



poems

For Safdar Hashmi

by Amitava Kumar

[This poem mimics Allen Ginsberg's "America."]

India I have given you all and now I'm a memory. I'm a name for a playwright killed and a movement born on January 1, 1989. I can't stand my own countrymen's minds. India when will we end the daily war? Go fuck yourself with your nuclear bomb. India, I'm not Sanjay Gandhi I don't give a damn about making Marutis. I will write poems about tyrants spilling blood in the streets. When will you be a playground for your children? When will you celebrate Holi with red flags? When will you remind the world of the dead in Bhopal? When will you be worthy of a single landless peasant in Bihar? India why are the songs of Bhikhari Thakur about in lean days? India when will you stop sending your engineers to America? I'm sick of the world's insane demands. When can I appear on Doordarshan and shatter H.K.L. Bhagat's dark glasses with my smile? India after all it is you and I who are perfect not the next world. Your ministers are too much for me. You made me want to be poor. There must be some other way to settle this argument. Gaddar is in a prison even at home it's sinister. Are you being sinister or is this a practical joke of the Home Ministry? I'm trying to come to the point. I refuse to give up my obsession. India stop pushing I know what I'm doing. India the gulmohar is blooming. I haven't read the newspaper for months, everyday somebody is accused of wild corruption.



India I feel sentimental about Telengana. India I became a communist when I was a kid I'm not sorry. I sing songs at town squares every chance I get. I sit in tea-shops for days on end and talk to strangers about bringing change. When I go to a basti we raise the cry "Halla Bol..." My mind is clear that they're going to make trouble. You should join me in reading Marx and Premchand. The priests say the old order was perfectly alright. I will not repeat the old half-truths and outright falsehoods. I have revolutionary dreams and songs about a new world. India I still haven't told you what you did to Manto when he did not leave for Pakistan in '47. I'm addressing you. Are you going to let your emotional life be run by television? I'm obsessed by television. I watch it every day. Its eye watches me every evening as I step inside my home. I watch it with friends in a room in A.K. Gopalan Bhavan. It's always telling us about the greatness of this country. Cricketers are great. Movie stars are great. Everybody's great but us. It occurs to me that I am India. I could not be talking to myself when I say this.



panchayat despite the fact that he doesn't belong to any caste.

India how can I write an epic poem in your television soap opera? I will continue like J.R.D. Tata my plays are as patriotic as his factories more so they're also for the working class. India I will perform a street-play Rs. 50 a piece Rs. 400,550 down on your Apna Utsav festivals. India put behind bars Bal Thackeray. India save the Naxalites. India Avtar Singh Pash must not die again. India I am Shah Bano. India when I was young my parents had organized mehfls in a small garden with communist artists like Bhisam Sahni and Habib Tanvir they had performed with the Indian Peoples Theater Association and we started with Machine because in a factory goons fired on striking workers who had wanted a tea-shop and a cycle-stand Comrade Mohan Lal was reminded of the martyr Bhagat Singh and Bhisamji said that a new link had at last been added to the freedom struggle the rhythm of people's heartbeats had found expression once again. India you don't really want to go to war. India it's them bad Pakistanis. Them Pakistanis them Pakistanis and them Chinese. And them Pakistanis. The Pakistan wants to make eunuchs of us all. The Pakistan's terrorist. She wants to take all our cricketers hostage. Her wants to destroy our temples. Her needs a Quran-quoting Times of India. Her wants our HMT watch factories in Karachi. Him military government running our corner bania-stores. That not godly. Chi! Him convert our untouchables. Him need the support of all Indian Muslims. Ha! Her make us all victims of missile attacks. Help. India this is quite serious. India this is the message being repeated by our rulers. India is this right? We better get down to the job. It's true I don't want to train in shakhas of right-wing vigilantes or join mobs intent on demolishing mosques. I'm a Muslim and unwelcome anyway. India I'm putting my unyielding shoulder to the wheel.

