

# FRONTLINE

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## Violence and resistance

DEEKSHA NATH

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Pushpamala N., Kali (after 1908 Calcutta art studio print). Photo: By Special Arrangement



(Left, next to wall text) Gulammohammed Sheikh, Gandhi Returns; (right) Gauri Gill, Irom Sharmila. 4493 Days. Photo: By Special Arrangement



(Left) Probir Gupta, Reconstructed from Debris and Memories; (right) Ram Rahman, Gujarat 2002: Survivors. Photo: By Special Arrangement





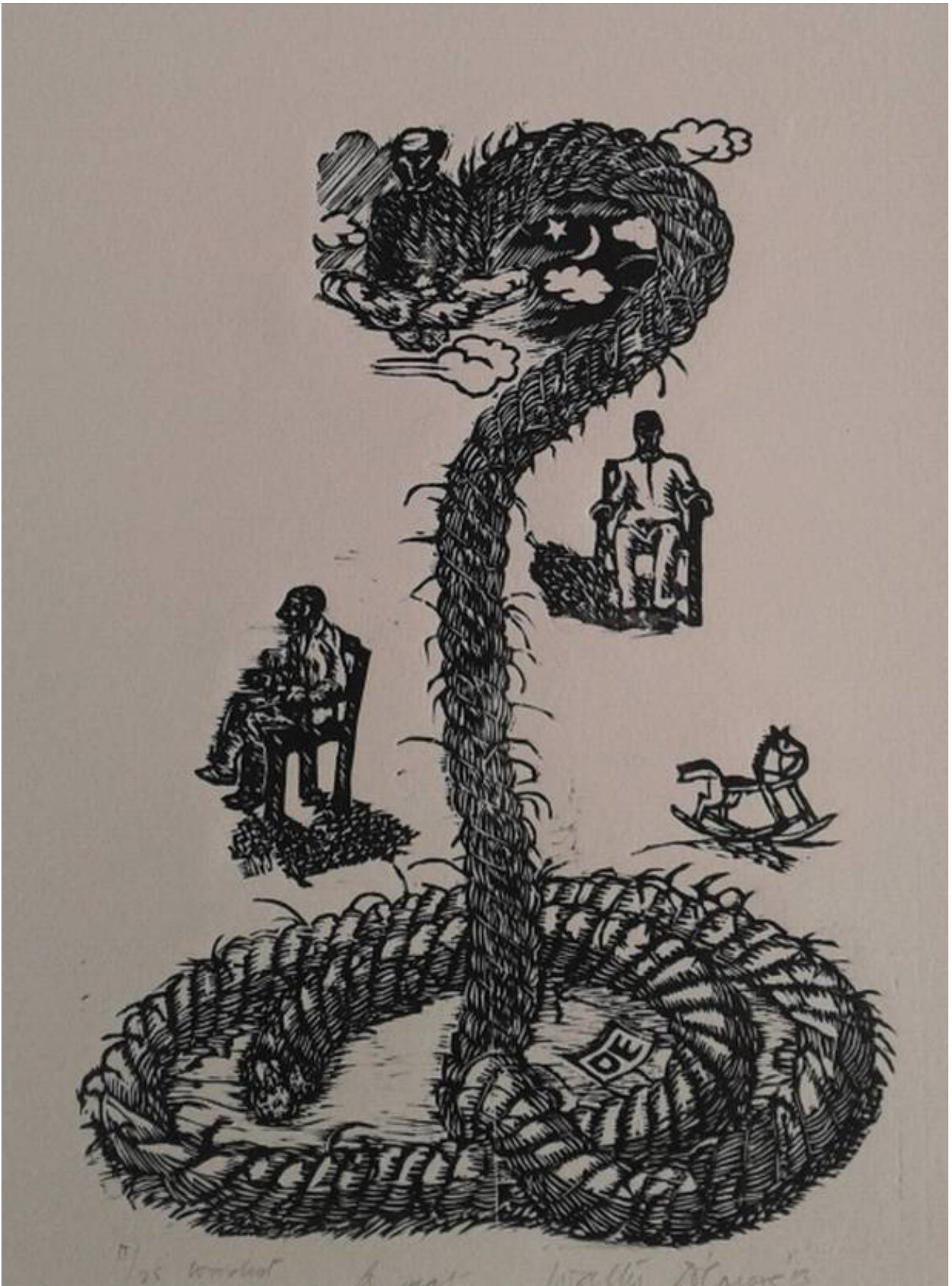
Vasudha Thozhur, 2002: A Portrait. Photo: By Special Arrangement



