

Risk

# HYBRID

INTERDISCIPLINARY JOURNAL OF ART, DESIGN, AND ARCHITECTURE



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# Hybrid

Interdisciplinary Journal of Art, Design, and Architecture

*Hybrid* is a thematic journal aimed at fostering a culture of research and writing at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture and beyond. It is transdisciplinary in nature, and focuses primarily on those practices and projects that seek to apply any combination of art, design, architectural, and related genres, to issues of critical, cultural, political, and educational significance, inclusion, and social justice. It emphasizes praxis by providing a forum for research into the creative practices that exist within urban, academic, developmental, and other milieus, especially in the national and regional contexts of Pakistan and South Asia. *Hybrid* offers a platform for disseminating research by established and upcoming academics and practitioners as well as students, and includes sections for lead essays, a photo-essay, interview, portfolio and a spotlight on crafts. Its objective is to bring new and multiple perspectives, grounded in Pakistan and the region, to a local, regional and international audience, and to further pertinent debates.

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## Editorial

It is only fitting that the editorial board chose 'Risk' as the theme for the 2021 issue of Hybrid. Individuals and communities around the world have been grappling with the uncertainties produced by the Covid-19 pandemic, as the rules of normal life got upended for months on end. Our choices about how to modify our behavior and protect the health and safety of our loved ones depended on figuring out what medical advice to trust and which government guidelines to follow. We became experts in constantly assessing and managing risk in our everyday lives.

At the same time, there are other crises bearing down upon the present historical moment and vying for our attention. The urgency of the climate change catastrophe and the devastating impact on the earth's environment resonate particularly loudly. The crisis of democracy and rise of authoritarian rule, the damaging march of globalized capitalism and neoliberal economies, the onslaught of ill-planned urban expansion and ensuing shortages of housing and livelihoods, all are threats that demand action. Anticipating and negotiating with risk seems to have become a permanent condition of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century period that we live in. The sociologist Ulrich Beck came up with the concept of 'Risk Society'<sup>1</sup> to describe this world characterized by proliferating technological hazards and a pervasive sense of insecurity. Anthony Giddens argues this is a condition of 'reflexive modernity'<sup>2</sup> where societies are increasingly preoccupied with examining themselves and are oriented towards the future rather than the past. Both theorists highlight how our perceptions and evaluations of risk shape the types of intervention, social organization and knowledge claims that become dominant.

Risk is typically associated with terms like danger, fragility, loss and failure in its quotidian use, i.e. with negative forces that need to be controlled and worked against. Attempts to regulate risk usually privilege discourses of safety and predictability within education, art and scholarship. Yet there are other creative and affirmative meanings of risk which invoke agency, growth, transgression and transformation that also underpin the discursive vision for this year's issue. Without putting something on the line, without imagining radically different futures, how do we find a way out of the multiple crises of our social institutions? When one takes on a risk, one also assumes the responsibility that comes with it. It is the richness and mobile history of this term that we invited our contributors to explore and that they embrace fully within this volume.

Nudrat Kamal shares her insightful look at the literary genre of speculative science fiction and fantasy writing in South Asia. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century texts contained expressly anti-colonial, anti-capitalist themes, while most contemporary works are set in dark, dystopic worlds marked by corporate control, surveillance and environmental destruction. Even as they describe grim realities, Kamal shows, these writings provide hopeful visions of a just, equitable and habitable future for the planet where hierarchies of gender, caste, class, and region are subverted.

Gulraiz Khan takes up the challenge of re-imagining what the city of Karachi could look like if a viable public transit system was available to its residents. Tragic failures of planning and political paralysis have left the metropolis without the infrastructure it needs to thrive. His well-researched and painstakingly constructed maps extend a series of interconnected bus, rail and ferry lines across the city, offering a tantalizing reminder of how Karachi can be transformed if barriers to urban mobility are removed.

Palvashay Sethi's essay about the Black American comedian Richard Pryor invites us to think about the transgressive potential of laughter and of comedic traditions that dwell on taboo subjects. She deftly analyses Pryor's performances that used to be rife with seemingly off-color jokes, demonstrating the close association between his risqué humor and the risks of speaking bitter truths about racial politics, sex, death, and those living at the margins of society.

Niyati Dave and Manjiri Dube of Khoj write about their curatorial projects with communities living in conditions of urban precarity in New Delhi. They bring out the potential of socially engaged art to enable connections and conversations about gendered violence, abuse, displacement, and spatial inequalities, even as the fragile nature of such interventions highlight their ethical responsibilities as curators. A photo-essay by the Pak Khawateen Painting Club documents the devastation wrought upon lands and people by ambitious infrastructure projects. Part performance and part ethnographic inquiry, the group's second expedition (the first one was to mega-dams in the north of the country) takes them to the lower reaches of the River Indus which has been tamed by a series of barrages, and makes them question the ecological costs imposed in the name of national progress.

In the section on crafts and artisanship, Babar N. Sheikh takes us on an intimate journey to an old Karachi neighborhood and down memory lane with the owner of a small family-owned business that has managed to survive amidst rising commercialization, mechanization and mass production. The shop is celebrated for its *bakarkhani*, a baked confectionery item made using a recipe and an arduous hand-crafting process that the family has perfected over six decades. Syed Safdar Ali's essay for the student section also contains a poignant rumination on memory and loss in the face of exploitative capitalism and urban development. He recounts how water

used to be a collectively shared resource in the small town of Tando Jam in Sindh and turned into a privatized good, unequally available to all, without any protest or lament being registered by the town residents.

The process of putting this issue together has itself been a risky endeavor that came together amid turbulence and uncertainty. The journal took a one-year gap during the pandemic and by the time I asked new members to join the editorial team, we were already confronting tight deadlines and additional responsibilities. I am grateful to all of them for saying yes and for being wonderful, thoughtful collaborators, as well as to our designer Kiran Ahmad for putting up with us through this madcap journey. I couldn't have asked for a more satisfying beginning to my time at the Indus Valley School.

Faiza Mushtaq  
Editor, *Hybrid* 04 | Risk



## Notes

1. Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. Translated by Mark Ritter. (London: Sage Publications, 1992).
2. Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. (Cambridge, England: Polity Press, 1991).

# Dreaming Futures: The Risks and Rewards of South Asian Futurisms

Nudrat Kamal

"The most characteristic science fiction does not seriously attempt to imagine the "real" future of our social system. Rather, its multiple mock futures serve the quite different function of transforming our own present into the determinate past of something yet to come."

– Fredric Jameson, "Progress versus Utopia; Or, Can We Imagine the Future?"<sup>1</sup>

"Visions of the future imagine how life might be otherwise. If we do not imagine our futures, postcolonial peoples risk being condemned to be spoken about and for again."

– Uppinder Mehan, *So Long Been Dreaming*<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction: Why South Asian Futurisms?

It is the end of the 21st century and Mumbai, like most major cities of South Asia, has drowned. Gaiacorp, a ruthless multinational corporation that already rules parts of the world, has won the bidding war to run the subcontinent's government, and many of the remaining unsubmerged towns are being ravaged by heatwaves, famines and violence. At the same time, hundreds of small, zero-carbon *bastis* have cropped up all over South Asia, each adapted to its local ecology but connected to one another by green corridors and a huge data network called the Sensornet that measures energy use, temperature, carbon flows, and biodiversity indexes. These *basti* clusters, largely the product of the engineering and design of an Adivasi woman, and inhabited and sustained initially by slum dwellers and climate refugees from all over the subcontinent, have just now begun to shift the regional climate back in the right direction, an event hailed as The Great Turning. Welcome to the future, as dreamed and articulated by Indian physicist and science fiction writer, Vandana Singh, in her short story "Reunion"<sup>3</sup>— a mixture of eerily plausible dystopia and quietly revolutionary utopia that is just one of a kaleidoscope of possible futures South Asian speculative fiction writers have been imagining.

The act of imagining and speculating different kinds of future societies is a creative endeavor as well as a political and philosophical one. From Plato's *Republic* which culminates in the articulation of a utopian city-state ruled by a philosopher king, to the vision of a perfect society ruled by Muslim philosophers expressed in Al-Farabi's 9th century treatise *Al-Madina al-Fadila*

(*The Virtuous City*), to 17th century writer Margaret Cavendish's *The Description of a New World, Called The Blazing-World* about a perfect, division-less society, writers and thinkers for centuries have been involved in constructing imaginary societies that help clarify their ideas about the futures of their own societies. But it was from the mid-19th century on, in the wake of the Age of Enlightenment and the acceleration of the intertwined projects of capitalism and colonization which undergirded Western modernity, that visions of the future began to be solidified in the form of the distinct literary genre of science fiction (or SF). Entangled as modernity is with ideas of both scientific and social progress, it was a particularly well-suited period for futuristic visions, more so than the historical periods that came before. According to Anthony Giddens, "modernity is vastly more dynamic than any previous type of social order. It is a society which, unlike any preceding culture, *lives in the future, rather than the past*."<sup>4</sup> To grapple with the dynamic change that characterizes modernity, many futuristic SF texts emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries, a flowering that continues to this day.

However, just as modernity is intertwined with the Western imperial project, the development of the science fiction genre too has a particular colonial history. According to Adam Roberts, science fiction serves as the "dark subconscious to the thinking mind of Imperialism",<sup>5</sup> the seedy underbelly hidden beneath the rationalistic veneer given to colonial and neocolonial ideas. John Rieder argues that the origins of science fiction must be contextualised as a product of imperialist culture, beginning in late nineteenth-century British and French fantasies of global conquest and then emerging in the "new" imperialist cultures of Germany, Russia, the United States and Japan in the twentieth century<sup>6</sup>. After all, the two biggest myths in science fiction are that of the Stranger (the alien, whether it's extra-terrestrial, the technological, or the human-hybrid) and the Strange Land (the far-away planet or a distant part of our own, waiting to be conquered), and both these myths also serve as the pillars of the Western colonial project. But just as the genre of science fiction has been a vehicle to explore and further imperial fantasies, it also has the generic tools through which critiques of colonialism and racism can be enacted, through which non-white people can tell their own stories, drawing on their own cultural heritages in different forms. Science fiction's exploration of otherness and marginality, and its potential for imagining more equitable futures, lends itself well to a postcolonial ethos – a potential which many science fiction writers from colonized and formerly colonized places have embraced and which has led to a hybrid kind of science fiction known as "postcolonial science fiction". Postcolonial science fiction can be defined as that particular kind of science fiction that acknowledges and then subverts, in different ways, the genre's genealogical and ideological debt to colonialism.

The term postcolonial science fiction is useful to keep in mind while tracing the trajectory of futuristic visions in South Asia, the origin of which can be traced to the early 19th century. Much of the science fiction being written in the subcontinent since the 19th century, according

to Suparno Banerjee, re-contextualized modernity "not only within the Enlightenment tradition but also within a mythic rebirth of ancient Indian wisdom, or traditions that question modernity itself by imagining alternative ways of being"<sup>7</sup>. In contrast to visions of the future that came from the minds of writers from Western Europe and North America in the wake of modernity, South Asian visions of the future have a more complicated relationship to modernity, because the subcontinent's own relationship to modernity has been shaped by its colonial past and continues to be mediated by neocolonialism and global capitalism. It is therefore worth investigating the specificities of such futuristic texts to see whether they can be gathered into visions of a collective and transnational future for South Asia which we might call "South Asian futurisms."

In trying to tease out the nuances of what the term South Asian futurisms might constitute, we can look to Afrofuturism and African Futurism for inspiration. The term Afrofuturism was a term coined by Mark Dery<sup>8</sup> to refer to speculative fiction that addresses the concerns of Black Americans in modes that draw on their unique histories and cultures. In critiquing the West-centric gaze of the term Afrofuturism, Nigerian speculative fiction writer Nnedi Okorafor came up with the term African Futurism, which might be even more useful for our purposes. Okorafor defines African Futurism as "a subcategory of science fiction" that is "similar to 'Afrofuturism'" but more deeply "rooted in African culture, history, mythology and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West"<sup>9</sup>. By not centering itself around the concept of "American" in its definitions, African futurism is freed from the white Western gaze. Similar to the ways in which African futurist texts imagine sustained and specific futures based on various African countries' unique cultural traditions and histories, and which acknowledge and grapple with the role of Western colonialism and slavery in the continent, South Asian speculative fiction envisions futures for South Asia that draw on our own histories and cultures without necessarily centering the Western gaze. In conceiving of the category of South Asian futurisms, therefore, we might understand this body of South Asian literature as one which mixes colonial ideas with indigenous philosophical thought, scientific knowledge and cultural mythology, in ways that reject Western understandings of South Asia because they have typically been produced by and for vernacular communities of the subcontinent.

What kind of futures are being envisaged by writers who are located in specific local socio political contexts of South Asia and who are rooted within various South Asian histories and cultures? How can these futures transcend the local and contribute to global visions of the future? How do such visions explore the unique risks of being an individual or a community in South Asia in the 21st century, subject to various systems of power and hierarchy? An important aspect of this envisioned futurity is its power of de-familiarisation and restructuring of the reader's own present. Futuristic visions can play a role in jarring readers out of their complacency and allowing them to view their own present through a more critical lens. Frederic Jameson contends

that this de-familiarisation enacted by SF futures also does the important work of turning the reader's present into the past of something indeterminate, making readers more aware of their own temporality.<sup>10</sup> This function of futuristic texts becomes doubly important when it comes to colonized and formerly colonized peoples, who have been cast as being perpetually "in the past" in the race towards progress and modernity. South Asian futurisms, therefore, might be tools we can use to wrest the discourse away from the dominant Euro-American culture machine and dream of radically different futures. Over the course of this essay, I hope to illustrate that this body of South Asian futurisms offers a vibrant poetics and vocabulary to explore questions of risk and reward which arises out of the impacts of (neo)colonialism, global capitalism, religious nationalism, and, increasingly, climate change on the subcontinent.

## A History of Imagined Futures

The subsection of South Asian SF that has been involved in articulating visions of the future has its roots in the distinctly political and anti-colonial discourse of 19th century colonial India. An early futuristic fiction written in South Asia was Kylas Chunder Dutt's English-language short story 'A Journal of Forty-Eight Hours of the Year 1945',<sup>11</sup> which was published in 1835 and depicts a future rebellion undertaken by the Indian Army against the British colonizers. Dutt was an 18-year-old Bengali student when he wrote this piece, which is also one of the earliest South Asian fictional texts written in English. 'Journal' narrates a battle between the English-educated, urban elite revolutionaries led by the charming Bhoobun Mohan and the British colonists, whose leaders are the appropriately named Governor Lord Fell and Colonel John Blood-Thirsty. Even though the story ends with the Indians being defeated, the text is clearly radical in its orientation. 'Journal' was followed by another futuristic text, also written in English, called 'The Republic of Orissa: A Page from the Annals of the 20th Century',<sup>12</sup> which was written by Shoshee Chunder Dutt and published in 1845. This vision of the future also depicts a battle for independence, although this one is more radical than 'Journal' in more ways than one: not only does this battle end with Indian independence, it is also a revolution which is led not by local elites but by the doubly marginalized Adivasi tribes. Set against the backdrop of a fictitious Slavery Act passed by the British in 1916 which leads to a violent confrontation between the British and Indian revolutionary forces from Bangla, Bihar and Orissa, the story ends with the independence of the state of Orissa and the slow decline of the British empire. Both these works of futurisms fall under "soft" or "social SF," as they are less concerned with scientific principles or advanced technology and more with a changed political and social order. As Banerjee explains, both these stories are examples of "utopian 'future-histories' in their political motivation and portrayal of coming events through extrapolation of contemporary socio-political developments. The element of 'estrangement' in these texts is temporal...wherein the temporal estrangement helps create a radically new social order."<sup>13</sup>

An important intervention into this nascent body of South Asian utopian-futuristic texts was made by Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's delightful feminist utopian short story, 'Sultana's Dream'.<sup>14</sup> Published in 1905 in the Madras-based *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, and written in the form of a dream visited upon the eponymous Sultana, the story presents a futuristic world called Ladyland which flips the gendered concepts of *purdah* and *zenana* observed by upper-class/upper-caste Muslim and Hindu women of Hossain's milieu. Instead of the women being sequestered into the *zenana*, a gendered space that was literally removed from the arena of social and political activity, Ladyland places these constraints upon men by restricting them into what the story calls the *mardana*, while the female citizens of Ladyland are given agency in regulating their movement as well as the shaping of their society. Thus, as Sultana discovered, in Ladyland women use education, science and modern technology to govern a futuristic state which is without hierarchies of religion and class (caste, however, is conspicuously missing). The women rulers of Ladyland use scientific knowledge in order to work with nature for society's benefit – for example, they have learnt to harness the sun for the city's power. Through this feminist utopia, Hossain elaborates on an alternative, feminist form of modernity which differentiates itself both from the indigenous as well as the colonial patriarchal definitions of modernity. Like 'Journal' and 'Orissa', 'Sultana's Dream' is also avowedly anti-establishment and written in a playful and humorous tone, although it stands apart as being the only one of the three that complicates ideas of gender in its vision of the future.

The early 20th century also saw the publication of another important utopian-futuristic text, the Hindi novel *Baisvin Sadi* (The Twenty-second Century)<sup>15</sup> written by Rahul Sankrityayan and published in 1924. Sankrityayan was, at various stages of his life, an Arya Samajist, a Buddhist monk, a nationalist who was imprisoned by the British on many occasions, and a Marxist socialist who was inspired by the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917. *Baisvin Sadi* brings together many of these aspects of Sankrityayan's political and philosophical journeys. The novel begins with the main character Viswabandhu ('friend of the world'), a retired teacher, emerging from a cave after a long sleep of 200 years to explore a utopian India which is free of caste and communal discord, and where society is organized on the basis of rationality and for the benefit and enrichment of each individual. *Baisvin Sadi's* future is clearly a socialist utopia, as all means of production are owned by the state and there are no social inequalities. Private property has been abolished and a four-hour workday, education, health and happiness have been secured for all. The private domain has also been transformed – children are communally raised and men and women are socially and financially equal. Professions such as military generals, lawyers and manual garbage-pickers have been rendered obsolete. Not only is *Baisvin Sadi* possibly the first response to the Russian revolution outside the USSR, it is also remarkably anti-colonial and anti-capitalist, presenting a communist alternative both to British colonialism as well as to the religious nationalism that was rising as a response to the former.

In contrast to these anti-colonial and anti-capitalist utopias of colonial South Asia, South Asian futuristic visions after British independence are much more sombre, tilting more towards dystopias that express postcolonial anxieties, mixed with more muted utopian impulses. These texts engage in social satire and critique of the newly formed postcolonial South Asian states through the articulation of dystopian futures. The authors of these texts were extrapolating from the anxieties of their own times, from geopolitical tensions and religious fundamentalism to state corruption and neo-colonial exploitation. One text which would sit perhaps uneasily within this category is Urdu satirist Muhammad Khalid Akhtar's novella *Bees Sau Gyara* (Twenty-Eleven)<sup>16</sup>, published in 1954 in Karachi. Although depicting a dystopian future, it is far from being dark or sombre in tone, adopting instead the ironic and playful tone of the earlier 19th century utopian works and applying it to an absurd dystopia. The novella begins in a 21st century which is reeling from the destruction wrought upon the world after a great war. It is narrated from the perspective of Mister Popo, the president of a fictional state who is invited by the government of the country of Mazneen to tour its capital city Shutruba, and whose compilation of a report of this tour forms the bulk of the novella. Apart from being a president, Mister Popo is also something of an amateur anthropologist and so his report is filled with his insights into the cultural, social and economic conditions of this futuristic country, which is clearly meant to be a satire on the then-newly formed Pakistani state. The fascist surveillance state of Mazneen is indicated by the presence of a special police category called the PULJAKMACH — *Pakar Lo Jis Ko Marzi Chahey* (arrest anybody you want). The state machinery includes the *Vazir-e-Jhoot* (Minister of Lies) and the *Wazir-e-Jahalat* (Minister of Ignorance). The few women that are visible on the streets are enclosed in "kiosks" made out of tin and fitted with headlamps, side horns and small wheels – a dystopian critique of the *pardah* which can be contrasted to the utopian *mardana* of Hossain's Ladyland. The poor and homeless, who are plentiful, are re-named Lovers of the Open Air. Akhtar's playful and light-hearted approach to this dark future is reinforced in the preface to his novella, where he emphasizes the ultimately optimistic interpretation of the world of the novella: "Perhaps you will find this world strange, bizarre, crooked in many ways, yet despite all of its frailties I believe it glows and thrums with the warmth of human love".<sup>17</sup>

Akhtar's own assessment of the work and the ultimately hopeful tone of the novella brings to mind the concept of the "critical dystopia." Elaborated upon by Thomas Moylan in *Scraps of the Untainted Sky*, a critical dystopia is one which recognizes the redemptive qualities of the dystopian world it creates and offers possibilities of transforming or changing this world through the alliance of diverse voices and perspectives<sup>18</sup>. Unlike the static worlds of 19th century South Asian utopias or classical dystopias, critical dystopias are heterogeneous and uninterested in black-or-white absolutes. He says, "The critical dystopian vision of the 1980s and 1990s took a hard look at the bad new times of contemporary enclosure and, within a sober apprehension of the intensified exploitation and deprivation, endeavored to find traces,

scraps, and sometimes horizons of utopian possibility".<sup>19</sup> While Akhtar's *Bees Sau Gyarah* is an early example of such a critical dystopia in South Asian SF, I argue that this heterotopic and critical imagining of the future comes into its own in some of the futuristic imaginings of contemporary South Asian writers, many of whom are writing in English.

