

*I was very fond of Safdar, but who wasn't?
We liked him for his charming personality,
his easy laughter, sophisticated manners,
effortless articulation, clear-cut views
and tender human values.*

HABIB TANVIR

‘*Halla Bol* is unputdownable. It is fast-paced, vivid, action-packed, but you know only too well, with sinking heart, it is no fiction. It is the story of a man everyone loved – a comrade for whom humanity was ever greater than Party; an artist, poet, writer, actor, activist, never burdened by his own accomplishments. In short, a man so gifted that all the world could stand up and say: “This was our New Man.”

And in Sudhanva, he now has his chronicler.’

ANAND PATWARDHAN *filmmaker*

‘Luminous. *Halla Bol* is about theatre, culture, politics, and hope, and more poignantly relevant today than at any other time in our country’s history.’

SANJNA KAPOOR *theatreperson*

‘Tightly packed and fast-paced in its intertwining narratives, *Halla Bol* is several things all at once. A vivid memoir of Safdar Hashmi, it is about intersections between cultural practice and working-class politics, and about lives lived at those intersections. Studded with details about the making of plays and the staging of them at street corners, the book’s nimble prose reads like a well-crafted play. A riveting read!’

AIJAZ AHMAD *Marxist scholar*

'Halla Bol is a powerful account of the short and rich life of Safdar Hashmi. We get to see what it means to live political resistance – complete with poetry and play, humour and tenderness, courage and hope. And Hashmi is never alone onstage. This is, perhaps, the triumph of his life – and this book. *Halla Bol* shows us, close-up, how one man's life and death are intertwined with the stories of many people. Together, they reveal the profound link between ideology and real-life struggle. This is the kind of book we need today, so we can renew our understanding of resistance, and find the strength to put it into practice.'

GITHA HARIHARAN *author*

'For a generation that grew up without knowing Safdar Hashmi, *Halla Bol* is a treasure, with stories and accounts that render his passion, humour and humanism into an intimate portrait. But this is not a book about one man or one tragic incident. Sudhanva plumbs the depths of Jana Natya Manch's long journey, and along the way there are countless voices and bodies and imaginations, and myriad incidents, each unique in what they tell you about compassion and solidarity.

To me, this is a book about love.'

NEEL CHAUDHURI *playwright and director*

‘A combination of great storytelling and empathy allows Sudhanva Deshpande to illuminate Safdar Hashmi’s rich and deeply committed life. This is also the story of a period of tumult and change in India, and many of the ideas Safdar and his colleagues grappled with are harbingers, for better or worse, of how we are as a society today. Safdar’s end was tragically senseless, but he emerges as an idealist, unwilling to give up the artistic in pursuit of the political, dealing with self-doubt, and courageously leading one of India’s most significant theatre companies. *Halla Bol* is an invaluable addition to the sparse body of literature on contemporary theatre in India.’

SUNIL SHANBAG *theatre director*

‘A terrible storm is blowing across the page of history we call our present. In *Halla Bol*, Sudhanva Deshpande has cupped his hands around that tender, resilient flame that was Safdar Hashmi. It is to Hashmi’s credit, and to the movement he was a part of, that *Halla Bol* pays tribute not just to an individual but to an ethos, a collective ideology, that says artists linked to communities-in-struggle hold the promise of our liberation.’