Accept Charge, Woman

Seven poems by Farhad Mazhar

Translated by Prof Gvatri Chakravarty Spivak

I kneel again before you, woman No, not in love, not in remorse, but asking to be forgiven Praying to have my heart washed by your kindness I have whipped the man inside me into submission I have asked him to kneel down before you I want to be forgiven, have mercy on me Not on me alone Forgive all men I ask your forgiveness today on behalf of all men

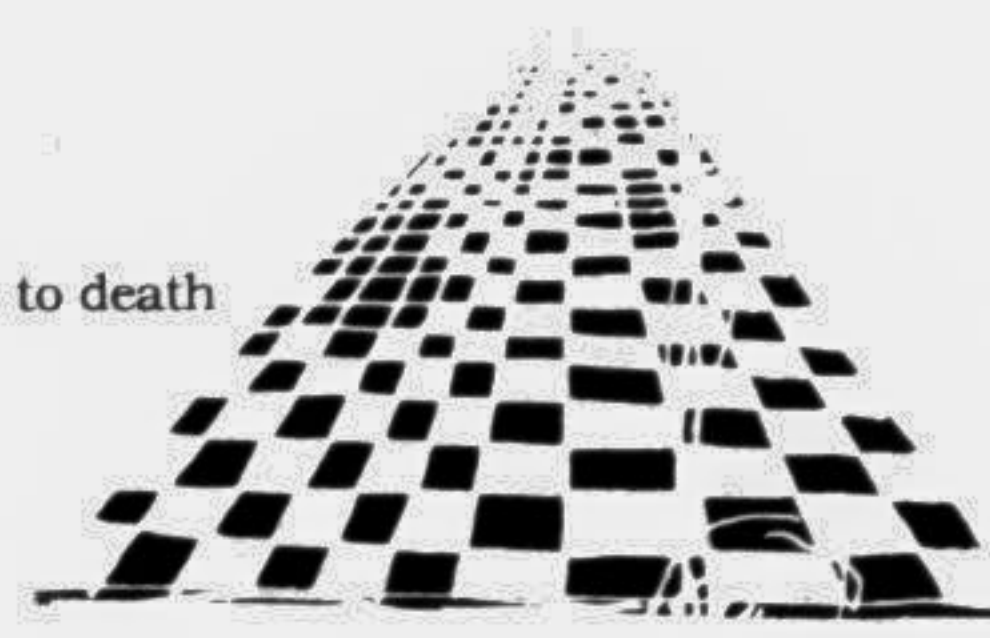
Once again before you Man is on his knees Have mercy on him.



Men have used you as if you were a domesticated beast Pressing down your knees as in a sugarcane factory They have bred children As if into a television box they have stuffed inside you Their world Burning like a bluish flame everyday You go on transmitting it — Your existence is as inanimate as electronic equipment As lifeless as a plastic doll

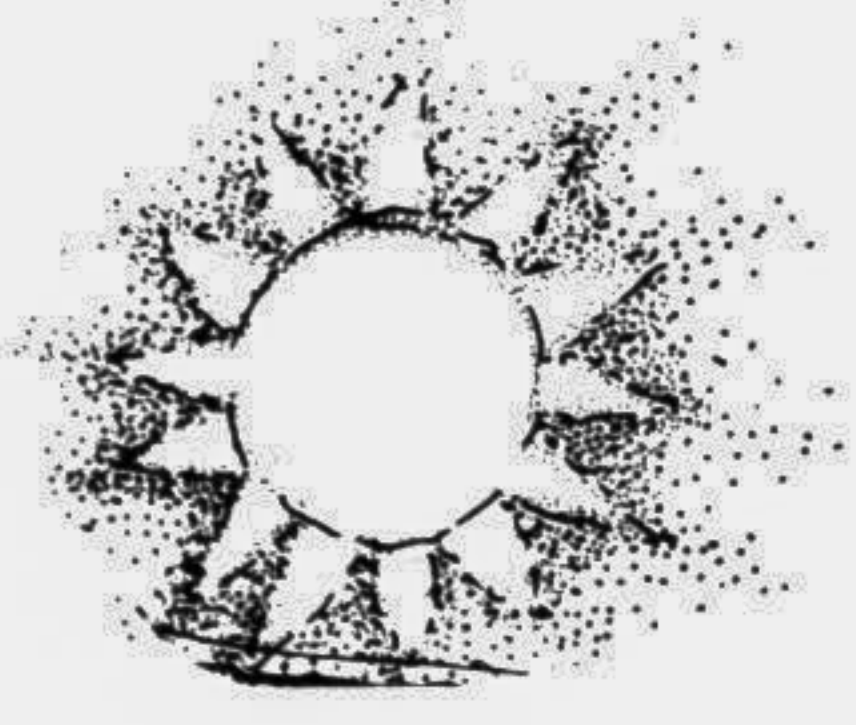
You could have been called charcoal You could have been called hammer You could have been called sewing-machine You could have been called bitch Apemen have called you woman in mockery Knowing all this in front of you I stand with head bent, woman I am a man Forgive me.

