

## **SAHMAT celebrates India's Annadata**

Amol Saghar

In the year gone by the dark clouds of COVID-19 continued to hover over our lives. And like in the preceding year the plans of families and individuals relating to leisure and work were disrupted once again. However, unlike 2020 a glimmer of hope was provided by vaccines in the year gone by. The relentless onslaught of the Covid virus on human lives was not the only issue which was in the limelight, 2021 was also a year when the farmer protest occupied the centre stage. The almost year long agitation by the farmers forced the incumbent government to withdraw the three black laws. Had they been implanted the three laws would have wreaked havoc in the lives of Indian farmers. The withdrawal of the farm laws by this otherwise insensitive regime was a momentous event which we all witnessed last year. The farmers indeed have shown us that all is not lost and that the reactionary forces are not invincible.

To mark thirty-three years of its inception SAHMAT decided to honour the farmers and celebrate their victory over evil! The theme of the event was aptly titled as 'Bol Ari O Dharti Bol' (Speak up O Earth Speak Up!). Traditionally the cultural evening organised by SAHMAT is marked by riveting performances and camaraderie and bonhomie

among long associates and friends. However, since the proceedings of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Safdar Hashmi Memorial took place virtually, it, unfortunately, meant the absence of the latter element.

The proceedings of the day began with a moving recital of Majaz's poem Bol Ari O Dharti Bol! The poem which encapsulates the problems that common people have to endure to survive under an authoritarian regime was recited beautifully by Sohail Hashmi. Though written quite a long time back the sentiments expressed by the poet in this poem are relevant even in contemporary times.

The recital of this poem, which set the stage for the evening, was followed by a fascinating guided tour of the exhibition, 'India is not Lost' by Ram Rahman. The exhibition which has been put up at Rajiv Gandhi Foundation at Jawahar Bhawan, New Delhi has been curated by Aban Raza, a young artist. The title of the exhibition is a play on one of the statements that Gandhiji made during one of his last fasts that he undertook to bring to an end the communal frenzy that had overtaken Noakhali. In his statement he said that if Noakhali is lost then India is lost. So, the in the title 'India is not Lost' there is an assertion that till the time Gandhiji's and other freedom fighters' ideals are alive India is not lost.

The exhibition takes a look back at the various programmes and exhibition that SAHMAT, in association with artistes and historians, has done over a period of thirty odd years relating to the freedom movement and the resistance movements that various people have carried out in post-Independence era to protect the secular and egalitarian values of the country for which scores of freedom fighters laid down their lives. The exhibition has been put up to celebrate the seventy-five years of India's independence. The art collection containing works by artists like Parthiv Shah, Dhrubajit Sarma and others throws light not just on individual personalities like Gandhiji and Bhagat Singh but also important events like 1857 Revolt and Jallianwala Bagh massacre which played important role in shaping the trajectory of the national movement. A major portion of the exhibition is dedicated to the art series that SAHMAT did, 'Postcards for Gandhi'. The series is made up of art works by several artists who drew on picture sized post cards paintings depicting the diverse values that Gandhiji symbolized.

A short play titled 'Hum Shaheen Bagh Hain', written and directed by Naresh Prerna, was also enacted on the occasion. The solo performance highlighted the struggle that vast majority of people waged against the draconian Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA). It also underlined the harsh treatment that the state meted out to those who

participated in this struggle. That among a large number of people, it was especially the students who had to face the maximum brunt of this regime, notwithstanding the fact that they were fighting for a just cause, was a message that the play was able to send out loud and clear.

During the course of the farmer protests a number of poems were written by different poets which highlighted the various facets of the struggle as well as underscored the participation of people from diverse social and economic backgrounds. A selection of such poems was recited on the occasion by Navtej Johar and Sangeet Toor. While Johar recited poems penned by Surjit Patar, Sangeet Toor recited a poem by Professor Puran Singh. Translated versions of poems relating to the farmers and their struggles were also recited by Saif Mahmood as well as Sohail Hashmi.

The trio of Mamta Sagar, Anitha Thampi and Salma who call themselves as Dakshin Dhvani (Poets from the South) too gave a recital performance during the course of the event. While Sagar writes poems in Kannada, Thampi and Salma are poets who compose poems in Malayalam and Tamil respectively. Their poems have been widely translated in English and other languages. The three on this occasion recited self-composed poems in Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. Each of the poems were followed by translations.