AMITAVA KUMAR *author*

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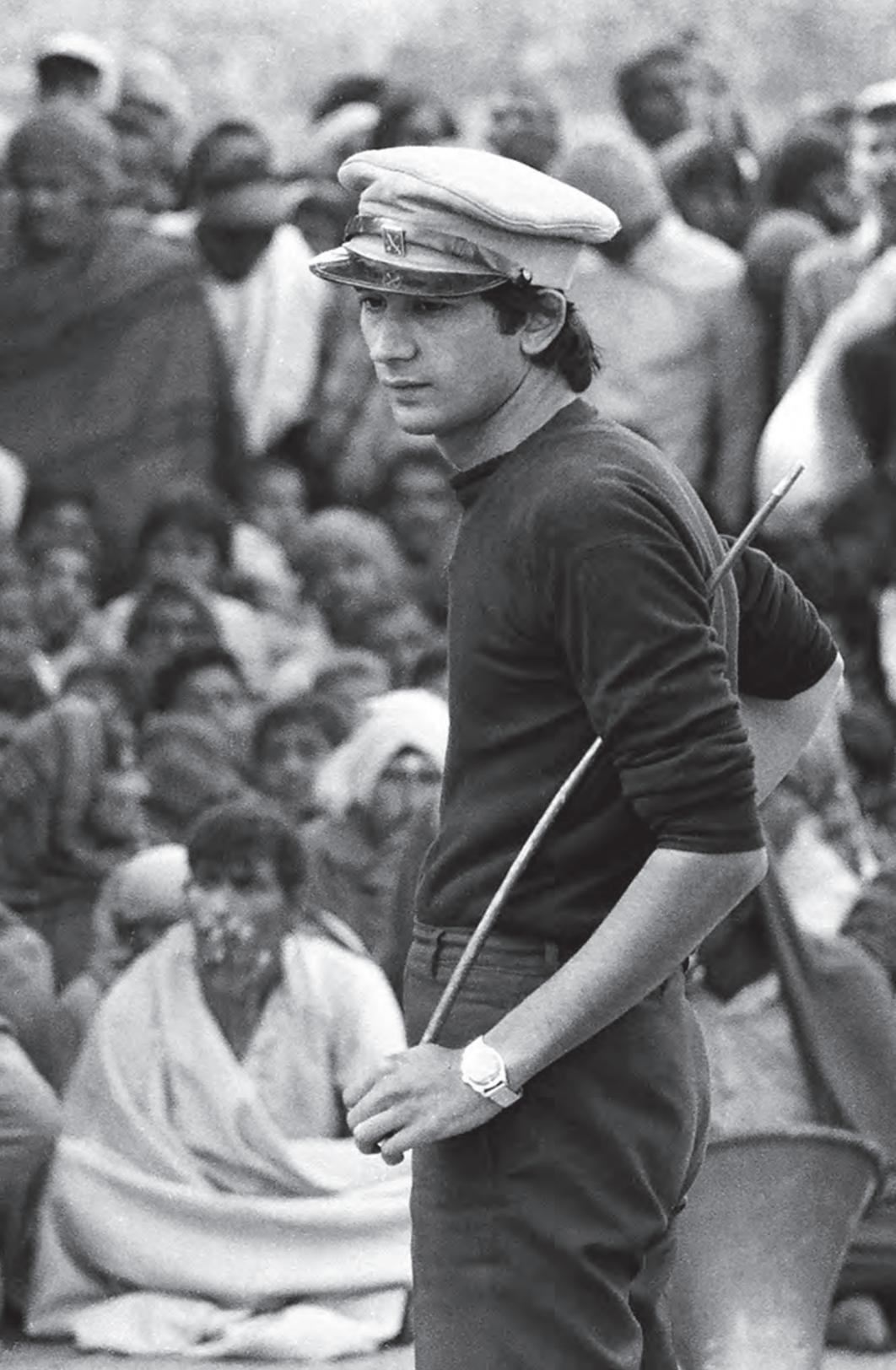
He is Managing Editor, LeftWord Books.

He cycles around town.

This is his first book.

**halla
bol**





halla The Death and Life of Safdar Hashmi **bol**

SUDHANVA DESHPANDE

LeftWord

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For Comrade Aai and Professor Baba

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On New Year's Eve, 1988, we were laughing and singing, out in the open, perched on a giant rock amid lush greenery, caring a fig for the bone-chilling cold, and we didn't want the night to end.

On New Year's Day, 1989, we were huddled together, unable to feel rage or grief, in a government hospital corridor with its banal walls, numb to the bone-chilling cold, and we didn't want the morning to arrive.

