

An artistic anarchy for politics of peace

A unique protest raises questions about our times through plays, poetry, art and conversations, writes Amrita Singh

"Agar abhi nahi bologe, toh kab bologe (If you don't speak up now, when will you speak up)?"

These were the first few words I heard as I entered 15 August Park at the Red Fort in New Delhi. Before I could stop and take a moment to reflect on what I had heard, I was in the midst of artistic anarchy, with poetry being recited close to where I stood, hip-hop playing on the other end of the park, a man walking around with a sack covering everything but his legs, and a lot of people from diverse backgrounds hopping from one spot to the other to engage with different kinds of art — from short films to art installations — in every nook and cranny.

I was here to witness "Artists Unite! for Democracy against Hate", a unique two-day event held last week. Contrary to the way it was organised, replete with food stalls and performances by the likes of singers like Shubha Mudgal, it was not merely a cultural gathering but a protest by artists who feel the right to life, the right to love and food choices, cultural expression, language and histories are under assault by a politics of hate in India.

Saba Dewan, the documentary filmmaker who spearheaded the "Not In My Name" campaign at Jantar Mantar in Delhi two years ago against lynching of Muslims and Dalits, was one of the core organisers of Artists Unite in Delhi. Just like the idea behind Not In My Name resonated with many in different cities across the country, Artists Unite, too, made its way to cities like Mumbai, Bengaluru and Chandigarh. While Mumbai witnessed a parade from Dadar to the Carter Road sea face with performers who belong to different art disciplines, artists in Chennai organised a film festival at the Panuval bookstore.

The uniqueness of this protest, organised like a cultural gathering, lies in the fact that there is no singular body responsible for organising it. In fact, the reins are in the hands of artists from different cities who wish to use their art as a language to reach out to people and spread the message of peace.

According to Dewan, the idea to organise Artists Unite gained momentum in September last year. It all started with a declaration, which served as "a call for a national convention of artists to weigh in with a collective voice, and with creative energy that makes arts and literature a site of resistance to the hate politics that is sweeping the country". To date, more than 750 signatories have endorsed this declaration. Among them are actor Naseeruddin Shah,

writer Arundhati Roy, Bharatanatyam exponent Navtej Singh Johar and Carnatic music vocalist T M Krishna.

The declaration mentions how new cultural narratives, driven by the ideology of hate, revenge, aggression and violence, have taken shape in the form of lynchings, murderous attacks on writers and artists, disruption of cultural events and the re-writing of history, all of which have made headlines in the last five years. Whether it was the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh in 2017 or *Eidgah ke Jinnat*, a play on stone-pelting in Kashmir, being cancelled in Jaipur a few weeks ago as protesters stormed Jawahar Kala Kendra, the protest was aimed at drawing attention to issues and events that have in some way or the other marred India's cultural, ethnic and religious diversity.

The protest, a peaceful gathering of artistes and non-artists, comprised many stages, or *manch*, which were named Ekta (Unity) Manch, Lok (People) Manch and Zindabad (Long live) Manch. These stages in fact were areas in the park that could be accessed without any barriers. There was also a Tasveer (Films) Ghar, Azad (Free) Manch and Khula Manch, or open mic. These had the artistes either dancing, singing, displaying their creations, playing chess, acting or simply moving around. Khula Manch was for people attending the protest, not necessarily artists, to voice their opinions.

At Lok Manch, Third Space Collective, a group of theatre practitioners from Delhi, put up a performance with seven actors enacting the role of bystanders at the student protests that broke out at Ramjas College, Delhi University, in February

2017. Devoid of dialogue, the performance relied on descriptive narration and acting to take the audience back to the scene of the clash between students from the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) and those who were protesting the violent manner in which the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS)-linked organisation had disrupted a programme at Ramjas College held the previous day. The brutal beating of the students by the police, stone pelting, acid attacks and sexual harassment, among other atrocities, made their way into the narration, making each audience member a bystander to the violence as well.

"We need to speak to people who don't belong to these arts," says Neel Sengupta, a member of Third Space Collective. "Our actors for this performance are those who have just finished college and were witness to these student protests," he adds. By

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1 Inder Salim, a poet from Kashmir, appeals for peace

2 Third Space Collective puts up a performance about the student protests that broke out at Ramjas College, Delhi University, in February 2017

3 A protester performs his poetry at Kula Manch



playing with form in theatre, using Hindi or non-verbal methods of communication and experimenting with socio-political content, the collective plans to reach out to the masses to begin conversations about the challenges of our times.

