DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

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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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Drawn to Change:
Image-Text Interplay in Indian Graphic Journalism

Ira Sarma

Abstract

This article introduces Indian graphic journalism by exploring the general dynamics of the interplay of text and sequential visual narrative within this medium. A close reading of a selected work—a graphic feature on the suicide of the Dalit student Rohith Vemula in 2016, published on the Indian news platform *The Quint*—shows that the genre's success is driven largely by three key factors: the accessibility of images, their captivating nature, and their ability to convey additional layers of meaning. An overview of the current landscape of Indian graphic journalism will contextualize the findings, emphasizing the diversity of genre within the format. The article demonstrates that graphic journalism spans various genres with reportage, feature stories, and opinion pieces standing out as the most prominent within the Indian context. Across these genres, the inherent subjectivity of the drawn image is employed deliberately to challenge dominant narratives and bring marginalized voices to the forefront, giving rise to diverse forms of "visual activism" and creating valuable archives of protest and social commentary.

Indian graphic journalism

On January 16, 2018, the independent Indian media platform *The Quint* published a visual article under the title *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* (Gopinath and Paul 2018). It served to mark the death of an Indian PhD student belonging to the Dalit community who had committed suicide on the campus of Hyderabad University two years earlier after a prolonged period of harassment and recurring incidents of discrimination. At the time, the tragic incident triggered a nationwide wave of student protests against campus-based discrimination and caste violence. Since the RSS student organization *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* or *All India Students' Council* (ABVP) had played an essential part in the unfolding of the events, the case was also discussed widely against the background of an Indian state that was becoming ever more repressive under a Hindu nationalist government. The article in *The Quint* looks into some of the events in the months preceding Rohith's death by using the format of graphic or comics journalism—"an umbrella term," according to the British graphic journalist Dan Archer, "that covers any approach to reporting that combines words and images in sequential panels" (Archer 2024, 199). Archer emphasizes that panel sequences in graphic journalism differ significantly from comics[1] formats usually found in news media—that is, single-panel cartoons or comic strips that end with a punch line. Graphic journalists research, investigate, and plan their stories like conventional journalists, and their works usually amount to at least "a few pages of artwork with text inside speech balloons or captions" (Archer 2024, 199).

The Rohith Vemula piece, which is a collaboration between the journalist Vishnu Gopinath and the illustrator Susnata Paul, thus presents us with a series of drawings in a comics-like format to be scrolled through vertically. It is an example of a graphic feature—a journalistic genre that emphasizes storytelling over news reporting and allows for greater creative freedom with regard to exploring selected aspects or different viewpoints of a topic. In order to show how graphic journalism works and what the combination of text and sequential visual narrative can achieve in this context, I will, in the following, combine a close reading of the Rohith Vemula piece with references to further examples and an overview of what the Indian scene has to offer.

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[1] Following Scott McCloud's definition, I use the term "comics" as a "plural in form used with a singular verb" (McCloud 1994, 20).

I shall show that graphic journalism thrives mainly on three aspects: first, that images are easily accessible; second, that they are, by nature, captivating; and third, that they convey meaning which adds to that of the text.

What led Rohith Vemula to take his own life?

Like most works of graphic journalism published in the context of news media (both digital and in print), the Rohith Vemula piece is presented as a regular journalistic article [fig. 1]: Under a headline and subtitle, we find the names of the creators and—as is generally the case for web articles—the date and time of publication. On the right-hand side, we learn that the article runs under the category "politics" and that it is a three-minute read. Underneath, we are presented with a visual teaser combining a part of the last panel of the article with a drawn version of an iconic photograph of Rohith Vemula. The story itself starts at the end and then unfolds the events leading up to it in a flashback. Thus, in the very first panel, we are made witnesses to Rohith's suicide [fig. 2]; the five inset text boxes present us with his voice through literal quotes from his suicide note that had been made public shortly after his death. After this, at the bottom of the panel, the narrator fills us in on some facts.

Figure 1:
Screen shot of the first rerun of the story on 17 January 2021, which commemorates the anniversary of Rohith's death; except for the date and time, the content and layout of the article are identical with the first publication in 2018.
© The Quint

Figure 2:
Rohith's suicide. First panel of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint
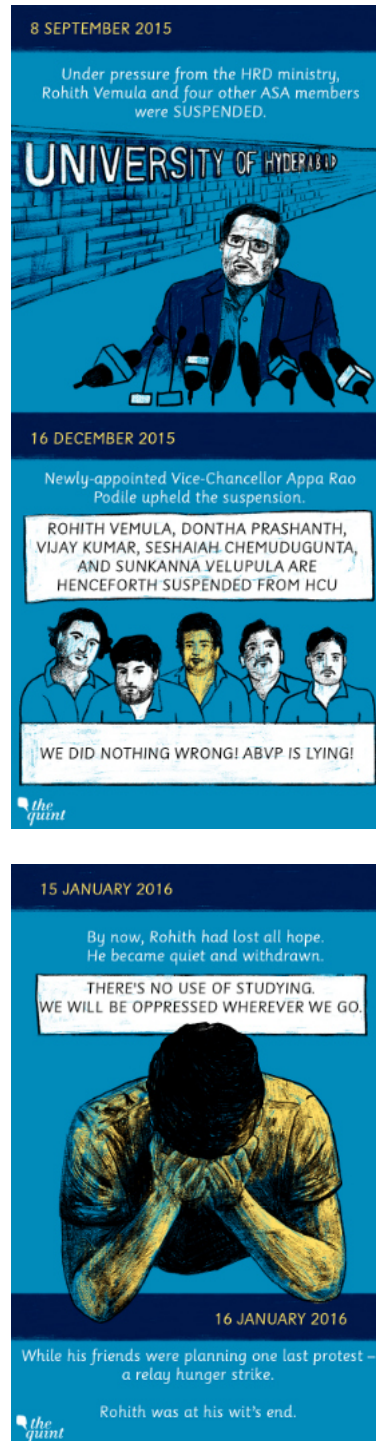
Figure 3:
Suspension of five Dalit students from Hyderabad university. Panels 5 & 6 of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint

Figure 4:
Rohith in despair. Panel 11 of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint

Figure 5:
Rohith's imminent death. Last panel of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021. © The Quint

In a flashback, we then learn how, in 2015, five Dalit students from Hyderabad University, among them Rohith Vemula, are suspended due to false allegations by a member of the ABVP who claims that he had been beaten up by activists of the *Ambedkar Students Association* (ASA) [fig. 3]. We witness how Rohith loses his monthly stipend and can no longer send money home; the five students have to leave the hostel and put up some makeshift dwellings on the campus. The initial support of fellow students soon dwindles, and as people begin to lose interest, Rohith loses "all hope" and becomes "quiet and withdrawn," as the narrator tells us in a caption. We see Rohith in a close-up from a bird's-eye perspective as he covers his face with his hands in despair [fig. 4]. The narrative ends with the moment in which Rohith enters the hostel room to hang himself [fig. 5]. Corresponding to the first panel, we again hear Rohith's voice through quotes from his suicide note in a yellow font pitched against a black backdrop. The fact that the short passages are literal quotes is, this time, indicated through quotation marks. At the end of the article, the narrator concludes:

> And just like that
> a mind full of ideas
> a man full of hope
> was broken

In the weeks and months following Rohith's suicide, reports, features, and opinion pieces on the incident proliferated nationwide. Media coverage has continued ever since, commemorating the incident, reminding us of it in the context of student protests and Dalit identity, or commenting on the controversial closure of the case by the Telangana police. While the discourse surrounding the incident had a strong visual presence from the outset, which I address below, *The Quint* was the only medium to approach the topic through a piece of graphic journalism. In the following, I will show what unique contributions this format has to offer, and what it is that motivates journalists, artists, and comic creators to adopt this form.

Images are accessible

A first point that comes across clearly is that images are easily accessible. Dan Archer has pointed out that images explain things: "Comics are the perfect way of synthesising a lot of complex information in a very easily intelligible and accessible way" (Archer 2011, 1:18–1:25). And indeed, the piece at the centre of this article makes for easy reading and packages a complex story into a "3 min read," as advertised by *The Quint.* The realistic drawings speak to the reader straightforwardly, and in most of them, the information content is boiled down considerably because they omit all backgrounds and unnecessary detail—that is, visual information not needed for an immediate understanding of the intended message of the image. Instead, they concentrate on persons or gestures, mostly set against a monochrome blue backdrop. This capacity of drawings to focus on key information becomes especially clear when we compare images of the article that are visual quotes of press images with the corresponding photographs. A panel, which depicts an ASA protest [fig. 6], thus shows the protest banner

Figure 6:
ASA protests. Panel 2 of the graphic feature *What Led Rohith Vemula to Take his Own Life?* by Vishnu Gopinath (text) and Susnata Paul (art), as published on 17 January 2021.
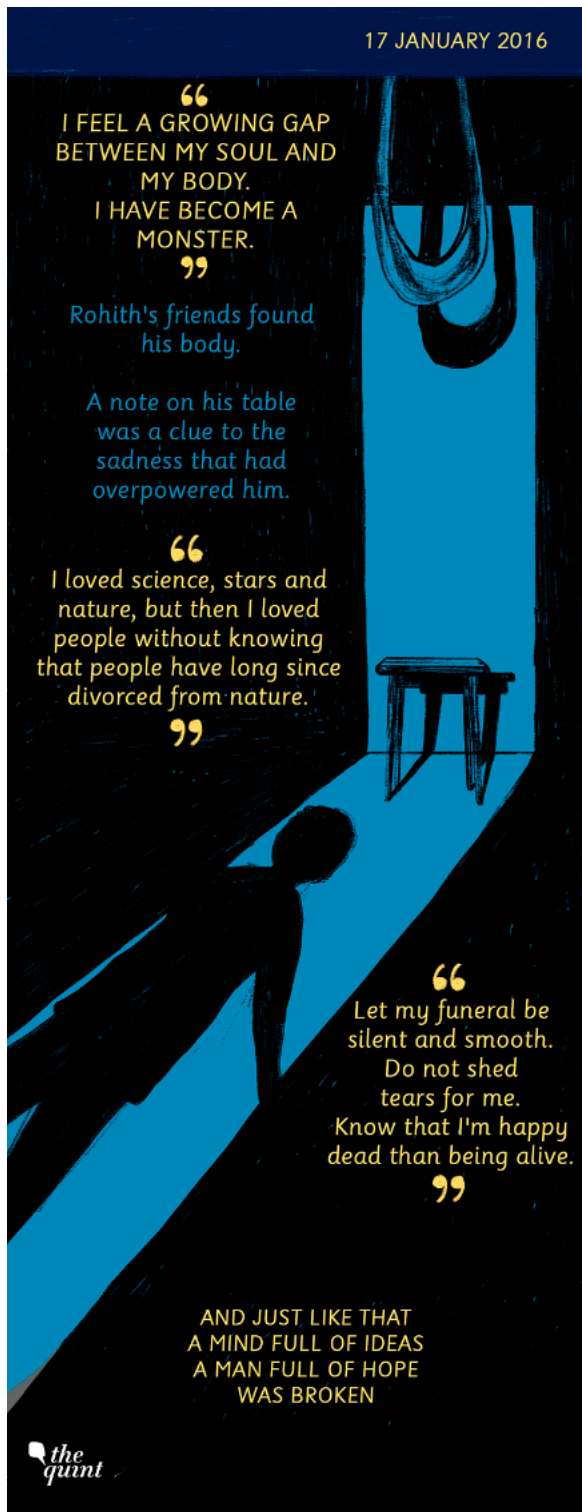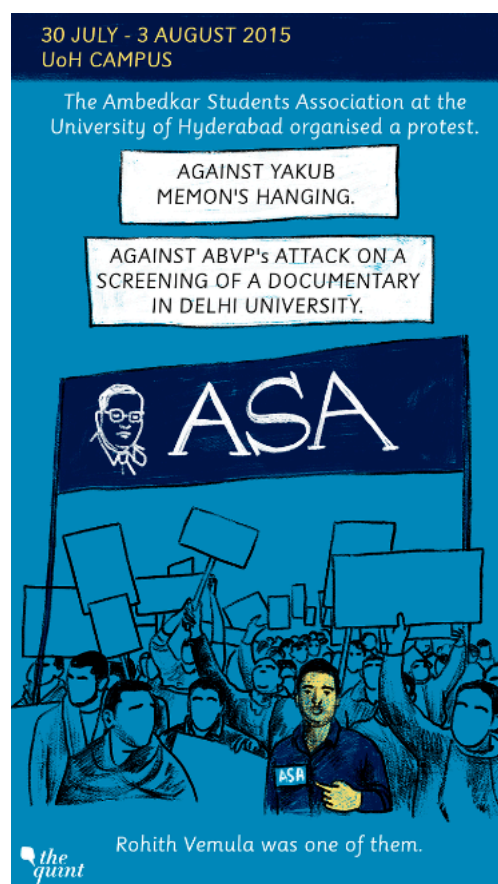© The Quint

with only two distinctive characteristics—a stylized portrait of Ambedkar on the left side and the ASA lettering in the center—but omits other mottos usually found on the banner, as seen in various press photographs. Likewise, drawings of Rohith Vemula, which are visual quotes of widely circulated press photos, show him without any of the surroundings pictured in the photographs, thus placing his persona center stage.

As far as the verbal level is concerned, accessibility is ensured by the fact that the text passages are short, and longer passages, like the quotes from Rohith's suicide note, are subdivided visually, as is typical for comics or graphic novels. In addition, alternating voices are presented in different layouts such as a white script on a blue background, using both capital and small letters, or black script on a white background in inset boxes and speech balloons using capitals only. The overall aesthetic of the lettering is rather restless, which is further emphasized by the fact that there is no consistency between the style of lettering and potentially corresponding voices. However, the constant shift between different designs provides variety and dynamism and emphasizes the presence of the multiple voices. Moreover, this variability of voices is employed to highlight a central message: in the initial panel, the narrator's matter-of-fact tone in the comment at the bottom of the image underscores the tragic nature of the incident *because* it is in stark contrast to not only the disconcerting content of the lines but also Rohith's own lyrical speech [see fig. 2].

Alongside such web-based examples of graphic journalism, we also encounter a fair amount of high-quality works in print published in anthologies. Cases in point are the feminist collection *Drawing the Line* (Kuriyan et al. 2015), the anthologies *Longform* and *Longform 2022* (Sen et al. 2018; Sen et al. 2022), or the two volumes *First Hand* (Sen and Sabhaney 2016) and *First Hand: Exclusion* (Sabhaney 2018). The latter work, in particular, is a striking example of how images make information more accessible. Bringing together graphic adaptations and interpretations of academic articles from the *India Exclusion Report* 2015 (Anon. 2016a), the creators state explicitly that they aim to make the topic engaging and approachable for a new, younger, and nonspecialist audience. The crucial role of accessibility of the drawn image is a foundational concept of the work, which presents us with themes like the failure of the healthcare system, communal violence, and the displacement of tribal communities together with original reportages on, for example, working women or ethnic conflict [fig.7.1&7.2.].

The editor, Vidyun Sabhaney, even goes one step further when she explains in the preface:

[The volume "First Hand 2: Exclusion"] is a contribution towards a visual register of inequality and exclusion. It has been produced with the hope that a visual register will make such phenomena easier to identify, critique, and fight (Sabhaney 2018, 8).

Figure 7.1.:
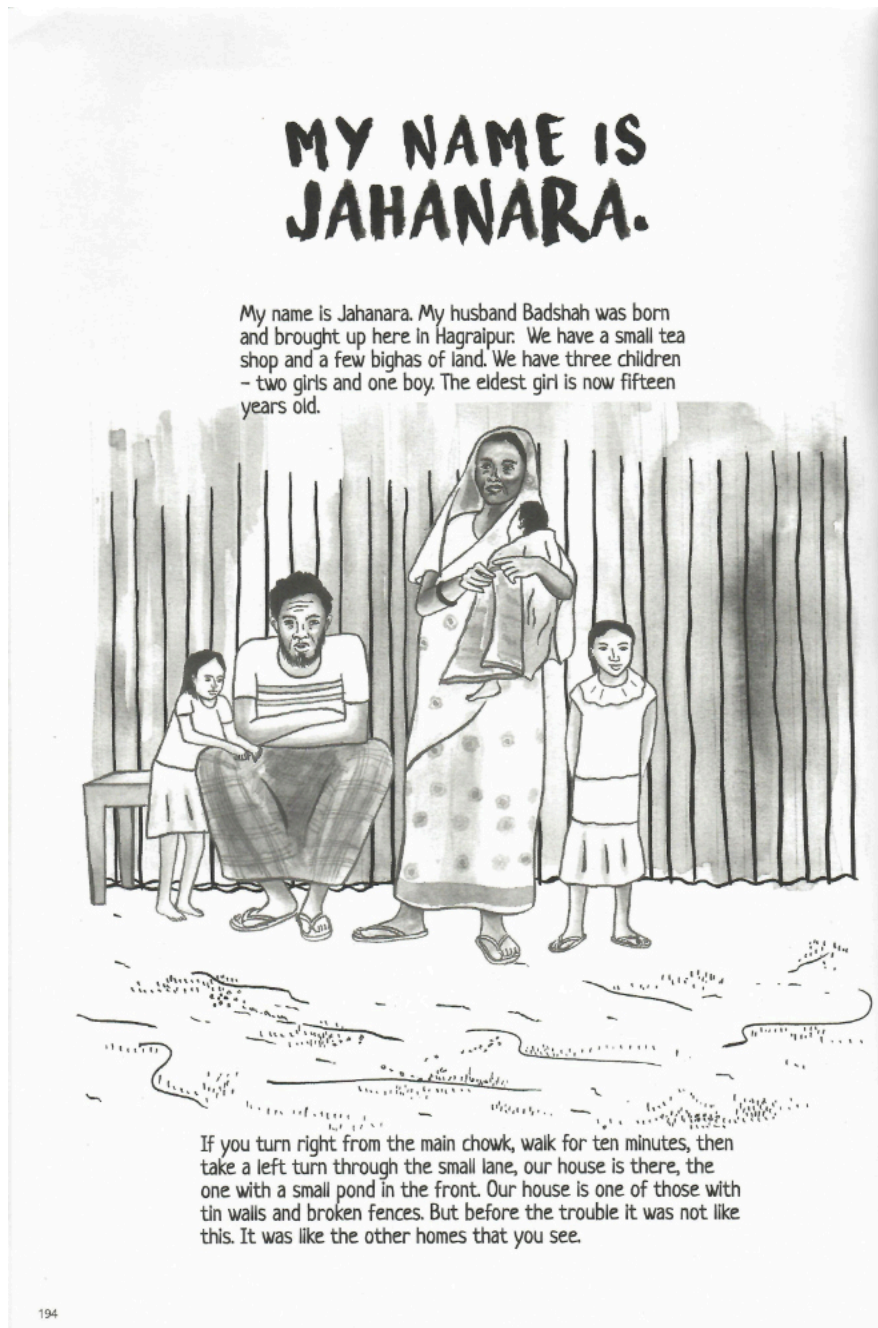A page from the reportage *Survivors: Ethnic Conflict in Bodoland* by Amrapali Basumatary (text) and Vipin Yadav (art); published in the volume *First Hand: Exclusion* (Sabhaney 2018). © Yoda Press
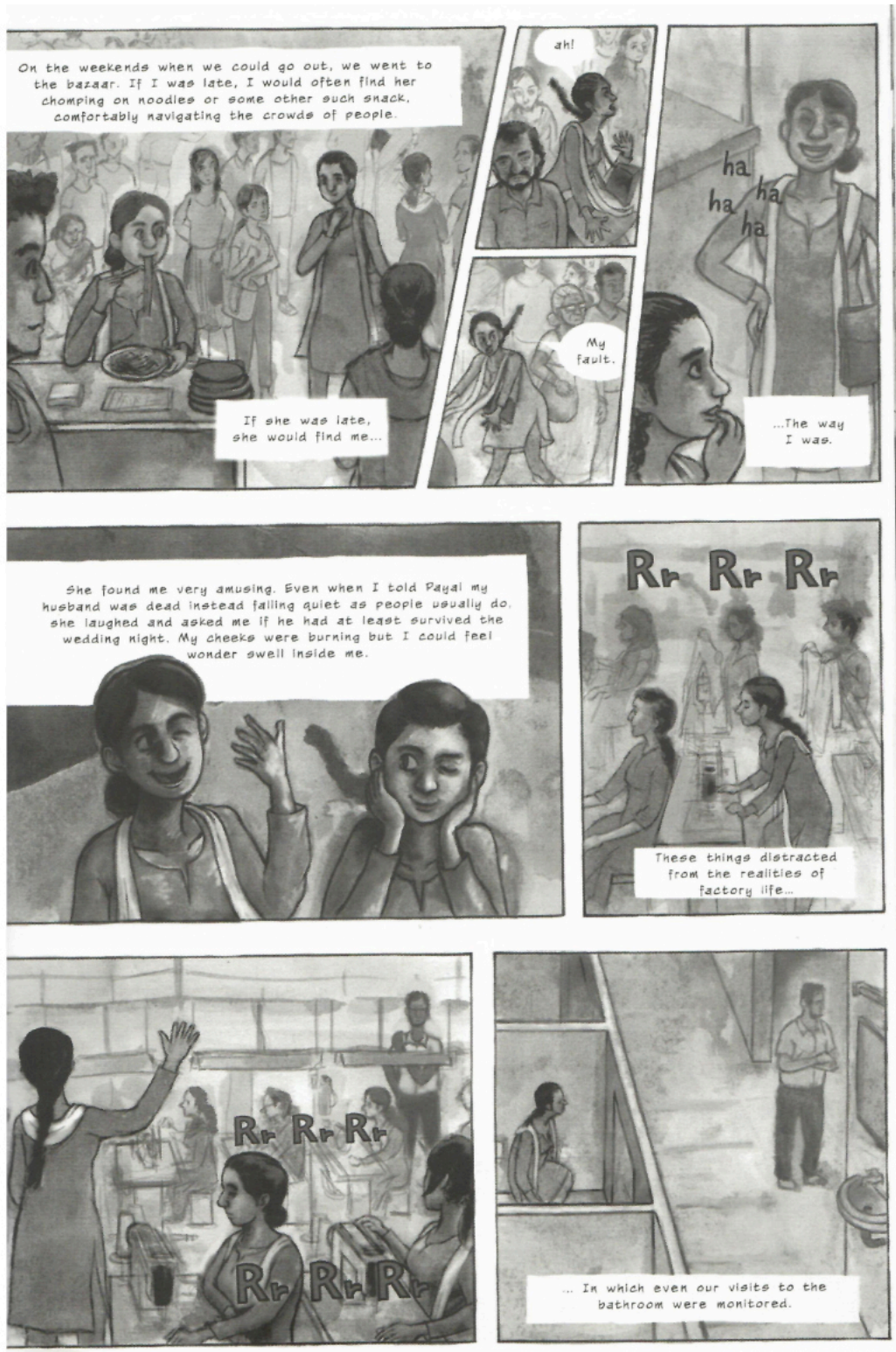
Figure 7.2.:
A page from the semi-fictional reportage *Hard Times* by Vidyun Sabhaney (text) and Shohei Emura (art) on women and work published in the volume *First Hand: Exclusion* (Sabhaney 2018). © Yoda Press

