

Scarecrows Speak: Stories from the underbelly of a park



**Bhaijaan Bajrangi: Based on the new Salman Khan film, this scarecrow was created to protect lovers in the park.*

Sun Set Lovers

The sun was just about to set and we sat facing each other on the park bench. The silhouette of her face only just visible under her hijab. Four months of secret meetings in the park, safe from the prying eyes of her family, away from the daily pressures of the city. It was our only safe space in the city, and sometimes we joked about how the park existed solely for lovers. Over boiled peanuts, her deliciously hand cooked meals, spicy bhel puri and frequent cups of tea and coffee – our love blossomed. Sheltered, under the big trees, the park was our very own cocoon.

Jaane Jigar Jaaneman Mujhko Hai Teri Qasam

Tu Jo Mujhe Na Mila Mar Jaungi Main Sanam

Once inside, the identities we wore, to navigate the external world lost all meaning. She wasn't a secretary, forced to work so her brother could study and I wasn't a junior associate in a software company, barely making enough to rent a room. Tucked inside the bamboo grove, our dreams grew big.

O Rokena Hum Ko Ab Kya Zamaana

Mar Ke Hamein Hai Vaada Nibhaana

I had just gotten a bonus, to celebrate, we shared a plate of chaat, ate ice cream and sat in our favourite spot, listening to our favourite song. I was resting my head on her shoulder. My eyes were close. I reached out, to hold her hand. She blushed. All of a sudden, her body stiffened. I looked over my shoulder. He stood there, pants down, touching himself. His eyes daring us to make a sound. She began to cry.

I couldn't catch him. Angry, defeated, we looked for anyone from the park authorities.

“Sir, we were sitting quietly, we did not even see him. We don’t know how long he was standing there.”

“I’ve seen you both before, you were only holding hands, is it? Not touching anything else?”

“We were just holding hands sir, not anything more.”

“Perverts, you think this is your bedroom?”

“And look at you, you have no shame. Give me your father’s number”

After this, I have not seen her again.

I still come to the park.

Alone.

I wander past the empty park benches.

I read the boards filled with rules and regulations.

Only the trees remember the lovers, the whispers, the laughter.

Their branches weigh down, still carrying our secrets.

**

Do I confuse you?



Am I man or woman?

“We declare that Section 377 IPC, insofar it criminalizes consensual sexual acts of adults in private; It violates Articles 21, 14 and 15 of the Constitution.”

Why are you turning away, are you embarrassed?

..the thrust of Section 377 IPC is to penalise sexual acts which are “against the order of nature”; that the provision is based on traditional Judeo-Christian moral and ethical standards and is being used to legitimise discrimination against sexual minorities;

I have known many like you, intimately. They used to come around this time, taking rounds in the park, hoping to find me.

..that the section serves as a weapon for police abuse in the form of detention, questioning, extortion, harassment, forced sex, payment of hush money;

It's a standard process. You pay me first, and my body is yours for an hour. There are a wide list of choices, looking, touching, feeling, groping, penetration...

I find it funny, that the people who look at me with suspicion and hate, are the same ones who want to touch me, who pay me, tell me their darkest secrets and desires

..that the section perpetuates negative and discriminatory beliefs towards same sex relations and sexual minorities in general;

We are a contradictory society, particularly when it comes to sex. I don't fit any of your labels, I defy all your assumptions.

Perhaps that is why they fear me, try and destroy what you can't understand.

The criminalization of homosexuality condemns in perpetuity a sizable section of society and forces them to live their lives in the shadow of harassment, exploitation, humiliation, cruel and degrading treatment at the hands of the law enforcement machinery.

