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Witnesses, Graphic Storytellers, Activists: An Interview with the KADAK Collective

Abstract

In this interview, several members of the South Asian womxn's graphic storytelling collective, KADAK, discuss the group's recent projects, their collaborative production processes, and the themes that are most central to their work. After a brief introduction, the discussion turns to the benefits and difficulties of self-publishing, working online and offline, and nationally and internationally, and the collective's first book-length, crowd-funded project, The *Bystander* Anthology, which will be published in 2020.

Keywords: comics and zines; graphic anthologies; diversity in comics; print and digital media; comics collectives; South Asia

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Introduction

KADAK is a collective of South Asian womxn producing a diverse range of graphic storytelling and visual art, from short comics and zines to graphic anthologies, and published both online and offline. Working between India and other parts of the world, from Mumbai to St Louis, Missouri to London, they are one of the most exciting groups producing visual narrative art today, in India, South Asia, and globally.[1] Their work explores provocative and prescient questions around identity, politics, gender, and nationality, among other themes, and they approach these topics from a refreshingly subcultural perspective that is further enhanced by their use of unconventional artistic and narrative forms. Their name, 'KADAK', refers to a sharp, spicy, roadside chai, or tea: rather appropriately, the name does not translate easily from Hindi into English, but still conveys something of their fiery visual engagement with a range of simultaneously mobile and marginalised themes.

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[1] Throughout this interview, the terms "India" and "South Asia" are used more or less interchangeably, with the exception of some references to India's specific national and political context.

The collective was formed at a time when the normativity of comics scenes, both nationally and internationally, was becoming especially visible, epitomised perhaps in the all-male nominee list for Angoulême's 2016 Grand Prix. Against this state of affairs, KADAK promotes diverse gender and queer identities in their work, and all of the projects discussed in this interview challenge geographic, gender, and racial normativities, emphasising their intersectionality. Through their *Gender Bender* commissions, for example, the collective have produced a series of works that push back against normative portrayals of human bodies, while in their upcoming book-length project, The *Bystander* Anthology, they explore a range of themes that come together around the figure of the 'bystander', probing the intersectional topographies of privilege that might prevent people from acting up or speaking out. In addition to these projects, they have also used their artwork for the Creatives Against CAA movement, a campaign to protest the Indian Government's controversial Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), which discriminated against marginalised—and especially Muslim—identities and sparked large-scale protests in India in 2019.

While in lockdown during the Covid-19 crisis in April 2020, I caught up via an online call with Akhila Krishnan, a London-based member of KADAK, to get a sense of the history of the collective and to discuss their most recent projects. The group are dynamic, networked, and very difficult to pin down (one of their key strengths), producing artwork as individual creators while also operating in strategically collaborative and collective ways: in order to orient the reader, I have therefore included each KADAK member's location below, in brackets after their first contribution. Our conversation focused as much on KADAK's innovations and struggles with the processes of comics making as it did the themes of the comics themselves, and we have tried to bring these concerns through in the questions and answers below. KADAK are radically and admirably democratic: they take decisions as a group and have developed different models of online working (including the use of Google

Docs, a platform instrumental to this interview) to ensure a wide range of different voices are fairly heard.

In what follows, several KADAK members offer their thoughts on the current Indian publishing scene, the benefits and difficulties of working locally and internationally, and online and offline, and why they chose the theme of the 'bystander' for their first book-length graphic anthology. I'm extremely grateful to the collective for their time, and for writing such detailed and insightful answers to my questions, which I am sure will be of interest to comics readers, critics, and artists alike. It may be the figure of the witness, or bystander, that allows the group to bring new perspectives to bear on contemporary political and social events, but there can be no doubt that in comics and graphic storytelling KADAK are a forceful intervention to look out for, in India, South Asia, and internationally.

The Interview

Dom: What are your views on the current Indian publishing scene, especially for graphic work? And how do you see KADAK's innovative modes of production fitting into – or pushing against – this scene?

Aarthi (Bangalore): In India right now, there's this sudden boom in self-publishing. Comics, zines, different kinds of experimental narrative forms – they're visible at independent events like the Indie Comix Fest, and online on people's Instagram and Facebook pages.

