

Safdar Hashmi Memorial Observed With Fervour

Shatam Ray

FOR 28 years now, January 1 has been an important date on the Delhi calendar. What began as a spontaneous coming together of artistes of different hues, vocations and inclinations has become, arguably, the most prominent annual cultural and political event in the city. Routinely, the colorful drapes and banners adorned the otherwise dreary built structures of VP House. The events organised by Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust began at noon with the play “Desh Badal Raha Hai” by the theater group, Bigul. Inspired from the popular children’s tale, *Emperor’s New Robes* the play talked of a King who heaps unspeakable miseries on his people, and presents these as part of his generosity. Jatan Natya Kendra, Rohtak adapted three poems by Raghuraj Sahay, Manmohan and Ashok Prakash and presented them as short plays as a scathing critique of the contemporary trends in Indian politics. Finally, Jan Natya Manch-Kurukshetra composed and sang poems *Hubbe Vatan* by famous Urdu Poet, Hali.

Saif Mehmood followed the performances and recited protest poems, most prominently by Faiz Ahmed Faiz. The story telling tradition of *Dastan Goi* followed with an innovative take on Mohandas Gandhi and his relevance in the present times. The two ‘dastan goyas’, Fouzia and Fazal, performed *dastan-e-Gandhi* and reflected on how today’s society is being built on all ideas inimical to Gandhi’s vision of justice and morality. Soon after, it was time for performances by vocal artists. Blending together diverse traditions of classical, folk, modern and progressive inspirations, music artistes performed to a rapt audience. Bringing together familiar and fresh performing artistes on the Sahmat platform, Scott Moses Murray, Tanveer Ahmad Khan, Priya Kanungo, Vidya Shah, Wassifuddin Dagar, Harpreet, and Jasbir Jassi contributed to a celebratory *maahol* both inside and outside the hall.

The cultural performances were also accompanied by the official release of three book titles by Sahmat. *The Progressive Cultural Movement: A Critical History* has been brought out to mark the 80th anniversary of the setting of the Progressive Writers’ Association (PWA). Simultaneously, Prabhat Patnaik’s four part lecture series on the Bolshevik Revolution and its contemporary resonance was printed earlier but its Hindi translation was made available. Finally, Irfan Habib’s collection of lectures on nationalism and the idea of nation were also put together and brought out at the official book release. Introducing these books, prominent poet and writer Ashok Bajpeyi said that the history of progressive literary movement in India is an important reminder to the long tradition of political dissent that the literary stalwarts of their times have upheld as well as a strong rejoinder to those who cry themselves hoarse against such voices.

The evening was brought to an end in a truly novel way by an energetic performance by Delhi-based BFR Sound System, Delhi Sultanate and Begum X. Inspired from Rastafarian, R&B and other contemporary musical traditions, BFR artistes performed songs with explicit political content targeted at the present national government. Not shying away from calling out the powers-that-be, these young performers brought a different set of sensibility as well as form to Sahmat’s events.

The cultural evening organised by Sahmat remains very hard to explain to those who have not had an opportunity to experience it. Besides a list of talented and motivated artistes performing one after

another, this evening is also marked by camaraderie and bonhomie among long associates and friends. The milling of people around the food stalls constitutes an equally important social space of this evening, parallel to performances inside.

The January 1 event, apart from observing Safdar Hashmi's martyrdom day, also marks the summation of struggles against authorities in the past one year and the vibrancy of the events negates any sense of despair that may creep in.

If 2015 was notable for the dialectics between the muzzling of voices of dissent and the subsequent chorus against a perceived sense of intolerance, 2016 was a year of heightened frenzy. The polarisation between the *bhakt*s and the dissenters has seen a sharp separation and many have even characterised the contemporary conjuncture as the, "post-facts times." The positivist sentiment underlying the label notwithstanding, what has been missing is reflexivity in our own thoughts and speeches. It is in these times that Sahmat took the opportunity to resort back to Gandhi and his ideas. Admittedly, many feel ambivalent towards a return to Gandhi. But at the same time, the man and his words continue to inspire millions till this day precisely because Gandhi had the ability to be sanguine and exercised power with equanimity. The reissue of "Postcards for Gandhi" – a massive project that saw over 100 artists collaborating – and 2017 calendar on KG Subramanyam's sketches of Gandhi were highlights of this effort.

And yet, it is not a typical harkening back to 'Great Men' vision of history. With its exhibition documenting the eight decades of progressive cultural movement and the accompanying book, Sahmat also continues to keep the tradition of critical, social art alive as a medium of political transformation. At the very heart of this idea is the democratisation of both the arts as well as the artistic space to a larger set of classes and their concerns. As the essay by EMS Namboodiripad in the Collection argues, art is neither subservient to, nor divorced from the political concerns of its time. The relationship is fraught but not one-sided. It is this sense of continued relevance of 'song and dance' as essential markers of vitality of any free and just society that Sahmat strives for.

Finally, it will not be unfair to borrow the words of Mulk Raj Anand (speaking on the 50th anniversary of PWA's journey) to describe the spirit of the hundreds that gathered at VP House on that one, slightly chilly evening, "... (a) membership so large that it forms, quantitatively, one of the largest blocks for the defense of culture in the world."