Graphic nonfiction—embodied in various journalistic genres—is employed deliberately for its potential to effect change. Thus, the collection *Drawing the Line* showcases the subtitle *Indian Women Fight Back*, attesting to its spirit of rebellion; and examples like Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh* and Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* have even been read as "visual activism" (discussed below). What unites these works is their reliance on the fact that graphic journalism is "visually compelling," as Dan Archer asserts (Archer 2011, 3:02–3:04): Images draw us into the story, they can create an atmosphere that captivates us, and they give us "access to the places and spaces" narrators and speakers have been in (McNamee and Allen 2021, 328).

The captivating nature of images

In his seminal work *What Do Pictures Want* (2005), W. J. T. Mitchell distinguishes "image" from "picture:"

> *The image has value, but somehow it is slipperier than the value of the picture or statue, the physical monument that "incarnates" it in a specific place. The image cannot be destroyed. The golden calf of the Old Testament may be ground down to powder, but the image lives on—in works of art, in texts, in narrative and remembrance. (Mitchell 2005, 84)*

It is this longevity of the image—its capacity to captivate us and stay with us long after we have turned away from the physical picture—upon which graphic journalism builds. In the Vemula article, this finds excellent expression in the first and last panel, which frame the sequence of events by depicting Rohith's death.

In the first panel [see fig. 2], Susnata Paul illustrates the moment of death by using the potential of comics to convey the passage of time through sequential images, demanding that the reader should fill in the information about what has happened in the gutters between the panels. In three frames superimposed upon the image of Rohith's lifeless body dangling from a fan, we see two close-ups of Rohith's face and one of his feet on the chair. In the upper frame, his eyes are open; in the middle one, they are closed, implying that he has since pushed away the chair on which his feet— shown in the third frame—have still been standing a moment ago. As Rohith's open eyes in the upper frame look straight at the spectator, his glance seems to speak to us directly—vividly and imploringly in this moment of desolation, as the image suggests. Likewise, the last panel [see fig. 5] has us "spy on" a moment of utter loneliness as we

see (presumably) Rohith's shadow falling through the open door into a dark room. In it, a noose and a stool underneath cast eerie shadows on the wall. The image has a cinematic quality and is reminiscent of the aesthetic of a still from a horror movie, indicating imminent danger but also forlornness and gloom.

The *Quint* article distinctly draws our attention to an aspect of the incident, which verbal articles typically encapsulate in brief prosaic statements declaring that Rohith Vemula "hanged himself" (Apurva 2016, Henry 2016) or "committed suicide" (Biswas 2016a)—phrases that fail to convey the gravity of the situation. The artist Susnata Paul, however, creates two visually haunting panels to depict what has remained hidden from the eye: the exceedingly intimate situation of the suicide. By choosing to depict this scene, she draws the reader's attention to the brutality of the moment, evoking a more emotional response than the corresponding verbal descriptions in articles could do, thus attesting to the power of the image. The immediacy of images engages the viewers on a visceral level, bypassing the cognitive distance often associated with reading verbal descriptions. This affective charge amplifies the emotional resonance of the scene, emphasizing the unique capacity of visual art to communicate the unspeakable.

Images convey additional meaning

On another level, images are powerful because, as Mitchell reminds us, they are also "mental things" that can be "highly durable" and assume an immaterial symbolic form (Mitchell 2005, 84, 87). The *Quint* article shows this in two ways: by employing both visual metaphors and visual intertextualities. Both stylistic devices add value and meaning to the narrative but rely on the viewer's interpretation or prior knowledge. With regard to the Vemula article, however, it is important to note that it is not necessary to decipher them to understand the story and its message—true to Gérard Genette's dictum that any text that references a previous text "is invested with a meaning that is autonomous and thus in some manner sufficient" (Genette 1997, 397). As in verbal texts, some of the conventional visual metaphors in the article will go largely unnoticed, such as the empty open wallet indicating a lack of money or Rohith's hands that cover his face signifying despair [see fig. 4]. A more elaborate and eye-catching metaphor is Rohith's fragmented body in the first panel, which mirrors his life being torn apart. Likewise, the use of yellow as signature color for Rohith is a compelling example: It not only makes him stand out from the rest of the crowd in the
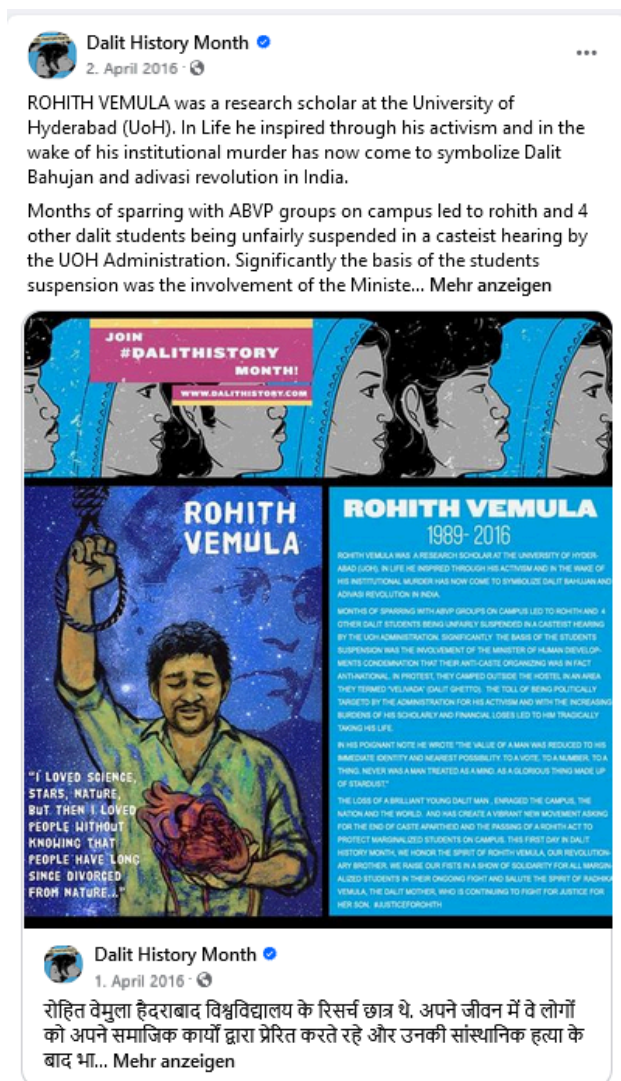
Figure 8:
Screenshot of a commemorative collage on the Facebook site of Dalit History Month. © Dalit History Month

images but—especially against the blue background—also gives him a golden glow, showing him as a bright and warm person.

Another visual metaphor that seems to speak to us rather straightforwardly is the noose in the last panel, which signifies menace and death. Here, however, the metaphor extends into the realm of intertextuality. I have shown elsewhere that visual intertextualities are a powerful means used in Indian graphic novels to create not only surplus meaning but also pleasure for informed readers who can identify them (Sarma 2018). Unlike graphic novels, however, whose largely cultural intertextualities characterize them as an elite medium, the Vemula article references societal and (social) media discourses to establish a connection with relevant movements and their ideologies. "Memes on Rohith Vemula suicide flood [...] social media" titled the *Times of India* on January 20, 2016, four days after Rohith's death (Biswas 2016b). In the following weeks and months, the noose becomes a central symbol for "institutional murder" in countless cartoons and memes, especially in the context of Dalit activism. Examples include the commemorative collage on the Facebook page of Dalithistorymonth.com [fig. 8] or a much-shared cartoon from the website Rebel Politik [fig. 9]. The former shows a drawing in which Rohith raises his right fist through a hanging noose in a gesture of defiance set against a well-known image of Ambedkar as

Figure 9:
V. Arun's Story of *Eklavya 2.0: A Story of Murder*; cartoon from the
website Rebel Politik, published on 18 January 2016, one day after
Rohith Vemula's suicide. © V. Arun/Rebel Politik/CC BY-NC 4.0

a backdrop (Anon. 2016b). In the latter black-and-white cartoon, the story of *Eklavya*[2] is transposed into the present, in that we see a representative of the administration of the University of Hyderabad—identifiable as a "modern *Dronacharya"* through his hairstyle—handing a noose to *Eklavya*, who is about to cut his thumb, asking him for his life rather than only his finger (Arun 2016a).

A second example of visual intertextuality is found in the teaser, which opens the article with the drawn version of a photograph of Rohith [see fig. 1]. As mentioned above, the photograph [fig. 10], which was taken from Rohith's Facebook account right after his death (Chnige 2021, 121), achieved iconic status and has been omnipresent in the surrounding discourse ever since. Along with depictions of Rohith's suicide note, this "image"—rather than the "picture" in Mitchell's sense—continues to circulate in artwork through protest posters and graffiti as well as digitally, and it has been turned into "a key symbol of resistance to the oppression of Dalits by institutions and the state," as Malavika Chnige shows (Chnige 2021, 188). During the months after the incident, the image was, for example, employed as a Facebook profile picture by

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[2] The story of *Eklavya* from the *Mahabharata* is a key narrative for the Dalit community to expose caste discrimination and inspire resilience. *Eklavya*, a skilled tribal archer, idolizes the teacher *Dronacharya* and secretly practices archery in front of a clay statue of the guru after being denied formal training. When *Dronacharya* discovers his proficiency, he demands *Eklavya*'s right thumb as *guru dakshina* (teacher's fee) to ensure his favored student, *Arjuna*, remains unrivaled, thus crippling *Eklavya*'s archery skills.

people who wanted to express solidarity with the Dalit cause (Garalytė 2016, 14)—in a visual gesture resembling slogans such as "*Je suis Charlie*" (2015) or "*Ich bin Hanna*" (2021) that soon turned into memes.[3] Chnige further argues that the photograph was quickly amalgamated with the well-known iconography of Ambedkar (Chnige 2021, 118–128). The drawn interpretation of the photograph in the article's teaser is therefore not only employed for its recognizability, but must be seen as both an acknowledgment of, and active contribution to, the visual discourse of solidarity and protest.

Figure 10:
Photograph of Rohith Vemula from his Facebook account (2016).
Author unknown.

Graphic activism and the question of subjectivity

The Vemula article presents an accessible and condensed narrative, but at the same time, the visuals ensure that we are not simply given a skeleton of facts but a piece that offers us depth and a distinctive attitude. The fact that images carry additional meaning allows the artist to enrich and comment upon the narrative. Conversely, however, this also means that artists have to be alert as to the visual choices they make. Graphic journalists are acutely aware of the fact that a drawing is always interpretative and ultimately "reflects the vision of the individual cartoonist," as Joe Sacco, the Maltese doyen of graphic reportage, points out (Sacco 2012a, XII). The graphic journalist, he

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[3] "*Je suis Charlie*" became a global meme following the 2015 terrorist attack on the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*, symbolizing solidarity and support for free speech. "*Ich bin Hanna*" emerged in Germany in 2021 as academics criticized precarious employment conditions, turning it into a broader symbol for better working conditions in academia. Both phrases were adapted to various contexts, highlighting the power of messages of solidarity in rallying public support.

states, "draws with the essential truth in mind, not the literal truth" (Sacco 2012b, XII). It is, therefore, not visual accuracy but rather pictorial veracity that graphic journalists strive to establish during their work process. Instead of aiming for a faithful representation of observable details, the emphasis lies on the visual communication of a scene's essence or truth as seen and felt by the artist—for example, by making choices regarding the style of drawing, the perspective (in the literal sense of the word), but also the question of which details from a real-life "canvas" are to be included or omitted. Far from seeing the inherent subjectivity of drawings as a shortcoming, practitioners take pains to emphasize that this is the very strength of graphic journalism. The Lebanese comics artist Omar Khouri, for example, asserts:

I feel like comics can be more truthful about the fact that nothing's really objective. This is all just somebody's perspective on whatever it is that we're talking about, and I think that's the power of comics journalism. (Sanyal and Kelp-Stebbins 2021, 290)

In order to create a sense of transparency or "honesty" in their works, graphic journalists regularly approach their own positionality proactively—for example, by drawing themselves into the pictures. The US-American graphic novelist Sarah Glidden explains:

I really embrace [subjectivity]. I try to make it very clear that this is my point of view, and […] including myself in the work is part of that. […] you can't forget that this is subjective when my face is in half the panels. (Hubbert and Obert 2021, 96)

Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts* (2016) introduces her persona right on the cover page of the book—a reportage on the question of "how journalism works" (14) set against the background of personal stories that show the effects of the Iraq War (2013–17) on refugees in Turkey, Iraq, and Syria. On the front cover, we see two reporters interviewing a third person on a rooftop while a young woman—Sarah Glidden, as we learn in the narrative—is leaning against the right-hand balustrade, silently witnessing and drawing the scene [fig. 11]. In the course of the narrative, her persona remains constantly visible, and we see her reflecting on the journalistic process; pondering questions like accountability, truth, and honesty (Glidden 2016, 27); or considering how to portray "people in all of their human imperfection" (Glidden 2016, 43). Glidden sets out to do a reportage rather than a memoir (43), but in a review, her book has nevertheless rightly been called "[p]art memoir, part ethical inquiry and part travelogue" (Cooke 2016).
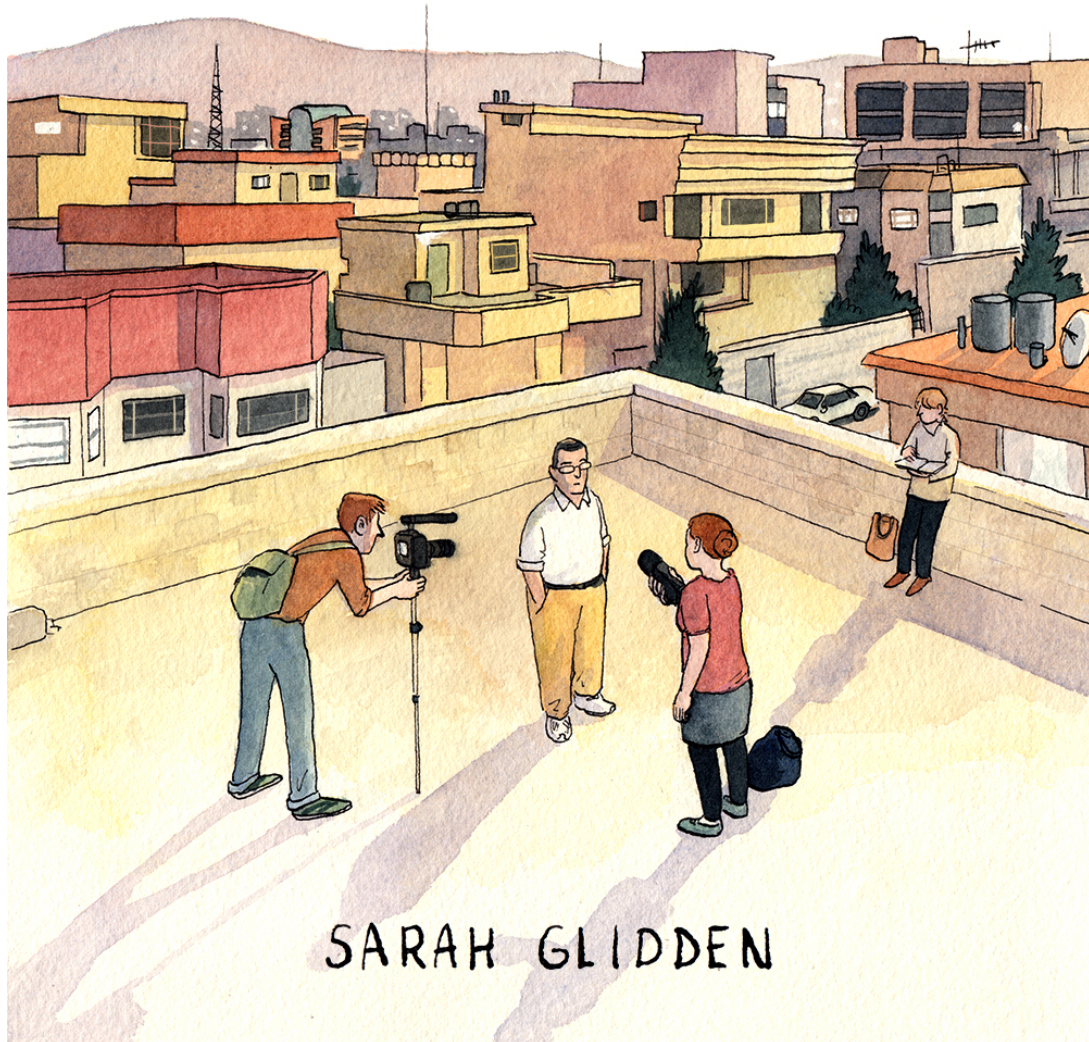
Figure 11:
Front cover of Sarah Glidden's *Rolling Blackouts*.
© Sarah Glidden. Used with permission from Dawn & Quarterly

Figure 12:
Front cover of Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh*. © Yoda Press

A similar fluidity of genres characterizes Ita Mehrotra's book-length reportage *Shaheen Bagh*, which deals with the women-led anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)[4] protests in 2019 and 2020 in the neighborhood of the same name in South Delhi [fig. 12]. The subtitle *A Graphic Recollection* heralds a personal narrative with a subjective viewpoint, which also finds expression in the fact that she has drawn herself into the story. Moreover, like many graphic journalists who write longform reportages, Mehrotra employs a first-person point of view for her persona: In the first caption on the second page, she recollects, "I met Shahana in January 2020 at Shaheen Bagh," and then continues to document her involvement throughout the course of the book (Mehrotra 2021, 15). Like Sarah Glidden's "graphic self," Mehrotra's "I" comes as a full-blown character who appears as an interview partner and witness but also uses the captions to address her feelings about the events. A slightly different approach can be found in Vidyun Sabhaney's article *Haq* (*Right*) on women's roles in and perspectives on the farmers' protests[5] in 2021, published on the independent Indian news platform *Scroll* (Sabhaney 2021). Like Mehrotra, Sabhaney writes from a first-person perspective, but she refrains from including herself in the story. Instead, her visuals position us—the readers—as the conversational counterparts of the interviewees, with most women looking straight at us from the pictures while presenting their views [fig. 13]. Sabhaney nevertheless highlights her subjective viewpoint by ending the narrative on a meta-level: While verbally expressing her dilemma as to "how to draw a final panel," she chooses to depict her hand in the process of drawing the last image showing one of the interviewed women, thus unequivocally pointing to her own role as the narrator of the story [fig. 14].