## Imagining Futures Now

If the futuristic visions of the latter half of the 20th century represented a "dark futurity,"<sup>20</sup> as authors grappled with postcolonial state failures, geopolitics and the effects of neo-colonialism, the 21st century has only added to these anxieties being explored by South Asian SF writers in their imagined futures. Climate change and the growing power of corporations working in tandem with or even overtaking state governments are two of the common threads that are discernible amongst contemporary South Asian futuristic writing. This is unsurprising, given the level of destruction climate change is already bringing to the subcontinent, as well as the increasingly precarious and exploitative position South Asian countries have in the neo-colonial global marketplace. A third common anxiety that these futuristic visions bring to life is the sinister and rapidly advancing surveillance technologies in the hands of corporations and state governments. These urgent global and planetary concerns have led to a flowering of dark futuristic imaginings by contemporary South Asian SF writers. These futures are either classical dystopias or more heterotopic critical dystopias and both sets of works explore the increasingly dangerous risks of being alive in the present moment in South Asia.

One of the more interesting recent additions to the classical dystopian category is the Pakistani Urdu animated short film *Shehr-e-Tabassum* (The Smiling City)<sup>21</sup>, which was released in 2020. Unlike in some other languages of South Asia, in Urdu we find multi-genre hybrid works that combine elements of science fiction with fantasy, horror, mystery and adventure in serialized stories published in pulp magazines and periodicals. An example of such a hybridized Urdu work is *Devta*<sup>22</sup>, a serialised fantasy thriller novel by Mohiuddin Nawab, written in the form of an autobiography of a man with telepathic powers, which was published in the Karachi-run *Suspense Digest* for 33 years from 1977. However, a robust tradition of purely science fictional works is lacking in Urdu. This is what makes the arrival of *Shehr-e-Tabassum* all the more noteworthy. Written by Ayesha Iftikhar and Arafat Mazhar (and directed by the latter), the nine-minute long short film was produced by Puffball Studios, an independent animation and design studio in Lahore. The film explores Pakistan in 2071: the prologue states that after a protracted and violent civil war, the state has finally established an era of stability, peace and innovation. In this country of supposed contentment, it is illegal for citizens to express any emotion other than happiness. The state closely monitors each citizen's emotional state through the mandated use of a high-tech headgear known as Hasmukh and polices their speech and

expression via flying bots. All forms of dissatisfaction, from personal unhappiness to political dissent, are therefore outlawed. The Hasmukh device awards you points based on how well you comply with the law of perpetual smiling, and these points in turn are the prevailing currency of the country, thus showing the ultimate collaboration between a totalitarian state, unchecked capitalism and advanced surveillance technology. In its tone of cautionary despair, *Shehr-e-Tabassum* can be seen as a classical dystopia in the same vein as Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As Robert Seyferth explains, a classical dystopia is the antithesis of a utopian narrative: "dystopia is described not by a fascinated visitor, but by an inhabitant of an apparent good society that, from the inside, does not look very good at all."<sup>23</sup> The term that screenwriter and director Mazhar uses to describe the film's political and generic inclinations is *cyber-khilafat*: a hybrid form that combines the aesthetics of cyberpunk with the specific religious and ideological anxieties of contemporary Pakistan.

Cyberkhilafat, Mazhar argues "explore[s] modern forms of Islam, technology and power combined to corrupt language and dictate political and social norms to mute individual identity."<sup>24</sup> The term is meant to tease out the perpetual contradiction of contemporary Pakistan's supposed avowal of democratic values and its simultaneous embracing of elements of a "supremacist khilafat state." The specificities of *cyber-khilafat* are articulated further in another animated Urdu short film written by Mazhar called *Swipe* (2020)<sup>25</sup>, which explores a future Pakistan where citizens are gripped by iFatwa, an app that crowdsources religious death sentences – the app shows you the profiles of your fellow citizens who have committed varying levels of sin, and you swipe left or right on them depending on whether you believe they ought to be forgiven or given the label of *wajib-ul-qatl* (deserve to be killed). The futuristic vision envisioned by the 14-minute-long *Swipe* draws on contemporary Pakistan's preoccupation with ideas of religious purity (exemplified by the stringent blasphemy laws) by combining them with sophisticated forms of social media technology and state corruption. As such, both films fit into the tradition of classical dystopias or anti-utopias, which Moylan argues are "closed worlds examining the negative impulses of humanity, ending in a despair of awareness."<sup>26</sup> *Swipe*, in particular, exemplifies this despair of awareness, as the main character, Jugnu, in his quest to swipe on the app as much as possible to get enough points to earn the label of a *ghazi* (defender of the faith), ends up swiping right to his father's profile and has to watch as a violent mob kills him. The end of *Shehr-e-Tabassum*, however, has the glimmer of a utopian impulse, as the unnamed female protagonist, whose perspective the audience is experiencing the futuristic city through, takes off her Hasmukh device and stares into her reflection in a mirror as her state-mandated smile fades into an expression of snarling defiance. The film thus ends with this image containing a potential transformation of the dystopian world it has created.

On the other side of the border, an Anglophone Indian novel exploring similar themes of religious fundamentalism and totalitarianism against the backdrop of intense climate change

is *Leila*<sup>27</sup> by Prayaag Akbar. *Leila* tells the story of Shalini, a once-wealthy woman who is now at the bottom of the political and social hierarchy of a digitised, heavily surveilled city ruled by the faceless, autocratic Council. Amidst acute shortages of clean water and breathable air, the Council has segregated the city's population into sectors separated by 60-foot walls and connected to each other by "skyroads." This segregation – based on class, caste and religion – means each enclave has its own rules and rituals of marriages, births, deaths and eating, and this segregation is carefully policed and reinforced by armed gangs known as "repeaters". In order to avoid "impurity", sectors privatise their air by enclosing themselves within large air-conditioned "skydomes", the ecological brunt of which is faced by the people living in the slums outside of these sectors, the ones that don't even come under consideration in this hierarchized urban landscape, and whose clean air and water are stolen by their elite neighbours through the skydomes. *Leila* shows the interconnected-ness of the ideas of utopia and dystopia. As Sami Ahmad Khan notes, "The skydome seeks to ameliorate living conditions for the rich by making the poor even poorer and increasing their squalor. 'Must you share their air?' becomes the ultimate symbol of 'aspirational otherising'. A utopia for some – for reasons logistical rather than conceptual – can only be accomplished by creating a dystopia for many."<sup>28</sup> As with *Shehr-e-Tabassum* and *Swipe*, Akbar's futuristic vision is also one where existing divisions along class, caste and religious lines are only exacerbated and intensified in the face of technocracy and climate change. Unlike *Shehr-e-Tabassum*'s final image of potential change, however, *Leila* offers the reader no such hope. Instead, the narrative ends with the main protagonist herself embroiled in Moylan's "despair of awareness" as she realizes the extent to which she herself has been complicit in the systems that serve to reinforce caste and class divisions in this future India, despite her otherwise progressive politics and her opposition to the ideology of the Council. The novel implicates Shalini, and by extension the reader, in the realization that the difference between Shalini's and the Council's actions is merely of scale: the Council is reinforcing, at large, ideas of social division that are already ingrained in the fabric of present-day South Asia.

In contrast to these classical dystopian visions of the future of South Asia are two recent heterotopic or ambiguous dystopian visions which have glimmers and traces of utopian possibility embedded within their narratives which I find particularly interesting. The first one is "Bring Your Own Spoon",<sup>29</sup> by Bangladeshi speculative fiction writer Saad Z. Hossain. The story is set in a futuristic, dystopian Dhaka ravaged by climate change, a world where the boundary between the human and supernatural worlds has become threadbare and where both djinns and humans struggle to eke out a daily existence. This is a Dhaka where the water is poisoned, and nobody has eaten fruits or fish for 200 years because of the fear of toxins in them, sustaining themselves instead on synthetic food. In this future, every citizen is chipped and the de facto currency is "sat minutes" – time you can borrow from satellites to activate your chip and provide you entry into a virtual reality that most rich people remain plugged into. Hossain's story, however, is not interested in the elite people of this city and instead takes place entirely amidst



the most marginalized – the ones whose bodies are used by nanobots to clean the city air and create microclimates, or who are experimented upon by powerful pharmaceutical companies. Within this dystopian nightmare, Hossain tells the story of a human, Hanu, and a djinn called Imbidor who come together and start a restaurant with real, organic food, allowing the people on the fringes of this society to come together as a community through the act of sharing a meal together. This restaurant, where customers bring whatever they are able to scavenge from the wilderness and then cook it and eat it together, slowly becomes a site of compassion, shared remembrance and collective caretaking, paving the way for the possibility of resistance.

Despite the harsh world Hossain has created, the focus of the narrative remains on the kindness the characters show each other, an alternative way of being in the world that is at odds with the ethos of dystopia around them. Towards the end of the story, as the surveillance state zeroes in on this small community and threatens to eradicate it violently, this alternative way of being is articulated by Imbidor's call to action: "We should follow Hanu, who gave us food from nothing. I have slept a long time. I remember when they used to chain you to the earth and force you to work, to force your children and their children to the same labor. Now I am awake, I see they have taken your flesh too, they have herded you together like cattle, and living or dying, your bodies are little factories, cleaning the air for them. Your chips are your collars. They kill you without thought. You fear the air, the water, the trees, the very ground you walk on. What more can you lose? Why not leave this place? Let us go forth into the wilderness, where they dare not follow."<sup>30</sup> This seed of utopian possibility is one that is nurtured over the course of the narrative, and provides a kind of blueprint from finding one's way out of a dystopian world – a blueprint which rejects individualism and segregation, and instead emphasises connection, not just with each other but with nature, "the wilderness" which humans have poisoned and then become fearful of.

This utopian impulse, which is founded on an ethics of interconnectedness, also thrums in the futuristic vision I began this essay with. In Vandana Singh's "Reunion," the larger world of the narrative is dystopian in ways that are similar to the other contemporary futuristic visions I have discussed – unchecked power of corporations, the destruction wrought by climate change, a grotesque divide between the rich and the poor. But Singh's narrative offers a way out of the dystopia, in a manner similar to Hossain's story. Mahua, the Adivasi woman who comes up with the design for the zero-carbon, interconnected *bastis*, gets her idea from observing nature. She notices little tufts of leaves growing out of the cracks on a road she traverses every day, "like a bunch of islands in a sea."<sup>31</sup> As she explains to her friend Raghu, "There were places along the side of the road that had already become overrun with weeds by the same process. And some of the islands were connected to other islands through cracks. So it occurred to me – well, the road is so much stronger than a leaf. But when a leaf settles in a crack, it starts a process. Soil accumulates, plants start to grow, and you know what plant roots can do...split rock. Split

the road."<sup>32</sup> Extending the metaphor, Mahua and Raghu realize that small pockets of change, if they are the right kind of change "but also if they have the right kind of connectivity,"<sup>33</sup> have the potential to bring about change on a larger scale. The story proves this right as, despite the drowned cities and the subcontinent overtaken by a megacorporation, the climate of South Asia begins to shift in the right direction by the microclimates created by the interconnected *bastis*. Singh's narrative rejects the idea of urban centers being the sole sites of change. As Raghu says, "Positive social change always comes from the margins, but islets of resistance in the mainstream are also important."<sup>34</sup> It also complicates the idea of Western science and technology being the savior, as Mahua's work is a complex interaction between her engineering and design knowledge with her Adivasi heritage, the history of their marginalization and their community's specific way of connecting with nature. Both "Reunion" and "Bring Your Own Spoon," therefore, emphasize localised forms of community-building and solidarity, particularly amongst those on the peripheries – small communities utilizing indigenous forms of knowledge and collective memory to build their resistance against the larger dystopian social order.

## Conclusion: Finding Utopias Within Dystopias

The radical possibilities offered by South Asian science fiction and fantasy writing stand in stark contrast to the grim-realism genre of literary fiction that is usually privileged in South Asian literary discourse as well as in the global literary marketplace. The fiction which is most often talked about in literature festivals, or which gets reviewed and critiqued in newspapers and journals, is that which utilizes the generic tropes of literary realism to explore South Asian stereotypes like hunger, crowding, terror and poverty. This is particularly true of Anglophone writing in South Asia. This privileging of a certain kind of genre and form has, I think, led to a narrowing of the South Asian literary imagination which in turn has limited the narrative possibilities we have for imagining our futures. The realist form is proving to be increasingly less relevant is helping us make sense of our contemporary situation. Our reality today is outlandish and almost fantastical in its absurdity and bleakness, and requires a matching radicalness to meet it. Perhaps the sheer audacity of the science fiction and fantasy genre is the only one equipped to do the job. Situated within the traditions of South Asian literature, science fiction and fantasy certainly offers a range of unique narrative tools that speak to the complexity of our bewildering present. Despite the continued marginalized status of the genre within literary discourse in the subcontinent, speculative fiction writers are continuing to write stories that circulate in international and local online magazines as well as publications by smaller independent presses and are slowly elbowing their way into the mainstream. This is partly because younger readers have already been disillusioned by the limitations of the realist genre for understanding the present and envisioning the way forward.

This elbowing of speculative fiction onto mainstream literary discourse in South Asia is indicated by initiatives such as *The Salam Award for Imaginative Fiction*, which aims to promote science fiction writing in Pakistan and recently announced its fifth annual winner, and the publication of two volumes of the anthology *The Gollancz Book of South Asian Science Fiction*, which gathers together speculative writing from South Asia in English as well as works translated from Urdu, Bengali, Marathi and Hindi. In the introduction to the second volume of the anthology, which has writings from both established and new writers, editor Tarun K. Saint argues that current trends in contemporary South Asian speculative fiction reveal “a productive conjoining of the bizarre and the mundane, the real and the hyper-real, yet underpinned by a sense of the perils of existing in techno-bubbles of simulated utopias in a region on the cusp of what may be irrevocable alterations.”<sup>35</sup> For Saint, the contours of the worlds being created by South Asian science fiction writers today reveal “a return to an ethically grounded collective South Asian civilizations narrative, along with a growing recognition that multiple ‘other’ South Asian spaces exist.”<sup>36</sup> One can discern various thematic strands and prose styles of writers in different languages converging into the distinct literary tradition of South Asian futurisms, a variegated body of work which speaks to the multiplicity of South Asian realities.

Visions of the future are more crucial now than ever. As this essay has argued, an important function of futuristic visions has always been to estrange readers from their own present moment so that they might be able to view it differently, a call to action which is increasingly urgent today. The futurisms offered by South Asian science fiction and fantasy writers have responded to specific socio-political moments in the subcontinent’s history, offering alternate visions of the future in contrast to the varying discourses of (neo)colonialism, capitalism, ethno-religious nationalism and geopolitical conflict. As the optimistic, resistance-fuelled fervour of 19th and 20th century South Asian utopian futurism has given way to the dark futurity of the 21st century, contemporary visions of the future offer a reminder about what exactly is at stake if the current trajectories of our lives in South Asia are allowed to proceed unchecked. These visions are startling not because of how dissimilar they are to our present, but because of how plausible and realistic they appear. The dystopia of climate change is already upon us, and we have already been witnessing decades of violent nationalism and increasing authoritarianism. What South Asian futurisms might offer us is perhaps a roadmap into a radically different future: one that connects localized forms of struggle and resistance into a broader, transnational and potentially global way of being, one that urges us to seek out and nurture those glimmers of utopia we can see in the dystopian world around us.

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# Karachi is Hard to Love

Gulraiz Khan

**Karachi has not always been a miserable place to live, and it didn't become one because of lack of planning. Is there any hope for its future?**

Karachi is hard to love<sup>1</sup>. Its treacherous seas tried to devour Sanval, the husband of the city's founding matriarch, Kolachi<sup>2</sup>. Its lush mangroves lured the city's first colonizing fleet, only to disappoint as a "gloomy portal of a desolate and uninteresting country."<sup>3</sup> Lady Lloyd felt so sick during her stay that she had her husband make a pier in Clifton that would take her, every evening, as far away from the city as possible. TE Lawrence, of the Lawrence of Arabia fame, was so unimpressed by the "sorry place" that he barely ever left his garrison at Drigh Road in a year and half of being posted here.<sup>4</sup> Fehmida Riaz wistfully longed for a liver firm enough to bear the city.<sup>5</sup> Perveen Shakir swore that it was "a whore."<sup>6</sup>

But Karachi is also hard to ignore. Shah Abdul Latif bemoaned the city's metaphorical whirlpools. "Whoever goes to Kalachi, never comes back," he lamented.<sup>7</sup> Legions of peripatetic saints, from the 7th to the 20th century, made this unremarkable pitstop their home. One Pir, Mangho, and at least seven Shahs—Abdullah, Ghaiban, Hassan, Yousuf, Misri, Ali Et Mewa—retired along the sea and riverfront, like true city elites. Millions have followed in their footsteps since, including my family, in waves after waves. Today, anywhere between 15 to 20 million people, depending on who you ask, live here precariously, suspended between the city's promise and peril.

This essay, and the accompanying set of maps, are not a descriptive history of Karachi's public transit or a prescriptive proposal for its future. This is a story—of a colonial hangover, a race to the bottom, a fever dream and a future set right. It is a manifesto for a more accessible and equitable city. It is an invitation for a conversation on why we, the residents of Karachi, deserve better. If nothing else, it is a reverie for a city that is not impossible to love.

## Prologue

Cities are abstractions—ideological, material, and social. For all their shrines and temples and claims to divine origins, they are essentially human: sites for flows of people, their ideas, and goods. The more easily people, goods and ideas can flow through, and within, a city, the more successful they become. No one moves to a stagnant or decaying town, no matter how beautiful

the landscape. Karachi's prosperity and promise made it the destination of choice for migrants not just from the length and breadth of Pakistan, but from Iran and Afghanistan to Sri Lanka and Bangladesh throughout the latter half of the 20th century.

After the shock of partition, when the population swelled from 400,000 in 1941 to a million in 1950, Karachi galloped at an average growth rate of around 5% for the next 50 years. At the turn of the century, in the year 2000, the city clocked in roughly 10 million residents.<sup>8</sup> In this half century, Karachi was to south and west Asia what New York was to a war-torn Europe in the first half of the 20th century. From 1890 to 1945, the newly consolidated New York City grew from a regional powerhouse of 1.5 million residents to a 7.5 million strong global metropolis.<sup>9</sup> Despite this similarity in population growth, their trajectories could not have been more different. New York harnessed this half century of migration to become a global financial capital. Karachi squandered this opportunity and ended up being an inglorious regional backwater.