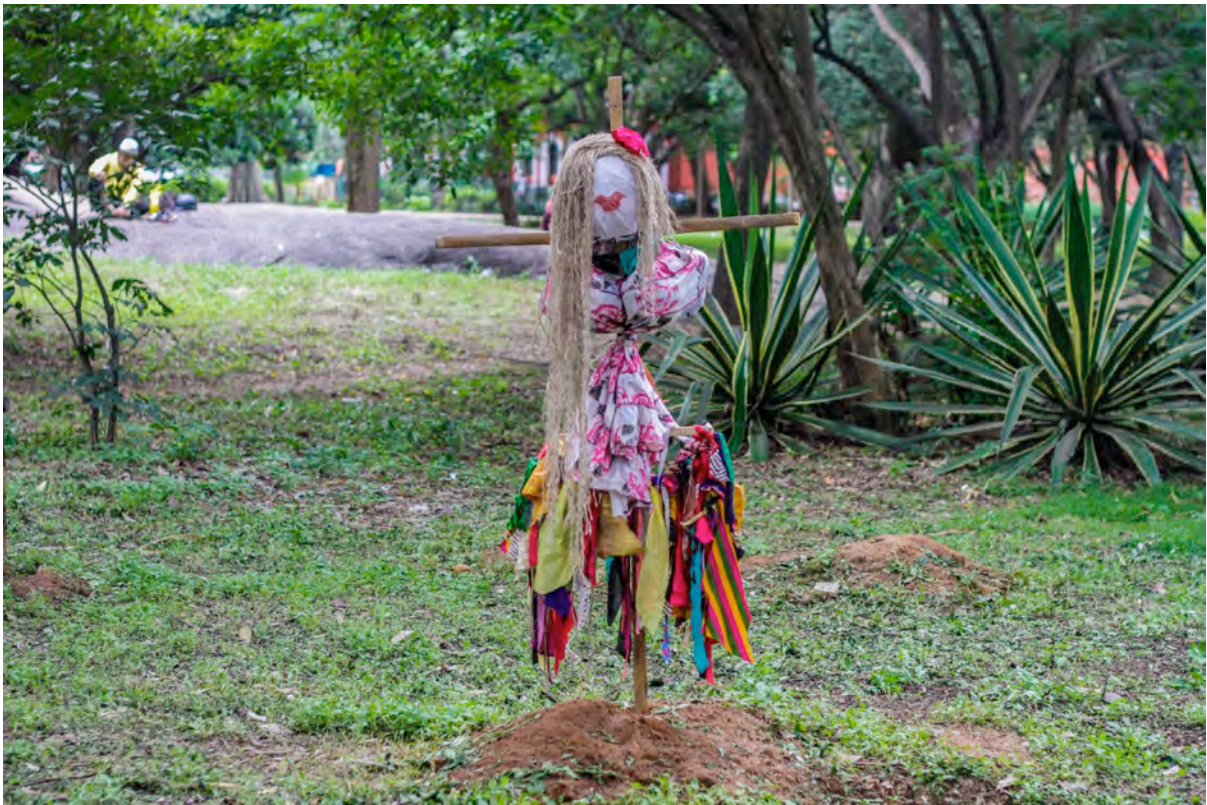
I know a park that was wild, unruly, free. Like me. They fear what they cannot control. I don't belong here, in your sanitized park.

The Government of India estimates the MSM number at around 25 lacs. The number of lesbians and transgender is said to be several lacs as well.

The gates of the park are closed, but my body remains open.

Section 377 targets the LGBT community by criminalizing a closely held personal characteristic such as sexual orientation. By covering within its ambit, consensual sexual acts by persons within the privacy of their homes, it is repugnant to the right to equality.

Laila's Story:



You desire me as much as I desire you.
You want me to hide.
And then you seek me.
My lipstick has stained your uniform.
My lipstick has stained your duty.
I know your truths, darling.
I know your secrets.
I know your sweat.
You slapped me. I took it.
You asked me to love you. I did.
You asked me to keep quiet. I did.
You don't threaten me, darling.
I know you more than you know yourself.
I am your surveillance camera *Wherever you hide I can see you.*
I feel sorry for you.
You think you are clean.
And the public believes you.
I feel sorry for you.
You think you can hide behind lush green grass.
Flower shows and sanitized vegetables.
Don't hide from yourself. You will get caught.

I am



Do you like my jeans?

I bought them, from Shivajinagar, right after my family had beaten me, and chased me from home. They said they were ashamed of me, that they couldn't recognize me. I found this funny, because at that moment, standing in front of them in my sari, I had never known myself better. I started coming to Cubbon park, shortly after I had run away and come to Bangalore. I felt safe inside the park, secure in the anonymity it offered. I didn't know anyone in the city, so I spent a lot of time alone, wandering in the park. It was here, that I first discovered others like myself.

