



Saavdhaan: The Regimes of Truth

Adwait Singh

‘Saavdhaan: The Regimes of Truth’, the second in the series of exhibitions organised under the label of Allies for the Uncertain Futures, claims space in a little-known and largely forgotten structure comprising The Kalakar Theatre in the Saidul-Ajaib neighbourhood of Delhi. Acquired by The Kalakar Trust from the government in the 1990s for the benefit of the bhule bisre kalakars of the Katputli Colony at a time when the relocation of this ragtag bunch of troupers and street performers seemed imminent and the recent shifts in the urban policies (such as the promulgation of the anti-beggary law) mandated the earmarking of a special exhibitory space for the continued sustenance of this precarious community¹,

The Kalakar Theatre, now an overgrown ruin, has largely fallen off the rim of cultural memory, and the locals who frequent this trail evince little familiarity with its history. The semi-circular amphitheatre folding a segmented tubiform warehouse in its helm, has gathered under its ominous, fire-licked roof an unlikely alignment of an eclectic group of artists, media organisations and publics as diverse as the people it was originally intended for. A loudspeaker, commonly used for making security or public service announcements, greets the visitor at the entrance with a call to attention, underscoring the exhibition title. The work of Asim Waqif, the sonic intervention contributes to the

atmosphere of brooding anxiety pervading the current socio-political sphere that has been carefully replicated into the exhibition space, through a series of ludicrous announcements in Hindi, cautioning an undeclared audience against renting out of morals together with the property or offering in an offhanded aside ‘they publish trash in newspapers anyway!’ This piece then effectively sets the exhibition premise to the theme of the ongoing information warfare and a tooth and nail grapple for control over media channels, the ‘truth’ or what constitutes the dominant version thereof, and eventually over democracy itself. This started in 2014 with the coming to power of the right-wing

Payal Arya, *Except for the fact that the war was still going on, it was a perfect morning*, Wooden debris, single channel video, text, smoke machine, olfactory intervention, 2018.

BJP government and its political and industrial allies who have been progressively cornering power to push their own personal agendas.

Vidisha Saini sustains the thread of absurdist fiction² through her work *Dial Vikas* where a series of recorded telephonic conversations with people named Vikas, picked at random from a directory, become a way of signalling the narrative of *vikas* (development) or *acche din* (good times) so easily exploited by governments in the so-called developing economies in a bid to political power. Just like the eponymous character in the absurdist play *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, the promised *vikas* or *acche din* (this latter being fodder for a million memes) ironically never arrives. Similarly, her Dadaist sculpture *Waving Hand by the Window* featuring a deconstructed fortune cat, emptied of its body, with just the mechanical hand swinging to and fro, critiques the empty gestures and posturing that a number of ruling politicians are given to. Triggered by a photoshopped image of prime minister Narendra Modi doing an aerial *rece* of Chennai floods tweeted by the Press Information Bureau as well as the achingly slow and inadequate response of the same government to the floods in Kerala,

the work can be read as a cynical commentary on the fabricated nature and deliberate framing of political overtures/spectacles, especially if one considers the fact that *maneki-neko* or fortune cats are a Japanese addition to the originally Chinese concept of *fengshui*, and that the artist chose a mass-produced model made-in-China to fabricate this sculpture. There is a certain play here on ‘riffing’, ‘duplication’ and ‘dissimulation’ that binds the medium and the concept together, a sleight of hand that’s confirmed by a series of posters that read ‘now you see it, now you do not’. Created in collusion with the magicians from the aforementioned *Katputli Colony*, *Now You Do Not* carries impressions of a batch of special rupee five coins issued by the Reserve Bank of India in 2013 to commemorate the silver jubilee of Sri Mata Vaishno Devi Shrine Board. In reference to the subsequent challenging of the iconography of the Hindu goddess found at the back of these coins as well as their validity as legal tender of a secular state, Nafis Qazi petitioned the court to ban these.³ This purported favouring of one religion over another has since materialised in a very real way as the rampant ‘saffronisation’ drive that has overtaken the country, championed

by parties such as the BJP and the Shiv Sena, as well as Hindu nationalist organisations such as the RSS whose mission it is to realise an exclusive Hindu state or *Ram Rajya*. This has translated into a spate of mob lynching and subtle (and not-so-subtle) elimination of political detractors under charges of anti-nationalism, urban naxalism, cow slaughter etc.

The rising concerns over unconstitutional lynching of religious minorities by vigilante groups in the name of restitution for cow slaughter, are voiced in the works of Sarah Naqvi and Sanket Jadia. Naqvi draws upon her family history to craft a set of woollen sculptures of human body parts hanging from butcher hooks and messily spilled out on the table. Through this direct and rather graphic instigation, the artist appears to be bridging the leap of imagination that it takes to perceive live human bodies as so much meat for slaughter, reminding one of an episode from *Black Mirror*⁴. Indeed, this has been true of certain marginalised bodies in the post-Independence India that have been racialised and reduced to the status of bare life, a trend that has received significant boost from the lack of governmental condemnation of communal pogrom in Gujarat (2002) and the subsequent election of



Dalit Panther Archive, *Dalit Panther Vachanalay*, Reprinted little magazines and posters, 2018.



Sarah Naqvi, *Bashaoor*, Woollen felt sculptures, 2018.



Vidisha Saini, *Waving Hand By The Window*, modified found object, 2018.



Sanket Jadia, *Residual Gaze*, Photograph on card, black ink, 2018.

