

## **Celebrating Foundation Day of SAHMAT in a Novel Way, 1-1-2021**

The year gone by would be remembered in human history for the havoc that COVID19 created in the lives of one and all. The epidemic that began sometime in late December soon turned into a pandemic making its presence felt in all the continents, including Antarctica. While countries like Cuba, China and Vietnam were able to successfully control the spread of the disease with timely intervention majority of the European and Latin American countries including Brazil and above all United States of America—the so-called super power— became its worst victims. The virus indeed exposed the harsh realities of the health care systems in place in these ‘developed’ nations.

Like other parts of the world India too was not able to escape this menace. Tragically people here, especially the poor and the downtrodden, due to the delayed and reckless response by the incumbent government, had to pay a heavy price. And while states like Kerala did make sincere attempts in reducing the pain of these people majority of the states governments failed them miserably.

The pandemic has brought about far reaching changes in our lives. It has forced people to go beyond their comfort zone and explore avenues which have hitherto remained under-explored. One such avenue is that of the virtual world. In last one year virtual platforms like Zoom, Google Meet, Youtube, Facebook et al. have become an important part of human lives and have changed the manner in which day to day human interactions take place. While some have found it difficult to adjust to this change others have found such platforms quite convenient. Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT) too, as this past 1<sup>st</sup> January showed, experimented quite creatively and with gusto with the virtual platforms.

Traditionally the cultural evening organized by SAHMAT is marked by riveting performances and camaraderie and bonhomie among long associates and friends. However, since the proceedings of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Safdar Hashmi Memorial took place virtually, it, unfortunately, meant the absence of the latter element.

The theme of this year's event, depicted aesthetically on the SAHMAT brochure titled 'Dukh Likha Jana Chahiye' ('Sadness should be Documented'), was the plight of the downtrodden, particularly the migrant labourers— people who were let down by the Indian state.

The proceedings of the evening began with moving tributes to Astad Deboo, Arjun Dev, Kumi Chandra, Manglesh Dabral and Anjum Singh all of whom were closely associated with SAHMAT and its workings and whom the organization lost in the year gone by. M.K. Raina talked about Astad Deboo's long association with SAHMAT and his life-long commitment to the ideals of the organization. Raina while remembering Deboo's contribution in the field of dance threw light on the fact that even though he was a trained classical dancer he had over a period of time created his own dance form influenced by several ideas from around the globe.

Rajesh Joshi in his tribute to Manglesh Dabral talked about his immense contribution in the field of literature. The mark that he has left in Hindi journalism was too underlined by Joshi. That Manglesh Dabral was a master of protest poetry was also pointed out by Rajesh Joshi. His poetries reflected the problems encountered everyday by the urban dwellers. He also spoke about Dabral's close association with SAHMAT. His untimely death has left a vacuum in the literary world which will be hard to fill. In Manglesh Dabral's memory extracts from one of his works *Ghar Ka Raasta* (co-authored with Mannu Bhandari) were also narrated.

Tributes to Kumi Chandra were paid by Madhu Prasad. She in her tributes narrated not just her personal relationship with Chandra but also her contributions to the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust. Prasad talked about the enthusiasm that Kumi Chandra and her husband Anil Chandra showed in bringing out a weekly newspaper, *Mongolpuri Samachar* in 1990 during the days when the first Janotsav was organized in Mongolpuri, Delhi. An interesting thing of this weekly newspaper was that all the work associated with its publication was done by the local population of Mongolpuri itself. She also spoke about the proactive role that Kumi Chandra played in organizing the musical concert Muktnaad in Ayodhya in 1993 in the months

following the demolition of the Babri Masjid. That her loss to SAHMAT is immense was underlined.

Year 2020 also saw the passing away of eminent historian Professor Arjun Dev. Tributes to him were paid by two of his closest colleagues Professor Harbans Mukhia and Dr. P.K. Shukla. While Mukhia in his tributes remembered the immense contributions of Arjun Dev in the project which was undertaken in 1950s and 60s of re-writing school textbooks by NCERT. As a member of NCERT and part of this project Dev ensured that the school textbooks being written did not carry the colonial perspective. Even though the project faced a lot of opposition by the right wing organizations Arjun Dev's efforts made sure that the textbooks survived the onslaught. And his demise, Mukhia underlined is more than just a personal loss. It is a loss to the entire education fraternity which is today under a grave threat.

Dr. P.K. Shukla spoke about the close bond that Arjun Dev shared with SAHMAT. The values and ideals that Dev and SAHMAT stood for complimented each other. Shukla too recounted the firmness that Arjun Dev showed in dealing with the right wing groups' opposition to the NCERT textbooks written by him and other historians. Shukla narrated how SAHMAT provided a platform in those decades to historians like Arjun Dev and others to voice their anger against such 'intellectual' attacks. That Arjun Dev from the platform of SAHMAT voiced his protest against politics guided by communal and fascist agendas was also highlighted in P.K. Shukla's tribute. The important part that Arjun Dev played in opposing, along with SAHMAT, the irrational approach in history writing cannot be ignored. His staunch support to SAHMAT in its fight against 'saffronization' of various educational institutions as well as right wing organizations' repeated attacks on the essence of Indian Constitution was also spoken about by Shukla.

Tributes were also paid to Anjum Singh. Her long and close association with SAHMAT was fondly recalled by Parthiv Shah.

Following this Danish Hussain, well known film artist and *dastango* presented a poem penned by Faiz Ahmed Faiz titled 'Intisaab'. The poem incidentally was dedicated by Faiz to the farmers of the country. Though written quite a long time ago it remains relevant even today. And, moreover, given the current scenario in which farmers are fighting for their rights the addition of this poem in the evening's proceedings was quite apt. Another poem by Gauhar Raza about the ongoing farmers protest and titled Kisan was also recited by Danish Hussain.

