

Kyta or the fragile balance of an art center in the Himalayas

INTERVIEW WITH SHAZEB SHAIKH

Kalga is a village in northern India located at 2600 meters in altitude along the Himalayan foothills. Since 2014, an artistic residency program has taken root amongst its traditional homes called KYTA [Karma Yatri Travel & Art]. Its goal? To explore the interactions that arise when the traveling spirit, local life and culture, and contemporary artistic expression meet. Conceived as a living laboratory, the residency welcomes at least 10 artists per year, from India or abroad in equal proportion, representing the most diverse range of artistic practices. The singularity and force of the experience resides not just in the individual creations produced there, but also in the relationships woven between residents. Story and testimony by the co-founder Shazeb Shaikh.

In its five years of existence, KYTA has hosted 57 artists from varying practices, invited to work on site for 4 to 6 weeks. They hail from various regions of India and from Brazil, Argentina, Taiwan, France, the United States, Switzerland, South Africa, Slovakia, Italy, Germany, Mexico, Netherlands, Austria, South Korea and UK. They work in a multiplicity of artistic forms: sound, digital art, sculpture, ceramics, design, architecture, performance, installation, weaving, video, dance, theater, writing, photography and illustration.

People from outside the artistic sphere—astronomers, physicians, lawyers...—are also invited to share in the experience. Aside from the natural resources and basic materials or tools brought by the artists, the means of production available on site are limited, so the artistic possibilities are focused on pure creation and/or collaboration.

As part of its residency program, KYTA already organized two international editions in 2014 and 2016 (India-World), a bilateral session in 2015 (India-France), a trilateral edition in 2017 (India-South Korea-Switzerland) and an Indo-Europe edition in 2018. Although the first edition in 2014 gave free reign to the artists to decide the content or form of their individual and collective production, the 2nd edition in 2015 offered French and Indian invited artists to co-produce a feature-length film of 60 minutes.

Since the 3rd edition (2016), KYTA proposes topics related to village life, with the idea of creating a local art collection and electronic archives open to the public. Rashi Jain who was a resident artist in the inaugural edition (2014) returned as a visiting artist in 2016 and created Karma Studio, a small sculpture and ceramics studio now open to any artist working

with clay. In 2017, it was Sound.Codes' turn to create Quad Karma, an experimental studio for sound. Lastly in 2018, in association with Swiss artist, Aline Veillat, a new facility titled AI.NA has been symbolically inaugurated to study the intersection between AI (Artificial Intelligence and NA(ture)).

Switch (on Paper): Kalga is a rather unique village, a kind of settlement borne of the desire, it seems, to build a tourist compound in the Parvati valley that looks nothing like the buildings or well-known modes of mass tourism. And yet thousands of tourists head there every year. How do you maintain a balance between these temporary migratory flows, daily life, local culture and the environment?

Shazeb Shaikh: Kalga is indeed the perfect anomaly in the Parvati valley - the perfect metaphor of the Garden of Eden for us. What set the petite Himalayan village apart for us was its convenient confinement and anonymity away from the popular hotspots in the region. A feeling that we collectively fell in love with and built a community around, while its essence itself evolved and challenged us to find equilibrium and retain it over the years and into the future.

With just a few houses ensconced in a spread of apple orchards, every little walk in the tiny hamlet is a joy ride. You could live in almost any house here to find new perspectives in and sections of the divine landscapes that surround the village. That's because you are in a rare tourist village where there is hardly any permanent population except for a handful of families, almost all of whom also invite you to stay and dine with them. So in a way, everyone is a seasonal guest in Kalga - even the locals. The seasons themselves play important guest characters too - waltzing with each other sometimes within moments. Kalga is a beautiful bubble, an illusion on its own but reality is not too far either. At the base of the diminutive village is a gargantuan dam that was only recently completed (2018), creating one of India's latest man-made water bodies - also a new sightseeing opportunity for the tourists in the region. And with regular tourism comes irregular waste - though the people of Kalga are quite aware of this problem and make a good effort of collective cleaning drives besides segregating 3 kinds of waste at source.

