



**Transfigured**  
Urdu poet Taqi Abedi (left) reciting at the international musha'irah, Jashn-e-Bahar, in New Delhi, 2018. • JASHN-E-BAHAR TRUST

ESSAY

# Minerva's owl flies at dusk

A new book traces how Urdu poets have used the modernised musha'irah as the site from which to contest the parochialism of the nation state

**Kartik Maini**

*Sab hi ka khun hai shamil yahan ki mitti men/ Kisi ke bab ka Hindostan thodi hai* (Everyone's blood is present in this earth/ India is not anyone's personal property)

Inscribed on the first pages of Ali Khan Mahmudabad's latest book, *Poetry of Belonging: Muslim Imaginings of India 1850-1950*, this couplet from Rahat Indori's iconic performance at a musha'irah (poetry reading) is also the book's *pièce de résistance*. Indeed, the enunciative force of Indori's words is consonant with the tenor of the book, for Mahmudabad's pen never runs demurely: his book is a sharp riposte to the sovereigns who regard India as their 'personal property', the frequent references to the ruling party and the RSS leaving little about the identity of the sovereigns to readerly imagination.

**Alternative history**

Here Mahmudabad is in august academic company. In South Asia, history has not only followed the Hegelian labour of expressing and interpreting the political present but also found itself tasked with the burden of dispelling a diverse assortment of claims upon the past – colonial, nationalist and, more recently, those peddled by votaries and organisations united by a commitment to the ideology of Hindutva. This has been productive, even necessary, and yet, in so far as it magnifies the discursive presence of the disputed object, stultifying. But more on that later.

Because majoritarian projects can only regard the Muslim, *à la* Faisal Devji, as "the symbol of national frustration and insecurity" whose loyalty to the nation is hopelessly divided and ever suspect, Mahmudabad takes the recovery of an alterna-

tive history as his endeavour. This is a history located in the trajectories of the musha'irah and locked in a time when the nation-form was yet to colonise the political wholly.

We meet a galaxy of figures remarkably akin to Indori in their use of a modernised poetic medium, the musha'irah, to debate and reinscribe conceptions of *qaum*, *millat*, *ummah* and *watan* (people or nation, religious fraternity, community of Islam, homeland) and thus contest the parochialism of the nation state. The latter is, it seems, deducible only retrospectively: to go back to Hegel, only with the coming of dusk does Minerva's owl spread its wings.

Much of Mahmudabad's effort is devoted to demonstrating that the colonial encounter and developments such as print and sound technologies, produced significant transformations in the performative site of the musha'irah that had hitherto been opaquely metaphysical. Thrown open to different audiences and compelled to surrender its otherworldly poeticism to contemporary issues, the musha'irah fashioned a liminal space that sought to bridge linguistic and political chasms.

**Thriving subculture**

Drawn to its political elegance, several thinkers courted the musha'irah in long, mostly unrecorded, and truly illustrious careers. These individuals brought their selves to bear upon the expressive capacities of a thoroughly transfigured creative vehicle that produced 'a view of the Muslim as a political subject'. Corporate selfhoods were reformed as musha'irah poets eschewed nationalist insularities for transnational cosmopolitanisms. Mahmudabad could certainly have explored the musha'irah's transnational economies in richer detail.

There is another problem worth considering. Mahmudabad's musha'irah is a pirouetting article in an entropic world whose conqueror is nev-

er inexorable until the nation-form, at Independence/ Partition, assumes a restrictive presence. For Mahmudabad, this presence is epitomised in Hindutva's intolerance of any political or identitarian recalcitrance.

The nation-form need not have been inescapably Procrustean, but it was perhaps not avoidable either. Indeed, for much of the 19th century, the 'nation' remained the most concrete mode of organising the political, one that was and is, like most hegemonies, strengthened by questioning. Few could settle the question of the nation, but fewer still could deny the existential basis of its being one, as Mahmudabad establishes when he quotes a poet from Anjuman-e-Punjab, the literary society founded in Lahore in 1865: '*qaum se janta ka zizna ho, qaum say badhkar koi chiz na ho*' (Life should not be as precious as the nation, nothing should be more important than the nation.)

In South Asia, national imagination was coterminous with the making of 'Hinduism' as national religion. This renders the political assaults of the right wing today fully intelligible while also revisiting the position of Independence/ Partition as a definitive historical juncture. Perhaps the musha'irah was not an alternative culture but a subculture, and although responding to the present is crucial, perhaps the proverbial rot runs far deeper than the RSS and BJP.

There is, however, little doubt about the accomplishment of *Poetry of Belonging*. Mahmudabad's command over his sources is impressive and his writing is as cogent as immersive. The book will, in its liberal employment of tweets and audio-visual data as serious source material, ruffle orthodoxies. And this is only the first of many feathers – and orthodoxies – that the monograph will ruffle.

