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 BREWED BY TEENA KHANNA AT TERMINUS 1
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This fortnight's print edition

The many stories of silence

Amar Kanwar's video installation reflects upon experiences of sexual violence in the Indian subcontinent during times of crisis, writes Time Out



A lone bolt of lightning forks the sepia-coloured sky. It looks like the dying filament of a tungsten bulb, weighed down by the sights it has witnessed, and the unbearable memories of it. It cuts across time frames and geographies to tell a story of many silences.

Technically, Amar Kanwar's *The Lightning Testimonies*, which is part of the ongoing exhibition at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art, Saket, curated by Roobina Karode, titled *Is It What You Think?*, is an eight-channel video installation, where each screen "talks" about incidents of sexual violence by Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs during Partition (1947); by the Indian armed forces in Manipur (1986, 2004) and Nagaland (1957); by the Pakistani army in Bangladesh (1971); during the Gujarat riots (2002); by upper caste Hindus on Dalits (2006); and about social worker Mridula Sarabhai who set up camps after Partition to help "abducted" women (1949).

Philosophically, it is much more than the sum of its parts. Each narrative moves slowly and only two videos have spoken dialogue. Yet, the simultaneity of the screenings pulls you into a vortex and numbs you into a sad silence, when you realise that for all the words spoken and written, for all the perspectives analysed and debated, for all the protests held and bills passed, sexual violence on and against women continues, perhaps even thrives.

"The way something is presented to you affects what and how you comprehend it. It affects your ability to make judgments and conclusions," Kanwar told *Time Out*. "The eight channel projection allows me to tell you a story, many stories with simultaneous flashbacks and flash-forwards. When focusing on one story, you hear a sound, for example, the bark of a dog from another screen, and it feeds into your experience. It disturbs your ability to put these stories into neat categories, and it forces you to see the larger narrative."

The evasiveness of *The Lightning Testimonies* from being completely comprehended is what makes it an important work. The video installation is not a documentary of sexual violence. It is neither about the point of view of the victim nor does it present us with a perspective. You cannot see the video installation and then have a debate on why and how an event took place. The installation overwhelms your ability to propound on it.

"People have a way of justifying sexual violence. When you speak to Punjabis who experienced Partition, they will use the Punjabi phrase 'vada raula' as a prefix to explain violence to you. The term literally translates into 'the big raucous'. So they will say 'the big raucous... and then people raped and killed'. It is basically their way of saying that there was temporary insanity and so these things happened. These justifications can range from being scientific to outright stupid. But when you delve deeper into them, you realise that they always fall short," said Kanwar, who has recently been chosen for the prestigious Leonore Annenberg Prize For Art And Social Change that will be presented in Sweden in November 2014.

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Kanwar, however, did not come to this work because of the stories he heard about Partition. "I began with the premise of this work with a sense of unease arising from news reports of sexual attacks on women in 2002 that were justified or accepted or celebrated by some people. This was hard to understand, and so, this work began in a way to comprehend the meaning of this violence. Over time, it shifted to first learning about it across the country. This process opened out to me the different ways in which women and communities have archived and recalled trauma and pain. I also did not want to meet survivors and ask them to recount their experiences. So in a way, I entered a terrain of multiple vocabularies of remembering and subsequently of going beyond it as well."

Kanwar uses the powerful medium of film innovatively to convey the futility of our debates around sexual violence.

"When you see that during Partition, the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs all committed heinous crimes, and they all helped each other, you can't blame somebody's religious background as being the reason behind their crimes. Families traded one daughter for the safety of the other. In the case of the Bangladesh War, the perpetrators and the victims were of the same religion. So you can't blame the Hindu-Muslim animosity. There's also this Victorian 'scientific' reasoning that the winning army commits rape as a metaphor for assertion of power. Again, in the case of Bangladesh, the Pakistani army was a retreating, losing army."

Through each narrative in the film, Kanwar draws us into understanding how victims and their loved ones remember the trauma. Though the spoken word, like the written word on the screen, is factual, the memory, like the image, is diffused. The rain on the stone surface, the orange tree in the village, the stained glass windows of the old house are all invoked as mute witnesses. Their still silences bear a testimony to a never-ending story.

"Remembering is, as one learns, also very important in the struggle for justice and dignity. It is also true that the sharing of memory and experiences is crucial so as to be able to analyse and comprehend beyond one's own lived experience."

In the midst of cacophony and many silences – knowing, uncomfortable, forced – the struggle for justice also continues. It is the tenth anniversary of the protest by 12 Manipuri mothers, who disrobed in front of the gates of the Army headquarters in Imphal for the rape and killing of Thangjam Manorama Devi.

"It was by far the most powerful anti-rape protest we have ever seen in this country. And we remember it, in thousands of ways, sometimes personally and in unseen ways, and also collectively at times. The thousands who confronted parliament and the police after the sexual violence and killing of a young girl in Delhi in December 2012 was not a random coincidence. The regime of impunity created by the Armed Forces Special Powers Act in the Northeast and Kashmir is challenged every day from many positions. These are all inter-related events and possibilities. Nothing is futile. There is a huge upheaval taking place in India, even as we speak, and it's happening regardless of us. What is happening in Kashmir, Chhattisgarh, Orissa or Kudankulam at this moment will surface in our face quite soon," Kanwar warned.

Is It What You Think is ongoing at the Kiran Nadar Museum of Art. See listings in Exhibition.

By Blessy Augustine on July 18 2014 8.04am

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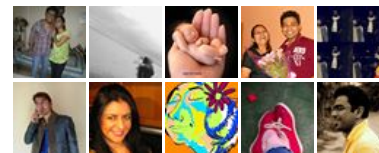
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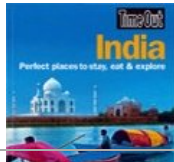
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