The first time I stepped in the village of Kalga was actually on the first day of KYTA's first edition. This was also my first time in the state of Himachal Pradesh. My impressions of Kalga were priorly painted only with images and imaginations emerging through conversations with Hashim (co-founder, KYTA) who had been romancing the village for over a decade. Going in with the ten resident artists of the inaugural edition in 2014 without any first hand contexts was a way for me to spark collective discovery in the spirit of beginning an experimental program in the Himalayas. So my personal perspective and response to finding balance in Kalga has synergistically evolved hand in hand with both the project and the village itself from my very first day there. As an example, the tourist footfall in Kalga has gone up 500% since 2014.

The locals attribute part of this growth to KYTA, especially so for opening up a second season for the village in the months of September and October (the primary season being the summer months spanning April - June). But the real identifiers in terms of finding balance for us as a project has been the fact that we have been able to positively influence the conservation of Sunset Cafe, the oldest building in the village which functions as KYTA's residency space during the program periods. From being one more to go down and make way for a cement structure, Sunset Cafe today is a shining example of positive reinforcements for a few of the remaining traditional buildings in the village that have followed suit and reaped greater value for offering an authentic Himachali experience. Most importantly, we have been successfully involved by the locals in the ongoing dialogue of warding off the plan that proposes a motorable road to Kalga, as well as with waste management.

Just a few years ago, the average tourist would stumble upon Kalga on the popular trek up to the hot water geysers of Kheer Ganga. But now people are coming especially to immerse themselves in the inimitable mood of the village. Something that is indescribable in words but instantly understood in experience within the first few breaths here. It's an inevitable feeling of homecoming for everyone and a peculiarly intense one for the artistically inclined. A feeling that roots your memories in the earth here and makes you pine to come back. This has been unanimous with all those whom we have invited to Kalga - the place is indeed psychedelic for the artistic mind. In our own experiences as organisers this is true too as our original plan was only to host the first edition here and then move to a new location every year, but now the project has itself expanded from being a travel and art experiment to experimentally establishing a global arts destination.

Finding balance in the project has been equally experimental as the yardsticks have themselves shifted because of our own actions and the recent developments in and around the village. We believe that while KYTA has been instrumental in exposing the hidden heaven of Kalga to the wider world, it was inevitably going to happen as we are experiencing now. And more so now it's the turn of our intentions to materialise into our vision. The vision of establishing Kalga as one of the choicest destinations in the world to imagine, produce or experience art with long-term sustainable and ecological impact. And we're working hard to ensure that this lofty ambition does not come at the cost of compromising something we call our own heaven.

Switch (on Paper): Kalga is a well-known departure point for mountain hikes, but above all, it is known for charas, considered the best cannabis in the world. It's easy to imagine that tourists gladly partake in this psychotropic plant that is practically given away for free. But how do the local and national authorities react to the open consumption of a product that is supposed to be illegal?

Shazeb Shaikh: Agriculture and tourism are the two pillars of the Himalayan state's visible economy. Spirituality is the hidden third. And charas from the region being known as the finest in the world becomes the high-value meeting point for agriculture, tourism and spirituality. Lord Shiva being associated with the plant, and the Parvati valley being the place where he meditated for thousands of years, marijuana's local cultural position has remained that of a divine offering. The locals and the national authorities have respected this notion in unison and mutual profit - charas is freely available pretty much wherever you go in the valley or the state, though it remains illegal nationally. You could openly smoke in most places mostly only avoiding direct contact with the police. The borders, however, remain tightly monitored for tourists trying to take hashish back with them. This keeps the pot culture and its market closely guarded to remain within the functioning of the state.

Within the state and the Parvati valley, there is a pecking order of strains named after some of the places they are grown in - for example, the 'Malana' cream is known to be the most superior as well as the most elusive and expensive. The reality is that though you would find stray marijuana plants in almost any village in the Parvati valley and neighbouring regions, charas itself is highly valued by the locals across the state. So they would ritually share it with you if they were smoking, but definitely nothing is being given away free. In fact it is also a secondary source of livelihood for many who may have all sorts of parallel professions.

