainder of his song focuses on landscape transformation and the internal fractures within Kinnaur's society, including the ignorance and negligence of some of its people, the flaws of party politics, and corruption.

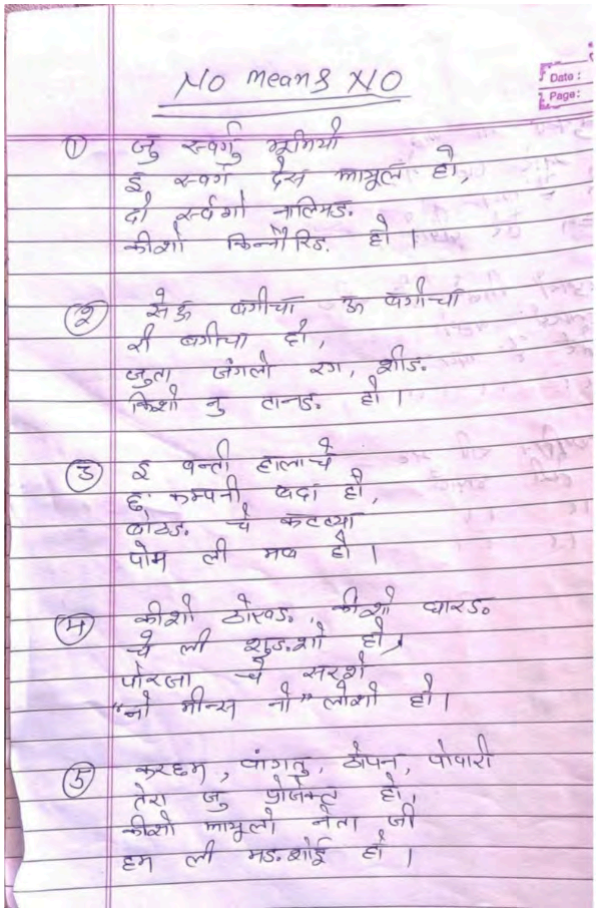
Thakur Bhagat is another young singer who has contributed a song to the campaign. He hails from Jangi, one of the villages that will be affected by the Jangi Thopan Powari Hydroelectricity Project.[19] Unlike Deep's, his song is more akin to folk songs in style and music. He sings about the destruction of mountains, rivers, and land occurring with the advent of hydroelectric projects in Kinnaur. In the music video, Thakur Bhagat wears a No Means No T-shirt and is performing a traditional dance, while one of the largest power projects in the region, Karcham Wangtoo, can be seen in the background.[20]

Figure 8: Still from Thakur Bhagat's "No Mean[s] No|Protest Video Song." Courtesy of the artist, https://youtu.be/cf__qtPD3Lg?si=K9HE1AkG0SrhD34Y (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[18] Translation by PN with input from the artist. The transliteration used is his.

[19] November 18, 2023, was a temporary triumph for the opponents of the project. On this day, the government of Himachal Pradesh issued a statement in which it canceled the allocation of the project to the previous operator SJVN (Satluj Jal Vidyut Nigam) due to delays in construction work. See, http://himachalpr.gov.in/OnePress Release.aspx?Language=1&ID=32087 (last accessed 22.12.2023). The campaigners keep pushing for the project to be scrapped completely.

[20] The T-shirt was designed and printed by a young supporter of the campaign who gave it to the movement at cost price. Incidentally, he is the grandson of R.S. Negi, retired IAS officer (Indian Administrative Service) and convener of Him Lok Jagriti Manch.



No means No

1) Upon this heavenly abode
there is a heavenly *phayul*,
the name of the heaven
is our Kinnaur.

2) Apple orchards, flower fields
Chilgoza forests,
the stones and woods in the forests
are our ornaments.

3) What a strange thing
that the company has come,
trees are all chopped down
and now the snow doesn't come.

4) Our mountains, our rivers
all has perished,
the public has risen
"No Means No," everyone says.

5) Karcham, Wangtoo, Thopan, Powari
how many projects,
our *phayul's* politician
where will you hide.

Figure 9: Lyrics of "No Means No" by Thakur Bhagat. Courtesy of the artist.

In addition to official music release, people who use Instagram and other platforms to disseminate their art have also contributed to the campaign. One such example is the video of the user a_v_brown, which has been circulating on Instagram since July 29, 2021. One campaigner's comment reads: "Other social media platforms FB or YT *pr bhi daalo apne is rap ko...*" (Upload your rap on other social media platforms such as FB or YT), followed by raising hands and clapping emojis, which obviously suggest an appreciative reception. The video is by rap artist Avinav Thakur, also known as a_v_brown. He raps in Hindi and questions the discourse on disasters as allegedly "natural events." The song's chorus goes, "No more hydro projects *humein nahi chahiye, bohot ho gayi chuppi ab ap bhi kuch kahiye*" (We don't want any more hydro projects, enough silence now, you too say something). As an independent rapper who has released a few music videos in collaboration with Punjabi artists, Avinav is an interesting case in terms of what has been said about the protest not being "instructed" and yet seemingly orchestrated. Avinav is not associated with the local music industry, he does not rap in

the local language and is not an active part of the campaign, yet he felt the urge to speak up for the local cause—"This is for my birth land," his song's intro says—and it has been well received and seen as a supportive part of the campaign.

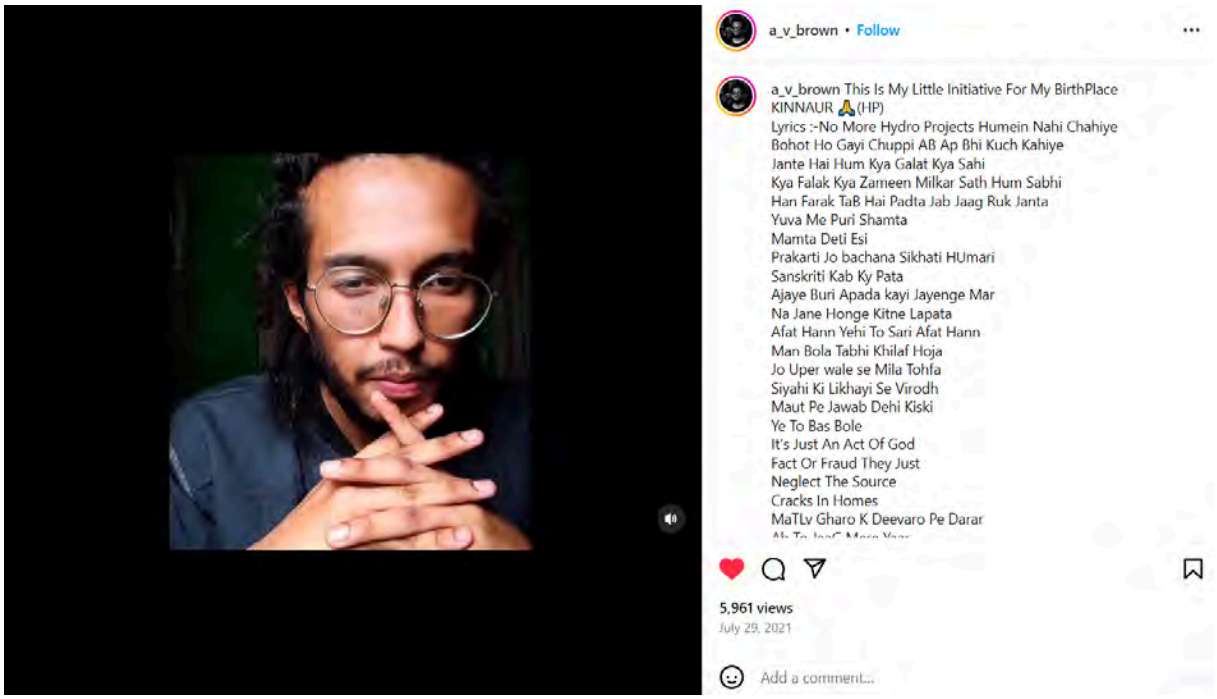


Figure 10: Still from a_v_brown's Instagram video with lyrics uploaded as captions. Courtesy of the artist, https://www.instagram.com/p/CR6NC3ajCls/ (last accessed 22.12.2023).

Songs are just one of the many art forms used in the campaign. The incorporation of Kinnaur's arts and crafts tradition also deserves attention. Among them are wooden carvings in the *santang*,[21] jewelry making, handloom weaving, art, and architecture inspired by Tibetan Buddhism, and the fabrication of musical instruments—many of which are reflected in the campaign's posts on social media, featuring a mix of cultural repertoires.

Mahesh Negi, who uses the page "Kyang" for his awareness and educational work, has long been with the campaign.[22] Kyang, through its social media channels, not only promotes the campaign, but also educates people about environmental issues, such as waste management awareness, the adverse effects of unsustainable tourism, and the like. The artworks seen on Kyang's page are framed by the *topru*, which is one of the common patterns for woolen goods such as shawls, scarves, and *dodu* (wraps) in

[21] The abode of the local *devta* (deity).

[22] *Kyang* is Kinnauri for "spark" and is related to the initial ignition—or spark—of the campaign. The metaphor also appears in Deep Poet's song.

Kinnaur. The art of weaving has existed since ancient times and is closely interwoven with Kinnaur's culture, history, and economy.[23]

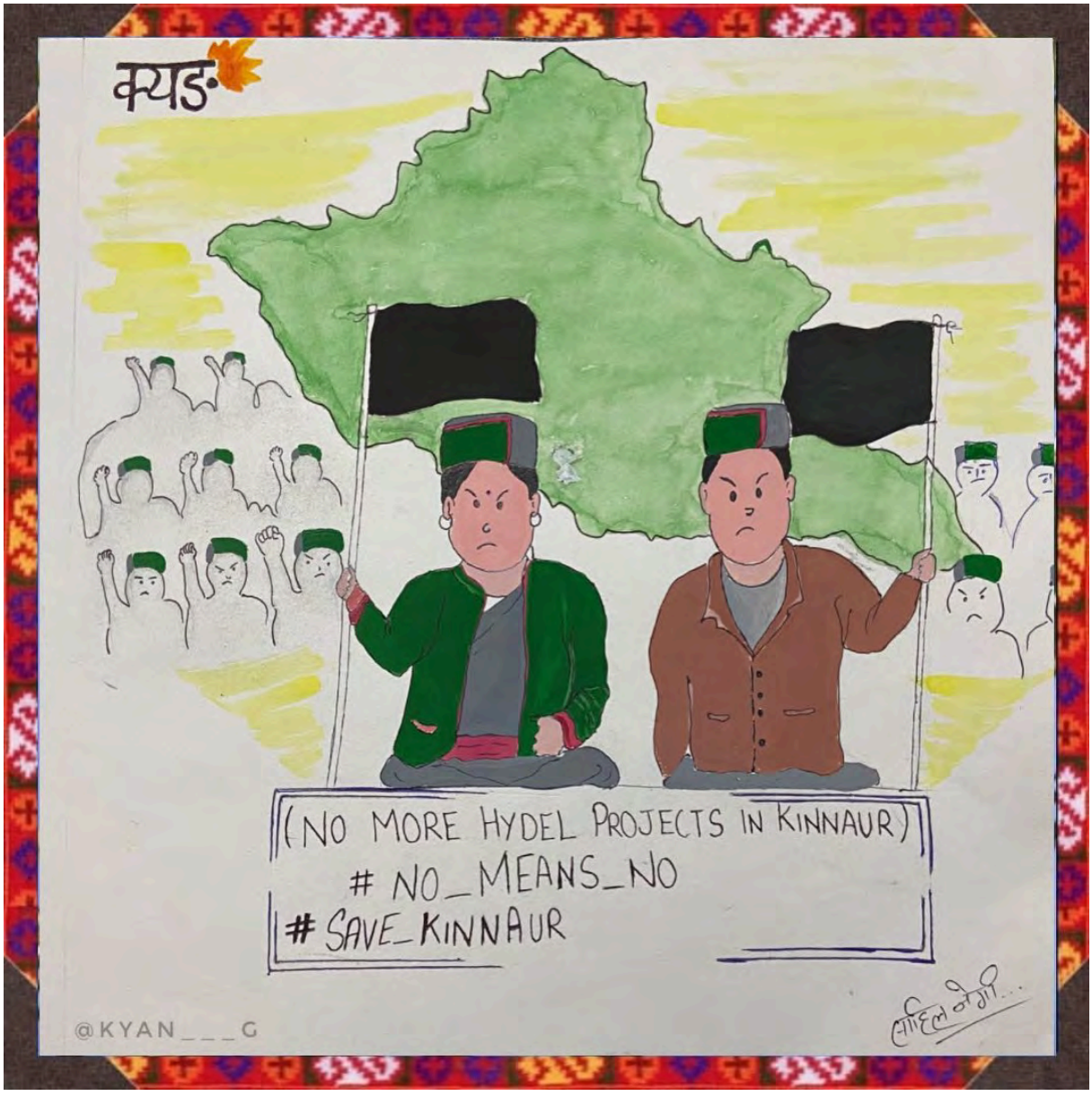


Figure 11: "No more hydel projects in Kinnaur."
Artwork by Sahil Negi and Prabhakar Negi. Courtesy of Kyang and the artists,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CRvF1BMLeJv/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==
(last accessed 22.12.2023).

[23] Kinnaur is located on the old Hindustan Tibet route, an ancient trade route that connected Tibet with the Indian subcontinent. Sheep farming and the trade in wool products became the primary economic activity in Kinnaur at the time. The weaving tradition that followed dates back thousands of years (Copley Patterson 2002).