Navjeet Kaur gave a brief overview of the Punjab Land Alienation Act and the struggle that Sardar Ajit Singh and colleagues waged to get it repealed. In her presentation she threw light on the fact that a Singh along with his colleagues started a Pagdi Sambhal movement in 1907 to force the incumbent colonial regime to repeal the Act which like, the three black laws, could have destroyed the livelihood of several farmers. Kaur also highlighted that to honour Sardar Ajit Singh's memory and the movement that he launched the Samyukt Kisan Morcha celebrated 23<sup>rd</sup> February as the Pagdi Sambhal Divas. Dr. Anjali Raina sang one of the verses of Kabir. The verse which she sang was a part of the popular play Kabira Khada Bazar Mein which was directed by M.K. Raina. The verse chosen by her encapsulated beautifully the prevailing socio-political scenario.

Professors Irfan Habib, Romila Thapar, Prabhat Patnaik and Dr. Visvamohan Jha touched upon some pertinent historical issues that remain relevant in the present times too. Habib in his presentation gave brief background to the circumstances that led to the formation of Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust and the kind of issues that it has been involved in since its inception. The important role that the Trust has played in taking culture to the wider public audience was underlined by him. The ideals that Safdar Hashmi represented and sacrificed his life for was

highlighted by Habib. In his brief presentation he noted the active role that SAHMAT has played over the years in promoting values like secularism, egalitarianism and liberty. In his concluding remarks Irfan Habib argued that given the fact that the present regime is hell bent on destroying Indian ethos there is an urgent need for organizations like SAHMAT to take the lead in protecting the unity and culture of the country.

Professor Romila Thapar in her short but crisp talk wished that Indian society returned to what it was during the time of independence namely an ethical society which gave importance to the well-being of all citizens. She argued that it reflects poorly on the country's values and culture when section of Indians openly demands the total annihilation of their fellow travellers at a 'religious' congregation. It is indeed deeply distressing for the future of the country. The welfare of citizens is a fundamental principle in every society and civilization. Her presentation was peppered with examples from history. Thapar also highlighted the fact that 26<sup>th</sup> of January is a day when we became a republic. It is also a day when we celebrate our Constitution. There is a need, according to her, especially in the present times, to give more importance to the Constitution and its principles from which we have

drifted away. She also underlined the historical importance of the Constitution.

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 and has played an active role in upholding the ideals of the Constitution. 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 close association between the Hindutva forces and neo-technocrats was also highlighted 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 organisation and one of its kinds in India.

Dr. Viswamohan Jha paid tributes to Professor D.N. Jha who passed away on 4<sup>th</sup> February, 2021. In his message Jha argued that there is a need to move away from iconoclasm and situate D.N. Jha's work in the larger historical perspective. He underlined that his views on various facets of history came as a shock to those who were ignorant in the subject. However, to the majority of people his views were important in

that it helped them better understand the past. An alternative reading of history was provided by Jha and others in their works. And this according to Vishwamohan Jha is of extreme importance.

Condolence was also paid to Rati Bartholmew who was closely associated with SAHMAT since its early days. She was in fact one of the founding members of the Trust. The tribute was paid by Ram Rahman gave an over-view of the rich and fulfilling life that Bartholmew lived.

Tributes were also paid to Professor Ali Javed, whose untimely passing away last year came as a shock to one and all. Anis Azmi in his condolence message threw light on many known and unknown facets of Javed. His commitment to Left liberal ideology was also underlined by him and so was his firm stand against any kind of communal politics. Apart from his political commitment the active role that Ali Javed played in promoting Urdu literary culture was also highlighted by Azmi.

In addition to these the evening saw riveting musical performances by Harpreet Singh, Rageshshree and Samridhi Sharma, T.M. Krishna, Vidya Shah and Madangopal Singh. These singers through their songs showed their support to the cause for which farmers were out on the streets. Various facets of the farmer protests were touched upon in the songs of all these singers. T.M. Krishna's musical performance was



preceded by a short message from Perumal Murugan. He in his message traced the evolutionary history of farming and underlined the fact that despite farming being one of the most important economic activities in human history the socio-economic conditions of farmers have for the larger part of human history remained unsatisfactory. The lyrics of the song that Krishna sang were in fact written by Murugan.

Besides these musical performances short clippings from CAA as well as farmer protests were also put up. These clippings highlighted the brave resistance that common people have up in recent months against the incumbent right wing reactionary government. The visuals were accompanied by some nice background songs which encapsulated wonderfully the sentiments which were being shown.

And with this the 33rd Memorial Day of Safdar Hashmi culminated. Though the whole experience of attending the virtual session of SAHMAT was quite exhilarating it is sincerely hoped, once again, that it was the first and last of its kind.