(Left, on the floor) Inder Salim, AFSPA You Kill; (right) Subba Ghosh, Prisoner-1. Photo: By Special Arrangement



A view of the exhibition: (left) Inder Salim, In performance; (right , video) Anita Dube, Kiss-e-Noor Mohammed. Photo: By Special Arrangement



Walter D'Souza, A Seat (woodcut). Photo: By Special Arrangement





Walter D'Souza, The Great Indian Rope Trick (woodcut). Photo: By Special Arrangement



Riyas Komu, Stoned Goddesses (detail). Photo: By Special Arrangement



Reena Saini Kallat, Untitled. Photo: By Special Arrangement





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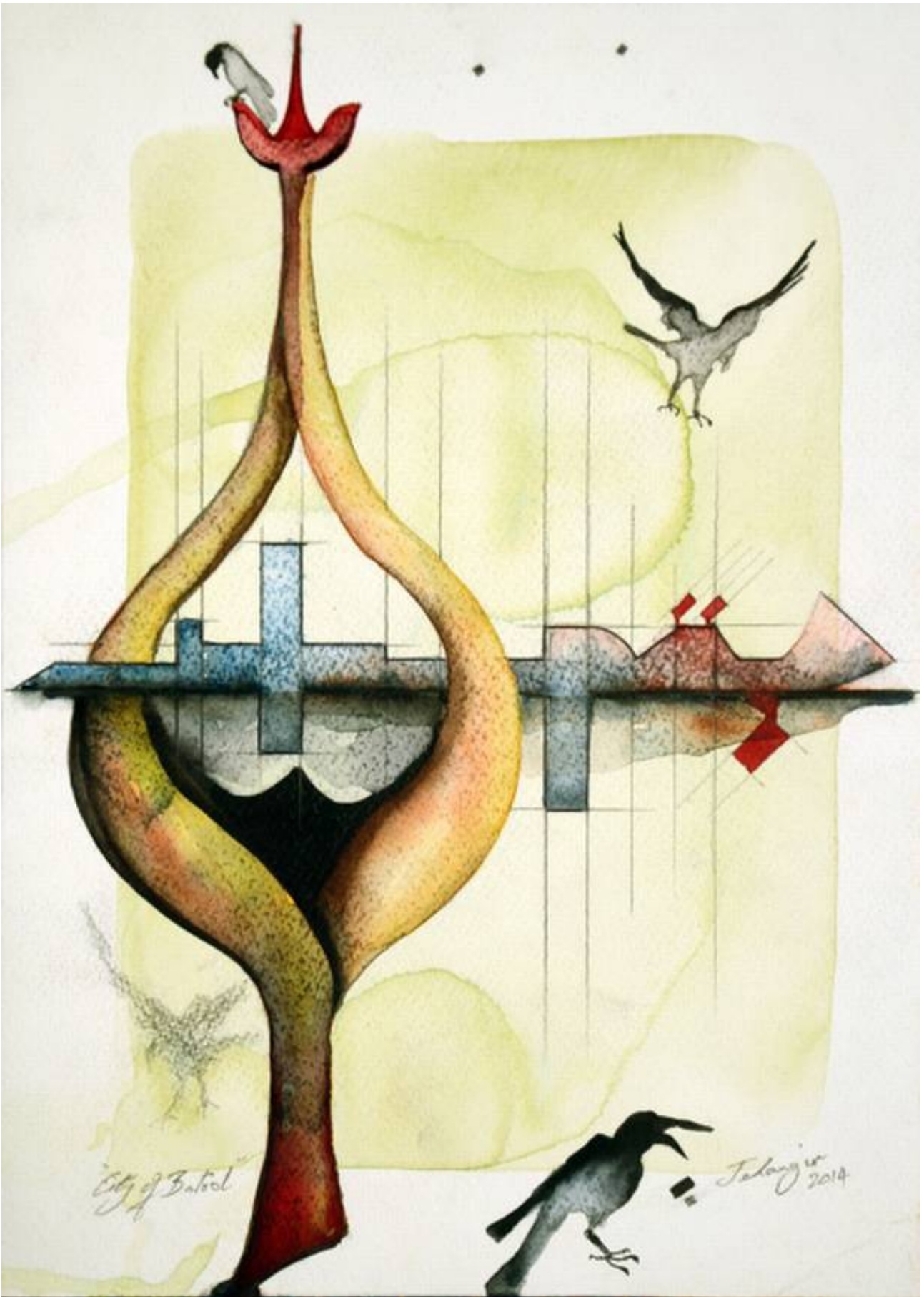