I think KADAK has generally tried to find ways of working that are democratic and innovative, and we've experimented with different ideas over the years – whether it's a traveling reading room, workshops on zine making, different kinds of print and web collaborations for pieces, setting up online platforms for dissemination of political work

(Creatives Against CAA), and working with translations in our pieces. Modes are linked to means, privilege, and access. And working as a team means working across differences in understanding and ideology. We've examined and re-examined our own politics, and addressed issues that have come up – there have been challenges at every stage. It's taken a lot of dismantling and rebuilding at every step, but we've kept going.

In terms of the scene, I think we're all plugged in as individuals, on the one hand, and then collectively, on the other. It can be challenging to balance one's professional practice with a collective passion project like KADAK.

Janine (London): There seems to be an increasing interest and engagement in self-publishing and zines in India, both from audiences and publishers. It's also an affordable and easily manageable medium in which to publish your own work without having to pitch to publishers. Given the current state of the global pandemic, most people (non-essential workers) will shift or have shifted in some way or another to online ways of working: online meetings, exhibitions, creative sessions, workshops, and so on. I can see our collective's online way of working becoming the new norm for a while. At work we are presently doing creative zoom sessions and 'silent', 'idea generation' Google docs workshops, in which ten people will respond on a single Google doc as part of a creative session to generate different ideas, since we cannot have a team meeting.

I imagine that, once lockdown lifts, or further into the future when gatherings are safer, there will remain a strong desire to integrate offline connections, meets, and workshops with online correspondence, which is a nice middle ground. It will be interesting to think about how KADAK's practice can shift to meet these kinds of changes.

Akhila (London): I think India is in a really interesting position with regards to self-publishing because the costs for screen, digital, or offset printing are not prohibitive, especially when compared to a country like the UK.

So as a young student or professional in India, you can actually afford, economically speaking, to experiment with publishing, printing both small and large runs of your work. With the explosion of social media and the internet you can then share this work with a local and international audience in a way that was not possible 5 or 10 years ago. This has allowed the work of creators like Mira Malhotra of Studio Kohl and Sameer Kulavoor of Bombay Duck Designs to become hugely successful all over the world.

KADAK's model of working, which is networked and collaborative, and explores non-conventional and experimental subjects, can thrive in this context and also push it in a new direction. For example, publishing and collaborative practice can come together to create an entirely new platform and market for itself that might not have been possible otherwise.

KADAK has been exploring both bespoke analogue printing practices as well as pushing digital publishing (through our *Gender Bender* and The *Bystander* Anthology projects), and I don't think we are exploring one at the expense of the other. Oddly enough, in our work, both of these opposing mediums actually feed into and fuel one another.

Shreyas (St. Louis, Missouri): The self-publishing scene in India is on the rise, though at this point it might feel slower than the scene outside India. I've found that while there is a great interest in India for self-published work, audiences outside India are far less intimidated by the cost of zines and comics. We're still some ways from the interest in self-published work matching the valuing of it.

KADAK's Reading Room (a travelling library of self-published comics, zines, and art) has helped a lot in pushing for that parity, and has travelled to Bangalore and Chennai in

India, as well as to Luzern in Switzerland as part of the Fumetto Comics Festival. There are very few opportunities for people to engage directly with zines and comics beyond online platforms and zine or comics festivals. And both of these scenarios bring their own kind of exposure fatigue. The Reading Room is deceptively effective in its ability to create a solid pocket of time and space for people to just immerse themselves and browse without distractions. I think there is some pleasant surprise on both ends of the production-consumption spectrum; our work reaches audiences we never thought it might, and people read work that they never expected to otherwise. The setup of a reading room collating a number of self-published works is starting to become a more common fixture in shows in India, but the high number of comments on KADAK's social media from people asking for the Reading Room to come to their cities is very telling.

Insert Fig.1: KADAK Showcase at Bold, London Design Festival, 2017. Reproduced with the permission of the KADAK Collective.

Dom: KADAK is an astonishingly international collective, and *Bystander* an international project, but they both have strong roots anchored in India. What are some of the benefits and difficulties of working both inside and outside of South Asia?

Aarthi: The world is so mentally hyper-connected right now that it's possible to be very informed about a certain context, no matter where you are. And that does affect you, no matter where you are. You can make well-researched, well-informed work about anywhere else – this has been possible for a while now, even Hergé did it! But there are certain kinds of lived experiences and stories that are playing out in South Asia that need to be told.

There are also important differences within a certain country itself. I live and work in Bangalore, India, and working here can be very different from working in, say, Delhi, or Mumbai, or Goa. We obviously cannot claim to represent the entire, or even a significant part, of the spectrum of South Asian experiences.

