



Worlds Without End

Stories Around Borders

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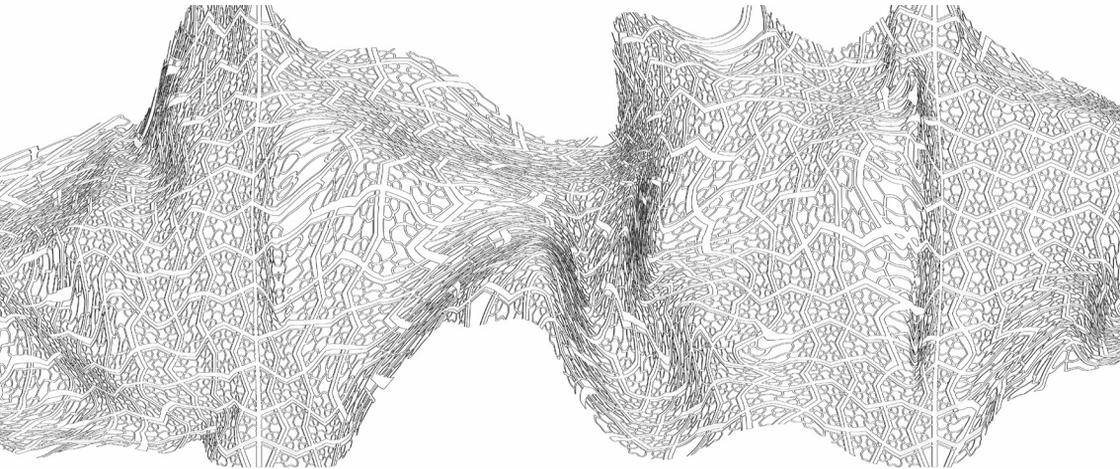
Hugh Lane Gallery

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Introduction

This is a reflection on permeability across the India-Pakistan border, and resulting bordered-up states of mind, the occasion being a recent conversation with Shuddhabrata Sengupta (Shuddha) of the Delhi-based Raqs Media Collective, a group of media-practitioners founded in 1992. We talked of his witnessing the Delhi protests in the winter of 2019/20,¹ where the anthems of the protests were two Pakistani poems. The protests were peaceful but faced armed intimidation by right-wing gangs and the police of an oppressive regime. In an infamous incident, the police broke into the library of Jamia Millia Islamia, a college central to the protests, and beat up students who were reading. Jamia is Shuddha's alma mater.

Raqs Media Collective's video installation *Undoing Walls* (2007) is part of *Worlds Without End: Stories Around Borders*.



1. The continuous protests began in December 2019 and were against the Citizenship Amendment Act (passed in Parliament), National Register of Citizens, National Population Register, which together put Indian citizenship to a religious test, and against police brutality. In late March 2020, the Covid-19 virus, and the regime, put an end to them.

In this text I am going to be writing the words protest, protestors and poetry repeatedly, and it is going to look redundant, like *The Jewish Question*.²

These protests in Delhi I accessed primarily from Shuddha's social media. They were dream protests for me: most protestors were students and women, their leaders were women, and they sang and held up posters of poetry in Urdu, the official language of Pakistan, much of it iconic Pakistani poetry of protest;³ it was the armed oppressors who were intimidated. The centre of the protest was Shaheen Bagh, a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood. Most of the protestors were Muslim women. They were protesting the regime's new discriminatory laws, and appealing to the secular constitution of India, which guaranteed the rights of all citizens. You would have to have spent formative years, and then many other years in Pakistan, to know why this could be a wildly exciting dream. And like the usual kind of dream, it played tricks with time and space.

