

Voices Against Intolerance

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What do you do on an evening of dissent? You dance, you draw, you perform and yes, you sing. For as the vibrant banners, strung at the annual SAHMAT cultural event, reminded us of Bertolt Brecht's iconic words, "Yes, there will be singing about the dark times." But you also speak. The responsibility of speaking was reiterated by Madangopal Singh's beautiful rendition of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's beautiful poem, "Bol ke lab azaad hai tere, bol zabaan ab tak teri hai." If it is true that the commissions of the first day of the year carry the signs of the coming year then the 27th Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust event on January 1, 2016 promises that the coming year will only strengthen our resolve to protest and hold on to freedoms that we have so assiduously struggled for.

SAHMAT's beginning of the year event barely needs an introduction. An event that was meant to mark the memory of slain theatre and Communist activist, Safdar Hashmi has become, over the past three decades, an opportunity to 'speak truth to power'; whatever may be the times. In that spirit, the Annexe of the Constitutional Club of India was decorated with colorful banners and posters. Ever since the refurbishment of the complex, some of us have come to miss the vibrant marquees that were set up for the occasion using protest banners and slogans. However, there was no dearth of colour otherwise. One could enter to an art exhibition bringing together a diverse set of contemporary artists using their personal style and mediums to strike a common chord of revolt against the growing atmosphere of impunity for the bigoted.

Along with the works created by the Delhi-based artists, on display in the make-shift gallery were works by over 45 artists both from Mumbai and Delhi. SAHMAT had received an overwhelming response in Mumbai when the exhibition was first put up in Mumbai in early December 2015. As many as 33 artists had done work for SAHMAT Avaaz Do in Mumbai. The exhibition's curator Ram Rahman had appealed to artists to make banners in response to the attacks on freedom of expression and protest the growing atmosphere of intolerance.

The works were received from Amol K. Patil, Atul Dodiya, Dhruvi Acharya, Meera Devidayal, Lalitha Lajmi, Sudhir Patwardhan, Sheetal Gattani, Nalini Malani, Ketaki Sheth, Shilpa Gupta, Shakuntala Kulkarni, Jehangir Jani, Gieve Patel, Navjot Altaf, Minal Damani, Yardena Kurulkar, Prajakta PallavAher, Jenny Bhatt, Madhu D, Sarita Chauhan, Ali Akbar Mehta, Anju Dodiya, Anjali Monteiro and KPJayashankar, Sumeshwar Sharma, Zasha Colah, Kiyomi Talaulicar, Archana Hande, Bharati Kapadia, Jitish Kallat, Justin Ponmany, Prajakta Potnis, Reena Saini Kallat, Yogesh Barwe.

The show by Delhi artists was curated by John Xaviers and included works from Arpana Caur, Mahula Ghosh, Tanmoy Samanta, Sumedh Rajendran, Chandan Gomes, Saba Hasan, Veer Munshi, Anita Dube, Arpita Singh, Gigi Scaria, Inder Salim, Ita Mehrotra, Probir Gupta, Sheba Chhachhi, Subba Ghosh, Vasudha Thozhur, Sharmila Samant, Tushar Joag, Ram Rahman, Akhlaq Ahmad.

John Xavier had noted that in an atmosphere when speech is gagged to speak out itself becomes a gesture "It is the sensibility of the secularist values, that enable a generation of artists to voice'

political concerns about the crisis in modernity that India is facing today with obscurantist political ideologies based on pseudoscience and false-history, expressed through rhetorics, showmanship and antics.”

A poster exhibition ‘Assault on Reason’, documenting from Press coverage, the communalisation of Indian polity, culture and society, saffronisation of institutions and free run to the ideological bigots of the ruling party was also on display.