But I do think, living in South Asia, in India – it's very chaotic, in every sense, and keeping your sanity is a struggle. So is making a living. There are also the questions of what kind of living you make – what projects do you take on, and how do you balance commercial projects with personal projects? And in today's climate, being political is also a challenge. How much freedom do you have to take a certain stance, and how does the stance you take affect your livelihood?

Janine: Some of the difficulties of working outside South Asia are that if any project goes from digital to physical you tend to miss it. There have been a couple of *Gender Bender* exhibitions that I would have loved to have attended, but obviously couldn't as I'm based in London. Additionally, sometimes not living in India means there is a little distance: you are one step removed from what is happening politically, as opposed to being immersed in it.

The positives are that distance can give you a different perspective, or a way to tie it to political policies going on in another country. Another key reason is that there are strong common threads that link South Asian artists in a way I haven't really found with white and/or European artists. The engagement is slightly different, and the subjects are slightly different too.

Akhila: An important advantage of working in South Asia is an implicit understanding of the context and nuance of our main audience's point of view and how they might engage with

our work - which as I have said, has always been experimental and alternative, thematically speaking. In India, we push our audiences to look at familiar things in a new way.

Once those stories travel internationally, of course, some understanding of the work's context and nuance is lost, so as creators it pushes us to work harder on other dimensions of the work, and ultimately makes the work better, I think. We'll never compromise on the context or the nuance of it, but working internationally helps us push the production, presentation, and other story-telling aspects of it because of newer audiences.

I also think that our work is needed at an international level, where graphic story-telling is dominated by the white, Anglo-American experience. We're breaking that norm and that is important to do. We're reclaiming this space.

Mira (Mumbai): As an artist who works in India, I feel like we are constantly carving out our niche, almost like starting from scratch. The industry has changed drastically in the last few years, and it's constantly moving. This is very exciting, but also hard to keep up with, and we have no idea which way it'll go, or what will catch on. This is always unpredictable, in any country, but in India it's even more unstable, as there is no established 'scene'. There's a lot less respect and regard for creative work and its power – and who can blame our country, we have basic issues that need solved. Besides focusing on craft, a lot of my time goes into convincing people that design, illustration, and comics are powerful media that can be used to highlight and solve so many problems. I do feel that if I was an artist outside India, and especially in the global North, some things would be easier, but we would also be competing at a much higher level. The ability I have to shape the international conversation from this vantage point is quite challenging, but I like that I am able to do it. In my own work, I think it's amazing that I get to decide what parts of international design protocols I can incorporate into my work, and what should be left out to make room for a more South

Asian approach. The one thing I would complain about is not being able to have as much respect for my work and my craft from those who could possibly be patrons. Always having to prove oneself can be tiring.

Insert Fig.2: KADAK Reading Room, Bengaluru. Reproduced with the permission of the KADAK Collective.

Dom: KADAK straddles the tension between digital and material spheres in some really interesting ways. What are the advantages and disadvantages of online and offline publishing, respectively? And what sort of strategies has the collective developed to navigate the tensions between them?

Aarthi: KADAK has always published comics and zines both in print and online, and The *Bystander* Anthology has those two outputs as well.

Online publishing tends to happen mostly on social media platforms, and this leads people to expect free content. So people tend to not spend money on comics, because they feel that they can 'get it for free somewhere online'. Self-publishing requires a lot of capital investment, and a collaboration of this scale requires a significant amount of funding.

This project and the crowdfunding campaign we designed for The *Bystander* Anthology was actually a strategy to navigate some of these tensions. We wanted to bring many artists together and create something ambitious. We wanted to pay everyone at every stage well, at international rates. We wanted to produce a beautiful print artefact and an equally compelling online showcase.

This project and the crowdfunding campaign are the first of its kind in terms of scale and scope in South Asia, and we're very pleased that we reached our goal.

Mira: Like Aarthi says, in the online space, there is a massive expectation for free content, and people understandably don't take it well when they hit a paywall. I feel this is still great for those who write short format comics, and you see these taking off on Instagram. But I'm not sure if these artists are really earning much from actual comics, or if it just works promotionally or is a way to become an influencer. Those who write and draw in a longer format do feel more like hidden gems of the comics scene and do not enjoy the same popularity online, but they are more likely to get legit book deals. I think a great way to work with the constant conflict between the two, since we value both, is being able to create content that's smaller and bite-sized, but leaves you wanting more – or alternatively, to incorporate a wider range of more interactive technologies, like audio and video. In *The Bystander* Anthology we straddle both worlds, and have created both components. The online version, though far smaller than the print edition, let's people in, gives them an idea of what's inside the book, even if they're not the same stories. This helps us to establish what this book is to a wider audience, while not giving it all away at once.