Gauri Gill, Irom Sharmila. 4493 Days. Photo: By Special Arrangement

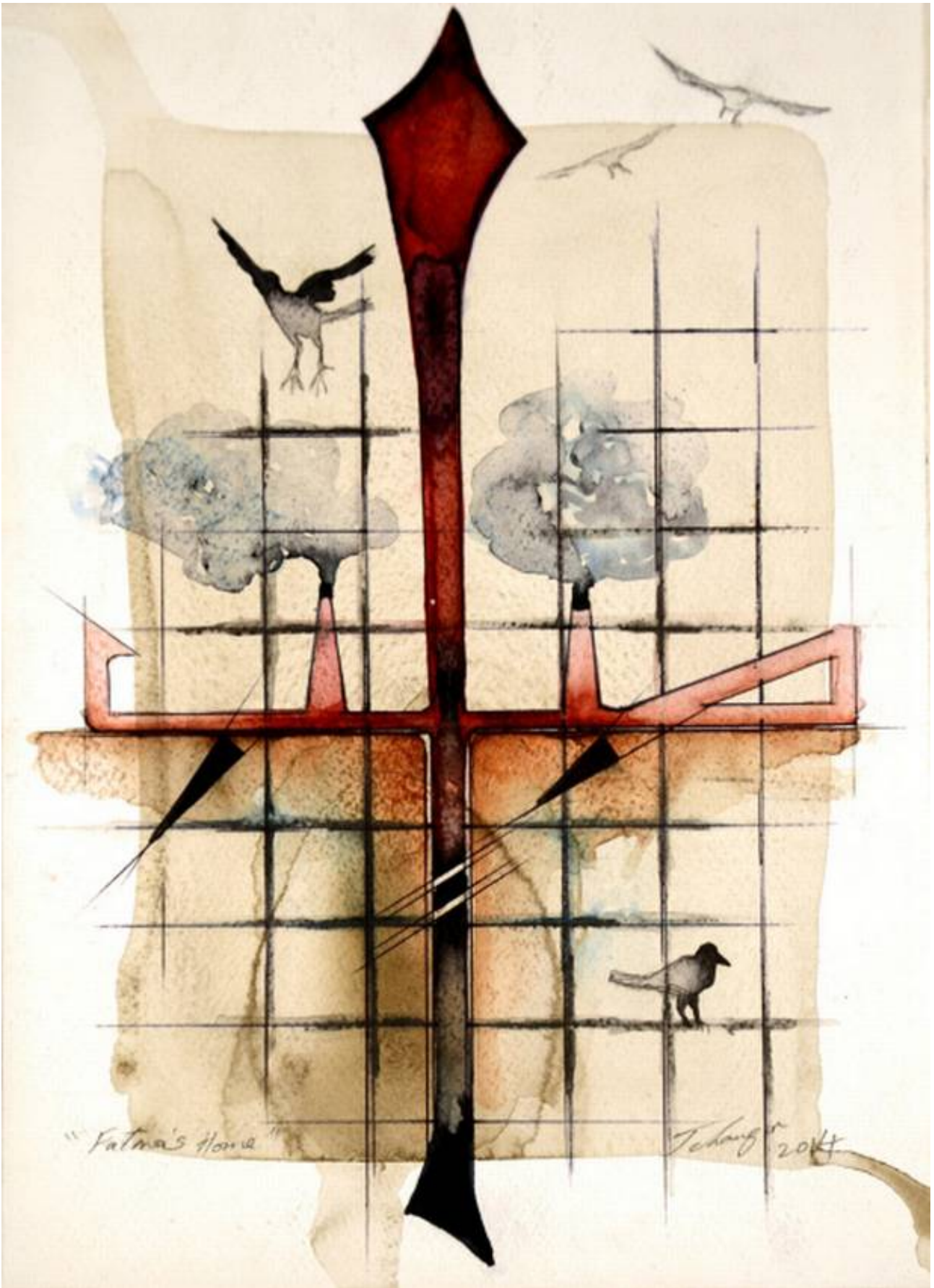


(Foreground) Arunkumar H.G., Droppings and the Dam(n). Photo: By Special Arrangement





