

Media/Materiality/Comics: Conversations with Three Graphic Artists

Arunava Banerjee

Ita Mehrotra's *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (2021) is different from her colourful, hand-lettered posters, or her short comics that negotiate public spaces in Delhi. Renuka Rajiv treats the line as a thread and the needle as a pen to locate their art practice in embroidery, and sees comics as a means to an end. Vishwajyoti Ghosh reveals that his book *Delhi Calm* (2010) is relevant because it studies codes of propaganda and their circulation. The different approaches adopted by these three artists illuminate the many trajectories and cross-sections of art, media and reportage that have been generated by recent Indian comics and graphic novels through their interaction with other mediums.

Ita Mehrotra

Arunava Banerjee (AB): How does the purpose and urgency of your work change with a long-form project?

Ita Mehrotra (IM): The first drawings I made during the anti-CAA protests were calls-to-action posters. I was jotting down visual notes and one-liners from speeches being made just a few days into the sit-in led by Muslim women at Shaheen Bagh, New Delhi, in December 2019. There is a politics of being responsible for the home that is very sharp in calling out what larger policies will mean to everyday lives and society in general. My posters were responding to these women and also to the police brutality against students at the Jamia Millia Islamia campus that had taken place before this. The works were created fast, in the urgency of the moment. They had bold colours and were shared via social media.

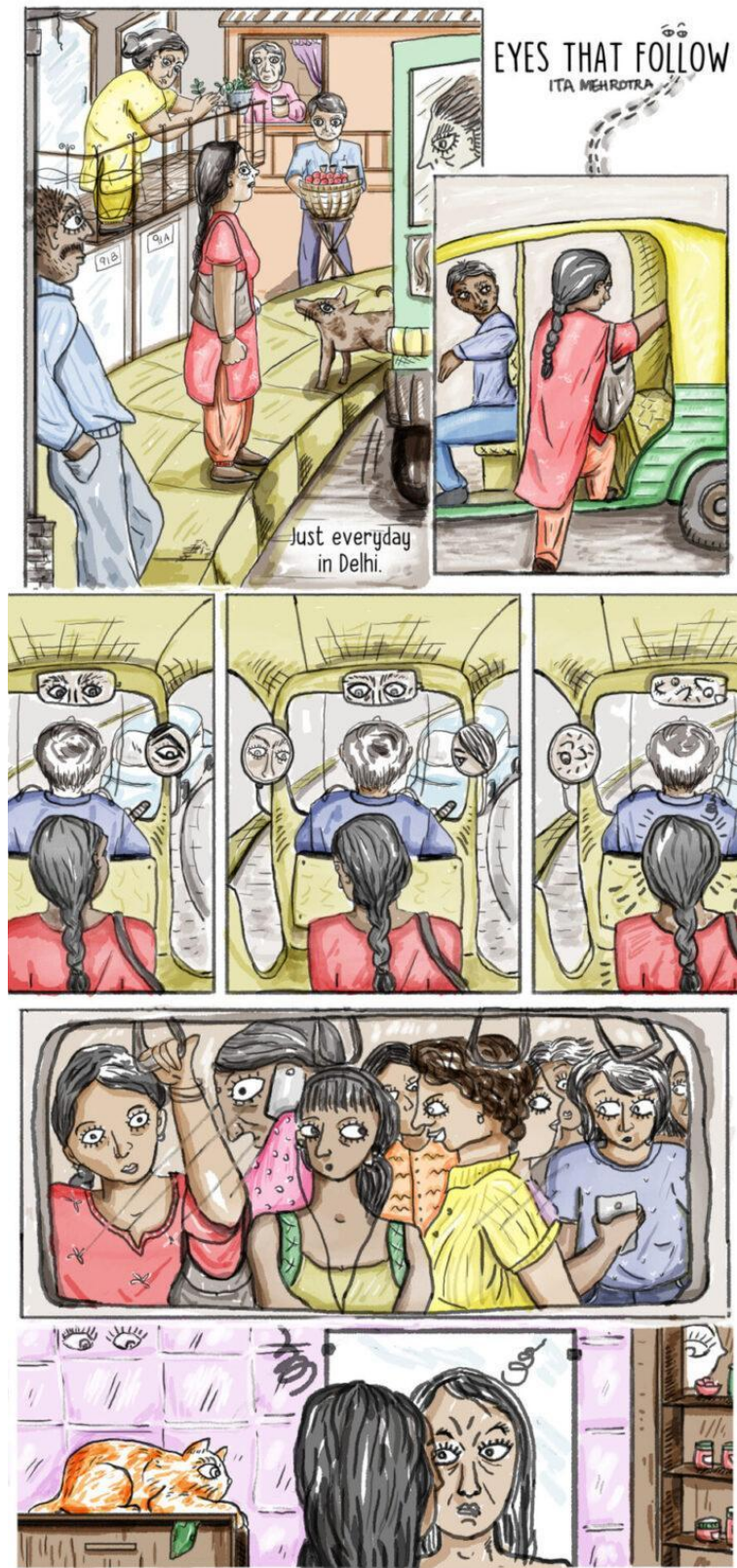


Figure 1. "Eyes That Follow", Ita Mehrotra, 2018. Image courtesy: Popula.