Like the Rohith Vemula article—albeit in a more deliberate manner—Ita Mehrotra's book is part of a visual discourse of protest, but it can also be read as a form of visual activism, as Fritzi Titzmann has shown in an article that examines the ability of art and media to transform and shape narratives of solidarity and resistance (Titzmann 2023). We have seen that the anthologies *First Hand: Exclusion* and *Drawing the Line* are further examples of graphic activism. Another work that must be mentioned in this context is Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994), a fictionalized reportage cum mythical

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[4] The protests began in 2019 and were directed against the *Citizenship Amendment Act*, which fast-tracks citizenship for non-Muslim refugees from neighboring countries. Critics argue it discriminates against Muslims and undermines India's secular constitution.

[5] The protests began in 2020 and were directed against three agricultural laws that farmers feared would deregulate crop pricing and weaken their bargaining power. Farmers, mainly from Punjab and Haryana, camped at Delhi's borders for over a year, until the laws were eventually repealed in November 2021.

Figure 13:
Two panels from Vidhyun Sabhaney's article *Haq* (right) on the women farmers' protests at Tikri, published in Scroll on 6 November 2021. © Vidhyun Sabhaney
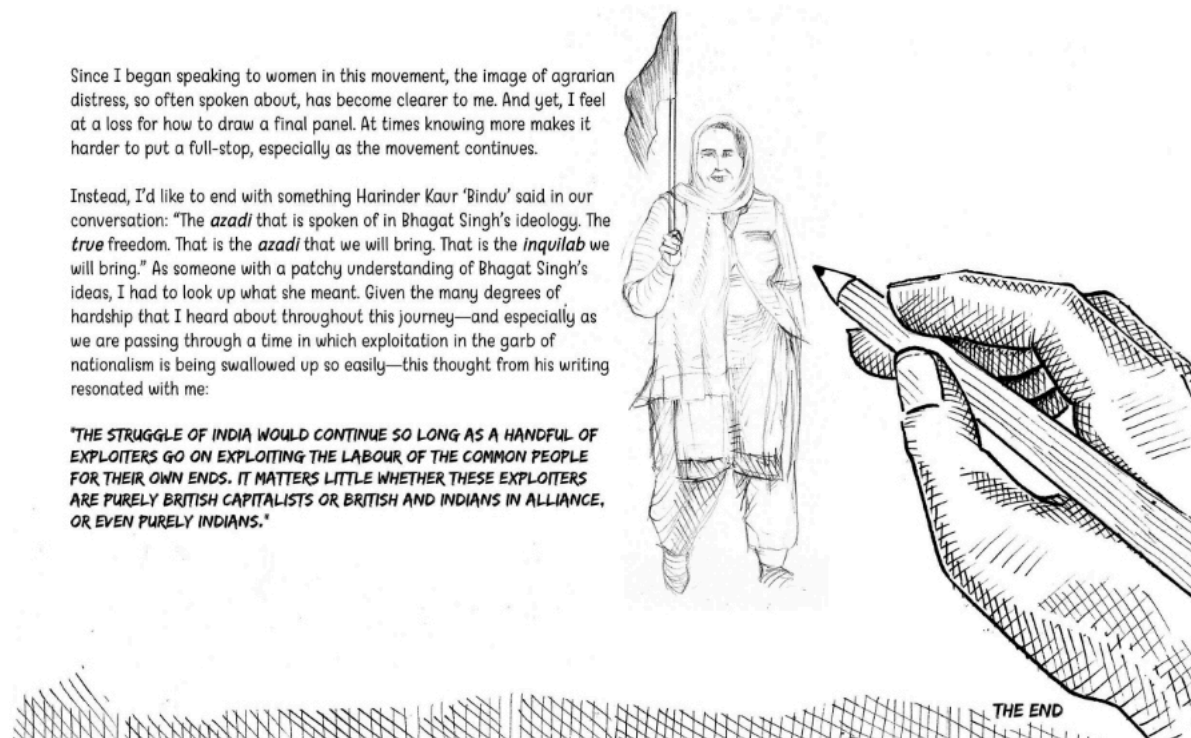

Figure 14:
The last panel from Vidhyun Sabhaney's article *Haq* (right) on the women farmers' protests at Tikri, published in Scroll on 6 November 2021. © Vidhyun Sabhaney

story on the protest movements surrounding the construction of the massive Narmada Dam in West India. Sen's work is widely recognized as the first Indian "graphic novel," but must also be seen as an early work of visual activism: At the time, it was not only meant to articulate the perspective of the protesters but also served to bring the message to an urban audience that had been largely unaware of the project's extensive repercussions. Graphic journalism is perceived as a medium that allows for untold stories to be told—to show "shadowy, invisible sides" of society and portray "socially vulnerable groups," as the Russian graphic novelist Victoria Lomasko states (Sanyal 2021, 175). Much in line with this position, the editorial team at *The Quint* declares that they aim to make "marginalized voices" heard, "humanize big events," and "propel change" (*The Quint,* year unknown). Against this background, it is thus vital to conclude by addressing a further genre that is a staple in Indian graphic journalism: the commentary or opinion piece.

Graphic commentary—archives of protest

Since 2016, *The Quint* has published more than fifty works of graphic journalism on a wide range of themes, mainly historical or (inter)national current political issues including Kashmir violence, LGBTQ themes, or the topic of rape [fig. 15]. Like the Vemula article, most of the pieces are categorized as "graphic novels"—a buzzword used to better market them—because the genres we encounter most often are the feature and the reportage. Both are longform graphic explorations, which dominate the landscape of graphic journalism both within India and internationally. One reason for this choice of genre is that "graphic journalism is slow journalism," as the Dutch comics creator and critic Joost Pollmann emphasizes (Pollmann 2013). It is not ideal for daily news articles that need to be produced rapidly to keep pace with the constant flow of new information. The process of drawing a complex, in-depth narrative, however, takes considerably longer than the process of writing, as Joe Sacco somewhat jealously remarks when asked about the time he needs to create his books: A full-blown reportage of some 200–300 pages, he states, may take as long as three to seven years to create (Lyday and McNamee 2021, 26).

Therefore, in order to address pressing issues more spontaneously, another format has taken root: the graphic commentary or opinion piece. Outstanding examples are the works published in *Mint*, a prominent Indian daily print newspaper, which also runs a digital platform called *Livemint*. Between 2011 and 2014, *Mint* ran a series of weekly
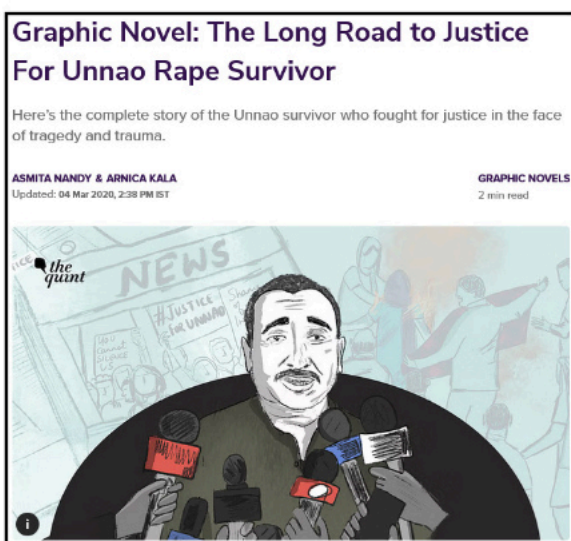
sociopolitical graphic commentaries under the editorship of Dileep Cherian. It was introduced with the following words:

Cartoons and caricatures are popular means of visual comment and commentary. It is the rare paper that doesn't have them [...]. In an attempt to push the boundaries of what traditionally passed for visual comment, the paper is now delighted to announce the launch of The Small Picture, a full page comic strip op-ed [...]. The Small Picture is created exclusively for Mint by Manta Ray, a small indie graphic novel studio. It will appear every Wednesday—a doff of the hat to popular comic book culture where new issues traditionally appear in stores on Wednesdays. (Sukumar 2011)

Figure 15:
Screenshots of three works of graphic journalism from *The Quint* from top to bottom: *Through Blinded Eyes: A Kashmir Story* by Qadri Inzamam (text) and Susnata Paul (art), published on 4 August 2016; *How a Lesbian Couple is Waging a Fight Against Conversion Therapy* by Meenakshy Sasikumar (text) and Chetan Bhakuni/ Aroop Mishra (art), published on 13 July 2024; and *The Long Road to Justice For Unnao Rape Survivor* by Asmita Nandy (text) and Arnica Kala (art), published on 20 August 2019.
© The Quint

Mint's editor suggests the "op-ed" as a genre that stands for "opposite the editorial page" and usually designates a piece of journalism in which an author who is not affiliated with the publication expresses their opinion. Over the years, *Mint*—in collaboration with Manta Ray—published more than 200 such pieces by over 50 contributors, each spread over one whole page in the print newspaper's "Views" section and addressing issues of immediate concern to the creators. Topics included personal reflections on the disappearance of nature from cityscapes (Patel 2013) [fig. 16] or the iconic Indian Ambassador car (Madhok 2014) [fig. 17], but it is current sociopolitical topics that dominated the series such as the Indian slutwalks (C, Sunando 2011) [fig. 18] or various political scandals (Chakraborty 2012, here referred to in the borders of the iconic image of the first page of the Indian constitution) [fig. 19]. Visual commentaries set out to provoke thought, influence public opinion, and encourage discussion, but when taken together, they also function as rich and intriguing archives of protest.

Popular platforms for graphic opinion pieces, which also feed into these archives, are social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram as well as individually run websites. Even though such examples take us to the fuzzy outskirts of graphic journalism where the borders between journalistic genres and caricature, cartoon, or comic strip become blurred, it is important to consider these formats as part of the tableau of visual activism. As a concluding example, I would like to introduce the indie website *Brainded,* which is run by the Indian graphic novel artist Appupen. On it, he collects his graphic opinion pieces and commentaries, including his delightfully provocative *Rashtraman* series (Appupen 2016 ongoing). The first season of this series also ran in the category "Comicle" on the web-based Indian platform *Newslaundry* (Appupen 2016), which later also featured Appupen's visual column *Dystopian Times* (Appupen 2018). The *Rashtraman* series is a masterpiece of superhero satire that features the iconic cult superhero Rashtraman—"Nationman," in literal translation— who, in Appupen's words, "strides disrespectfully past popular culture, mythology, politics and superhero fantasies on the singular mission of his own popularity" (Appupen 2019). Rashtraman stands in the service of a hypernationalist and repressive nation, "Rashtria," satirically mirroring 21st. century India under a Hindu nationalist government. In an interview, Appupen explains:

> *Rashtraman embodies all that I hate about superheroes and power. Since 2014 we've had an atmosphere of control, surveillance and fear in India too. The Big-Brother like image of the government did the rest. (Mitra 2018)*

Figure 16:
Rashmi Patel's opinion piece *Remembering the Good* from the series *The Small Picture*,
published in Mint on 14 June 2013. © Mint
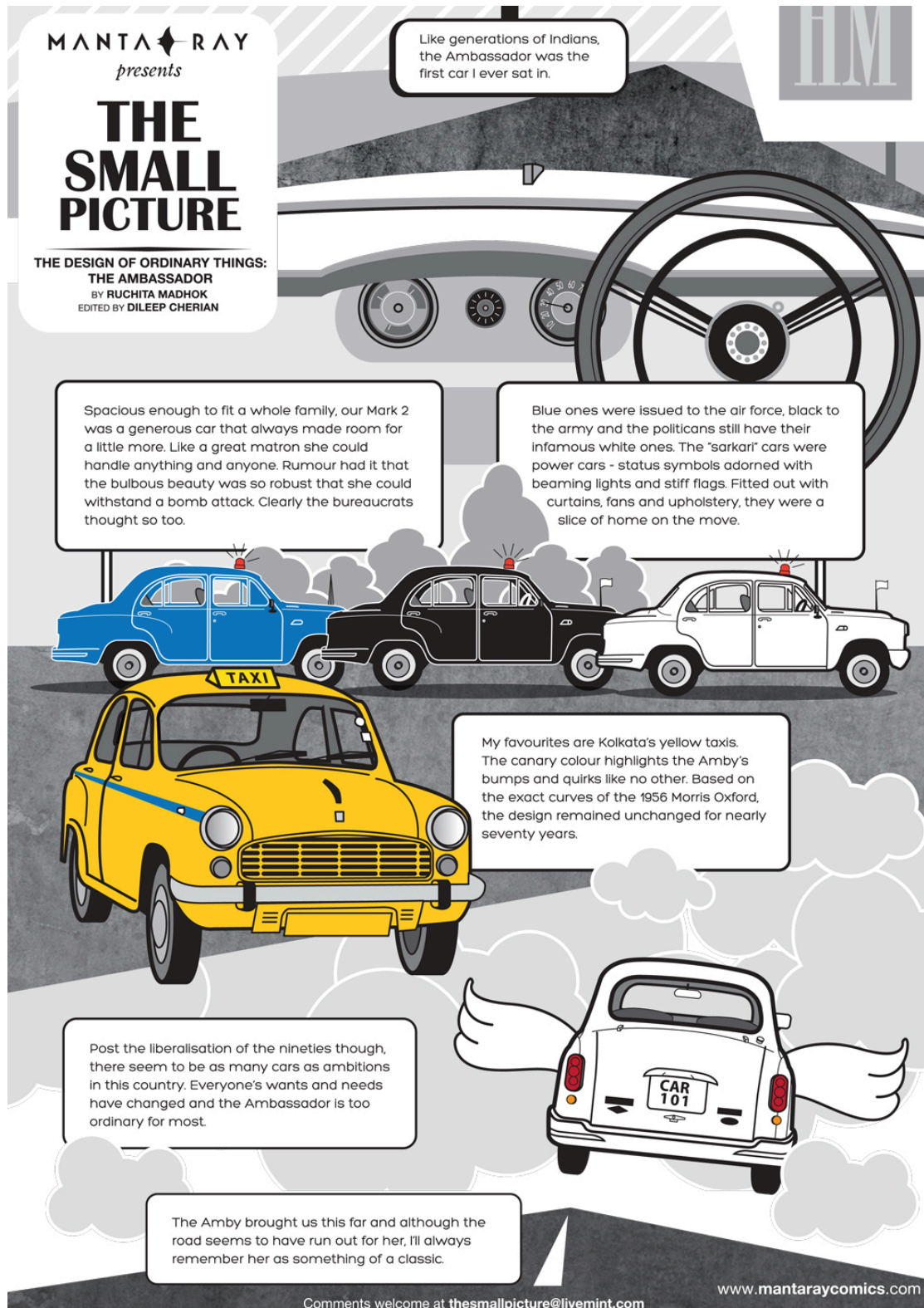
Figure 17:
Ruchita Madhok's opinion piece *The Design of Ordinary Things: The Ambassador* from the series *The Small Picture*, published in Mint on 12 June 2014. © Mint

Figure 18:
Sunando C's opinion piece *Secret Origin* from the series *The Small Picture*, published in Mint on 28 September 2011.© Mint
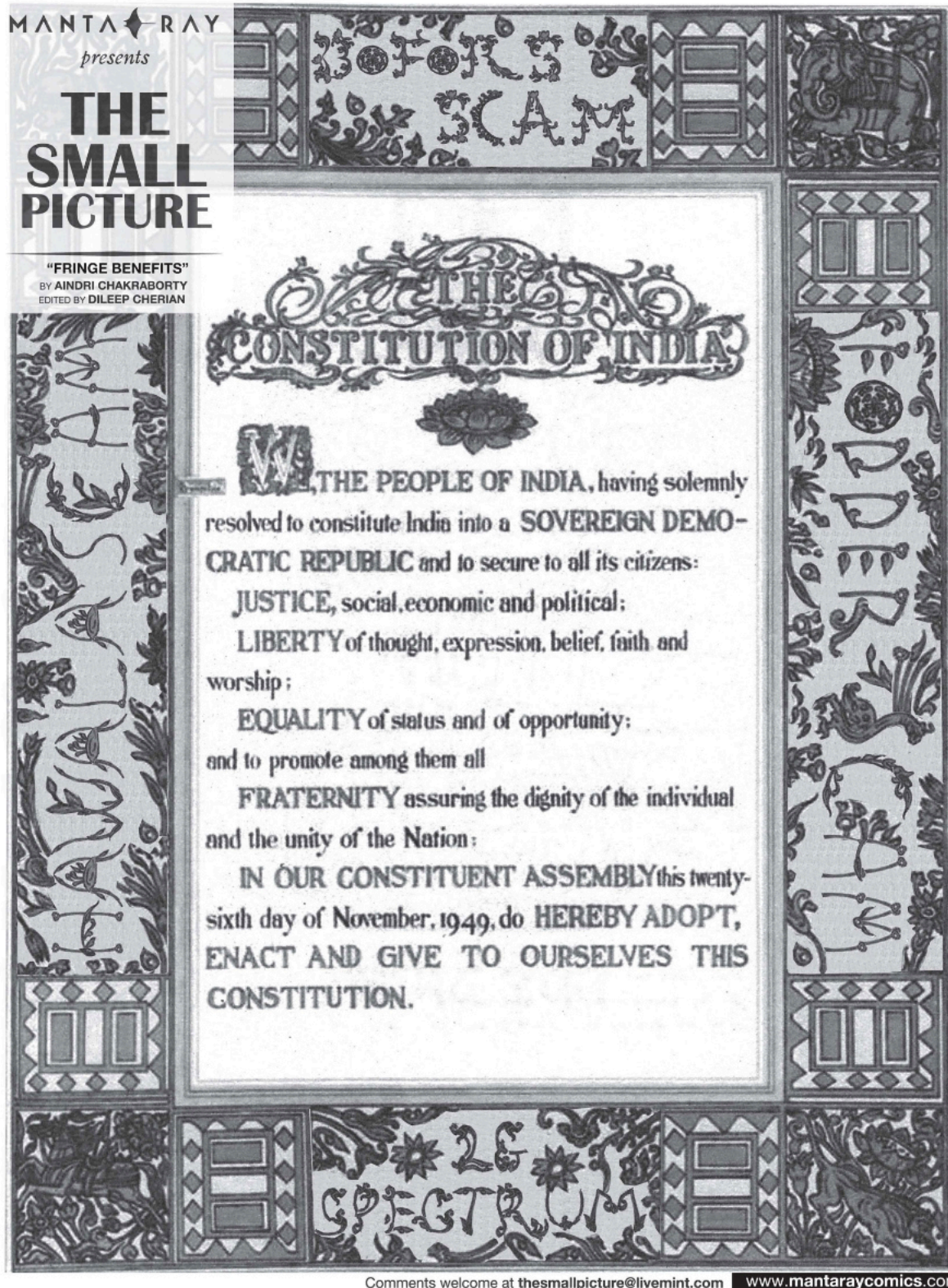
Figure 19:
Aindri Chakraborty's opinion piece *Fringe Benefits* from the series *The Small Picture*, published in Mint on 9 May 2012. © Mint

In solitary panels or brief comic strips of up to six images, we see Rashtraman blurting out bizarre nationalist statements and slogans, propagating whatever it takes to create an atmosphere of anxiety and threat. Appupen either unceremoniously satirizes ongoing political events or, through wild exaggerations, exposes authoritarian attitudes often concealed between the lines of everyday political talk, effectively serving as an interpreter of Hindu nationalist lingo. The radiant colors, unique to this series of Appupen's, amplify its confrontational character. An example is the six-panel narrative *The Art of Believing* [fig. 20] from season one, which exposes the populist strategy of disinformation and the BJP government's continuous attempts to introduce and spread pseudoscience in order to establish India as a nation superior not only to Muslim or colonial society but also to contemporary Western civilization (Saleem 2023). By highlighting how even the most absurd claims, such as the sun revolving around the earth (or, in this case, Rashtria), spread like wildfire and find ready followers, Appupen mocks the proliferation of nationalist pseudo-knowledge and warns that while repeating lies does not make them true, it can eliminate doubts about them. By having Rashtraman quote Adolf Hitler admiringly in the last panel ("Adolfji"), he furthermore suggests that such efforts to enforce conformity in thinking are bordering on fascism. Another example is a one-panel piece from season three: In *Hanging out with Rashtraman* [fig. 21] we see the protagonist abolish democracy by hanging its personified constituents such as "secularism," "judiciary," or "critisism" [sic] on the gallows. In an affable tone, he candidly warns the onlooker not to criticize him, while the caption "Contempt of course!" cleverly puns on numerous "contempt of court" cases, which (supporters of) the Modi government have been using to target critical voices.