Figure 12: Post shared on the occasion of Raksha Bandhan.[24]
Artwork by Sahil Negi and Prabhakar Negi. Courtesy of Kyang and the artists,
https://www.instagram.com/p/CS3ZsP6hJ8o/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA==
(last accessed 22.12.2023).

[24] Raksha Bandhan is a festival in which a sister ties a *rakhi* (sacred thread) on her—literal or figurative—brother's wrist and the brother promises to protect her. It is not customarily celebrated in Kinnaur. Across India, the festival has been appropriated by various groups and political forces.

The above artwork was uploaded by Kyang in August 2021 and appeared a second time in a video released on International Women's Day 2022. The image, titled "Tribal women," is followed by clips of women chanting the slogans "*Naari shakti zindabad*" ("long live the power of women") and "*Awaz do, hum ek hain*" ("call out, we are one") at two rallies, one of which was held on August 26, 2021 in Reckong Peo. Another video featuring the artwork was created by "The Pahari Zone," one of the campaigners from Rarang village who runs a social media account under this name, and published on his Instagram page. In the video, students can be seen jointly painting variations of the artwork. The video's caption is particularly interesting in context of this essay. It translates roughly as: "Whenever we meet our friends from Kinnaur (students), they ask us: How can we ensure our contribution to Kinnaur ... and they tell us that even if we can't do things on the ground, we can always contribute to creating a better Kinnaur through painting, singing and various platforms. Salam to the children who retain such sensitivity for their motherland."[25]

Sunder Negi's recitation of Bhagat Singh Kinner's poem *"Kal maine Satluj ko rotey dekha"* ("Yesterday, I saw Sutlej crying") is another example of the fusion of repertoires, debunking once more any heavy-handed dichotomy between "traditional" and "new" art.[26] Sunder, who left his job as a banker in the city in 2018 for a life in the village, has played a crucial role in the campaign's launch and expansion. The video brings the words of the poem to life by placing visuals of the dammed and tunnelled Sutlej alongside images of indigenous customs and rituals associated with the river. It reflects different repertoires and temporalities both in terms of content, giving meaning to indigenous worldviews in contemporary times, and with regard to the medium and format (video recitation), which has the clear intention of broadening the audience for the poem, as Sunder writes in the caption: "*Ise humne video format mein sabke samne lane ka prayas kia hai. Ummed hai aap sabhi ko pasand ayega*" ("We have made an effort to bring it [the poem] before everyone via video format. Hope all of you like it").

[25] See https://www.instagram.com/reel/CgCIcWdghdf/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA== (last accessed 22.12.2023).

[26] Bhagat Singh Kinner, who hails from the village of Rarang, is associated with the history of protest in the region.

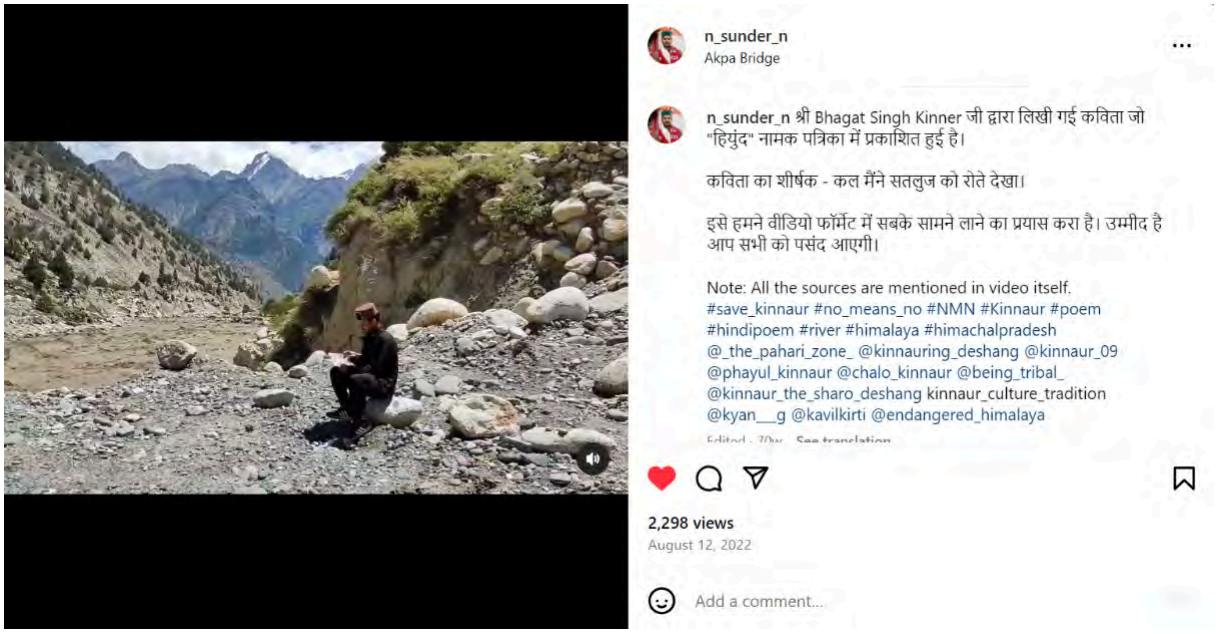


Figure 13: Sunder Negi reciting Bhagat Singh Kinner's poem "*Kal maine Sutlej ko rotey dekha*" on the shore of Sutlej. Courtesy of Sunder Negi. https://www.instagram.com/p/ChKRF5xhVGM/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D (last accessed 22.12.2023).

Competing (for) spaces

One crucial aspect to which these artistic expressions draw attention is the interrelation between the campaign's use of art and space—an observation not unique to this mobilization. Two variants can be distinguished here. On the one hand, there is the creation of dedicated spaces in which art can thrive; these include online and offline spaces for specific events, exhibitions, or happenings. On the other, there is the utilization of public space for protest through artistic expression. Alongside considerations of distinct places, landscapes and sites of protest, space is conceived here as a participatory setting for political articulation and mobilization. Movements shape space as much as they are influenced by it. The significance of spatiality for matters of culture and identity has long occupied scholars (for anthropology, see Gupta and Ferguson 1992, 1997; further Dirlik 2001; Escobar 2001, 2008); more recent studies on various sites of struggle confirm the importance of spatial aspects with regard to questions of resistance (see, for instance, Daphi 2017; Johansson and Vinthagen 2020; Juris 2012; Milbourne and Mason 2017).

The public event on August 26, which has been recurring every year since the abovementioned tragedy in 2021, and the subsequent representation of the event on

social media, is a good example of the intertwining of spaces. What happens in offline and online spaces is not necessarily practiced by different actors, nor does it pursue different goals.[27]

Figure 14: *Awaz-e-Kinnaur: Apda, astitva, adhikar aur sangarsh | Paryavaran, satat vikas va janjatiya asmita par paricharcha* (Awaz-e-Kinnaur: Disaster, survival, rights, and struggles. Discussion on the environment, sustainable development, and tribal identity).[28] Poster announcing the event on August 26, 2023. Design: Tanisha Negi

[27] As Jeffrey S. Juris likewise notes with regard to the #Occupy movement: "It is clear that new media influence how movements organize and that places, bodies, face-to-face networks, social histories, and the messiness of offline politics continue to matter (…)." (2012, 260)

[28] This was the English title chosen by the organizers, which retained *"Awaz-e-Kinnaur"* instead of "Voice of Kinnaur." Eventually, the Hindi title found its way onto the poster and into wider distribution. The choice of "*janjatiya*" and "tribal" in conjunction with Kinnaur's collective voice and identity is worth noting.

Particularly interesting is how events take on a new quality and find a new reach when they are disseminated via social media, often as part of artistic video contributions. Not only is the audience potentially different, but the context in which the artifacts are placed, mixed, and possibly modified also shifts. To state the obvious, but nonetheless important, the commentary function on the videos also allows recipients other than those at the event itself to voice their opinion. Videographic representations enable a different temporality and scale of reception, which brings a new dynamic to the perception and self-perception of those staging the event as well.

Figure 15: Deep Poet's performance at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur" featured in a video of the event. Courtesy of The Pahari Zone, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SR9QII01sYw (last accessed 22.12.2023).

Figure 16: Jaswant Negi's paintings at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur," August 26, 2023. Photograph by PN

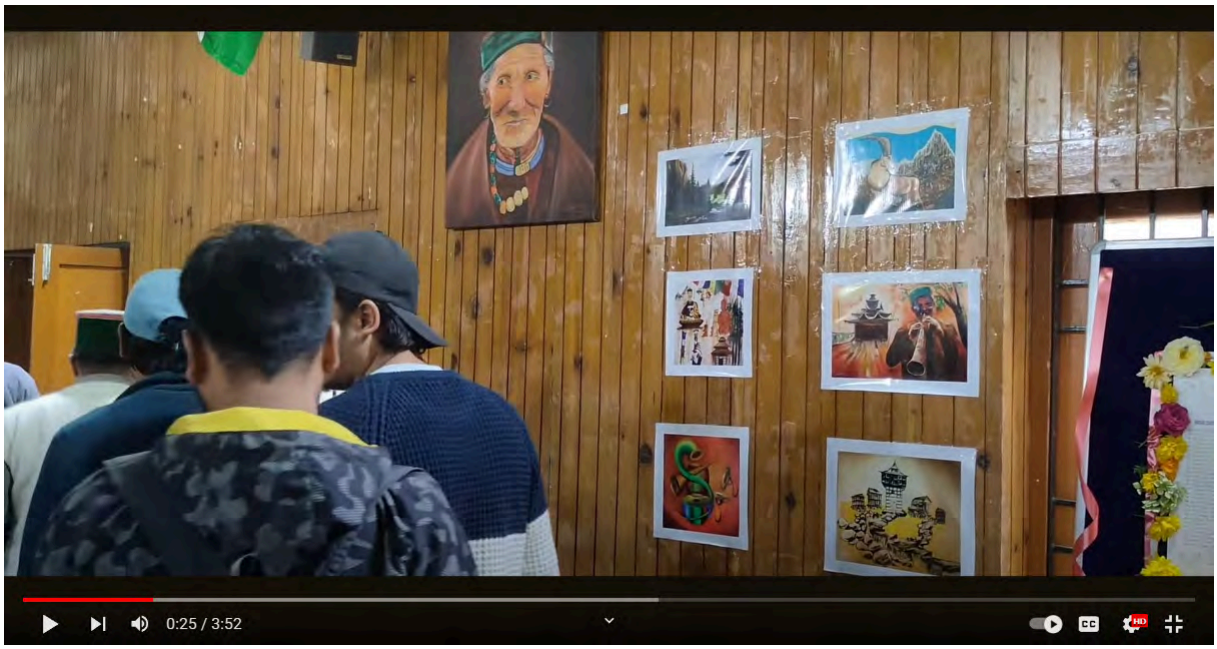


Figure 17: Jaswant Negi's paintings at "Awaz-e-Kinnaur" featured in a video of the event. Courtesy of The Pahari Zone, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SR9QII01sYw (last accessed 22.12.2023).

The campaign is certainly not the only player engaging spatiality to further its aims. State actors have long focused on appropriating space for their goals, including the promotion of a preferred version of "culture." Different spatial levels come into play here, including physically tangible places, where variants of more or less "staged authenticity" are produced, as well as virtual spaces, such as the Himachal Tourism Official Website, where landscapes are made accessible—and coined—for non-locals.[29] As can be seen from these and the above examples, both online and offline spaces operate with varying degrees of mediation and mediatization, which ultimately blur the boundaries themselves. Given the hybridity and interplay of spaces, "(...) any opposition between the 'virtual' and the 'real' is fundamentally misleading in almost the same manner as a distinction between the 'digital' and the 'nondigital' (or 'analog') is untenable" (Frömming et al. 2017, 13).

The government of Himachal Pradesh has decorated public walls all over the state with paintings depicting the culture of the region. The ones below can be seen at the bus station in the district capital of Kinnaur, Reckong Peo.

Figure 18: The picture wall, bus stand, Reckong Peo. Photograph by HW

[29] Images of "Kinnauri tradition" feature quite prominently on this page, see https://himachaltourism.gov.in/ destination/ ethnic/ (last accessed 22.12.2023). The title of the URL/sub-page is also noteworthy.

Figure 19: Traditional architecture in Kamru village, embellished with ripe apples, bus stand, Reckong Peo. Photograph by HW

Figure 20: Kinnauras dancing in ethnic attire in the santang of Kalpa village, bus stand, Reckong Peo. Photograph by HW

Comparing the images displayed at the bus stand with the paintings shown in the art gallery at Awaz-e-Kinnaur, one may not recognize much of a difference in the motifs at first glance. What is shown are features of "culture and tradition," such as women in folk dress, traditional architecture, landscapes, and animals, aestheticizing the place. That is where space as a participatory setting for political articulation and mobilization becomes crucial. The context in which the paintings are shown matters. It makes a difference whether the apples are a nice decoration that might attract tourists who come in season for a cheaper buy or whether they are shown in an event where a clear (symbolic) link is established to a threatened economy. It makes a difference whether the pristineness of nature is shown as if nothing has happened, to appeal to those who pass by the projects on their way to unspoiled landscapes, or whether it is shown, still aesthetically pleasing, but everyone in the room knows what will happen if the projects were to go ahead. It makes a difference whether the Kinnaura woman in the traditional attire is featured in a clip about the beauty and modesty of "tribal women," or whether she is holding a placard reading "No Means No," as in the images above. After all, the way in which the campaigners see the landscape they inhabit and envision their future is quite clear:

Figure 21: Rock graffiti near Akpa checkpost. Photograph by HW

Conclusion

This essay has been an attempt to present our reflections on the relationship between art and resistance in the context of socioecological mobilizations. Using the case of the No Means No campaign in western Himalayan Kinnaur, we hope to have shown essentially two things. First, there is no inherent relationship between art and resistance that prescribes roles and goals; it is a dynamic process in which neither the role of the individual artist and the trajectory of the artifact nor the choice of art forms and content are predetermined. Secondly, the repertoires used by the artists are fluid and the critical potential of the artworks arises precisely through creative synthesis and shifting contexts. The ability to navigate different cultural registers in terms of means and narratives is as crucial as the versatility of form and performance that co-creates the spaces in which the works are presented and received.

