

“new forms of unreason”. He further observes that this may be why a “subaltern” *bhasha* like Hindi, “in spite of its inferior status in the pre-modern hierarchy of Sanskrit imperialism, appears to extend the prospect of functioning as the language of power in the new ‘anti-modern’ regime visualised by right-wing and conservative forces in India”.

NOTABLY, THE AUTHOR draws case studies from pan-Indian literature only in a limited manner to explicate his points. Except for Gopinath Mohanty’s novel *Paraja*, Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* (which is set in Kerala), a brief mention of Fakirmohan Senapathy’s *Chha Mana Atha Guntha*, and passing mentions of a few other Indian authors from various literatures, most authors and works discussed and referred to are from Malayalam. It has its positive side as readers at home and abroad can become ac-

Bhasha is described as “the common word for ‘speech’ or a ‘regional dialect’ in most Indian languages, especially when used in opposition to the hegemonic language of Sanskrit”.

quainted with the works of key Malayalam literary figures. However, while discussing “Modernity and Indian Literature”, examples from other literatures, such as Kannada, Bengali, Marathi, Hindi, and Tamil, that are readily available through English and Malayalam translations could have been incorporated.

Nevertheless, this work is indeed a solid addition to Indian critical literature in English. It will certainly be an indispensable text in the study of Indian literatures, particularly in English translation, comparative literature, and cultural studies. As Indian Literature in English Translation is gaining importance as a specific discipline in university departments throughout the country, this will doubtlessly become a canonical text. ■

A.J. Thomas is a poet, translator, and former editor of *Indian Literature*, the bimonthly English journal of the Sahitya Akademi.

Breaking barricades

This book is an attempt to provide a kaleidoscopic, deep, and reflexive critique that reflects on cultures of protest, oppression, aesthetics, and power across time and space in India. **KALPANA KANNABIRAN**

“It is a case of territorial segregation and of a cordon sanitaire putting the impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of a cage.”

—B.R. Ambedkar quoted in the book

In this book, Brahma Prakash opens out to view the interlocking carceralities of economic violence, sexual violence, and pandemic governance in a post-truth regime—and resistance. He does this through a fluid narrative that moves back and forth citing an array of instances, poets, events, and concerns—reflecting on cultures of protest, oppression, aesthetics, and power across time and space in India. The regime feeds off and is

fuelled by the production and reproduction of aggravated violence within the larger context of Hindu majoritarianism and its deathly coils of caste, community, ethnicity, and gender. Barricades of different orders at different levels entrench impunity—state and civic. Matters of religion and faith are reduced to homogenised denominational identities underwritten by caste. While we know that the deep oppression of caste and “Muslim hating” have been “in the bone of the nation” (pages 68 to 91), the resistance to both has been unceasing—through political struggle, the crafting of the Constitution, and the imaginations of just orders through a redefinition of art, aesthetic, and performance. In this re-



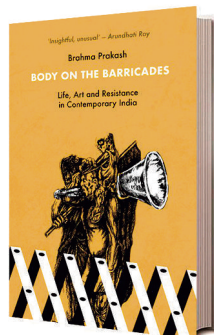
view, I open a window to the text, reading it through a few overarching themes that I hope will illuminate its possibilities.

Prakash's book is stunning in its attempt to provide a kaleidoscopic, deep, reflexive critique. We must look within to comprehend that which is outside. The inside and the outside, the public-political and the private, are not separate worlds. Textuality, orality, and performative worlds are mutually constitutive—"Curtailed movements create choreographic patterns. They... become part of muscle memory" (page 13). And yet it is also true that "earnest hope in the face of extreme curtailment" (page 12) helps us imagine a realisable utopia.

BARRICADES ARE EMBLEMATIC of the power of the regime (and its proxies) to debar the "outsider" from entry—the figure of the outsider shifts constantly, depending on who the targets of maiming are in particular instances—but barricades provide the logic of classification, separation, and segregation, weaponising thought, speech, and action in the process. The eight essays in this volume are a meditation on resistance in contemporary India. In contextualising resistance, Prakash redefines the idea of meditation itself—removing it from a commonly understood placid state of detachment and inner peace to a breathless, feverish reflection on the "politics of maiming" (a term I borrow from Jasbir Puar's reflections on other barricaded contexts) in majoritarian Hindu society,

Body on the Barricades

Life, Art and Resistance in Contemporary India



By Brahma Prakash
LeftWord Books
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▼ **Migrant workers** waiting at a bus stand for transport to board a train to West Bengal after new restrictions were imposed by the Delhi government due to rising COVID-19 cases in New Delhi in January 2022. SHIV KUMAR PUSHPAKAR

especially under Hindutva, and the imagination of liberatory futures. It is pertinent to recall Puar's elaboration on "maiming" in her book *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability*—"a status unto itself, a status that triangulates the hierarchies of living and dying" and "is exercised as a domain of sovereignty... enacted to target both bodies and infrastructure for debilitation" (Puar, 2017: pages 137, 139).