Rasthraman is an excellent example of journalistic commentary dressed up in the garb of a comic strip or cartoon. The series presents us with a host of stand-alone images and brief stories, but unlike the usual cartoons found in newspapers, it draws a significant part of its strength from the complex narrative that unites the individual pieces into a carefully crafted mosaic committed to addressing controversial issues. "Through comics, art, stories and essays, we look beyond the trends, eyewash and agendas in an attempt to unravel today's human being," Appupen states (Appupen, year unknown), and his words may well be read as a motto of graphic journalism, which invites us into alternative spaces that engage us on multiple levels and prompt us to consider new, often critical or rebellious, perspectives.

Figure 20:
The Art of Believing by Appupen. © Appupen
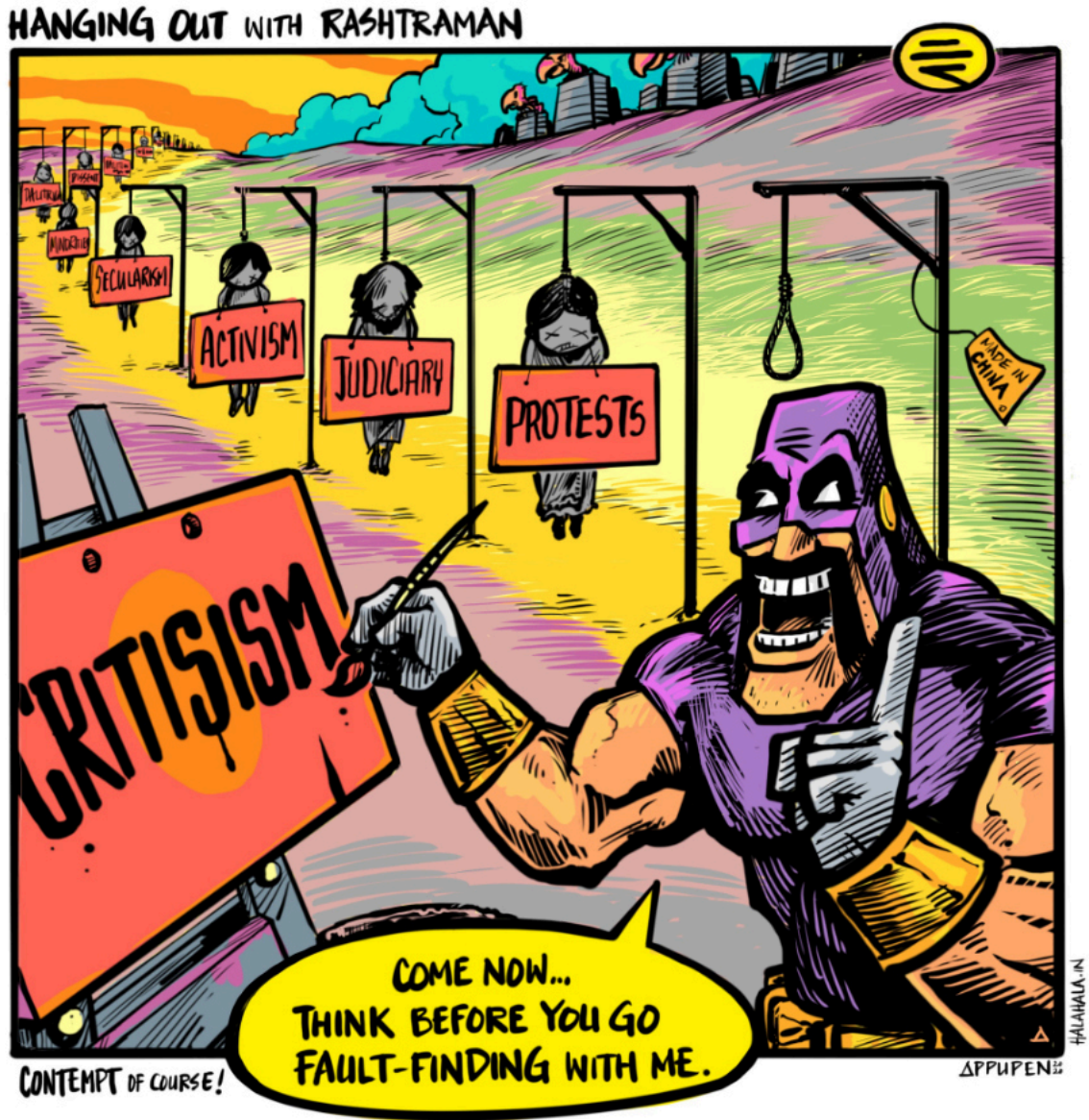
Figure 21:
Hanging out with Rashtraman by Appupen. © Appupen

Conclusion

Graphic or comics journalism is a powerful medium for presenting or commenting upon sociopolitical issues in a way that captures attention and engages readers. It presents us with "unconventional" perspectives, because it disrupts traditional journalistic norms and, as a result, our viewing and reading habits. This makes it especially suited to subvert mainstream representations: Graphic journalism in India has served as a medium of social critique, protest, and activism from its earliest stages beginning with Orijit Sen's *The River of Stories* (1994). The format, however, has really only come into its own since around 2010, developing alongside the rise of the graphic novel, which has paved the way for the creation and dissemination of visual narratives aimed at an adult audience. The strength of graphic journalism lies in the power of the image. Practitioners build upon the image's compelling nature as well as its capacity to evoke emotions more directly than text, allowing the journalist/artist to focus on the affective weight of the visual. Moreover, images have the potential to make information accessible, because they can literally be grasped "at first sight" and condense as well as simplify information. At the same time, however, they can maintain depth by expanding meaning—for example, through the use of visual metaphors and intertextualities. Importantly, the latter allows them to tune into broader visual discourses, including those of India's 460 million social media users (Datareportal 2024). Yet, by stepping outside traditional journalistic conventions, graphic journalism has the potential to cut through the noise of today's crowded media landscape in which time and attention are limited, and offer readers a fresh view on dominant stories.

Bio

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The Bleeding Heart:
Arshi I. Ahmadzai's Exploration of Feminine Identity

Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai and Isabella Schwaderer

Abstract

This article showcases the complex intersection of feminine identity and cultural heritage through the work of artist Arshi I. Ahmadzai. Drawing on Persian and Mughal miniature traditions together with the abstract aesthetics of the Bauhaus, Ahmadzai's recent series explore how women experience emotional and physical transformations. Central to her work is the recurring symbol of the bleeding heart, which embodies pain, vulnerability, and a deep emotional connection. Through her use of fabric, natural pigments, and Urdu writing—often intentionally unreadable—Ahmadzai blends poetry with artistic expression, creating a unique visual language that resonates across cultural boundaries. Her experiences in India, Kabul, and Weimar (Germany) profoundly shape her art practice. This article captures how Ahmadzai's art not only reflects her personal struggles with patriarchal norms but also offers a universal commentary on the sanctity of the feminine experience, culminating in a body of work that is both intimate and powerful. Her art engages deeply with Sufi tradition and is an exploration of pain, resilience, and the sacredness of the feminine in a modern, global world.

How can the political and social situation of women in South Asia be explored artistically, and how can art become a universal form of expression, especially in the context of migration? The two authors, Isabella Schwaderer, a scholar of religious and cultural studies, and Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, an Indian artist born in Najibabad, Uttar Pradesh and a specialist in painting and miniature techniques, met in Weimar in 2021. Since then, they have been discussing artistic visions and exploring the intersections of art, culture, and religion. This text presents these themes in a curated interview conducted shortly before Arshi's move to the United States. It focuses on the evolution of her work exploring the agency—or lack thereof—of South Asian women. The artist's travels from India to Kabul to Weimar have influenced her techniques and modes of expression. Her artworks draw on the poetry and Sufi literature of South Asia and the principles and techniques of Persian and Mughal miniature painting, transforming them into combinations of words and images. More recently, her encounters with the intellectual history of Weimar, its architecture, and the art of the Bauhaus movement have played a significant role in her work.

Arshi completed her undergraduate studies in Fine Arts at Aligarh Muslim University and her graduate degree at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi. Having lived in India, Kabul, and Weimar, she is now preparing to move to New York with her family.

Isabella Schwaderer: *Arshi, how did you become an artist and why did you choose painting as your technique?*

Arshi I. Ahmadzai: *Like many parents in South Asia, my father had hoped I would become a doctor. But instead of learning how the human heart functions, I found myself drawing it. This heart introduced me to art, and from that moment, I knew it was my calling. My mother, who writes in Urdu, also played a role in this. She introduced me to the rich world of Urdu poetry, with poets such as Mirza Ghalib, Mir Taqi Mir, Parveen Shakir, Allama Muhammad Iqbal, and Altaf Hussain Hali inspiring me from a young age.*

At art school, we learned a variety of techniques—from miniature painting to video art—but painting has always remained my favorite. It carries less risk than other mediums; you can paint under almost any circumstances; all you need is a pen and a sketchbook. But after completing my master's degree, it took me eight years to realize that painting is finally my calling.

I met my husband, the musician Waheed Saghar, while he was studying music in India. When we moved to his hometown of Kabul, the city's environment and living conditions

had a profound impact on my artistic practice. I transitioned from using paper to fabric, which transformed my approach to art. Fabric can be folded, molded, or crushed. It can be small enough to fit in your hands but can open up as large as a shaamiyaana*—a canopy or tent. I use papier-mâché on the fabric, which adds texture and depth. I work with a specific upholstery fabric, and I soak it in rainwater, because I want to embed a sense of narration into the material. The rainwater adds a poetic layer to the fabric. In the end, art is about storytelling, and we are all stories.*

Once the fabric is soaked, I iron it and apply paper-mâché. The preparation of the fabric is a time-consuming process, but it's one I enjoy. After that, I paint on the fabric. I started using paper-mâché in Kabul, but this technique exists across many cultures. It also brings back memories of my mother, who would teach me how to form toys from paper-mâché. In many ways, this material holds pieces of my past—my emotions and memories. It feels more poetic and nostalgic to me, making the process deeply personal.

In her paintings, Arshi applies the principles and techniques of Persian and Mughal miniature painting. It begins with the care with which she prepares the ground for the artwork and the production of colors from natural pigments. Arshi explores the agency—or the absence of it—of South-Asian women, creating pieces that merge words and images, often evoking the feel of arcane, fragmented texts. One notable example is the early work *An-Nisa III* (*The Women III*, 2019, fig. 1) in which a larger-than-life figure of a woman blends into her own reflection. Faces are unrecognizable, reduced to mere silhouettes, while her body is overlaid with sweeping but unreadable words in Arabic. The entire series was inspired by *Sura An-Nisa* (*The Women*), the fourth chapter of the Qur'an. This sura is named for its numerous references to women, addressing their rights, responsibilities, and societal roles throughout its verses. A red, veined heart throbs at the center of both the woman and her reflection, vibrant and raw against the monochrome background. She has no hands to defend herself, no mouth to voice her pain—only uncontainable emotions that pulse beneath the surface.

Figure 1:
An-Nisa III (Women III, 2019)
Image Courtesy: Phalguni Guliani.

I.S.: I am fascinated by the symbol of the Bleeding Heart. What is the story behind it?

A.A.: I created a series called Nafas (Soul) - Isolation Diaries. This consists of 140 letters to my husband during the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020. The title Nafas refers to the Arabo-Persian concepts of breath and soul and is also used as a term of endearment to refer to one's beloved. Art supplies were unavailable, so I turned to my mother's garden for inspiration. I made colors from the flowers I found there. The garden later became an ever-present part of my work. The idea of the garden resonated deeply with me because it reflects a space that we all carry within us—a sanctuary of our own.

This series emerged from the personal and challenging experience of the lockdown, a time when we all retreated into isolation. My husband and I were separated—he residing in Kabul, while I remained in India. The emotional strain of this separation became the impetus for a collection of illustrated letters in which the symbolic representation of the heart plays a central role. The painting June 7, Dil... Gosht ka Ek Tukda hi Toh Hai! (The Heart Is But a Pound of Flesh, 2020, fig. 2) critically engages with the reductive notion that the heart is merely a muscle, a biological organ within the body. The accompanying text raises a profound question: "If the heart is simply a muscle, why is it the source of such intense emotional pain?" It is present in my artwork as a symbol of things that we cannot think of but only feel. Words are not enough to explain this experience.

Many of Arshi's artworks feature her distinctive symbol: a bleeding heart. Both in everyday language and religious metaphor, the heart often embodies the true self and is considered to be the seat of emotion in many cultures including Sufism, or mystical Islam. In Sufi poetry, the heart is a metaphor for the longing of the soul, the pain of separation from the Beloved, and the joy of reunion. Through this juxtaposition of anatomical and affective perspectives, the series explores the complex interplay between physicality and human emotions.

From the very beginning, this emblem has been central to her artistic vision and emotional expression. It is a metaphor for the soul's pain—both delicate and vulnerable. The heart is also a language that no one speaks, but everyone understands instinctively, even if we don't have the words for it. Whereas scientists describe the heart as merely a muscle, for poets, it holds far deeper significance. As Arshi herself notes, she is still in the process of exploring the heart's many facets and what it truly represents in her work.

Figure 2:
June 7, Dil... Gosht ka Ek Tukda hi Toh Hai! (The Heart is But a Pound of Flesh, 2020).
Image Courtesy: Artist and Blueprint.

I.S.: *Gardens play an important role in your work. How did this start?*

A.A.: *As I mentioned earlier, I used flowers from my mother's garden to create natural pigments. This led me to explore gardens depicted in historic paintings, particularly in Persian, Mughal, and Pahari miniatures. Initially, the connection to these gardens was not always intentional, but over time, I began to focus on them more deliberately, incorporating their essence and materiality into my technique. When I worked on a series inspired by Bagh-e Babur (Babur's Garden) in Kabul, I mixed soil from the garden into the paper-mâché paste I applied on the fabric. Those fragments of the garden may not be visible, but they're present for me, adding personal connections, memories, and emotional warmth.*

In Kabul, there are many gardens—some open, some closed—each with its own significance. Some are for men, others exclusively for women, like the Bagh-e-Zanana (women's garden). It has been closed since the Taliban took over in 2021. While the architecture of these spaces may not stand out, it is what happened inside that made them remarkable. In a city where there were few places for women to gather freely, this garden became a sanctuary. Here, they could take off their burqas*, revealing the beautiful clothes worn underneath. They would cook or bring food from home, creating a space for shared celebration, for singing and dancing. They played around the trees and braided their hair with flowers from the garden. They adorned each other's hands with* henna*, shared their stories, and offered support—sometimes even showing their scars. It was one of the only places where women could talk openly. In this series, I used gold to capture the sunlight on fabric, reflecting the sun women once enjoyed in the garden.*

Zameen ka Aftab hona (*The Illumination of the Earth*, 2023, fig. 3) is a part of the *Bagh-e-Zanana* series inspired by the Women's Garden in Kabul—a square painting, all gold with neutral stripes. On the uniform blocks of the background, Arshi paints Persian trees, a row of elegant cypresses (*sarv* in Persian), slightly swaying and dancing in a line, each independent but all together.

Trees are frequently mentioned as metaphors in the Quran, such as the "good tree whose root is firm and whose branches are in the sky" (Q 14:24). Mughal miniatures depict cypress trees in most renditions of gardens (Aamir and Pervaiz 2018, 13). In Persian and Mughal poetry, tall and elegant figures are often compared to the tall and slender cypress, but these trees also symbolize the immortality of the soul, because
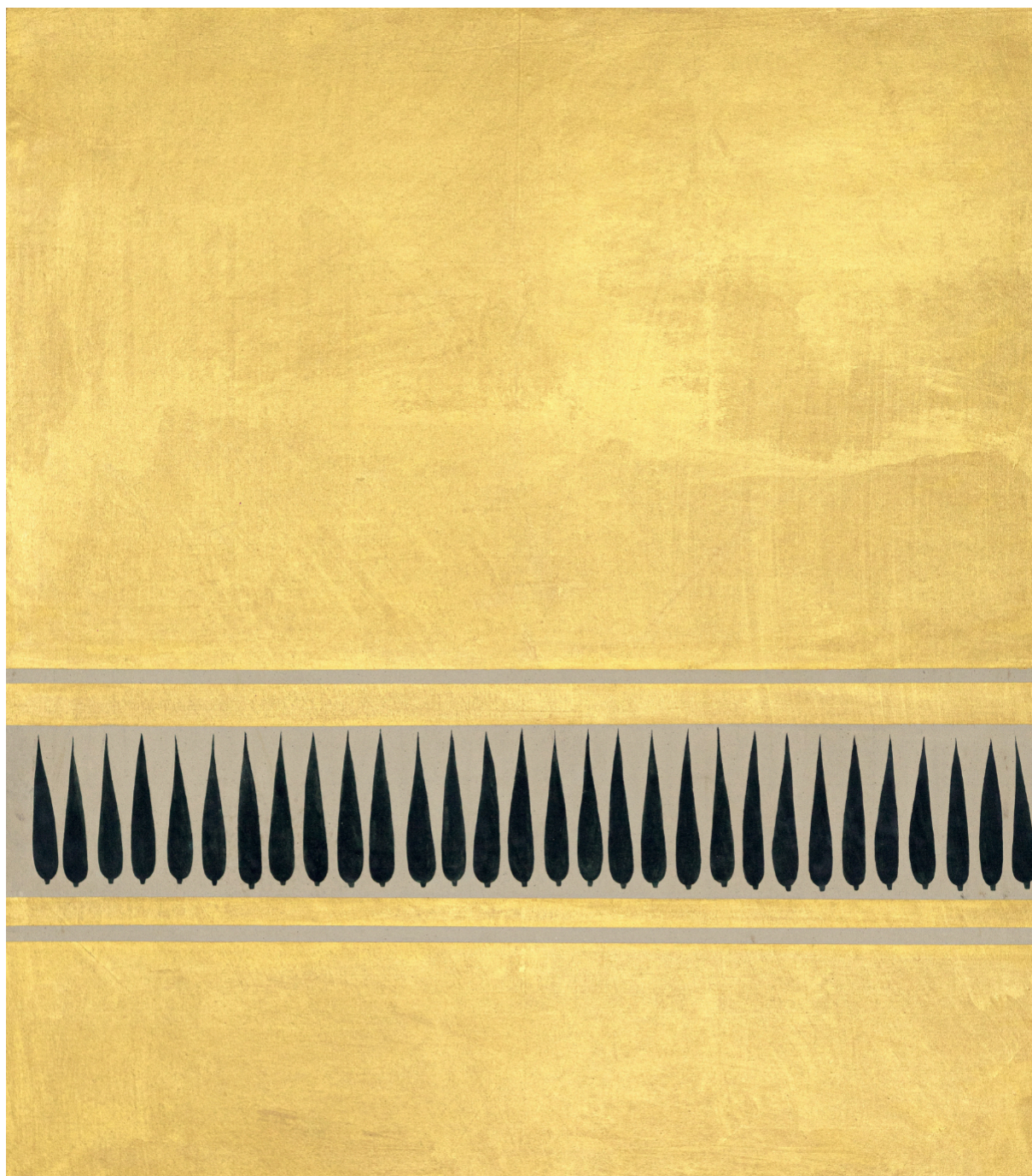
Figure 3:
Zameen ka Aftab hona (The Illumination of the Earth, 2023).
Image Courtesy: Artist & Blueprint.

they are evergreen and survive in hostile environments and harsh winters (Mahmoudi Farahani et al. 2016, 14). The cypress also comes to show the straightness of the direction in the path of love leading to spiritual elevation. The poet, Islamic scholar, and Sufi mystic of the thirteenth century, Jalaluddin Rumi wrote:

> *I am the tall cypress, which I can show you a sign of straightness, there is no sign of more straightness, other than the cypress height.*
> *(Aamir and Pervaiz 2018, 10).*

In *Zameen ka Aftab hona*, the cypresses point upward toward the celestial sphere, yet they are rooted in the earth and suggest an interior world of spiritual emotion (*batin*) and growth (Minissale 2021, 263). Precisely painted one by one in dark green, the cypresses float in the golden atmosphere of the background. The composition combines elements of Persian miniatures with Western modern art; the simplified figurative elements, single-colored fields, and rhythmic arrangement of forms reflect influences from the Weimar art tradition. The cypresses stand in an imaginary space where the art of the Mughals meets the Bauhaus in a female solidarity: tall, prideful, rebellious, fresh, young, and regal.