To give an example of this rather abstract claim: Jaswant’s paintings clearly illustrate that purpose is as important as context—in this case, that of the exhibition. But they also show that “tradition” may change at a different pace than its critical scrutiny, which means that the aim of cultural preservation can potentially serve very different purposes. Displaying artifacts seen as representative of one’s culture takes on a practicality beyond “strategic essentialism” (Spivak 1993). In the moment of the resistive act, “who we are” and “who we want to be” conveys a powerful message without necessarily implying a concession in terms of content. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay, the aspect of “learning,” constantly stressed by the campaigners, plays a crucial role here: learning about themselves, their combatants, but also about “activism,” not yet defined, as a possible way to create a different future. Tomorrow, I may want to be someone else if I realize I have taken the wrong path. If we rethink essentialism in the present context, it can have both a resistive and possibly subversive potential, as it offsets the content of what is shown at the very moment it is shown because of the context in which it happens. Images of “traditional architecture,” “scenic beauty,” and “rich folk heritage” fulfill this function, as do songs replete with feelings of loss and nostalgia. This is not a reactionary longing for the past (even if this is a possible direction), but rather the expression of an identity crisis that juggles a future yet to be created. While the campaigners evoke a strong sense of community, many have critically reflected on their people’s role in bringing unwelcome societal change to the region. The cooperation between colonial state authorities and the local elites, for example, has been called into question time and again. Critical

questions directed to the political leaders of Kinnaur have been posed in songs and social media posts.

Scholars have long have argued that the Indian state is behaving in an imperial and colonial manner in its "tribal" and border areas, turning them into hubs for large-scale development projects and extractive industries that violate indigenous people's rights to their lands and autonomy (see, for instance, Anand 2012; Baruah 2012; Kikon 2020; Xaxa 2016). Such criticism is reflected quite vividly in No Means No. The campaigners challenge the development interests of the state and contrast this with a different future. Not necessarily a future that is finalized in all aspects, but a future that is "decolonial" because it holds a vision of space where the people have more control over decision-making processes and ancestral territories. Beyond the common tropes of "development critique," sustainability is high on the agenda, including livelihood issues, reconcilable tourism, horticulture, and self-paced—and self-defined—development.

The context is equally clear—and by extension equally decolonial: From its location, positionality, and resources, No Means No has to struggle against a long tradition of hegemonic historiography and ethnography in India (and elsewhere) that has always sought to incorporate its margins into the mainstream. The (post-)colonial Indian state operates on a hierarchized social structure (Xaxa 2016). This reflects prominently in the long-held and partly prevailing view that indigenous peoples or "tribals," to quote the still common official language, are basically "backward Hindus" whom the state should strive to assimilate into the Hindu mainstream civilization. In view of the current political transformations in India, this becomes even more pertinent. Although not yet as widespread as in neighboring regions of the Himalayas, sanskritization[30] is already a significant phenomenon in Kinnaur. It is against this backdrop that, e.g., Kinnauri rapper Deep Poet's art can be read. Rapping in his mother tongue becomes a decisive means for asserting cultural and territorial autonomy, and a fitting example of Kinnaur's present-day "artivism." The resistance of the region's youth is decolonial through its criticism of development paradigms. But it also debunks these terms through its very being and acting on the ground.

[30] The hierarchization of castes, by which lower castes and "tribals" are classified and assimilated into a Brahmanical worldview. This includes the marginalization of indigenous rituals and customs as well as the supersession of languages of non-Sanskritic origin. The replacement of terms from the vernacular with non-equivalent Hindi terms—such as in *santang* (deity's residence, but also place of assembly) through *mandir* (temple)—results in considerable shifts in meaning, which have an impact on local customs.

Recalling the questions posed in the introduction to this essay, we must concede that there is no necessary relationship between art and resistance (here, as throughout the essay, understood in the narrow sense of political action). Nor is resistance per se transformative.[31] Chances are good, however, for art to assume a resistant role through the spaces it creates or appropriates. Beyond questions of intention and impact, the campaign's political aesthetic has manifested and spread with a vigor certainly not conceivable at the outset. Even though art in its various forms is only one element of the campaign, it is crucial in visualizing the potential and tenacity of the resistance. This is perhaps most evident in the rock graffiti shown in this essay, situated as they are between materiality and metaphor. At first glance, a rock may simply be a rock, but as soon as it is used as a canvas, it changes its valence. And so, the rock, as a symbol of resistance, underscores the resistance itself. The message written on it interacts with its unbreakability: No Means No.

[31] Whether art is resistant in itself is another question, given the homonymy of the term "resistance." See Rancière (2008).

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Seduction of the old City of Srinagar: An Enquiry into Competing Narratives of Belonging

Arshi Javaid

Abstract

This essay explores the various narratives of belonging vis-a-vis the city of Srinagar. As the city witnesses massive transformations politically and socially, the interplay between space and power acquires new forms. In this essay, I map this interplay through the elite narrative, the porno-tropic narrative, and the localist narrative to the city.

Keywords: Srinagar, heritage, smart city, localism, right to city

Introduction: The nature of the old city of Srinagar

The old city of Srinagar in the Kashmir valley is witnessing massive political and social transformations, as influenced by both the state and private sector. The shift threatens the fragile architecture, infrastructure, ownership, demographic composition, and the lived heritage of the city. Like other cities, the old city of Srinagar is not only a spatially bound geographical cluster but also a cluster of social and political networks.

Likewise, the old city of Srinagar is the product of historical interactions that have taken place over the years, from the significance of the Kashmiri Sultanate days (1339-1561), when the old city was formed, to the present-day. The history and location have made this a diverse place in the sense that it harbors plurality. One walks in the city and is confronted with signs of disparate living in terms of the size of the houses, the architectural styles, and the *mohallas* (quarters) developed on the basis of occupational similarity. In a conversation, noted journalist Zahid Ghulam Mohammad discussed the plurality in the city as exhibited by the presence of the native population and the migrant population, which formed over the years comprised largely of Sufis

and their disciples. In Mohammad's imagination, the old city of Srinagar has been a space under construction. Routine practices that are materially embedded follow a systematic daily rhythm. As any city's spaces are inherently political, the old city of Srinagar also needs to be approached in terms of its politicization and the political sphere that it forms. It has been a cradle for sub-nationalists and nationalists, and subsequently emerged as a battlefield for contested politics within these domains.[1]

This essay has been developed over the course of many such interactions and interviews conducted. These took place in Srinagar and on digital platforms during the past few years. Additionally, the essay profits from my sustained engagement with the subject of Srinagar city online. Here I have been connecting my personal experiences with a wider understanding of the subject. The tenor of my essay is also informed by the collective response towards the city after the abrogation of Article 370 in Kashmir.[2]

In introducing these narratives, my primary objective is to discuss the intricate interplay between space and power, particularly, how power can manifest itself spatially. Each narrative of belonging carries with it distinct political objectives. The elite narrative perpetuates an interpretation that disregards any acknowledgment of socio-historical processes. In this view, the city becomes a stronghold of the elite, overshadowing and marginalizing those who contribute to its existence. On the other hand, there is a porno-tropic narrative that perpetuates a complex web of connections between the state, capital, market, and colonial influence. While appealing to neo-liberal and nationalist perspectives, these two viewpoints undermine the indigenous narratives of the city. Such narrative reproductions of the city not only pose a physical threat but systematically erase the presence of the local population.

[1] In the 1930s, the old city became a spatial center for resistance against the Dogra rule in Kashmir. Mirwaiz Manzil was erected as a hub for political leadership, and to meet with its representatives, people from far flung areas would visit the place. From the 1940's to the late 1970's, Srinagar's urban space was divided into two groups, Sher and Bakra (Lions and Goats). Lions followed the National Conference, which was comprised of sub-nationalists within the Indian state, while Bakras were the followers of Mirwaiz Mohammad Farooq, who also had control over the oldest mosque in Srinagar. Bakras held to the vision of Pakistan and associated with the larger Muslim world. The two groups would fight around local issues, and at times they became embroiled in physical fights. The Sher-Bakra divide ended in 1983 but was soon followed by militancy that erupted in 1989. The Jammu Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) pioneered the militant movement, and its spatial center was also Srinagar.

[2] Article 370 was added to India's Constitution in 1949 and allowed Jammu and Kashmir together to have their own constitution, a separate flag, and control over matters of foreign affairs, defense, and communications. The autonomy as allowed was eroded over the years. On August 5th, 2019, the Indian government suddenly revoked Article 370 of the constitution, stripping the state of its last remnants of autonomy.

In contrast to these narratives, there is a localist perspective; it dismantles the myth of the ideal smart city citizen who is emblematic of futuristic smart cities, while championing the right to the city. This alternative narrative challenges existing power structures and emphasizes the importance of preserving indigenous stories and the well-being of the local population.

Elite narrative to the city

The elite narrative to the old city can be traced back to the creation of surplus value, which eventually led to the formation of classes and to subsequent population movement outwards of the city. Rai (2004), Zutshi (2003) discuss the rise of trading families in Sheher-e-Khaas (the local name for the old city of Srinagar). These families had enormous influence on the politics and affairs of the city and have been instrumental in generating trade and commerce. Nonetheless, their social capital and privilege also had a capitalistic flair and became a central feature for the reproduction of business interests. Mohammad (2023) discussed the rise of "war wealthy," popularly known as *jung khojas*, who made massive economic progress during the years around the world wars.

This geographical and social concentration of surplus wealth resulted in a class stratification phenomenon. It also meant that surplus must be extracted from somewhere, i.e., from the city's working class. The city perpetually produced the surplus that this type of urbanization required and it became instrumental in creating a new lifestyle. The creation of surplus was a class phenomenon where the capitalistic classes used the predatory practices of exploitation and dispossession against vulnerable populations. Harvey (2012) notes those who had helped to create exciting and vibrant neighbourhoods then lose them through predatory practices to upper-class consumers and capitalists. The elite narrative looks at the city of Srinagar as a commodity, while the commons can be destroyed. At the heart of this narrative lies a neoliberalist ethic of possessive individualism. The members of this upper class could move into posh colonies in the city's suburbs, which often became privatized public spaces under constant surveillance. This narrative reproduces the old city as a market-driven urbanity, shaped more by the market's logic than by the inhabitants' needs. Public concerns held by the population that resides in the town take a back seat to the glorified narratives of the elite, who take ownership of the old town. In this logic, the old city becomes the function of what Harvey calls "surplus capital absorption," i.e., it

becomes a site of capitalist functioning in pursuit of profitability rather than one that serves public needs (2012).

The elite narrative to the city pitches tourism to audiences in a heritage city to mediate the past, which could sometimes also be seen as actively contributing to creating ahistorical narratives. The old city of Srinagar is presented in a manner that whitewashes the complexities of processes occuring locally. The argument is repeatedly illustrated through the material culture independent of any particular historical contingencies surrounding its creation.

I will use two examples to illustrate the old city's elite narrative and associative politics. Marryam H. Reshii has written about food and lifestyle for thirty years. She has been a food critic and an independent writer, according to her

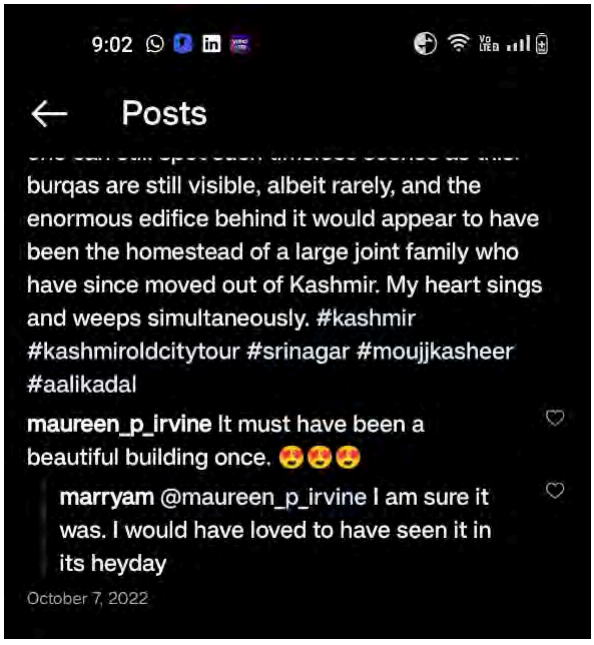

Figure 1 (left) and 2: Some pictures from Marryam's Instagram page. © marryam

website.[3] In her Instagram posts, she tells us that she was married in the old city and that she has been forever charmed by it. She uses her influence as a food curator to write about the city. However, what comes out through her narratives is a monolithic image of the city, decked up with flowery stories of heritage and the charm of old houses and architecture. In other words, she talks about the city without its inhabitants, the invisible dwellers who toil there. The only occasion where the natives are mentioned arises in one or another oriental fantasy of individuals being presented as extremely good-looking, as wearing a burqa, or as having magical hands that produce world-class crafts. Kabir (2009) explains that the Kashmir Valley gained symbolic significance through its indirect integration into the British Empire in 1846. Postcolonial India has inherited this symbolic capital since 1947. Kabir further explores how India's yearning for Kashmir, the dynamics of representation and self-representation, and the interplay between hegemony and resistance are all intricately tied to the enduring shared desire for the valley.