Everyday some one husband beats his wife to death Everyday some one in bestial lust Throws acid on your face Every day an 11-year-old child Is raped by 11 men You are on sale As if you are vegetable or groceries lamb or mutton They measure your breasts with tape They measure your thighs with tape They weigh you on hanging scales They test your teeth your hair your nails and fix your price You could have been called butterbread You could have been called Japanese Honda You could have been called Dunhill cigarettes



So you are called lady You shine like furniture in every house So you are called housewife In accents of equal meaning as the word man I want to name you, woman But I cannot In infirm shame in front of you I stand like a culprit I am a man Forgive me.

I have come to tell you today The word man means in-charge And it is time for you to accept charge, woman Accept him.



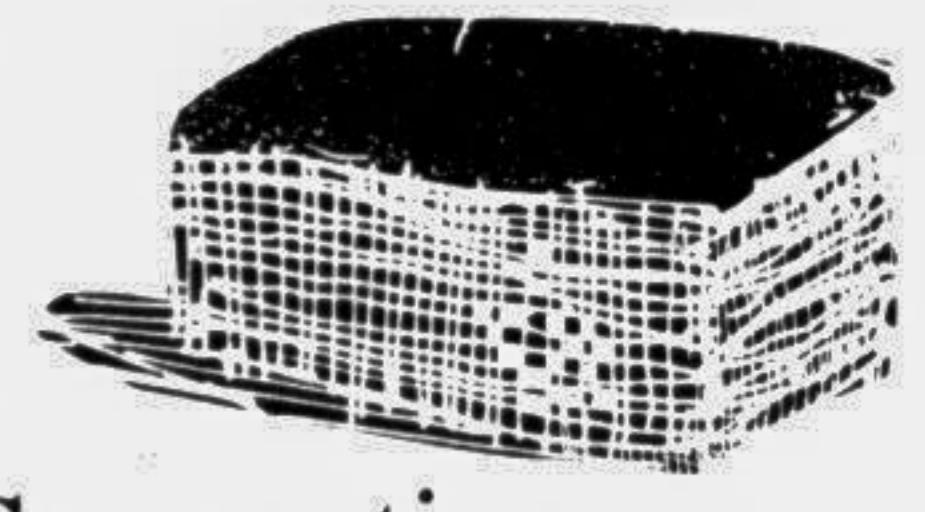
Register the World

Not a bit of strength not a bushel's worth of spirit You've become Lord God in the seven firmaments All you say is that you are the real owner of the world Yet others own all, claiming themselves as God.

Take the worthy Haji Maulavi Samad of our village Owns a hundred acres of prime land in his own name Forty-three for the Chairman; Contractor Rashid has another sixty-two.

Master Chharu of the brick kiln Owns fourteen point two, and others — like Samiruddi Or Chandan's Dad Haradhan — they're all your shareholders Is it bogus then that your power is one and the same?

If their papers are false, lord, litigate Get an advocate to register the world in your name.



