

## ***how many songs from a single note?***

**After the closing of Rah Naqvi's recent solo exhibition in Mumbai, curatorial advisor Shaunak Mahbubani spoke to the artist gathering personal reflections, audience responses, and ways of moving forward in dark times.**

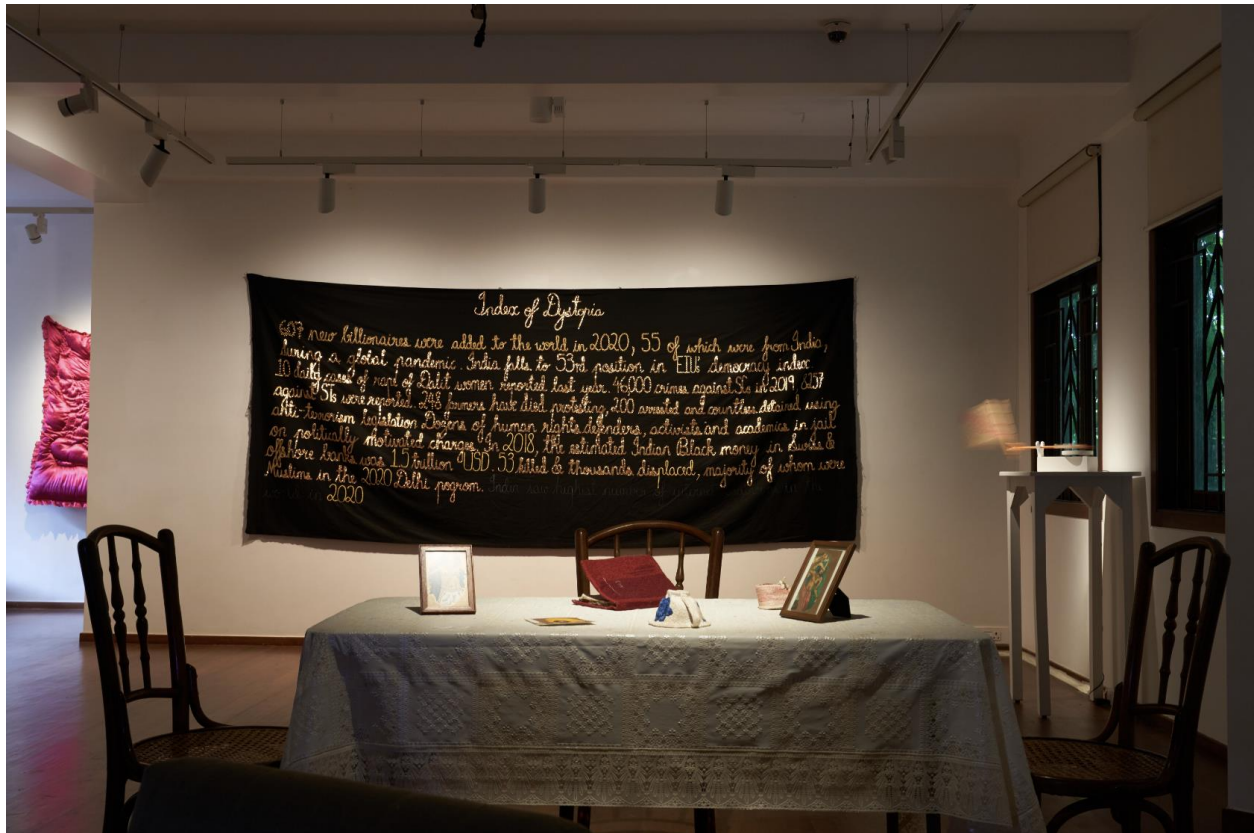
**Shaunak:** Big congratulations on such a beautiful exhibition! What are you feeling as the exhibition comes down? What responses and reflections are you taking away from it?

**Rah:** I think as the show comes down, I feel honestly just relieved. I feel like this is really something that I wanted to do for almost four years now. I felt like these were stories that I've been carrying with me for so long, and to some extent, they felt like they were uprooted from their context when I used to show them in Europe, and I think it has its own purpose there. But to show it back in my home city, it felt like it finally found home or I found a place where it could be understood for what it really is, without the voyeurism that is attached to it when it's shown in Europe.