Figure 3: Some pictures from Marryam's Instagram page. © marryam

[3] https://marryamhreshii.com/ (Last accessed:15.10.2023) Needless to say, there is no personal enmity or competition associated with the examples I am using. These examples are selected from the public Instagram handles of the users and are only being used to to consider a point.

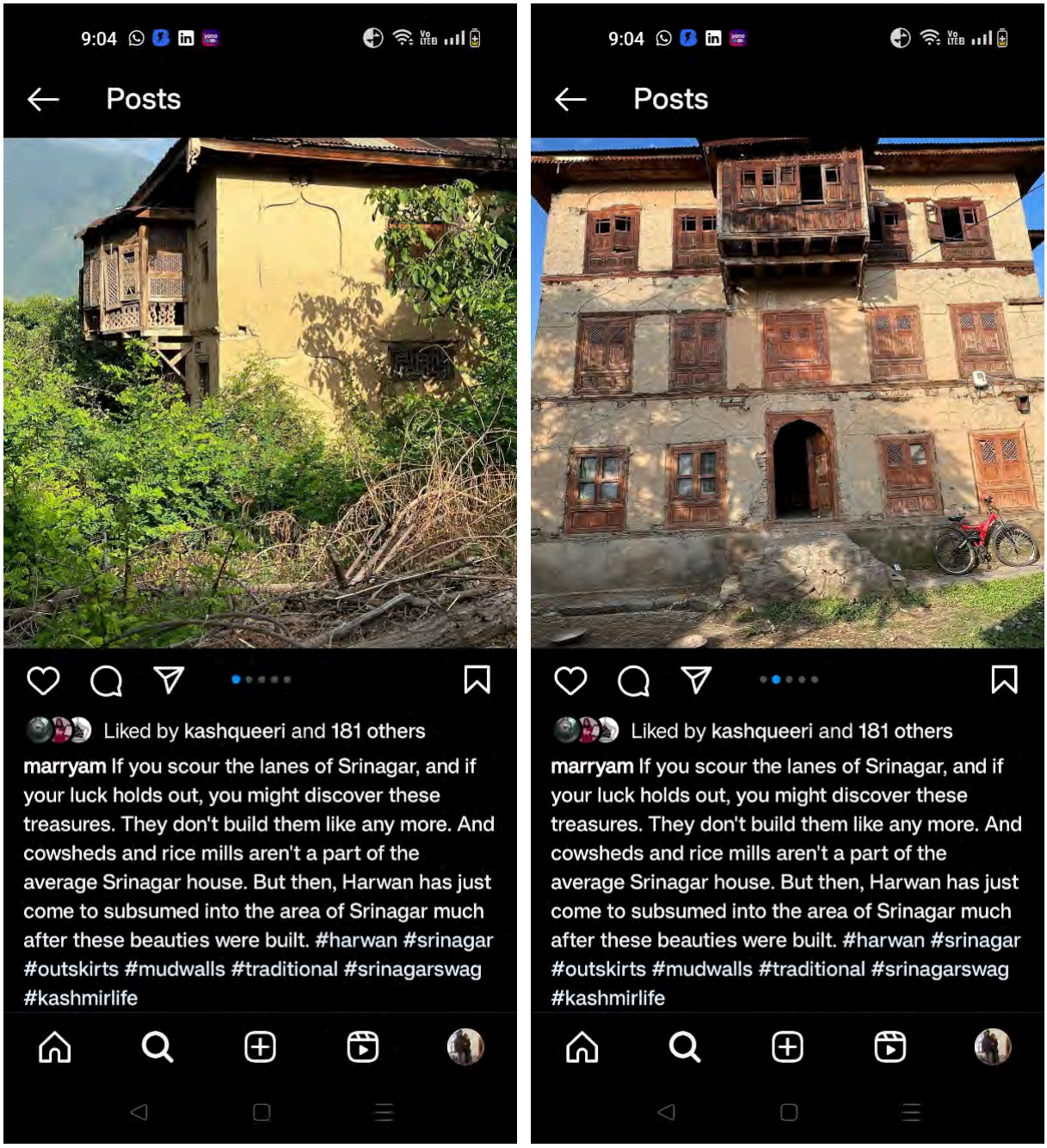

Figure 4 (left) and 5: Some pictures from Marryam's Instagram page. © marryam

In Marryam's narratives there is never any mention of the struggles and shortcomings experienced by the city dwellers or of what the old city has undergone in the past thirty years of active conflict. Nowhere in her writings does one find it reflected that the businesses, educational establishments, and religious places in the old city were closed for prolonged periods. The city was punished collectively for its political standpoint and loyalties. Essential services were denied to the city repeatedly, and it was stigmatized

socially—so much so that people from the old city would find getting their children married in the outskirts of the civil lines area difficult. Admissions to schools lying outside of the old city were denied owing to a perception that people from the old city were fierce and combative. Going back to Marryam's flowery narration of the old city, it may cater to a distinct niche in the market, but it also becomes appropriative and impacts the narrative that needs better visibility. Shields (1991) reflects on how specific spatial arrangements and cultural practices become appropriate for particular types of activities. Such arrangements and practices constitute a mythical place, one that is undergirded by a suite of local images.

The second example used to illustrate my point is taken from a project of the architect Zoya Kashmiri, where she juxtaposes scenes from the old city of Srinagar with scenes from famous Hindi films. She also uses Hindu iconography from the work of renowned artist Raja Ravi Verma. Religious depictions of Hindu deities in the old city are also reflected on her Instagram page. With regard to her work, it could simply be a matter of her having a normal interest in a particular artistic style and utilizing it in the designs she creates. But it also means obscuring the realities of the city. There have been some designs which reveal a gothic influence or an influence of Degas. Yet, the absence of the city dweller is something that remains consistent throughout her work.

Figure 6: Zoya Kashmiri's Instagram page.
"Shahabbuddin is arriving soon in a white buggy."
© zoyakashmiri

In *Fearless Collective*, the title of another project executed by Zoya Kashmiri, a mural was painted on a multi-story building near Magarmal Crossing in Srinagar. A newspaper article quoted the artist as saying,

> "it's for the first time in Kashmir Valley that women artisans are being appreciated. As one can see, the mural has Kashmiri women artisans making namda, copperware and sozni embroidery and pashmina. Our motive was to send across a message by making this mural on a four-story building so that people know about the history of our crafts and also focus on Kashmiri craft getting more recognition."[4]

As with the other classic emancipatory movements for the liberation of women, this narrative recognizes women through a bureaucratic-institutional logic whereby women from a different class and geographical location come together to paint images of marginalized women practicing their craft. As unrepresentative as the campaign could be, it privileges elite identities over marginalized artisan identities. In terms of its relation to the city and its dwellers, the campaign promotes a hierarchical social engagement by those who are not practicing the craft but rather promoting it. It's equally unfortunate that within this campaign, the mural becomes bigger than the artisanal lives it is aimed to pay tribute to. Moreover, it's also dubious as to just how the state allowed this mural to be installed, when it has been removing the graffiti and murals throughout the city.[5] Johnson (1999) emphasizes the mechanisms through which space is privileged over time in a manner that loses sight of the complexities of localized historical processes. In a way, this approach seems to "museumize" the city by focusing on a display of material culture without regard to the historical contingencies around its own creation.

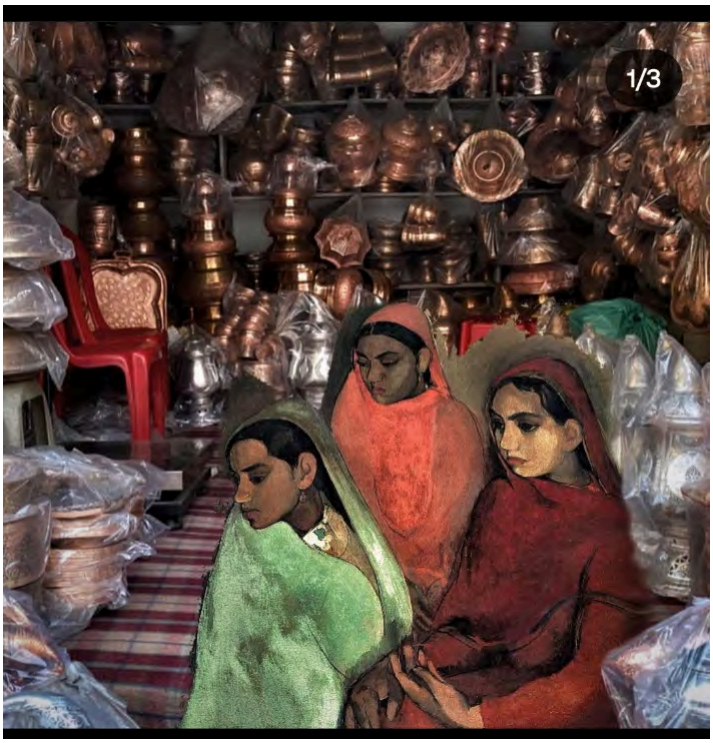

Figure 7: Zoya Kashmiri's Instagram page.
"Three Girls in Zaina Kadal." © zoyakashmiri

[4] https://www.wionews.com/india-news/kashmirs-women-artisans-get-long-overdue-recognition-through-mural-621682 (Last accessed:4-12-2023)

[5] https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/Graffiti-gone-from-Kashmir-walls/article60525760.ece (Last accessed:15-10-2023)

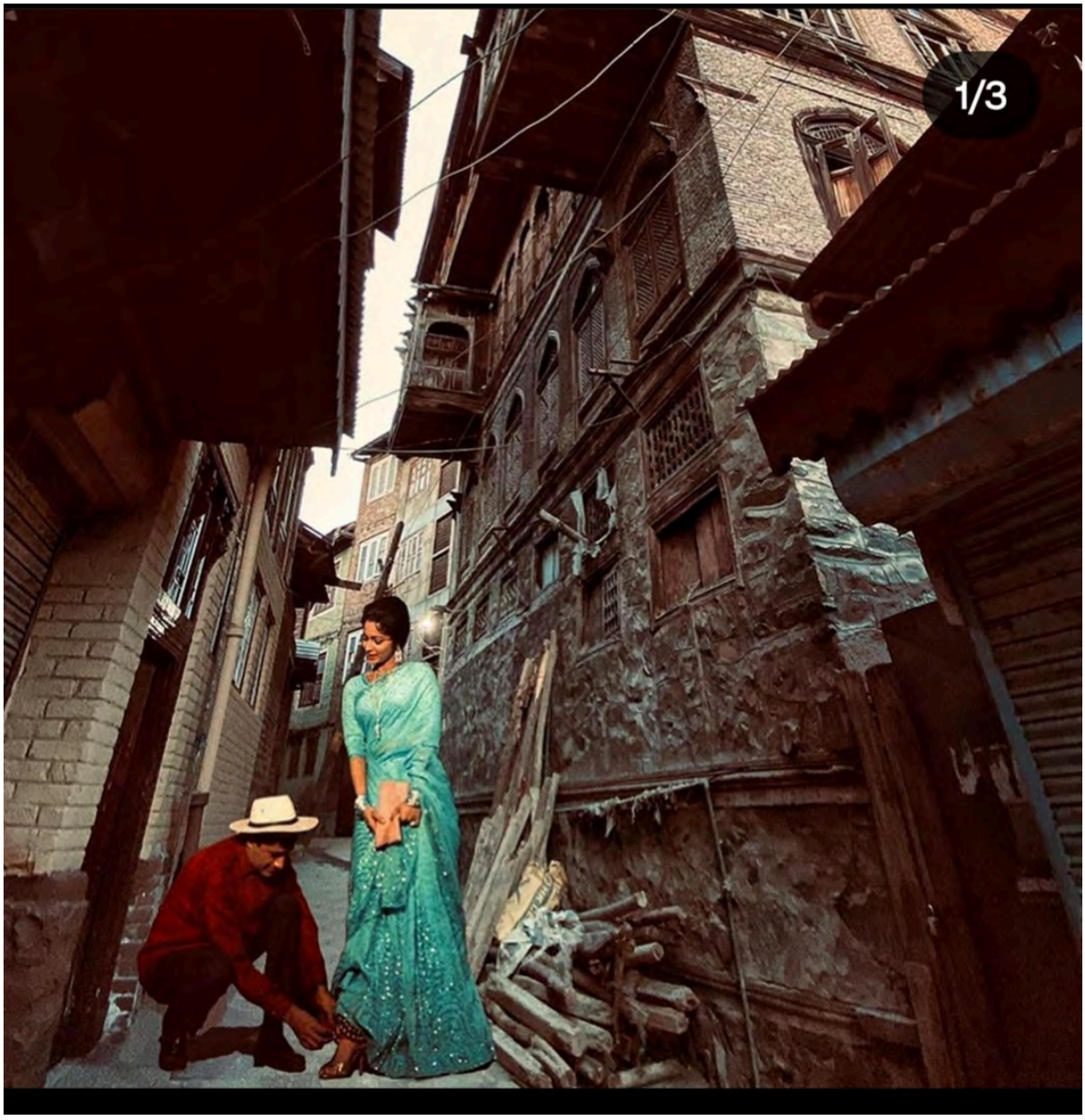

Figure 8: Zoya Kashmiri's Instagram page. "Rosie Marco X Sheher-e-Khas." © zoyakashmiri

Figure 9: Zoya Kashmiri's Instagram page.
"Sheher-e-Khas X Raja Ravi Varma. Padmini waiting for Bahaar." © zoyakashmiri

Porno-Tropic Narrative to the City

From Hindi cinema representations to the current phase of social media reels, Kashmir stands out for its symbolic topography and positioning as a "territory of desire" (Kabir 2009). Ananya Kabir (2009) examines the roots of Indian desire for the Kashmir Valley and looks into representation, self-representation, hegemony, and resistance to help explain the perpetuation of this collective passion for the valley. Looking at Hindi cinema's consumption of Kashmir, one notices a pattern whereby the films could have been shot at any location other than Kashmir; the stories don't belong to Kashmir or to Kashmiris either. In the films made before the 1980s, a Kashmiri character played by a non-Kashmiri actor would have had a minor, indeed, frivolous role that added nothing to the plot. Or maybe a Kashmiri actor would be an effeminate jester who provides some comic relief. However, the background would be glamorized. In the post-1990s set-up in Hindi cinema, the Kashmiri character has forgotten its spiritual roots and evolved into an evil terrorist who has to be controlled and somehow defeated. Nonetheless, the background again is picturesque and needs now to be unblemished by its savage inhabitants.[6] Delaney-Bhattacharya (2019) writes about how the male protagonists in Bollywood films are Kashmiri Muslims who, by their very nature and perceived cultural proximity to Pakistan, suggest a dangerous cultural threat to India. These narratives demonstrate how Bollywood's representation of Kashmir is open to cooptation by anxieties over Pakistan and Islam. These anxieties play out on the screen by means of the representation of Kashmir, Pakistan, and Islam as something that is dangerous and as enemies of the state. The narrative of coercive belonging has been circulated through popular mediums and dominates the touristic gaze, too, which has itself to safeguard the verdant meadows and the snowcapped mountains from the savage natives.