They had grown into their alien bodies and carried themselves with grace and confidence. They taught me how to swing my hips, the trick to making my lips look fuller, how to flirt, and avoid the police. Spending time with them, near the rock, laughing, chatting, talking about crushes, soon became my only sense of home. We felt a sense of ownership over the park. The one space we were free from fearful eyes and violent touch.

One evening, we decided to have a picnic in the park. I came early, carrying food, and some soft drinks. I was wearing these jeans. As I stood, waiting for my friends, two policemen surrounded me. They grabbed my arm, and started dragging me, across the park, toward the police station. I kept asking what I'd done wrong. Finally, one of them said: "*People like you don't belong in the park*". They tugged my hair, my plait coming loose. "*Why do you dress like a woman? You are unnatural, if you visit the park, you'll scare away other tourists. Shooo.*"

I was held in a cell for six hours. They took my phone and beat me for an hour. Using lathis, their boots, their hands, their words. After a point, I couldn't feel anything. By the time my friends came, I was semi-conscious. They filed an official complaint. The case is still pending in court. You won't find me in the park anymore. Look closely at my arms, you can still see the scars. They are reminders of cruelty, of fear, of ignorance. Hope you are not lonely without me.

Woes of a Balloon



My name is Meena. I live near Nandini Layout. I work as a construction worker on weekdays. On Sundays, I sell balloons in Cubbon Park. My mother used to bring us here, since our childhood. We are three sisters. Here are my beautiful sons. They make me laugh, they help me sell. They watch out for the security guards, they take care of me.

Cubbon Park is home for us, you know? We have been coming here for more than 35 years. We played here, ate here, grew up here. It was the safest place, sometimes safer than home. We could wander about freely, without any fear. Cubbon Park was like going back to our mother's home. To be driven out of your own home is insulting.

It was not like this before. After the bandstand, has got a new roof, things have started to change. They don't want people like "us" to be in the park. Do we look dirty? Do we litter the park? Do we cheat people? We sell balloons for Rs. 10/-. This is our livelihood; we are not becoming millionaires with it.

Let me explain the economics of my life to you, listen.

You know the prices of everything today: One kg Onion is Rs. 46/- ; One litre of milk is Rs. 36/- One kg banana is Rs. 50/- Rice is Rs. 36/- Dal is Rs. 100/- We are five people in the house. We need at least Rs. 100/- per day on just food. We used to eat two meals, now it has come down to one because we just cannot afford it.

Like you , we also feel hungry and thirsty
We also have dreams to secure our children's future, like anyone would.

Bus fares have increased. We pay Rs. 300/- for drinking water. Another 600/- for borewell water. Rs. 200/- electricity. School expenses alone is Rs. 500/- per month.

Income per day/per person	Monthly Income/per person	Monthly Expenses
Rs. 170/-	Rs. 4420/-	Rs. 6000-8000/-

My husband and I are daily wage workers. We earn this amount only if I go to work on all days. If we miss a day, they cut my salary. You tell me, is Rs. 4000-6000/- enough to run a family in this day and age?

Sundays at Cubbon Park

Expenses	Income	Profit/Loss
One Packet of 80 balloons = Rs. 130/- (10 are usually damaged 10 tear while blowing) Travel to and fro Cubbon Park * 4 = Rs. 180/- Total = Rs. 310/-	Sale of 50 Ballons = Rs. 500/- Sale of 25 Balloons = Rs. 250/-	Profit from 50 Balloons = Rs. 190/- Loss from 25 Balloons = Rs. 60/-

One good day at Cubbon Park is definitely better than one day of daily wage work. Earlier, we could sell up to 50 balloons, nowadays we struggle to sell even 25. They chase us out of the park. Tell me something, is the Government afraid of this profit?

A few months ago, my sister Kamala was beaten by the guards here, who raised their lathis to burst the balloons. We try to complain to the police, but they refused to take down an FIR. They continue to harass and chase us. They want us to be afraid of them. From being a place we love, it has now turned into a place we fear.