It still is quite conflicting at times because it's hard to feel any kind of confidence or comfort when you make something from vulnerability. But getting responses that were very honest from young artists around, who are going through similar things, dealing with the same problems, dealing with the same questions, working along the lines of the same questions, that's something I keep with me. I feel like there is a community and it's not as isolating as it often feels.

I also left Bombay at a very crucial point for my own personal journey. I didn't really get a chance to explore queerness in the queer scene in Bombay and I didn't know much about it. So I think this show was also quite important for me in that regard. A lot of queer people did go for the show and I received a lot of messages and that felt so nice. I just think that I hadn't gotten a chance to really immerse myself like that. This was like my little effort into establishing myself as one of us in the community.

**Shaunak:** One of the most interesting things for me when creating exhibitions is to transform the experience of the space so that viewers can suspend their expectations and absorb the works in a different light. It was an exciting process to also find conceptual grounding to do that in this exhibition, especially in imbuing the upper level with elements of a domestic space in response to the middle ground where your works straddle interiority and exteriority. Would you like to speak more about this? Did the experience of the works change within this?



Rah Naqvi, how many songs from a single note?, Install view, TARQ Mumbai, 2022

**Rah:** In regards to how the space and work interacted together in a gallery atmosphere, I think I owe most of that to you to be honest, because I think you also had a vision for the work. During the time that we were also having our conversations, I was so stressed about work and production and getting things done on time but you really came in with the vision that just made so much sense that it also elevated the work to a great extent. Transforming a gallery space, which fundamentally has its own visual language and aesthetics is actually quite major. It changed the way the work told stories together very cohesively. In terms of a curatorial perspective as well, I think that's also what bound everything because the visual languages of all the works are quite different. For example, the top level which was focused on a domestic sphere completely broke the kind of hierarchy that we usually see in spaces that are designed to be somewhat clean and pristine. So I think the way in which we created this space was non-hierarchical in a way.

The comical aspect to my work is very entertaining for me personally in many ways. I think it also breaks that wall with the artworks that are present in art spaces and gallery spaces. But I've noticed with my work, and I got to see it more watching people

interacting with this show, that there's always a giggle or a laugh that comes out. For me, that's very precious because that's undoing some of the inaccessibility inherent in the artworld. I think if people lose the humor in art, if we lose the joy that comes with that. Without the different interpretations and understandings I think it just doesn't do its job.

**Shaunak:** In our discussions, as well as towards the titling of the exhibition, we spoke a lot about the narrow homogeneity we are being forced towards vis-a-vis the complexity and polyphony of the trans-queer experience we are grappling with. In your practice too, you have branched into explorations with many more formats, combining and playing with them in beautiful transdisciplinary ways. Can you speak more about your multi-format way of working?

**Rah:** I always tend to fluctuate and try to dip my feet in different waters when it comes to media; and also languages, I always switch between Hindi, English, and Urdu. With mediums there's films, textiles, and costume-making. Also, vocals and performance. For me, it feels like it gives me enough space to explore the different areas of interest that I have, but also to maintain the curiosity that I think is very important as an artist to hold on to.

It also brings a lot of humility in my practice. There is nothing that I feel I can say that I'm a master of, I don't really believe in that. I like this unknown territory when you step into a different medium and you're just learning and you're exploring. And there are no rules necessarily because it's not something that you were taught professionally. The nature of the work embraces the unknown. And I think it does make the work feel accessible because there's a childlike quality to it.

Another reason why I switch between mediums for different works depends on how economically and financially sound my condition is at the moment that I am producing the work. It's a very important thing to emphasize for me because I think there are very few artists in the world who really have the financial means to create from stability, always. For each work, the way in which I tend to explore a medium is also based on how much money I have at that time to invest into my work, apart from just the daily expenses of trying to have a space to work in or have rent to pay. So sometimes when I'm working with film, it's merely because I don't have a studio space or if I'm working with textiles. It's because I have time on my hands, so I can put in all of my energy into a slow practice.