Since the abrogation of Article 370 in 2019, the old city of Srinagar has become a newfound location in the Indian tourist itinerary. Before the abrogation, the old city was considered politically volatile, so tourists did not venture around. The coercive

[6] To name a few films from the 1960s and 1970s, *Junglee* (1961), *Kashmir ki Kali* (1964), *Aarzoo* (1965), *Jab Jab Phool Khile* (1965), *Aap Aye Bahar Aayi* (1971); none of these represented the cultural space of Kashmir as it exists. Ananya Jahanara Kabir's research delves into the portrayal of the Kashmiri protagonist in three prominent Indian films: *Roja* (1992), *Mission Kashmir* (2000), and *Yahaan* (2005). Her objective is to make a case for a fresh emphasis on the Kashmiri identity as Muslim within Bollywood's extensive engagement with the Kashmir Valley; she unpacks how Kashmir and Islam, despite having distinct discursive origins within Bollywood, have significantly intersected at a particular historical juncture. This convergence has opened up new avenues for the ideological appropriation of the Kashmir conflict and the role of Muslims in India by the popular cinematic medium.

sense of belonging discussed above pervades the newfound relationship between the Indian tourists and the old city of Srinagar. Acting as rescuers of local heritage, a few initiatives led by groups from Delhi and Srinagar have been operating legacy tours for reviving the heritage of the old city and explaining the authentic tradition and culture of Kashmir to outsiders and Kashmiris alike. However, the meaning of heritage in their scheduled presentation is strictly focused on sites or objects without there being any mention of their cultural, historical, or political significance. It's also worth mentioning that diminishing the value of these sites also weakens the possibilities for fostering political cohesion and enhancing collective political legitimacy.

Time and again the Government of India and the subordinate state governments of Jammu have nurtured the above-discussed narrative of belonging, through their promotion of tourism over other sectors. It is seen as an avenue for creating employment and also for arresting the secessionist tendencies of the population. From promoting tulip diplomacy[7] to branding Kashmir as a "mini-Switzerland" or a "Venice of the East," the state becomes complicit in promoting porno-tropic[8] narratives of belonging. Sacred geography and religious tourism are invoked to create and celebrate the idea of the nation.

In a set of top-down measures, the Government of Srinagar has been included in the new Smart City Program,[9] run by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India. The program promises an urban renewal and retrofitting of the city for providing core infrastructure and applying smart solutions to improve cities and their infrastructure. The approach imagines the Srinagar city governed within a top-down order, homogenous, and often in tension with heterogeneity and the indigenous networks. Here arises the dilemma in terms of what Srinagar loses with its inclusion in the Smart City Network. The contrasts sharpened by the transformation are already dramatically threatening the old city: the monopolized commodification along the streets, the disintegration of what had once been a vibrant neighborhood life built around arts and craftsmanship, the demolition of old businesses and ownership patterns. Other factors include the surrounding political uncertainty and the

[7] https://www.knskashmir.com/tulip-garden-was-my-dream-project-conceived-with-an-aim-to-compete-with-other-mughal-gardens--ghulam-nabi-azad-176479 (last accessed:29.08.2023)

[8] The word porno-tropic is borrowed from Anne McClintock's influential book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (1995). She refers to the European tendency to sexualize the orient and rework it into a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears. This term was used to evoke a fetishistic colonial idea of the tropics as sensual and feminine, alluring yet dangerous.

[9] https://srinagarsmartcity.in/ (last accessed:29.08.2023)

marginalization, exclusion, surveillance, repression, censorship, and disempowerment of the old city resident. The porno-topic representation fosters a skewed relationship of space and power and, more specifically, of colonial power and indigenous space.

The new localism

Against this backdrop of the elite and the porno-tropic narrative to the city, there is a minor local story that is people-oriented and that considers the old city and its heritage unfixed, changeable, constructed, and varied in historical processes. Here the story of the city doesn't start with objects and sites. Rather, it encapsulates experiences of the city-dwellers and reinforces the very "right to the city." The narrative entails efforts to restore the glory of the city by re-using its former name Sheher-e-Khaas and to initiate various civil society reforms for removing the city's stigma.[10] Those reforms had the goals of fostering civic conversation and of creating an engaging and empowering participatory place to live.

The new localism in Srinagar makes its claim to the city as a collective right. It starts from a critical awareness of urban structural inequalities and extends to social struggles of different classes for claiming specific rights. It manifests itself as a higher form of rights: the right to freedom, to socialize, to enjoy a habitat, and to inhabit. It is both a cry and a demand, or as Marcuse (2009) remarks, it is a cry out of a necessity and a demand for something more. It represents both the outcry of urban residents who have been denied basic human rights and the aspirations of individuals striving to unlock their potential within a controlled urban environment. Therefore, this concept of a right to the city assumes greater significance in the context of the socio-political crisis that the old city is facing. To give an example of the new localism, I am using the song "Down Town"[11] written and sung by Musaib Bhat.

The song was released in 2021 and has been watched by 7 million people on YouTube. Shot locally in various parts of the old city, this song is a lyrical complaint about the lack of services and the discrimination seen by the city. It fosters a deeper appreciation for the city's value system, praising in particular the characteristics like *zaanun maanun*

[10] In an interview with Zahid Ghulam Muhammad in 2023 about re-introducing the term Sheher-e-Khaas, I was informed that in usual conversations at the editorial office of a well-known newspaper in Kashmir, it was suggested that he write a weekly column to revive the city. Once he started writing, he ended up writing several books on Kashmir and the old city. His writing also created a civil society focus, and many authors and writers joined him in in his efforts to sensitize the readership around the devaluation of the old city.

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YmQ_36hrerE (Last accessed:15.10.2023)

(knowing and understanding), *bhaichara* (brotherhood), *yakjehti* (solidarity), *meacher* (sweetness). Gradually the song moves to the part where the lack of services in terms of hospitals, ambulances, petrol pumps, and marriage halls is reflected. Musaib also talks about the frequent stone pelting incidents (*kanie roud*, or "stone showers"), armed vehicular movement within the city, locking of mosques (referring to the locking up of Jamia Masjid Srinagar) and political sloganeering. In the chorus, he recalls the neighborhoods named for bridges in the city—Habbe Kadal, Kani Kadal, Safa Kadal, Bohri Kadal, Razai Kadal, Eail Kadal, Zanie Kadal, Fateh Kadal, Gaw Kadal, Saraf Kadal, Teank Kadal. The song then goes back to the non-tangible values in which old city dwellers delight.

The new localism, in essence, offers a dual critique. On the one hand, it challenges the prevailing elite-driven and superficial narratives concerning urban areas. On the other, it questions the motives of smart city initiatives, which often prioritize efficient urban management at the expense of sufficiently maintaining the status quo, thereby reinforcing the dominance of powerful stakeholders under the guise of participatory processes. An architect, one who chooses to remain anonymous for political reasons, underscores in an interview that this form of new localism is essentially a commentary on the developmental path of an imbalanced city. This approach perceives shortcuts as mere technological solutions that perpetuate socio-economic hierarchies. Moreover, this new localism embodies an open-ended and pluralistic approach, which creates a dynamic space to reflect the ebb and flow of movement, complexity, conflicts, and contradictions within the urban landscape. This new localism strikes a balance between routine, critical analysis, and creative thinking. These juxtapositions open up possibilities for new aesthetic and political interpretations of the urban environment.

Conclusion

This essay discusses narratives of belonging to the city of Srinagar. The idea behind the introduction of these narratives is to inform reflections on the relationship between space and power and how it is, in turn, that power can lend itself to spatial considerations. Each narrative of belonging produces its own precise political aims.

The elite narrative to the city fosters an understanding which resists any sense of socio-historical processes. The city remains a citadel of the elite, while those who make the city vanish into the margins. The porno-tropic narrative reproduces the nexus of state, capital, market, and colonial character to present Kashmir as a territory of desire. These

evocations are attractive for neoliberal and nationalist imaginations but erode indigenous narratives of the city. The reproduction of the city in this manner threatens the city materially and systematically denigrates the local population.

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DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

Khuddur Yātrā: a Symphonic Poem of Texts and Images

Elizaveta Ilves

Abstract

This essay offers an analysis of text-image relations in Abanindranath Tagore's often overlooked work, *Khuddur yātrā*. The work is an experimental *yātrā*-play for children based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and was published in facsimile for the first time in 2009. The manuscript is illustrated with cutouts from newspapers, periodicals, and product wraps, creating a diverse visual landscape. The text of the play, equally complex, weaves together traditional *Rāmāyaṇa* heroes with new characters, while employing a multitude of languages and dialects. After providing a detailed overview of the work and categorizing text-image relations within it, this essay focuses on the single most complex and experimental one among those. Following Bachtin, who proposed to analyze literary work by using the musical concept of polyphony metaphorically, the author argues that the concept of symphonic poems provides the best way to approach the complexity of text-image congruencies in this work. Additionally, the essay explores some the thematic and visual connections between Abanindranath Tagore's *Khuddur yātrā* and the broader landscape of Bengali children's literature in the early 20th century. Upon closer examination, *Khuddur yātrā* emerges as a dynamic and layered artistic creation that challenges the viewer to construct new meanings when navigating the complex interplay of text and images. The text and images within the narrative perform various simultaneous functions, thereby encouraging both children and adults to construct, deconstruct, interpret, and reassess the surrounding reality. Abanindranath's playful use of signs, symbols, and language reveals the intricate interconnectedness of the world, prompting viewers to recognize its complex and intertwined nature.

Keywords: text-image relations, Abanindranath Tagore, *Khuddur yātrā*, Bengali children's literature

Writing with scissors[1]

"There is no one else who can produce such instances of the craft of pure madness," wrote Rabindranath Tagore to his nephew Abanindranath Tagore after going through some of the *yātrā-pālās*[2] (Tagore 2009, 16). He encouraged Abanindranath to publish them, yet the manuscript remained hidden from the public eye for almost seventy years. *Khuddur-yātrā* (Khuddu's journey and also Khuddu's *yātrā*) was published for the first time in 2009 in a facsimile edition. However, despite its original character–in relation to which poet and critic Sankha Ghosh, in his introductory article, considers *Khuddur yātrā* possibly the first collage in Bengali art (Tagore 2009)–this work remained even after its publication long unnoticed by researchers.[3]

Khuddur yātrā bālak bālikādiger janya likhita is a *yātrā*-play based on the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and was "written for boys and girls." The 241-page manuscript, written between the years 1934-35 and 1942, is illustrated with cutouts from newspapers, periodicals, magazines, and product wraps. The illustrations include advertisements of various types, fragments of texts and captions, labels, logos, emblems, ornamental and abstract designs, fashion drawings, natural history drawings, photos, and doodles. These cutouts are placed on the pages in several ways; it can be a picture or a word cutout that is pasted onto the page. Sometimes, several cutouts are placed around or within the handwritten text. At times, collages are made from pictures, or from segments of images, words, and phrases. The placement of illustrations on the page also varies; these sometimes take up one or even two pages, and such a placement is sometimes of a tiny picture modestly claiming its own little corner of the page.

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[1] The metaphor is taken from the book title: *Writing with Scissors: American Scrapbooks from the Civil War to the Harlem Renaissance* by Ellen Gruber Garvey (2013). The book is not used in the present article, as Abanindranath's manuscript is not a scrapbook. But it would serve as a good starting point for anyone who is interested not only in the topic, but also in the mechanisms behind contemporary social media. It argues that people have long had a strong personal relationship to media. Like newspaper editors who enthusiastically "scissored" and reprinted attractive items from other newspapers, scrapbook makers passed their reading along to family and community. This book explains how their scrapbooks underlie our present-day ways of thinking about information, news, and what we do with it.

[2] In the context of the traditional performing arts of South Asia, particularly in regions like Bengal, *jatra* or *yātrā* is a popular form of folk theater. *Jatra* performances typically involve a combination of music, dance, and drama, and they often feature mythological or historical stories. Within the broader framework of *jatra*, the term *pālās* refers to individual acts or segments of the performance. These *pālās* serve as specific episodes or scenes within the overall narrative of the *jatra*. Each *pālā* contributes to the unfolding storyline, and plays a crucial role in conveying the plot to the audience. *Pālās* may vary in content, style, and theme, allowing for a diverse range of storytelling elements within the larger *jatra* performance.