In 1948, the two cities briefly collided in a fortuitous and almost foretelling encounter. Ghulam Ali Allana, the first mayor of independent Karachi, visited New York during a larger official visit that he documented in a travelogue. Like a fish out of water, he was unable to grasp the complexity of post-war, diverse, eclectic New York. With all the energy of a middle-aged, privileged Pakistani man, he was most impressed by Times Square and the synchronized traffic lights, and hoped to bring the latter to Karachi. The city's lifeline and engineering marvel, the subway, merely got a passing mention.<sup>10</sup> A more perceptive administrator would have picked up on the transformative power of rapid mobility, but alas, not Allana. He took taxis everywhere and frequently tripped over his racist, classist and moralistic ideals, as he uncritically navigated New York's youthful post-war exuberance. By the time his trip ended, it was painfully obvious that Karachi and New York exist in two wildly divergent worlds and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

## Colonial Hangover

When the first post-partition migrants arrived in the early 1950s, Karachi was the city worth moving to. The city had a centuries-long maritime tradition, cemented by the thriving seaport, an airport and rail connections to up-country. There were robust municipal services, public transport, and an air of cosmopolitanism. A 1930 colonial town planning consultant's report termed Karachi "one of the cleanest and best kept cities ... in India."<sup>11</sup>

The shock of partition was still raw, and the bulk of the city's non-Muslim population had left. Their markers, however, were aplenty. Standing at Eidgah on Bandar Road and looking south through the dust-specked late afternoon light, the domes and spires of municipal buildings,

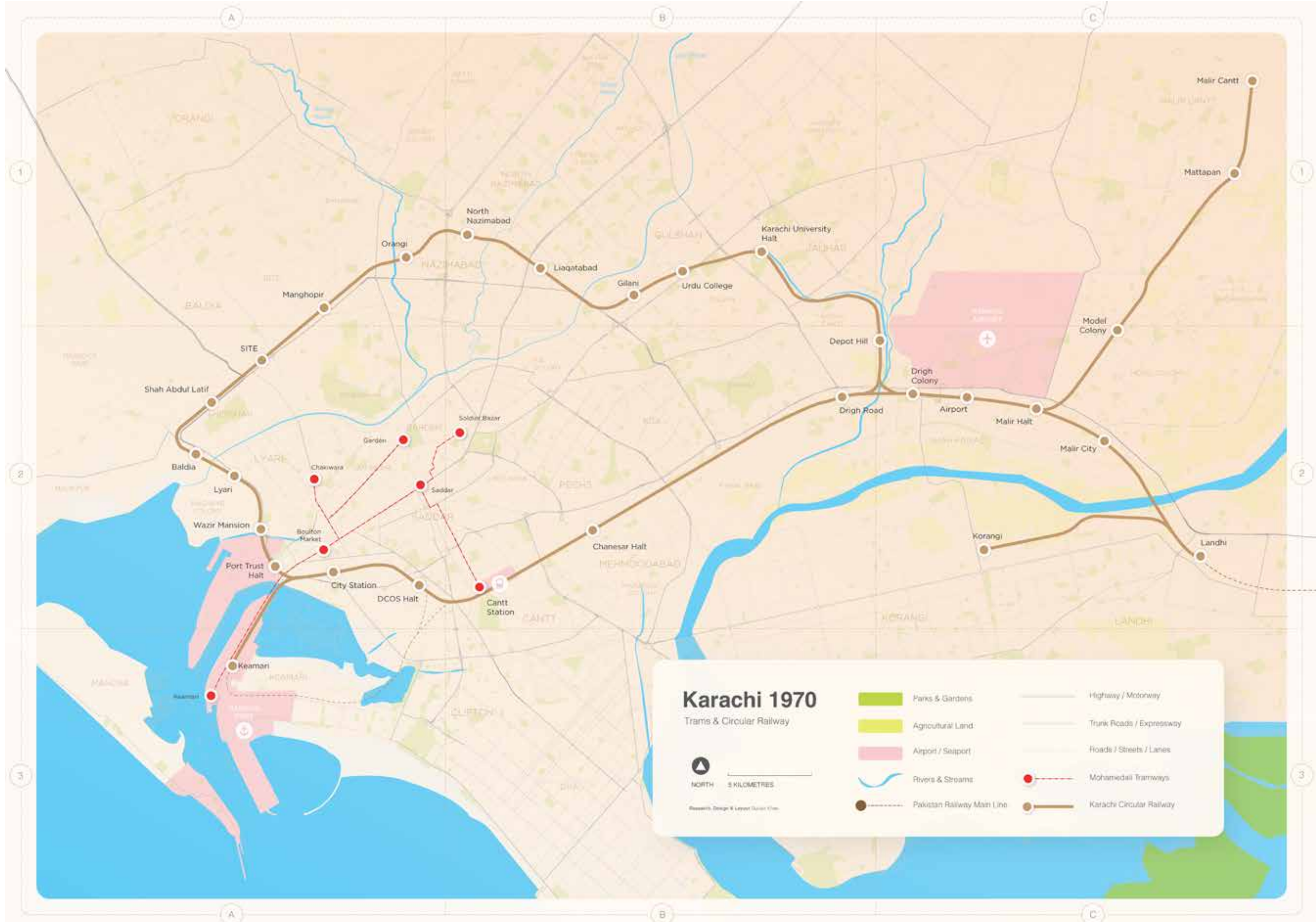
commercial offices, clock towers and public halls, the shikhara of the Swaminarayan Temple and the tapered minarets of New Memon Masjid must have been both a spectre and a spectacle. It left an indelible mark on at least one immigrant from Hyderabad Deccan, Ahmed Rushdi, whose preppy song "*Bandar Road se Keamari*" would immortalize the road and jumpstart Rushdi's career as a playback singer.

While Rushdie set out in his horse-drawn carriage, Bandar Road bustled as the spine of the country's only urban transit system. Sixty-four petrol-powered trams shuttled citizens from Cantt and Soldier Bazar to Saddar, and down Bandar Road all the way to Keamari, all for an anna. A branch line from Gandhi Garden along Lawrence Road brought residents of the old, dense quarters—Bhimpura, Chakiwara, Ramswamy, Ranchore Lines—all the way down to the boisterous Boulton Market junction. In 1949, the East India Tramway Company was sold to a Karachi merchant, Sheikh Mohamedali, and became the Mohamedali Tramways Company.<sup>12</sup>

Karachi in the 1950s was a dense, multi-ethnic, multi-class city, and both my sets of grandparents set roots in close proximity to Bandar Road and Cantt Station. It was a worthy capital of this new country and the energy was palpable. The city was bursting at its colonial seams, and foreign consultants had been summoned to develop a Greater Karachi Plan to accommodate the influx of migrants and the demands of a new capital. A 1952 masterplan by a consortium of British and Swedish firms, Merz Rendel Vatten (Pakistan) (MRVP), expected Karachi to treble in population to 3 million by the year 2000. The Report on the Greater Karachi Plan consolidated the primacy of Bandar Road and extended the administrative center of the capital further north-east along the same axis. For future growth, it proposed dense, self-sustaining satellite spurts in all four directions, all connected by a robust light rail public transport system and supplemented by rapid and local buses.<sup>13</sup> In comparison, mass transit did not feature in any of Lahore's master plans until the 1990s.

The exuberance, however, was short-lived. The capital was shifted to the north, and the rug was pulled from under the aspirations of the 1952 MRVP Plan. Instead, irked by the presence of refugees in the city center, the martial law administration commissioned a Greater Karachi Resettlement Plan in 1956, this time by a Greek firm Doxiadis Associates (DA). The firm proposed two satellite townships, Landhi-Korangi in the east and New Karachi in the north. General Ayub, desperate for visible signs of progress, ran with the idea of Korangi before Doxiadis Associates could even finish the detailed plans, and built 15,000 houses by 1959.<sup>14</sup> But once the dust settled, there was little of the promised industry to support the residents and the Korangi dream started falling apart as quickly as it had been conjured into being.<sup>15</sup>

Before the lights went out though, Karachi experienced a flash of public works brilliance the likes of which it will not see for decades. The city built the country's first urban rail transit





system, the Karachi Circular Railway (KCR), a scaled-down version of the local railway system proposed in the MRVP Plan of 1952. It was initially launched for goods and limited internal service in 1964 but, when the loop was completed in 1969 and service was opened to the public, it was an instant hit. Ridership soared almost immediately. At its peak, over a hundred trains would shuttle people constantly across the loop and main line of the KCR.<sup>16</sup>

It was an urban marvel, both in its essence (rapid mobility for everyone) and ambition (a well-connected, growing city), but unfortunately it arrived at the wrong place, at the wrong time. Globally, the private automobile was ascendant and cities were rapidly reconfiguring themselves to accommodate this new beast. Under Robert Moses, New York had been shaped in the image of the automobile—highways running down the east and west coast of Manhattan, connected to bridges strung over the East River to Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx. The impact was not limited to private transport only. After a 30-year building spree, subway construction in New York City came to a halt and the dense network of electrified streetcar lines connecting Brooklyn to Queens was replaced by a fleet of buses.<sup>17</sup> Rail-based public transport would take a back seat for some time now.

Karachi's tram network was a casualty of this broader shift in mobility patterns. Under local ownership, the system was unable to keep up with the city's growing demand and shifting dynamics. Maintenance was poor, as reported by concerned citizens,<sup>18</sup> and while the number of trams had increased significantly, not a mile had been added to the system even as the city had rapidly grown all around it. Increasing automobile traffic led to congestion along tram routes and the trams were routinely involved in accidents. The local administration shifted its focus to buses, in line with global trends. In April 1975, exactly 90 years after it first opened to service, the Mohamedali Tramways Company which had been chugging along privately since 1949, unceremoniously shut down.<sup>19</sup>

This was the city that the second wave of migrants arrived in, from a now-independent Bangladesh. The center was crowded, so they camped at Orangi. The state turned a blind eye to their needs. The city had already crossed the 3 million mark in 1970 before their arrival. Seven years of the Bhutto government and rapid nationalization of industries, an inordinate proportion of which were based in Karachi, brought more migrants from within the country. The population swelled to 5 million before the decade was over.<sup>20</sup> The music had stopped playing and the party was beginning to end, but you couldn't tell above the feverish din of the decade's popular politics.

## Race to the Bottom

Shifting demographics and simmering grievances created ethnic flashpoints that blew into a full-scale multi-ethnic conflict in the 1980s. The third wave of migration, from neighboring Afghanistan, added a new dimension and plenty of ammunition to the conflict. When a young woman, Bushra Zaidi, was run over by a minibus in Nazimabad in 1985, it hardly mattered what the ethnicity of the bus driver was. The bus was burnt, riots ensued, and the city was charred<sup>21</sup>. Altaf Hussain rose from the ashes of popular grievances and captured the imagination of the city's Urdu-speaking residents. His party and workers were beaten to a pulp in the early 90s, but his iron grip over the city persisted. For decades, he would be able to shut down the city in minutes, over a croaky, scratchy phone call from London.

When my parents married in 1984, they moved out to an apartment in Shadman Town on the northern edge of North Nazimabad. My father wanted to start fresh, with some breathing space. But after a few months of a frustrating daily commute to Chundrigar Road and back, they packed up and moved back into an apartment in Lighthouse, off Bandar Road, close to my father's work and extended family. In the mid 90s, we moved to another apartment in Araam Bagh which was fairly unremarkable except, while I was growing up, it gave us an unenviable front seat to Altaf Hussain's phone calls that were broadcast in the Araam Bagh mosque grounds late into the nights.

The 90s were a blur of military operations, shutter-down strikes, targeted killings, and bodies in gunny sacks. The ethnic strife boiled over and sectarian groups jumped in, adding a religious zeal to this macabre ballet. Against this bonfire, the city literally came to a grinding halt. A few seminal events in this period from the mid-80s to 2000 would transform urban mobility for the worse and bring Karachi to the brink.

After several failed attempts to run a bus-based mass transit system, the provincial government deregulated and privatized public transport. What this basically translated into was that the transport department would only issue route permits, after some palm greasing, and look the other way. Private transporters, backed by loan sharks, snapped up permits as public transport was ghettoized along ethnic lines.<sup>22</sup> During strikes, the minibuses were the first to be torched. This deregulated transport model was eminently unsustainable, and the number of buses plummeted as the quality of service and vehicles nosedived. It was a race to the bottom, but with the kitsch amped up.

For all the initial enthusiasm, the Karachi Circular Railway started losing steam soon enough. There was a constellation of reasons cited for its decline: fare evasion leading to financial losses, reduced service frequency, competition from private buses and rickshaws, lack of integration with other public transit modes, lack of investment for upgrades, lack of interest from the military regime, dilapidation, petty crime and so on<sup>23</sup>. The system declined steadily through the 1980s and in December 1999, a mere thirty years after it first opened to the public, the Karachi Circular Railway was packed up completely. That probably qualified it for the dubious distinction of being the shortest-lived mass transit system in global urban transit history.

But these challenges were only for the city's millions of poor. For the handful of rich, a new era was about to dawn where their mobility needs would trump everyone else's. The city built its first flyovers—at Drigh Road, Nazimabad, and NIPA<sup>24</sup>. Earlier, bridges were built over bodies of water and railway lines to overcome natural or man-made obstructions to the flow of all traffic. These new bridges, or flyovers, were built to overcome the congestion caused by automobiles themselves. They were monuments to, and for the explicit facilitation of, private automobiles. It was the beginning of the erosion of the city.

Throughout the 1990s, several plans for mobility corridors in a vastly expanded city were drawn and even officially notified, but the exorbitant price tags and political instability meant the plans never left the papers they were printed on. They did, however, form the backbone of all future transit plans, decades later. Karachi topped 10 million in population,<sup>25</sup> at probably the most precarious point in its recorded history, as it limped into the new millennium.

## Fever Dream

9/11 thrust Karachi as a transit node in the global War on Terror. As the region's largest seaport, Karachi had little choice but to bend over for American and NATO military supplies headed to the Afghan war theatre. Driven primarily by this logistical need, General Musharraf decided to micromanage Karachi through federal agencies and two rounds of hand-picked local governments. Armed with a shovel and a blank chequebook, Karachi was about to get a total facelift.

It started innocuously enough with a Rs29 billion "Tameer-e-Karachi Package," a much-needed investment in the city's infrastructure after decades of neglect.<sup>26</sup> A flyover here and a bridge there to ease traffic congestion. Parks. Sewage lines. But it wasn't long before the steroids kicked in. Signal-free corridors rolled off everyone's tongues. SITE to Karsaz. Surjani to Drigh Road. Saddar to Toll Plaza. Metropole to Malir. Northern Bypass. Southern Bypass. Lyari Expressway. Flyovers on Underpasses. Flyovers on flyovers. Dinosaur sculptures in city parks and traffic medians. Conocarpus trees all around.

For the first decade of the new century, Karachi was a fever dream, fueled by cheap consumer loans, "enlightened moderation," a "benevolent dictator," and a "representative, empowered" city government. All this road building was not for nothing. The number of registered cars in Karachi doubled: from a million in 2004 to over 2 million in 2011. The number of motorcycles trebled: from 400,000 to over a million.<sup>27</sup> Except for a few dozen deep green Swedish buses, and outlandish MOUs with obscure foreign companies for monorails and Maglev trains, there was no work or investment in public transport. Karachi was being definitively shaped in the image of the automobile.

Our family was caught up in this euphoria too. My father was able to take a home loan from his bank, and we moved out from Aram Bagh to a more spacious apartment in PECHS. A car followed, and so did a handful of credit cards. We had cheap money, and a car to go around and spend it. We shopped at Park Towers and dined out at Zamzama. It was all heady until he had to take an early retirement in 2009, and spent half his retirement funds to pay off the maxed-out credit cards.

When Musharraf departed in 2008, the elected PPP government threw out the local government baby with the dictatorship bathwater. The locus of decision-making shifted, but not the development direction. The PPP took a leaf out of the MQM and Musharraf book and plunged head-first into building roads and bridges and underpasses. In the world of electoral politics and public works spectacle, it made sense. For instance, few city arteries have received as much love from politicians and administrators over the last two decades as the 15 km-long Shahrah-e-Faisal: eight flyovers, two underpasses, two remodels of older bridges, and an overall widening project. That's thirteen foundation laying ceremonies and thirteen ribbon cutting ceremonies. Twenty-six public work spectacles for political mileage. Each flyover or underpass takes three to six months to complete. The total rupee cost of this two-decade-long serial spectacle: about Rs5.4 billion. Adjusted for inflation: roughly Rs10 billion. Political mileage: priceless.

Compare this to the proposed transit projects. The Green Line BRT will probably finish around Rs30 billion<sup>28</sup>. The KCR, when last checked with the Japanese who completed a detailed feasibility in 2012, was going to cost over \$2.5 billion<sup>29</sup>. That's Rs425 billion today. The Red and Yellow Lines, loans for which have been secured from the ADB and World Bank, will each cost roughly half a billion dollars.<sup>30</sup> And if the current execution capacity is any indication, each of these projects will take upwards of six years to complete. What is the 2021-22 budgeted development allocation for the Sindh government's transport department? A paltry Rs8 billion.<sup>31</sup> The city's needs do not match its fiscal, electoral, and administrative reality. The provincial government knows the best they can realistically do right now is a flyover here and an underpass there, while keeping the political-builder gravy train running. There is no appetite, or aspiration, for anything more ambitious. Why take a political risk?



## Karachi 2020

Bridges, Flyovers & Underpasses



NORTH 5 KILOMETRES

Research, Design & Layout: Urban Infra

- |  |   |  |   |
|--|---|--|---|
|  | <b>Lyari Expressway</b><br>Maujpur — Sheikh Gohar         |  | <b>Corridor 3</b><br>Swatol — Toll Plaza          |
|  | <b>Northern Bypass</b><br>Quibai — Toll Plaza             |  | <b>Corridor 4</b><br>National Highway — POC       |
|  | <b>Southern Bypass</b><br>National Highway — Karachi Port |  | <b>Corridor 5</b><br>Bander Road — Toll Plaza     |
|  | <b>Corridor 1</b><br>SSE — Karachi                        |  | <b>Corridor 6</b><br>Bander Road — Nagar Chowring |
|  | <b>Corridor 2</b><br>Sutark — High Road                   |  | <b>Corridor 7</b><br>Jail Chowring — DNA          |

## Pakistan's Sick Man

It seems avoidable until you can taste the despair—brackish—at the back of your throat. Karachi's days of preeminence as Pakistan's most vibrant and diverse metropolis, and an economic juggernaut, are numbered. The reckoning came in the 2017 census. Karachi's population growth rate has slowed down over the decades, which is not surprising given that this usually happens as income levels rise. It's a global pattern. What was surprising to most observers though was that this was only true for Karachi. Lahore, Islamabad, and a host of other cities have been growing much faster than Karachi.<sup>32</sup> Some observers chalked this up to statistical errors,<sup>33</sup> or deliberate undercounting of the city's migrants,<sup>34</sup> but it should not have been all that surprising.

What hubris was it to think that decades of divestment, violence, and plummeting quality of life would not make Karachi an undesirable place to live? The signs have been all around. The World Bank's City Diagnostic Report looked at night-time light intensity, along with data on labour productivity and economic growth, and argued that there is evidence that "Karachi's economic growth may have stalled" from 2004 onwards.<sup>35</sup> The dimming lights in the city's core point to reduced economic activity, corroborated by declining rates of labour productivity when compared to the rest of the country. The city is still big and growing, but it's not growing qualitatively. The report argues that the city is losing competitiveness, especially in manufacturing, and there is a definitive shift from formal, high-productivity jobs to low-productivity informal work across industries. This is again corroborated by the speculative property and construction boom, especially at the periphery of the city, where night-time light intensity has grown and where low-wage, low-skill labour is employed. The report also highlights extremely low female labour force participation, driven, among other things, by "inadequate, unreliable, and unsafe public transport for women."<sup>36</sup>

The provincial government, meanwhile, has little to show in improved governance and municipal services for its decade of absolute control over Karachi. The city consistently bottoms out on global Quality of Living indices.<sup>37</sup> Are we surprised that all the investment in signal-free corridors did not make Karachi a more livable, vibrant and desirable city? Who could have predicted that destroying the city's public transport infrastructure wouldn't just hamper poor people's mobility, but would eventually slow down the city's economic engine? Restoring Karachi to health requires, at the foremost, restoring flow for millions of its residents and their goods, quickly, cheaply, and strategically. The city needs a blueprint for its final act. Fortunately, it already has one.

A Karachi Transport Improvement Project 2030 study by JICA built on the mass transit corridors proposed by the ADB in 1995 and suggested a revival of the Karachi Circular Railway, supplemented by eight bus and rail-based rapid transit lines.<sup>38</sup> By the time the study was made



public, Punjab Chief Minister Shahbaz Sharif had already built the country's first Bus Rapid Transit line, the MetroBus, in Lahore and started work on the Orange Line Metro Train. The Sindh government took the JICA plan to donors and agencies, but the only money that came through was from the Nawaz-led federal government that dropped Rs15 billion in the bank and kickstarted the building of the 35-kilometre long Green Line BRT in 2016. Red-faced, the Sindh government coughed up enough money to add a small 4-kilometre appendage, the Orange Line.

It's been five years, and both those corridors are yet to open. Shahbaz Sharif, meanwhile, built BRTs in Rawalpindi-Islamabad and Multan, and his Orange Line trains, despite court cases and delay tactics by opponents, rolled onto the tracks in October 2020. Even Peshawar managed to launch its scandal-prone BRT. All this while, from Gurumandir to Surjani, Karachi residents wistfully look out from their apartment balconies at the almost complete tracks and dust-covered stations of the Green Line, wondering when (or if) they will get to use it. What is also gathering dust is Karachi's future, and its continued existence as a significant city. Pakistan's sick man is terminally ill.

Fortunately, cities are an abstraction. A human construct. Karachi can, and should, be revived, and there could not be a more opportune moment. The next 25 years are symbolically significant. Eight years from now, in 2029, Karachi will celebrate the third centennial of its founding as a native fort. A decade after, in 2039, the second centennial of its declaration as a modern port city. Eight years after, in 2047, the city will mark the first centennial as the workhorse of a post-colonial, independent nation. Will Karachi make it to 2047? Will we have a city worth living in, let alone one worth celebrating? What follows from here is pure fiction.

## Tripping Over the Last Mile

The Green and Orange Lines opened to much fanfare in early 2022, albeit six years too late. Karachi finally has good quality public transport, 23 years after the last one, KCR, shut down. Hassan Raheem and Talal Qureshi shoot a music video on it, and it's a total bop. Pakistan's largest bank wraps every square-inch of available surface on the stations in its corporate colours, supporting the project and promoting PSL 8.

The enthusiasm is short-lived though. Ridership is limited, and the impact on congestion imperceptible. Traffic still snarls every evening at Patel Para and Golimar. This isn't surprising. People don't change their mobility patterns overnight. It took decades for people to shift to motorbikes and shape their lives around it. They are not going to give it up because a 39-kilometer corridor has opened in a city with over 10,000 kilometers of roads. Meanwhile,

ground has broken on construction of the Red and Yellow lines, and the digging up of University and Korangi roads is causing hours-long bumper-to-bumper traffic jams. The projects threaten to become a political liability for the provincial government, right around the election year. The routinely meddling and perennially anti-poor Supreme Court takes a suo moto notice.

