

SAHMAT Observes Safdar Hashmi's Death Anniversary

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ON October 8, 2023, with the sympathies of the world on its side, the Israeli authorities spoke with a renewed bellicosity. It vowed to “eviscerate” Hamas; the governing body that has managed everyday affairs in the small strip of land we know as Gaza and the body that led a highly audacious military operation, a day earlier, to break the captive blockade under which 2.5 million Gazans have been forced to live. However, as we have learnt over the course of the past few months, for Israel and its allies in the western world, there is no distinction between the Hamas and a Palestinian. Deploying deeply dehumanising language of “human-animals” as well as 2000-pound bombs purchased from the US (amidst duplicitous talks from the same US of asking Israel to *limit* civilian casualties), Israel has inaugurated an unrelenting and indiscriminate elimination of Palestinian people, homes, culture. There are now more children that have died in Israel’s “counter offensive” in Gaza than US combatant troops in their near 20-year occupation of Iraq. While Gaza lays in ruins and all its people face a near certain extinction, how will the land we call Filistine be remembered?

There is a spot at Surjeet Bhavan, where three worlds come together, albeit ephemerally. It is a spot where you can stand physically close to friends of yore and now, while the art exhibition is in your view. It is also a spot where as your greetings for the new years sift through the air, your panopticon vision is surrounded by the art and your auditory senses are comforted by the words of Kabir and Moinuddin Chishti, of Mahmoud Darwish, Faiz Ahmed Faiz and Maya Abu al-Hayyat from the ongoing performances. It is a spot where Palestine and a much longer history of Third World, Afro-Asian Solidarity survives. And it survives amidst smiles and laughter, not as the oppressor would have it in sighs of despair and stream of blood and tears.

On the occasion of the 35th anniversary of Safdar Hashmi’s death, Surjeet Bhavan at ITO was draped in colours and banners that old-time associates of Sahmat (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust) have long associated with 1st January at VP House. Sahmat’s annual gatherings had lost a lot of its vivacity since the time of government enforced Covid lockdown in 2020; a situation exacerbated by exponential traffic

and pedestrian-related snarls and the gradual passing away of a public culture germane to Sahmat's own continued vitality. Perhaps it is this longing for critical culture's more prosperous days or perhaps it is to escape the pall of gloom that has set in many of our lives lately, that this year's celebrations felt significant. From the moment you walked through the gates of Surjeet Bhavan, the whole space looked brimming with uncharacteristic energy. There were scores of faces, familiar and new, that stood in the long passage that leads to the parking lot of the Bhavan. Greeting everyone can be time-consuming. Remembering the names and associations of fresh acquaintances even cumbersome. And yet one does all that on 1st January without any hesitation. And most often it happens next to the tea and food stalls or the splendid spread of Sahmat and allied publications. A place where people and words – spoken and printed – come together in canny ways.

In 2023, Sahmat lost an old and dear friend. Vivan Sundaram died in March 2023 and Sahmat was quick to commemorate its intimate association with him by bringing out their 2024 calendar, designed beautifully by Alpna Khare, celebrating the works of one of Sahmat's founding members. Another founder member, noted theatre activist and actor, Habib Tanveer, too draped the surroundings with new banners and posters released to mark his birth centenary. There was also a collection of prints as well as a photo exhibition documenting Sundaram's life and works, of where Sahmat is featured significantly.

Those familiar with Sahmat would readily agree how significant it is that the Trust has remained salient across a vastly transformed political and cultural landscape, especially since the deepening of contemporary capitalist relations in India in the last three decades. Central to its endeavour has been its ability to produce a thematically bound art exhibit every year on 1st January. For a communist who was moved by the sufferings of everyday life, Safdar would have responded to the killing of Palestinians and the present-day government's tacit commissioning of it by imagining a cultural artefact of his own. *Fida-e-Filistine*, an art exhibit curated by Priyanshi Saxena and Vijendra Vij and contributed to by 35 artists across a variety of mediums, was on full display and is perhaps representative of the principles of anti-colonialism that Safdar kept so close to his heart. The exhibition is also a small but powerful reminder that despite the omissions of the present-day government, the war on Palestine does not have the consent of its people. Many works used the images of mothers and

children as motifs of trauma, loss and resistance. Some centered on objects found at homes as debris to comment on lives torn asunder by the ongoing war. Other works bring gore and the ensuing chaos to populate their canvas, making linkages with the west's never-ending wars of the past and expressions of domestic resistance to relief.

It is also well-known to many that Sahmat's 1st January evening is filled with song, dance and poetry performances. The performance by one-half of the Vedi sister is what this writer caught first; her booming singing voice in stark contrast to her comforting voice in which she spoke out verses of solidarity and mourning to the fallen. Ashok Vajpayi, noted poet read out Hindi translations of poems of solidarity while Sohail Hashmi alongside Saif Mahmood and Danish Hussein gave a powerful reading of excerpts from Habib Tanveer's play on Mirza Ghalib. Interspersed with these acts of solidarity with Palestine was a movie on Vivan Sundaram and his *oeuvre* of works that was screened in the performance marquee. The words of Kabir, Bulle Shah, Moinuddin Chishti and even, John Lennon came together as the evening progressed seamlessly, reminding of the centuries that we as people have spent in remarking on the human condition and abjuring hate. Performers with Jana Natya Manch, who back in 2015 collaborated and performed with The Freedom Theatre, Palestine, performed *Ujle Safed Kabootar*, a set of readings on Palestine translated from works of Arab, Somalian, Palestinian, Arab-American and Pakistani writers. Mahmoud Darwish's "Under Siege" was rendered intimate and immediate in Brijesh's Hindi translations and the readings by Moloyashree, Brijesh and Sudhanva while other members of Janam performed songs and readings.

The programme began with Jana Natya Manch-Rohtak's enthralling performance through contemporary and older poetry. Subsequent performers include Aanya's reading of protest songs, and Rajnish singing Nazir Akbarabadi's compositions which were also part of Habib Tanveer's play, *Agra Bazaar*. Inquilab Zindabad, Dastaan Live, Mita Pandit, accompanied by Zakir Dholpuri and Amjad Khan, and Majma brought different traditions of resistance performances alive as the evening wore on.

As the night came to a close between Madan Gopal's rendition of "Anand" and the hectic energy to bring the curtains down on the event, my mind went back to that ephemeral space again. There were no sounds any more, most had gone back home and the works were now

covered in plastic sheets, to protect them from early morning dew. The space had once lived, but within hours it only survived in traces and fragments. Perhaps “anand” seems like an out-of-place sentiment in the face of the mass destruction we are witnessing. But the lands whose capital lies in Al-Aqsa, the lands from where the Prophet ascended on *shab-i-miraj*, now have proliferated in distant lands, in another brief *shab*. And the night of miracle will come back again. In larger numbers, with infinite happiness.

And till then, I recall Brijesh’s translated words from *Ujle Safed Kabootar* again.

Kya Dharti phat jayegi agar mein apne hisse ki zameen jote loon?