Kalga, however, does not have more than a few stray marijuana plants as the locals are primarily growing apples and walnuts. So the village is not really known for charas at all. The absence of any local produce of charas in Kalga was also one of the motivating reasons to develop KYTA as a project here as it allowed us the opportunity to build an identity for the village associated with contemporary thinking and experimental doing rather than cannabis. This approach was not to enforce a conservative view of marijuana but more so using it as a point of departure for our program, in a region which is stamped with the perception of being a cannabis county. The only project at KYTA that has had any direct association with the plant was only last year (2018) with Italian-French artist, Alexis Cicciu. Even in his case, it was a hemp project in which he extracted fibres from local plants to produce threads that he would use to embroider shawls made in the village. This to me is the perfect example in which the plant finds a subtle alternative place for itself in a traditional context within a contemporary framework.

Switch (on Paper): Kalga is also known as the R&R destination for Israeli soldiers on leave. Is that a deliberate policy of the Israeli government or simply a trend amongst these young people who rely on the essence of charas as an outlet for the inherent violence in their country?

Shazeb Shaikh: To clarify, all of the state of Himachal Pradesh is perceived as the R&R destination for Israelis in general. Kalga, thankfully, has always been a confluence of people with no particular dominant culture or nationality. Israel was recognised by India

in 1950 which somehow culturally manifested as a growing migratory pattern of young Israelis cooling off in the Himalayas during summer, then moving southwards, especially Goa, towards winter. They have a visibly strong presence in these places with some establishments now running exclusively for Israelis. There is one such homestay in Kalga. So that's a bit strange to encounter in reality. But otherwise, we've never had an Israeli artist or team member in the project yet, to have a shared perspective on this.

What's for certain is that there is indeed a long-standing cultural trend, now almost worthy of a pilgrimage status, of young Israelis looking up at the Himalayas as the spiritual gateway to their emancipation. And this subculture has seemed to be embedded in certain regions in India including the Himalayas. What needs to be investigated is whether this large mass of exchange of Israelis in India over the years only has negative cultural associations related to a hedonistic lifestyle. And if that's the only story, then there should be a political initiative to reform this as that's not the reputation the Indian society needs to live with or tolerate. Because it gives the impression that we are welcoming of any diplomatic friendship if it amounts to profit for the state, at the loss of diluting its culture.

Switch (on Paper): Why do these residencies take place every year in autumn? Does this period correspond to a kind of necessity? We heard that this was during the rainy season.

Shazeb Shaikh: Our first edition was held in the summer months of April and May, after which we attempted the second window starting a little too late in October going through to the austere last week of November. After these two contrary experiences, we picked the end of the rainy season as the beginning of the program. Currently we start in the first week of September and end by mid October when it is still comfortable to host an Open Village Showcase (the last 3 days of the program). This period can be described as a 5-week long timelapse of the apple trees starting with full bloom until they go completely naked. This period was chosen with the expectancy of good weather as it is meant to be the second summer and we had splendid conditions during this time in 2016 and 2017. This decision would also allow KYTA to open up a second season for Kalga as this was otherwise considered a lull period for tourism in this part.

Our 5th edition that concluded on October 15th 2018 was probably the worst edition in terms of weather. Owing to a cyclone in the region, we lost 4 consecutive days to heavy rainfall which usually leads to power outages that last even longer. The main bridge connecting the Parvati valley to the expressway leading to New Delhi was also damaged with this outlash slowing down the region further. We experienced frequent rainfalls and bad weather almost throughout the last residency even though this is not the rainy season. The Himalayan monsoons peak in June and August, and then return bringing winter towards the end of November, and then it snows and rains through December until February and March.

We will continue to operate in the autumn window with the KYTA program though we are now working on increasing our presence with activities throughout the year. And so it would mean making the most of the 'on-season' periods which are a total of 5 months at best from April - June and September - October. The rest of the months remain shrouded in difficult weather to plan programs with a focus on production.

Switch (on Paper): In his post-residency report, Alexis Cicciù talks about a rather incredible relationship to the environment that is supported by the communal life shared between artists, the local population and the natural surroundings. This gives the impression—at least for young Westerners who are used to very different styles—that the point of this residency is not so much for there to be artistic production than it is about having a unique experience, even if that experience may sometimes prove difficult. What pushed a curator like yourself, someone used to the more conventional network of galleries or museums, to create the conditions for this exceptional experience?