How does the government justify the exorbitant cost of the project and a continued subsidy to the tune of Rs2 billion per year, given low ridership and continued congestion? More importantly, on what grounds does it justify taking foreign loans worth \$1 billion for the Red and Yellow BRTs? The BRTs are a costly public nuisance, and why should they not be shut down and dismantled immediately? There is, after all, a precedent for this in Delhi, where the BRT was dismantled in 2016, eight years after it was opened, after public pressure and a court case which argued that the badly designed and implemented BRT worsened the traffic conditions.<sup>39</sup>

The provincial government fumbles before the Court's questioning, but fortunately for the people of Karachi, Arif Hasan is around. Pensively hunched over in his trademark safari suit, Arif looks up unamused and, in his authoritative voice, says the one thing he has repeatedly said for decades: transit corridors need to be rezoned for high density, with provision for low-income residents. If the people who will use the buses cannot live and work close to it, why would anyone use it at all? This logic is simple and universal but has eluded Pakistani politicians and policy makers across provinces: Shahbaz never rezoned the Lahore Metrobus or the Orange Line corridor. To this day, PTI tries to run the project to the ground on Twitter, citing low ridership. At home in Peshawar, the PTI provincial government faces the same accusation when it comes to the Peshawar BRT. The Zu bikes across Hayatabad are fun, but not a scalable last mile solution.

Last mile connectivity is a serious challenge for trunk transit projects. Without feeder services and deliberate rezoning, these projects become white elephants and a drag on scarce public resources. The time to rezone is not after the project is completed, but when the route is finalized and the construction begins. Incentivized by better connectivity and available space, businesses will move closer to major transit nodes first. People will follow suit, living close to stations along the corridor. The shift happens over years, if not decades.

The provincial government is forced, against its will, to table a bill rezoning the Green, Yellow, Orange and Red Line corridors. There is much arm-twisting behind the scenes. Federal agencies and cantonment boards are now legally bound to give up un- or under-utilized land along the transit corridors. They won't give it up without a fight. The provincial government finds itself between the devil and the deep blue sea. The Red and Yellow Lines finish in 2029, five years behind schedule and billions of rupees over budget. They are jointly opened at the 300-year celebration of Karachi's founding as a native fort, Kolachi. It is now possible to go from Surjani to Landhi, or from Korangi to Orangi, quickly, affordably, and with one's dignity intact.



## Ephemeral Infrastructure

It is 2030 and images of flooded subway stations from across the world are a recurring feature on the news cycle.<sup>40</sup> As cities everywhere grapple with more frequent hurricanes, storms, and heavy downpours, they struggle to keep their underground public transit infrastructure dry. The global opinion on large, fixed infrastructure is shifting, much like it shifted on large dams a few decades ago. Multilateral agencies, such as ADB and the World Bank, have pulled the plug on all such investments. Without foreign funding, the Blue, Brown, Aqua, Purple and Silver Lines are non-starters.

Rahul Mehrotra, Chair of the Department of Urban Planning and Design at the Graduate School of Design at Harvard, had published a book titled *Ephemeral Urbanisms* in 2017, exploring uncertainty and ephemerality in the context of planning. He cites the example of the world's largest human gathering, the Kumbh Mela, for which a city of 100 million people in the Ganges floodplain is assembled, inhabited, and then dismantled, all within the space of five months, once every twelve years.<sup>41</sup> The idea of dynamic and ephemeral, as opposed to static and fixed, infrastructure takes on a fresh urgency in this climate ravaged world.

In the face of increasing demand following the success of rezoned Green and Red corridors, and limited fiscal capacity, the provincial government in Karachi is forced to innovate. They convert the remaining BRT corridors into busways, an experiment pioneered on 14th Street in New York City a decade ago.<sup>42</sup> High quality buses travel in marked lanes along existing roads, separated from the remaining traffic by plastic bollards. Instead of concretized grade separation that earned BRTs their moniker "jangla bus," busways are enforced through traffic cameras and good old Karachi Traffic Police officers, now with their NFC-enabled mobile challan devices for pesky bus lane violators. Stations are precast and modular, and can be shifted along the corridor if required. There are no more flyovers and underpasses at every intersection. Priority signaling allows buses through, while holding back turning traffic. With the hard, civil infrastructure removed, project costs plummet and execution takes a few months rather than years.

The provincial government takes a Minimum Viable Product (MVP) approach, used for decades in digital product development, to public infrastructure. They test out the first MVP on extensions of the Green and Orange Lines. It is a hit. They scale it up to the extensions of Blue Line and the Common Corridor, before going back to the drawing board to redesign the Brown, Aqua, Pink and Purple lines as ephemeral transitways. The work is groundbreaking, and for the first time, Karachi is noticed in global urban conversations as an innovative leader. In 2039, Karachi builds nine of the ten transit corridors proposed in the JICA plan. The only one missing is the Circular Railway. Density within the city swells as corridors are rezoned and people move closer to stations. The city is much more livable than it has been in decades.

## Karachi Consolidated

The Karachi Circular Railway continues to be a non-starter. The wrestling between federal and provincial governments over ownership of the land has made it a toxic project for any funding, even from lenders of the last resort i.e. the local banks. The transit corridor rezoning bill has been a thorn in the sides of the city's various landowning agencies. It started with the pesky progressives, but the centrist and center-right parties are also jumping onto the bandwagon. Popular opinion has shifted. Karachi's fragmented governance problem can no longer be brushed under the carpet.

To build and rehabilitate large scale infrastructure, including water, sewage and garbage collection, the city's governance needs to be consolidated under a single authority, much like it was done in the case of New York in 1898.<sup>43</sup> It's an old demand but is now reaching a crescendo. Land-owning agencies, including cantonments, need to forfeit their municipal functions within defined city limits. The battle is dirty, drawn out, and mostly behind the scenes. Provincial governments collapse frequently. There is a stalemate, and a compromise is brokered by the city's financiers and industrialists who have much to gain from this shake up.

On January 1, 2040, Karachi, Clifton and Faisal Cantonments are decommissioned, as had been recommended in the city's first masterplan by MRVP,<sup>44</sup> and handed over to civil administration. Malir Cantt is merged with DHA City and incorporated as a new satellite city, administered by retired brigadiers. They're all too happy to leave the swampy peninsula in the south anyway. The navy keeps strategic locations along the coast and returns the rest for public development. A ferry service has started, with stops along Hawkes Bay, Sandspit, Manora, Keamari, Boat Basin, Clifton, Sea View, Do Darya, Gizri Creek and Ibrahim Hyderi. Millions in the city by the sea can finally easily embrace the sea. It is possible to go to Hawkes Bay from a ferry station in Clifton, without driving through the loaded trucks on the cratered Mauripur Road.

Bahria Town, meanwhile, has defaulted on its Rs456 billion fine to the Supreme Court and has been annexed by the Greater Karachi Metropolitan Authority. The arc of the moral universe was long, but it bent north of the Super Highway.

The KCR revival is the first test of city-province partnership under this new consolidated arrangement. After a few initial hiccups, the project gets underway in 2042. The timeline is tight, but monumental. There can be no slippages.

The Karachi Circular Railway re-opens on August 14, 2047. I'm almost 60 and live in the PECHS apartment that we moved into in the early 2000s. Late afternoon, when the sun goes down a bit and the inauguration crowds have thinned, I walk down to the Chanesar Halt station and take

my first ride south to Tower. There is a hum and a fresh train smell, and the articulated electric carriage snakes south on dedicated tracks. I get off at the cavernous Tower station. I walk out and cross the road, passing by Merewether Tower, and look at glorious Bandar Road in the dust-speckled golden light. Karachi is hard to love, but not impossible if you try.

Pages 36-37: Karachi 1970: Trams and Circular Railway Map

Pages 42: Karachi 2020: Bridges, Flyover Et Underpasses

[Insert between pages 48 and 49 Karachi 2047: Public Transit Map](#)

Notes

1. The title for the essay is inspired by the title of the 2015 Whitney Biennale, *America is Hard to See*. Like the exhibition, the essay suggests the impossibility of a simplified, universal emotional relationship with the city's past, present and future.
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# Richard Pryor in Black and Blue

Palvashay Sethi

"What I'm saying might be profane," I explained. "But it's also profound."

- Pryor *Convictions* by Richard Pryor

"Inter faeces et urinam nascimar"

- Misattributed to St. Augustine of Hippo

I don't remember the exact date when I first encountered Richard Pryor's comedy, but I do know it was after my sister, Gule, had returned from the United States where she'd been pursuing a Film Studies degree at the State University of New York at Buffalo. It must have been sometime in 2007, when she either pulled up clips on YouTube or pirated *Richard Pryor: Live on the Sunset Strip* (1982). I not only remember Pryor's red suit, but I also remember his bit near the end of the concert, when he thanks the audience and his wider fan base for supporting him after his near-fatal suicide attempt – departing from traditional suicide attempts he poured rum on himself after freebasing cocaine and set himself on fire:

"I want to say y'all gave me a lot of love when I was not feeling well...and y'all really, I appreciate it. Also, y'all did some (audience applauds)...yeah applaud yourself. Also, y'all did some nasty-a\*\* jokes on my a\*\* too. Oh yeah, y'all didn't think I saw some of these m\*\*f\*\*ers (Pryor begins to light a match)...since you love me so much. I remember this one, you strike the match like this and go (Pryor holds a lit matchstick and waves it across right to left): What's that? (That's) Richard Pryor running down the street!"

It was a striking introduction and it's certainly not often that someone lives to tell you a yarn about their self-inflicted incineration. By the end of the concert, I was suddenly privy to extremely intimate details about Pryor's life. Although I don't remember much about the other bits (apart from his visit to Africa and his subsequent disavowal of the n-word – an expletive and racial slur that I later learnt had been an integral part of his comedic routines in the past), I do remember how I felt after watching him: full and absolutely steeped in laughter.

The landscape behind this introduction was post-9/11-and-very-much-in-the-throes-of-War-on-Terror-Pakistan, and while on a first glance it seems improbable that a 17-year-old Pakistani girl would find much in common with the experiences of a 42-year-old Black man talking

candidly about his addictions and predilections, the connection was actually quite obvious. In a world besieged by violence, misery, and heartache, the few moments of reprieve are offered by laughter. This seems blasé, but humour me if you will.

Despite living a sheltered life in Islamabad, far removed from the more devastating effects of the American invasion of Afghanistan and the Pakistani military's numerous failed and unaccounted for "operations" that were ostensibly meant to combat terrorism, I also remember the siege of Lal Masjid in 2007 and the bombing of both the Danish embassy and the Marriott hotel, which were within less than a half-mile radius from our house at the time. Although the two bombings took place in the year subsequent to my introduction to Pryor, my peers and I had already developed a perverse, immature, and audacious – in a way that only teenagers can be – approach to the onslaught of violence we witnessed on newly privatized Pakistani TV channels. Fake bomb threats to our school to get a holiday were not uncommon and despite not participating in said pranks, I regret to say I did little to condemn them. We developed a warped and grim sense of humour<sup>1</sup> – gallows, morbid, and dark are adjectives that come to mind – to the events around us; laughter was one of the few ways to react to the absurdities in abundance. Therefore, it's also not a coincidence that I returned to Richard Pryor in the midst of a global pandemic, and listened to most of his albums, a lot of his concerts, and watched a number of his movies during the past year and a half.

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Pryor's comedy lies squarely at the intersection of two comedic traditions: black and blue humour. The term black humour (*humour noir*) was initially coined by the French Surrealist André Breton in order to contend with the work of the Irish satirist Jonathan Swift. Later on, Breton published an anthology of writing in 1940, which illustrates instances of black humour; namely, humour that exhibits a preoccupation with suffering, death, tragedy, violence, and subjects traditionally considered taboo. While the term entered print in the mid-twentieth century, it's fair to assume that various literary and cultural traditions along with antecedent texts display instances of proto-black humour.

Blue humour, on the other hand, is humour that relates to sex and the body, and is referred to through a gamut of names – bawdy, ribaldry, risqué, off-color, blue. It's speculated that the word bawdy finds its roots in Middle English "bauded" or "bowdet", which means "soiled, dirty" and derives from the Welsh "bawaidd" that itself emerges from "baw", which also means "dirt, filth." The bawdy tradition uses the body as its primary site of inquiry and doesn't shy away from questions of intimacy that take corporeal realities seriously. It strips the human body of any semblance of puritanical dignity and lays it bare at the altar of a joke. And on occasion,

the bawdy tradition can reveal something about our attitudes towards race, gender, sexuality, and class. In fact, by instrumentalizing humor, the bawdy tradition is often able to provide great insight into the frailty and fallibility of the human form. Pryor does this frequently in his comedy: he is often the butt of his own jokes by talking about how his body fails him. The use of the bawdy has a long, storied tradition in literature, one that certainly doesn't begin with but can be found in the work of authors like Shakespeare and Rabelais. Eric Partridge's seminal essay in Elizabethan Studies titled *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (1947) provides a remarkable and thorough taxonomy of the bawdy tradition in Shakespeare's repertoire (non-sexual bawdy, homosexual, sexual, and valedictory) for those interested, and the tradition itself allows us an entry-point through which to expand our understanding of Pryor's comedic style.

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When I was asked to write an essay on the theme of risk, I immediately thought of global finance, plunging stock markets, and the financial crisis of 2008. Risk animates my imagination in dystopic ways, but I don't claim to understand much about its connection to finance. Additionally, the essay isn't a form I feel comfortable inhabiting, and this is neither an academic essay nor solely a personal one. Maybe it is best described as a collage, an attempt at gluing together or reading between the seams of a text. I can imagine that's an unsatisfying frame but that's the risk I have to take.

The ghost of an essay has been steadily materializing in my brain during the pandemic. I've been wanting to write about Richard Pryor, the grotesque body, and the sublime ever since I chased Pryor down a rabbit hole – the notion of the sublime unfortunately gets left to the wayside in this iteration. I wasn't thinking about the essay in terms of an audience so much as an itch I wanted to scratch. Perhaps if I did a close reading of some of his comedy, I could gain an inch of understanding about what tickled me and gave me comfort and I could return to the familiar pleasure of parsing sentences until I could squeeze some meaning out of them. Thus, I sought to make a risky bargain with the editors of this esteemed journal: I'll write the essay as long as I can write about Richard Pryor. It helped in no small part that risqué is the first cousin of risk, and the former adjective is one of many apt descriptions of his comedic style. It felt like a hard sell at first but surprisingly the editors said yes.

I then did what I usually do when given a word as a theme: I turned to etymology. Here is where matters turned murky: all over the internet, links between risqué, risk, and the Islamic concept of rizq emerged in ways that suggested a false/folk-etymology, but were in fact just routine matters of dispute amongst linguists, lexicographers, and etymologists<sup>2</sup>. I looked to scholars to see if there was any credence to the connections between risk, risqué, and rizq. It's worth



producing the full if lengthy quotation on the matter from an essay "The meanings of 'risk': a view from corpus linguistics" by Craig Hamilton, Svenja Adolphs and Brigitte Nerlich:

"Random House Webster's College Dictionary (1996: 1162) defines 'risk' with reference to the French word 'risqué' because 'risk' entered English from French circa 1660. According to Ewald (2000), 'risqué' was used in France for the first time in 1578, and very early the word was used as both a noun and a verb. Ewald (2000) apparently gets the 1578 date from Le Robert. The definition of the noun 'risqué' in Le Nouveau Petit Robert (1993: 1990) can be paraphrased as follows: 'possibly from Latin rescare 'to cut,' or from ancient Greek rhizikon ('risk' in modern Greek), from rhiza "root"'. This reveals a fundamental uncertainty about the word's origin among lexicographers. Webster suggests the word 'risk' initially entered Greek from Arabic ('rizq'), while Le Robert suggests it entered French through Italian – either via ancient Greek or Latin. Given these conflicting views of the word's etymology, along with the fact that nouns' gender in French switched from feminine to masculine between 1578 and 1663, 'risk' has had an interesting history. The first OED entry for the noun 'risk' refers to a phrase from 1661, while the first OED entry for the verb 'risk' refers to a phrase from 1686. Whereas the French spelling ('risqué') was preferred in the 17th century, both English and French spellings were used interchangeably in the 18th century." (pgs. 164–165)

Leaving aside the matter of rizq, the links between risk and risqué appear abundantly clear, and Pryor's experiments with humour that dabbled in the black and blue traditions were both risqué and risky. At the moment there seems to be consensus amongst most comedians in America that eliciting laughter is doubly risky business. Contemporary debates in American popular culture about cancel culture, outrage (faux or otherwise), and political correctness gone awry or too far, partly echo the refrain that it's hard to make art, in this case comedy, without fear of the much dreaded but amorphous notion of "getting cancelled".

Personally, I find the debate stale and the terms unclear. Are we talking of Louis C. K. being cancelled (after five women came forward to report he had masturbated in front of them without their consent)? Or the broad and disparate forms of ostensible cancellation (including C. K. 's) that Dave Chappelle – one amongst many comedians also indebted to Pryor's legacy – extensively talks about in his 2019 Netflix special *Sticks & Stones*?<sup>3</sup> It's important to note that C. K. was accused of sexual misconduct while Chappelle has been accused of making off-color jokes at best, and hateful and discriminatory jokes at worst.

Chappelle has complained in *Sticks & Stones* about having a "#MeToo headache". He also included jokes about the allegations against R. Kelly and Michael Jackson, and provided a

dubious explanation about why his jokes about trans people were in fact progressive (spoiler alert: they aren't). Since then, Chappelle has gone on to win the prestigious Mark Twain Prize for American Humour along with winning the Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album twice. All this to say, a significant part of the outrage about outrage is now orthodoxy and the comedians doth protest too much, methinks. Is comedy really risky business when you're beloved by the cultural cognoscenti?

Addendum: Chappelle's *Sticks & Stones* begins with a spoken epigraph by Morgan Freeman:

"This is Dave. He tells jokes for a living. Hopefully he makes people laugh, but these days it's a high stakes game. Hmm, how did we get here, I wonder? I don't mean that metaphorically, I'm really asking: how did Dave get here? I mean, what the f\*\* is this? But what do I know? I'm just Morgan Freeman. Anyway, I guess what I'm trying to say is if you say anything...you *risk* (emphasis mine) everything. But if that's the way it's gotta' be—okay, fine, f\*\* it!"

Irrespective of whether you agree with the sentiment expressed, the oft repeated and unquestioning acceptance of comedy as an inherently dangerous and risky proposition merits further scrutiny.

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Perhaps part of the answer as to why comedians consider comedy to be intrinsically transgressive, lies in the history of figures as similar and vastly dissimilar as the Fool and the Trickster. The Fool is a capacious and nebulous category and has produced a varied taxonomy. I'm thinking specifically of the Court Jester, found in wide-ranging cultural traditions, who at least in the popular imagination if not reality – as is disputed by some historians – occupied the position of truth-teller. Beatrice K. Otto in *Fools Are Everywhere: The Court Jester around the World* states "we have seen the impressive extent to which jesters everywhere were allowed and encouraged to offer counsel and to influence the whims and policies of kings, by no means being limited to 'small historical windows of possibility'."

The figure of the Trickster also spans cultures, histories, mythologies and literatures, but unlike the Fool, it can also have divine or mythological properties. It is important to not consider these categories discrete and the spirit of mischief that is the quintessence of the Trickster can also be found within the Fool. However, the difference between foolishness and mischief may also help in articulating the difference in disposition between the two. Henry Louis Gates in *Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* provides a brief sketch of the divine

trickster Esu in Yoruba mythology and posits him as the sole messenger to the gods. Alongside this, Esu is also characterized by the qualities of "satire, parody, irony, magic, indeterminacy, open-endedness, ambiguity, sexuality, chance, uncertainty, disruption and reconciliation, betrayal and loyalty" (pg. 6). The tension between a serious role and a mischievous temperament is one of the contradictions that invigorates most tricksters.

Perhaps also, there is something to be said about the historical and contemporary associations of laughter and lunacy with excess. The symbiotic relationship between laughter and lunacy is in some ways apparent because both laughter and lunacy and/or madness can exceed reason and meaning. If we bear in mind the adage that an explanation of a joke kills it, it is as if pure, unadulterated laughter emerges from a subterranean region that doesn't merely defy but outright disfigures and rejects explanation. Laughter can be ineffable, inscrutable, and transcend the mere notion of an explanation.

Laughter can also elucidate or clarify. Another adage popular amongst comedians is that the audience *knows*, i.e., the audience will let you know what material works and what doesn't through laughter or its opposite: the purgatory of silence. But this romanticized notion of the audience as the custodians of the key to a venerated form of communal laughter is at odds with the audience that comics turn on when the former doesn't laugh. Then the audience is too frigid, unsophisticated, puritan, and the list goes on and on. Moreover, there is no singular notion of the "audience", which itself is a capricious shapeshifting beast that on some days can be mastered and on others will show no mercy to the lone comic on stage. The stories of Richard Pryor's genius are also accompanied by many anecdotes of Pryor bombing on stage, but persisting, hours into a set and sacrificing or risking his dignity in pursuit of a laugh.

Laughter isn't always righteous. People laugh for all kinds of reasons because laughter is mercurial and not bound by a singular affective register: laughter can be polite, cruel, nervous, joyful, and hopeful amongst other things. Laughter can also be libidinal.