Jehangir Jani, City of Batool. Photo: By Special Arrangement



Jehangir Jani, Fatma's Home. Photo: By Special Arrangement

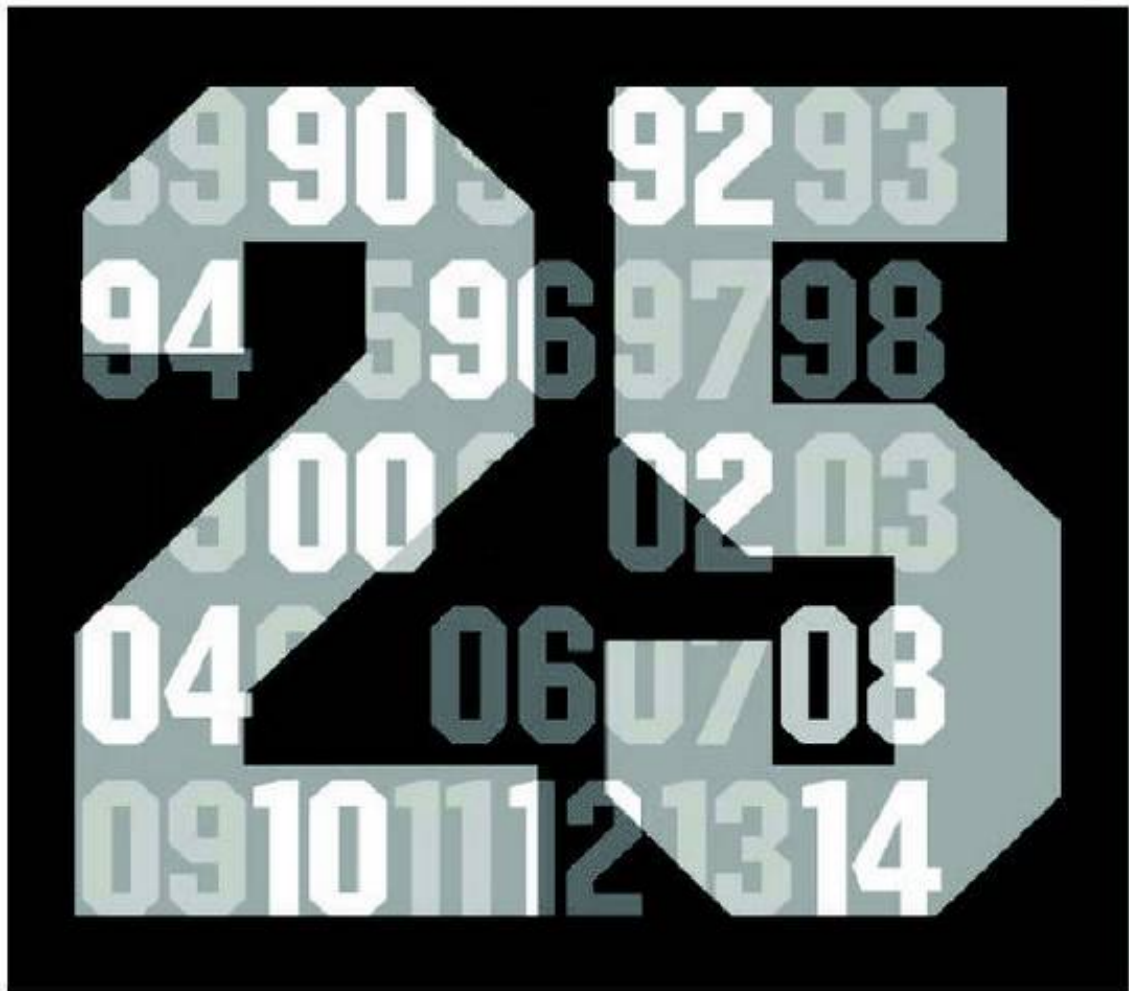




Safdar Hashmi, during a street performance. Photo: By Special Arrangement



# SAHMAT सहमत



Forms of Activism, an exhibition held to commemorate the 25th anniversary of SAHMAT, is a testimony to the state violence and erasure experienced by 'marginal' groups in the country and the varied forms of protest and struggle that have emerged as a response.