In between, time stopped. One hand of its clock was an iron rod, the other the barrel of a gun.

My heart was stone. I went through the first three days of January 1989 in a trance. I remember it as one remembers a movie one has watched a dozen times – the picture sharp, crystal clear; the colours vibrant; the soundtrack crisp. I can play the images in slow-motion on my memory's player; but it's a movie, it's not life.

I came back to reality when we went back to Jhandapur to perform *Halla Bol* ('Raise Hell'), the play that was left unfinished when we were attacked three days ago, which had resulted in two deaths. An artist's head deliberately clobbered by blunt instruments, a worker's life snuffed out casually by a bullet.

Theatre is make-believe; theatre is life. It is ephemeral, momentary, fleeting, transient, a wisp of smoke; it is palpable, organic, aromatic, acidic, a bean of coffee.

And it sometimes reeks of blood. The blood spilled on the brick-paved streets of a working-class neighbourhood on a perfect winter Sunday morning.

This is not a story of death. It is a story of life.

The luminous life of Safdar Hashmi, extraordinary in all its ordinariness.

EPILOGUE

Ghaziabad used to be a massive district, comprising Ghaziabad city, Loni, Modinagar, Baghpat, Thekda, NOIDA, Dadri and Hapur. NOIDA and Dadri went into Gautam Buddha Nagar when that district was carved out. Subsequently, Hapur became an independent district as well. Ghaziabad district was left with two major industrial belts, Tronica City, and Sahibabad. Sahibabad itself has several industrial areas: Loni, Loni Road, Rajendra Nagar, Anand, Meerut Road, Bulandshahar, South of G.T. Road, Site IV, etc. Ghaziabad city is known for its technical and engineering colleges. Initially known for manufacturing engines and pumpsets, textiles, sugar, steel, and electronics, through the 1980s and later, the region's industrial output diversified with the arrival of companies such as Dabur, Hero Cycles, Godrej, Atlas Cycles, Coca-Cola, Delhi Press, Bhushan Steel, and so on (some of these, such as Hero, are shut now). Overall, Ghaziabad doesn't have too many large enterprises; it is mainly a centre of medium and small enterprises. It has also been home to two public sector enterprises, Bharat Electronics (BEL) and Central Electronics (CEL). Ram Bahadur, the other victim of the attack of January 1, 1989, worked at CEL.

Ghaziabad had a history of attacks on the working class. Herig-India is one example, and became the inspiration for Janam's play *Machine*. That happened in 1978. CITU, because it was the most militant of the trade union organizations in the region, had also faced attacks. A few years after the Herig-India incident, a CITU district secretary, N.C. Pal, was killed in his own house, though it is not certain if this was a result of his trade union activities. A

few years later, another worker connected to CITU, by the name of Mann, was killed. Then Vijay Narayan Singh, who worked at East India Transformers, was killed. Finally, in the summer of 1988, a local CITU leader, Harendra Pal, was killed. He had led a strike at Precision Moulds and Dies (PMD), where the workers had unflinchingly confronted the police.

The attack on CITU and Janam was led by Mukesh Sharma, owner of a small enterprise called Indu Plywood. Safdar, at 34, was a young man when he was killed. Mukesh Sharma was 26. The 'property business', or the real estate market, is a refuge for criminals of all shades. Sharma had already acquired a bit of a name for himself in illegal land-grabbing, and had also diversified into running petrol pumps. Patronage by the Congress, the ruling party, and contesting the local election, were both ways to shore up his clout, which was essential to his business. His elder uncle was an elected sarpanch. The locals feared Mukesh, partly for what he was capable of on his own, and partly because he came from a family firmly entrenched in local networks of power and lawlessness.