Janine: The advantages of digital are that it doesn't restrict us to a specific location or even necessarily a schedule. The document containing the questions for this interview, for example, will be responded to by some or all of us at various times, with us sometimes even editing simultaneously. Online tools don't require people management in the same way that organising a meet-up might. With regards to publishing, it also frees us – to a certain degree – from the larger costs associated with offline publishing, exhibitions, and so on. We can publish a webcomic easily and quickly without print deadlines or cost.

The downsides for me are the long Google Hangout or Zoom calls, which are necessary at times, but can become very cumbersome when it's a larger group. Sometimes

meeting in person also changes or may change how we interact online with someone. We see this with online trolls, for example, their behaviour changes when they are unmasked, but I think this is also true of even online groups. Friction can go unnoticed longer, tone cannot be so easily judged, and sometimes a face-to-face discussion can help smooth out these small road bumps.

Akhila: I don't think we've consciously developed formal strategies for working online and offline. When we print and self-publish, we usually do so in small editions. Online publishing is not bound by numbers or location.

As a collective, we do all of our work online. Our members live all over the world in different time zones, so we do all our work in shared documents like the one we're using for this interview. So the online space is appealing to us because of this as well: it mirrors how we are structured and how we work.

Personally, I like online publishing because more people can access and read our work through it. Especially when compared with my childhood growing up in India, *everyone* now has a mobile phone, often a smart phone, and sometimes one person owns more than one phone. It's such a powerful tool that is changing the way people live in South Asia, and it's exciting to explore its possibilities when it's applied to graphic narrative. We got our first *Gender Bender* commission from the Goethe-Insitut India to create an online publication, for example. However, given the possibilities of print, especially in India – its bespoke quality, and its materiality and tactility – it is not something we will give up.

So our work moves between the two, exploring different dimensions in each. It's the best of both worlds! When we devised the idea of The *Bystander* Anthology, both a web and a print publication were always going to be part of it.

Shreyas: As the others have said, digital publishing just tends to have a wider reach than physical publishing, and it opens up possibilities for interaction in new and exciting ways. On the downside, there is an expectation for all online consumption of work to be free, but simultaneously, I do find that there is still a great desire in people to own or possess a physical artefact. For example, Akhila and I created an illustrated series, 'Alphabreasts', as part of KADAK's online Reading Room for *Gender Bender* in 2018. We followed it up by adapting the same work into a five colour, risograph-printed zine. The fact that the content already exists for free online has not stopped people from wanting to acquire the physical zine, which I think is a trend that we can expect to continue.

Insert Fig.3: Cover of the upcoming *Bystander* Anthology. Design by Mira Malhotra. Reproduced with the permission of the KADAK Collective.

Dom: India, and indeed the world, is going through a series of seismic political shifts just now. Why did the collective choose the theme of 'bystander' for the forthcoming anthology? What does it mean to you to be a witness, either individually or as a collective, to some of these fraught social shifts and events?

Mira: All of us were talking along the lines of geography, gender, and spaces, but we found that there was already quite a bit of work done around those themes in the last five years. We felt that we needed another angle that we could explore.

Aarthi came to us with the idea of a 'bystander', and I thought that was very cool. These days, a lot of us are having to question our privilege, especially with the idea of intersectionality entering more and more into feminist conversations. We thought about what it was like to be privileged in one way, but not to be privileged in other ways, and to be able

to negotiate your own privilege. The idea was: what happens to the Other? And the conversation really expanded from there. What do we expect from people with privilege? What about situations when you can intervene, but you don't? What if you can't intervene for some reason? How do you engage with a situation unfolding when you aren't privileged enough to participate in the discourse? Another thing that Aarthi pointed out was that there is no proper translation for the word 'bystander' in most South Asian languages.

Sabika (New Delhi) : When Aarthi wrote to me and shared her idea with me, what got me really excited was the fact that, for me, the idea of a bystander is something that I've explored in my own work, and thought about and had tensions with before.