No, we will not go anywhere. Chase us as much as you want. This is our home.
No, I don't want your sympathy. Just, let me do my work.
You dare bring that lathi close to me. Watch out!

Sound of the Djembe



I don't want a stage to play.
I don't want distance from my audience.
I don't want to dance to anyone's tunes.
I don't want to be on a pedestal.
I don't want a microphone.
I don't want to seek permission.
I don't want to hear your whistle blow.
I play the djembe.
I want to look into people's eyes when I play.
I want play amidst trees.
I want to feel free to use any place in the park.
I want you to listen to me.
I want to feel this park is mine.
I am an artist. You wouldn't know.

The Hunt



The sun was setting and the character of the park began to change. Most of the families who had spent the day enjoying the little green island in the midst of the busy roads of Bangalore had begun to leave. There were a few stray joggers, looking purposefully ahead, egging themselves on. The streetlights would soon be on, casting their silver light in and around the park. There was still time though, an hour or so before the lights came on, when the shadows began to take over the park. Om began to peer into the dark, trying to adjust to the lighting. This was the perfect time to be here. As people began to leave, the only ones left behind were a few men. Some of them were seated on the benches; others strolled around attempting to look casual. Om began to enjoy the darkness. A familiar thrill ran up his spine, as he began to walk around the park, casually making eye contact with those sitting on the benches and others walking around like him.

Today was a good day. There were quite a few men like him who had decided to check out the scene. Some of these men were there out of curiosity. Others had come there out of desperation, unable to find a private space or an avenue to meet other men. And then were people like Om, who were there for the thrill of cruising. There was something about the dark; the furtive glances, seeking pleasure in a public space that excited him. It was the thrill of the experience, the quick hand movements, the unzipped pants, the eyes locking in knowingly, and the sense of partaking in conventions that had been around forever.

Om felt secure as the darkness enveloped him. The dark provided him a cover. In the dark it was the outline of other men one looked for. The colour of their clothes, the style of dressing, the bulging biceps, became irrelevant. It was the outline of their shadows, the specifics of their movements that set them apart. This was a twilight world, a world where smell, sound, touch and taste overwhelmed the faculty of sight. Om knew, like everyone else, that this was momentary. The lights would come on soon. The police would be there blowing their whistles. If he was not careful, he might be waylaid by a cop, or even worse caught in the act by a cop, and this would mean having to either pay money, or go to the police station. Since the police station was round the corner, this wasn't an inviting proposition.

The police were getting more frequent. The government had decided to clean up the city, showcase its true global potential. One of the first things they did was to purge the city of street life – the street vendors servicing clients on pavements, sexworkers selling their wares, the loiterers without a purpose, the antisocial, the hijras earning their living on traffic junctions. It wasn't surprising then, that the parks were being policed. The government even tried proposing an entry fee into the park, leading to protests from citizens groups.

“Is it worth the risk. What if I am caught? Imagine the shame it could cause if this were to become public”, Om thought to himself, as he spotted a shadow towards his right. Before he could answer the question, he saw that the shadow had a distinct outline, a sinewy shape that began to move towards him, casually. As their paths crossed, their eyes met for a brief moment. Om turned around and followed. He smiled to himself. The hunt had just begun.

The future of the park is unknown



This is not good for you.
The trees have heard your secrets.
The trees communicate with me.
I have access to your ugly blueprints
I know all that you have hidden
The future of the park is known to me
That future of the park is unknown to you

You threw out families and lovers from the park
You hurt them, shamed them, beat them
No, you don't have authority.
You don't have the right.
I have collected their tears and curses in a box.
I will let them out one day, and see how you will crash and burn.
This is safe!?! IN YOUR HEAD.
Surveil your heart first, before you suspect us.
You want power. You want money, you tyrant.
I have let snakes into the park, beware.
The water nymphs and ghosts near the bamboo grove record your actions everyday.
You will soon be exposed.
The future of the park is known to me *That future of the park is unknown to you*
What do you know about love? Have you held somebody's hand? Do you know to read them? And now you want to sneak into someone else's intimacy, and destroy it?
Let the lovers be, you fool. If not, they'll come back with rage.
The future of the park is known to me
That future of the park is unknown to you