[3] At this point, I have encountered one publication in Bengali that focuses on the manuscript: খ`দ্দুর যাত্রা। অবন ঠাক`রের কাটাক`টরি নত`ন দুনয়িা by Debdutta Gupta in 2018. In English, three introductory articles (in which the authors called for a closer study of the work) were published in the supplementary volume and one article was published online, which, unfortunately, is not available anymore. I was happy to discover that, finally, *Khuddur yātrā* is slowly coming to the attention of the international scene, as I have come across an abstract of the presentation by Rupsa Kundu which focuses on the analysis of *Khuddur yātrā*: https://solentva.hypotheses.org/translation-across-mediums

The text of the play is as complex as its illustrations. It is shaped by the multiple voices of the traditional characters of the *Rāmāyaṇa* together with the new characters created by the author. The characters speak in Bengali and also in Sanskrit, Hindi, Maithili, Brajabuli, Oriya, and in dialects from West Bengal; all of these languages are written in Bengali script. Moreover, the lines of many characters are occasionally sprinkled with English words and phrases.

Abanindranath Tagore was not the only one to experiment with the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Some authors from colonial Bengal changed the epic's storyline either partly or entirely. The most famous examples of such texts are *Meghanād'bad kābẏa* (*The Slaying of Meghanada*) by Michael Madhusudan Dutt, written in 1861, in which Ravana, not Rama, is portrayed as a hero; and a play by Sukumar Ray *Lakṣmaṇer śaktiśel* (*The Weapon of Lakshman*), a satire on the new Hindu middle class. Abanindranath also wrote *Khuddur yātrā* as a satirical play. Its storyline—as the narrators state in the introductory part—follows the storyline of Valmiki's *Rāmāyaṇa*, whereupon it was then rewritten "in simple language" by the "wise" Krittibas Odjha (Sen 1911, 170).[4] However, the primary narrators are the chorus of children and representatives from the lower classes: Khudiram, Becaram (lit. sold Rama), Kenaram (lit. bought Rama), and Bidhiram, who sometimes transforms into Bidhibam (lit. misfortune). Working through the prism of his *Rāmāyaṇa-yātrā*, and using the voices of children and the underprivileged, Abanindranath satirizes and criticizes various aspects of his contemporary society.

A special place is given to the portrayal of the crisis of religious faith within the Hindu community, which is partly reflected in the names of narrators Kenaram and Becaram, which translate as "Bought Rama" and "Sold Rama," by adding a *yātrā*-duet (Banerjee 1998, 105). Trijata (sometimes spelled Trijat) and Trijati (lit. those with three streaks of matted hair) is an old childless couple of Brahman caste. They follow the heroes throughout the journey, devising ways to make money from the places visited by Rama, Lakshmana, and Sita. Those financial strategies include setting up temples and also a confectionery named after Rama and Sita, starting a school to teach people to worship, and chanting the names of Rama and Sita. To emphasize the criticism of how religion is used commercially, snippets from newspapers with catchy phrases in English, such as

[4] The *Kṛttivāsī rāmāyaṇ*, also known as *Śīrīrām pācālī*, was crafted by the fifteenth-century Bengali poet Krittibas Ojha. This rendition of the *Rāmāyaṇa* into Bengali follows the traditional *Rāmāyaṇa pācālī* from of Middle Bengali literature. It goes beyond being a mere rephrasing of the original Indian epic, serving as a vibrant mirror reflecting the societal and cultural nuances of Bengal throughout its circulation, spanning from the Middle Ages to the modern era.

"Religious faith: that driving force!" are pasted throughout the entire manuscript. Like advertising slogans, they shout at the reader, grab their attention, and together with images set the play's *mise-en-scène* in contemporary social reality. Of course, the contemporaneity is also reflected through the text; however, the modern world bursts into the space of the pages by means of the cutouts, which make the satire all the more poignant, visual, and even tangible. For instance, the page where Surpanakha describes her passion and love for Rama and asks her servants to seek the means for her to marry him is illustrated with an advertisement for a face cream promising a fair complexion (Tagore 2009, 44). She is presented through the ad image of a dark-skinned man lacking beautiful facial features. He has stolen the face cream in the hope that after using it his complexion will become lighter and thus he himself handsome. It adds more humor to the whole situation; in the text, Surpanakha—a dark and ugly female demon—describes herself as being fairer and more beautiful than Sita.

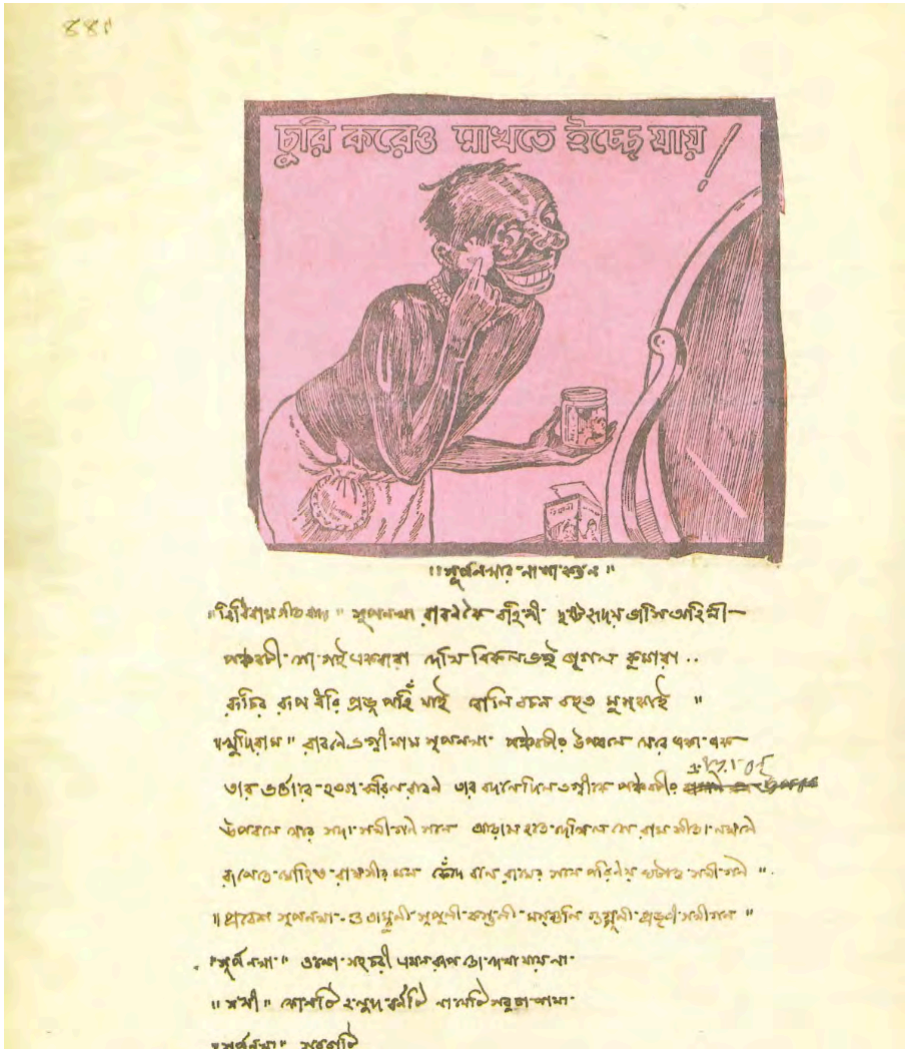

Figure 1:
Surpanakha
(Tagore 2009, 44)

Abanindranaths' use of images in the manuscript goes far beyond mocking various aspects of life in his contemporary society. The diversity of relationships between texts and images is perhaps equal to the variety of pictures used in the manuscript; this is not surprising considering the scope of Abandindranath's oeuvre. He has experimented with text-image relations throughout his career by illustrating other authors' books and, later on, his own writings. With its sheer size, the *Rāmāyaṇa* allowed him to explore these interrelations on a different level. On the other hand, the *yātrā* form, with its carnivalesque nature (Bachtin 1996), allowed him to remove the boundaries of the ordinary and the conventional. By disrupting the distance inherent to the epic and the tragic character of *Rāmāyaṇa*, the form of the *yātrā* moves the depicted into the zone of familial contact. Its pathos and cheerful relativity prevent the reader's thoughts from stopping and becoming frozen in one-sided seriousness and certainty. Moreover, in taking advantage of the ambivalent nature of the carnivalesque, Abanindranath combines beauty with ugliness. He destroys the barriers between different styles and closed systems of thought, connects the distant, and unites the disconnected, portraying the reality of his contemporary world.

Overall, despite the constant experimentation conducted throughout the manuscript, we can systematize the text-image relations of the play by marking tendencies and defining several types of these relations, namely: direct illustrations, pun for fun,[5] and text-image experiments. In this essay, I will focus on the latter group, as it is the most complex and experimental.

What else can words and pictures do?

Text-image experiments is an umbrella term for a wide-ranging group of *Khuddur yātrā's* text-image relations, which I have further divided into different types. Perhaps another fitting name for this group would be "What else can words and pictures do?" For Abanindranath explores various ways of combining these two modes of expression. He experiments with different shapes and forms of illustrations. And he plays extensively with the capacities and meaning-making process of visual and verbal forms of expression.

[5] The "pun for fun" group is based on verbo-pictorial puns, which take the *yātrā* to the world of children for whom Abanindranath created the play. Abanindranath's "pun for fun" group employs verbo-pictorial puns, such as homophonic plays on Bengali words, for instance, *laṅkā* meaning both Sri Lanka and chilli peppers. Additionally, he uses metaphorical puns, transforming characters like Jambavan from the *Rāmāyaṇa* into a teddy bear and depicting Ravana as Santa Claus, drawing imaginative connections between their appearances and features.

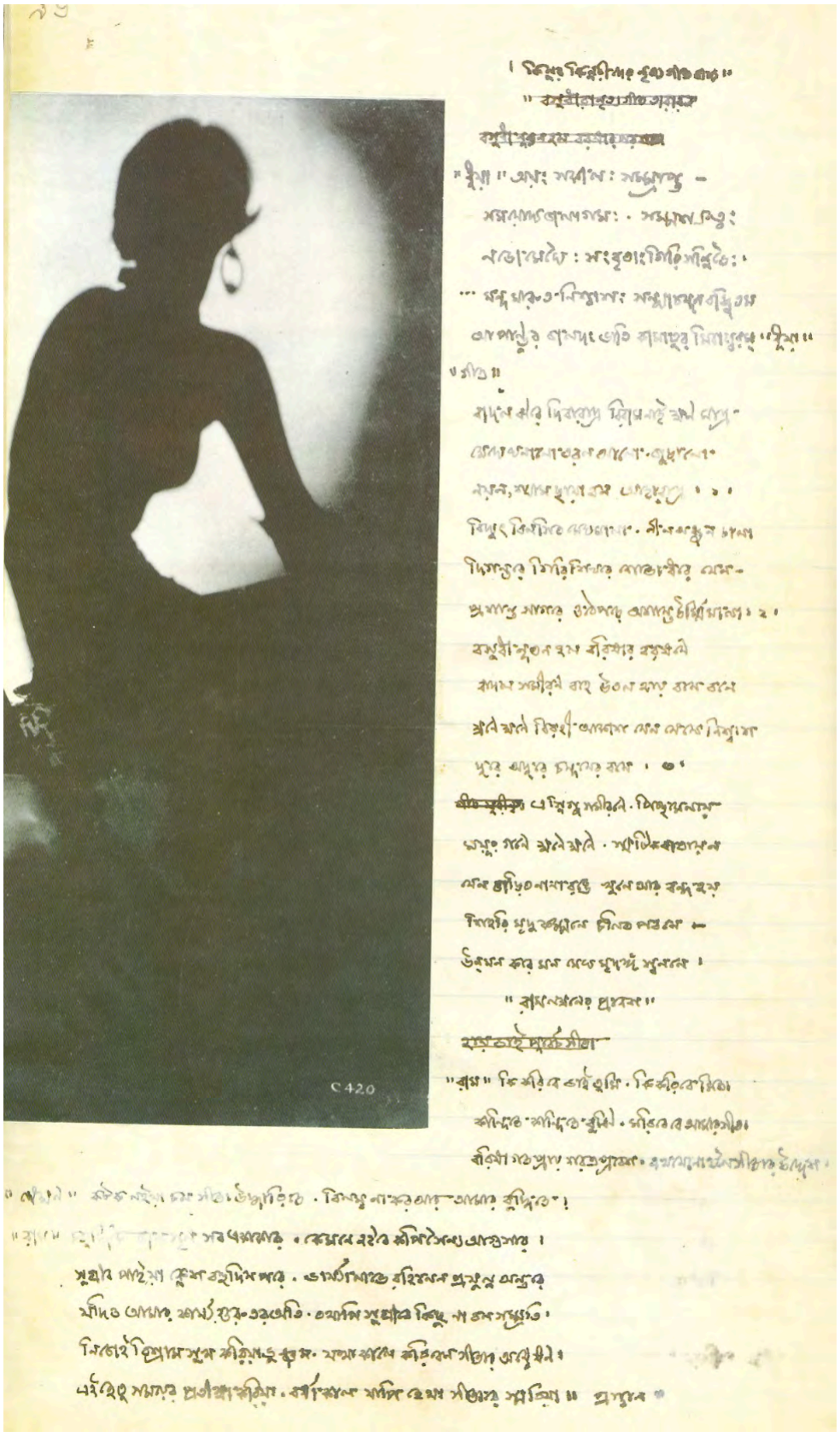

Figure 2: Sita (Tagore 2009, 96)

At times images practically become active figures; these alter our perception of the textual narrative. One such example is found on page 96. The text describes the suffering of Rama when separated from Sita. Celestial musicians—*kinnaras* and *kinnarīs*—open the scene by dancing and singing about the pain of being separated from one's beloved during the rainy season. After that, Rama and Laksmana enter the stage where Rama talks about his worries, suffering, and desperation as heightened by Sita's absence; Laksmana tries to console him. A photograph filling almost half of the page illustrates the scene. The image depicting a woman's shadow emerging from the darkness against the white background can be seen as symbolizing the simultaneous presence and absence of Sita in the scene. Following Mitchell (2010) and Gell (1998), this page demonstrates the role that images can play, not only in narrating and representing but also in performing, acting, and doing. Although the presence and absence of the heroine pervade the text, we would without the picture have concentrated our attention on feelings and thoughts. The photograph brings the heroine to the forefront; in fact, her silhouette is what we see first when we open the page. And the photo makes Sita virtually appear as an active participant in the scene.