Among his henchmen that day was one Surjit Nagar, later reportedly chopped into 50 pieces – for ease of stuffing into a gunny bag – by his own relations. There was a Karan Singh, who ran a ration shop in Jhandapur. It took the Indian legal system, our magnificent colonial legacy, merely 14 years, from 1989 to 2003, to confirm what the world knew: All the 14 accused – including two who had died in the meanwhile – were guilty of having committed the murders of Safdar and Ram Bahadur.

Every political killing is a public spectacle, designed to spread fear and terror. The question is, who is the intended audience? In the case of Dr Narendra Dabholkar and others who were assassinated, and of others such as M.F. Husain, who are attacked in various other ways, the intended audience is national. The attacks are planned to extricate maximum media attention – for the Hindu Right's twisted worldview, yes, but also for the attackers personally, as Malvika Maheshwari brings out in her study, *Art Attacks*. Often, the

EPILOGUE

attackers alert the media and invite them to be spectators as they go about spreading mayhem. Safdar's killing, on the other hand, was meant for a local audience. Ram Bahadur, for them, was no more than collateral damage, and was given just as much importance as a speeding highway bus driver gives to the dog he crushes. The killers spent a long time in the area, strutting about, firing in the air, shouting obscenities, in a macabre choreography of terror.

Safdar was not assassinated, for that presupposes a specific target. His was a political murder. Mukesh Sharma and his henchmen were no evil geniuses; they were local thugs, protecting petty fiefdoms comprised of businesses such as land-grabbing, extortion, and black marketeering. Fear was the currency they traded. Which is why they came armed with guns, thick lathis, and iron rods. Their target was the workers' movement, which was a direct threat to their fiefdoms.

This was an instance of class struggle. Safdar was targeted because he put himself between the killers and his comrades in the class struggle. He offered his body, so others could be saved. If Janam's performance had started an hour earlier, as it was supposed to, they'd have probably missed us. But the attack on the working-class movement would have taken place another time, at another location, with other victims. Safdar's heroism saved lives on that winter morning.

The rapidity with which the news of the attack and Safdar's death went viral – before we knew that word, in an era without mobile phones and the internet – was stunning to me as it unfolded, for I was utterly clueless, in shock, unable to mourn, perplexed and scared at being looked upon as a minor hero, even if momentarily. There were protests all over the country, in towns and cities and villages. In some measure, this was because of Safdar's own personal contacts and friendships, which he had built up more or less effortlessly, with little expectation of payback and certainly no expectation of personal gain. Safdar was a natural organizer, he wasn't a networker.

At another level, the scale of the protests had to do with a decade or more of discontent boiling over – over economic issues, for sure, but also over the increasing evisceration of our social fabric by ideologies of hate based on identity. The scale of the protests was amplified by the fact of Safdar being a Communist, and his party, the CPI (M), along with its mass organizations such as CITU, AIDWA, and SFI, taking the message of his life and sacrifice to millions of people. Finally, the spread and scale of the protests were born of shock – how could a person be killed for simply doing a play? In that sense, it was that moment of liminality in the history of our republic, when we went from a certain naive innocence at the idea of an artist being killed on the streets, to a hardening of the arteries of our humanity, leaving us inured at rapes and lynchings of Dalits and Muslims.

But Safdar’s life, and his death, show us that another rage is possible. Safdar’s name and his face wouldn’t have acquired an iconic quality had artists not banded together under the banner of Sahmat, and had Sahmat itself not been so innovative in responding to the growing brutalization of Indian society. Safdar died a hero, and his heroism was magnified by the creativity of thousands of artists and intellectuals who came together in his name to create a secular counternarrative to the religious right.

But Safdar’s life also shows us how an artist can live in this world, not by embracing this or that identitarian cause, but by carrying within themselves a vision of human liberation transcending identities. A vision of liberation so glorious and boundless that it includes all the beings that inhabit this earth.

Akbar raja lajawaab tha, samajh mein uske aai

Ya to duniya sab ki hai ya nahi kisi ki bhai

Emperor Akbar was dumbfounded, for he at last understood
This world, it either belongs to all, or to none at all