Shuddha knows that I have this dream. We initially met twenty years ago when I lived in Lahore and came to Delhi on a fellowship. We recognised each other as allergic to the majoritarian political cultures where we lived. As he showed me Delhi at night – a Sufi shrine,⁴ a library,⁵ a campus,⁶ the steps of the mosque where the poet Hali spent the night;⁷

2. See Marx's essay from 1843 which has a powerful argument for the civil and social emancipation of German Jews, and by extension, any minority. The part of the essay where he gives a Jewish answer to German (civilizational) questions is controversial. This winter the Muslims of Delhi did give a straightforward answer to Indian questions, having to do with the Republic and otherwise.
3. Written in the eras of Field Marshal Ayub Khan (1958–69), Zulfikar Ali Bhutto (1971–77) and General Zia (1977–88). Frankly, since Pakistan was founded there has been poetry of protest.
4. Sarmad Kashani (c. 1590–1661). A saint of Delhi, buried at the steps of the Grand Mosque, born Jewish, spoke a famous blasphemy when asked to recite the kalima, one of the fundamental declarations of Islam.
5. Maulana Husain Ahmed Madani Library near ITO, Delhi. He said that because Indian Muslims are part of Indian civilization, they, a minority in India, live in a state of harmony with the majority.
6. Jamia Millia Islamia is a Central Indian University, historically a Muslim foundation, born in 1920 out of the first nationalist mass movement to challenge colonial rule. Gandhi raised funds for it.
7. Where the young poet spent his first night in Delhi after running away from his marriage in small town Western UP.

all part of the same history that Karachi and Lahore belong to – we talked about the cities of our upbringing and shadows would fall over us, darker than the night, cast by borders, frontiers, nationalisms and psychologies that form the great walls between India and Pakistan. We felt besieged twice over, by both the borders and the authoritarian regime.⁸ There were few like-minded people where we lived, and impermeable national borders kept anyone else from our different locations sharing radical commonality. In the winter of 2020, these protestors in Delhi, finding inspiration in Pakistani poems from 40, 50, 60 and 70 years ago, created a miraculous bridge across time and space, linking an understanding of authoritarianism with righteous action. Shaheen Bagh, and the proliferation of the protests, lifted that shadowy siege that Shuddha and I know.⁹ In another time and another place where I grew up, an identity-based majoritarianism promising fascism with a rising economy was called Islamization¹⁰ in the 1980s; now in India the same thing is called Hindutva.

Shuddha said he had never felt such hope and such despair. In the late 1990s and early 2000s he felt alone in his thinking; now he has amazing company. There are so many so astute. He also said the times are worse: the mass murderers of the 2002 Gujarat Riots are in power in Delhi in 2020.

8. See Faraz's 'Mahaasra' ('The Siege').

9. Events from my friendship with Shuddha illustrate how borderisation, using the term coined by the exhibition *Worlds Without End*, lays siege. Twenty years ago I lived in Lahore, Pakistan and was invited by Raqs to give a talk in Delhi, India, in the aftermath of the Kargil War. Shuddha read out my text for fear of reprisal in Pakistan against me because it was a critique of nationalism in Pakistan (*nazaria e Pakistan*). Though the text was available online under my name, Shuddha was correct about how structures of power, even those of rival nations, view dissent. On another occasion post-9/11 when I travelled to Delhi to write on the garrison state in India, about how the Indian parliament attack of 2001 was being used to create a war on terror, and Shuddha helped with introductions to civil liberties lawyers defending Afzal Guru, back in Lahore a college withdrew their teaching job offer because the Pakistani equivalent(s) of Homeland Security intimidated the dean, saying, 'Don't offer Rehan a job; he travels to India'.

10. This pietistic sounding term was the name for the regime of former Pakistani President General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq's Nizam e Mustafa (1977-88) that curtailed freedom of expression, political parties, instituted capital punishment, anti-women laws and arbitrary religious tests.

I doubt the fascists will stay intimidated by Urdu poetry. Obviously, at first they were taken aback by its sudden appearance from an unexpected direction, fully developed, and in the hands of women. By now they probably hum the lyrics. In Islamabad, I have met many an army man and establishment bureaucrat, along with their children and in-laws, who love radical poetry.