Narendra Modi (one of the prime accused) to the office of the Prime Minister in 2014. Similarly, Sanket Jadia has been keeping a close eye on cases of lynching, especially the one in Ramgarh (Jharkhand) in June 2017. Employing an investigative visual language, the drawings executed in pencil and ink, and illuminated by lightbulbs in a manner similar to that employed in police interrogations, depict silhouetted scenes gathered as alternative evidence from tertiary photographs and reports that are available on the case. Openly questioning the neutrality and efficacy of the justice system, one of the painted photographs portrays the Union Minister, Jayanta Sinha felicitating with garlands the convicts released on bail at an event organised by the BJP. Through a cross-examination and cross-hatching of material, the artist attempts to shed light on certain subtle manipulations in media coverage, that selectively emphasise or occlude certain details, not unlike the blackened-out bits

in certain classified documents. A similar overlaying of material and artistic framing, not to mention an attitude of suspicion, is also discernible in Asim Waqif's video that takes on the burgeoning economy of doctored reports and fake news sustained through mainstream media channels and dedicated social media groups whose sole task it has become to spew state-sponsored propaganda.⁵ Alternative media organisations like AltNews, featured in the show, are meeting this challenge head-on by keeping a vigilant eye and exposing such chicanery. In a scenario where speculations are projecting the cybernetic sphere as the main war front in the upcoming elections, with parties already investing in digital marketing in an unprecedented way, the role played by independent media would be absolutely pivotal. What works like those by Jadia and Waqif accomplish is to turn the enquiry inwards on one's own complicity and methods, or what Akansha Rastogi called 'casting

self-doubt on one's own profession'⁶ citing an episode from 2016 when the NDTV prime-time journalist Ravish Kumar had the television screen blackened-out and turned into a radio for an hour, as a call for reflection on the media's responsibility.

The exhibition, however pushes its injunctions further than simply pinning down media's responsibility, by urging the individuals to take control of their own narratives and representations through DIY methods. This is where the second connotation of the title 'Saavdhaan' as a call to caring attention/ curation is mobilised, placing the individual squarely at the centre of scrutiny of her own complicity. Video Volunteers has empowered over 250 community correspondents by arming them with basic camera phones and recording devices, promoting a DIY style of journalism that's both localised and unmediated. Over 5700 videos, covering urgent issues, have been created at the source, and are regularly screened directly

for local audiences where these issues are the most salient. The exhibition also features snippets from RJ Shikha Mandi's popular radio program in the vernacular Santhali, Johar Jhargram which similarly takes on local social issues in an approachable and humorous way, interspersed with folk music. Smita Rajmane exercises this agency to self-determination and representation on behalf of the Dalit minority by means of an archival intervention. Envisaged as an elaborate eye clinic, *Swaachh Vision Mission* takes as its immediate point of departure, the Bhima-Koregaon violence earlier this year, perpetrated against the lower-caste minorities who were gathered there to commemorate a historically significant victory for their people. The well-researched work, reads between the lines of the media reports surrounding the case as well as the subsequent arrests of some vocal journalists on faux charges of urban naxalism, piece by piece, for muffled casteism to deliberate misrepresentation or



Installation view.

outright dismissal of the Dalit cause, extending the inquiry all the way into the history of modern India. The result is a series of infographics, vision charts disguising quotes by Ambedkar, to posters offering correctives to different 'vision impairments' that have supposedly lead notable political leaders and journalists to make unfortunate observations on the Dalits, revealing at their heart a deep-seated logic of purity and pollution, unease and distaste that has historically dictated the discriminatory treatment of Dalits at the hands of the upper-caste. A staggered alignment of screens mounted on crude armature and dressed in clinical green canvas reminiscent of operation theatres, with peep holes that reveal, in varying resolutions, the videogame-style visual of the Bhima-Koregaon victory pillar at the end of a road, incites the viewer's myopic gaze to acknowledge the site of violence. Another installation invites the viewer to reenact Radhika Vermula's powerful performance of breaking ghasas (an earthen pot) at Shaniwar Wada (the erstwhile seat of power during the rule of the Peshwas), symbolising a willingness to relinquish one's position in the varna system and a smashing of caste hierarchy. The will to unsettle the monopoly

over representation is also staged through the inclusion of an assortment of didactics ranging from zines from the Dalit Panthers archives to independently published and individually distributed newsletters, pamphlets, manuals, history books etc.

'Saavdhaan: The Regimes of Truth', curated by Shaunak Mahbubani, 6 October – 3 November 2018, presented by Apex Art at the Kalakar Theatre, New Delhi.

- 1 The relocation to the neighbourhood never went through although the sanctioned amphitheatre has remained under the administration of the Kalakar Trust since, if under-utilised. The conglomerate of people from different underprivileged castes, tribes, and regions that constitute the largest living colony of street performers in the world – the Katputli Colony – continues to lead a highly unsettled existence and was in fact forcibly rehabilitated to another neighbourhood in Delhi as recently as October last year. See the report by The Wire: <https://thewire.in/government/delhi-katputli-colony-demolition>
- 2 Historically speaking, the Theatre of the Absurd as a post-World War II literary and artistic technique, was a direct response to the widespread existential crisis and shell-shocked senselessness in the wake of mass-destruction and violence that the reigning fascist regimes of the time had plunged the world into.
- 3 The petition was however rejected by the Delhi High Court which found these coins to be in compliance with the Coinage Act.
- 4 See the episode called Men Against Fire (Series 3, Episode 5).
- 5 The curatorial essay by Mahbubani informs us that according to an analytics website IndiaSpend report, the government's declared advertising expenditure from 2014-2018 was so large that it could have provided a midday meal to 46 million children for an year. See <https://bit.ly/2BeqsSk>
- 6 This was during her conversation with Mahbubani as part of the final exhibition walk-through on the evening of November 2nd, 2018.

All photo credits: Polina Schapova