Shazeb Shaikh: As an independent curator with a focus on experimental practices and processes across human endeavour, I have explored several questions I've had as an individual by searching for answers within original frameworks of interdisciplinary artistic research and production. The value of the 'experience' is the corpus of my life and through all my attempts, this objective remains sacrosanct for myself, the artists I work with and the audience. My projects usually involve multiple experimental artists and creative practitioners across disciplines working in live and experimental situations. It's true that I'm more invested in artists, than in art itself. But that's also because my practice itself emerged with a sort of way of life in bringing contrasting people together rather than academically-informed curating. In fact, I have only one large gallery / museum exhibition to my credit with a city (Basel) and its people as the muse, designed with a hybrid concept of a display, a live laboratory and a festival in experimental co-existence influencing and transforming each other over 2 weeks and multiple venues. But other than this, all of my work has revolved around building experimental communities and culture projects outside the white cube.

With KYTA it was clear to me at the onset that both, the artistic and the human results, were equally important. The latter would give the project a life of its own while the former would naturally draw in the attention of viewers completing the ecosystem of the artist and the audience. So the very first question I asked myself while planning the first edition of KYTA was – how could we bring people from all walks of life to work together instead of working in silos (as is usual in most residencies) and multiply their individual strengths. The curatorial question driving the first edition emerged from this thinking - “what happens when 10 artists travel so deep into each other, that they find only one result?” Our first 10 resident artists came from as many different disciplines and cultures to successfully produce an experimental film as a unified artistic result within a month long residency. Such a format allowed us to take strategic artistic risks that paid off better than expected as most importantly, it gave every

artist a live context of working with not just one but multiple disciplines within a singular artistic framework. This approach, I believe naturally expanded the capacity of exchange of skills, thought streams, culture and opinions - and hence, the value of the collective's time.

We continued with this format of "10 artists, 10 disciplines, 1 result" for another year in 2015 and then switched to a standard interdisciplinary residency format of multiple artists, multiple artworks as our strategy and focus shifted towards the vision of establishing Kalga as an international arts destination. But with this shift also came the need to reengineer the KYTA framework as an ecosystem expanding on the residency model and including modest artistic facilities to enable year long engagements with artists, as an example. So as a curator, I've had to remain agile and nimble to switch routes and approaches to remain in hot pursuit of our ambitious vision amidst the operational changes of finding relevant support to survive and grow as an experimental program. These are challenges and experiences I proactively seek to help me grow as a curator and producer. And I've had a very fulfilling journey with KYTA starting as a travel and art experiment, and steadily transforming into a subcultural motif of contemporary arts in rural Himalayas.

KYTA's program design has the collective code of experience embedded in its schedule itself. The first phase of the residency, 'Get Acquainted', stretches over 2 weeks during which the artists get to know each other better through a 20-min presentation and a workshop each which need not be related to their primary practice. In this phase, we also take the artists on walks to personally introduce them to the village, its people and animals, neighbouring areas, and also sometimes the nearest market which is about 2 hours away by road. Living as neighbours sharing a building of exactly 10 rooms, working and hanging out in a common space, starting mornings with yoga (which we missed in 2018), eating all meals together, trekking as a group to the hot water geysers of Kheer Ganga and still so much more going on at an interpersonal level - all of these elements become the glue that forms different portraits of the artist groups every year. The second phase of the residency, "Experiment. Edit. Create" starts in the third week and continues until the end, though it's quite common for some artists to get to work on day zero itself. Each edition has traditionally ended with an exchange of the group's experience and showcase of artworks in New Delhi, and now since the last 2 years also in Kalga itself. In 2018, we initiated 'Kalga Day' as part of the Open Village Showcase - a celebration of local culture and traditions as well as the diverse people who have made Kalga their home.

Switch (on Paper): What does the collection of artworks or archives produced on site consist of since 2016 ? Could it be described as a series of collaborations created with local artisans?

Shazeb Shaikh: The Kalga Art Collection comprises of artworks spread across the outdoors of the village, indoors in homestays and an electronic archive. All of the artworks in the collection have been made by the resident artists or in some cases, the visiting artists - so

none of the work has any participation from local artisans just yet. We hope for this to change but it involves longer and continued physical presence in the village which we are working towards in the next 5 year plan.

