

ESSAY

It has to be print



ILLUSTRATION: AMREETA LETHE

It's true that zines and other modes of independent publishing provide an avenue into organising that helps evade technological and institutional challenges we're still learning to navigate, but that is not all they have to offer. Zines have long been used as tools for sociopolitical education—breaking down complex theory and thought into more digestible and accessible material.

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There is something in the tactility of books that even non-readers find themselves admiring, and readers more so. The texture of paper, the act of turning over a book in one's hands and thumbing through its pages, and the promise it offers in its first page or two through notes, dates, signs, and dedications construct memory and bear witness to its history. The inimitability of these experiences and affections only strengthens the case for there to be thriving print publishing scenes, no matter the burgeoning costs of ink and paper, or the dwindling interest in readership in favour of our infinitely more entertaining and doomscrollable news feeds. It is why our shelves continue to fill up and fill out, and why newspapers are still slid beneath our doorsteps before the day begins.

But our publishing scenes are not without their problems. In mainstream media and publishing, the existence of state/commercial interests and corporate lobbying ensures that what appears in the market is often overly sanitised and depoliticised, if not entirely spun together to sway readers and manufacture consent towards whatever is of corpo-political interest at the time. This is hardly surprising, these being institutions built on our existing systems, after all.

Predictably, this has always led to waves of alternative and often underground streams of press and media that are founded on the basis of being anti-establishment, and as reactions to the status quo. Zines, for instance, have long been a popular means of sharing experiences and making information accessible among various communities, by way of their self-published and non-commercial natures. As Janice Radway chronicles in "Zines, Half-Lives, and Afterlives: On the Temporalities of Social and Political Change", the zine scene in the West erupted in the 1980s with punk music fanzines and "punk's defiant response to the commercialism of mainstream society." It has since seen multiple cultural revivals, and zinesters continue to idealise and insist upon the importance of "an outside, alternative, free space uncomplicated by political compromise or capitulation". Zines have also historically been adopted by marginalised communities as a means of disseminating ideas, advice, and knowledge in a way that is ungoverned by

any major institution, and thus not subjected to their policies, practices, and prejudices of censorship.

In the literary world too, rife with its own charges of censorship on account of obscenities sanitisation, and "marketability", there have been alternative means and movements of publishing. Notable among these, and particularly relevant to Bangladesh, is the little magazine movement, which originated in India and has historically opposed the literary establishment for its traditionalist and often bourgeois sentiments. The little mag movement has as such been a similar "outside, alternative, and free" space, a playground for experimental, non-conformist, and often cutting edge literature. The little magazine genre differs from zine subculture, however, due to its adherence to typical printing and distribution methods, as opposed to the more handmade, self-publishable/reproducible, and community-oriented nature of zines.

When we look to the coverage of the ongoing genocide in Palestine now and in the past six months, the continued importance of alternative streams of media and publishing is only reinforced. As mainstream media in the West continues to characterise this genocide as either war or conflict, refuses to name whose bombs kill and maim innocent civilians in Gaza, and spins entirely fabricated accounts in favour of the Israeli-American war machine while disregarding journalists on the ground, it is no surprise that people around the world have turned to alternative channels of reportage.

Within the imperial core, as encampments spring up across university campuses, the role of independent student journalism as among the only reliable sources on the protesters' demands, goals, and tactics has been repeated, with the students' own reportage covering the protests more empathetically and with more nuance than their mainstream counterparts. Multiple videos have emerged of student protesters completely shutting out external media channels due to their instigative natures, and the students' refusal to engage with media representatives is thought to be a part of their centrally enacted media guidelines.

Interestingly still, for those participating in the encampments, zines and physical copies of books have once again emerged as a means of disseminating information while avoiding

the surveillance that comes with the use of social media or technology of any kind. One of my particular favourites is "How to Liberate a Dining Hall" by Abolish the UC, which outlines the roles and responsibilities of various community organisers, essentially working as a how-to guide for students. Explaining the reasoning behind the idea, the zine notes: "Liberating a dining hall is a form of mutual aid that takes university resources (in this case, food) and makes them free for everyone regardless of student status or university affiliation. As such, it is simultaneously an act of community care and a blow to the university's bottom line."