THE group exhibition Forms of Activism, curated by Vivan Sundaram and Sasha Altaf, was on view at the Lalit Kala Akademi, Rabindra Bhavan, New Delhi, from February 24 to March 5, 2014, marking the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust's (SAHMAT) 25th anniversary. SAHMAT was formed by a group of artists, scholars, cultural activists and media persons in response to the murder of the theatre activist Safdar Hashmi on January 1, 1989. SAHMAT has worked, through performances, exhibitions and publications, to create spaces for the expression of social pluralism, justice and equality.

The 37 artists in Forms of Activism address multiple areas of violence, censure, erasure and abuse experienced by different groups and individuals in contemporary India, and the varied manifestations of protest, challenge and struggle that arise in response to them. They do so through a mix of bold performative gestures, impassioned and accusatory text and speech acts, documents and statements of fact steeped in outrage, and abstract, conceptual, contemplative artworks.

State silent, state implicit, state complicit

We are repeatedly shown evidence of the state's and the Army's use of barbaric intimidation and interrogation techniques to maintain fear and control in troubled parts of the country, under the rubric of the Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act (AFSPA). At the start of the exhibition, we confront a monumental black-and-white photograph, taken by the Delhi-based photographer Gauri Gill in 2005, of Irom Sharmila in her hospital confinement with the nasogastric tube through which the authorities are forcibly feeding her. The force-feeding keeps her alive as she protests the presence and actions of the armed forces in Manipur, through a hunger strike which she began in 2000. Irom's young life may not be her own: first, given up to her beliefs and the lives of her people, and second, not allowed to meet its natural end through the violent intervention of the

feeding tube. Yet, she has put to practice a form of protest valorised in modern India since Gandhi. Why did Anna Hazare succeed in garnering clamorous attention across the country through his hunger strike but not Irom? Irom Sharmila is under arrest because her hunger strike has been defined by the Army as a form of suicide and thus deemed criminal. How can a nation idealise one person's hunger strike and criminalise another's, we are prompted to ask. Artists in the exhibition act out expressions of their rage. An installation by Inder Salim shows a corpse-like form shrouded in a Kashmiri carpet, lying on a bed. Strapped to his body is an electronic ticker on which scroll the words "AFSPA, You Kill". This is accompanied by endless sounds of gunfire. The installation is startlingly forthright, crude and direct in its address. Placed alongside is a large black-and-white drawing of a squatting, handcuffed prisoner by Subba Ghosh (Prisoner-1, 2010). The dehumanisation of individuals in captivity through fear and abuse is part of the process of breaking down their mental, physical and emotional resources.

Draconian laws validate the state's transformation from protector to hunter—a hunter of terrorists, of insurgents, of animals. The debasement of human beings to an animal state is also the theme of Sheba Chhachhi's exhibit—two vertical light boxes with a stationary backdrop and a scrolling narrative and visual reference (The Trophy Hunters, 2008).

In one, the backdrop is a tapestry of scenes of hunts and war, with references from medieval miniature paintings, photographs and found images from print and archival media. Spectral trophies of animal heads scroll in the foreground. The second lightbox is text, interviews and conversations with the perpetrators and victims of injustice and violence in Kashmir. There is a sport made of the hunt and the kill. In the Middle Ages, it was the sport of royalty and the powerful to stage the hunt of a powerful beast. Today, security personnel play a cat-and-mouse game with those on the fringes of our society, staging encounters, retelling tales of murder, exemplified in an instance narrated by a police officer, reproduced in Chhachhi's scroll.