In the first two editions, the final results were films - the first, an experimental film titled ' ' featuring Taiwanese performer, Wei Chingju, interacting with the village and artworks as a metaphor of 'Kalga-Dreaming'. In our second year, hosted as a bilateral edition between India and France, we came together as a group to 'make a feature film with a non-feature film approach'. With none of the artists having a feature film credit, in fact most of them being contemporary artists, they successfully produced 'Inedie'. This film remains my personal favourite artwork at KYTA as it distinctively proved that it is indeed very hard to bring multiple artists together to create one result with shared ownership at the mercy of time - but when you do filter the egos by building collective trust, the essence of experimental interdisciplinary production comes to life like never seen before. Since 2016, the unified artistic result of our programs has become the Kalga Art Collection, dedicated to the Himalayan village.

The scope for production is quite limited as we are in a remote village which can only be accessed by foot. Our resource budget is negligible being an independent program and we are conservative about the materials from an ecological perspective. So it's a very tight line to walk for most artists, as well as for us, but that's really where the two core aspects of KYTA shine through - experimentation and collaboration. These conditions have also brought the joy of handicraft back into the game for artists who have naturally drifted away from it. Though several installations have been made site-specifically in the outdoors, only a handful have survived the weather and the animals.

In 2016, sound artist Farah Mulla created an igloo of discarded plastic bottles situated at one of the entrances to the village. This was designed to serve as a spot to take a break after the trek up - but while sitting inside and inhaling the views, you could also perceive the changes in the wind as the bottles whirred and whistled. Harsha Durugadda gifted a totem to the village in the form of an abstract life size gathering scene made with clay, jute bags and found things. Rohan Joglekar, hand-painted over 200 flags with simple visual contexts received from daily life in the village and from its people. But nobody knew while he was doing this that he was aiming to string these flags between two telephone towers at the foothill of Kalga - this was his version of the locally popular Tibetan prayer flags blowing good wishes to the village. Slovakian artist, Maria Cukor, symbolically brought a dead tree trunk to life by attaching movable branches around it connected to a pulley. Painted with a series of paper mache masks, the dancing tree installation became a natural setting between two giant rocks for a music video in which a character is sitting at the tree wearing a large robe made of autumn leaves. South African artist, Jo Voysey, produced a series of pharmacological artworks using expired medicines, with the animals and insects in Kalga as her muse. In the same year (2016), Rashi Jain, our resident artist from the first year returned to make something she had attempted but failed in her first attempt. This time she successfully

created a handmade kiln to fire pottery and sculpture up to 2 feet tall, and a pizza oven that remains the most loved artwork of the project because the woodfired pizzas made in this are simply incomparable. With these creations, we had our first facility for pottery and clay with a little studio space for working and storing clay samples from different regions.

The 2017 edition was a trilateral program featuring 17 artists from India, Switzerland and South Korea. In this year we had wood innovator, Gregory Chapuisat (Les Freres Chapuisat) working with a new material - ropes, and immersing himself in the meditative process of making knots. He created a site-specific installation, Laziness, with a locally hand stitched long hammock floating over a sea of knots in the form of a safety net, looking into the grand Dhauladhars (mountain range surrounding Kalga). Simon Wunderlich presented Time Sparkler, a labor of love project in which he collected mica stones and crushed them into different grades to create natural glitter. He used this material to blow-paint the surface of a octagonal water tank situated a short but steep climb above Kalga. This is designed as a place for reflection as the sunshine travels across the tank bursting into a million more suns. The locals and the villagers were particularly interested in Simon's handmade mica processing and application method as it gave them a visible example of how simple materials around them could be processed into a homegrown medium for construction textures. South Korean artist, Ikkyun Shin, presented a table floating in four buckets of water showcasing a simple science experiment in buoyancy. Jaehong Jo made a twin painting on Korean paper mounted on handmade plywood frames - 'Days and Nights of Kalga' - the day represented the rapid growth in Kalga since the artist had last visited in 2015, and the night shows the rule of animals when everyone is sleeping. Indian artist, Shailesh BR made multiple works both as an artist and a chef. His piece, 'Smoke Tree', gave branches to a chimney used on local water heaters, creating a painting of smoke that resembled the shape of the pine trees in the landscape around us. In this year, we also created our second facility, KarmaQuad - an experimental audio environment with a focus on making and listening in binaural formats. Mumbai-based artist duo Sound.Codes, transformed a storage area into a tuned room with experimental treatment for the ceiling and the floor - the sound still travels through the wood and stone building but we are not working with a large sound system, instead we have a quadraphonic speaker setup for a higher degree of immersion in the sound. Handcrafted apple wood reflectors function both as acoustic treatment as well as natural artworks. Akash Sharma (Sound.Codes) has also finished the first of a twin set of large synthesizers that can be used by visiting sound artists.

