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ARUNDHATI ROY

'Powerful. Be prepared to get enraged.'

SANTOSH DASS

'A book for the time which feels like an aberration but when "business as usual" revealed itself to our collective naked eyes its grotesque, revolting, suffocating truth.'

GHAZALA JAMIL

'Lyrical, searing and powerful.'

NIVEDITA MENON

'An extraordinary examination of the politicking, grieving, protesting body.'

ANNIE ZAIDI

'A searing cultural critique of the contemporary nation body.'

K. SATYANARAYANA

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**Body on the Barricades**

**Brahma Prakash**

'Insightful, unusual' – Arundhati Roy

**Brahma Prakash**

# **BODY ON THE BARRICADES**

**Life, Art and Resistance  
in Contemporary India**



This set of essays is a series of meditations on hatred, tenderness, grief, mourning, labour, resistance, social justice and the possibilities of meaning and solidarity, all viewed through the lens of some traumatic events that have convulsed India in recent years. It is an insightful, unusual guidebook that illuminates the path that we as a country and as a people took, to arrive at the dangerous place in which we are now.

ARUNDHATI ROY

Author of *The God of Small Things*

*Body on the Barricades* is powerful. Brahma Prakash's narrative, told in beautiful prose, describes the barricades that India's women, men and children face on a daily basis. His spotlight shines on the societal curtailments, part and parcel of Hindu society, which have incrementally and maliciously permeated Indian politics. He shows us how the light in dark days is to be found in the resilience and inspiration of academics, activists, artists, Adivasis, and those imprisoned without bail or trial. I can't recommend Prakash's work of passion strongly enough. Be prepared to pause and contemplate his words. Be prepared to get enraged.

SANTOSH DASS

Co-author and co-editor, *Ambedkar in London*



Leisure affords contemplation, but during a time of great turmoil it is corporeality which teaches one philosophy. What you can learn in a few hours being on the side of barricades where the oppressed stand up to the mighty, cannot be learnt spending years in a library. In this book, Brahma Prakash recounts what authoritarianism feels like in our bones. A book for the time which feels like an aberration but when 'business as usual' revealed itself to our collective naked eyes its grotesque, revolting, suffocating truth.

GHAZALA JAMIL

Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

Lyrical, searing and powerful, *Body on the Barricades* addresses political struggle as performance, making visible protest as embodied, dramatized. The body bearing its caste, gender, religious community identity, is presented in the thick of battle against the coercive power of the state, of dominant groups. Scholarly rigour blends with the power of emotions that set this body, these bodies, in motion — rage, grief, solidarity, love, hatred. Brahma Prakash's book bears witness to one of the darkest, but also most inspiring moments in the history of India.

NIVEDITA MENON

Professor, Jawaharlal Nehru University

This book is an extraordinary examination of the politicking, grieving, protesting body. From choked breath to the taken 'knee' and flogged back, and from the curtailed tongues of poets to plastic extracted from the bellies of cows, it sweeps a broad arc across contemporary politics, all the while rooting for the flesh and blood and tears of human bodies.

ANNIE ZAIDI

Author of *Prelude to A Riot*

Brahma Prakash's *Body on the Barricades* is a searing cultural critique of the contemporary nation body. It is a commentary on the everyday life of love, labour, art and protest. It captures a moment when the nation's body is barricaded not just by its borders but by its segments: region, religion, caste, gender, and class. Authoritarian regime turns the Covid-19 pandemic into a site to practice segregation, division and suppression of the poor and the vulnerable. People can't speak, mourn, write, read, march, and not even breathe. The book is polemical, poetic, and sharply political. A must read to understand and contest the politics of hate and majoritarianism of our times.