The cultural events of the evening were interspersed with the release of *In Dark Times: Voices Against Intolerance* – an anthology of news clippings, statements, editorials and ‘award vapasi’ statements in the recent past to mark the intolerant ways of the present government and its lackeys. The book brought out by Sahmat and released by Ashok Vajpeyi, poet and critic and one of the the first Sahitya Akademi recipient to register his protest carries a thoughtful introduction by Prabhat Patnaik on the importance of being an ‘intellectual’ in a democracy and the crucial responsibilities incumbent upon these privileged social actors. The earlier published *The Republic of Reason: Words They Could Not Kill* – a selection of writings from the larger oeuvre of Narendra Dabholkar, Comrade Govind Pansare and M.M. Kalburgi – was also released at the event along with its Hindi translation, *Vivek Ka Parisar*. Another book edited by Rajendra Sharma *Ashishnuta ke Daur Mein* was also issued.

A special poster based on the work of Hema Upadhayaya made just before her tragic death, with a Faiz Ahmad Faiz poem was also released. The remembrance of the two artists who were associated with SAHMAT since its very inception-Shamshad Husain and Mrinalini Mukherjee was marked by displaying the reproductions of their 1989 poster soon after the fatal attack on Safdar Hashmi. A calendar with Shamshad’s 1992 work done soon after the demolition of the Babri Masjid was released as a homage to him.

The afternoon programmes commenced with two street plays. The play *Taqseem* (Division) based on a story by Pragya Upadhayaya was put up by Delhi-based theatre group Bigul. The play quite-graphically brings out the divisive politics of the religious bigots. A theatre group from Haryana Rangbhoomi enacted from poems underlining the secular and egalitarian values.

Music performances of the afternoon began with Tanveer Ahmad Khan and Priya Kanungo who sang Kabir, Meera and Khusaru, the Sufi Bhakti poets who rebelled against the tyranny of religious fundamentalism.

A recitation of Urdu protest poetry by Dr. Saif Mahmood was greatly appreciated. The scintillating modern dance performance of eminent dancer Astad Deboo, which is by now a regular feature over the last 26 years, enthralled the growing audience. Other musicians who performed include Maham Suhail from Pakistan and Rekha Raj. Navtej Jauhar gave a Dastan Goi performance.

Popular singer Jasbeer Jassi performed again this year and his energetic presentation of folk songs was quite popular. Jassi, who probably registers in our consciousness as a singer of mainstream bhangra-pop, had surprised quite a few last year with his diverse abilities and upon receiving a fair amount of encouragement had spent a fair bit of time on the stage singing some Khusrau for his audience. This year his performance was crisp and energetic.

Moloyshree Hashmi, street theater activist with Jan Natya Manch, introduced a young comrade from the Freedom Theatre, Palestine who is presently touring different parts of India in a joint production with the former. The Palestinian drew analogies with the conditions back in Palestine to a rapturous audience, perhaps an important reaffirmation of India's historic support for the Palestinian freedom even as successive governments in the last decade have been keeling one over another to impress upon the occupying Israeli state. The young Palestinian activist was clearly overwhelmed from the reception he and his troupe had received in India and spoke of continuing the struggle against all forces of oppression. Madangopal Singh and his ensemble brought the evening to a close, performing songs from a wide set of artistic provenance and contexts, from Kabir to Bob Dylan. He was accompanied by musicians from Wood Stock.

As is now to be expected from this evening, the people in the audience mirrored the diversity of performers and vocations on stage. Intellectuals, academics, photographers, actors, artists, young students and professionals were seen milling around on a barely cold evening, sifting through the SAHMAT book stalls or conversing at the food stalls when not sitting in for the performances. Despite the familiarity which the event has come to acquire, many would admit that the SAHMAT event for 2016 happened in a context of heightened frenzy in the country. It is true that SAHMAT and its friends have been there, since that dastardly day when Safdar Hashmi was murdered in broad daylight, to witness the demolition of the Babri Masjid or the ruthless killing of Muslims of Gujarat in 2002. It is true that SAHMAT and its friends are no strangers to days and nights when the secular fabric of Indian society has been torn apart by different constituents of the ruling elite. But in the last one year, something more sinister, something more insidious has come to represent the tone of our times. It begins with a whisper, soon it is being bellowed through a loudspeaker and before you can dispute the canard, a man, any man is dead. In these times, when the siege on India's Constitutional commitment to secularism and social justice is more pervasive what struggles await SAHMAT in the coming year?