I.S.: *How did you finally come to Weimar?*

A.A.: *I came to Weimar to meet my husband, Waheed Saghar. He left Kabul for Weimar while I was still in India, and later, he brought me here. We were in Kabul when the Taliban took over on August 15, 2021. We were outside when we suddenly saw people running in panic. Waheed quickly realized what had happened, and we hurried back to our home. Inside, the situation was bleak—people feared to lose their jobs and livelihoods, but no one wanted to talk about it. Outside, I saw men in three-piece suits going into washrooms and emerging in* salwar qameez. *It struck me as strange—how did they know to change? Did they carry the clothes with them?*

The day I went to the Indian embassy to seek evacuation for my family was chaotic. People were running, and so were Waheed and I. I remember a woman running alongside me. I was wearing modest clothing as expected—trousers, a long shirt, and a headscarf—but as we ran, part of my trousers peeked out from under the shirt. This woman turned to me and said, "It's because of women like you that they are coming after us!" It was painful to hear such words from one woman to another while we were both fleeing for our lives.

After five or six days, my embassy evacuated me, but Waheed stayed behind. As a

musician, he was at risk of being pulled off the bus to the airport, which was happening to many men at the time. I was carrying my artwork with me, and during the evacuation, before reaching the airport, our bus was hijacked. They asked countless questions, and I remember thinking if they had asked me, I'd have had to deny the artwork was mine. That thought still weighs on me. My studio in Kabul held much of my work, and I had already destroyed all the pieces featuring women, fearing what might happen. Waheed also destroyed his musical instruments because the Taliban were raiding houses.

Yet, despite everything, others faced much worse. I decided to focus on moving forward. Eventually, I made it to India with my remaining artworks, though many pieces were unfinished, marked by the chaos we had endured. Later I joined Waheed in Weimar.

Waheed had connections to a major musical and cultural initiative supported by the German Foreign Office. The Afghanistan Music Research Centre (AMRC) was established in the fall of 2014 through the Transcultural Music Studies department at the Institute of Musicology at the University of Music Franz Liszt Weimar and the Friedrich-Schiller University of Jena. This connection enabled Waheed to be evacuated to Germany and secure accommodation in Weimar.

The situation following the withdrawal of the U.S. army from Afghanistan and the subsequent Taliban takeover of Kabul in 2021 was marked by tragedy and chaos. Many individuals who had developed ties with Western institutions over the previous two decades were suddenly in grave danger, and not all of them managed to escape.

I.S.: *How has Weimar shaped your thinking and artistic practice?*

A.A.*: Before arriving in Weimar, I had been separated from my husband, and the entire experience was deeply traumatic. However, Weimar has become a place of healing for me. The artwork I've created here is a reflection of that healing and my new surroundings. In Weimar, I lived between the Nietzsche Archive, Goethe's Garden, and Liszt House. The works done in Weimar are closely tied to the environment, the art, and the architecture. Moreover, they are inspired by the gardens in Weimar as well as Goethe's and Nietzsche's writings.*
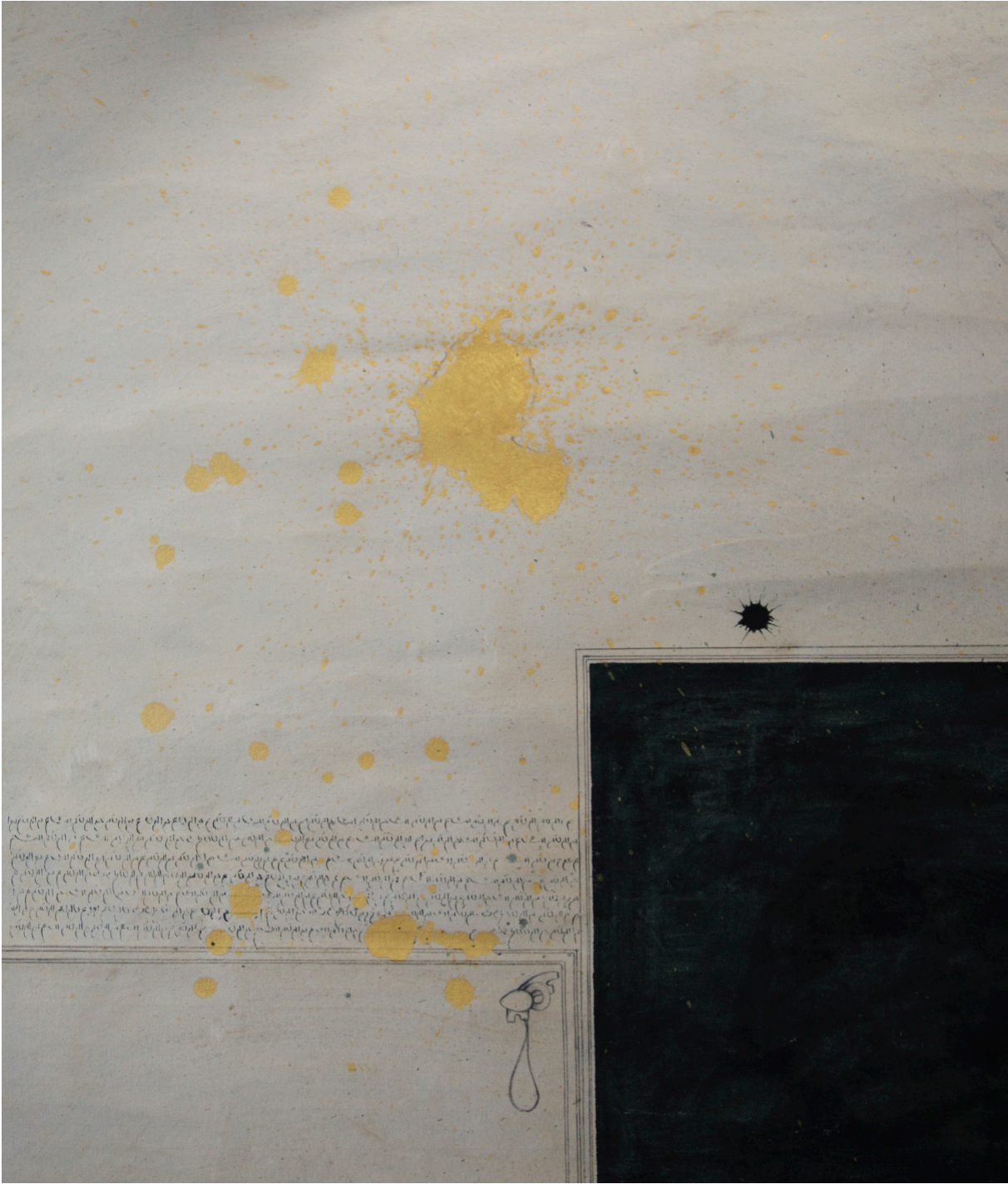
Figure 4:
The Birth of Tragedy (2024).
Image Courtesy: Artist.

Figure 5:
Ek panna Beyond good and Evil se (A page from 'Beyond Good and Evil,' 2023).
Image Courtesy: Artist and Chatterjee & Lal.

Figure 6:
Bagh-e-Falsafi IV (A Philosopher's Garden IV, 2022).
Image Courtesy: Artist and Chatterjee & Lal.

These three paintings were inspired by the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, who spent the last months of his life in Weimar in mental derangement. His sister, Elisabeth Förster Nietzsche, moved into a villa and converted it into her Nietzsche archive with the modernist architect and forerunner of the Bauhaus, Henry van de Velde. The archive houses some of Nietzsche's personal belongings and his manuscripts, many of them small notebooks, barely legible in closely written pages. The prophetic and gloomy pages of Nietzsche's books inspired numerous German modernist artists and are as much a part of Weimar's heritage as the poets Goethe and Schiller.

The Birth of Tragedy (2024, fig. 4) shows a dark green on earthy tone; fine lines divide the fabric further and, in the center, flows an illegible text whose letters—without diacritical marks—do not conceal their Urdu origin. The text gives the impression of intimate notes, like a dream that one cannot remember after waking up. The viewer's eye moves back and forth between the evenly curved letters, following their hidden rhythm. Splashes of green and gold adorn the fabric, embodying exuberant creativity and the spontaneous bursts of inspiration reminiscent of the philosopher's fragments. Below the text is the artist's signature, the bleeding heart.

Ek panna Beyond Good and Evil se (*A page from 'Beyond Good and Evil,'* 2023, fig. 5) plays with the color relations of large, nested blocks separated by fine construction lines. Spread across the page, they evoke both calm and movement, a steady rhythm of small steps in the center. These paintings combine the rhythmical structure of abstract paintings from the Bauhaus era and Persian tradition. Gold leaf was an extremely versatile medium in the Persian palette. It was often used in text illumination, in painting, and in the decoration of the borders of manuscript leaves. In this painting, the thick block of gold adds divine light to the otherwise earthy tones. It is also a reference to the style of paintings by the Viennese artist Gustav Klimt. The use of borders to separate the blocks of color is reminiscent of Persian miniatures in which lines form a frame—that is, a border containing a series of lines of varying thickness. The border defines a frame for the painting and represents an opening to an ideal world of beauty and a glimpse of eternity.

At the Bauhaus school, the use of color was a central, often debated topic. Its key influences were Goethe's *Theory of Colours* ([1810]2019) and the color model developed by his Romantic contemporary, Philipp Otto Runge, in the same year. For Runge, as with Goethe's holistic view, the effects of color could not be understood in purely scientific or technical terms. Artists like Kandinsky, Itten, and others at the

Bauhaus continued to explore and systematize the optical and psychological impacts of color, building their teachings on this foundation (Gage 1982). Through their use of color, the Bauhaus artists derived universal patterns of explanation and development for the diverse manifestations of artistic form. While it is not possible to speak of a single unified style of painting within the Bauhaus school, the use of large blocks of color in abstract compositions—exemplified by artists such as Paul Klee and Johannes Itten—is considered characteristic of this unique form of modern painting. The principal colors of red, yellow, and blue became paradigmatic for the clarity of expression and also the hidden meanings of colors beyond their realistic perception.

In *Bagh-e-Falsafi IV* (*A Philosopher's Garden IV*, 2022), Arshi once again introduces the motif of the *sarv* (cypress tree), symbolizing the metaphysical garden, and combines it with Nietzsche's presence in Weimar. A bold block of Bauhaus blue—representing a river—separates the cypresses from a series of golden frames inscribed with poetry. These frames feature multilobed arches at the top, inspired by the architecture of seventeenth century Mughal buildings in Agra and Delhi (Koch 1991, 103–124). The painting merges the Bauhaus approach to color with Persian motifs, metaphysics, and philosophy, creating a harmonious fusion of Muslim South Asian and European cultures.

I.S.: *What does the writing mean to you? Many of your pictures show writings, what do you write, and why?*

A.A.: *Urdu writing plays a crucial role in my art, nearly as important as the images themselves. It's like keeping a diary, but without a fixed meaning. For example, when I write poetry, I intentionally remove the dots from the Urdu letters. By removing the dots, the text becomes unreadable, even to me. This transformation allows the words to open up, carrying multiple interpretations almost as if they start to float freely. The titles of my works, mostly aphorisms in Urdu, serve as windows into the image, inviting a deeper exploration. Since moving to Weimar, I've found myself writing more and more. Poetry, in particular, has become a way for me to express myself. Yet I consider myself an "inept poet" because I feel uneasy reading my poetry aloud. Perhaps that's why I began removing the dots in the first place.*

I.S.: *In Weimar, you became pregnant. You documented this incisive phase of your life in the "pregnancy diaries."*

A.A.: *I kept a regular diary of my pregnancy and painted every day from May 2022 to January 2024—there are more than 300 drawings on paper. The whole project was*
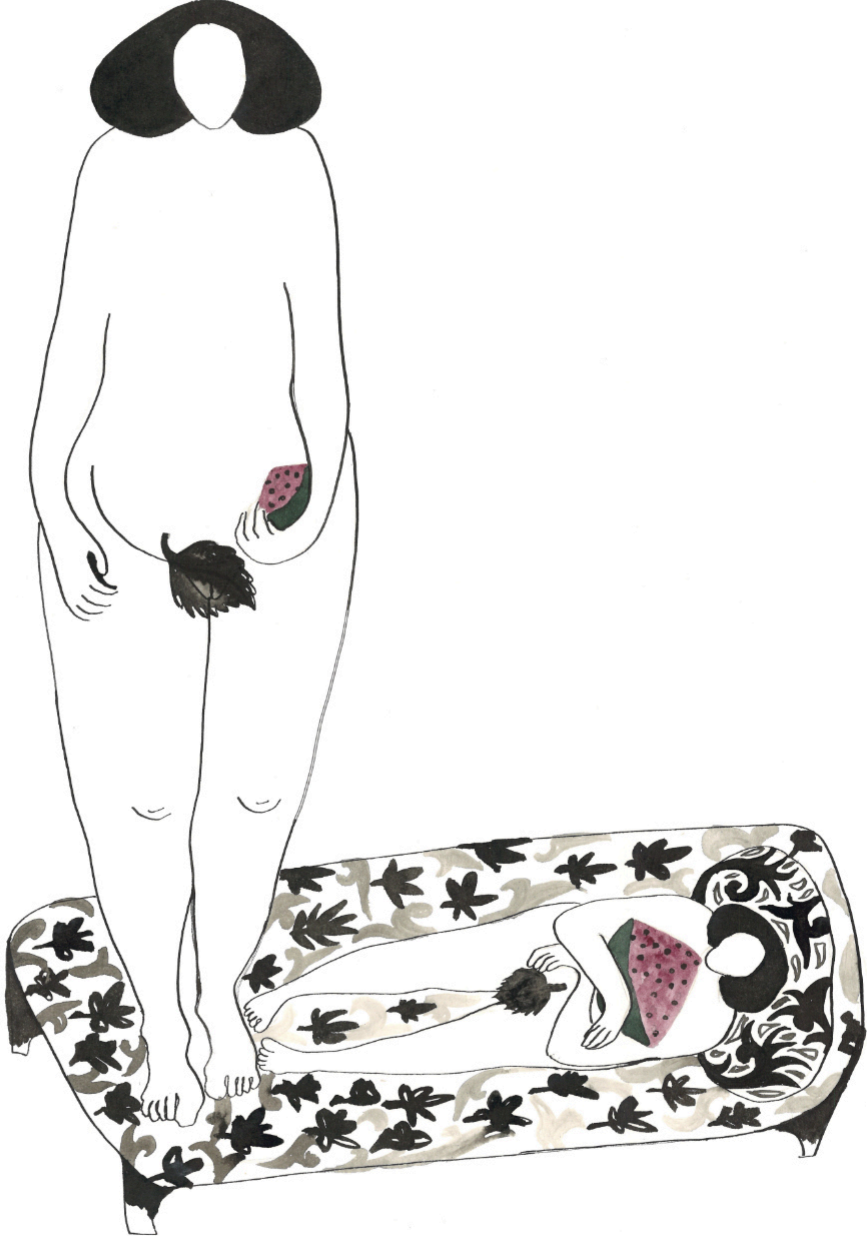
Figure 7:
July 2nd, 2022
Image Courtesy: Artist.

Figure 8:
October 3rd, 2022
Image Courtesy: Artist.

part of a fellowship granted by the Bauhaus University and the Martin-Roth-Initiative. While creating, I was in a meditative state of wholeness. Feeling life inside me, I forgot about the uneasiness and pain.

The *Pregnancy Diary* series portrays the physical and emotional experiences of an expectant woman. As in much of Arshi's work, the central figure is a faceless, shadowy outline with black hair, always nude and solitary in each frame. The scenes depict everyday moments—lying on a *charpoi* (a traditional woven bed from South Asia, fig. 7), sitting in a chair, or performing simple tasks such as showering. However, these seemingly ordinary activities are rendered differently, reflecting the challenges of pregnancy. Even a simple act, like trying to scratch an unreachable part of the body (fig. 8), becomes symbolic of the changes and limitations brought on by this new reality.

Small, decorative elements—such as a bright red watermelon with its numerous tiny black seeds—elevate the scenes from the mundane into the realm of universal feminine experiences. The embroidery on the bed evokes a sense of homey comfort, but it also mirrors the concept of the garden as an ideal space of beauty and harmony. The intricate patterns suggest both the warmth of a familiar domestic setting and the serenity of a lush, cultivated garden—a place where nature and human creativity come together in perfect balance. The sensation of carrying life, feeling the child move within, and adapting to the transformed body are experiences shared by countless women, yet they are rarely depicted with such intimate detail in art. This series captures the artist's ongoing confrontation with her own body and the role of motherhood as shaped by patriarchal expectations, giving the works a unique intensity and emotional depth.

The piece titled *September 29th, 2022* (fig. 9) depicts a woman showering alongside two pulsing, bleeding hearts. The connection between mother and child is established not only through the physical umbilical cord but also through an emotional bond—two hearts already sharing joy and sorrow within the womb.

Figure 9:
September 29th, 2022
Image Courtesy: Artist.

Figure 10:
January 19th, 59 x 42 cm, Ink on paper, 2023
Image Courtesy: Artist.

January 19th, 2022 (fig. 10) is a portrait in a garden full of flowers against the backdrop of blue mountains. The woman is in pain and giving birth. She spreads her bent legs and the baby's head is already visible in the wide-open birth canal. A deep connection runs through the bleeding heart from mother to the child. From behind, another faceless woman assists the mother giving birth. She is a pregnant woman with large wings and a fiery halo.