In the last edition in 2018, we finally had two installations made in metal that should stand the test of the weather. Vivek Chockalingam created a giant three-dimensional scribble of a tree in wrought iron with a message hanging on it - as you walk around the sculpture, the meaning of the Hindi words in the Devanagri script come to life - "an ever-changing imagination". Austrian artist, Marlene Hausseger, created a simple but highly contextual large-scale metal rod sculpture in the form of a simple circuit diagram symbolising 'resistance'. The installation overlooks the dam below making a commentary both on electricity and the ecological issues associated with such rampant constructions in the heart

of the Himalayas. Indian design artist, Smruthi Gargi Eswar, worked in her artist avatar but her series of paintings on slates (flattened stone used as roofing in the traditional houses) put together as a chandelier, balance the presence of both art and design. Poonam Jain invested her time in observing and investigating sites of conflicts in the village - whether between man and authority or man and nature. She collected rubble from a broken house, weighed every piece and tagged their weight, while maintaining a register of her rubble collection. Eventually she displayed the rubble in her own suitcase and at the site of the broken house, she installed two drawings on local cloth with coded messages.

The electronic archives as part of the Kalga Art Collection consists of the documentation over the years as a library that captures both the interdisciplinary process and the people. There is also a growing sound archive with live recordings from our past resident and visiting music artists as well as new works being produced in our sound facility. The archive also has our video collection of live performances which were the final artworks for our performing artists. Our past work in films, the documentation of their making, and key resources that were used to facilitate the complex process of collaborative storytelling are all available in the archives. The collection can be accessed by visitors in Kalga on appointment.

Switch (on Paper): Contemporary art in India is also subjected to the influences of international art. But the power of Indian cultural traditions like the weight of rural ways of life, religions or castes seem to still have a rather rich and original influence on production that remains relatively unknown to the rest of the world. What should be done to bring more visibility to this creative output, while avoiding the eternal exotic clichés that get brought up when talking about non-Western artists?

Shazeb Shaikh: Indian traditional arts such as dance and music have always been highly valued and respected internationally. Even authentic Indian design and craft whether its fabrics, wood or jewellery has a massive luxury market overseas. What's missing I believe is exchange between the Indian traditional and contemporary art worlds, as well as with international experimental communities like KYTA. Exposure to new people and perspectives can change the game for both sides (traditional and contemporary) besides amplifying the visibility of each other. Such a crossover would also introduce traditional craftsmen to 21st century skills like critical thinking and storytelling in a time when they are all mobile and internet literate.

Though it is true that popular contemporary Indian artists have also taken personal stories of Indian culture, rural life, and commentaries on the caste system, to the wider world - what remains absent is a real collaboration that blends art and craft as it used to be in India before the influence of the British and later from globalisation. To change the scenario, the policy makers especially those in the arts and culture ministries in India need to first be capable of recognising the value of this collaboration between contemporary and traditional, in a time when AI is coming to conquer it all. Though KYTA attempts to bring contemporary thinking and experimental

doing to a rural area, we are currently in fact working on a potential program that brings together international artists and designers to work with local artisans across a range of crafts.

Switch (on Paper): India is facing some critical social issues: the terrifying growth of some megalopolises, the sustainability and preservation of artisanal and ancestral traditions, but also conjugal and family drama, the long and fragile emancipation of women, the fate of homosexuals and a resurgence of AIDS. Are these topics taboo for artists, or on the contrary, can they be freely addressed?

