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Premium

The lies we tell ourselves

Writer Amitava Kumar on how a painting became a canvas for reflection on inequality and lack of social justice; how when we slow down news and engage with its horrors can we square up to the truth of our unequal lives

Written by Amitava Kumar |
October 21, 2021 5:32:20 pm



Sameer Kulavoor's painting Mob, 2019 (Courtesy Sameer Kulavoor)

A man is being beaten. He is on the ground and, in an effort to survive, he has covered his head with his hands. One of the men attacking him has raised his foot — it is aimed at the head of the man, who is being beaten by sticks and rods. We do not know whether the man will live. Will we learn his name from the newspapers the next day? More likely, we'll learn it from a [viral video](#).

This is a painting by visual artist and graphic designer Sameer Kulavoor, who gives it a simple title, *Mob*. One can see the illuminated smartphone screens in it. The assault is being recorded. That has been the truth of the [lynchings](#) over the past few years: there are always a few men among the participants who take a peculiar satisfaction in preserving evidence of their brutality. They do this, perhaps, because they see nothing wrong in what they are doing, or perhaps, they want to use the video to recruit more followers.

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There are other questions that the painting forces me to ask: Will we learn the names of the attackers too? Will anything happen to them, will they be punished? I do not know the answer to such questions.



Take a careful look at the faces of the members of the mob painted by Kulavoor, you will see they are indistinguishable from each other. This seems just right because the mob is single-minded in its claim to truth. The only individual here, in any real sense, is the man being beaten. He is distinguished by his wounds.

Kulavoor's art records this brutal fact.

Kulavoor was trained at [Sir JJ School of Art in Mumbai](#). As a boy growing up in that city, he witnessed the riots that took place in 1992-93. He was around 10 years old. Riots had followed in the wake of the Babri Masjid demolition in Ayodhya on December 6, 1992. Official figures put the number of those killed in Mumbai during the riots at 900: 275 Hindus, 575 Muslims, and 50 others. As the product of a mixed marriage, Kulavoor told me, he had till then moved easily among different religious communities and traditions but the riots were a traumatic experience. The Gujarat riots of 2002 further deepened the trauma and he began to follow the news closely.



Amitava Kumar's *Man with Red Marks* (Courtesy Amitava Kumar)

With Narendra Modi's ascent to power in 2014, Kulavoor says, "Things went downwards" for minorities, Dalits, and rationalists. He mentioned the lynching of Mohammed Akhlaq, in Dadri in 2015, and the murder of [Gauri Lankesh](#), in Bengaluru in 2017, as milestones on the national descent to a hell that made The New York Times declare 2018 as "the year of the lynch mob" in India. In February 2019, Kulavoor painted *Mob*. The national elections were a few months away. He was trying, Kulavoor tells me, to create "an image that was direct but also symbolic" of Modi's first term as Prime Minister.



photojournalist Danish Siddiqui, we see a man being beaten by a mob. It was taken by Siddiqui in northeast Delhi during the riots in early 2020, even as then US president Donald Trump was being feted in another part of the city. The riots were the culmination of what had so far been a peaceful protest against the new citizenship laws, seen as discriminatory against Muslims.

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Siddiqui had described the scene he'd captured: "Shadowing lines of heavily outnumbered police, I noticed more than a dozen people ranging from teenagers to old men assaulting a Muslim man in white clothes. Using sticks, cricket stumps, plastic pipes and metal rods, they brutally beat the man. Blood flowed from his head as he went down on his knees." The man who was being beaten was Mohammad Zubair. He survived. He had told Siddiqui, the mob attacked him when they saw his cap and beard and knew he was a Muslim. They knew nothing else about him. He asked Siddiqui, "What kind of humanity is this?"

I have recently published a **novel**, *A Time Outside This Time*, in which my narrator grapples with the realities of the current moment. The world comes to him in the form of bad news. One day, he makes a small painting from a photograph he had seen in a Delhi newspaper in May 2017. The photograph showed a man kneeling in the dirt, begging for his life. Half of his white vest — and his face — was soaked in blood. He was surrounded by onlookers — you saw their legs, their feet, but not their faces. The man on the ground, who had not been lynched yet but would be very soon, was named Mohammed Naeem. He was suspected of being a kidnapper. He was asserting his innocence, because that was the truth, but it was already too late for the truth.

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In making a painting from a photograph in the newspaper, my narrator was trying to look at the scene more closely. And attempting to make his readers do the same.



I want to borrow my narrator's impulse and take it further.

My Account

On every vaccination card in India, on every rice bag distributed by the government, or every advertisement and government notice, we see Prime Minister Narendra Modi's face. My modest proposal is that instead of the photograph of the Prime Minister, let's put **Kulavoor's** painting on every rice bag. Let *Mob* be a kind of reality check. Let it enter our consciousness as the truth of our times. The truth that we, as a nation, have entered an era where our foundational truth is a lie. A lie that we are all equal before the law, irrespective of our religion.

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Amitava Kumar is the author, most recently, of A Time Outside This Time (Aleph)



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