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The specter of Death is always hovering in Pryor's comedic routines, but rather than being a malignant force, it's more in keeping with Pryor's style of physical comedy and one can conceive of this specter as a poltergeist: noisy, naughty, and chaotic. Similar to the poltergeist that enjoys physically tormenting its victim, Death too likes to remind humans of the ultimate betrayal their bodies will enact on them. Pryor's bit about having a heart attack in the seminal *Richard Pryor: Live in Concert* (1979) is masterful not only in terms of his physical comedy – Death is ventriloquized in the form of the heart attack ordering Pryor to get down on one knee, lay

splayed on the stage, and eventually reduces the comedian to a fetal position – but also in terms of the host of different voices Pryor conjures in a span of a few minutes: his own voice plaintively negotiating with Death; Death's voice taunting Pryor in the form of the heart attack that's verbalized; the nasal and indifferent voice of an angel in customer service that Pryor contacts to plead with God about his impending death; and lastly his Heart, which is angered by Pryor's lack of faith in its ability to function: "Your heart say, 'Was you trying to talk to God behind my back? You is a lying m\*\*f\*\*er.'" In another bit in the same special, Pryor relates the true story of his father – a retired pimp – having a heart attack during sexual intercourse:

"Thinking about death, though, I'd like to die like my father died, right. My father died f\*\*ing. He did! My father was 57 when he died, right, and the woman was 18. My father came and went at the same time. And the... and the woman that he was making love to, right, couldn't give away no p\*\* for two years, cause people were going, un-un, no, no, mmm, uh, no baby, uh, no. You done killed one m\*\*f\*\*er with it, that's all right. No, that's some p\*\* you can keep right there, mmm. And I saw the lady recently, and she's still a little f\*\*ed up about it, you know. She came and said, I'm sorry I killed your father. I said, miss, what are you talking about. I said, s\*\*, people get killed in plane wrecks and run over by buses and s\*\*. He died in your p\*\*. That's called recycling. You know, I just figure God must have loved my father an awful lot to let him go out like that, right. 'Cause if I had a choice, now, men, you know the truth when I tell you if you had a choice between dying in some p\*\* or getting hit by a bus, which line would you be in? I know which line I'm gonna' be in. I'm gonna' be in that long m\*\*f\*\*er, jack."

While Pryor's encounter with death seems considerably less gratifying than his father's, the macabre comedy of "My father came and went at the same time" find the strands of blue and black comedy inextricably intertwined: eros and thanatos interlocked in a dance to the death. It's also interesting that Pryor displays flagrant disregard for the conventional set-up of a joke and is involved in a more immersed and embodied form of storytelling through physical comedy and mimicry where the punchline appears on its own volition and can be secondary to the bit. The second punchline is where he comforts the woman and calls the circumstances that engendered his father's death "recycling." In this rendering, the vagina functions as the site of birth and death; the void and that which is full; both abundant and barren. Something incalculable also exists between these binaries in the form of something porous, perhaps a portal: one can go in and out (in more ways than one: sexual intercourse, childbirth, menstruation, vaginal discharge) like Pryor's father who "came as he went."

This is, in some ways, redolent of the "grotesque body" conceptualized by Mikhail M. Bakhtin in his monograph *Rabelais and His World* (1968). A key text in Renaissance Studies, Bakhtin considers the ritualization of laughter through various cultural forms, but most substantively



through the medieval carnival: unofficial feasts not bound by the strictures of those with religious and political power and a space where normative hierarchical structures were temporarily suspended. One of the ways in which this suspension manifests is through the collective nature of carnival:

"Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it...It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part." (pg. 8)

To this end, because the carnival effaces the distinctions between spectator and participant along with public and private, the grotesque body is not singular but plural. And because the grotesque body is not individual but of "the people, a people who are continually growing and renewed...This is why all that is bodily becomes grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable." (pg. 43). Similar to Pryor's notion of the vagina being a site of "recycling", one of the characteristics of the grotesque body is that it contains "two bodies in one: the one giving birth and dying, the other conceived, generated, and born." (pg. 50).

Why does any of this matter? It matters because Bakhtin's historical appraisal and characterization of the grotesque body troubles our understanding of the body as a discrete, functioning unit. The aesthetics of the grotesque exist in opposition to some of "the canon of antiquity that formed the basis of Renaissance aesthetics" (pgs. 28-29). In fact, the emphasis "on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose" (pg. 16) illustrates how the grotesque body pushes, shoves, squeezes, and thrusts against the constraints imposed by classical form through the processes of "copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking, or defecation" (ibid.) – processes that were relegated to the realm of the profane, low, and folk.

In *Live and Smokin'*, which was filmed at The Improv in New York in 1971 but released fourteen years later, Pryor dives into his set with little warning, beginning with how he grew up near "whorehouses" and elaborating on his first encounters with white people:

"They come down through our neighborhood to help the economy. Nice white dudes, though. 'Cause I could have been a bigot (raises his voice in faux-anger), you know what I mean? I could have been prejudiced...but I met nice white men, (puts on a baritone voice with a "white" accent) "Hello, little boy. Is your mother home? I'd like a b\*\*." I wonder what would happen if n\*\* go through white neighborhoods doin' that. "Hey, man, is your mama home? Tell the b\*\* we wanna' f\*\*."

"Ah, I'll see. She says you have to come back after lunch."

At the mention of "whorehouses", the audience hesitates to laugh, as if unsure about the truth of the bit and its possible trajectory. They warm up by the end as the critique concerning the double standards inherent in racism becomes legible and digestible. Pryor cycles through a wide variety of material as denoted in the contents of his set-list that flash upon the screen at the beginning: "Colored guys have big ones"; "Eating with white friends"; "A disease called virgin"; "White folks don't come"; and so on. From this brief and incomplete sampling alone, the inclinations of the grotesque body to consume, either through lust or gluttony, are obvious.

In the bit concerning how the eating habits of white and black people differ, Pryor subverts racialized caricatures of excess by presenting white people and their consumption of food as clinical and joyless: "White folks eat quiet." In a juxtaposition that plays on the Other as a signifier of excess, Pryor mimes his father eating with gusto and with repeated invocations of the profane and curses in a manner that doesn't reify racialized notions of polite/impolite and civil/uncivil behavior but in fact elevates the material. As Bakhtin says,

"Eating and drinking are one of the most significant manifestations of the grotesque body...the body transgresses here its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows at the world's expense." (pg. 281)

There is an erotic charge in Pryor's characterization of the differences in eating habits between white and black folk, an emphasis on the sensual that animates so much of his work. It is this tension between the bawdy and political that informed a screenplay Pryor wrote titled *Bon Appetit*, which he mentions in his autobiography, *Pryor Convictions*:

"The picture opened with a black maid having her p\*\* eaten at the breakfast table by the wealthy white man who owned the house where she worked. Then, a gang of Black Panther types burst into the house and took him prisoner. As he was led away, the maid fixed her dress and called, 'Bon appétit, baby!'" (pg. 107)

I'm not sure where to begin: the politics of interracial desire in a country that continues to contend with the legacy of chattel slavery; the inversion of dominance in heterosexual intercourse in terms of both class and race; and finally, a revenge fantasy enacted through recourse to the bawdy and the literal act of "eating" out the "black maid". While this may be a different type of "eating", the setting of the breakfast table is reminiscent of the banquet at carnival and, as Bakhtin suggests, "the encounter of man with the world, which takes place inside the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought" (pg. 281). What are we to make of this scene? The text and the subtext alone could merit another essay. According to Pryor in his autobiography, the movie "was retitled *The Trial*, was a silly stab at a political statement. The Panthers held the guy in a

basement and put him on trial for all the racial crimes in US history" (pg. 107) and members of the public demanded for the man to be lynched.

This comic nihilism – the seemingly coarse but complex intermingling of sex and death – and descent into chaos also typified by one of Pryor's earlier pieces called "Hank's Place." Before elaborating on the aforementioned bit, it helps to emphasize that the imbrication between black and blue comedy which occurs in Pryor's work, can be traced to the historical moment and cultural milieu during which he was writing and performing stand-up: the late sixties and seventies. Shelley Bonis, Pryor's second wife, was "a child of liberal Hollywood" (pg. 188) as Scott Saul says in *Becoming Richard Pryor*, and the interracial union between "the two lovers...(was) emblematic of larger hopes and tensions (between)...the Black Power movement and the largely white counterculture (movement)" (pg. 192).

Unfortunately, these hopes were thwarted, and the tensions exacerbated, reaching their apex after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. At the memorial benefit held for Dr. King two weeks after his murder, Pryor took the stage and said: "All these people here are giving money, but if your son is killed by a cop, money don't mean s\*\*\*" (pg.194). This statement, which prompted numerous complaints, had more of the sting of truth than comedy or eulogy. Correspondingly, when Pryor's father Buck passed, his Aunt Maxine said: "Your father f\*\*ed everything. Just be glad he didn't f\*\* you" (pg. 206). Viewing these statements simultaneously, there's an irreverence that's tragicomic, which is exemplified by the black humour Pryor engages with in his entire oeuvre.

According to Saul, in late July 1968, the comedian's then-manager Bobby Roberts – Pryor went through a slew of managers throughout his career – was able to record four nights of Pryor's performances at the Troubadour, after Roberts commissioned a recording engineer by the name of Robert Marchese (pg. 197). Saul offers a thorough account of both the material generated for Pryor's self-titled debut, and the behind-the-scenes hijinks that ensued as both Roberts and Marchese tried to comb through and cohere the free-wheeling and provocative material (pgs. 194-203). What's of interest to me is a bit called "Hank's Place" that was axed from Pryor's debut vinyl due to concerns about subject-matter, an issue that would afflict him for a significant part of his career. However, it's amongst the best material produced during these recording sessions and the set-up is a simple and familiar one to those familiar with Pryor's comedy. The setting is an after-hours watering hole where the audience is introduced to a quick succession of characters over the course of eleven minutes. It's worth mentioning that these characters recur throughout his repertoire, as they chuckle, dance, hustle, and eulogize their way in and out of different comedic bits. Further, these characters exist at and against the margins of society, disturb social norms, and live a life that embodies the spirit of risk, in spite of the drudgery of the day-to-day. They are the derelict, vagrants, eccentrics, lunatics, sex-workers, pimps, addicts, and drug-dealers.

This particular sketch opens with Pryor telling the audience that he would go to Hank's Place as a child to "play cards, shoot craps, and eat fish sandwiches." He says that it was a "beautiful place...where everybody was individual" and adds that a lot of "tricks" went there along with "farmers...looking for thirteen-year-old girls." Immediately, the juxtaposition is established: while the community at Hank's is both "beautiful" and unique, it's more troubling aspects never lurk too far from sight. As the audience nervously chuckles at Pryor's imitation of a farmer cajoling an unnamed "boy" for an under-aged "trick", Pryor acknowledges the tension in his description of Hank's by saying, "it's rough, but that's the way it went down" and moves on. What commences is a tour through the surreal late-night landscape of Hank's, and an extended polyphonic riff on the word "nothing" that is an obvious literary complement and counterpoint to Samuel Beckett's riff on "nothing" in *Waiting for Godot*.

While I don't intend to evaluate each use of the word "nothing" in this bit, I'll itemize the ones relevant to my point. The first character Richard observes is Mr. Perkins, a carpenter, looking to overcharge if not outright swindle Hank, as he offers unsolicited advice about the state of the craps table at the bar. Mr. Perkins offers a wide range of arguments to persuade Hank to hire him such as "I knew you as a little boy"; "I knew your mother, she always treated me well", and beyond these appeals to familiarity, the chance of a real bargain: "I'm going to do it for nothing...but thirty-five dollars and maybe a fish sandwich." The punchline hinges on the fact that no amount of community kinship can undercut the demands unrelenting capital makes on subjects marginalized by race, class, and gender, and that any bargains in a capitalist economy are mere smokescreens for further extraction. Mr. Perkins may have known Hank as a "little boy" but "nothing" in this context means "thirty-five dollars and maybe a fish sandwich."

The second character we encounter is Big Irma – Pryor prefaces her arrival by telling the audience that "her favorite thing was to tell people to kiss her a\*\*\*" and that she was "big, black, and beautiful." Irma's monologue is replete with "nothings" as she says:

"Ain't nobody got no money. Funky m\*\*f\*\*ers ain't got *nothing*! Just kiss my a\*\*, n\*\*, I ain't giving up *nothing*! Tell me *nothing* about it; what's happening Martha? Fix me a fish sandwich, baby. Hey pretty n\*\*, you sure is fine. You could get some of anything if you do the right thing. Kiss my a\*\* now, don't be asking me for *nothing*. (Italics mine)

The semantic shifts in Irma's variations on the word "nothing" may seem like nothing but are in fact something. With each nothing proclaimed by Irma, meaning accumulates in ways that defy quick elaboration, but the laughter and round of applause that Pryor receives at the end of Irma's monologue demonstrates that the audience is all too aware of the proliferation of meaning taking place. Each "nothing" has a staccato rhythm; a form of sharp punctuation that nonetheless provides a cadence that I cannot possibly do justice to on paper. Like it did

for Beckett, who mentions "nothing" over forty times in *Waiting for Godot*, "nothing" means everything.

\*

When I began this essay on Richard Pryor, I knew it was an exercise in risk. I wrote on a cardboard on my wall:

"I'm writing an essay on Richard Pryor and risk.

I'm writing an essay on Richard Pryor and risk.

I'm writing an essay on Richard Pryor and risk."

I find finishing things – tasks, conversations, and texts I'm writing – hard, which in fact makes me a little soft, the kind of sentimentality and lack of performance that Pryor would abhor and deride respectively. I tried to come up with a sentence containing the kind of off-color puns he would have loved, but I'm not quite sure how to conclude this essay. I'm not making an argument about Pryor being politically progressive – he was and he wasn't. I'm also not trying to provide a neat narrative trajectory about his comedy career – because there isn't one. What I can show is that, through his blending of black and blue comedy, Pryor often risked his dignity (and frequently that of others) to make us laugh. A risky move that makes one think, how much is too much in the service of laughter? He states as much in the preface of *Pryor Convictions*:

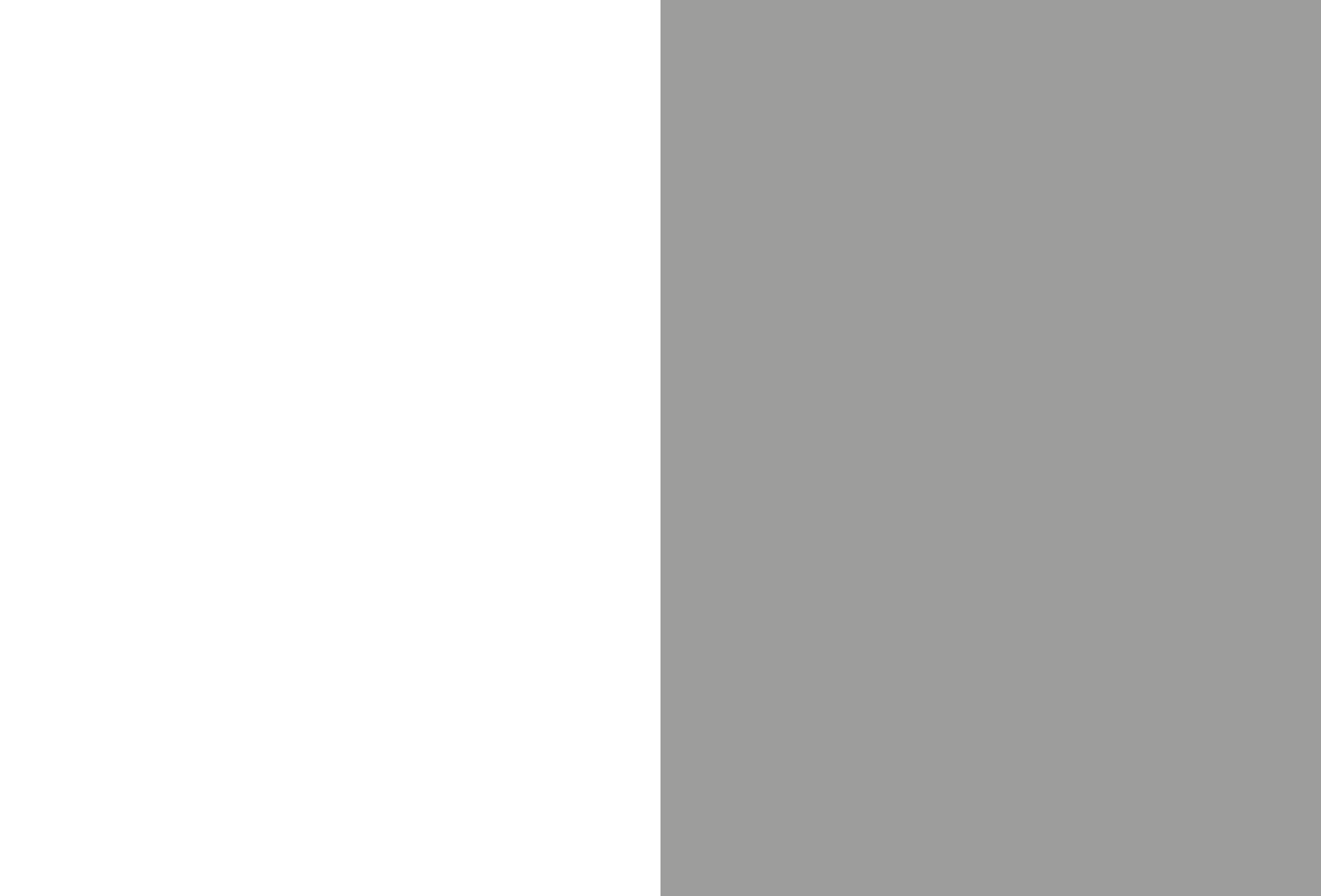
"It was a risk, a big risk, which he knew" (pg. 5).

This is an essay on Richard Pryor and risk.

Notes

1. Another anecdote, to give a sense of where my comic sensibilities were headed, is from when I must have been six or seven. I asked a family member – who shall remain unnamed – to braid my hair. Unable to pronounce چُنیا I asked her to make me a چوٹیا instead, and suffice to say it provoked laughter on not one but multiple occasions when I was asked to repeat this request in the presence of company. A few years later when I finally understood the joke, it seemed marvelous that a difference in consonant and a misstep in pronunciation could result in uproarious laughter. It is also entirely unsurprising that I lived in a household where impromptu recitations of verses from the eighteenth-century bawdy poet Chirkeen were not beyond the pale: چرکین کی گلیوں میں جب یار کا آنا ہوا پیٹ میں اینٹھن ہوئی اور دھڑ سے پاخانہ ہوا
2. In the Pakistani context, an illuminating example of the construction of a false etymology can be seen through the explanation of the word سامراج offered by a Pakistani novelist over a decade ago, where the aforementioned word allegedly had links to the raj of Uncle Sam in a post-Partition context. The claim was debunked, and I honestly don't mean to be pedantic, but the function and seduction of language as confirmation bias is an interesting phenomenon to be explored in another essay.
3. This essay was conceived before *The Closer* (2021) – Chappelle's latest special for Netflix – was released and while my thoughts on that special are best suited for another platform, I will say this: the distinctions between censorship, cancellation, and curation as cultural phenomena are something that require our sustained attention. Their routine conflation amidst the American culture wars, and by extension, the global culture wars, clarifies little and clouds far more.

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# Imagined Utopias: Art as a Social Practice

Niyati Dave and Manjiri Dube of Khoj International Artists' Association

When we began writing this essay, we had been in the pandemic for over a year. In a normal year, we would have been working out of Khoj Studios – a large, airy, white building that forms a U-shape around a cobble-stoned courtyard, flecked with white flowers from a Mousari tree. We would have been meeting artists and cultural practitioners over coffee and carrot cake, conducting student residencies, curating public interventions and exhibitions, and visiting sites for the community-based projects we had commissioned. Instead, all our animated interactions with artists, the public and with each other were now reduced to a grid of badly-lit squares on Zoom. As arts funding dried up, our building fell into quiet dormancy and our projects were at risk of not materializing the way they had been envisioned. The projects that were at greatest risk were those under our on-going Peripheries & Crossovers program.

Peripheries & Crossovers (2019) is a multi-city program of 12 socially engaged projects. These projects focus on cultural norms and narratives around gender and explore how place-making can destabilize these conventions. Through this program we try to build a discourse on how perennial urbanism in India is a condition marked by extreme precarity – of livelihoods, of housing, of safety and health – and how this precarity is unevenly borne by gendered bodies.

Our engagement with these precarities is more than a curatorial interest. It is, in fact, a shared exercise in learning how to live and work in Khirkee, where Khoj Studios is located. Khirkee is a dense, unauthorized settlement in the heart of New Delhi, lacking municipal oversight and clearances. Though central to the map of Delhi, it is peripheral in its access to civic services because it is unauthorised. Its cheap rents and central location have attracted a diversity of residents – students, refugees particularly from Afghanistan and Africa, migrants from other Indian states, artists and laborers. For all of these reasons Khirkee is a contested area that is constantly on edge. Over the years our projects, Khirkee Storytelling Project and Khirkee-yaan, have used participatory media and storytelling to initiate difficult conversations between diverse (and sometimes hostile) neighbours and create a living archive of the neighbourhood. These community-based projects were underscored by a belief in the legitimacy of art as a powerful tool for cracking open spaces for dialogue and engagement. Through them we learned that art could offer more speculative and expanded inroads for working through difficult questions and potentially become a tool for communities to articulate their own visions for a more equitable future.