The writer is a history student in the University of Delhi.

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TRANSLATION

# Sowcarpet chronicle

You don't need to have Tamil roots to appreciate these delightful stories set mostly in an old Chennai neighbourhood

**Vijayree Venkatraman**

The wealth of contemporary Tamil literature has always been tantalisingly out of reach for readers like me who speak their mother tongue well but tend to stumble over the printed word. But you do not need Tamil roots to appreciate this delightful new book of short stories, translated from the Tamil original, *Kadavu*, published two decades ago. In fact, the author, Dilip Kumar, is not a native speaker of the language.

In the title story, we meet Babli

Patti, a devout old Gujarati lady who wants to get rid of a stray cat that has taken to raiding her flat to lap up milk meant for the god Krishna.

**It's real**

Her son asks their godless relative, Surendran, "the one-man kangaroo court for all of the wrongdoing in the Agraharam." This hooligan, who can swear fluently in both Gujarati and Tamil, breezily says, "Consider the job done!" Eventually, this humane layabout ends up saving the cat from the clutches of his pious aunt.



Unlike R.K. Narayan's *Malgudi*, the *agraharam* of the title is a real place on the map. *Ekambareswarar Agraharam* is a set of three-storey buildings around the 350-year-old temple of the same name in Sowcarpet, an old neighbourhood of north Chennai. The translator, Martha Ann Selby, an American scholar of Tamil and Sanskrit at the University of Texas in Austin, provides the context in the introduction.

The Gujaratis of Sowcarpet

**Unlike R.K. Narayan's Malgudi, the Agraharam of the title is a real place on the map**

come alive for us, in English, via Tamil. Sowcarpet has been a stronghold of north Indian immigrants for centuries. As Chennai burgeoned into a centre of commerce in the 17th century, Gujarati weavers from in and around

**Bustling** Just another day in Sowcarpet. • M. PRABHU

Madurai took up residence near the *Ekambareswarar* temple. Then came the Gujarati merchants or *sowcars*, who gave the neighbourhood its name. They were soon joined by Rajasthani traders. These relatively affluent immigrants are known as *saits* in local parlance. In Tamil films, the stereotypical *sait* is often a moneylender who speaks broken Tamil interspersed with nonsense words like '*nambal, nimbai*'.

Dilip Kumar's ancestors moved from Kutch in Gujarat to South India nearly a century ago. He belongs to a family of rich businessmen and has relatives in Sowcarpet. Following the early death of his father, he dropped out of school and took up jobs to support his family. These difficult circumstances gave him plenty of experiences to draw on later. His humanistic, hyper-realistic fiction is laced with gentle humour.

**Pitch perfect**

*Ekambareswarar Agraharam* teems with relatable characters. My favourite is Gangu Patti who makes "beautiful use of vast num-

bers of Gujarati swearwords, turning them into cubes of jaggedness." Young women seek her advice on everything, "including sex, religion, pickle-making, and the nature of time and god." As Patti holds court, her tragic backstory is narrated through a series of conversational vignettes. The hardest part of translation, Selby says, is rendering dialogue correctly. These conversations sound pitch perfect. Indeed, the best of the 14 stories are those set in Sowcarpet.

But other stories too have their own appeal. Selby points out that a few stories have autobiographical elements: the young worker in 'The Bamboo Shoots', the suicidal poet in 'The Scent of a Woman' and the letter writer in 'The Letter' are all versions of the author. (A Tamil film, *Nasir*, which premiered and won an award at this year's International Film Festival Rotterdam, is based on Dilip Kumar's 'A Clerk's Story', not a part of this collection.) 'The Miracle

that Refused to Happen' is the Indianised version of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*.

In all likelihood, this book will whet your appetite for stories by other Tamil masters. In that case, pick up a copy of Dilip Kumar's comprehensive anthology, *The Tamil Story: Through the Times, Through the Tides*, which traces the evolution of modern Tamil short fiction through 88 stories.

Or you may want to read more of Dilip Kumar. Selby points out that the author, who taught himself Tamil by reading newspapers, writes in short, "almost telegraphic" phrases. This suggests that even an intermediate reader of Tamil like me can hope to read his work in the original. It is an unexpected but inspiring take-away from this book of superbly translated stories.

The reviewer is a Boston-based science journalist.