Abanindranath explores further illustrative possibilities by playing with visual and verbo-visual metaphors in the manuscript. They appear not only through the congruences between the text of the play and illustrations, but also in the texts and images in the cutouts, and in their relation to the *yātrā* text. For instance, to illustrate the scene in which Ravana defeats Jatayu, Abanindranath inserts the photograph of a Labor Day badge from Nazi Germany. Under the words "Tag der Arbeit" (Labor Day), the badge depicts Goethe's head and an eagle with a hammer and sickle in its wings and a swastika wreath in its claws. The badge is dated 1934. The words "Labor Day" in their literal sense, i.e., as in the day of labor, serve as a metaphorical title for the scene. In a way, it is a day of hard labor for Jatayu—he fights Ravana with all his strength, and although defeated almost to the death, he strives to stay alive so that he can tell Rama and Laksmana what happened. The image of the eagle carrying a sickle, hammer, and wreath with a swastika, represents Jatayu. This image falls neatly into the context of the *yātrā*, where Jatayu was a son of Suryas' charioteer.

Moreover, I argue that the photograph of the badge has another connection to the text. The fight scene between Ravana and Jatayu, who dies trying to save Sita, is one of the darkest moments in the *Rāmāyaṇa* plot. The year 1934, commemorated in the badge, is one of the darkest moments in world history.

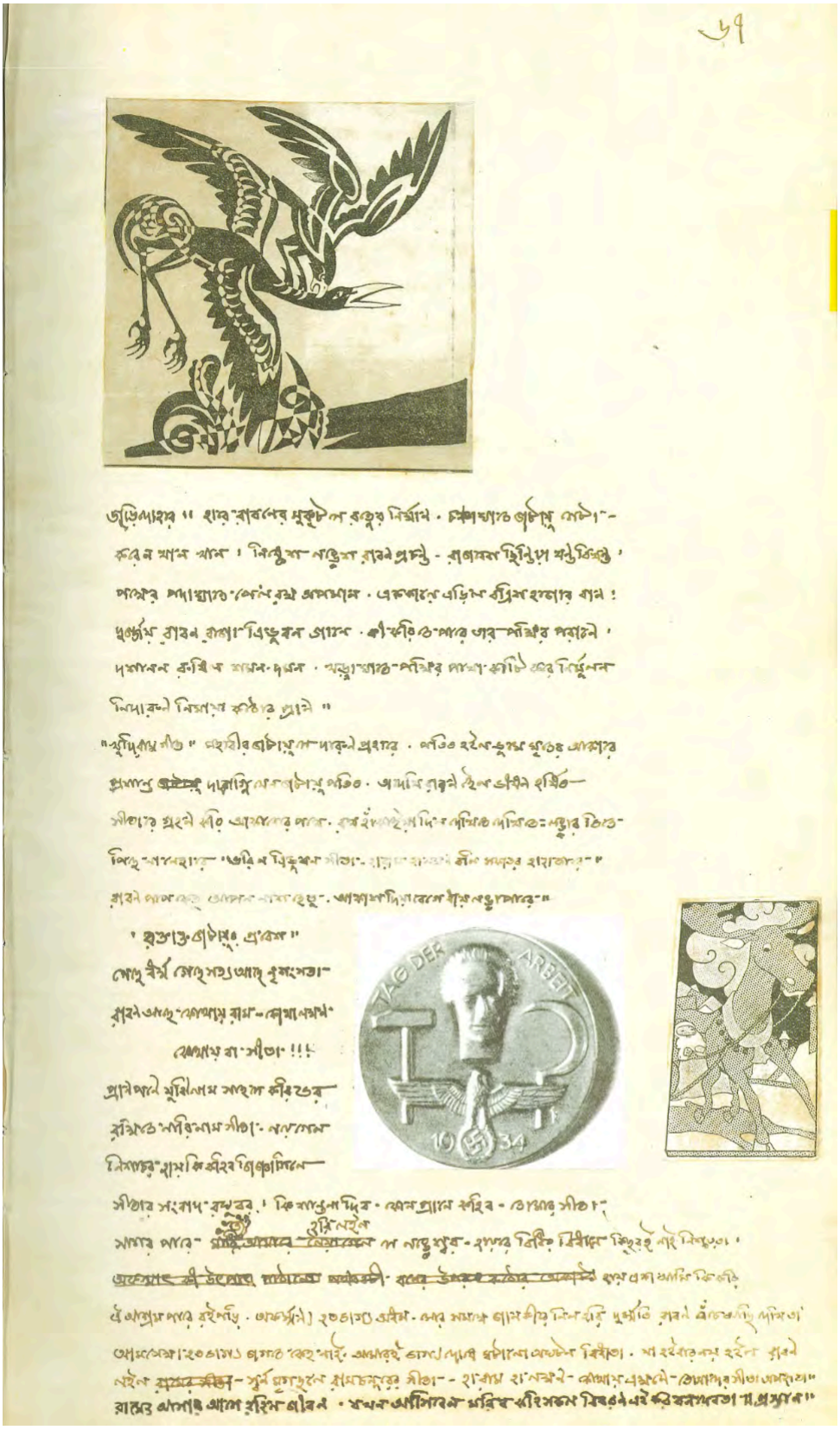

Figure 3: Fall of Jatayu (Tagore 2009, 67)

This is the year in which Hitler became dictator of Germany, after ordering the murder of the SA (Sturmabteilung) leadership. The meeting of these two moments on the same manuscript page is no coincidence. In the text of *Khuddur yātrā*, Abanindranath repeatedly assesses and comments on the events taking place, not only in his own country but also elsewhere in the world, and this case is a perfect example. After the chorus and Khudiram's song about Jatayu's fall in the battle, and Sita's abduction, a bloodied eagle enters the stage. It begins its speech with the following words, which given the presence of the badge on the same page, can also serve as a reference to the events that took place in Germany in 1934: Religion is gone, truth is gone / All that remains is cruelty (*geche dharma geche satya āche nṛśńsatā*). Jatayu then laments that he could not save Sita even though he fought to the last, also lamenting the grief that will fall on Rama when he finds out, and so on. On the other hand, Abanindranath continues on the same page his pun for fun by again representing Ravana with a picture of Santa on a sleigh.

The multitude of meanings on the page can seem overwhelming. To navigate this complexity, I suggest employing the musical concept of a symphonic poem just in much the same way that Bachtin applied the musical concept of polyphony to analyze Dostoyevsky's novels (Bachtin 1996). A symphonic poem is a musical composition for an orchestra that illustrates or evokes the content of a poem, a story or novel, a painting, a landscape, or another non-musical source.[6] The main compositional feature of the symphonic poem, which allows the content to be transmitted and transformed into a musical form to its fullest extent, is the development and interplay of new, often contrasting themes within the overall unity of the musical composition. To create this structure, composers use the following compositional practices: a cyclic form and a thematic transformation. A cyclic form is created through specific movements that are not only linked to but also reflect the content of one another. In turn, thematic transformation is a variation in which one theme changes not into a related or subsidiary theme but into something new, separate, and independent. Abanindranath often structures the text and images similarly on the pages of *Khuddur yātrā* and, in fact, throughout the whole composition of the play. Within the frame of the central theme, which repeats in a cyclic form, new themes and leitmotifs develop, at times contrasting or relating to each other, at times going into separate, independent directions, thus building the multiplicities of meanings.

[6] One example of a symphonic poem is "Scheherazade" composed by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in 1888 and based on *One Thousand and One Nights* (also known as *The Arabian Nights*): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vdnUBQT5Bqw&t=899s

For example, on the page describing Jatayu's fall, the central theme is *Rāmāyaṇa's* plot. And all the pictures on this page have in one sense or another to do with the scene. On the other hand, each picture either develops its themes (the Labor Day badge) or continues leitmotifs (Santa Claus on a sleigh) that have nothing to do with one another and can even be contrasting.

Other tunes and themes

Kuddur yātrā connects to the children's world not only through the text or through text-image relations that we have examined, but also through the images, by which I do not mean particular images, like pictures of toys or cartoon characters, but practically all of the cutouts that Abanindranath used to illustrate the manuscript. We can find the same variety of images in Bengali children's magazines and periodicals, subscriptions for which, by the first decades of the 20th century, ran into the thousands: Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri's *Sandeś*, Bhubanmohan Ray's *Sakhā o sāthī*, Barodakanta Majumdar's *Śiśu*, Shibnath Shastri and Hemchandra Sarkar's *Mukul*, to name but a few. All of these publications covered various topics: original fiction, folktales, foreign literature in translation, poetry, epic and mythological narratives, articles on popular science, history, travel, adventure and sport, as well as riddles and tales-in-pictures. Moreover, these magazines included pages with advertisements for different goods and products. Thus, by using the cutouts in *Khuddur yātrā*, Abanindranath practically recreated both the thematic and the page layouts in the children's magazines of his time.

According to Satadru Sen (Sen 2004), Bengali children's literature in general and Bengali magazines in particular can be defined by four primary geographies: the civilized abroad, the exotic abroad, the dysfunctional/comic/real home, and the nostalgic/fantastic/lost home.[7] Similarly, we can map the world in *Khuddur yātrā*, whose geographies partly overlap with those suggested by Satadru Sen. Just like the Bengali script incorporates several languages in *Khuddur yātrā*, the text incorporates several spaces through plot and language. Within the epic space of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, we can trace the outlines of two other worlds: "the collective West" and "home." The collective West is a place of imported products, habits, and customs that are used and

[7] I would not completely agree with the classification that Satadru Sen proposes in his article, for in my opinion, his "map" is simplified, at least in the case of *Khuddur yātrā*. But I find some of the categories useful and very fitting for the arguments made in this article.

appropriated by heroes (e.g., 5 o'clock tea, cold supper, etc.). The space of "home" is more complex. It incorporates spaces from the city and the countryside, also the comic and the tragic, the fantastic and the real, children and adults, and all classes of society. This home can be "dysfunctional" or "comic," as Satadru Sen puts it, especially when it comes to *bhadralok* (gentlefolk) and their understanding of the world and religion. At the same time, here in *Khuddur yātrā* home is almost not even a place, but rather a kaleidoscope of different folklore—*brataktha*, folktale styles and characters, nursery rhymes, folk songs, street hawkers (*pherioẏālā*), shout-outs etc.—interspersed with elements of epic tradition and the classics of Sanskrit literature such as Kalidasa.

Furthermore, it does not stop there as not only literary styles but also languages and dialects are mixed. Abanindranath creates this motley composition by taking advantage of the carnivalesque form of *yātrā* mentioned earlier, thereby depicting the multifaceted reality of contemporary Bengal.

By incorporating products from Bengal, the images not only contribute to shaping the representation of "home" on the map but also depict other locations, including the United States of America, Britain, collective Europe, various regions of India, South East Asia, and Africa. The USA is an exporter of movies, cartoons, "blackface" and caricatures of African-Americans. Britain trades in all sorts of products, Europe delivers politics and architecture, technology comes from all those places, dancers from South India and South East Asia, and Africa exports hoards of aboriginal armies dressed in loincloths and armed with spears.

As we can see, each part of the world has particular representations, which partly fall under Satadru Sen's categories of the civilized and exotic abroad. Yet, although Abanindranath introduces geographies, he does not always follow this labelling, especially when it comes to the "civilized" abroad. On the contrary, he often exposes and satirizes the consumption culture and his country's dependency on European products. For instance, even a *śibikā* (palanquin) in which a dying Bali is carried away by a group of bears is made in England (Abanindranath takes a wrapper for Morton's toffees printed with the words made in England and, as it appears on page 93, cuts it to the shape of a palanquin (Tagore, 2009).

The concept of the exotic abroad, on the other hand, is very much present, and in that area, Abanindranth acts more like a consumer of contemporary narratives than as one who exposes those. This becomes self-evident in the representations of black Africans and people of African descent, or more accurately, through the relations between text

and images that Abanindranath creates by using their portrayals. Following the narratives of his time (Mazumder 2019),[8] which, whether circulating in or outside India, characterized Africans as primitive and which confined Black people to demeaning stereotypical images, Abanindranath uses satirical cartoons of African-Americans, and photos of actors using blackface and of African tribes to illustrate Hanuman's monkey army. For instance, the collage that illustrates the moment when Sugriva finally comes to the gates of Bali's palace and challenges him to battle portrays the character through the photograph of the "blackface" actor.[9] On the pages describing the preparations for war, the picture of an armed African tribe illustrates the army of the monkeys, whereas the satirical cartoon of African-Americans portrays the monkey chiefs who came to meet with Rama.