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 1. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 3. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 2. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)



Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 4. (Photo by Bhavyaa Parashar)



The Peripheries and Crossovers program grew from these initial experiments in Khirkee, aiming to examine the extent of spatial injustice in similarly peripheral areas across India. We put out three open calls in order to select and commission projects that fit into our program, and eventually supported 12 projects from 2019 to 2021. Some risks are inherent to socially engaged practice: there are significant anxieties around building trust with the communities and around the ethics of representation and knowledge production. With Covid, however, came a new fault line. It exposed the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on those who were already on the peripheries: the complete erosion of their rights during the lockdown, absolute loss of in-person communication because of fear of contagion, and the depopulation of entire areas because of the sudden loss of jobs and livelihoods. These had implications for the way the projects could be implemented. In some instances, artists working on these projects could not visit their sites anymore. In others, communities themselves shifted or changed. Overwhelmingly, across all projects, there were many more degrees of separation between the Khoj curatorial team, the creative practitioners carrying out these projects, and the communities they were working with. This essay reflects on how some of these projects navigated these challenges in working with communities whose daily negotiations with risk became all the more complex because of the pandemic.

Kapashera is a tenement town that lies in the green belt that separates Delhi and Gurgaon. It is home to over 250,000 cyclical migrants from various parts of India like Bihar, Bengal, UP and Orissa who work in garment manufacturing units. Almost everyone here works on informal contracts and daily wages. They live in densely-packed housing units of around 9 square meters per family of four. While the men leave for work during the day, the women are confined within dark windowless rooms with no opportunities for work and no safe spaces for recreation. Right next to their tenements are sprawling bungalows and mechanized, industrial units built on illegally appropriated agricultural lands. This cadastral plan has become the de facto masterplan to serve the powerful landlords of the area. Sumedha Garg and Nitin Bathla's project, *Studio Otherworlds*, explores these complex, exploitative labour and class relationships. It questions the meaning of home for people in a place that is in a perpetual state of flux and how the temporariness of livelihoods and belonging affects the lives of women in this space.

Nitin and Sumedha started out by repurposing an old abandoned warehouse in Kapashera to create a space which the women could view as a safe space for daily conversations. Being outsiders, building trust was difficult because the women were not open to discussing personal accounts of their lives with anyone outside their community. Over time Sumedha encouraged them to stitch together in this "third space" casually referred to as the studio. Proximity to garment factories meant they had access to a wide range of leftover pieces of cloth in all colors and shapes. The gendered nature of the chore of sewing comfortably allowed the women to immerse themselves in this activity and gradual conversations helped them open up and begin

sewing their stories of migration, loss of home and domestic abuse on pieces of cloth. Proof of their openness came as a heartwarming revelation when six women who visited the space regularly, expressed a desire to form a collective called *Saat Saheliyan* (Seven Sisters) and invited Sumedha to be a part of it.

What began on the scale of the intimate and domestic, expanded into a larger project when the women started challenging the cadastral map of Kapashera and its patriarchal representation of space. They began to create a tapestry that allowed them to reimagine their own understanding of the space and of ideas of identity and belonging. The tapestry was divided into three parts: black and white tenement blocks represented their present situation and living conditions; the center was a space for reminiscing - remembering a life they had left behind, a life of festivals and togetherness, of ecological memory of greener spaces. It was also the space that brought out personal stories of aspirations, of gendered struggles and domestic abuse in Kapashera. One of the members stitched a clock on the tapestry to represent a time machine that she wished could transport her back to her ancestral village. The third part was a dark patch, a black hole in the middle of a blue sea which represented the toxicity of their lives and a speculative look into the future. It revealed the planetary entanglements wherein processed cotton that arrived from China into Kapashera was stitched into garments and left for Western shores. It portended a dystopic future, of ecological devastation and being sucked into this darkness.

Between the months of December 2019 and February 2020, Nitin and Sumedha further expanded the scope of their engagement by organizing a series of public workshops to critically engage with the tapestry created by the *Saat Saheliyan* Collective and initiate dialog between different groups of people around migration and gender inequality. These workshops in parks, universities and public squares attracted curious passersby to stop and interact with the Collective. The tapestry soon became a tool for social engagement and went beyond being just an object. During one such public workshop conducted at the Labour Square in Kapashera, a large number of male daily wage migrants curiously gathered around the tapestry. Pictorial accounts of street harassment experienced by women coming back home in the evening, stories of men lying on the streets under the influence of alcohol, and domestic abuse resulting from unemployment sparked many interesting conversations about gendered violence in Kapashera.

All of this turned on its head when Covid put a stop to the project's public engagement overnight. As the pandemic raged on, factories were shuttered, rents became difficult to pay and serpentine lines of migrants from all over India began arduous treks back home. To shelter in place implies that safety is to be found at the home, but this temporary home only made the migrants more vulnerable to exploitative forces. Lack of wages and no access to healthcare facilities compelled them to move back to the villages in search of the security that comes with family ties and familiar spaces. During this extremely fraught time, Sumedha and Nitin tried to





(Right) The Saat Saheliyan Collective stitching in public co-producing parts of the tapestry in dialogue with passers-by. (Photo by Aishwarya Ashok)

(Page 80-81) Nitin Bathla and Sumedha Garg, 2019, *Studio Otherworlds*, Tapestry Detail 5.

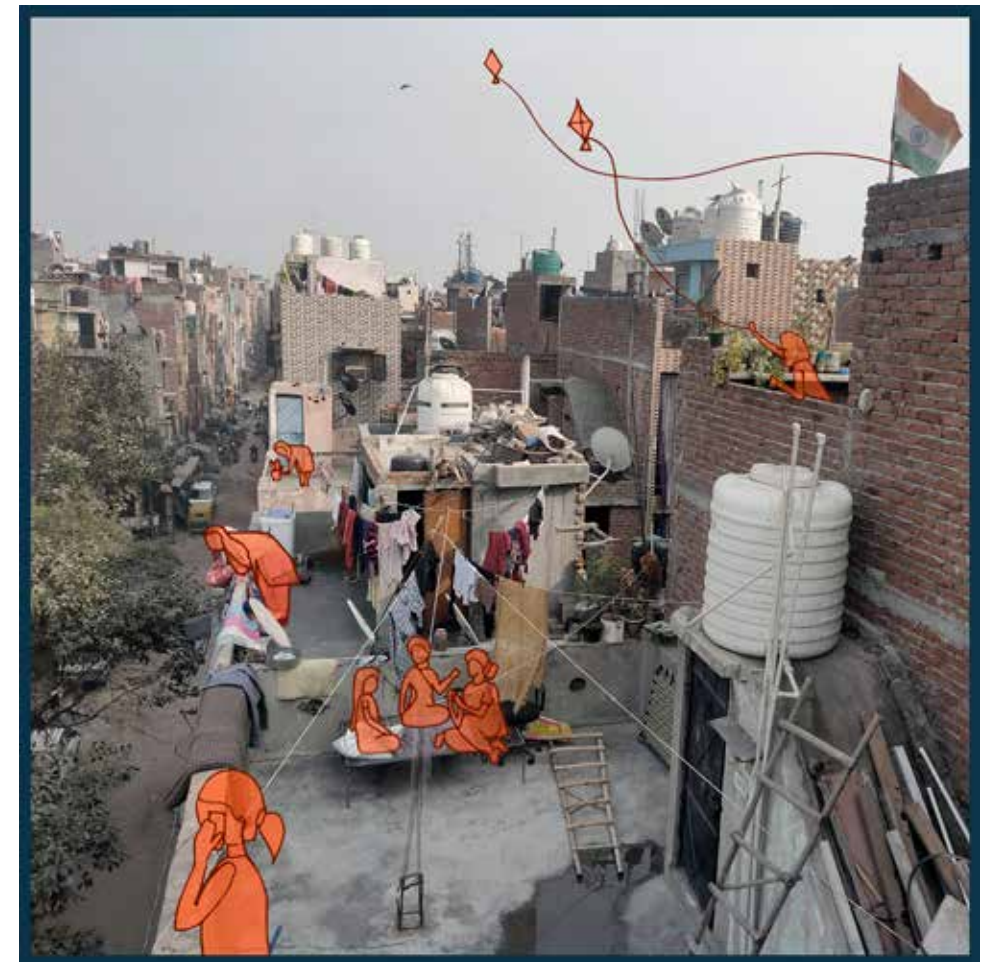




hold on to their conversations and stories, encouraging the women who stayed on in Kapashera to continue stitching. The women began to communicate with them through cellphones – often devices that were shared by entire families or borrowed from another *saheli* (friend) – to create and share embroidered images of the shifting nature of the neighborhood during the pandemic. Several heart-breaking stories of violence, exploitation and abuse unfolded in Kapashera during the lockdown. As many of the original members of the *Saat Saheliyan* Collective also migrated back to their villages, the project came to a complete close only to underscore how often an undertaking of this nature is as fragile as the community in which it is located.

While the violence women endured in Kapashera was visible, quieter forms of violence emerged in Madanpur Khadar, a resettlement area in New Delhi. Madanpur Khadar has seen rapid change over the last two decades, as it has transformed from agricultural land into a resettlement colony. It now houses evictees from across informal settlements in Delhi and lacks many public services especially water, electricity and public transport. These adversely impact women's lives, particularly their ability to commute to the city for work. Most public places of leisure in Madanpur Khadar, such as tea stalls and parks, are crowded by men. This largely masculine public domain is either completely off-bounds or hostile to young women and gendered Others. It pulsates with the threat of imminent violence for women if their conduct does not conform to acceptable public behavior as dictated by patriarchal gender norms. Families thus limit and restrict the movements of their daughters for activities other than school and work. The risk of unsafe public spaces shrinks urban opportunities for women and reduces their presence and participation in urban life. Civil society has been advocating for creating inclusive, safe spaces for women and gendered minorities but the process of urban planning has largely been devoid of any civic engagement, particularly in areas so far from the mainstream. Women's inability to use public spaces as freely as men in Madanpur Khadar, became the entry point for spatial design practitioners, Divya Chopra and Rwritee Mandal.

Divya and Rwritee's *Fursat ki Fizayen* is an on-going project that explores how women can carve out spaces for leisure in an area where the public domain is seen as the province of men and is rife with judgement. The idea of leisure has not received a lot of attention in gender studies discourse despite the effects gendered inequality of free time has on the well-being of women. Divya and Rwritee set out to understand these unequal spatial and temporal realities of young, single women of Madanpur who live at the margins geographically, socially and economically. They began talking to young women of ages 18 to 30 about "leisure time" and their relationship with paid and unpaid work. The group was a mix of working and non-working women: a single mother, a guard at a night shelter, a fashion designer who ran a small boutique, students and some women who worked as social workers. For these women, "resting" hours of the day were blocks of time that could be filled with unpaid care or cleaning work at home. Not only was there a lack of understanding of the importance of leisure time for personal well-being, spaces



Rwritee Mandal and Divya Chopra, 2020, *Fursat ki Fizayen*. (Photo by Parvez)





Mapping Workshop at Jagori Office. (Photo by Mandal)



Co-production of terrace space, mural painting in progress. (Photo by Parmar)

at home and outside were unwelcoming or even hostile to the idea of women taking some time for themselves or enjoying moments of solitude. Internalized ideas around gendered public spaces were so pervasive that it was hard for the women to imagine possibilities of leisure in the public realm. Most of them had simply never even thought about it.

Through drawing workshops, Divya and Rwritee got them to identify and document spaces they turned to in their time away from work and chores. These creative expressions revealed the terrace as a common denominator: it was seen by most as an ideal open space for leisure. With no access to public spaces, women resorted to using the terrace as a transitional space that was both not public and yet allowed them to experience the open air between chores.

As abruptly as they did in Kapashera, the pandemic-induced shelter-at-home orders temporarily derailed *Fursat ki Fizayen*. The situation pushed the young women to seek solace in their cellphones instead and the digital soon became an extension of the physical — an important space for moments of leisure. Once the second wave subsided, Divya and Rwritee returned to Madanpur Khadar and conversations around leisure took off again. With city mapping, workshops, help from local NGOs and through other collaborative exercises, the women have found a terrace that they have decided to reclaim as their space for collective action, reflection and leisure. The terrace is being painted with murals by some of the women, who are actively incorporating some elements of their lives and identity in them. Apart from co-designing the terrace, the women have also started finding ways to enhance their digital experience on the terrace by buying better data packs to improve internet connectivity. *Fursat ki Fizayen* has a simple premise: that leisure is also a priority and that joy is as important as safety when it comes to imagining gender-sensitive cities.

While Studio Otherworlds and *Fursat ki Fazaein* addressed only women's concerns, *Gendered Spaces* expanded this discourse by bringing men into the conversation to question patriarchy and notions of ideal masculinity. *Gendered Spaces* was initiated in Chitpur, one of the oldest neighborhoods in Kolkata by artists Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das. This area is home to a diverse set of people and histories: *bastis* (shacks) along the railway tracks and one of the biggest red-light districts close to the heritage palatial homes. *Gendered Spaces* was an attempt to examine how different spaces in Chitpur perpetuated shared ideals of masculinity: Sumona worked at an all-male body building club and Nilanjan at the riverside *ghats* (riverbank).

Sumona and Nilanjan's journey began as a series of walks in Chitpur. During these explorations they chanced upon the *Hathkola Byam Samiti* (men's body building club), a 100-year fixture of the locality with an open courtyard outside. A narrow trail lined with murals of muscular men leading to the entrance piqued their curiosity and drew them into the club. *Hathkola* was set up a century ago at a time when local clubs were created to train young men for the Freedom





Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das, 2019, *Ideal Man, Game for Gendered Spaces*. (Photo by Hamdasti)

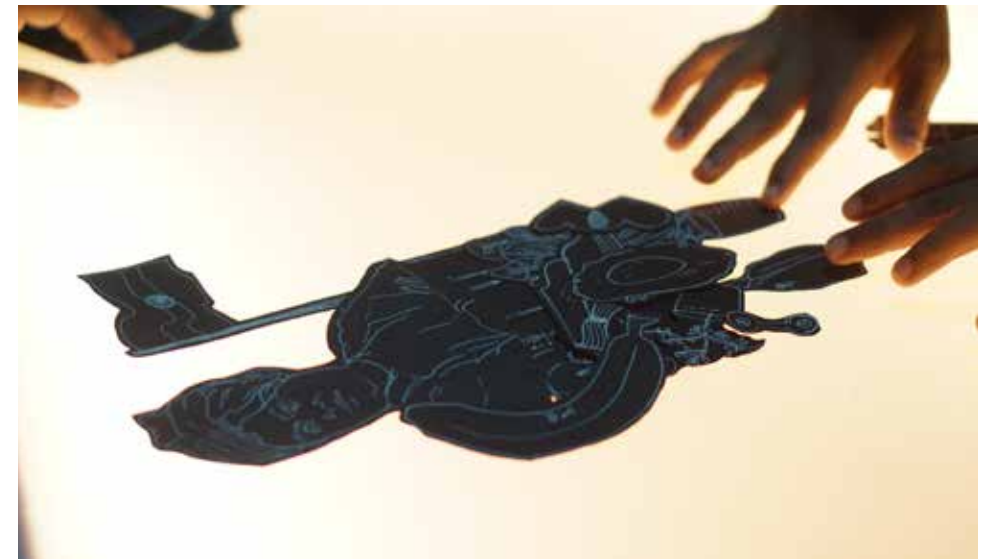


Movement. Men went to the club to build their physique but, more importantly, this was also their way of portraying themselves as the ideal men in their families and communities. Sumona and Nilanjan chose the club's courtyard for the first round of conversations about gender roles. The men's-only club was a gendered space which women never entered. However its courtyard, surrounded by houses, was easily accessible to men, women and children. The gym's location was not entirely public but not exclusive either.

After a series of conversations with the younger club-members, Sumona and Nilanjan devised an activity based on a light-box collage-making exercise to understand what drove the members to join the club, what their ideas of ideal masculinity were, what their lifestyles were like, and how they viewed their role in society. These interactions led the artists to develop a framework of visual codes or prompts which could initiate a dialog around notions of an ideal man. These prompts were black and white cutouts of everyday objects and symbols - the cooking *kadai* (pan), Indian flag, shopping bag, gym weights, a bouquet of flowers, cosmetics, beef, chicken and also images of the murals of famous men that adorned the entry walls of the gym. Each participant was asked to create a silhouette of an "ideal man" by placing the cutouts in the shape of a human being on the lightbox. The game was an invitation to talk about and reason with their choice of the visual symbols. Cooking utensils were rarely chosen, but the shopping bag was a popular choice and signified decision making to participants. The images of Bahubali and Tagore inspired a feeling of greatness, physical strength and a need to serve society. Cutouts of earrings were pushed aside for the television. As these activity-based interactions developed slowly, they began revealing several aspects of how men perceived their roles at home and in society.

The idea was to create something that was familiar but also add new and surprising elements which would compel the participants to recognize and admit something about their views of gender roles. The encounter had many defining moments especially when a group of transwomen and later a group of men collectively engaged with the lightbox to create a silhouette of an ideal man through discussions and debate. These moments prompted more reflection and questioning.

At the end of each activity, the artists would step back only to find that the club members had taken over "debating everything from whether "ideal men" should wear bright prints, cook for their partners, be a home husband, invite their partners to visit the club and use accessories or take part in protests that are deemed "anti-national". *Gendered Spaces* was driven by a desire to create an engaging, open public domain where gendered bodies could encounter "the other". To co-create and co-own narratives of a space, one has to allow divergent perspectives to be heard. These incremental encounters through trust building and interactive games brought people together to collectively reflect and reimagine the idea of masculinity in public spaces and in their homes.



Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das, 2019, Ideal Man Collage. (Photo by Hamdasti)



Sumona Chakravarty and Nilanjan Das, 2019, Ideal Man Collage Display. (Photo by Hamdasti)

Looking back at their encounters Sumona and Nilanjan reflected:

*"People were able to share their perspectives on gender roles, masculinity and intimacy, yet encounter different opinions and ideas. We were all collectively challenged to revisit and reflect on our own ideas and we hope that the games, light installations and puppets created an atmosphere that was beautiful, celebratory and meaningful, allowing these conversations and memories to live on."*

These sites were also sites of discomfort for the artists themselves, since they unsettled and contested their own ideas of gender roles. For Sumona, this meant navigating an all-male body building club as a woman, while for Nijanjan it challenged his own understanding of ideal masculinity. To discuss intimacy, masculinity and biases in society required them to build an atmosphere of trust, in which this discomfort could also be acknowledged and worked through.

As curators, working with these projects through the pandemic was particularly challenging, with many degrees of sensorial loss. We navigated anxieties about the ethics of authorship and longevity. With a growing number of outsiders – researchers, journalists, NGO workers, survey-takers, and now artists – swooping into vulnerable areas to conduct activities and seed new initiatives, there is a growing concern about the ethics of exiting these spaces when the fieldwork concludes or funding dries out, and more importantly around representation of stories which are not documented collectively. What happens when the artist becomes the exclusive author of collective action? What are the ethics of gathering and sharing information within this context? We constantly grapple with questions such as how much information is too much to share publicly? What would be unfair to the community, were it to be revealed? How can artists, as relative outsiders, take a truly community-based approach to this work?

The output of these practices certainly does not feed into the exhibitionary complex that is the domain of contemporary art. However, embarking on such artistic practices, which are process-oriented and rely on long-term engagement, also runs the risk of not producing any tangible outcomes. Does the absence of immediate results, the thwarting of instant gratification, invalidate them as artistic practices of the here and now? In that sense, the tensions within Peripheries and Crossovers have emerged as a fertile ground for us to think about how we conceptualize a practice that retains the speculative, creative and generative aspects of an art practice, along with a commitment to supporting socially-engaged work. It has enabled us to start thinking not only about what art is, but what it can do when it is mobilized as a tool to imagine more equitable futures.

## Expedition 2: Barrages and the Fragmentation of the River Indus

### Pak Khawateen Painting Club

A group of Pakistani women artists called the Pak Khawateen Painting Club ventured to the frontiers of the Indus River for *plein-air* paintings of large-scale infrastructure projects and their effects.

The Pak Khawateen Painting Club (translated from Urdu to English as 'Pure Women's Painting Club') is a collective that was formed in 2020. Its work focuses on gender, environment and geopolitics as the four members gain access to sites that are heavily guarded by the state, under the guise of a group of benign, bourgeois, female painters.

In this photo essay, the group documents its journey to hydrological structures built and imagined by powerful men to generate energy and abundance for the nation, while they subvert the roles prescribed for them as women.

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One fine January morning, the five of us<sup>1</sup> from the Pak Khawateen Painting Club set forth on our mission to chart the journey of the waters of the Indus. We were draped in uniforms inspired by Pierre Cardin's design for PIA air hostesses in the 1960s.

Our duty was to unearth, experience and document the path of the waters that had given rise to the glory of our nation. A journey that had begun from the waters of the Great River as it trickled past the snow-capped Himalayan Mountains has now led us to the lush fertile plains of Punjab and towards our final destination, Sindh.

In 1932, the British administration in pre-partition India constructed the Sukkur Barrage (or Lloyd Barrage) spanning the width of the Indus, with the aim to develop the agricultural potential of the barren lands of Sindh. This pattern of development continued after the partition of the region.