Universities have often justifiably been criticised as ivory towers, fatally incapable of "touching grass", as we're inclined to say these days. The hypocrisy of the academy as an institution reinforcing the status quo (despite producing endless amounts of scholarship on anti-establishment and decolonial thought) has long been established. Consider also, the academy's reluctance in normalising open-source technology and the corporate refusal to make research, knowledge, and information freely available to the public. Perhaps that is a digital world still outside our grasp.

Until then, print media continues to be a crucial and unmatched channel of communication, capable in many ways of circumventing the increasing surveillance and repression internet users are subjected to. An internet-based approach to reach is essential, of course, as it awards important social causes views and engagement ranging in the hundreds of millions, numbers impossible to consistently attain through print. However, so long as this technology is governed as it is by the powers that be, and increasingly susceptible to surveillance and doxing practices, the importance of several alternative channels of communication, particularly in print and in a way that cannot be traced, is imperative for community-based organising.

It's true that zines and other modes of independent publishing provide an avenue into organising that helps evade technological and institutional challenges we're still learning to navigate, but that is not all they have to offer. Zines have long been used as tools for sociopolitical education—breaking down complex theory and thought into more digestible and accessible material. They have also been used as advice columns and how-to guides—a means of circulating knowledge and lived experiences within communities that were otherwise unrepresented or deemed too "unsavoury" for the mainstream; zines like these often discussed inclusive sex education, protest education, and social awareness. Sometimes, zines were simply a way to share one's personal tastes and interests, be it in music, movies, games, or books, with like-minded folks.

The unrestrained potential zines hold, to be whatever one can dream them into being, is what makes them subversive. There is something I find intrinsically magical about the thought and care that pervade the pages of a zine, merely on account of it being penned, painted, and put together with one's own hands—the world's capacity for love and rage, all contained within a few leaflets of printer paper.

Amreeta Lethe is a writer and translator, and a Sub editor at Star Books and Literature. Find them @lethean_ on Instagram.

INTERVIEW

On making zines with Aqai Thami

STAR BOOKS REPORT

Last week, Star Books and Literature sat down with Aqai Thami to discuss zines. Thami is Thangmi woman of the Kiratimma first peoples of the Himalayas. A big believer in social exchanges and developing safe spaces to position art as a medium of healing in community, Thami works on ceremonial interventions, performances, drawings, zine-making, fly posting, and public intervention, brought together by participant involvement. Most of her work is self-funded and realised in collaboration. She is the founder of Sister Library, the first travelling, community owned, and community run feminist library of South Asia.

Katerina Don, curator of HerStory Foundation and host of Sister Library Dhaka was also a part of the conversation.

We would love to know a little bit about how you came to zine-making?

My dad would write a lot about the indigenous resistance and land back movement, print pamphlets, and distribute them. I think that stayed with me when I came to Bombay. But I never thought of my dad or aunt and uncle as zine-makers because of how different it seemed. Our processes were completely different. I have more pace and grace to sit with the work and bring it to life. That never happened with my dad. He used to make these publications so people knew what was happening, what the military was doing, what the government was trying to say. He would even reproduce speeches. He used to write speeches that he made and print it and distribute it amongst people. And there was one uncle who had an offset printer and even through the curfew, my dad would come home with these zines (or pamphlets or publications). He was in his 30s then and now, I'm finally getting the chance to reconnect and look back. So that was my first interaction with publication. And the first work that I started doing as a part of *Bombay Underground* is where we used to make monthly zines called *A4*

where we would invite people to send in entries and put it together and publish it. And you know once you have your writing or drawing in print, and you hold it, something shifts in you. So everyone would send them in and they would be crying. There was so much gratitude. From *A4*, we built up to the contemporary zine movement. Because there were no zine makers before that and so we had to slowly show that this is a possibility. And we got to see Bombay becoming this place where people wanted to print and publish. Hoards of people still continue to write to us with the possibility to publish. And then we have to keep clarifying that it won't be a zine if we publish it. And that they need to do it themselves in order for it to qualify as a zine. And we got lots of questions regarding how to do that. We even published a zine about zine-making titled 'zine kya hain' so that people know what it means to be a part of the zine ecosystem, what it means to be a zine maker, and how your place is so important in the world despite what you are told. After that, the first zine that I seriously made that was entirely my own, was *Bhujji*, about my grandmother. It came to me all at once and I made it one night. The next day I went to the supermarket and printed it and now I think we've sold over 3000 copies of it.