This motif shows another aspect of Persian miniature painting: the portrayal of significant religious figures, angels and prophets adorned with a radiant halo. The painter's approach to this tradition, however, is a very personal one, a reinterpretation from her own point of view. Throughout Islamic history, depictions of the prophet Muhammad in Islamic art were rare, though a notable corpus of images exists. One of the most commonly represented scenes is the *Mi'raj*, the legend of his ascension to the heavens, where the aureole of flames often signifies the sacred presence of Muhammad, other prophets, or angels (Gruber 2018). Traditionally, women are not adorned with this symbol of holiness in Islamic art. However, Arshi challenges this convention by portraying the pregnant body as a symbol of holiness, elevating the sacredness of femininity and emphasizing the sanctity of the female form.

Conclusion

Arshi uses her personal experiences and artistic techniques to challenge traditional narratives surrounding femininity, motherhood, and holiness. By blending Persian and Mughal miniature painting with Bauhaus-inspired architecture and color structures, her work emphasizes the often-overlooked sanctity of the female form. Through her evocative use of fabric, writing, and symbolic imagery, such as the bleeding heart, Arshi creates deeply personal and culturally rich art that transcends geographical and social boundaries. Her journey, from India and Kabul to Weimar and beyond, reflects her dedication to exploring the complexities of South Asian women's identities and their agency within patriarchal societies, offering a powerful, intimate portrayal of struggle and resilience.

Bio

Arshi Irshad Ahmadzai, an Indian artist based in New York, weaves a tapestry of memory, identity, and agency in her evocative works. Born and raised in Najibabad, her journey has taken her across the cultural landscapes of India, Afghanistan, and Germany. Educated in Fine Arts at Aligarh Muslim University and Jamia Millia Islamia, her art defies boundaries, exploring a rich array of themes and mediums. Through recurring motifs like pomegranates, chairs, takhtis, gardens, and bleeding hearts, her work reflects a thoughtful meditation on her identity as a South Asian woman. Influenced by Sufism, philosophy, literature, architecture, Mughal miniatures, and poetry, Arshi's art invites a meaningful dialogue on agency, existence, and the delicate interplay of culture and self-expression.

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Documentary Filmmaking: Notes on *Survey City* and the Need for Films that Concern Mass Social Movements

A Conversation Between Art and Activism

Tarini Manchanda

Abstract

This article encapsulates a history of social justice filmmaking in India or South Asia more broadly with regard to what is being heralded as the Indian documentary wave since 2021-till date. It asks what role funding institutions and grant-making bodies play who tend to cater to their audiences more than the instincts of justice that tend to motivate filmmakers who pursue stories about underrepresented communities or social justice. The article complicates the discussion on the process of making social justice films, and delves into the complexity of form and content vs. addressing social issues, as well as the sociological aspects of a non-fiction film and its production.

Keywords: activism, social justice films, documentary, art, high art, activist films

This is a reflection on the making of the film *Survey City* and the texts, images, and photographs that informed its production.

SURVEY CITY: A film by SANJAY SRIVASTAVA, MATT BIRKINSHAW & TARINI MANCHANDA
In association with: BASTI SURAKSHA MANCH (ABDUL SHAKEEL, SHEIKH AKBAR ALI, NEHA FARMAN VANDANA)
Direction (Film & Research): SANJAY S. Co-direction: MATT & TARINI. Cinemtatography: TARINI, Additional Cinematography: PRIYANKA VERMA & AKBAR ALI. Editing: TARINI & NIKHIL SANGHOTRA. Music: MUKTIYAR ALI. Surveys: NEHA & VANDANA.
Sound Design: MATT & NABA KISHORE. Graphics / Illustrations: R. BADRI NARAYAN. Titles: AKASH YADAV.
Equipment: ADVANCE MEDIA PRODUCTION. Poster: MADHUSHREE & JAYANTI.
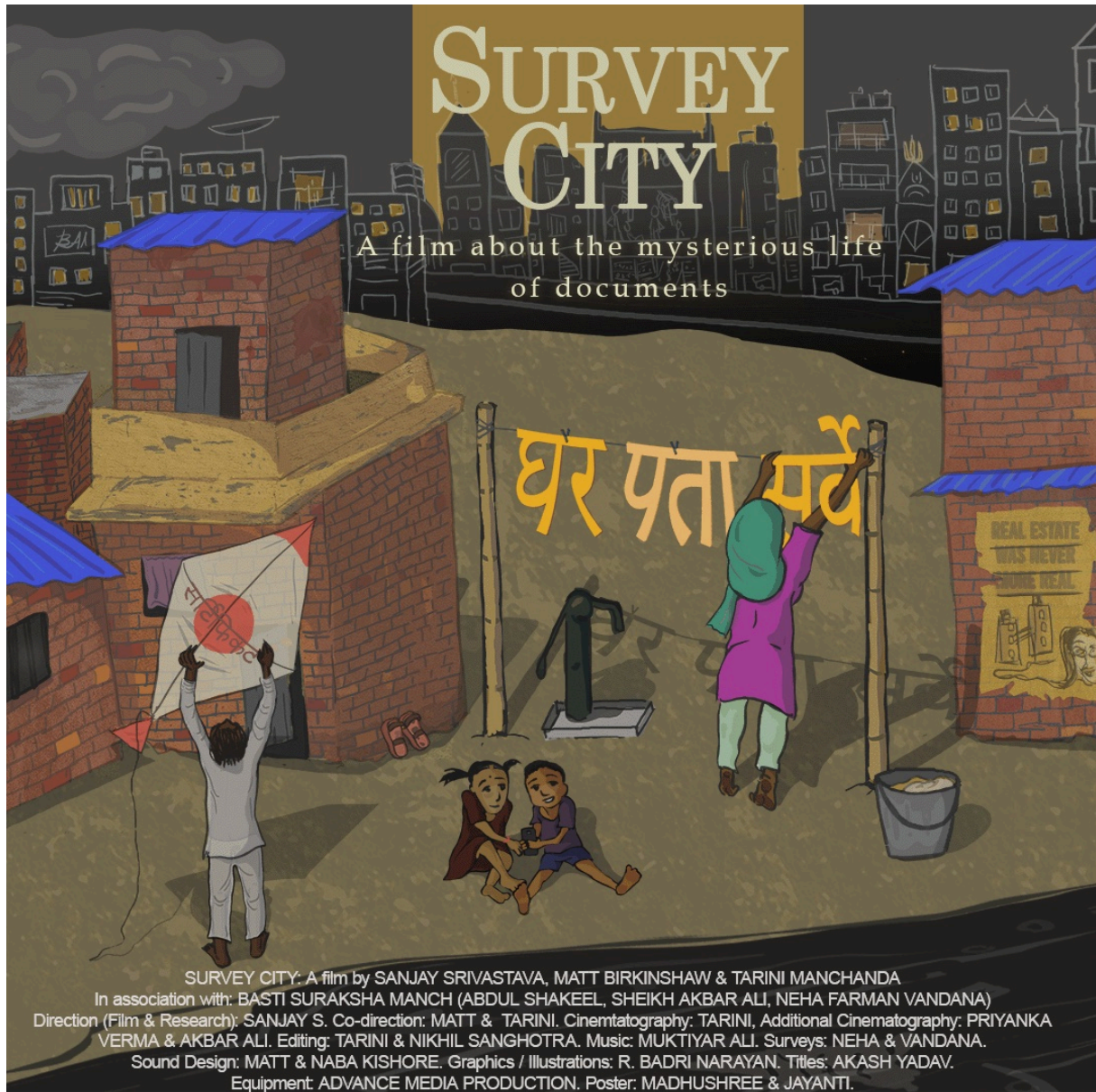
Figure 1:
Instagram post for *Survey City* created by Madhushree and Jayanti,
along with the film's credits. © Tarini Manchanda

In his master's thesis, 28-year-old Anand Patwardhan warned of "bourgeois" cinema that would dumpen the impulse to ask revolutionary questions by providing neat cathartic conclusions to social revolution via films. In a more extended discussion on the role of cinema in society, he describes the guerrilla cinema of Chile, where filmmakers lost their lives due to the political positions they had taken in their films. In the prologue to the reprint of his thesis, in the 2018 book titled *Towards a Peoples' Cinema*, Patwardhan questions his use of Marxist terminology in the 1970s, but largely stands by the arguments he made in his original thesis. He remarks that if films are to express solidarity with "the masses" for example those who protested against the measures introduced by Indira Gandhi during the 21-month long period from 1975 until 1977 that has become known as "the Emergency", they should avoid neat conclusions, as he had done at times in his film *Waves of Revolution* (Patwardhan 1975) that followed the events of the Bihar uprising with the JP movement of the 1970s. Patwardhan's thesis reflects on his filmmaking process (Patwardhan 1981).

Similar, this essay focuses on the process of producing a different sort of film at the height of a political struggle against the CAA and NRC.[1] This production, undertaken by university professors, engaged with civil society at the height of a critical moment in India's contemporary political arena. The film follows people whose lives are interrupted by one of many government-directed surveys.

In *Survey City*, a 32-minutes long film about the city as a social space and people seeking the security of tenure through documentation, the camera is not probing very far. It is entering a heavily studied space, in which people on the "periphery" of this city, in this case Dehli, are constantly at risk of becoming refugees (Mehra 2010). This film, while disconnected from Patwardhan's thesis, follows a trajectory in documentary cinema in which observations are made without drawing immediate conclusions. Instead, it works with questions and the exposition of what happens when a policy, much debated in public, is applied to the lives of the urban poor. It is about the social life of documents, but also seeks to inform about the ways in which a specific policy can impact society, on the kinds of unethical research techniques, on the consequences of unethical research, and the role of civil society. Thus, even as the film strives to humanize its characters, it is consequently humanizing civil society, which, as this essay argues, is an essential and now forgotten aim of documentary cinema.

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[1] In 2020, a series of protests took place across India. These were directed against the application of the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC), both legislations that would further facilitate the discrimination of Muslim citizens of India.

Figure 2:
Ayesha, the film's protagonist, looks through the door of her home in Border Basti.
© Tarini Manchanda

Capturing the chaos

In making this film, the cameraperson was asked to shoot during a "chaotic" certificate distribution ceremony in order to depict the chaos. To capture chaos, however, a camera must not move while its subjects are moving. As the ceremony took place, it had to be recorded according to its character. The ceremony involved a certificate distribution in what appeared to be chaos. However, the camera, a close and still observer, noticed harmony within the group of people convening in this space. It watched how everyone in the locality was familiar with or knew each other, so they could identify such details as who was missing, who was at home, and who had lost a family member and therefore lived by themselves. What appeared as chaos to an outsider, such as the camera, was rhythm and familiarity to the insider. In this space, the camera was not given much privilege. It was pushed, shoved, and even forgotten as the approximately one hundred people in attendance sought the piece of paper that, along with the Chief Minister's photograph, promised them a home through the CMAY scheme, short for Chief Minister's Awas Yojana, a housing scheme for the urban poor. As they stood in line for the certificates that would guarantee rights to their home, their names were called out. People who were present in the queue received their documents. Upon receiving them, some people discovered mistakes in their documents, while others were entirely passed over. One thing they shared was the concern for their homes, their relationships with family members, how they would make their next meal, or the future of their children and families. The footage on the mirrorless screen of the rental Canon 5D camera was an almost mundane rendition of the meeting that took place despite all the pushing and movement. To depict chaos, the camera had been quiet, still, omnipresent, and shifting but uninvolved. Initially, achieving this did not seem entirely possible, because one was pushed around several times, and no one could get in the way of the dream of a home.

However, as time went on, and each time the camera was moved, I realized that some movement would be natural and leaned into it. While natural hand-held movements sometimes prevented the jerky alternative of a tripod being moved around, the frames achieved some stillness by guarding the tripod. In consequent constructions of the film, we interrogated the notion of a home through its various elements. A second camera person was hired, and she was given a set of ideas or notes to think with.

Shooting notes to the cameraperson who worked on *Survey City* along with me:

Ayesha's home is a one-room two-storied place in Border Basti. The outdoors is often busy with people passing by. It would be important to capture a moment of calm and quiet in the exterior of the home. Maybe you can do this at the end of the shoot?

Within the home: What location indicates pain or strife between her and the family? Are there corners where the children play, or do they play in the center? How does food emerge in the space. Is it central or secondary? What are objects that seem to have prominence, if any?

What are signs of scarcity in the space? Where has it been neglected? Is there a sort of recycling of things within the space? The most important object is her cupboard, where she keeps the documents that indicate that she is a formal resident of the area. How is the cupboard placed? Is there something to demonstrate its importance, maybe by shooting corners and angles of the cupboard?

The outcome of this shoot was a series of disjunct shots of a space. How could we depict the home without pitying or glorifying it? A structure was comfortably captured through the arrangement of the people within, flying bits of string, cloth, and the corner of a staircase. However, the most exciting aspect was that, after they had been captured, these shots, when put together, allowed meaning to emerge. Only when reviewing footage away from the mundane reality of the space, could the space become legible to an outsider.

As the camera captured Ayesha cutting a bitter gourd in her room, the viewer is invited to wonder about her emotional state. If she is perhaps bitter about her peripheral role in the city, the color green could be taken to signal hope or faith. In the consequent shots, we captured someone painting their home green, another indication of planting roots, home, and of all the elements signified by the certificate of approval provided by the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB).

Another technique we used in the film was to invert the gaze. As John Berger (1977) has noted, cinema often depicts women as objects to be viewed or looked at. Likewise, the historic photographs depict royalty in a similar way. However, members of the royal family do not look at the camera, but rather invite a gaze. Keeping this in mind, the project captured a similar situation revolving around waste removal workers stemming from an area known as "Border Basti", one of the many dwelling places of the urban poor. By placing them in positions similar to those adopted by artist during the early

days of photography, we attempted to undo the canonical ideas of photography: including, valorizing, and shining a light on the grand people of society. Instead, we allowed to give respect to marginalized members of society in the same way that was once reserved for royalty, and allowed them to gaze piercingly or critically at the camera as women in the media are rarely allowed to do. This is an act of defiance, to humanize the people we worked with through the medium of film.

Figure 3:
Rabiya looks at the camera with confidence and some cynicism in *Survey City*.
© Tarini Manchanda

In sharing this film and images, as in any other project, one is constructing a reality out of fleeting moments. These moments become sedimented into a longer time frame, perhaps defining the story of a place in a way that will never be entirely accurate. The story itself contains no revelatory moments. Ayesha dreams of a home but feels unsafe in the park; and the social environment constrains her work and life. In the visuals, however, we watch her child play with the dishes as she washes them, we watch her chat with a member of her community, and we walk through the space currently inhabited peacefully—despite its peripheral nature. The images thus speak to a more profound emotional truth and construct the affective dimension of characters or people in order to humanize those whose lives and existences are translated into survey numbers.

The process provides no neat conclusions. It is open ended, and the film explores a range of opinions and experiences around the survey. These reveal complexity instead of providing neat answers to well-worn questions. The visuals enable this by collating images that look closely at an otherwise neglected space, such as finding beauty in the ruins without justifying the dehumanizing nature of surveys. Through in-depth interviews with protagonists, the film attempts to capture their fatigue with surveys, surveyors, cameras, and all things that scrutinize. In an attempt to respect the protagonists' wish for privacy and as a protective measure, we only included select scenes in the movie, although other shots provided significant insights into the work taking place inside the basti, or makeshift dwelling, in which all kinds of waste is hand-sorted, recycled, and organized.

It is useful to pause and reflect on the current moment in nonfiction filmmaking, as a way of providing a broader context to documentary cinema. The years between 2014 and 2024 have been heralded in Indian nonfiction cinema as a "the new wave of documentary films" (Ramachandran 2024), in which a range of Indian nonfiction films have emerged in markets across the world. However, it remains to be asked whether these films serve the function of democratic filmmaking (if not guerrilla), whether they are driven by the market's involvement, or a bit of both. An unfortunate byproduct of this moment is, however, the demolition of the movement film. The politically motivated, social-issue movement film has emerged as the black sheep of the current social paradigm, and a safe post-*bourgeois* film (following Patwardhan's comment on terminology published in a series of essays titled *Towards a Peoples' Cinema* [Patwardhan 1981]) has become the darling of the web and nonfiction afficionados.

Another dimension of peoples' cinema is the range of films that emerged around the Narmada movement in the 1970s. Studied as a phenomenon in film, these works are observed and critiqued—often in a manner that remains hostile to the real displacement of people depicted in the movies. In her article, Ghosh (2009) seems to condemn the repetition of individuals across Narmada documentaries and she is critical of the tone and the agitprop nature of the films; but the analysis of these films fails to engage with the movement itself. This is the failure of people watching socially embedded documentaries with the interests of cinephilia. They cannot see the film's social dimension and instead paint it as a contrived portrait or propaganda due to their lack of social engagement and consequent distrust of the marginalized people depicted. As a way of explaining, I will share the example of my own experience as a filmmaker who has travelled to the sites and individuals affected by the construction of

the Narmada dam. I have noticed how the individuals chosen to represent a story are often suggested by activists and movement representatives, because they have taken a particular stand on the issue of the dam. One particular individual refused compensation for the demolition of his home, which was a rare choice to make given that several farmers chose to accept the government's terms and conditions. This person has often been interviewed due not just to his eloquence as pointed out by Ghosh, but also to his role in the movement that he is representing. The latter is crucial, because it points to the web of connections, injustices, and neglected social dimensions that documentary filmmaking has the potential to depict when they are public issues of social concern. It is unfortunately unable to do this when it is burdened with the expectation of entertainment, creative prowess, or a strong formal element (Ghosh 2009).

In a more recent admission of their complete disdain for social-issue films, filmmakers Mira Nair and Shaunak Sen have gone so far as to say that only some films are conceptually driven, while implying that others fall into a "blueprinty" category (Nair and Sen 2024). Unfortunately, the conceptual engagement with justice, social issues, sociology, and social movements is brushed aside in one stray statement by the filmmakers, in which Mira Nair is quoted saying that this type of filmmaking amounts to "agitprop," even though they do not mention any specific films. This approach to social-issue documentaries can be hugely damaging, because it does not explicitly note any films that are doing a disservice to social issues, but instead tends to brush aside the very valid and deep concerns of people who have led, constructed, and emboldened the justice-related demands of social movements through films—which which are aesthetically pleasing in their own right and do not first of all aim at conveying a conventional sense of "beauty"—but films that address the heart of a social issue that is important to marginalized minorities, individuals, farmers, or people it represents.

While social realities have been addressed and marginalized voices have been amplified through the medium of nonfiction films such as *All That Breathes* (Sen 2022), it remains to be asked whether such examples serve the nuanced and crucial purpose of "guerilla" films discussed by Patwardhan. It is clear that they do not, in fact, address social realities with much engagement, but, instead, fall into a category that does not intend to be a witness of the current moment or to be critical of power, because what it seeks to do is provide catharsis in a moment of crisis, instead of leaving uncomfortable questions with the viewers—as art is often able to do. In equivalent

terms, the urinal in Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* provided an incomparable and much-needed discourse on art and its role in society. To dismiss it as a disservice to art would be to miss the point, which is what creative documentary seems to be doing when it is compared to social issue films.

Recent creative documentaries are not the concern of this essay. Instead, one is drawn to the social-issue films of the past: not the films nurtured by the Films Division of India, but those that came about in tandem with and as a result of social movements. In addition to the work of Anand Patwardhan, there is a wide range of films that have delved into questions of globalization in artistic ways and engage in a thick description of the changing times, but these films have often been met with academic skepticism, and held to high standards of social justice.

Over the years, my personal experience in nonfiction filmmaking has been that fiction filmmakers deem this work "*jhola* carrying" (associated with the activist bag and assuming a lack of some sort) or label it unimaginative for the form or methods used to depict contemporary issues of justice and injustice. "No one is interested" or "say something new" are thrown at me, expecting that although the story has not changed in real time, and injustice continues, the medium, form, and content will somehow lull our senses into compliance and catharsis. No one has the patience for discomfort, and despite the new wave, nothing has changed. On the other hand, I have found that injustice, while it is the instigator of curiosity, is also the site of much complexity and nuance. How does a place, a project, a movement, or time come to be defined as the social juncture of the annihilation of caste, for instance, or the representation of women beyond limited binary roles?