The great Indus River was considered a bearer of prosperity and growth, the taming of which would herald a new era of development for the nation. The creation of this structure had

the intended impact: the irrigated agricultural land of Sindh was 792,000 ha in 1885-1890 and by 1970-71, this had increased to 5,604,00 ha.<sup>2</sup> The local economy was strengthened and the country's political and economic institutions benefited from all this construction. However, prosperity comes with a price.

This was evident as we made our way to the noble Lloyd Barrage with its magnificent view of the Indus. The river's sprawling beauty belies the delicate balance it has long maintained for the spiritual and physical presence of all living beings in and around it, and which has now been upset. The fabled *Palla* which once lived in these waters can no longer visit the shrine of her beloved saint.<sup>3</sup> The fate of the endangered local blind dolphin has also been perilous, with its path of yore – from the snowy peaks of the North to the mangroves of the South – now becoming a small stretch in the safe confines of Sukkur.<sup>4</sup> However, what is the plight of a fish before the glory of man? The grandeur of the heroic colonial structure, enormous in size and history, reminded us that the primary function of nature is to serve man after all. What greater delight and joy could there be for any creature but to sacrifice its needs for God's chief creation? So we pondered over our purpose, as our scenic boat rides acquainted us with the history and culture of the land, found in the islands of Khwaja Khizr and Sadhu Bela, protected from the terrific whimsies of nature by the great desert-hued structure of the barrage.

With the construction of the Kotri Barrage, the flow of fresh water in the Indus River has been reduced further, resulting in the loss of the much-needed sediment carried by the river which sustains the mangroves. Saltwater from the sea encroaches into the lands of the delta, affecting the 1.2 million inhabitants of ethnically diverse agrarian and sea communities, causing the end of livelihoods and consequent mass migration. In 1959, 155.36 BCM of water was released downstream from Kotri Barrage. In 1973, it was 118.77 BCM with 274 MT of sediment. In 2002, just 0.32 BCM water with 1 MT of sediment made its way downstream, with the delta receiving fresh water only in the months of August and September. Once prosperous ports in the district of Thatta now lie barren, mere ghost towns as the young migrate to urban centres and leave the elderly behind to fend for themselves.<sup>5</sup>

As we crossed the last barrage at Kotri and headed towards the delta, the change was visible with greater effect. It presents a curious sight: the waters are a brilliant cerulean, yet there is not a drop of vegetation around. The residents of Keti Bandar, a small village at the edge of the delta, claimed they were once farmers, but their share of the water was cut off with the appearance of the structures that now mediate them. Though the Indus had once emptied in the delta, the might of the glorious barrages is such that they now decide who gets what share. The residents of this village have to walk for two hours just to claim a drop of drinking water.

Looking at the weary ships and boats at rest, some broken and abandoned amidst the saline fields, it was hard to imagine this village was once a thriving and major port. The importance of the Indus was impressed upon us once more. Truly, the great *durya* was the bringer of life and, where her mercy had waned, survival was hard.

The reins of power at the top have kept changing hands but the mind-set that equates development with prosperity continues to thrive. Multiple structures for harnessing the power of the Indus have appeared and the once unabated wild flow of the water has seen a decline as it reaches its final destination of the delta. National growth plans see this decline as positive, since it reduces wastage of fresh water. However, the impact of these interventions is borne by communities and the environment whose needs are not accounted for. With the combined effects of reduced freshwater flows, environmental destruction and unchecked construction activity, the once-thriving mangrove forest in the delta which once spanned 600,000 ha had been reduced to merely 80,000 ha by 2013.<sup>6</sup>

To see how the Indus shaped history is to know the future of the people who can no longer depend upon its waters for their daily survival because they have taken its ecological generosity for granted for too long. We came face to face with these fearsome effects as we ended our journey: the diminution of the mighty kingdom of trees that once stood as fair sentinels guarding the coast of our great nation, the loss of sustenance that left entire lands to die. This is what being bereft of the mercies of the great Indus means.

































Notes

- 1. We were accompanied by a videographer on our journey.
- 2. Haines, "Building the Empire, Building the Nation: Water, Land, and the Politics of River-Development in Sindh, 1898-1969."
- 3. Khan, "The Palla, the Shrine, the Catch and the Cook."
- 4. Sindh Irrigation Department, "Environmental and Social Assessment."
- 5. Kalhoro et al., "Vulnerability of the Indus River Delta of the North Arabian Sea, Pakistan."
- 6. International Union for Conservation of Nature, Pakistan Country Office, "Sindh Coastal Community Development Project - Mangroves Raised by Coastal Forest Division Sindh Forest Department, Government of Sindh At Shah Bundar Et Ketī Bundar."

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# Bakar Kahani

Babar Sheikh

In the area near Karachi Zoo which is colloquially known as 'Gandhi Garden', a few hundred meters from the shrine of Hazrat Pir Jumman Shah Bukhari, stands a sixty-year old shop. The *Garden ki Bakarkhani*, as it is popularly known, remains a confectionary haven and a palatable portal to a long-forgotten past. The air of the neighbourhood was once filled with erratic sounds of brass instruments being tuned, muffled by the bustling sounds of honking Karachi Transport Corporation (KTC) buses and pedestrians. The first floor of the complex opposite the shop was home to wedding bands and several of the shops were used as booking offices by Karachi's most popular brass bands. Before falling victim to the recent anti-encroachment drive, the rustic structure facing the shop displayed band members' laundered uniforms drying on makeshift washing lines. About three hundred meters from the shop was Café Nazlee, named after the famous actress who regularly performed cabaret there. The building where the shop is located is also in shambles – a fragile memory of simpler times. The shop is a family-owned business and serves as a retail outlet as well as a workstation where its celebrated product, *bakarkhani*, is prepared.

Bargess Buns, a friend and saxophone player, had taken me to the area almost two decades ago to find and purchase a tuba. In order to celebrate the acquisition of one dating back to 1914, Buns and myself stopped at the *Garden ki bakarkhani* shop to treat ourselves. As we approached the shop, he was full of praise for the unique taste of the *bakarkhani* and how one bite of it transports one back in time. It was with much anticipation that I waited for our order to be handed to us.

A little larger than the circumference of one's palm, the *bakarkhani* was almost round and layered, with a golden-brown top. Fresh from the oven and still slightly warm, the crisp layers crumbled in my mouth as I took the first bite of this celebrated local delicacy. There was honesty in its plainness, an age-old taste assured within those layers. My first experience formed a memory that kept returning to me for years. What was so special about this place, its people and the *bakarkhani*? Was it the abandoned poetry, remembrances and unspoken narratives? Was it just that particular day? Or the blank look I had seen in the eyes of a trumpet player in the area as he smoked his cigarette and stared endlessly at the road? I was not sure what had left a mark on me. Everything seemed connected in the simplicity and stillness, which stood in sharp contrast to my fast-paced life.



Tahir standing at the entrance of his shop.  
Image courtesy: Khalid Moeed.



For approximately two decades I returned to the store as an occasional customer, and my interactions with the store owner were limited to a cursory *salam*. When I finally did speak to the owner, Muhammad Tahir Sahib, I introduced myself as a student of the arts and he unlocked the small metal gate of his shop to let me in. A septuagenarian of medium height and build, Tahir Sahib had an air of quiet self-assurance about him. He was puzzled by my interest in a six-decade old *bakarkhani* shop, but his hesitation gradually disappeared. There was so much I wanted to ask him: how did a small family business like *Garden ki Bakarkhani* survive all these years? Which social and economic factors influenced and shaped the business? With no signage, advertising or expansion, how do they service such a massive clientele? How did the craft and business outlive trends of mass-produced, machine-made food? What does survival in Karachi mean? What are the risks of earning a livelihood through a hereditary craft, and most importantly, what is his life like?

Stepping into the shop was like being teleported to the past that had survived, tucked away on the corner of the road. It made me wonder how thousands of such extraordinary stories exist in old parts of the city – layers of urban memories centred in belonging and belief much like the *bakarkhani*, seemingly simple yet composed of several complex layers.

The evolution of Tahir Sahib's recipe and the process of making the *bakarkhani* is deeply rooted within the 1947 Partition of India and the accompanying mass migration. Abandoned and separated children who survived were provided refuge at an orphanage run by a social welfare organization in Lahore. Tahir Sahib explained;

"My father, who was still young at the time, was given refuge at an orphanage near the Attari border. Periodically, lists of orphans would be announced to the public and families willing to adopt would come forward. Film star Ejaz's paternal uncle Haji Jani had no children, so he adopted my father. He was a resident of Mochi Gate, Androon Sheher Lahore, and used to run a successful business selling naan, *kulcha* and *bakarkhani*. At the time it was common to involve young children in family businesses and Haji Jani did what he thought was best for the sustenance of my young father."

## Muhammad Tahir's journey and his craft

Tahir Sahib's family had initially moved from Amritsar, India, to Lahore, but after sensing a lack of harmony with the lifestyle of Punjab, his parents opted to move to Karachi. They set up their household in the Pakistan Quarters in the Gandhi Garden area of Karachi where his parents faced many struggles. Together, his parents sought to ease their financial challenges by making *bakarkhani* out of a modest clay oven from the veranda of their home. Over a short

period of time, word spread and his entrepreneurial parents set up a tin shutter to formalise the separation between their home and the space they had dedicated on the property for the shop. *Bakarkhani* was a popular food item in areas of Punjab and Kashmir, and a number of shops in post-Partition Lahore served it. In the beginning, people who came to buy *bakarkhani* from Tahir Sahib were those who were familiar with its taste and specific style. They included migrants from Punjab, its adjoining Hindko speaking areas and Kashmir, as well as immigrants from Amritsar, who yearned for traditionally prepared cuisine from the region. The fast-developing palette of Karachi, with an appetite for multiple flavours brought by its migrant communities, quickly included the *bakarkhani* as a staple everyday item for consumption. Tahir Sahib recounted those early days of the business:

"As time went by, things started to move in a positive direction, everything started falling into place. All of us, as a family, contributed to the craft and the business, especially my mother who had a very important part to play. By this time, I was five years old [and] my hand couldn't reach the counter where all the work took place, [so] my father constructed a wooden stand that I could climb on and help with the process of rolling the dough using the rolling pin. When I was growing up and trends were changing fast, my father once asked me if I wanted to continue this lineage, working with the craft of baking? I was honest and told my father, I find this very tedious and hard work. First of all, the proximity to the tandoor and a constant exposure to high temperatures and then the required level of attention. He asked me what I wanted to do. My stepbrother worked in Meetha Dar, Sarafa Bazaar as a jeweller. I told him I wanted to work with him. Soon after I started working part-time with him learning the craft of jewellery making. I could not abandon the shop at home so I still helped my father in the mornings.

In 1993, my father fell victim to a tragic road accident, when an out-of-control 5C bus hit him. He suffered major injuries and, after forty days of being treated at a local hospital, he passed away. After his death, I was once again at the crossroads reviewing my career choices: should I continue working as a jeweller and close the *bakarkhani* shop or should I return to my hereditary work and craft? I don't know if my decision was rational or emotional, but I realized that this generational work of baking was something that I could depend on more than the newly learnt craft of jewellery making. In retrospect I think it was a good decision. That was a period I dug deep into the years and years of learning, tried to completely focus and dedicate all I could to the craft and the process of making *bakarkhani*. What you inherit is unique to you, *virasat* (heritage) has a different colour than anything else. I valued and treasured my knowledge of the craft that was handed down by my father, and with the same sense of responsibility, I passed it to my son and to a few trusted *karigars*<sup>1</sup> who had



The process of making. Image courtesy: Chandan Pirzada.



spent years working at the shop. It is nothing short of a challenge to awaken this level of interest since a majority of the *karigars* are not concerned with details such as the crispiness of the layers and the drying out process that affects the quality and freshness. Their focus is production and quantity that in turn delivers them their daily wage. Since we focused on the details of the making process, I realized it took us, my son and myself, much longer to do the same work that our *karigars* did in a much shorter time period. The *karigars*' objective was different from ours."

## The process of making

Muhammad Tahir continued with his narrative as he spoke about the origin of his version of *bakarkhani* and what makes it different from others:

"From my understanding and knowledge, over the past few centuries, our version of the *bakarkhani* was popularized by the Kashmiri people. Families of Kashmiri descent were responsible for bringing it to various parts of the subcontinent, but the shape changed from region to region. Once it came to Lahore, it looked different than what it did in Kashmir; similarly when we developed it in Karachi we reformed the texture. In Lahore, they are used to making it a little solid with less layers, whereas we chose to replace the solidity with more layers, which drastically changes the texture. In comparison the *bakarkhani* you find in Rawalpindi is much heavier, the taste is pretty much the same but it feels like each piece weighs a quarter of a kilogram. The *bakarkhani* we produce doesn't even weigh twenty-five grams. This innovation came as a result of constant experimentation for years, which can be credited to my father. And through time we were able to minimize the water content to a great extent. This drying out is also the reason that you are able to store our *bakarkhani* for extended periods of time. Even after a year of storage the taste does not change, there is no stale smell. However, the shape might deform a little and if it is baked or microwaved for a couple of minutes, it becomes as fresh as when you first bought it.

I grew up watching my father unceasingly trying to develop this form, the layers kept getting thinner and thinner to a point when the ultimate baked texture was realized: a cross-section of very fine crisp layers held together by coatings of margarine. When the rolled out dough is placed in the tandoor for baking, it sticks against the vertical tandoor wall. This position helps the margarine to melt through the layers and integrate evenly. There is so much heat coming through the contact between the flour and clay that the *bakarkhani* is almost fried by the temperature.



Fresh Bakarkhani from the Tandoor. Image courtesy: Chandan Pirzada.

The excess water is sucked into the clay walls and the rest becomes steam and evaporates. It's the basic law of science, anything standing up vertically will have the gravitational pull in one direction. This is the reason why the *bakarkhani* prepared in modern day bakeries taste so different, they are placed horizontally and not vertically, in metal trays, when baked. Back in the day when my father started the shop it was not margarine but animal fat that we used as a prime ingredient."

In addition to the production of *bakarkhani* and *nankhatai*, Tahir Sahib also experimented with *manda*, a paper-thin sheet of flour used for samosa and Chinese spring rolls. *Manda's* popularity by the mid-80s led Tahir Sahib to create and sell his own style that is a comparatively thinner and drier alternative. Within the city centre, shops selling fried items began to procure *manda* from them, especially vendors from the Memon community. From the 10th of Sha'ban each year, the business focuses primarily on the production of *manda* for the next two months. However, large quantities of *bakarkhani* are made and packed into cartons to cater to the influx of customers during Ramzan. The supplementary creation of *manda* has thus proved crucial to the shop's survival.

### Persistence (*Tasalsul*)

For fifty-five years, Tahir Sahib has worked at the shop which has survived amidst an ever changing urban landscape. Tahir Sahib and one of his sons stay close to the craft to this day as they work alongside employees, kneading, mixing and baking without any hierarchical differentiation between them. Mechanisation and its ability to increase production and revenue had inevitably impacted traditional manual crafts, including the production of *bakarkhani*. Tahir Sahib tried his luck with a mechanized dough-maker, as well as electric and gas ovens, but soon realized the negative impact on the taste of the product and quickly reverted to kneading by hand and the use of traditional clay *tandoors*. "Something went missing each time we tried to innovate the process through technology," he says. The modern industrial baking oven is made of metal in order to heat and cool down rapidly, while clay *tandoors* gradually heat up and then retain their temperature which adds crispness to the layers of *bakarkhani*. "When the dough comes in contact with the hot clay tandoor, most of the oil is drawn out of it during the process of baking", explains Tahir Sahib. The family's dedication to their longstanding traditional method as well as maintaining the quality of their craft, where others have compromised in the interest of expansion and revenue, evokes an uneasy ambivalence between the manufactured and the handmade as well as between modernity and tradition.



Tahir at his shop in the evening. Image courtesy: Khalid Moeed

Tahir Sahib reflects on his father's persistence and resilience:

"My father, with his tragic childhood and two migrations, saw very hard times. It was God-given perseverance that helped him survive. Take any business that has numerous branches spread out over a region. One would think it's very tough to manage so many businesses at the same time, but the truth is that the real hardship comes one's way in establishing that first business. The drudgery, focus, dedication and honesty required in that process is unparalleled. To develop and introduce a product to a group of people is the most difficult task; societies are made up of multiple communities, you never know what you are getting into. Patience and persistence are two factors that play a major role in developing a clientele. It's been nearly six decades and we still have to answer questions like, what is this you are selling? What kind of *paprhi* is this? Is this a crispy *kulcha*? What is a *bakarkhani*? Clients come and go, people's tastes continuously change and evolve, customers move on, they too need a change. In turn we get new ones, it's a natural cycle, a process where God creates this *tasalsul*. When one puts in time, effort and dedication, it results in the formation of *tasalsul*. New businesses, especially in the eatery industry, crop up every day. Lakhs of rupees are invested into fancy shop fronts and impressive outlets that unfortunately only last for a few months. There are countless examples of this across the metropolis. It's my point of view and belief that if you focus on something completely and struggle in making it happen then God grants you success. A lot of it depends on your *niyyat* (intention) and if you have managed to make a connection between your hard work, the craft, and your expectation of a result, this *lau lagana*<sup>2</sup> eventually brings you its rewards."

Tahir Sahib's resolute belief in his hereditary practice is informed by his experiences, hardships, and successful experimentations. He links his comments on mechanisation to overpopulation and rapid urbanisation and believes that these factors are linked to the diminishing *thehrao* which is being replaced with *nafsa nafsi*<sup>3</sup>. There is a change in his tone when he speaks about the past, signalling an emotional protest against the need to revert to a relatively easier life with more manageable expectations. "Quick popularity never stands the test of time", Tahir Sahib declares. He uses the words *mutawatir mehnat* (continuous effort) to describe his lifelong work and his dedication to his traditional craft.

The process of constantly making and unmaking of a city produces a loss that is especially disorientating for traditional craftsmen, as it leaves no place for permanence and stability. The story of the *Garden ki Bakarkhani* shop and those who stood against the tide to preserve and refine its craft draw one inexplicably to the notion of *thehrao*, an intrinsic and invaluable part of craft-making.

Notes

- 1. The use of the word *karigar* is interesting as it does not mean any ordinary worker but one with some craft skills.
- 2. In this case, the expression signifies devotion towards one's craft.
- 3. 'Thehrao' denotes slowing down, stability and contentment. 'Nafsa nafsi' is a term that means selfishness or self-indulgence and is often associated with the idea of a rat race.

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## Eik Yaad Jo Kisi Ko Yaad Nahin

ایک یاد جو کسی کو یاد نہیں

Syed Safdar Ali

سید صفدر علی

یہ ہوا کی سرسراہٹ

سب کے لیے کیوں ہے

یہ سورج کی کرنیں جا بجا کیوں ہیں

یہ چاند نی، یہ بادل مشترکہ تو نہیں ہیں

پھر کیوں یہ مشترکہ سمجھے جا رہے ہیں

تو آؤ ایک حکم نامہ جاری کریں

کوئی شق، تعزیر عائد کریں

اور طے کر لیں کہ ...