This is an excerpt from the interview.



DESIGN: AMREETA LETHE

HIGHLIGHT

100 feminist zines to shake, inspire, and sooth you

A zine can be dedicated to any subject or topic and challenges the status-quo (which is no monolith thing but a multitude of statuses, notions, ideas, products, systems, and policies to keep power consolidated with the same group of people).

KATERINA DON

This year, to celebrate Sister Library Dhaka turning four, we acquired a collection of 100 zines curated by the library's founder, Aqai Thami. The collection will be available for reading at the Goethe-Institut library from June onwards. With the acquisition of this collection, we are finally connected to the mothership Sister Library in Bombay.

Zines are traditionally low-cost, do-it-yourself publications that are made, reproduced and distributed by an independent maker. A zine can be dedicated to any subject or topic and challenges the status quo (which is no monolith thing but a multitude of statuses, notions, ideas, products, systems, and policies to keep power consolidated with the same group of people). A zine challenges the notion that change is not possible; that things will always be the way they are; that people's actions, thoughts, and words don't shift the needle.

The tools of the zine maker can be as simple as a piece of paper, a marker and a photocopy machine. The space of the zine-maker is anywhere. Aqai, who

has over a decade of experience in this tradition and comes to it through her parents making pamphlets and posters to protest occupation of indigenous lands in Darjeeling, explained that it's not just about zine-making but the whole process of creation, reproduction, distribution and the creation of a zine ecosystem that needs to be considered. Each of the curated 100 zines is living proof of the power of solidarity and community; from how to protest safely, cook wheatpaste, make kombucha to how to be an anarchist parent. A pocketful of adjectives can be used to describe the zine collection—it is subversive and supportive, it is radical and traditional, it is educational.

This collection challenges us, the curators of the Library. It does not fit into our institutional mode of operations. The zines are not permanent. They are not lendable. They are not archivable. They are not to be digitised. You, our dear readers and members, have to come to the library and read them there and then. And interact, react, make your own. For institutions like ours, this forces us to be more open and flexible, which is at once challenging and exciting

(unimaginable, unplanned things can happen!). Some of the suggested ways of working with zines are having reading sit-ins, connecting to rural presses, acting as a distro (distribution centre), collaborative making.

Currently the collection is in English and we hope that in the next months, through workshops, discussions, and reading sit-ins, zines will be made in the other languages of Bangladesh—they will be shared and will multiply. Zine

makers are often anonymous and self-dependent, taking on the role of writer, visualiser, editor, printer, distributor. "When you hold a book you made in your hands, something shifts," Aqai mentions about the process of making a zine. It is a process of embracing self-reliance, independence, and letting go of the need for perfection.

There are some mighty pamphlets in the collection that are no more than photocopied pages of type. Others are elaborate art-works, screen-printed, and



ILLUSTRATION: MAISHA SYEDA

bound. There is a zine that is smaller than the palm of your hand (*Tips on Zine Making*) and states that "You are never too old to make zines".

A zine is like a good embrace, intimate, timely, consensual. And ephemeral. We absorb the information, let go of the paper, create anew. Zines are an escape from a mainstream media that tells us to be, feel, think a certain way. "You Don't Meet Nice Girls In Copy Shops" reads the headline of the listicle for *girls (and others, but mostly girls) who write zines*. They are like songs that break open the bell jar to hold you and inspire you to hold others.

A note of thanks to the Goethe-Institut Bangladesh for investing in this collection and Star Books and Literature for their partnership in activating the collection.

Come over to the Sister Library Pink Shelf on weekdays at the Goethe-Institut Library at Drik Bhavan!

Katerina Don is the curator of HerStory Foundation and together with Shoma Sharmin and Zaima Hamid Zoa hosts Sister Library Dhaka.