The recitation of the poem was followed by a reading of a message by Professor Irfan Habib. In his message Habib remembered the martyrdom of Safdar Hashmi and paid tribute to him. He underlined Hashmi's dedication and steadfast approach in supporting the cause of poor and the oppressed. The Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, he highlighted, has, since its inception, stood for the protection of secular traditions of India and has fought vehemently against groups that have made attempts to divide India on lines of caste and religion. SAHMAT has also through various mediums including publications, plays, discussions et al. has made successful attempts over the years to pursue the cause of the people apart from making them aware of the Indian culture. SAHMAT in its three decades of existence has played a pivotal role in fighting communal forces. It has never bowed to the communal agendas. He also recounted the active role that SAHMAT played in spreading messages of peace in places like Ayodhya in the months following the destruction of Babri Masjid through various means. SAHMAT has, through lectures and publications, made sincere attempts to present an accurate account of the Indian national movement and has thus tried to protect the heritage of the Indian national movement. He concluded by saying that at a time when Indian Constitution's ideals are under attack from the dark forces of the right wing groups an organization like SAHMAT which is at the vanguard should get support from one and all.

The message was followed by a melodious performance by Avahan— a musical group comprising of young students from University of Delhi, Delhi. The group presented some moving Sufi compositions centring on the teachings of Sufi saints.

M.K. Raina and Sohail Hashmi ably assisted by Anjali Raina and Saif Mehmood shared their memories of SAHMAT. Talking about their experiences they reflected upon the colourful history of the last thirty two years of the organization. They also stressed upon the fact that SAHMAT's foundation is based on ideals of secularism, peace plurality of cultures. In this context they spoke about the important role that it played in strengthening communal harmony which was under grave threat in the decades following the wilful destruction of the Babri Masjid. Raina and Hashmi also underlined the commitment shown by the younger generation in recent years towards the ideals of SAHMAT and the active role they played in taking forward its legacy.

A book on the seventy years of Indian Constitution was also released on this occasion. The book which is a result of an exhibition curated by Aban Raza which was put up on the occasion of the SAHMAT celebrations by seventy artistes was released by well-known artist Ghulam Sheikh. While releasing the book Sheikh briefly discussed about his long association with SAHMAT.

Professor Romila Thapar in her short but crisp message recalled some of her past memories from the days when she was a school student in 1940s. It was a period when national movement was at its peak. She recalled the struggles and sacrifices which were made to achieve some of the fundamental rights. And since today many of such rights are facing threat of being obliterated it is, she was of the opinion, time for another national movement akin to the one in the past. Such a movement is needed to secure the equal rights of all Indians and establish an unshakeable secular democracy.

Professor Prabhat Patnaik in his message highlighted the fact that virtually from the time of its formation, SAHMAT has constantly campaigned against the rising tide of communalism. He reiterated the fact that SAHMAT has played a pivotal role in fighting communal and fascist forces. Its unique style of fighting communal agendas by bringing together people from all walks of life on a common platform was also highlighted by Patnaik. The all-India character of SAHMAT was also underlined by him. That unlike many

other NGOs, SAHMAT is political in nature and that it straddles the two worlds of politics and culture is also something which needs to be borne in mind. In this sense it is a unique organization and one of its kinds in India. He concluded by saying that SAHMAT needs to reach out more to the people outside of Delhi and that the pan- India character that it already has should be strengthened further.

This was followed by a book release of a collection of poems written in Hindi and Urdu titled *Dukh Likha Jana Chahiye*. The title of the book has been adapted from one of the poems of Suryakant Tripathi 'Nirala'. The collection was released by Ashok Vajpeyi. He also read extracts from some of the poems.

A couple of members of BIGUL, a young theatre group, recited poems like 'Rail Gaadi' and 'Shikari Kaun Hai'. On the occasion Hussain Haidry, film maker, too presented some self composed poems which touched upon a range of themes.

The evening also witnessed an array of musical performances by Ananya Gaur, Priya Kanungo, Parvathy Baul, Vidya Shah and Madangopal Singh. While Ananya Gaur put on a musical performance of Faiz Ahmed Faiz's poems, Priya Kanungo sang some compositions of the Bhakti saint Meera. Vidya Shah sang some traditional folk songs centring on the city of Benaras and Ganga. Parvathy Baul, known throughout the country as well as outside as one of the most outstanding baul singers, presented some pieces from this great singing tradition. Madangopal Singh, the famed Sufi singer took the audience on a memorable musical journey. He sang about the Jallianwala Bagh and also a song that he had composed from a Jan Natya Manch in 1985.

*When the People are Not 'We the People'* a book comprising of articles by various journalists documenting experiences of their own as well as of migrants during the misconceived countrywide lockdown was also released on the occasion. The book was released by Sashi Kumar, a senior journalist.

A poem recitation by Navin Chaura and a dance performance by Aditi Mangaldas were also part of the 32nd Safdar Memorial.

The evening's proceedings came to an end with an enthralling musical performance by Shubha Mudgal. Mudgal a close associate of SAHMAT put on a riveting performance of Dushyant Kumar's powerful poem titled 'Ho Gayi Hai Peer Parvat Si Pigalni Chahiye' which focuses on bringing about a radical change in the social justice system.

With this the 32<sup>nd</sup> foundation day celebrations of SAHMAT culminated. Though the whole experience of attending virtual session of SAHMAT was quite exhilarating it is sincerely hoped that it was the first and last of its kind.

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