K. SATYANARAYANA

Professor, English and Foreign Languages University



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Life, Art and Resistance  
in Contemporary India

Brahma Prakash



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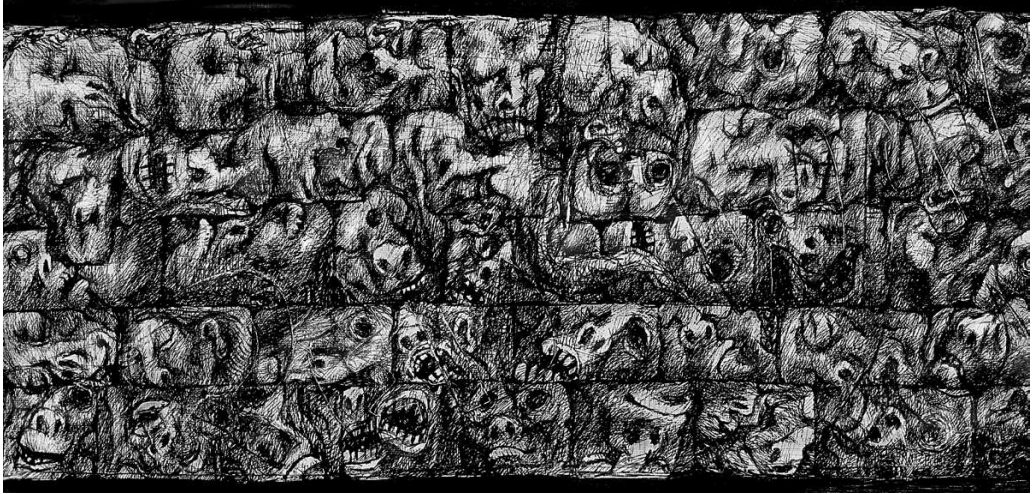
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## Prologue

*This is precisely the time when artists go to work. There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.*

— Toni Morrison<sup>1</sup>

It was April 2021. A ghastly month for India. The second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic ravaged the nation like a tsunami, moving so fast that before people could grasp its reality, they were in its grip, yearning for life and gasping for breath.

While working on this book of essays, I, too, caught the virus. The moment came for me too. Breathlessness suddenly became raw and real for me. Like a live wire, it entered my nerves. With an oximeter attached to my fingers and a thermometer on my tongue, I felt the urgency of life.

Moments turn into events when you start counting every breath. You count the heartbeat. You count your pulsating veins. You count blood vessels and bones. You become a vigilante of your own body. You never know when lungs and bones can turn white or black, when blood will turn into water, and disappear from the body like vapour. You keep checking if the skin is changing its colour. Devoured by the virus, you check that your eyes aren't turning black. You still see. You still think. You still register. You still resist.

<sup>1</sup> Toni Morrison, 'No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear', *The Nation*, 23 March 2015.

## BODY ON THE BARRICADES

Before I proceed and you preside, let me clarify that this is not a book on the pandemic. The references to the pandemic repeat, only to surface a symptomatic condition of the curtailment of life. The book is about a pandemic-like situation. The urgency of life and the barricading of freedom. The dilapidated socio-political and health condition that Naren Bedide stated, 'India is the pandemic.'<sup>2</sup> His insistence on the statement also shows how seriously are we taking these issues. The book is about earnest hope in the face of extreme curtailment.

In the urgency of life, the body takes all the attention. It takes all the forms; it takes all the shapes; it takes all the toll. You writhe like a fish out of water. You crawl like a worm, making all kinds of shapes. You move slowly, like a Japanese *butoh* dancer on a bed. You feel blockages you have never felt. You feel the openings you have never thought. You see the thoughts you have never seen. Out of fear of the virus, you check everything. You clean the broom and sanitize the sanitizer. You bathe the water before you take a bath. When fear enters our psyche, we become suspicious of everything. We suspect everyone.

The barbed wire used during Covid-19 in Delhi and Mumbai reminds us about the caste, race and ghettoised society. It reminds us of what B.R. Ambedkar said, 'It is a case of territorial segregation and of a *cordon sanitaire* putting the impure people inside a barbed wire into a sort of a cage.'<sup>3</sup> Fear, suspicion, rumour, invisible enemies, and zones connect the coronavirus to an extreme culture of authoritarianism. The 'identification, confinement, the drawing of boundaries and a strategy of exclusion have produced the reality of race in history.'<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Naren Bedide, 'India is the Pandemic,' Goethe Institute, October 14, 2020. <https://www.goethe.de/en/kul/ges/eu2/tlk/22008456.html>

<sup>3</sup> B.R. Ambedkar, *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* (henceforth BAWS) Vol. 7 (New Delhi: Dr Ambedkar Foundation, Reprinted 2014 [1987]), 266.

<sup>4</sup> Ranabir Samaddar, *A Pandemic and the Politics of Life* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2021), 9.