

# The women who led

A visual artist and educator's graphic recollection of last year's Shaheen Bagh movement, which she says was a sharp critique of state-backed oppression, is worth a read

**JANE BORGES**

THE Shaheen Bagh movement will remain a defining moment in India's history for more reasons than one. A group of burqa-clad women, often considered reticent and non-participative in public discourse, thronged the Muslim-dominated neighbourhood of Shaheen Bagh in South Delhi for a peaceful sit-in protest on December 15, 2019. They were standing up against the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, 2019, their response prompted by the alleged attack on students at Jamia Millia Islamia by the police. In a matter of weeks, the protest grew into a mass movement with thousands of women joining from far and wide, compelling the world to take notice.

"[The] Muslim women presented a very sharp critique, not just of the communal laws, but also demonetisation, unemployment, mob-lynching and other state-backed oppression they'd seen recently," says visual artist, art researcher and educator Ita Mehrotra. "It also refused to lift up any single leader and instead remained resolved in its democratic organisation throughout. The protest sites opened up spaces for conversations far beyond CAA, expressing directions of what and how the state should function, and allowing for the unfolding of libraries, theatre, music, large wall murals, and so much more.

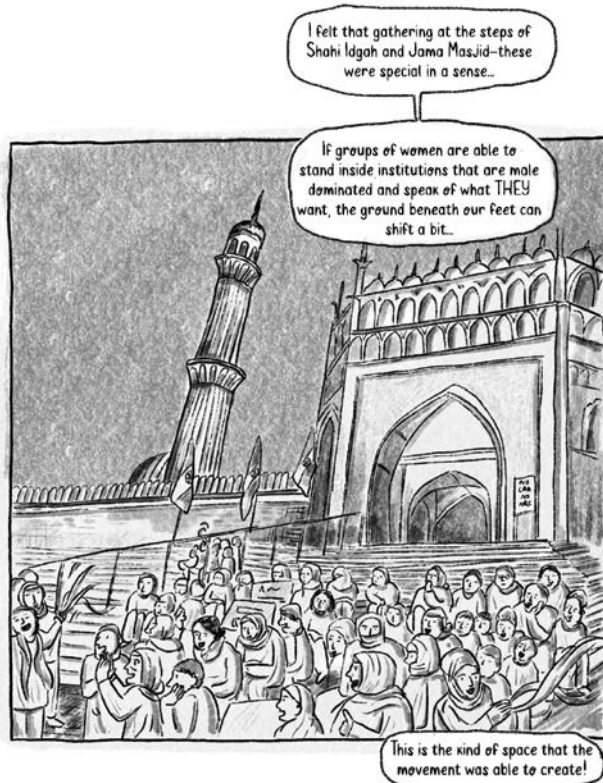
These in a sense, do not disappear when removed physically; they are more than any one space or physical location."

Stirred by the experience, Mehrotra, who is

director of Artreach India, decided to document the movement in the just-released book, *Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection* (Yoda Press). "I think bringing drawing and text together has the ability to engage readers in a conversation, by building layered immersive narratives. It can weave together multiple perspectives and I find that interesting," says Mehrotra.

In the book, she is as much a part of the narrative as Shahana, who re-

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lays the story to her. But, she says that at its heart, Shaheen Bagh was about "Muslim women, who were laying claim to their citizenship publicly, and it was imperative to keep [that] central [to her work]." "Over the course of protests, the space felt unusually like one owned by women, and for someone from Delhi, it changed the geography significantly. That women could be out at midnight, on street corners and in the middle of highways, shouting slogans and singing songs through bitter cold nights created a marked shift in the perception of what women-led movements can do," she says.

For her research, Mehrotra started out by having conversations with a few, whom she had met at the protest site. "It was important to have both, the younger generation students from Jamia and also those working in offices around the area, as well as older women's voices. A month or so into the book, the COVID-induced lockdown made it impossible to go on with meetings and interviews, so I also relied on previous reports, photos by friends who had been documenting the protests, and some calls and emails with those who were deeply involved with the relief work."