Aishwarya Srivastava, a young poet, recited her poem titled "I Am Not a Kashmiri and I Am Sorry". Lines like "forced to choose between hunger or grief" dealt with compassionate employment given to next-of-kin of civilians killed in militancy related incidents, while "if free is something you really were" pointed towards the many curfews and disruption of daily lives of those in the Valley of conflict.

A nukkad natak (street play) organised by students of Kirori Mal College, University of Delhi, drew a

large crowd as it raised questions about the disdain of the powers that be towards critical thinking and dissenting opinions. The dialogue "*Sawaal karne waale yahaan Naxal kehlaata* (One who questions is deemed a Naxal)," received roaring applause from the crowd gathered around the performers.

Similarly, a tent called the "Memorial of Mourning" played graphic scenes from movies like *Fandry* (2013), a Marathi film about a young Dalit boy, while the track "Azadi" from *Gully Boy* played in the background.

Madhavi Kukreja, a women's rights activist who has been organising the Sanatkada Lucknow Festival for the past 10 years, was one of the many known figures who attended the

protest. "The idea is to appeal to people through such cultural events so that they can connect with art and the artistes and experience the politics of love and diversity."

With 20,000 people turning up on the second and last day of the protest, and with no entry charges, Artists Unite managed to bring people of different classes, religions, castes and communities together to experience unity and love.

Choosing Red Fort as the venue was a conscious decision, explains Dewan. "Why should such protests take place only in South Delhi or Central Delhi? More importantly, Red Fort holds historical significance as the first Independence Day was celebrated here. Performing and displaying their work here is

extremely emotional for all these artistes," she adds.

Aparajita Jain, director at Nature Morte Gallery in Delhi, argues that art has broken beyond attracting merely a niche crowd due to growth in contemporary art forms like street art, community-led art projects and the emergence of public art spaces like The Sculpture Park in Jaipur, which is accessible to all.

"Events such as this [Artists Unite!] showcase the diversity and plurality that is at the heart of contemporary art in India, and bring out concerns regarding social justice, equality, and inclusive growth at a public platform, towards which we are all driven but perhaps fail to collectively address. These events allow us to come together, and cross our differences through art."

Kylie Jenner is the future of shopping

The social media phenomenon that she represents is here to stay

ANDREA FELSTED
9 March

Kylie Jenner's debut on the Bloomberg Billionaires Index at the ripe old age of 21 should strike fear into the hearts of mainstream consumer companies everywhere.

The young member of the Kardashian-Jenner clan (a brood made famous by reality TV) has joined the tycoon club after signing an exclusive partnership for her cosmetics company with Ulta Beauty Inc, a chain of US beauty stores. The deal embodies the trends — ultra-celebrity branding, Instagram and smartphone shopping — that are reshaping the retail landscape in everything from liquid foundation to food.

The giant corporates that still dominate the consumer industry have little choice but to try to keep up, not just with the Kardashians but the millions of "Konsumers" they have spawned.

Women have always looked to well-known personalities for inspiration. But Jenner takes the cult of celebrity endorsement to a new level. Not content to merely stick her name on something from LVMH SE or Kering SA and take a percentage, she kept more of the branding value for herself by setting up her own company. And why not? Jenner belongs to arguably the best-known family in the world (after the Windsors). The Kardashians are an industry in their own right, a powerful machine that pumps out influence over much of what we buy, whether that's leggings or lipstick.

Like her half-sister, Kim Kardashian West, Jenner is a hugely popular presence on social media. But by founding Kylie Cosmetics back in 2015, she has managed to take that in an even more lucrative direction. With 128 million



With 128 million Instagram followers, Jenner (pictured) can communicate directly with her fans, who then become customers

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The assumptions used to calculate Jenner's wealth are still open to interpretation, as Kylie Cosmetics outsources its manufacturing, packaging and sales to other companies according to Bloomberg News. The terms on those deals aren't public. But she has shown that with the right name and face you can cut out the L'Oreal and Procter & Gamble and just sell straight to the market.

While Ulta's bricks-and-mortar stores open up a new channel, before now she has sold to her millions of followers over the internet, most likely via their phones. *Forbes* magazine, which first reported Jenner's billionaire status, said Kylie Cosmetics had sales of \$360 million last year. So how can mainstream brand-owners make sure they don't lose mar-

ket share to future "super-influencers." First off, they can try the traditional route of just signing them up to front their brands. But even this can be fraught with peril. L'Oreal, a competent operator on social media, parted company with transgender model Munroe Bergdorf in 2017 after claims she posted racist comments online. Bergdorf has 119,000 Instagram followers, so that was a lot of potentially upset customers once the relationship didn't work out.