If you grow up with despotism in Pakistan, the authoritarianism and whatever growth stands for in the public culture are forever in lockstep. The civilians are despots as well, though not professionally armed;¹¹ all in all it is repressive patriarchy. But you also grow up with Urdu poetry: Ibn-e-Insha, Faiz, Noon Meem Rashid, Habib Jalib, Ahmed Faraz, Kishwar Naheed and Fahmida Riaz. You don't look for it; the Urdu finds you, and the lyric is loneliness awaiting a revolution, describing all three conditions in ways that draw audiences together. The audience, though, too often is the salon. You look for the public for this public art in vain. Look up at the nights of Karachi, Hyderabad, Lahore, Sialkot, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, and Quetta and you would think that the revolutionaries had never come; but at least the wait, the loneliness, the nights are the ones these poets describe. At most you feel alone, plus one (the poet's voice). In Delhi in the winter of 2019/20, and then across India, people agreed they saw the same interminable Pakistani nights in the company of poetry awaiting revolution, facing professional killers, and though the worst happens at dawn, they were not alone.¹² They proved this Urdu true and they sweetened Fahmida Riaz's taunting refrain to Indians: you have turned out exactly like us.¹³

I asked Shuddha what he marvelled at in this winter of protests. He said the aunties and uncles of the old left quoted Faiz, but the protestors found Jalib! Jalib's poem from the 1950s, unknown in India until this

11. Faraz's 'Peshawarana Qatil' ('Professional Killers').

12. Faiz's 'Subh e Azadi' ('The Dawn of Freedom').

13. Fahmida Riaz's 'Tum bilkul hum jaise nikle' ('You have turned out exactly like us').

time, was used widely at protests ('I refuse to accept this').¹⁴ A young woman in Bangalore became a symbol of protest because she held up the Indian tricolour flag and yelled 'Long Live Pakistan'. The young woman who said that 'the revolution will come wearing bangles, the tilak and the hijab' expressed a combination of images which befuddles staid bordered-up notions of identity. Shuddha took photographs of protestors with his phone; he said they wanted to be identified – a gesture which turned the inevitable state surveillance on its head. We agreed it was startling to us, who belong to an Indian and Pakistani generation that always understood protest to be hidden and power to be brazen.

In the days between Zia's coup¹⁵ and the execution of Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto,¹⁶ as a ten-year-old I noticed the difference between the dark and very dark shadows. During this time, I overheard my father saying he wished that instead of what would happen – Zia arranging a judicial murder of a prime minister and then ruling till kingdom come – we could have three or four elections instead. On the night that the news of the execution became public, I heard my father tell his friend that 'it's the end of thinking for ten years'. I already knew his journalist friend I. H. Burney, whose publication had been banned by Pakistani President Mohammad Ayub Khan in the early 1960s and then by Bhutto in the early '70s.¹⁷ Uncle Burney was invited by Zia to write a white paper on Bhutto denouncing the former prime minister. Burney met with the dictator, declined the Zia commission, and came back to tell my father that this one is even worse. So began the 1980s. Whatever resistance happened in the '80s, I was only able to find out about it decades later. For example, I found out 25 years after the fact that men in white suits came to a poetry reading by Ahmed Faraz, in Islamabad, where he recited 'Professional Killers' – the title tells you it is an anti-martial rule poem – and put him on a flight to London.

14. Habib Jalib's 'Main nahin maanta' ('I refuse to accept this').

15. General Muhammad Zia-ul-Haq deposed Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto on 5 July 1977.

16. Bhutto was executed on 4 April 1979.

17. I. H. Burney, *No Illusions, Some Hopes and No Fears: The Outlook Editorials of I. H. Burney* (Karachi, 1996: Oxford University Press).

This time around, there were times when there were 100,000 people at Shaheen Bagh. That was on Republic Day.¹⁸ When the Jamia campus was attacked, the condemnation from universities in India crackled like electricity.¹⁹ Shuddha said that the pushback against the regime started from the first hour. Fifty-three people were killed in Delhi in the anti-Muslim riots, and he said it could easily have been five thousand. He said he learnt about citizenship this winter from the protestors: citizenship is not about birthright or papers, it's a becoming and a practice.