The biggest challenge about working on her graphic retelling, she says, was the very immediate nature of the protests, the fact that it was ongoing and urgent, and that every day there were new events at various sites. "This meant that it was impossible to think of it as a book with an 'ending'. I had to consider it as being part of a longer, ongoing conversation."

jane.borges@mid-day.com



## Happiness comes in small packages

A varied collection of handcrafted souvenirs draws inspiration from the nature and culture of Nagaland

**CYNERA RODRICKS**

NAGA shawls, the Naga attire and the Hornbill Festival are the things tourists typically associate with Nagaland. But there is so much more to the region's nature and culture. Kagholi Chishi, a fashion designer by profession, started her initiative Little Miracles in February 2016 to make people aware of this Naga essence. To keep the Naga tradition alive in the most accessible and decorative form, and being an avid traveller herself who understands the value of souvenirs, she began crafting personalised items inspired by Nagaland's rich traditions. "A small, intricate item that is handy, attractive, captures the essence of the place and is worth gifting is hard to find," she says.

Chishi works with materials like clay, resin and paints, and since all of it is handmade, no item is identical. She offers a range of products, from napkin holders and figurines, to fridge magnets, pen stands and wall hangings, incorporating images and sculptures of the mithun, the hornbill and huntsmen. Every item, she says, has an element of the Naga spirit in it. "I try to recall what I see and work accordingly. As of now, I do not intend to go into any other thing because when it comes to gifts, I would like people who come to Nagaland to take something back with them about the Nagas," she proudly declares.

Chishi's initiative grew out of a long-standing passion which, due to other compulsions, remained unfulfilled for a long time. "Little Miracles came about with a thought that everything around us given by God is a miracle, provided we look at it like that. While people wait for big miracles to happen, little miracles happen every day and I am trying to create one," she says.

smdmail@mid-day.com



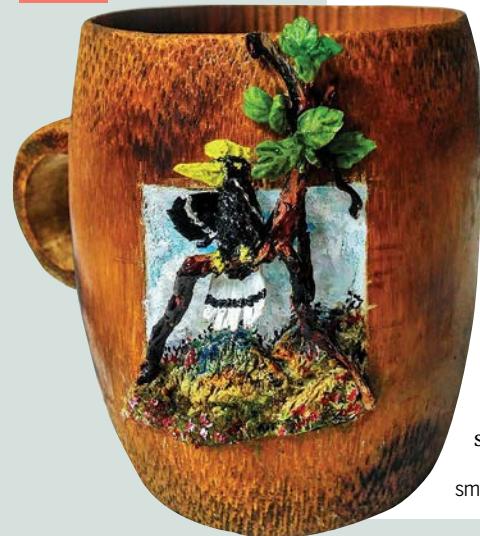
WHAT: Souvenirs from Nagaland

WHERE: 7005305829

FOR: ₹850 onwards



KAGHOLI CHISHI



WHAT: Shaheen Bagh: A Graphic Recollection

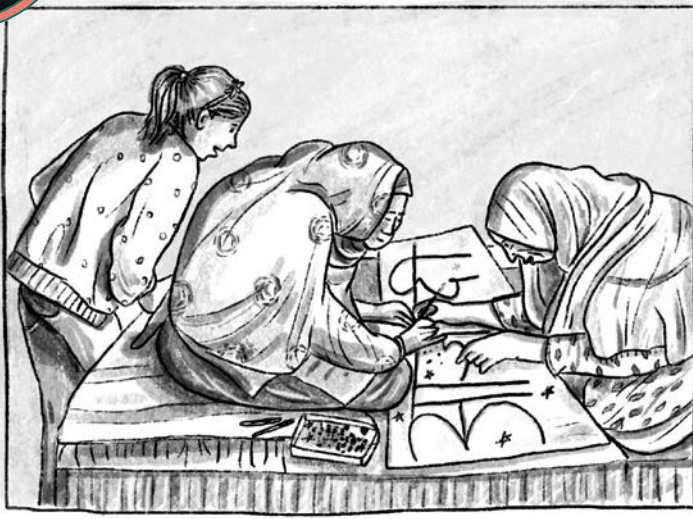
WHERE: amazon.in

FOR: ₹499



ITA MEHROTRA

Artist, art researcher and educator Ita Mehrotra feels that "drawing and text together" has the ability to create layered immersive narratives. PICS/ITA MEHROTRA, YODA PRESS



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