In the book titled *Salaam Bombay!* by Mira Nair and Sooni Taraporevala, there are segments that mention the drab "serious" Indian film without specifics but with a specific form of contempt. While no particular movie is discussed, it creates the sense that serious films are not interested in cinema. This disdain for the "boring" documentary is a common-sense understanding of the medium shared among several people in audiences across the world. However, it is necessary to examine what is being dismissed in the expression of this sentiment of condemnation, which, while not uncommon, is quite harmful. In condemning a particular type of activist filmmaking for its aesthetic limitations or other formal aspects, the medium of creative documentary appears to have remained as unconducive to the political concerns of mass and social

movements as it was during the period of Emergency declared by Indira Gandhi alluded to earlier (Nair and Taraporevala 2013).

Because creative documentaries perform in a market-based feel-good economy, they pose as the firefighters of democratic India. A true verdict is yet to emerge, but this lends as much to the shrinking of democratic spaces as propaganda or agitprop, because these films claim to address social realities, and they provide catharsis without necessarily opening up debate and discourse or building a deeper understanding of the social conditions they address. The films often finish with a poetic end, a peaceful conclusion in most cases, perhaps suggesting that social justice, as inconvenient as it is, has been achieved.

What is lost?

As I began to shoot a film on the border of Delhi and Haryana, an activist colleague who had spent his life organizing the people affected by internal displacement within India due to the Tehri and Narmada Dams insisted that I should not follow the one character that I was enamored by. To me, the film was her story; the social media videos were her daily visit to the temple and her insistence on staying put in the rubble that was now her displaced home. Instead, Vimal Bhai insisted that I capture the people affected by the displacement. It was his intention that the film express solidarity with and the views of each displaced person so that it did not build up the story of any one person too much.

Reflecting on this moment, I faced the conundrum of producing, on the one hand, something that could potentially find meaning and purpose in the mundane, and resolve a more significant social issue of evictions in one character's emotions. On the other hand, however, the stories of almost 10,000 displaced families were equally important. Some were away when their homes were demolished, others had lost their partners, and even others faced persecution due to their minority identities. So many stories cropped up, and so did a consensus or argument that was collective, powerful, and in tandem with the aims of a social movement that seeks justice for the many individuals lost in the chaos of development and the discrimination inherent in social life. If I were to take the route of a creative documentary, perhaps I would connect better with the humanity of the people living in evicted landscapes. On the other hand, however, in following the direction of an activist, I find the films revealing unique forms of injustice, means of exploitation, or the sense of being wronged. As films, these cinematic endeavors may not fill theaters or achieve the mass appeal of larger

Figure 4:
A shot from the evicted landscape of Khori Gaon.
© Nikhil Sanghotra

productions. Still, they capture the story of an otherwise insignificant person, encapsulate their worlds and memories, and consolidate their purpose as social and mass movements. The latter is as valuable as the former, but is no longer pursued or considered cinematically valuable, which is my concern in this essay. The role of films that do not make it to market circuits but circulate across universities, students, social movements, NGOs, and nonprofits tends to capture the conversations and thoughts of audiences as well as the filmmakers. Being sought by smaller film clubs, groups, and screening initiatives, the films tend to speak unspoken truths, shed light on injustice or taboo subjects, and create a parallel distribution network for social-issue concerns.

In 2023–24, several films and digital media pieces were produced in tandem with social movements such as the farmers' protests. Along with the unusual attention from a celebrity such as Rihanna who discovered the movement via social media, these films amplified the concerns important to the farmers' movement by speaking with the farmers and the women in the movement while expressing clearly the movement's demands. The role of these films was overshadowed by the voices of people such as Kangana Ranaut or celebrities who critiqued farmers on social media without context or research. The few social-issue films that emerged almost two years after the

movement did help to provide a space of understanding around the concerns of farmers, but even within these, there are shinier films supported by foreign markets and quieter ones that have mass audiences outside of festival circuits—namely, the works of ChalChitra Abhiyan and filmmaker Nishtha Jain, each unique in their modes of storytelling and concerns. While no filmmaker is to blame for this status, it is interesting for this essay to see that the guerrilla or social-issue film finds a space and reclaims its relevance as a medium of, for, and by civil society. This is why the farmers' movement provides an interesting area for potential further studies on this topic.

One example of a social-issue film that would otherwise not fall on the radar of more prominent publications is *Development Flows from the Barrel of a Gun* produced by Akhra (see India Water Portal 2024), a collective active in the mining regions of India that critiqued the exploitation of Adivasis and the disenfranchised. Connected with research made by collectives that expose corporate India's realities, the film indicates deeper trends in which communities are exploited for the benefit of corporations. When the state is dispossessing one group of their land, livelihood, or rights, films such as this one have served as a stage to amplify the stories of injustice against communities and to bring the disenfranchised some solidarity and support. Songs such as "Gaon Chodab Nahi" made by K. P. Sasi recall the agrarian resistance. They compound sentiment by expressing joy, anger, sarcasm, or creativity in unique nonmainstream forms and allow movements to connect with people experiencing similar injustices or finding humor in their struggles. Irrespective of the final outcome, it is because of the efforts of each person involved in a resistance movement (be they farmer, worker, satyagrahi, or leader) that social inequalities and injustices can be recorded, even if they cannot be brought to justice. "America Chodas" (Sasi 2024), a music video by K. P. Sasi has broad appeal and does not shy away from activism or formal innovation.

Without the support for socially driven films such as this one, the concerns of marginalized groups would remain unaddressed at policy or institutional levels. This is also particularly important, because while policymakers and research think tanks can fund their own studies that potentially perpetuate their own agendas and biases, independent films and media that are not funded by someone with a vested interest in the issue, such as crowd-funded films, provide a unique perspective on social concerns that can raise questions without self-censorship. Without the social-issue film, society is merely reveling in aesthetic feel-good politics in which we are led to believe that we are doing social good by watching a movie that plays against ideas of communalism

without addressing the systemic discrimination that stems from the same (Mamdani 2002).

My role here is not to comment on the work of artists who have produced the new wave of films. It is only to address the limited role such films can play in that they can express only so much as the grant-giving agencies, markets, and funding bodies allow.

Tropes of good Muslim–bad Muslim or the individual who made it out of their social conundrum and overcame the odds; these films alone cannot address the broader questions, and they need not do it. In the case of broader issues, civil society can retain its strength and build an atmosphere conducive to social-issue films only if it allows for aesthetic imbalances by sincerely addressing the uncomfortable questions of discrimination.

The documentary can shed light on the injustices faced by working class or disenfranchised groups, and it can critique companies playing havoc with lives, even if these films do not make for a comfortable or entertaining watch. However, the Bollywood hangover in India has compelled big budget films to play to the gallery instead of engaging with social movements. As beautiful and poetic as they are, and as much as they dwell in the gray areas, "creative documentary" as a genre cannot address the core of social issues, and it need not do so. On the other hand, however, it's supposed artistic superiority must not overshadow the social-issue film.

Earlier, when films were produced for social movements through donations, they were also made in tandem with a movement, be they films about the Narmada movement, working class struggles, the women's movement, or peoples' cinema. While similar movements are appearing around struggles for the Hasdeo Aranya forest, the documentary wave celebrated in the media is now primarily concerned with creative documentaries. It is against what is deemed as "the social-issue film," and this lends to a dearth of support for media concerned with articulating injustice, especially at specific political moments.

The hierarchizing of films and makers can lead to discrepancies in how social issues are addressed, and this can cause problems for democracy. The farmers' movement was already at full strength before films about it emerged. In contrast, films such as Akhra's have been known to reveal realities that the media could not reveal in the past. If subtlety and quiet dissent are somehow considered superior to the drama of emotion felt by someone disenfranchised, it further marginalizes voices of those experiencing pain. This is part of the problem, because it contributes to the squashing of dissent in

a democracy. Unlike Alexis de Tocqueville's ([1835] 2004) democratic public spaces for discourse, the creative documentary is converging discourse around the feel-good, commercially sellable moment, and this is a loss to the disenfranchised. It does this by identifying a limited number of characters as protagonists of the creative documentary. By capturing their realities in modes that are often reserved for fiction, such films tend to promote notions of resolve, that there is a narrative arc to the complexity of our social conundrums today, and that social issues are not sellable enough unless they can be solved with a neat end, just as in the creative film. The unfortunate nature of this extreme engagement with craft is that the movie can muddle the potential for social critique on ideas of secularism, nationalism, religiosity, and much more. By limiting social critique to an artistic preference for subtlety, thereby adding barriers to the production of films that could address more significant crises, it adds to a downfall in academic or journalistic freedom that is already in decline (Porecha 2024).

Films are crucial in bringing social injustice to light in academic environments as well. The historic social issue film may not be concerned with entertainment, but it can inform students of subjects that do not find space in their curricula. It was due to the screening of the film *Tawaifnama* by Saba Dewan on my university campus that many of us were able to learn more deeply about women's movements and concerns while doing a master's program in sociology. Without such films, we would lose insight into social complexity.

Additionally, the writings of academics such as Bishnupriya Ghosh (2009) focus on a critique of mediators of Adivasi issues. Tending to blame activists for social realities such as the police's differential treatment of *Adivasis* versus antidam activists, she finally accepts that the films, which often interview up to fifteen individuals in meetings around the Narmada movement, capture loss in evocative, affective ways, allowing audiences to relate much better to the dam-affected communities. This latter part of nonfiction films continues to inspire, irrespective of the mode of the film. It is the aspect of documentary that remains of concern to a robust civil society.

Market forces in the last decade

Funding plays a big part in determining the democratic spaces available to makers interested in learning and researching the diversity of subjects and people within India. Public film funding bodies encourage young filmmakers to tell stories. In the last ten years, the Public Service Broadcasting Trust has not only cut funding for documentary

films but also started mentorship programs for young filmmakers as it disburses funds. With this, a handful of filmmakers are deemed artistically superior, irrespective of the nature of the content that they have produced. While the value of a mentor and the Guru-Shishya tradition is common in India, filmmaking is a subjective art form. To deem one filmmaker superior based on constrained ideas of aesthetics or ideas inherited from both the independent or commercial film industries is to stifle the democratic potential of films that do not follow the norms set by mentors. Simply put, so-called bad films, considered inferior by curators or practitioners hired to mentor, have had different aims in the past. Allowing young filmmakers to receive grants and develop their own voices, networks, and sociopolitical sensibilities was a more democratic way of running the public funding bodies, even if the films produced did not always achieve aesthetic goals. As granting bodies change their structures, mentors are limited to people who may have film school experience but lack experience in social movements, sociology, and research that could inform the work of filmmakers more deeply.

If the exclusionary nature of high art is brought into the practices of funding bodies, where those who are already privileged by the filmmaking system are getting to decide who is a filmmaker of repute and worthy of attention and who is not, the type of stories being accessed is also limited. It lends to a stifling of complexity and nuance regarding the subjects chosen and the approaches allowed. In contrast, if films are produced without externally allocated mentors, they could engage with activists, social movements, and people experiencing social realities, as in the case of SPS Media or the Ektara Collective.[2] In this way, filmmakers and films can develop democratic formal practices out of the spaces that they engage with. In the current system, the aims of public films shift with mentorship programs—constrained by the aesthetic preferences of the mentor.

People who lived at the time following India's independence often remember the FD documentary playing on the big screen before every major Bollywood blockbuster. These films, telling stories commissioned by the Films Division, had a plethora of goals and aspirations. Academic studies (Sutoris 2016) have examined the anti-state nature of these films, their creative prowess, and the fact that they set a precedent for documentary cinema. Another wave, however, emerged in the 1970s and 80s. The movies of this time were the beginning of social-issue documentaries, and their

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[2] The two collectives mentioned operate in rural and urban Madhya Pradesh. They engage with filmmakers with indigenous and marginalized identities. Their films have circulated across numerous festivals and been well received by diverse audiences.

concerns were just as separate from those of state-funded or supported films as they were from fiction (Basu and Banerjee 2018).

Conclusion

"Social-issue" documentary is an endangered genre; it is often almost a reviled text, perhaps as part of a larger trend in which dissent in the country is stifled. However, these films have much to tell us about democratic practices and must be given the support they lack to enhance the diversity of Indian nonfiction.

While the new way of telling stories may be equally political, there is a loss when the latest codes, conventions, and methods prioritize a very particular kind of creative documentary in India. The loss concerns the role of documentary as a medium of democratic expression for those not otherwise well represented by the social and political paradigm. Documentary filmmakers focusing on social issues are given forums at national and international universities to educate students on contemporary and historic fact that is neglected in mainstream media, news, or in academia. Independent film clubs that spawn off to support activist filmmakers grow a world and an ecosystem to support the documentary form, because it functions as a tool of expression for mass-based social movements and people who have experienced injustices at the behest of powerful players who otherwise control the media.

Can market-funded "impact producing" even address the social complexity of water scarcity, climate change, farming, women's issues, or rights-based struggles? The movement against genetically modified foods could communicate farmers' struggles through films that focus on the pros and cons of genetic modification. Science communication does the same. Informative films are essential, and their significance in bringing change or social understanding must not be undermined.

Bio

Tarini Manchanda makes documentaries based on her interest in visual expression, training in Sociology and Environmental Policy. Tarini's films and projects have been taken to several residencies, communitues, festivals, and universities in North America, Europe and South Asia. Her interest in filmmaking stems from a desire for social change through observation. Tarini's films ask questions even as they capture a quiet bout of rain.

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Pandharpur Wari: Pilgrim Sojourn in the City of Pune

Suchetana Banerjee, Gayatri Mendanha, and Ananya Dutta

Abstract

The Pandharpur *wari* is an iconic annual pilgrimage in Maharashtra that starts from the towns of Alandi and Dehu. It has a rich tradition dating back to the thirteenth century. The *wari* (Marathi term for pilgrimage, also associated with the specific pilgrimage to the temple town of Pandharpur) involves hundreds of thousands of devotees known as *varkaris* walking for 21 days through villages and cities, traveling around 250 kilometers by foot to meet their beloved deity Vitthal at his temple in Pandharpur. The pilgrimage, passing through the city of Pune, is a significant event, because it transforms the city's atmosphere into one of devout reverence and collective celebration for three days. *Varkaris* carry with them *padukas,* impressions of the feet of saintly poets of Maharashtra, to meet Vitthal. The poet–god relationship, central to the *wari*, underscores a devotional ethos that is inclusive and accessible to the common person, reinforcing the ideals of mutual respect and coexistence. In an era marked by political fragmentation, the Pandharpur *wari* stands as an example of hope, enacting how cultural and spiritual practices can bridge divides and cultivate a sense of collective identity and solidarity. Thus, the *wari* is more than a pilgrimage; it is a living tradition that fosters unity and love and is a testament to enduring faith and communal harmony. This audiovisual essay offers an immersive experience of the *wari* in Pune.

Keywords: Vitthal, Pandharpur Wari, South Asia, Pilgrimage, Devotion, Bhakti

This essay combines text, visuals, and a soundscape for an immersive and multi-sensory experience of the Pandharpur *wari* pilgrimage. To fully appreciate the audio-visual and textual journey, we emphasize the importance of tuning into the soundscape while engaging with the text. Please note how this integration of media enhances the reading experience, allowing you to connect with the devotional and cultural essence of the *wari*. The Soundscape is found here:
https://hasp.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/journals/dasta/article/view/27346/26757

Introduction

This essay brings together images, audio, and text, because this confluence better elucidates the semiotics of the annual pilgrimage of devotees in Maharashtra who carry the footprints of their sacred poets to their god, Vitthal, who awaits them at his home in Pandharpur. In choosing this mixed-method approach, we offer the reader, who is simultaneously also the listener to this article, an immersive experience of the Pandharpur *wari* (pilgrimage), a living tradition of religious representation in Maharashtra, as it passes through the city of Pune. The palpable energy of hundreds of thousands of devotees carrying *palkhis* or palanquins who are entering, inhabiting, and transforming a city is an enactment and performativity of devotion that translates seamlessly into image, text, and sound. In the contemporary landscape of India's divisive politics, the *wari* emerges as a poignant testament to the enduring spirit of syncretism and coexistence that has historically characterized the subcontinent. This annual event, which sees millions of devotees undertaking an arduous journey to the Vitthal temple, encapsulates a profound celebration of unity amidst diversity. The *wari*, with its roots in the Bhakti movement, transcends religious, caste, and regional boundaries, embodying the poet-saint tradition in which the relationship between the devotee and the divine is intensely personal and egalitarian. It is a living example of diverse communities coming together in a collective act of devotion. In the introduction to Mokashi's *Palkhi,* Eleanor Zelliot states that the devotees "feel that the saint-poets go with them. The living and the dead walk together, and all who join the pilgrimage join the company of the saints" (Mokashi 1987, 38).

In accessing these snapshots of space and time as well as sound and color in movement, the reader-listener inhabits the transient and the cyclical. As the moon waxes and wanes, the journey is made repeatedly, as it has been done for centuries. Further, in making the journey vicariously, the reader-listener also participates in this living tradition. Living traditions that have been passed down for centuries allow for an engagement with the process of interpreting and understanding the world around us. Hence, these cultural practices and texts remain open to their creative possibilities. This is echoed by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, who writes that a "tradition remains living, however, only if it continues to be held in an unbroken process of reinterpretation" (Ricoeur 1995, 8). Ricoeur further reminds us that "to understand is not to project oneself into the text but, rather, to open up to an enlarged self, to incorporate into your world other possible worlds as portrayed by the text" (Tan et al. 2009). In accessing the religious experience of Marathi *bhakti* through sung poetry of

the *wari*, we, as researchers, gain access to the aesthetics of devotional practices and performances in the region.

This audiovisual essay introduces several methodological interventions that enhance the comprehensiveness, accessibility, and engagement of the research process, offering the reader-listener contextual insights that pure textual analysis might overlook. Roland Barthes writes in his essay "Photographic Message" that a photographic structure is not an isolated structure but is in communication with the text—that is, its title or caption (Barthes 1977). The totality of information lies in the cooperation between these structures: that of the text and of the image. The photograph here tries to capture the literal reality, but not the reality itself, rather a "perfect *analogan*, a message without a code … [because] the photographic message is a continuous message" (Barthes 1977, 17). Unlike coded messages that rely on discrete symbols, photographs, by capturing moments in time and space, offer a continuous and uninterrupted flow of information. The picture holds more than the text; it provides the viewer with a depth of detail that can be accessed and reaccessed anew each time. The text informs the image, and the image informs the text. In their interweaving, an experience of space-time is felt intimately. Further, studying and documenting the *wari* allows us as researchers to contribute to a deeper understanding of the human experience, highlighting the resilience and adaptability of devotional traditions, and offering a powerful counternarrative to divisive forces in society.

The 20-minute soundscape of the *wari* further supplements the essay by capturing nuanced details of social interactions and cultural practices, offering another layer to ethnographic narratives as they are lived and enacted. The soundscape consists of several sound clips stitched together. At the heart of the Pandharpur *wari* are music and songs—the primary expressions of devotion. A central experience for the devotee is singing while walking together on this pilgrimage to their god. These sung poems do not carry the burden of the literary rules of conventional poetic language. Hence, although these traditions began in medieval times around the thirteenth century, there is a continuity to be found even today, because the poems composed then are still sung, allowing the devotee to add a new phrase or a line spontaneously (Dhere 2011, 34). We see this everywhere across the subcontinent, with religious poem-songs composed in all Indian languages. However, the sounds of the *wari* are not limited to those produced in the form of music or through musical instruments. Numerous other sounds also become part of this auditory experience. These other sounds are

interwoven with the music being performed. Thus, the soundscape is an attempt to approximate this experience of movement through the city, on the road, and on the pilgrimage with other people—both devotees and city folk from all walks of life. While the listener will be able to identify the *karatal* (hand cymbal), different vocals, and percussions, the sounds of people and movement emerge as key players. It offers an experience of shifting sounds and textures of varying density, inviting the listener to imagine walking on the pilgrimage itself, identifying recurring sounds, motifs, and thematic elements. It is an auditory experience of a sonic construction that tries to mimic the experience of a *wari*, urging the listener to step into the experience itself.