POETRY

# The rain eclogue

Birdsong and stifled scream and what the writer always knew



• GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK

**Anjum Hasan**

The wind is desperate here and the rain's wild, sharpened slant knocks the power out. "Almost everyone traverses their lifespan, from birth to death, with eyes closed... If we open our eyes for just a moment, a great and terrible cry will burst forth from us and we shall scream and never stop." I'm reading one more disregarded novel and you're

Mumbling explanations in your sleep. The storm makes tunnels of the lanes between hedgerows and houses, squalling in pain, and I think, what about hearing? Do we traverse our lifespan with our ears blocked up as well because try as I might I cannot hear the howling, the landscape carries no echoes of your distress, not even

Monsoon furies approximate to how you would break upon us if there was anyone to listen. The rain stops, all returns to stunned peace, the crickets harmonising with the gurgling in the gutters, and even though you said, describing, dry-eyed your betrayal, as they took you away, "I earnestly hope you will speak out before your turn comes,"

We would rather not open our mouths, not even for a moment, to say what we are: shipwrecked with all the hulking historical dreck of our divided selves. Last week, when the winds were still playing tug of war between southwest coast and Arabian Sea, I took in the silence, how sunlit and lazy, just the faint buzz of welding on a new roof

Melding with the sighing breeze and the sweet, silly twittering. And later, walking on that winding road above folded hills that fall away to this same sea, I saw a flash of exceptional blue in the swoop of a bird and tried to memorise the shape of its tail so I could look it up in my handbook. Malabar whistling-thrush. "Remarkably long

Human whistling, up and down the scale, thus nicknamed 'idle schoolboy.'" With what measure of muteness to honour your saying, woman whose name I've forgotten, I can go hungry but what to tell my children? And you, a man in a million, who said, I'd rather die on the road than stay here, how to offer you more than that stifled scream, how, as the

Poet said, to hold in a single thought reality and justice, how to save you from becoming a washed-out memory lost to the daily drama of the rain? How the light clouds up every half hour, how romantically the mist drifts in, how fiercely a blackbird knocks at our windows each dawn, trying to kiss its reflection, so I hammered some rusty nails

I found in a bag under your desk and strung up curtains on the outside to shut out that cold, orange-ringed eye, to resist the battering of its lonely refrain. Our neighbour down the lane – who drifts about all day tending to his fruit trees and flowering plants, worrying about coffee prices and labour shortages, who finds the needle of his suspicions

Always pointing at Mohammedans, though he also distrusts the working classes, the feckless poor, the dubious immigrants, but who is all the same a model of decency – served his government, paid his taxes, (mostly) resisted demands for bribes, dirtied hands only with his native earth – this gentleman tells me such birds can die, that is,

Wilfully break their necks on the glass they're trying to breach. All I can do is make these broken idylls with the old phrases my father would bring up to justify literature's superiority to life – say, the milk of human kindness, say, sweetness and light. As the novelist knew, our eyes will never open. The Draconian speaks elderly rubbish

From both sides of his mouth and I hear my father's voice night after unheeding night, "The Supreme Court called him a modern-day Nero". You Nero, and we the hard of hearing, and we the dim of sight. And here again the rushing sweep of maddened rain – drumming loud as the cement mixer nearby with which they're trying to create that

Elevated feeling the chance to make more money can bring, plain to see in the valley before us which is choking with gains, one profitably unpretty house after another. And then it clears to reveal the mynahs on the electric wires, black on black against the sky's grey blank – utterly sans insight for us who fiddle while home burns.

The writer's latest book is the collection of stories, *A Day in the Life*.

BROWSER

**Memoirs and Misinformation**  
Jim Carrey and Dana Vachon  
Knopf  
₹2,323

In this semi-autobiographical novel, Jim Carrey is an actor battling the blues and looking for his Oscar break. Suddenly he meets the love of his life besides getting a movie offer that has the potential to become the apogee of his career. This meta story is all about acting, celebrity and career crisis.



**Hiranyakashyap**  
Kevin Missal  
HarperCollins India  
₹250

In the second book of the Narasimha Trilogy, Hiranyakashyap seeks to destroy Indra's kingdom. His son, Prahlad, opposes him. Narasimha tries to find Prahlad but meets with hurdles. Holika too is hunting for her nephew, seething with anger. Can the questors fulfil their destiny?



**Nine Shiny Objects**  
Brian Castleberry  
Custom House  
\$27.99

The sighting of nine strange lights travelling at unbelievable speed over the Cascade Mountains unites a group of American dreamers and sets off a quest for a utopia of idealists where divisions of race, ethnicity, sexuality are absurd. But this is a dream, soon corrupted by the base instincts.



**Once There Was Me**  
Bobby Sachdeva  
Pan Macmillan  
₹450

Bobby Sachdeva's life has been scarred by communal violence. Then he tastes life without religious animosity in the U.S. and China. He finally submits a PIL for religious institutions to give away their excess income to the disadvantaged, thus incurring the wrath of bigots.