When mob lynchings are happening in India, the first thing that people ask is: what were the people doing standing around? Why couldn't they intervene? It's the same with road accidents, people rarely come to help. When I read the brief that Aarthi had sent, the nuances of the idea of a bystander was what was so attractive and unique about this project. We weren't interested in conversations around a unilateral narrative of a bystander. You could be a bystander because your identity makes you a bystander: your fear of becoming the victim could make you a bystander; your physical disability could make you a bystander; not knowing a particular language, being a migrant, belonging to a certain ethnicity, all of these factors could make you a bystander. The idea of a bystander is therefore fluid and intersectional and has many aspects.

Gopika (Bangalore) : Mira spoke to me about what KADAK had been planning and my interest was immediately piqued. I think in South Asia, and even globally, we have reached a tipping point of polarisation – conversations take place increasingly in silos. The theme of 'bystander' is an opportunity to capture multiple narratives at once – it is not just about larger

socio-political landscapes, but how these become real in messy, non-linear ways in our everyday lives. It has allowed for all of the contributors to explore this 'mess' by interrogating themes around complicity, privilege, marginalisation, and identity in intersectional ways. The anthology for me is an opportunity for self-reflection: we are all witnesses, across multiple spaces, and by engaging with this rich collection, the reader will definitely locate themselves in these pages too.

Shreyas: Following on from Gopika's point, the theme that Aarthi proposed became a common surface on which we could piece together multiple narratives and perspectives. The South Asian experience, despite commonalities and overlaps, is not a monolith. It was important for this to be apparent in the framework and premise of the anthology, since we knew our audience would consist of people both within and outside this extremely broad context. The notion of a bystander allows for the anthology to have a shifting point of view across stories that are all simultaneously current and historical, personal and collective, universal and specific, and that examine multiple facets of our identities and lives while also illuminating the ways in which they come together.

Akhila: A lot of my own work in graphic narrative is connected to real life and political events, using them as a starting point to create work.

In terms of KADAK's work, while all the members of the collective have diverse practices, when we work collaboratively, the themes we have chosen are always topical. So we've explored the idea of gender, for example, then took that one step further to create a series of works on breasts for our second *Gender Bender* commission. We choose to discuss topics or ideas that we are all grappling with in our lived experiences, so the topic of 'bystander' came about quite organically.

I think when Aarthi coined the exact word we all reacted to it viscerally and said yes, this is what we want to centre an anthology around. I think, yes, given the big changes happening in South Asia today this was on our minds, but for many of us, our lived experiences as womxn who grew up in the subcontinent perhaps already contributed to this interest in themes of 'othering' and 'witnessing' as well.

KADAK (in order of above appearance)

Aarthi Parthasarathy is a writer, researcher & filmmaker. She co-founded Falana films, created the webcomic series Royal Existentials & has written many short graphic stories.

Janine Shroff is a London based designer and illustrator with over 8 years experience in graphic design and illustration. She explores themes related to relationships, pregnancy & birth in her drawing & Illustration practice.

Akhila Krishnan is a multi-disciplinary designer & director working across projection design for live experience/VR, fine art, graphic narrative, moving image & collaborative practice.

Shreyas R Krishnan is an illustrator-designer & educator from Chennai. She teaches at Sam Fox School, Missouri. Her non-fiction comics, docu drawings & editorial illustration are rooted in research. She is interested in the intersections between visual culture & gender.

Mira Malhotra is a visual artist and illustrator. She is the founder and principal designer of Studio Kohl in Mumbai, India. She has a keen interest in DIY cultures, folk arts, social issues and music.

Sabika Abbas Naqvi is a performance poet, gender rights activist, translator, storyteller & alternative educator. She founded Sar-e-Rahguzar: Poetry on the Streets. Her poetry revolves around issues of reclamation, subversion, sexuality, gender & minority rights.

Gopika Bashi works as the Asia campaigner for Oxfam international 's worldwide #sayenough campaign. She is an advisor for the frida fund, serves on the board of a labour rights organisation & has worked on a range of gender justice issues.

Author Bio

Dominic Davies is a Senior Lecturer in English at City, University of London. He is the co-editor of *Documenting Trauma in Comics: Traumatic Pasts, Embodied Histories, and Graphic Reportage* (2020) and the author of *Urban Comics: Infrastructure and the Global City in Contemporary Graphic Narratives* (2019), along with other books, articles and chapters.