Figure 1:
Wari entering the city of Pune (2021).
© Suchetana Banerjee

Photo-essay

Every year in June–July or *ashadh*, devotees of Vitthal (a popular deity of Maharashtra) travel around 250 kilometers by foot on a *wari* (Marathi term for pilgrimage, also associated with the specific pilgrimage to the temple town of Pandharpur), or *yatra,* to meet their deity at his temple in Pandharpur. The word *yatra* is derived from the Sanskrit root *ya*—to go. *Yatra,* therefore, indicates going on a journey, and in this case, it takes the form of a religious procession. The pilgrim, the one who undertakes a *wari*, is called a *varkari* (a devotee of Vitthal)*.* This is a tradition with a rich history dating back to the thirteenth century (Dhere 2011, 12). This pilgrimage in the month of *ashadh* or the *ashadhi wari* is for the Deccan plateau people; and in the month of October–November, or *kartik,* people from the Konkan or coastal region undertake the *kartiki wari*.

Hundreds of thousands of devotees, women in colorful *sarees* and men in pristine white *dhotis* and *kurtas*, mostly from Pune, Marathwada, and Vidarbha region in Maharashtra, partake in this *ashadhi wari*. The *varkaris* travel on this *yatra* for 21 days and reach the temple town of Pandharpur the day before the first *ashadhi ekadashi*, the eleventh day of the waxing moon in June–July. This is considered an auspicious time because the Hindu god Vishnu is believed to enter a state of deep cosmic sleep that lasts for four months. He is believed to wake up at the time of *Diwali*, the festival of lights. It takes three days for the *wari* to cross through Pune to reach Pandharpur. They rest for a day in the city.

Taking the thrice-bent stance, O Mother,

he plays the flute at the foot of the wish-granting tree.

O Mother, Govinda Gopal.

Is completely supreme bliss, inside and out.

Seeing the dark, excellent life of all living beings,

the solid embodiment of bliss, my mind was lost.

Pervading the universe, moving and still, he remained imperceptible.

My father is the husband of Rakhumadevi; Vitthal is everything. (Dhere 2011, 4)

Figure 2:
A sculpture of Vitthal at Dive Ghat,
a route taken by the *varkaris* while crossing the city of Pune (2022). © Suchetana Banerjee

This song by the thirteenth-century saint-poet Jnanesvar points to the fascination the Marathi saints had with the child form of Vitthal. The devotee-poet is writing about different attributes of the Hindu deity Krishna: as a child with a flute (his favorite musical instrument) in his hand in the pose of *tribhanga* (three bends in the body; at the neck, waist, and knee). All attributes in the lines above are associated with Krishna being dark, all-pervading, and imperceptible. In the last line, the poet addresses him as Vitthal. From the *varkari* devotional literature, there flows the idea that the cloud-dark Krishna, who was allured by the joy of devotion to play and frolic in Gokul, and who later paraded majestically as the king of Dwarka, takes on the splendid form of Vitthal (Dhere 2011, 11).

The *varkari panth* is a *sampradaya* or devotional movement within the *bhakti* tradition centered on the worship of Vitthal. Vitthal literally means "one standing (*thal* or *sthala*) on a brick (*vit*)," which is also depicted in the iconography of Vitthal. This depiction is representative of a story about Vitthal and his devotee Pundalik. Pundalik

was a young man known for his devotion to his parents. After learning about Pundalik's piety, Krishna came to Pandharpur to see him. Pundalik was busy taking care of his parents and tossed a brick toward Krishna, asking him to stand on it and wait until Pundalik had time to meet him. In the form of Vitthal, Krishna has been standing on the brick for twenty-eight *yugas* (millions of years), waiting for Pundalik to have time for him (Deleury 1960, 14). Another traditional etymology of the name Vitthal, besides the Pundalik story, gives each syllable in "Vitthal" a philosophical meaning: *vida* (through knowledge), *than* (ignorant people), *lati* (grasp)—that is, "Vitthal is the one who accepts ignorant people through knowledge" (Dhere 2011, 12).

All the *varkari* saints from Jnanesvar in the thirteenth century to Niloba in the eighteenth century regard Vitthal as the "Shiva with Vishnu" and bestow on him titles ranging from the enlightened one (Bauddha) to the son of Jina (Mahavira or Jina, the conqueror of the self). Furthermore, they view him as the ninth incarnation of Vishnu, and address him as Kanada Karnataku or one from the state of Karnataka. Thus, in Vitthal, the saints, through their poetry, accomplish a confluence of various religious streams: Shaiva, Vaishnava, Buddhist, Jain, and more. Although the saints' faith tells them that Vitthal is a form of Shiva-Vishnu, they are also aware that he is different from the twenty-four incarnations of Vishnu. According to historian R. C. Dhere, Vitthal, who attained extraordinary status as a Vaishnava deity from the eleventh century onward, may have originally been a folk deity who gradually became absorbed into the Hindu pantheon (Dhere 2011, 23).

For scholars of the humanities, documenting the Pandharpur *wari* is of great importance, because it offers a unique perspective into the complexities of devotional practices in India. We have met many pilgrims who are not Vaishnavs (devotees of Krishna), yet choose to walk on the *wari*. For example, Shobha Maruti Shivadas, whose family deity is Bhavani, a form of the goddess Durga popular in Maharastra's Tuljapur, will walk in the procession singing *abhangs* (sung poems). Traditionally, she places herself as a devotee of the *Shakti* cult, but every year during *wari*, she takes time off from work to walk with devotees of Vitthal to ensure her grandchildren receive their blessings. Thus, the *wari* serves as a repository of oral narratives, history, poems, songs, and folklore that are invaluable for understanding the historical and contemporary dynamics of devotion and social life. In inhabiting the spaces of a living, creative tradition, the lens through which we do our research is transformed.

Figure 3:
Entry of Jnanesvar *palkhi* in Pune city surrounded by stalls of political parties, where locals come to feed the *varkaris* as an act of piety (2021). © Suchetana Banerjee

As the *palkhis* (palanquins) move through the city, they generate a field of activity, bringing together diverse communities through their devotion. Political parties use this occasion as an opportunity for publicity. One reason why all political stakeholders try to seek the support of the *varkaris* is that they represent an integral slice of Maharashtra itself. Further, political parties in Maharashtra support the *varkari* community due to their significant influence in rural areas; and by aligning with them, they aim to garner support from this substantial voter base. This strategic support helps political parties connect with the marginal rural, semiurban, and urban masses. In this photograph (Fig. 3), we see Jnanesvar's *palkhi* entering the city of Pune and moving past stalls set up by various political parties.

After the *palkhis* of poet-saints Muktabai, Kahnopatra, and Sant Sena pass, devotees, passersby, onlookers, revelers, and photographers (ranging from media houses to selfie takers) wait patiently to welcome the Jnanesvar's *palkhi* into the city. The cityscape transforms into a photographer's delight, for as far as the eye can see, the

dindis with their flags, gods, and devotees form a distinct line as they pass through a sea of enthusiastic onlookers.

In the midst of police *bandobast*, or arrangements, boisterous loudspeakers, political *pandals*, revolving merry-go-rounds, tightrope dancers, bales of cloth and *saris*, and toys and sweetmeats, one is surrounded by the chants of devotees calling out to their poet-saints "*Dnyanoba Mauli Tukaram*" and "*Dnyanoba Tukaram.*" There is an uproar and palpable excitement when Jnanesvar's *palkhi* arrives closer to the city. The *palkhi* arrives, and with it, a rush of devotees who reach out to seek blessings, for when God's saints pass, the very dust under their feet is sacred. The *palkhi* bear the floral inscription "*mauli*" or mother at its head, as seen in the photograph (Fig. 3). Jnanesvar's God Vitthal is also lovingly called Mauli. For the next three days, the city takes on the flavor of this devotion, and devotees and city dwellers alike address each other as Mauli.

Jnanesvar was a thirteenth-century Marathi saint, poet, and philosopher of the *varkari* tradition. His *palkhi* starts from Alandi, where Jnanesvar entered *samadhi* (a state of meditative contemplation) at the age of 22. There are many accounts of the origin of Jnanesvar's *palkhi,* and many believe that it began 800 years ago (Dhere 2011, 66). The narratives around the *varkari* poet-saints have been developed via inherited, local, and oral retellings that incorporate historical facts, myths, and poetic texts. The *varkaris* do not subscribe to any particular caste or religion. Their poet-saints, Jnanesvar, Tukaram, Namdev, Eknath, Janabai, Muktabai, and others, cut across caste, gender, and class, united in their *bhakti* or devotion.

The Tukaram *palkhi* carries the *padukas* of the seventeenth-century poet-saint Tukaram from Dehu to Pandharpur. Tukaram was born a *shudra* (lower caste), and for a *shudra* to write poetry on spiritual themes in colloquial Marathi was a double threat to the *brahmin* (upper caste) monopoly at that time. "Says Tuka/Witness the Word/He is God/I worship him/With words" (Chitre 1991, 2). Tukaram suggests that through his verses and songs, one can experience the divine. The above line signifies that his poetry itself is an act of worship, a medium through which he unites with the divine. For him, god resides in the utterance of the word. Tukaram was phenomenally popular during his own lifetime and was hailed as "Lord Pandurang incarnate" (Vitthal is referred to as Panduranga) by devotees such as poet-saint Bahinabai. Tukaram's translator, Dilip Chitre, writes, "Tukaram's genius partly lies in his ability to transform the external world into its spiritual analogue. He sees his own consciousness as a

Figure 4: Tukaram *palkhi* in Pune city. (2021). © Suchetana Banerjee

Figure 5: The day of rest in the city when locals throng to seek blessings from Tukaram's paduka in Pune. (2021). © Suchetana Banerjee

cosmic event rooted in the everyday world but stretching infinitely to the deceptive limits of awareness" (Chitre 1991, ix). No wonder he is *jagadguru* (teacher of the universe) to his devotees, which is seen written in flowers on his *palkhi* in the photograph (Fig. 4).

The Tukaram *palkhi*, carrying the *padukas* of Tukaram from Dehu to Pandharpur, is believed to have begun in 1685 (Deleury 1960, 54). The Pandharpur-bound pilgrims carry an impression of the poet-saints' *paduka* or feet in a *palkhi* from their respective shrines up to Pandharpur, where Vitthal resides. This *paduka* symbolizes the spiritual presence of the saints. When the *palkhis* rest in the city, locals, who may or may not be Vaishnavs or Varkaris, throng to seek blessings from the poet-saints by touching the *paduka* and bowing before it.

Figure 6: *Dindi* walking through the Pune city. (2021). © Suchetana Banerjee

Unlike other major gatherings of devotees on auspicious occasions across South Asia, the pilgrimage of the *varkaris* to Pandharpur is not marked with constant announcements of people being lost and found. The reason behind this is the organization of this large mass of pilgrims into *dindis*. A *dindi* is a group of pilgrims who undertake the pilgrimage together. Emblematic of "the Varkari principle of decentralization at work" (Nemade 1994, 87), the *dindi* is the cellular unit of the *wari*. Over the years, the organization of the *wari* into *dindis* has become more and more systematized. Registered *dindis* are given numbers and have a fixed place in the overall procession—some walking ahead of the *palkhi,* others following it. The *dindis* may be organized by locality, castes, class, fellowship, or lineage. In the photograph, we see the flag bearers leading their *dindi.* They are one of the symbolic elements of the *wari.* There are seemingly no restrictions on who can carry the saffron flag—onlookers, hosts, and anyone who commits to walking for a section of the pilgrimage with them are welcome to carry the flag if they wish to.

Figure 7:
The day of rest. Members of *dindi* preparing afternoon meals (2021).
© Suchetana Banerjee

The *wari* is a performative procession of pure collective devotion as well as an embodiment of personal spirituality. The schedule for the *wari* is known in advance: the starting location for each *dindi,* the location for breaks, as well as the location for longer halts for the night. Often, locals from the city that the *wari* is passing through feed the *varkaris*, and they consider it a privilege to offer *sewa* (service) to them. Communal food arrangements are a hallmark of the pilgrimage. Because *dindis* can be constituted across caste and class affiliations, the *wari* is charged with subversive potential—violation of certain practices, especially around food, that may still be practiced in their village homes. Their hosts may offer them meals, but more often, they just make provisions so that the *varkaris* can cook their own simple meals that are then shared with everyone.

The day starts early with a *kirtan*. The poet-saint Namdev is believed to have started the tradition of the *kirtan*, a performance of devotional songs and recitations sometimes accompanied by joyous, energetic dancing (Mokashi 1987, 39). These are occasions for the Varkaris to share their message of love and devotion, as well as invite others to join in the celebratory singing and dancing. At the end of the *kirtan*, the participants touch each other's feet—a recognition of the divinity in each other, evocative of the egalitarian spirit of the pilgrimage.

Figure 8:
Members of *dindi* resting in front of a shopping mall in the city (2022). © Suchetana Banerjee

When the Varkaris go to Pandharpur on pilgrimage, they are admonished not to engage in the varied and elaborate rituals that are practiced at the Pandharpur temples (Dhere 2011, 233). However, certain ritual practices are observed during the *wari.* The connection to centuries-old musical tradition is embodied in every *dindi*, which must be accompanied by at least one *vinekar*—a person tasked with carrying an instrument called the *veena*. This instrument is believed to be a symbol of Narada—a divine sage of the Hindu tradition who is often depicted as a traveling musician and is believed to be a devotee of Vishnu. While the *vinekar* is allowed to take breaks and even let others hold the instrument, the *veena* itself must never touch the ground. The instrument itself takes on divine significance, and many devotees, across class and caste boundaries, pay obeisance to it.

The long pilgrimage includes breaks during which the Varkaris rest on the street, eating, sitting, lying down, and chatting with each other before resuming their onward journey. Often, members of the *dindi* cluster the flags in an arrangement that creates space for all things considered holy. Apart from the *veena*, every *dindi* also carries with it the *tulsi* (holy basil) plant. Usually borne by women, this plant travels the entire journey from the home of a *varkari* all the way to Pandharpur. The *tulsi* is dear to Vittal and akin to other Vaishnava traditions. Wearing a garland of *tulsi* stalks is one of the initiation rites for being a Varkari.

People from far and near flock to pay respects to the great saints and delight in the *rangolis* (Fig. 9) that are drawn on the main roads by students and city folk. Whole families come, mothers with their babies and fathers hand in hand with their daughters, to watch these *rangolis* being drawn. They pay their respects to god and saint, then shop, amuse themselves with the festivities, and return back to their homes. In the midst of the hand waving, music on loudspeakers, *rangoli*, food, sweets, bananas, and balloons, one can hear the chanting of *Ram Krishna Hari*—Tukaram's vocabulary, as seen in the photograph. Rama Krishna Hari is often considered to be the *mahamantra* (the main chant) in Vaishnavism and can be traced to the Kali-Santarana Upanisad (Dhere 2011, 265). In the fifteenth century, it rose to importance in the Bhakti movement following the teachings of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu. Once the rain descends, however, the *rangolis* are washed away.

Participation in this annual pilgrimage is more than a spiritual experience for the Varkaris; it is also an occasion to break social boundaries, because this communal experience brings together people from different walks of life (Fig. 10).

Figure 9: A *rangoli* (pattern drawn with colors considered auspicious)
reading *Ram Krishna Hari* at a busy intersection of the city (2021). © Suchetana Banerjee

A special social custom of the *wari* is the *phugadi*—a game in which two participants lock outstretched arms and use that as the center of gravity to spin around. Special songs have been written about the *phugadi* that invite devotees to "play" with one another while on their spiritual pilgrimage. The "play" is designed to break social barriers, because it requires both participants to look into each other's eyes while spinning at a frenzied pace. Familiar to Indians since childhood, even strangers can engage in the game, but it requires a degree of trust in the other person to control the pace of the movement and ensure that one does not spin out of control. Further, in the city, caste and religious identities are sometimes rendered invisible to the extent that they are not immediately obvious in an interaction between strangers. Thus, the *phugadi* is part of the tradition of the *wari*; its role within it is to facilitate social interaction. Because the pilgrimage involves the coming together of people from different castes, classes, and regions, the forced contact during this game is a way of challenging traditional norms of social interaction, especially because these proscriptions often center around "touch" or hierarchies that prohibit direct eye contact.

Figure 10:
On their way out of the city, Varkaris playing *phugadi* (2021).
© Suchetana Banerjee

In recent times, concerns have been raised about the declining participation of young people in this annual pilgrimage, but here, one sees a group of playful young Varkaris performing the *phugadi.*

Bahinabai, a nineteenth-century woman saint-poet wrote:

Cymbals clang, laughter splashes, applause.

I soak in joy. Eyes closed, I'm on full alert.

Tukaram places his hand on my head,

and gives me the gift of poetry.

Bahini says:

Dream? Reality?

The senses wither (Pinto 2019, 161).

Figure 11:
Varkaris sing with the accompaniment of *chipliya* while they head out of the city (2021).
© Suchetana Banerjee

People celebrate this pilgrimage through singing, dancing, jumping, and chanting the name of their god. Along with the *veena*, other accompanying musical instruments are used such as the flute, *chipliya/kartala,* or cymbals and percussion. The *karatala* (hand cymbal) is derived from the root *kar* (hand/arm) and *tala* (beat). The chanting of *hari nama* (name of Hari) and the *abhangs* or *kirtan* are accompanied by the beat of the *karatala.* Together, the *dindis* move in a procession, joyfully singing the *kirtans* and *abhangs* by medieval Marathi bhakti poets such as Tukaram, Namdev, and Chokhamela.

Janabai, a thirteenth-century woman saint-poet wrote:

Such is the sweetness of the kirtan,

Vitthala leaps right out of heaven.

He prefers the company of the devout.

Jani says: He seeks them out (Pinto 2019, 125).

Figure 12:
On the third day, the *wari* leaves Pune (2021)
© Suchetana Banerjee

On these three days, as *lakhs* of Varkaris walk through the city, the city serves the devotees. One witnesses the transcendence of religious, caste, and class barriers as a Muslim barber delightfully offers to shave a Vitthal devotee, an upper caste woman serves food to a lower caste man, and an IT professional in his branded shoes walks behind a barefoot Varkari who leads the procession singing *abhangs*. There are several instances of non-Hindus offering their services and rations to the Varkaris as they walk through the city. For example, Saifuddin, a local Muslim shop owner, whose shop the *wari* passes by, spoke to us about this annual pilgrimage for which he donates money toward food arrangements for the Varkaris. Further, every year he invites the Varkaris to rest in his shop as they enjoy a meal. When asked about the reasons for his generosity and warm-heartedness, he said, "*Sabko dua chahiye*" which implies a recognition and desire for blessings and prayers from the Varkaris and their god. One also witnesses men and women who are grown weary with age, walking barefoot as a part of the procession. For Varkaris, this is a deeply spiritual pilgrimage, an *anand* (joy or delight) like no other. For others, it is a chance to leave the daily toil of *samsara* (material world) or to travel with like-minded companions through cities and villages to arrive at god's home. The journey is made in freedom, in song, and in celebratory companionship. Thus, this research enriches the broader academic discourse on faith, living traditions of devotion, community, and identity, and underscores the vital role that cultural practices play in shaping and sustaining social cohesion. Just as the Varkaris experience this spiritual journey as a cleansing, the city is also cleansed and blessed by their journeying through it. On the third day, when the Varkaris, along with their gods and poet-saints leave the city of Pune, there is a visible emptiness. The city no longer bears witness to centuries-old medieval poem-songs recited by the Varkaris on the streets, in temples, and in resting places, embodying a spiritual tradition and a philosophy. The beautiful *rangolis*, singing and dancing on the streets, give way to the loud honking of impatient commuters in traffic jams. Thus, the passage of the devotees through the city of Pune also marks the passage of time of the pilgrimage and in our lives.

Bio:

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