[8] Of course, the narratives from that time about the African continent were not all pejorative in tone. Often it was described as an exotic, fantastic place. And the notion of a primitive people was given the same romantic sentiment as evident in the description of rural Bengal. Nevertheless, their place in the racial and civilizational hierarchy was clearly defined. And the descriptions of natives were more often following the lines of uncivilized, uncouth, and coarse people who were depicted as barely clothed and as surviving by hunting, gathering, and stealing animals from trading communities, rather than following the lines of a people viewed as simple, joyful, and hospitable towards foreigners. For further reading on representations of Africa, see, for instance, Mazumder R (2019).

[9] The upsetting fact is that these images are still not described correctly even today. In her 2015 presentation "Postcolonial Modernism: Possible Methodologies for a Transcultural History of Art" at an Art History seminar in Berlin, Atreyee Gupta described the same picture as a picture of an African man: https://www.art-histories.de/veranstaltungen/details/postcolonial-modernism-possible-methodologies-for-a-transcultural-history-of-art.html

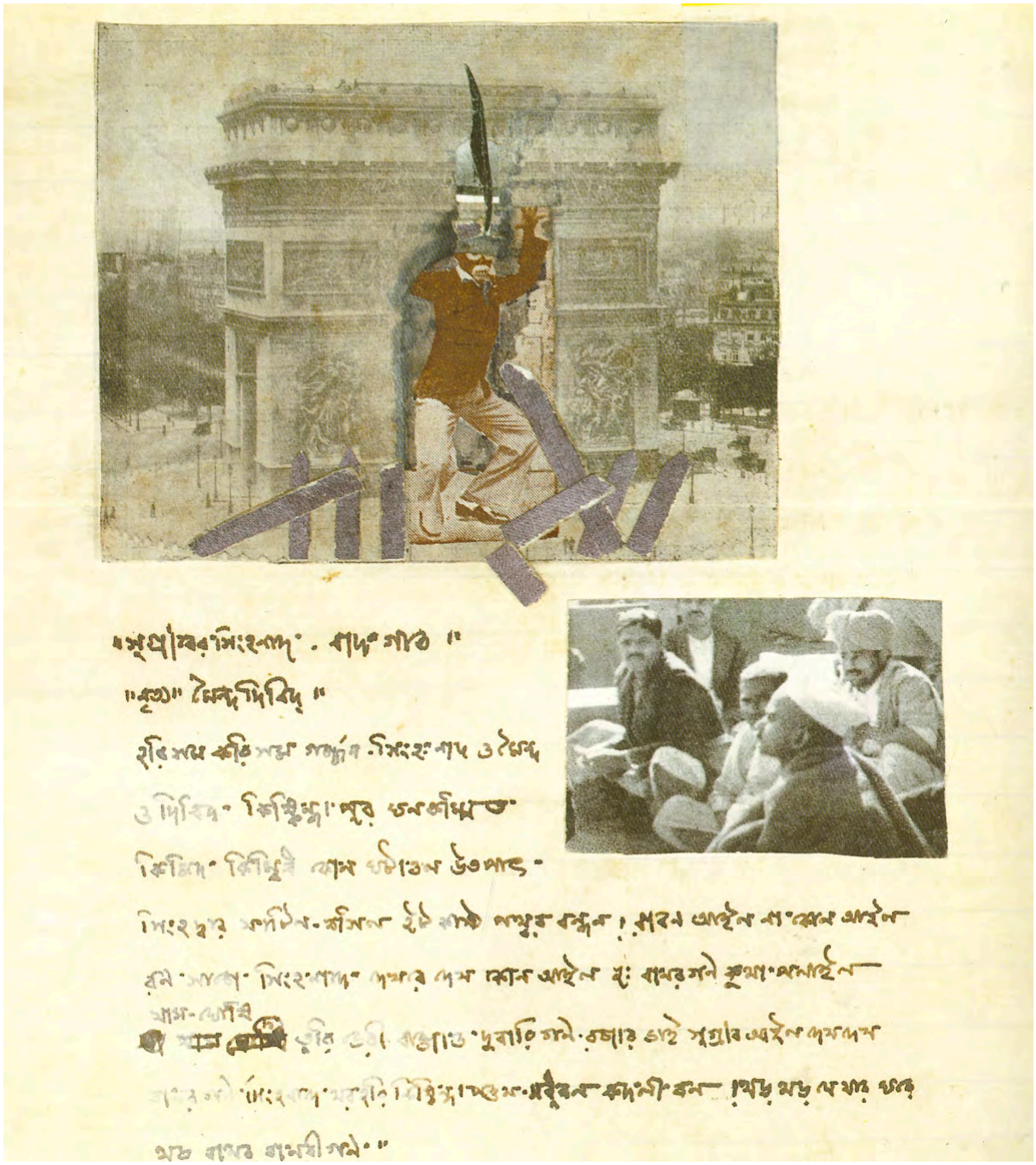

Figure 4: Sugriva (Tagore 2009, 88)

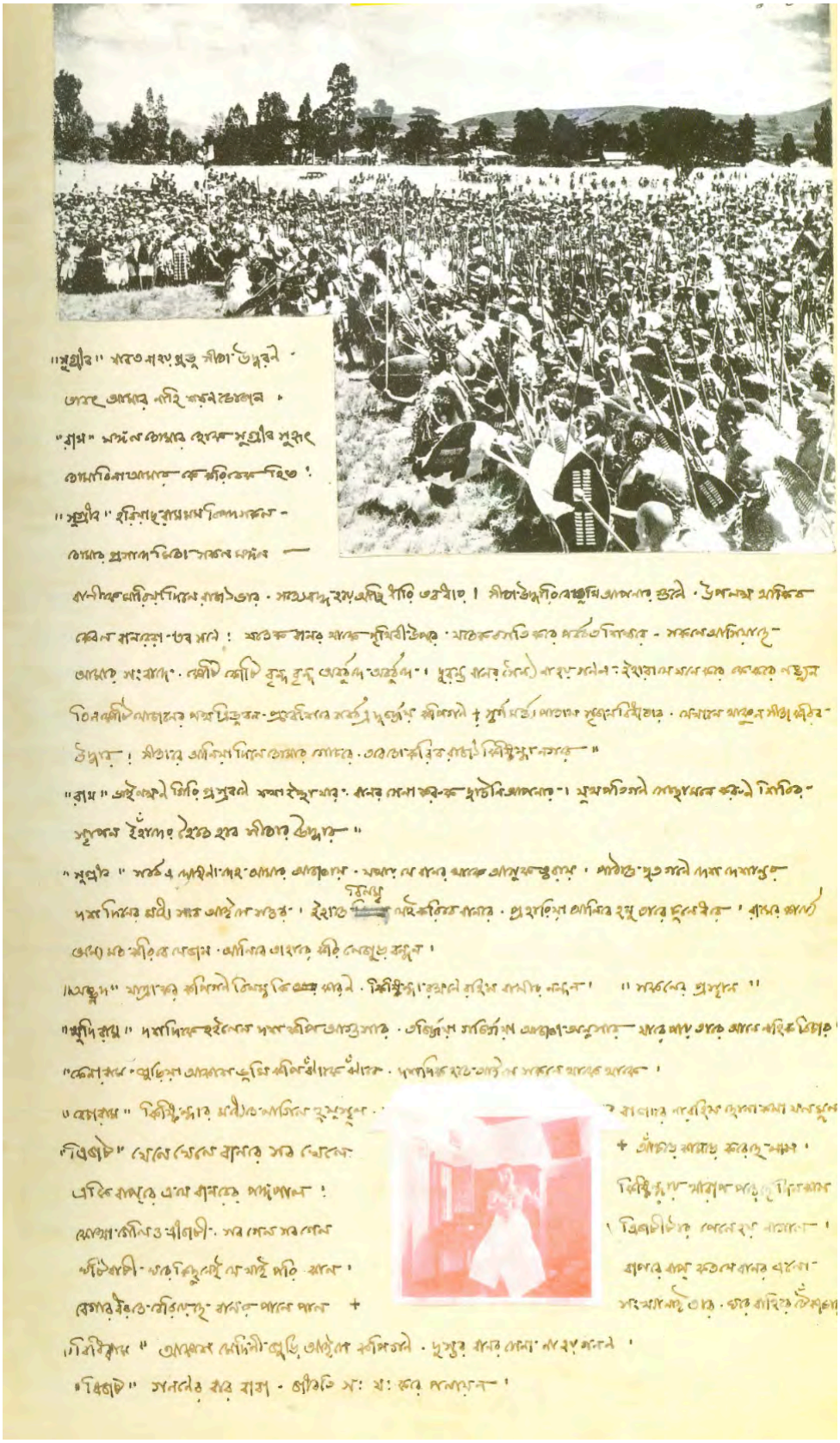

Figure 5: Army of monkeys (Tagore 2009, 101)

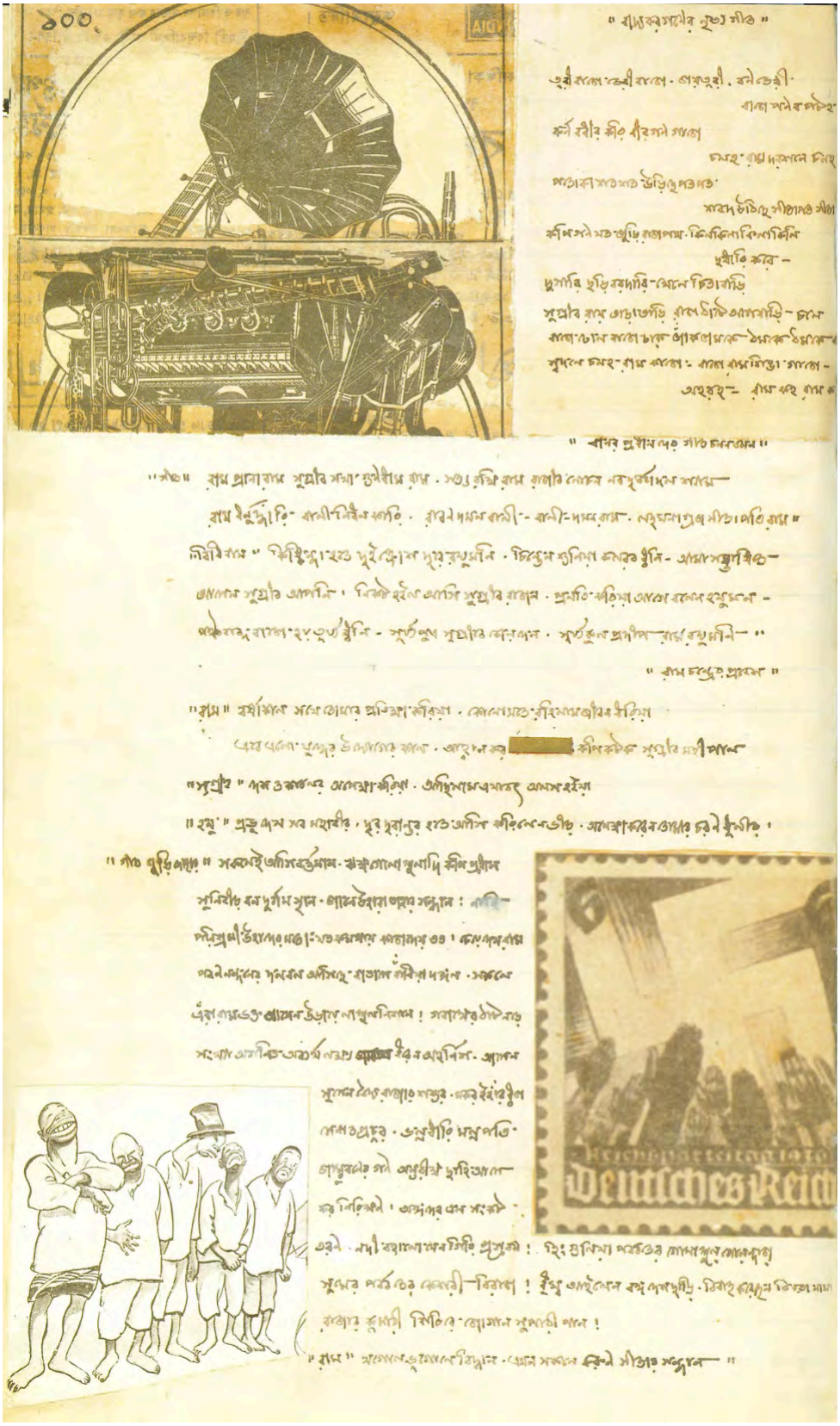

Figure 6: Monkey chiefs (Tagore 2009, 100)

Conclusion

Whether as an exposer or consumer of the narrative, Abanindranath challenges anyone who comes across *Khuddur yātrā*, regardless of the age in which they do so, to build new meanings; and he challenges them to do so by using the knowledge that he or she has already acquired, and also by removing diverse elements from the contextual frame, leaving its initial meaning in the past. Through the text, the images become "performative, transformative and ask us to look more" (Favero 2021, 26); through their interrelatedness, the text and images do different—at times contradictory—things at once: representing and presenting, crafting, and connecting (Favero 2021, 26).

Children and adults, each on their own level, are prompted and sometimes even forced to construct, deconstruct, interpret, and reassess their surrounding reality. Playing with signs and signifiers (for instance, the symbol of the swastika) and using the ambivalent nature of images and language (as, for instance, in the group "pun for fun"), Abanindranath shows the viewer what a complex place the surrounding world is, where everything is interconnected and intertwined.

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