When it comes down to performance, I think the performance came to me quite naturally, I always loved engaging with my body, and singing has always been my favorite thing to do. I just didn't think that it was possible for me to practice these because I always initially thought that I had to be trained in something to do something. But that's one thing that I let go of ever since I moved to Europe. The queer POC artist community that I am lucky to be with are visible sources of inspiration for me. And I see their work challenge popular, outdated discourses every single day. One of the reasons why this happens is also because of how much is expected from queer brown and black bodies. We don't just exist, we are asked to constantly prove ourselves. Also, I think being someone who is queer and trans, performance is not something that is quite alien to us. We are constantly on a day-to-day basis performing based on where we are and who we are around. Defining our safety, navigating around all the unsaid things. I think performance is quite deeply ingrained in us. It's just about whether or not we let people in, whether we let them see. And if we let other people perceive us that needs a lot of vulnerability.

**Shaunak:** The Indian state has really been cracking down on anyone from Muslim, Dalit and Adivasi communities who is raising their voice in dissent, including a lot of artists and cultural workers. Apart from this there is also the unpredictability of mob violence. Do these factors affect you when you are making and showing work? How do you find hope and power in times of despair?

**Rah:** As you mentioned Dalit, Adivasi, Bahujan, and Muslims, and especially low-income individuals within these groups are targeted the most by this regime. So, in many ways, I do not find myself that afraid because there is some degree of safety, alongside not being here in this country for most of the year. But one of my biggest concerns is always my parents and their safety.

I also think that my process of making isn't hindered by the thought of this danger. But rather it's highly motivated by the fact that I do have a lot of privilege because I am primarily based in Amsterdam now. That's why I feel the need to speak constantly and relentlessly about the subjects that I work with.

When I'm showing work, that's the point when I have to really consider my parents and their safety, and my safety. Especially when I'm showing in India because that's the reality of how things are. We have to navigate this very complex country in a strategic manner to continue doing the work that we do and making sure it is reaching the people that it needs to reach. My father always says that you can't really fight battles from the grave. So you have to constantly reinvent the ways in which you are talking about

subjects that can take decades and sometimes a lifetime to help change or contribute in any way too.

The act of presenting and showing work in different contexts demands changes. For example, in Europe, I often have to give them context about what's happening, because they choose to also stay very ignorant. I think their understanding of India is superficial in so many ways that they don't understand the depths of the damage that this government has caused, they don't understand that. When I show work here, I think some of the ground reality of things, like the government's ineptitude during covid, these are largely understood. So I focus more on the communal aspect of it. The nature of violence that a lot of minorities are facing.

**Shaunak:** I hope you are taking some well deserved rest after this show! But I'm curious, have these past months in India thrown up some new lines of thinking for you? What are you excited to unpack when you're back in the studio?

**Rah:** I think it's different for different people, but I don't know how to sit idle. I am just constantly hounded by this voice that keeps telling me that I'm not doing anything. I think it comes from being raised in environments where production and productivity is your entire personhood. So I think for me these last couple of months have been extremely life-changing because I've never felt this light especially since I started practicing. I have an understanding of what my body needs and what I need to work in a way that is more constructive to myself and for the work itself.

Since I have had that time to just be, I have reflected a lot on the little experiences that I'm having. Simple things actually like going to the barbershop. So I started going to my dad's Barbershop to get my hair cut, which has been extremely euphoric for me. It's funny because I think I always imagined that would be very unsafe, but there's something quite fascinating for me in that space. I think I do not understand touch in a masculine way that is received without the context of sex. For me the barber shop has a very complex sort of dynamic, as someone who is going there to get a get like a treatment or get a haircut and also to receive that kind of care and tenderness by a masc presenting person or a male bodied person. I have been really thinking about what it is that draws me so much to it. For example, I think about the periphery of this space, where you enter this barber space and suddenly men are allowed to have this kind of intimacy and tenderness between them, giving and receiving touch without the gaze that it would usually be met by in public and then the moment they step out it's gone. It's a precarious thing for me to experience as someone who's coming into my mascness and trying to figure out day by day who I am, and who I want to be.