Maiming takes the form of lynching—of words and of bodies (page 46). Authoritarian government is in an intimate dance with its foot soldiers (ordinary, everyday people leading ordinary everyday lives even while partaking in the orgies of genocidal violence). Delegated violence and delegated surveillance curtail words, bodies, and movement—diminishing life and freedom, and meaning and metaphors: "Before they take democracy for a ride, they talk about 'too much democracy'.... The politics that starts with hate leads to genocide and crimes against humanity" (page 47). And arrests under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act. Anti-CAA/NRC protes-

Migrant labourers and Rohingyas. Where do they belong? For the precariat, migration/the journey to *pardes*, is not a “pilgrimage” with “deep meaning” but a violent severance—like death.

ters, the women of Shaheen Bagh, the farmers from Punjab, urban Naxals, the Bhima Koregaon 12, Kathua, the Delhi riots.

Cut to the lockdown and the forced march of migrant workers. Witness the maiming through hunger, dispossession/displacement (from work, assets, and dwelling), recycling of ideologies of contagion, and that stark standing order “social distance” (in its many vernacular renditions); the bleeding of Islamophobia into carceral pandemic rule (the Tablighi Jamaat case for instance), and the use of custodial violence and arbitrary arrests with impunity. The question that remains unanswered, however, is, where were the migrant workers and their families marching to? As Prakash reminds us poignantly, “[f]or the migrant worker, the city may be cruel and indifferent, but the village is a life sentence that you escape. A life sentence is not life, and fugitives cannot be nostalgic.... Yet, there is the soil and the language. Yes, I love my village, but if you asked me to live there, I would not.” It is a land of social distancing that embeds brutal memories and cultural belonging—“such as being together but apart” (pages 101, 102). Migrant labourers and Rohingyas. Where do they belong? For the precariat, migration/the journey to *pardes*, is not a “pilgrimage” with “deep meaning” but a violent severance—like death (page 103), the alternative to maiming.

THE BOOK IS ABOUT thinking of life and freedom from the points of confinement. It is about the act of breathing from the point of breathlessness. It is the ultimate resolution of the body to cross the barbed wires. It is a situation where we cannot breathe but we breathe. “Breathlessness... is the point to think through the symptomatic condition” (page 16).

The book moves breathlessly between the fractures and the “we”, in a contrapuntal nar-

Prakash is also the author of Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the Folk Performance in India (Oxford University Press, 2019).

rative that lays bare the possibilities and pitfalls, and signals the enormous “cultural labour” (a trope Prakash has explored in his earlier work) that must be performed on a different scale altogether to confront the deprivations of Hindutva politics in India today, and fashion (not merely imagine) a different social order in resistance to it.

Breathlessness means many things. On the one side, “[b]reathlessness is a general condition of life” (page 13), gasping for every breath in the toxic, putrid sewers of caste society; grasping the last shred of life facing a riotous lynch mob; gulping and holding breath down in the fervent hope that the hate speech on street corners and television screens will not escalate to physical maiming and death; the chokehold, “suffocation”—“I can’t breathe”—that is all of this and more. On the other side, the utter urgency of crafting a just present that will lead to just futures—the breathless journey out of the tunnel of violence and desolation to life and liberty—a remembering of the histories of struggle encapsulated in the “We” in the Preamble to the Indian Constitution.

Brahma Prakash’s account captures this polyvocality and complexity embedded in the lifeworlds of the itinerant, pushing us to think through the barricades to the syncretism that provides a glimmer of hope in walking towards transformation—yet again—that must be durable. The pandemic forces us to think through the body (politic) anew. Lest we forget, even “at the cusp of mourning and mayhem... [p]eople were risking their lives... to save lives... they were creating a parallel system... a new possibility, a new assembly” (page 13). So, although in the pandemic that is exclusionary India, the *We* “moves between the possibility and the impossibility of marching together, [i]t presents the challenge of coming together... [and] reminds us of our shared humanity, our commonality, our deep emotions that connect our emotional universe despite all the fractures and holes” (page 27).

“Perhaps these workers need a pause. Perhaps they need to walk back, not to their villages or the cities, but to disrupt the mobility of capital for new possibilities, for a new movement, in a new time.” (page 113) ■

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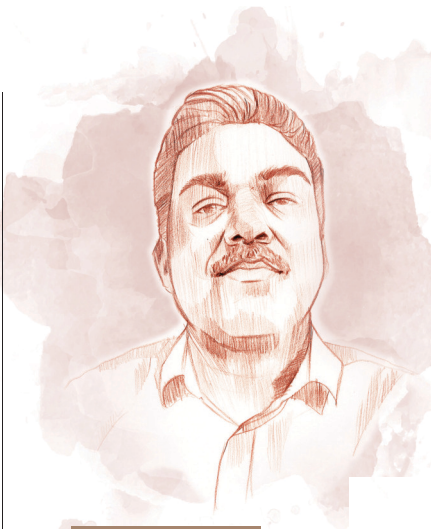
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