یہ سورج، ہوا اور پانی مشترکہ نہیں ہیں

یہاں کچھ بھی سب کے لیے یکساں نہیں ہے

اب ہماری نظر میں کوئی انسان نہیں ہے

سوال کے معنی بغاوت میں ملیں گے

سچ کی حقیقت طاقت میں ملے گی

کسی کو کہاں تک بے دیکھنا

کہاں تک بے سوچنا

ہم ہی طے کریں گے

بس ہماری اس عطا پر

تمہیں نہ بے کچھ کہنا

بس خاموش رہنا

ہم تم سے فقط اتنا چاہتے ہیں

## منصوبے کا بیان

ہم کیسے پانی کی قیمت طے کر سکتے ہیں؟ ہم کیسے پانی کو سرمایہ داری نظام کا حصہ بنا سکتے ہیں؟ ہم کیسے اس خون چوسنے والے جرم پر خاموش رہ سکتے ہیں؟ میرا کام اس طرح کے سوالوں پر ہے جن پر ہم سب خاموش ہیں، جن کو ہم سب نظر انداز کر بیٹھے ہیں۔ میری کوشش ہے کہ میں لوگوں کو یاد کرواؤں کہ آج جو آپ اپنے حق کی قیمت ادا کر رہے ہیں تو کبھی یہی حق ہر قیمت سے آزاد ہوا کرتا تھا، سب کے لیے یکساں تھا، سب کے لیے مشترکہ تھا۔ بالکل ایسے جیسے سورج اور ہوا مشترکہ ہیں۔ پانی کو بھی مشترکہ ہونا چاہیے، پر وہ مشترکہ رہا نہیں ہے۔ یہ خیال گھر گھر پہنچانے کے لیے میں نے بصارتی خط لکھے ہیں جو اسی پانی کے توسل سے گھر گھر پہنچیں گے۔





یہ منظر کشی ہے اُس منظر کی جو منظر اب باقی نہیں رہا۔  
میرے شہر کی یادوں میں ایک یاد ایسی ہے جو اب کسی کو یاد نہیں  
اور وہ یاد ہے اُس آب کی جس میں سب کہ لیے حیات پلتی تھی  
جو سب کہ لیے امرت کا ذریعہ تھی، وہ یاد مشترکہ تھی ۔



## پہلا تعارف

پانی پر سب کا مشترکہ حق ہوتا ہے اور یہ حق کافی سال پہلے ٹنڈو جام کے شہری پانی مہیا کرنے والی ٹنکی پر جتاتے تھے۔ پھر یہ حق ٹنکی کی خستہ حالت کو جواز بنا کر سب سے چھین لیا گیا۔ ٹنڈو جام پاکستان کے صوبہ سندھ کے ضلع حیدرآباد کا ایک چھوٹا سا شہر ہے۔ یہ حیدرآباد سے تقریباً ۲۱ کلومیٹر کے فاصلے پر، حیدرآباد اور میرپور خاص ہائی وے پر واقع ہے۔

بچپن میں اکثر جب کبھی حیدرآباد سے ٹنڈو جام آرہے ہوتے تھے تو شہر کو پانی مہیا کرنے والی ۱۵۰ فٹ اونچی ٹنکی کافی دور سے ہی نظر آ جاتی تھی۔ بس کا کنڈکٹر زوردار آواز میں کہتا تھا، "ٹنڈو جام اچی ویو آھی" مطلب ٹنڈو جام آ گیا ہے اور وہ آواز اُسی ٹنکی کو دور سے دیکھ کر بس کے کنڈکٹر سے بے ساختہ نکلتی تھی۔ اور اُسی آواز کی سماعت کے بعد ٹنڈو جام کے سارے مسافروں کی نظریں بھی ٹنکی کو دیکھنا شروع ہو جاتی تھیں۔

ٹنکی پر نظر پڑتے ہی اندر ایک احساس جاگ جاتا تھا۔ اُس احساس کو بیان کرنا ممکن تو نہیں پر یوں سمجھیں کہ وہ احساس اُس پرندے کی طرح ہے جو بہت لمبی اڑان کی تھکاوٹ کے باوجود اپنے گھونسلے پر نظر پڑتے ہی اپنے پروں میں تیزی کا اضافہ کرنے کی کوشش کرتا ہے۔ پھر چاہے وہ اڑان میں تیزی لائے یا نہ لائے، اُس ٹنکی پر نظر پڑتے ہی ٹنڈو جام کے باسیوں کا کچھ ایسا حال ہی ہوتا تھا۔ بس ٹنکی پر نظر پڑتے ہی منتظر نظروں کو گھر پہنچنے کا سکون میسر ہو جاتا تھا۔



اس ٹنکی سے میرا تعلق بچپن سے ہی بن گیا۔ ۱۵۰ فٹ کی اونچائی، ہمیں ماؤنٹ ایورسٹ کی چوٹی کی بلندی لگتی جس کو سر کرنا خواب ہی رہا۔ اکثر گھروں کی چھتوں سے اُس کو دیکھتے رہتے۔ گلیوں میں پھیلے ہوئے پانی کے پائپوں پر چلنے کی کوشش میں اکثر پاؤں پھسل جاتے اور ان پائپوں کی حرارت اکثر ٹھنڈی ہی محسوس ہوتی تھی۔

## دوسرا تعارف

پرانے وقت میں اس شہر کی اکثر آبادی اپنے پانی کا بندوبست کرنے سے لاچار تھی۔ حالانکہ تب پانی بھی بہتر تھا لیکن ہاتھ والا نل اور مشینی پمپ لگوانا ہر کسی کے بس کی بات نہیں تھی۔ اُس وقت شہر کے عام لوگوں کی مالی حالت بہتر نہ ہونے کی وجہ سے شاید اس شہر کی ٹاؤن کمیٹی نے یہ ٹنکی تعمیر کرائی تھی۔ پورے شہر میں پائپ لائن بچھائی گئی۔ پائپ لائن شہر میں اینٹوں سے بنی ہوئی گلیوں اور راستوں پر کچھ فٹ نیچے دی ہوئی تھی اور کچھ گلیوں میں لوہے کے یہ پائپ باہر ہی چھوڑے ہوئے تھے۔

ٹاؤن کمیٹی کے مقرر کیے ہوئے پلمبر اور اس سے منسلک دیگر عملہ شہریوں کی آسانی کے لئے موجود ہوتا تھا۔ پانی کے کنیکشن کے لیے ایک درخواست جناب چیئرمین صاحب کو دینی ہوتی تھی جو بہت آسانی سے منظور ہو جایا کرتی تھی۔ پھر ٹاؤن کمیٹی کے مقرر کردہ ملازمین ان پائپوں میں سے گھروں میں کنیکشن کر کے دیتے تھے۔ پانی فراہمی کی مد میں اُس وقت کے مطابق مناسب بل ہر ماہ ٹاؤن کمیٹی میں ادا کرنا ہوتا تھا۔ پانی کی





فراہمی کے مختلف اوقات مقرر ہوا کرتے تھے۔ ٹنکی پر ایک پمپ آپریٹر مقرر تھا جو مشین چلا کر ٹنکی بھرتا تھا اور وہ ہی مخصوص اوقات میں شہر کو پانی فراہم کرتا تھا۔ ٹنکی کے علاوہ ٹنڈوجام شہر میں کچھ پرانے کنویں بھی ہوا کرتے تھے کیونکہ مخصوص اوقات میں پانی کی فراہمی کے سبب شہریوں کی پانی کی ضرورت پوری نہیں ہوتی تھی۔ ٹاؤن کمیٹی کی طرف سے کچھ ماشکی مقرر ہوتے تھے جو چمڑے سے بنے مشکیزے کنوؤں سے بھر کر شہریوں تک پہنچاتے تھے۔ ٹاؤن کمیٹی کے ملازمین اور پمپ آپریٹر اور یہ دوچار ماشکی، یہ سارے کردار ٹنکی اور پانی سے منسلک رہے۔ شہر کا ہر باسی ان کرداروں کو عزت کی نگاہ سے دیکھتا تھا اور احترام کی زبان سے ان سے گفتگو کرتا تھا۔ شہر کے ہر دکھ اور سکھ میں یہ کردار ساتھ ساتھ ہوتے تھے۔ اسی وجہ سے اس ٹنکی کی پہچان کا انداز ہی الگ ہو گیا تھا۔ ٹنکی کے بالکل ساتھ میں ایک فوارہ بھی بنا ہوا تھا۔ فوارے کے برابر میں ایک خوبصورت پارک ہوا کرتا تھا اور اس پارک میں شہتوت کے درخت بہت مشہور تھے۔ کافی سرسبز پارک تھا۔ اس وقت جس علاقے کو بس اسٹاپ ناکہ کہتے ہیں اُس وقت صرف ٹنکی کے نام سے جانا جاتا تھا۔

## تیسرا تعارف

پھر شہر بڑھنے لگا اور جب آبادی ہزاروں سے لاکھوں میں تبدیل ہوئی تو اُس مہرباں ٹاؤن کمیٹی نے اپنی توجہ ٹنکی سے ہٹا دی۔ پھر وہ پارک معلوم نہیں کیسے ختم ہو گیا اور ٹنکی بھی زیوں حالی کا شکار ہو گئی۔ پھر شہر کی شناخت ہی شہریوں کے لیے خطرے کا جواز بنا دی گئی اور ٹاؤن کمیٹی نے اس خطرے سے نمٹنے کا بس ایک حل نکالا کہ اسے



مسمار کردینا چاہیے۔ نہ اس کی مرمت کی گئی نہ شہریوں سے رائے لی گئی اور اس مشترکہ ساقی کو ہستی سے مٹا دیا گیا۔ نہ کوئی احتجاج ہوا نہ کوئی سوال پوچھا گیا، اور آج شہری پانی جیسی بنیادی سہولت سے محروم ہو کے رہ گئے ہیں۔ شہری صاف پانی پینے کے لیے فلٹر پلانٹ والوں سے پیسوں پر پانی خریدتے ہیں کیونکہ زمین کا پانی پینے کے قابل نہیں ہے۔ پر جو شہری پانی خرید نہیں سکتے وہ اس زمین کا پانی پینے پر مجبور ہیں۔ اس ٹنکی کی باقیات میں سوائے اس آخری نشان کے کچھ بھی نہیں ہے۔ اسے دیکھ کر ایسا لگتا ہے کہ شاید اس نے زمین کو نہ چھوڑا، یا ہو سکتا ہے زمین نے بھی اسے نہیں چھوڑا۔

یہ زمین ٹنڈو جام کے میروں نے شہریوں کی بنیادی ضروریات کو مد نظر رکھتے ہوئے پانی کی ٹنکی کے لیے ٹاؤن کمیٹی کے حوالے کی تھی۔ ٹنکی کے مسمار ہونے کے بعد ٹاؤن کمیٹی نے اپنے محکمے کو خسارے کی بنیاد بناتے ہوئے اس کو بیچنے کا فیصلہ کیا تاکہ ٹاؤن کمیٹی کے خسارے میں کمی لائی جاسکے۔ کافی عرصے سے اس ملکیت کے دعویدار سامنے آرہے ہیں جن میں سر فہرست ایک سیٹھ ہیں۔ بقول اس ٹنکی آپریٹر کے، جو کافی سال پہلے اپنے فرض سے ریٹائر ہو چکا ہے، ٹنکی کو ختم کرنے کے بعد یہ زمینی ٹکڑا ایک بنیے کو دوا لاکھ اسی ہزار کے عیوض بیچ دیا گیا۔ ٹاؤن کمیٹی کے ”ٹی ایم او“ نے اُس رقم میں سے اسی ہزار بینک میں جمع کرائے اور باقی دوا لاکھ میں سے اُس نے خود کو اور اپنی والدہ کو حج کروایا۔ اس سودے کا ٹاؤن کمیٹی کے پاس کوئی تحریری ثبوت بھی نہیں ہے۔ اب ایک سیٹھ بنا کسی ثبوت کے اس زمینی ٹکڑے پر مالک ہونے کا دعویٰ کر رہا ہے اور حال ہی میں اس زمین پر ٹریکٹر لاکر صفائی کرائی گئی ہے تاکہ چار دیواری کھڑی کی







جاسکے۔ فرانسیسی فلسفی ژان ژاک روسو نے کہا تھا کہ عدم مساوات اُس دن شروع ہوئی تھی جس دن پہلے شخص نے کسی زمینی ٹکڑے پر لکیر کھینچتے ہوئے کہا تھا ”یہ میری ہے!“

تو میں نے اس شہر میں ایسی لکیروں کی جانکاری کے لیے جو طاقت کے زور پر کھینچی جا رہی ہیں، ایک سماجی تجربہ کیا۔ میں نے شہر میں پلاٹ اسکیموں کی تفتیش شروع کی۔ میں نے اُسی انداز کو اپناتے ہوئے ایک پوسٹر ڈیزائن کیا جس پر میں نے اپنا نمبر بھی درج کیا اور سوچا اس نمبر کے توسل سے شہریوں سے معلومات ملیں گی اور میں اس ٹنکی کی یاد بطور مرمت استعمال کروں گا۔ میں نے شہر میں اس پوسٹر کو آویزاں کرنا شروع کیا۔ اس عمل سے اکثر لوگ مجھ سے بس یہ ہی پوچھتے رہے کہ یہ اسکیم کہاں شروع ہو رہی ہے اور پلاٹوں کی کیا قیمت ہوگی۔

حالانکہ میں نے لوگوں کی آسانی کے لیے اس پوسٹر کو بہت صاف لفظوں میں ڈیزائن کیا تھا، اس پورے تجربے میں مجھے سوائے دو کالز کے کوئی بھی کال نہیں آئی اور اُن دو کالز میں ایک شخص نے مجھ سے یہ پوچھا کہ قتل عام کہاں ہو رہا ہے؟ اور دوسرے شخص نے پوچھا کہ یہ اسکیم کس جگہ پر ہے؟ اور پھر جب میں نے ان کی توجہ شہری ملکیتوں پر دلائی تو ان کا کہنا تھا کہ بھائی کسی نے ہمارے گھر پر قبضہ تھوڑی کیا ہے تو اس سے ہمارا کیا کام! پھر میرے اس سماجی تجربے کا موضوع شہریوں کی عدم توجہ کی طرف چلا گیا۔

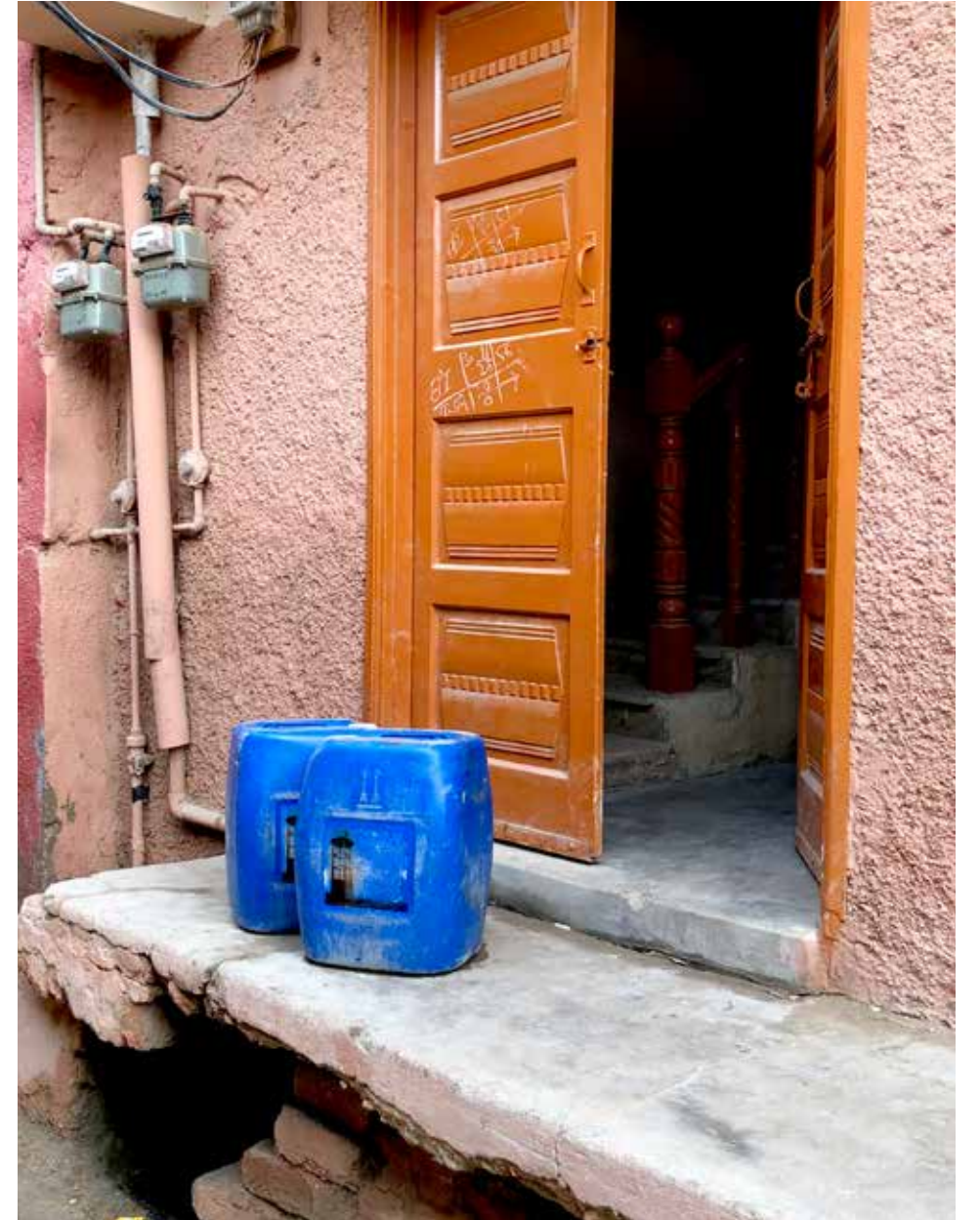




## چوتھا اور آخری تعارف

کوئی ردِ عمل نہ آنا بھی میرے لیے ایک ردِ عمل تھا۔ میں نے اسی بات کو جواز بناتے ہوئے اُس عدم توجہ کو جو میں نے محسوس کی تھی، ایک بصری شکل دینے کی کوشش کی۔ میرے پاس سوائے ایک تصویر کے کوئی اور مواد نہیں تھا۔ چنانچہ اسی ایک تصویر کو استعمال میں لاتے ہوئے میں نے ایک بصری خط لکھنے کا سوچا جس میں وہ سارے سوال موجود تھے جو دورانِ تحقیق وجود میں آئے۔

میں نے جب یہ خط گھر گھر پھنچا نے شروع کیے تو بالآخر کافی ردِ عمل سامنے آیا۔ کسی نے کہا ”آپ کے پانی کا گیلن گم ہو گیا ہے؟“ تو میرا بے ساختہ جواب تھا، نہیں، اس گیلن میں میرے شہر کی ٹنکی گم ہو گئی ہے۔ کسی نے پوچھا ”پھر سے ٹنکی تعمیر ہو گئی؟“ میرا جواب تھا، شاید۔ آگے سے ”انشا اللہ“ کہہ کر وہ اپنے کام میں مصروف ہو گیا۔











**Nudrat Kamal** is Lecturer of Comparative Literature at the Institute of Business Administration, Karachi. She has an MA in Comparative Literature from Stony Brook University, New York, which she attended as a Fulbright scholar. Her research focuses on literature exploring the South Asian Partition, as well as in the intersections of gender, postcolonial theory, and science fiction and fantasy. Most recently, her chapter "The Postcolonial Cyborg in Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome*" was published in Palgrave Macmillan's *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction*. She writes on literature, film and television, and culture for various publications such as Dawn, *Newsline* and *The Express Tribune*.

**Gulraiz Khan** is a design researcher and strategist, working at the intersection of design, urbanism and finance. He currently heads Customer Experience & Design at United Bank Ltd. He is also a Teaching Lead for IDEO U. Previously, he taught design at Habib University and co-founded the playground, Habib's center for transdisciplinarity, design and innovation. He received his MFA in Transdisciplinary Design from The New School's Parsons School of Design.

**Palvashay Sethi** is a student, writer, and teacher. Her fiction has appeared in *minorliterature[s]*, *Barrelhouse*, *The Aleph Review*, *Severine*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, and *FishFood Magazine*. She has a Masters in Literature and Modernity from the University of Edinburgh, and is completing an MFA in Literary Arts from Brown University. You can find her on Twitter as @Palvashits.

**Niyati Dave** is a writer and curator based in New Delhi. She is currently Curator and Program Manager at Khoj International Artists' Association where she leads *Does the Blue Sky Lie? Testimonies of Air's Toxicities*, a three year project that explores the troubled ecology of Delhi's air, along with working on other projects about ecology and the climate crisis. She studied Art History and Museum Studies at Smith College. Before joining Khoj, she worked at the Economic and Political Weekly, India's leading academic journal, and as the Communications Officer at the Centre for Policy Research for a project conducting collaborative research on urban informality.

**Manjiri Dube** is a part of the Curatorial & Programs Team at Khoj International Artists' Association and is leading *Peripheries & Crossovers*. At Khoj she has also executed the *Food Residency Ed. (III)*, the *Curatorial Intensive South Asia 2021*, and managed *We Are Ours: A Collection of Manifestos for the Instant* (Himali Singh Soin), *Deep Time* (Rohini Devasher), *Residual* (Anpu Varkey) and *Word. Sound. Power*. Manjiri has a Masters in International Relations from the University of Warwick, and has worked with the Commonwealth Human

Rights Initiative in New Delhi, NDTV Good Times in Mumbai, Here&Now365 in London and with artist Subodh Gupta in Gurgaon.

**The Pak Khawateen Painting Club** was formed by invitation in 2020 to create a new commission at the Lahore Biennale 02. It is an off-shoot of the Murree Museum Artist Residency, an artist-run initiative to examine postcolonial conditions and the decay of the British Raj-era hill station, Murree. The collective currently comprises of four members:

**Saulat Ajmal** is an artist, educator and independent curator. She is a Lecturer at the National College of Arts, Lahore and contributes writings on art for various publications.

**Amna Hashmi** is a visual artist and art educationist, currently teaching as Assistant Professor in the Department of Art and Design at COMSATS University, Islamabad.

**Saba Khan** is a visual artist and Assistant Professor at the National College of Arts, Lahore. She founded the Murree Museum Artist Residency and the Pak Khawateen Painting Club.

**Zohreen Murtaza** is a Lecturer in the Cultural Studies Department at the National College of Arts, Lahore. She is a visual artist and writer.

**Babar Sheikh** is a filmmaker, multimedia artist, musician and educator. His film narratives are centered around urbanism and its effects on everyday human interaction. Babar graduated from the Department of Communication Design at the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVS) in 1999 and is currently enrolled in the M.Phil. in Art and Design program at IVS. He is an Assistant Professor of Media Sciences at SZABIST.

**Syed Safdar Ali** received a BFA from the National College of Arts, Lahore in 2014. He has exhibited his work widely in Pakistan and has been the recipient of the ADA Awards 2019, Mansion Artist Residency 2018, ISL and Canvas Gallery Artist Residency 2017, Pioneer Cement and Canvas Gallery Artist Residency 2017, and Vasl Taaza Tareen International Artists Residency 2014. His art practice explores human beings' inability to identify with the structures created by them, specifically the contradiction between simultaneous distrust of social structures and desire to fit into them. Safdar currently teaches at the Shaheed Allah Buksh Soomro University of Art, Design and Heritages, Jamshoro, and is completing his M.Phil. in Art and Design at IVS.









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