Other consumer groups have gone further. LVMH has teamed up with pop star Rihanna (68.4 million Instagram followers) to create Fenty Beauty, another makeup line. Fenty generated €500 million (\$561 million) of sales in 2018, according to the French luxury giant. Rihanna's cut of the profit is undisclosed, but this looks like a smart way for the industry to keep pace with the social media revolution in shopping.

Another option is buying celebrity brands outright. At some point "celebpreneurs" like Jenner will want to cash in via an exit. The purchasing company can then combine the draw of a famous name with its powerful distribution network, thereby turbo-charging sales. It's an expensive choice, though. Diageo paid as much as \$1 billion in 2017 for George Clooney's tequila brand.

Any buyer of a celebrity-backed company is also betting on their popularity lasting. In a world where fortunes can turn on a tweet, that's a big risk. There's always the safer option of buying non-celebrity brands that serve similar consumer categories. For example, L'Oreal, Estee Lauder and Unilever have been snapping up niche cosmetics, skincare and fragrance businesses for the past few years. Companies could also do better at product innovation, though that's never easy when they're as big as they are.

The public's fickleness means Jenner's star will fade eventually, but the social media phenomenon that she represents is surely here to stay — especially given that the big consumer brands are deeply unimpressed with the returns they get from advertising through Google and Facebook. What can compete with a superstar sharing their intimate thoughts about products with millions of shoppers?

IMO



A Rafale fighter jet

CONTROVERSY OVER RAFALE DOCUMENTS

Nirmala Sitharaman@nsitharaman
1. Learned AG KK Venugopal told @PTI_News the Rafale documents were not stolen from the Defence Ministry & what he meant in his submission before the Supreme Court was that petitioners in the application used "photocopies of the original" papers, deemed secret by the government.

Randeep Singh Surjewala@rjsurjewala
Art of serving hundred lies to hide one truth! Yesterday in Supreme Court-Rafale files have been stolen. Today -Photocopies of Rafale files have been stolen. Modi ji, What's the 'duplicity' for tomorrow?

Dr Tamilsai Soundararajan@DrTamilsaiBJP
MK Stalin asking how Modi will protect country if he can't protect Rafale docs' is condemnable. Modi has proven as a timely decision making PM by his surgical strikes on terrorists. Responsible leaders should have condemned black sheeps near corridors of power stealing documents

Barkha Dutt@BDUTT
By saying #Rafale documents 'stolen' from defence ministry the Attorney General has just officially validated the reporting of @namindia

Jyotiraditya Scindia@JM_Scindia
Going back and forth on their stand is this govt's second nature. One thing's clear: the @BJP4India

is putting up the worst to cover up its misdoings, and the best to prove that it is a "suit boot ki sarkar".

Manuraj S@manuraj1983
Intelligence failure in the lead up to Pathankot and Pulwama+Contradictory statements on casualties after Balakot+Major gaps in explaining procurement process in Rafale+Now, Ministry reports theft of confidential documents; National security fail!

DONALD TRUMP'S TIM APPLE GAFFE
Sanjay Jha@JhaSanjay
Tim Apple. Should we have a name change here too; #NarendraRafale?

Anderson Cooper@AC360
@andersoncooper on Pres. Trump's 'Tim Apple' gaffe: Give the President a break. He has a lot to deal with and Cook is a tough name to remember. It's a tough tongue twister like all one-syllable names are. #TheRidiculist

ATTACK ON KASHMIRI VENDORS IN LUCKNOW

Rachit Sethi@rachitseth
Kashmiri vendors beaten in Lucknow. Nobody from any state should be attacked. 1 person thrashed in Muzaffarnagar because he was criticising the Modi Govt on Local TV. Both these incidents are telling what kind of society we have become under the Mob & Lynch Raj of BJP!

Omar Abdullah@OmarAbdullah
Nothing will do more damage to the idea of India in J&K than videos like these. Keep thrashing Kashmiris like this on the streets at the hands of RSS/Bajrang Dal goons & then try to sell the idea of "atoot ang", it simply wont fly.

Shah Faesal@shahfaesal
SSP @psnaithani is my batchmate and I am very happy that he has cracked whip on the goons who thrashed Kashmiri street-vendor in Lucknow. Well done cop.