

Seeds Are Being Sown

*7:15am: The crows had occupied the street
and at 7:50, now the pigeons.ⁱ*

A multitude of people, species, ideas, ideals, genders: *agents*, occupied public spaces in India in the first months of 2020. The occupations were held in opposition to amendments to India's citizenship provisions that blatantly exclude Muslims and are poised to leave millions stateless, especially Muslim, Dalit, and Adivasi women and trans people. The issue has a long history in India's northeast frontier region where indigenous groups vie for scarce resources with settlers coming through the porous India-Bangladesh border. This current entanglement of citizenship rights starkly brings South Asia's colonial history into a clash with the BJP-RSS government's vision for a Hindu Rashtra.

These sites of occupation, often collectively termed as *Shaheen Baghs* after the archetype in south-eastern Delhi, became fertile gardens for a range of desires and expressions, producing fleeting utopian glimpses of a world that is more free from religious divisions, gender discriminations, majoritarian state oppression, and economic oligarchies. The availability of space to think, breathe, converse and express, brought on a outpouring of people's artistic ideas, which some of us have had the opportunity to view, absorb, and be a part of, shifting creative practices and opening up questions of agency. However, the euphoria of creation was tainted by the harsh realities of violence, as some of these sites, and the areas around them, became sites of a brutal pogrom in Delhi and Uttar Pradesh, affecting those amongst us who are most vulnerable in this struggle.

As a body with substantial privilege who interacted a lot with these sites, I am keen to use time and space offered by the Prameya Art Foundation for an exhibition that can meaningfully respond to this movement, as well as the histories and vulnerabilities embedded within it. As public concerns move on to disease and distancing, what parts of this moment do we want to keep alive in collective imaginations? Continuing some of the questions in *Allies for the Uncertain Futures*, I am keen to think collectively about visions for an intersectional feminist future. What experiences, emotions, and critiques can we take from this and similar movements to leapfrog out of the oppressive structures that capture our present?

Looking outward, the movement has strong parallels in contemporary women's movements across the Global South, in Chile, Hong Kong, Sudan, Lebanon, and others regions. This parallel rise of womxn-led movements starting from #MeToo has been identified as fourth-wave feminism by Alka Kurien. She contextualizes this wave by writing, "Worldwide, female activists are combining attention to women's issues with a wider call for social justice across gender, class and geographic borders...Today's activists fully embrace the idea that women's freedom means little if other groups are still oppressed."ⁱⁱ

Within sub-continental history, one of the serpentine roots of this moment

can be traced back to the Chipko movement in 1970s Uttar Pradesh (now Uttarakhand), where women put their bodies on the line to prevent the felling of trees planned by a sporting-goods manufacturer. In both cases, marginalized women have gone to the frontlines to protect their rightful access to resource, and thus lives and livelihoods. This rooted connection is made to posit important questions of ecological crisis, pertinent within this time of consumption and contagion, within the present movement. How can we vision holistic worldviews alongside our struggles for equal human rights? How can we learn from the grounded knowledges of those who live with the earth?

Forests and groves, like the Jaher of the Santhals, have sacred value in many indigenous cultures. The word *bagh* too, as *charbagh* or *Shalimar bagh*, conjures images of the heavenly Garden of Paradise, promised to pious souls, described as a place of shaded trees, flowing water, gardens with sweet fruits and fragrant flowers.ⁱⁱⁱ These gardens and groves have been places of rest and contemplation, of connection to the within and without. While the fast paced and overwhelming nature of the protest site often doesn't give space for reflection, we find ourselves now forced into a space of pause, possibly of dreaming. As we look back to look forward, what seeds will we sow in these fertile soils of our uncertain times?

(Shaunak Mahbubani, 2020)

ⁱ Mahbubani, Shaunak. Excerpt from field recordings. December 26, 2019.

ⁱⁱ Kurian, Alka. "Protests across India's 'Shaheen Baghs' Are Part of a Global Fourth-Wave Feminist Uprising." Scroll.in. Scroll.in, <https://scroll.in/article/954283/protests-across-indias-shaheen-baghs-are-part-of-a-global-fourth-wave-feminist-uprising>, February 26, 2020.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ansari, Nazia. "The Islamic Garden." Dept of Landscape Architecture, CEPT University, 2011