I haven't been to Shaheen Bagh, but my father has because he visited his family there. He went in 1997, fifty years after the summer he fled Delhi on a train with his mother. His trip took place because of me, because he was exasperated and then curious about why I lived in Lahore and went to Delhi; he wondered what was the point. I still don't have an answer, even after fortnight-length Indian visas turned into annual business visas that led to a job with a newspaper in Mumbai for several years. Maybe there wasn't a point, like on a map, but a pattern like a web, that goes on and on, and holds itself. For my father, a scientist (a chemist), everything has a point, an equation, a controlled reaction, but on the eve of his departure from Lahore for his Delhi visit, he planned to cross the border on foot. Maybe it was being on foot and then catching a train that triggered it, but he changed his mind. All night he talked about a sister of 'Alia's' who was lost during Partition and how he was going to go to Gangoh to find her.²⁰ I left the room and let my uncle deal with him. He must have talked him out of this madness, because over the course of the trip my father did no such thing. He went to places in western Uttar Pradesh where his people are from and had the usual amazing adventures that Indians and Pakistanis have when they explore

18. 26 January is a national holiday in India to honour the day in 1950 when the Constitution came into effect.

19. Mukul Kesavan, 'The attacks on two Delhi Universities reveal Modi's target: Muslims and their allies'. *The Guardian*, 13 January 2020.

20. Alia was married to his brother, and was a mother figure as he lost his parents young. Alia's family was massacred at Partition and she was abducted and recovered. I recorded her talking about Delhi and it became a monologue in my play *Unburdened*.

their origins. There was an exchange in Shaheen Bagh with his cousin. My father told me later that he was astounded that Muzzafar bhai was devastated by the attack on the Babri Masjid in 1992.²¹ My father had said to him, 'It's one mosque, there are so many mosques, who cares if one goes! There are so many in Pakistan, take a few'. I thought to myself – I wonder who is doing better with heartbreak over the times they live in, Muzaffar or my father Masroor? Or is it too close to call?

The regime of India's Prime Minister Modi and its brown shirts have assassinated journalists writing in regional languages, stigmatised artists, calling them degenerate, placed their own zombies in institutions, and curtailed the press. Call it the Rawalpindi²² playbook, but this implementation of it by Modi and Amit Shah (Minister of Home Affairs), using their new citizenship laws, is going to make people stateless on such a scale it will take a generation of Joseph Roths to tell their story.²³ This regime has started constructing the detention camps. And they are threatening to give those camps a new use: detaining the multitudes of day labourers – out of work because of Covid-19 – who are leaving the cities and crossing state lines.

So the oppressors share a playbook, and they communicate with each other over time and space. Eventually, when they are done with our time, we will be left with the ruins of civic virtue. For the generations who will know only shards of some notion of civility, it will be difficult to figure out what the whole idea could have been. As with Pakistan, there can come a time when you won't know where to begin, no matter how many years pass. My father shares his alma mater Jamia Millia Islamia with

21. On 6 December 1992 this 16th-century mosque in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, was attacked and demolished by Hindu right-wing activists. This triggered Hindu-Muslim riots in India and anti-Hindu tensions in the rest of South Asia. Before the national election of 1991 the Bharatiya Janata Party (the current ruling party) led a national campaign to demolish the mosque and build a temple on this site.
22. This Pakistani city's name is also used to refer to the Pakistan Army headquartered there.
23. Austrian journalist who wrote the prescient book *The Wandering Jews* in 1928 about Eastern European Jews, and other refugees, migrating to Western Europe.

Shuddha. He has never forgotten his excitement attending Jamia's school for boys in the 1940s. I guess his family from a small town in western Uttar Pradesh had an enthusiasm for being secular AND Muslim, and were drawn to that in Jamia's identity. By my time in Pakistan it was extremely difficult to imagine how that idea works itself into an institution of public learning, or a family, for that matter. The protest at Shaheen Bagh has disbanded because of Covid-19 and the regime's crackdown. The authorities have erased the protest art on the walls and the streets. But we will remember Shaheen Bagh's continuous days of protest because it happened; it didn't have to be imagined, and we heard about it while it happened.

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