There were differences that emerged in the forms of protest when the movement spread to other sites and cities. In order to convey all these images and stories visually through a single graphic narrative, I had to bring together an immersive worldview through multiple folds within a larger context. It allowed me to go from spreads of enormous crowds to intimate conversations with just one person. The visuals in my book oscillate between large-scale protests and more mundane minor tasks, like serving food at the sites, which reflected its own culture of democratic voices and activities. The book is hopefully not separated from the research and the journey of making it. Comics allow that, as opposed to other forms of contemporary art, where you often have to let an object to remove itself from the process of making only to be told by someone else how it was made. It was important to keep the book at a size that would be easy to hold, pass around, or keep in a bag. I would be happy for someone to draw or make their own notes on the pages!

AB: The book contains nested references to our current media ecology. The state of networked television news and legacy media outlets that amplify misinformation about people's movements is a running thread. How might comics journalism engage with and contest such formulations?

IM: One major impetus for my work was to prevent it from falling into the polarizing formulations of mainstream media and be reduced by that. I did not wish to frame it as an opposition to mainstream media or to even what the government was saying. One way of achieving this was to continuously present multiple, even contradictory, standpoints, and not feel like that was taking away from the narrative.

If one is immersed in the form, it allows one to go into tangents. *Shaheen Bagh* has a young lead character called Shahana who imagines the future. For her, the success of the protests lies in not just the repealing of CAA, but also in the reclaiming of public spaces. At the same time, a grandmother looks back at their life in India and how they have claimed a certain history. There

are questions about what democracy should be, who can or cannot lay claim to this nation, and who makes this country.

Drawing so many pages means looking from different points of view. The vocabulary of comics pushes for unfolding the dimensions of what we see. Marshall McLuhan called it “cool media”, as opposed to the “hot media” of television and videos that constantly bombard the viewer on social platforms, not allowing them to think along. In comics you are not giving the whole picture but parts of a sequence. You must, as a reader, be part of that process of engagement to bring the story together.

Renuka Rajiv



Figure 2. “Vivid like a Covid Dream”, Renuka Rajeev, 2020. Image courtesy: Renuka Rajiv

AB: Your work as an artist is fluid and multi-medial. It has appeared in print, webcomics, exhibitions, and as textile. What role do comics and their ways of expression play in how your art and its materiality function?

Renuka Rajiv (RR): More than comics, drawings and narrative play crucial roles in my work. I do not look at a lot of comics. I find it hard to absorb so much content and detail packed into frames and pages (even though I have been delighted to come across alternative styles in works like Marjane Satrapi's *Embroideries* [2003]). Comics embody so many things my work is not, so maybe that is the main point to focus on. I admire what comic artists do, especially in terms of sequentiality and linearity which I struggle with. I am amazed by the sheer weight of certain comic works, and I would like for my art to embody that same level of clarity, richness and denseness. For me, comics are the perfect counterpoint to visit occasionally to improve my own practice.

My practice is located in the desire to make, and drawing is central to it. It is a physical (possibly cathartic) drive. I do not think of any metaphors with regard to my process. Instruments are a medium through which I express myself, and it is the flow that I feel with them which is important. At different times, different materials allow me to move forward, and I pay heed to them. In between projects, there are also periods of searching for what will work at the next catalyst.

Recently, I visited an exhibition of K. Ramanujam's works. It reminded me that I no longer look at drawings as frequently and closely as I did earlier. This needs to change. More than comics, I tend to look at drawing. That said, I found Tara Booth's *Nocturne* (2018) inspiring for its wordless narrative progression and animated quality. Both Ramanujam and Booth made me crave watercolour and gouache, which I hope to explore in the near future.



Figure 3. Spread from “Aloe Vera and The Void”, made by Renuka Rajiv and Aarthi Parthasarathy in 2016, for the online Kadak Reading Room. Image courtesy: Renuka Rajiv

AB: “Aloe Vera and The Void”, your 2016 piece with Aarthi Parthasarathy, mixes interviews with non-fiction comics to create a set of spreads that are both illustrations and an essay on trans experience. The binary of text and image is swapped for a spectrum. How did this series come to be?

RR: We conducted an interview with Purushi (the protagonist) through Poornima Sukumar (also pictured in the work). They conversed in Kannada, with Aarthi filming the interview. She then edited and prepared the text. I used stills from the interview as reference images, with the text directing the work. Neither Aarthi nor I are fluent in Kannada, so we needed constant translation while conducting the interview. We decided to preserve the spirit of the session,

which happened in cross-conversations. We also wanted to open this zine out to English-speaking (or not Kannada-speaking) groups. So we decided to keep the Kannada parts in Latin alphabet, making the text easy to read, regardless of language barriers.

This work happened only because it was collaborative. Left to myself, I could never make such a sequential piece in terms of narrative. The series never came to be and it ended up as a stand-alone zine. But the initial intention was to make ten such books that explored trans protagonists and different relationships to faith.

