

The setting up of Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat) was a spontaneous and organic response to the murder of a street theater activist, known for his commitment to the democratic and secular principles that undergirded the promise of Indian independence. Since it came in to being in 1989, Sahmat has stood for preserving the very values that defined Safdar's public work. And for those of us, who's path has ever crossed Delhi knows and looks forward to the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Day on 1st January every year.

This year, the Safdar Evening was themed around the 25th anniversary of the Babri Masjid Demolition. The outpouring of grief and rage at Safdar's death coincided with a transformational shift in Indian politics, manifest most notably in the rise of a seditious and pernicious *Hindutva* ideology. In a matter of months, if not weeks, artists, actors, writers and other cultural figures coalesced around an informal banner that Sahmat offered and used their cultural expressions to proffer a critique of the ideology of hate and discrimination. However, by 1992, the very idea of India as a composite society was upended on its head when a swath of *kar sevaks* brought down the "disputed" structure of Babri Mosque in Ayodhya with absolute impunity. The ensuing confusion and shock left little room for a concerted effort. Despite that, Sahmat brought a delegation together and sent representation to the then President of India while at the same time mobilizing artists to produce a critical response to the demolition on the streets of Delhi. An exhibition followed which travelled to Ayodhya, among other places, in those troubled times.

The story of the three exhibitions on display at the Vitthalbhai Patel House, where Sahmat's event has taken place for years, tells the story of India since that day. "Hum Sab Ayodhya"- the exhibition organized close on the heels of the demolition, was showcased on one end of the room. The exhibition closely follows the history of Ayodhya and falsifies the myopic and wholly contrived narrative of the Ram Janmabhoomi movement, by bringing to surface the syncretic traditions that made Ayodhya's history and that of its surroundings. However, in this age of love-jihad, beef lynchings and caste flare ups over works of cinema, it was hard to anticipate the many other vicious forces that Babri demolition would unleash. And this is the crucial difference that marked "Hum Sab Ayodhya" from this year's exhibition, "Beyond Dispute: Landscapes of Dissent". The latter explores the crevices that run [and divide] fault line- like the Indian society today. Beyond Dispute calls upon artists to reflect on the myriad ways in which the same degree of violence has been unleashed in our times whose moorings may seem different but contribute to the same environment of insular and exclusionary politics. With almost 50 artists working through different mediums, the new Sahmat exhibition unravels the politics of our times in the most vivid and yet, poignant ways. It goes far beyond the question of the Hindu-Muslim divide and brings to relief contestations around pedagogy and education, culinary and sartorial choices, conflicts and separatist tendencies, Dalit marginalization and mass displacement to name just few. It is apt to return to the editorial title that *the Times of India* carried out on the day after the demolition – The Republic Besmirched. Collectively these 60- odd works make the point about how a republic was lost, and a thrust for a new, undesirable one commenced on that fateful day of 1992.

The central panel of the exhibit also displayed an immense installation art with three dome like structures looming above the works, suspended in air as a constant specter.

The last exhibit, *Dharti ke Laal*, was a result of a call given by noted photographer Ram Rahman. In his call Rahman asked young photographers to directly engage with the ongoing agrarian crisis and represent the blazing fields in the portrait medium. 27 photographers participated in this project to produce over 150 powerful portraits that were mostly composed during the farmer's maha padyatra to Delhi in November, 2017. These images mounted in the montage format, collectively tell the story of one of India's most shameful act of denial where lakhs of farmers have been forced to take their lives and many more millions have abandoned their hearth and homes, to be thrown into further precarity. The images of widows sitting with the picture of their dead husbands awaiting compensation or the images of the sparse kitchens of the veritable food-producers collectively convey a message of indignation and state complicity.

Releasing the SAHMAT Gandhi Calendar for 2018, noted historian Mahmoud Mamdani remarked that the task of our times is to bring the enemy into the realm of an adversary. An adversary, he says, is one that can be engaged with an intention of reforming and an enemy remains just that; a formless being upon whom only the logic of crime and punishment applies. He was accompanied at the calendar release with his partner and film maker, Mira Nair.

Sahmat programme commenced with screening Virender Saini's 1993 movie "Ayodhya" the 40 minute film that was produced in 1993 itself underlines the plurality and harmony of the everyday lived life of the ancient city of Ayodhya. The director was present on the occasion and the cultural performances were interspersed with eyewitness accounts from 6th December 1992. Suman Gupta a senior correspondent of Faizabad based paper Jan Morcha was a key eyewitness of the events along with several other journalists on the 6th of December 1992. She along with another senior journalist Ruchira Gupta narrated the horrifying incidents of that dreadful day and how in a planned manner the Masjid was brought down by Kar Sevaks and the scores of journalist were threatened, molested and have beaten up.

The day as usual had started with street theater performances by Bigul, and Jatan Natya Kendra, Haryana, renditions of revolutionary poems as well as five songs on Ram which the Jan Natya Manch- Kurukshetra performed to relay the multiplicity of meanings that the god has for different classes and communities. A group of young artists from Pune performed a short play "Main Safdar Hoon".

The music programme began with the singing of young artist Arman Ali Develvi and the evening ended with powerful performances by folk and sufi artists, Madan Gopal Singh, Jasbir Jassi and Rabbi Shergill who regaled the audience with the classic Sufi-poetry.

As has become a convention by now SAHMAT released two books in Hindi. Do Sarfrosh Shayar (Two Revolutionary Poets) by Wakar Siddiqui, is an account of the lives of famous revolutionaries Ram Prasad Bismil and Ashfaqulla Khan who were hanged for being involved in the Kakori Case. Their lives, family backgrounds and poetry is made available in Hindustani for the first-time. The second book Azadi Ke Sattar Saal (Seventy Years of Indian Freedom) edited by Rajendra Sharma contains essays by Irfan Habib, Gopal Gandhi, Ashok Vajpeyi, Anil Sadgopal

(all organized by SAHMAT) as lectures marking 70 years of Indian Independence). Also included in the book are articles by Prabhat Patnaik, Amar Farooqui, Shubha, Subhash Gatade and Rajendra Sharma. The books were released by poet Manmohan.