Tushar Joag's *Repeal, Resuscitate: Waiting for the Wind* (2014) is visually eloquent in depicting the futility and desperation of the



disenfranchised victims of the AFSPA in the north-eastern region of India. Reports of numerous commissions have highlighted how the Act has become a symbol of oppression and a cover for atrocities, but they lie disused. The pages of the reports ruffle and turn weakly when the wind of a small rotating electric fan (such as one may see in a government office) turns onto them—a potent metaphor for the fleeting attentions of those in power, and the media and the public. A windsock is the hopes of the victims rising sky-high when filled with air, and deflating as quickly when the wind changes. At the same time, the installation signals solidarity with the people of regions where the AFSPA is in operation. With the windsock, however temporary its exultation, the artist gestures towards blowing life into the movements from the north-eastern States. Irom Sharmila chooses self-harm as her mode of protest but the state takes away her right to choose by keeping her forcibly alive. Others have chosen the same path of self-harm, a path that points to extreme despair and hopelessness. In the print media over the last decade, P. Sainath's reportage provides chilling figures on farmers' suicides: 46 suicides every day, nearly one every half-hour, since 2001. Five States account for the majority of farmers' suicides: Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. He calls into question the 2011 Census which shows decreased numbers, with Chhattisgarh declaring "zero" suicide. Sainath quotes Prof. K. Nagaraj, an economist at the Asian College of Journalism, Chennai: "Large numbers of farm suicides still occur.... Only that seems not to be recognised, officially and politically. Is the 'conspiracy of silence' back in action?" ("Farmers' suicide rates soar above the rest", *The Hindu*, Mumbai, May 18, 2013).

Prashant Panjiar's eight photographs in the series *Drylands* (2010) relate to farmer suicides in Vidarbha, Maharashtra, in the last week of March 2010. More than 8,000 farmers have committed suicide in Vidarbha since 2001. The documentary photographs append a dismal tale of corpses, untilled lands, extreme poverty and the martyrdom of those who died.

1984 and 2002: the riots memorialised

Riots in India have often been the stage for the state's inaction as well as complicity. Hartosh Singh Bal wrote of the Nanavati Commission, established in 2000 to investigate the anti-Sikh riots of 1984 in Delhi: "When the BJP appointed him [Nanavati], they already knew what he would conclude. The political class was shielding its own. The faith of the young Sikhs in the possibility of the Congress or the Indian state coming to its senses made them unwitting actors in the last act of a pre-scripted farce." In *Smouldering City 1984*, Arpana Caur paints a seated, yogi-like figure about to cut his/her long hair with a sword, a defacement of Sikh cultural identity.

Gauri Gill's small takeaway black-and-white booklet entitled *1984* is filled with photographs of survivors of the 1984 riots. Most of the survivors witnessed murders of their friends and family. The photographs were taken in 2005, after the release of the controversial Nanavati Commission Report, and again in 2009, 25 years after the riots. Alongside are biographical notes and observations and quotes by select artists to whom Gauri Gill sent individual photographs from the folio. The text contains stories of horrific murder and of official apathy and injustice; the photographs seem almost romantic in comparison—they are personal portraits and there is no violence on view. This dichotomy magnifies the tragedy: for survivors, life carries on, and their wounds are often not visually present.

Ram Rahman displays portraits of survivors of the 2002 Gujarat genocide (*Gujarat 2002: Survivors*, 2014). Alongside is an expressionist rendering of victimhood by Probir Gupta (*Reconstructed from Debris and Memories*, 2014), reminiscent of Picasso's *Guernica*. Next to the painted canvas is a boat made from rubble and a suitcase of broken wooden panes essaying a tale of resettlement and mourning.

Vasudha Thozur's *2002: A Portrait* (2008–13) includes paintings, prints and textile art, and revolves around a painting of Shahjehan, a survivor of the massacre at Naroda Patiya. The painting is a likeness of a photograph taken of the young woman while she was undergoing surgery to reconstruct her jaw and graft burnt areas of her skin. Around the painting are placed print experiments made by

the artist at the time and embroidered panels, which may allude to textile art as the main employer of many women in Gujarat. Navjot Altaf presents a strident critique of the state in *Trial of Impunity* (2014), a two-screen video installation housed in a skewed, tunnel-like structure covered with press clippings of the 2002 riots in Gujarat. On the screens are conversations between the artist, an activist and a survivor of the riots about the “forms of life that begin where dignity ends”. Says the artist: “There is a level of impunity built into the political system that has affected constitutional democracy in India.” The persecution of minority communities is effected in tangible and intangible ways—through the failure of the judicial system, by exclusion in public and private sector workplace, by poor medical and education services and infrastructure—but a large element of fear stems from the knowledge and experience of the people that state institutions and political parties protect and shield their own.