Direct Connection

I've never argued with the Prophet's words, with doctrinal debate Let priest-theologians trade peck away at runes I've kept antennae straight inside my brain Thus I get your message on the direct line.

You gave reason, and I haven't yet learned The trick of winking that reason asleep, my Lord. I reason out why you said what when and indeed To whom — I understand religion is not its books — Dharma means potential inlaid merit, It means love, knowledge, wit and making Above all history: the human beings gradual graduated Growing up from flesh-feeling to full Reason.

Adult dharma speaks forth in scholarship and science Yet religion-profession stays stable with runic bugs.

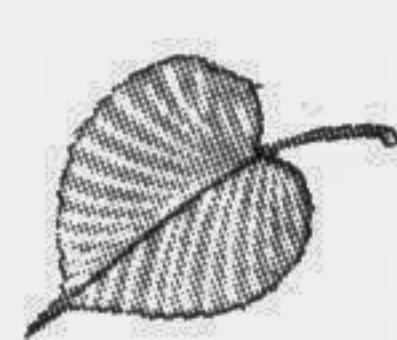


Bangla Not Yours

You've built Bangla with my skull, my palate Epiglottis plays in the long ah and deep ee In every breath I take stock of om and the breast Heartstring rings out in amazed consonance range —

How much it delights, Lord how very much the language of Bangla delights

I lick it clean in greed as if it's heaven's wood-apple. Are you envious? In this tongue You made yourself not forth! Yet forever I try my damndest



To make sure that this Queen, this Bangla Can keep abreast of all by own light and strength.

Some do say now, Bangla, are you, too, divine? Too non-pareil, unheard-of? Allah's alphabet as well?

I'm glad Bangla's not yours, if it were — Your insolent vanity would swell in Bangla's name.



"Welcome Mango Blossom"

I love dry dates and find the prunes of Arabia tasty I've tried each grain of pistakh and each nut Most pleasant and healthful, pears Give sign of sap whenever I pick one up.

Splendor of varied fruit in the land of sand I'm overwhelmed by this your Godly skill Why is Bengal so deprived from this grace, O Lord? I ponder, answerless.

Yet in February-March I have remarked By inner skill the mango-fruit blooms from The glory inside their heart muscle, And I say, "Welcome, blossoming mango."

There's also jamrul, jaam, the magic of boinchi Why list and make you jealous for no reason at all?

Lady Shalikh

In the Garden of Heaven a brown-bodied Shalikh Calls. O heart, did you hear on the branch of Heaven Our kind Shalikh calls with all her life At Allah's Court, in her own voice.

Do you hear, do you see, Lord lord, With knees pulled tight on yellowstick legs On the branch of the Tree of Knowledge, Clearing her throat with her two humble beaks in a thin Pained meek tone lady Shalikh calls?

What do I want Lord, our expectation is slight Let our heart's bird lodge in your Heaven Tho she's a brown-skinned girl, blunt-nosed, bow-legged Eyes sunk with labour, yet she's loved In Bengal and your Paradise fails without her.

Call with all life, Bird, even Allah's heart melts, call life.

Corpse-keeper of the Revolt

Lord, Dhaka's mosque is world — Renowned; much varied work on pillar and cloister.

In British days the whites, right or wrong Put in place the Asiatic Society and researched it all, we hear. With the White eyes of Whites, the new Bengalis dig now And look for things, we see. I wish them good luck that doctor's degrees Make them twice as worthy as their White forebears.

Lord I'm an unlettered fool, can't grasp the art Of Architecture and paint, yet my heart Aches empty as I stand, by old Ganga the Sepoys seem to hang still on hangman's ropes Waiting for last rites, The ropes uncut, The bodies still aloft.

No one to mourn to perform those rites, Don't you mock me with minaret and arcade, Me, the corpse-keeper of revolt.



You could have been called pussycat Half-cultured people have named you better half Knowing all this in front of you I stand with head bent, woman I am a man Forgive me.

You are a mother machine so you are called mother Your body can be fondled so you are called female As horses in mangers and dogs in kennels you live in the ladies room