Shazeb Shaikh: All of these topics can become a political problem when the expression for or against these find their way into popular territory or national dialogue. On one hand we hear our ministers advocating women empowerment but on the other hand, we have all forces flexing their muscles to not allow women in temples and shrines, resorting to physical violence even after the country's highest court has made a judgment on this in favour of equality. Likewise with homosexuality - being a democracy, this is the right of the people and they have been empowered by the Supreme court quashing Section 377 in 2018 and freeing the population to embrace their choice of sexuality. However, the truth remains rather different on ground with the chief of our army making a public statement (Jan 2019) that homosexuality in the armed forces will not be tolerated. In most cases, all of these issues boil down to the caste system and social hierarchy emerging from our largest religion that become the largest contributors to inequality in our country.

At KYTA, artists can choose their subjects personally as there is no overarching theme for our individual editions. One of the most successful projects to come out of the program was a film, Lila by Italian artist, Sergio Racanati in 2016, that showcased the perils of globalisation in the Himalayas. Last year, we had a British artist, Abi Joy Samuel, who created a portrait series of local women which I believe gave them the confidence of being inspiring figures simply by playing their roles in daily life. Swiss artist and sculptor, Mirjam Spooler, also produced a commentary on gender with her piece, 'Goddesses', based on birth, life and death inspired from the woman-deity, Kali - in this project, she used locally found items and cultural research to produce a series of attires incorporating local design patterns and raw materials. But even today, the locals, especially women remain partially inhibited by this melting pot of culture in Kalga as they probably see it as alien, diverting their attention from the traditions or role in society that they have been brought up with.

So though KYTA will remain open to people, expression and subjects of all kinds, the elimination of taboos in our society need a much larger social revolution. And for that to happen, very simply, the youth needs to actively participate in politics and policy making. That's not happening yet for one of the largest populations and we are at the brink of making a choice yet again for a prime minister in the national elections this year (2019). And with all honesty, we still have the same options as we did in the last election as there's no youth revolution in sight which essentially means that freely addressing topics of taboo is still a distant dream.

Switch (on Paper): Like many countries in the world, India is currently led by a nationalist party. The Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, has won fame for his controversial statements on Islam, but also for his spectacular results with the economy. Seen from outside, this nationalism appears more discrete than others. What are your thoughts?

Shazeb Shaikh: I believe our nationalism is in our faces right now so it's far from discrete. There is a rather strong wave of warped expectations from our countrymen by the ruling party and the prime minister. Compliance to their ideology is the only way to prove our love for India, even if we don't need to. This is an ideology that is doing nothing beyond trying to crown one of the oldest religions as the most superior, which makes nationalism the face of a new era of racism. With all due respect to all religions, the problem here is in its appropriation for political mileage and profit.

Behind this facade lies the truth of development and economics - which too is statistically in a worse position than it was before this party came into power in 2014. The results of the economy in Modi's reign have actually hit rock bottom with insensitive decisions like demonetisation in 2017 - without any sort of managerial thought to how it would be handled as a process by billions of people. This move took us years behind in time, irreparably for a large population of farmers as well as traders. The price of fuel and the cost of the dollar have hit all-time highs in the past year. The rich are decamping after looting the Indian public and settling abroad while the farmers commit suicides as they can't manage debts. So what may seem as India's economic prosperity for the wider world is nothing but propaganda. Everyone smiles with a gun at the back of your head and that's the face the world is seeing. Truth is that we can be a lot better off but when you speak the truth, you become an anti-national. Essentially, we're made to live in a vicious circle.

The problem remains that there is no relief in the form of new faces or parties in the political landscape that are strong enough to speak truth to the people instead of sugar coating their sermons for votes and creating regional, religious and caste-based divisions. I have always believed the solution lies in experienced subject matter experts running various departments and managing sectoral portfolios with a high degree of accountability instead of random understudied and over-enthusiastic politicians working for personal gains. If we manage to save even a fraction of the money we lose to corruption, positive changes and true prosperity can be just around the corner. My confidence in political change, however only emerges from the self in the words of Gandhi - "be the change you want to see in the world".

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