A myriad of exhibits ask the questions: How do we memorialise that which is unacknowledged, unjust—an open wound? How do we remember? How do we heal? And how do we live with the knowledge that ongoing unspeakable acts of violence are a state’s, a community’s, pogrom?

There is rot, a moulding core of a glass house (B.V. Suresh, *Bread Irreversible*, 2006–13). There is a tombstone made on a beach with white powder which reads “Wash Your Guilt. Build a Memorial”. The tide washes it away (Reena Saini Kallat, *Untitled*, 2014). There is a photograph of a historical building of the Mughal period on a ledge, the ground around it dug away (Gigi Scaria, *Peripheries of the Known World*, 2014).

A pensive Gandhi walks through a high street. He avoids eye contact (Gulammohammed Sheikh, *Gandhi Returns*, 2014). There is a burial/excavation site. Inside is a large photograph of Maqbool Fida Husain (Arpana Caur, *Do gaz zamin bhi na mili...*, 2014).

Resurgence as evolution

Environmental exploitation and damage is another recurrent theme in the exhibition. Parthiv Shah uses a bleached sepia tone in his photograph of pipes pumping in and out to the Narmada (*Piped Dreams*, 2014) as a metaphor for environmental degradation. Pratul



Dash's video, *The Story of a Landscape* (2010–11), depicts a lush green landscape turned black, referring perhaps to the destruction of ecologies by coal mining. Vibha Galhotra's *Untitled* installations (from the series *Sediments and Other Untitled*, 2010–13) include a wall-mounted, extra-long glass test tube in which the artist collected water from the Yamuna. During the course of the exhibition the black grime has settled at the bottom. The water is dirty and shades of the filth are visible in the graded grey water.

Arunkumar H.G. collected plastic bottle caps over several years to create an undulating enclosure, sensual in its chromatic and tactile appeal, in *Droppings and the Dam(n)*. Ayisha Abraham informs us in her circular monochrome book *Growth and Environment* (2011) that climate has tipping points and that one seemingly small change can have long-ranging and catastrophic effects. With this knowledge we watch Ravi Agarwal's video, *Mixer* (2014), of a cement mixer in motion, warning us of ever-increasing concretisation of land.

Defying the stern portents of a steadily greying world of ecological catastrophe, in Jitish Kallat's *Metonym* (2011), a tiny pipal plant sprouts from the wall of a building. The stubborn pipal grows through nooks and crannies of houses and is a quiet reminder that when we are done and gone there will remain organisms on this planet we will not have destroyed. Ecological resurgence mirrors acts of human resistance. So also, no matter how much a state straitjackets people and ideologies, resistance and pluralism will not be stamped out. Sharmila Samant's installation brings together some of these undercurrents. Against a backdrop of unchecked state power, beleaguered citizenry and land exploitation, she writes: "Resistance is the consequence, in spaces where domination, power or oppression by the state is the norm."

Art, activism and politics

Through the exhibition the viewer weaves between aesthetic merit and subjective address. We often find ourselves forgetting to look at the artwork for pleasure, because its appeal lies in its politics. We empathise with Saba Hasan's words: "We Indians like to burn", alongside her painting *Men Shedding Their Skin* (2006). Curiously, the painting of four overlapping figures bent over in an indistinct act supports the text, rather than the other way around.

It is almost impossible not to focus on what the artists are speaking of. But the lasting impression of the exhibition is that Forms of Activism forefronts the artist's position and the artistic endeavour in participating in the collective social conscience. And thus the title of the exhibition is clever wordplay, for it reads the duality of "form" as mode of being and mode of presenting. The artist not only depicts activism but embodies it, and thus artistic practice too is a form of activism. You get a different picture of injustice through the eyes of artists than perhaps you would from reading newspapers or historical accounts. The experience is much more intense, and the descriptions are much more explicit.

Deeksha Nath is a New Delhi-based independent art critic and curator.

*Deeksha Nath: Violence and Resistance, Review of Forms of Activism, Frontline Magazine, 2014*