Vishwajyoti Ghosh

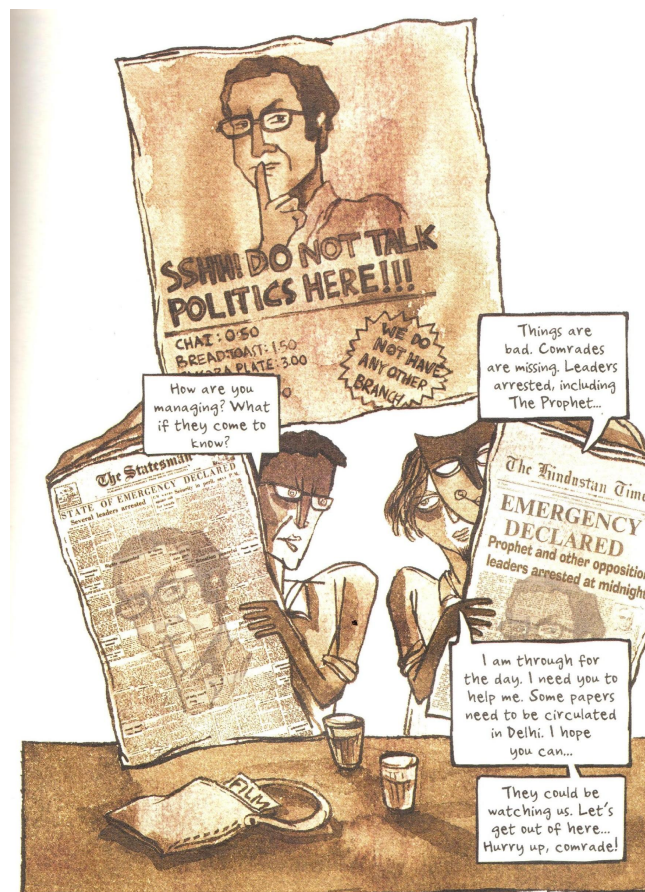


Figure 4. Page from *Delhi Calm*, Vishwajyoti Ghosh (New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2016). Scanned with permission of the author.

AB: *Delhi Calm* seems to draw from woodcut prints of Lynd Ward. The colour maintains a sepia tone. The hand-lettering is painted into the art itself. Your intricate layouts have the words take over entire panels, leaving the art to appear after. Why were these changes important and how did you arrive at them?

Vishwajyoti Ghosh (VG): When I work on a story, style is as important a part of the language as drawing or writing. These components do not coexist just for the sake of it; neither are they in competition. Chances are that I will not repeat myself in terms of style in any other story because I have not found *my* style. I shop for ideas, copy them, steal them, and make them my own.

Even though woodcuts have always inspired me, this comic grew out of my love for watercolours. I wanted to explore doing 200+ pages in watercolours with the same style, to see if I had the tenacity for it. Graphic novels are draining, in terms of the hard work that goes into research, story structuring, drawing, or achieving visual accuracy for a period setting. Sepia has a certain stereotype relating to memory. A reviewer said that the pages of this book reminded them of dried blood, but I did not have any such gory plans. Typically, when you work on a watercolour, you do one sheet at a time. But how do you paint panel after panel, page after page, in a sequential narrative with watercolour? The whole idea was to attempt that and see how the medium takes the storytelling forward.

In shorter forms, my loyalty is to the story, its tone and precise content. I always look for a style which will be in sync with that story. I am working on a book with biographies of 20 female entrepreneurs who started from scratch. Each story is in a different style. If I do not put my name on the cover, no one will know that all illustrations are by the same person.

AB: Most contemporary news outlets seem like direct descendants of the partisan, ironically self-revealing propaganda dispatches featured in *Delhi Calm*. How does embedding the representations of different media function here?

VG: Propaganda is the same, whether it is 1945, 1975, or 2020. The forms or tools have changed. I was trying to figure out the codes of communication that propaganda operates on. The same notes that were once passed on in Bengal under rotis are now passed around on WhatsApp. The idea was to explore how these tools transform into action, and sync with those in operation now.

Bobby (1973) was played on national television in a country where television operated for only four hours in the evening, except on Sundays. The Sunday films were a big thing when we were growing up. When the State wanted to stop people from attending the opposition's rally, they screened a blockbuster on television. I wanted to go back in time and re-engage with some of these concepts and strategies.

The text, for me, is also a part of the image. Additionally, I have used film-strips which reappropriate the real-life situations that took place around film viewing in the 1970s (specifically, around *Sholay* in 1975). A lot of the mass sterilization drives were conducted in the Indira Gandhi-Sanjay Gandhi era by people barging into cinema halls and sterilizing those who had come to watch films. How do you merge this memory with one of the most iconic scenes from *Sholay*? The challenge was to bring together the off-screen and on-screen worlds. How do you engage with historical media to tell your own story? I go back to typography, text, images and representations that circulated across various formats in a particular period. But the ultimate goal is to make what happened then relatable now.

Arunava Banerjee is a comics and media researcher with degrees in Literature and Film Studies from Jadavpur University, Kolkata. He currently works in publishing and as media coordinator at an NGO.