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Postcolonial Little Magazines in India: ‘Signatures of Dissent’ and Worldliness

Laetitia Zecchini (CNRS)

‘editorial policy / open as hell’

‘As short-lived as bugs, and not so infrequent as angel-visits’, little magazines ‘have nursed the literary flower in India over the last two hundred years’, writes Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (2020: 1). While this essay focuses on little magazines which flourished in various Indian languages between the 1950s and the 1970s, I argue that these alternative publishing spaces were indeed a privileged site of postcolonial print cultures, and a privileged medium of modernisms in India. In these provisional pages, writers exercised and found their creative and critical voices; connected with each other and with the world outside; and honed a radicalism that was often inseparably aesthetical and political.

Many Indian writers who started writing at the turn of independence would probably identify with the writer Vilas Sarang when he acknowledged that he has always thought of himself as belonging to an international modernist tradition coterminous with ‘the vigorous growth of a Marathi little magazine movement’. He defined this movement by its ‘spirit of rebellion and experimentation’, and its ‘aliveness to diverse influences and cross-fertilization’ (1994: 309-310). That is also what I identify as the ‘worldliness’ of these publications, which, following Edward Said, can be defined as the opposite of exclusivism and separatism, and as the awareness that works of literature are both *situated* in the political and secular world in which they emerge, and linked to the whole world of other literatures. Little magazines also represented worldly spaces in so far as they were open to the many voices and forms outside and beyond the established, guarded domains of ‘art’ and ‘literature’.

Far from representing ‘tiny, defensively constituted corner(s) of the world’ or ‘ethnographic specimens’ suitable for the attention of area experts (Said 2000: 382), I suggest

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that many of these publications were, like one of Mehrotra's little mags, in effect 'eating the corners of literature' and the corners of the world (*damn you* 4 1967: np). They must hence be reassessed in terms of their political and cultural significance both in India and in a global setting; in terms of their engagement with key issues and struggles of their time, and in terms of their critical relevance, since they help us revise conventional cartographies of 'world literature' and 'postcolonial literature'. In their pages, 'centers' and 'peripheries' are realigned or eroded, along with our understandings of what counts as local or worldly, trivial or important, literary or non-literary, and as aesthetics or politics.

This essay discusses magazines published in English, especially *Vrishchik* (1969-73), *damn you* (1965-1968), *ezra* (1967-1971), *Contra 66* (1966-1967), but also *Poetry India* (1966-1967), *Quest or Waste Paper*, with Bombay as one of its focal points.¹ Yet because this period was characterized by creative traffics across languages, genres, media and regions, I argue for a connected history of the little magazines in English with those published in other Indian languages; for a connected history of literature, and in particular poetry, with other art forms; and for a connected history of Indian littles with a transnational network of 'small publications', and with an international counter-culture.

How was the medium of the magazine (and its 'littleness'), integral to its agenda and worldliness? By what means could some of these magazines travel the world and what kind of communities did they contribute to create? Since these little magazines have been interpreted as embodying the 'signature of dissent' (an expression used by art critic Geeta Kapur, herself an influential presence in some of these publications)² of a whole generation of writers and artists, how was this rebellion declined, and what kind of 'literary activism' — both understood as activism *on behalf of*, and *through* literature — did they embody?

Fig. 1. Some of the English little magazines published in the 60s and 70s. Author's collage and photographs, courtesy Arvind Krishna Mehrotra and Adil Jussawalla

I. Dialogical modernisms

Remembering the 'demotic openness' of the art world in the 1960s, Homi Bhabha also suggested that its limitations (there was no market for art at the time, no state support, few artists and galleries) and its absence of professionalization, could account for the 'tremendous translational vitality' and intensity of interaction that characterized the period (Bhabha 2013: 23-24). Artists and writers of Bombay's many creative worlds after independence in fact all recall the effervescent transactions between literary cultures and languages (especially Hindi, Gujarati, Marathi and English), and between literature, theatre, art, music or advertising in 1960s Bombay.³

'The lower cases of modernism swept away the boundaries between languages that now seem so prominent' acknowledged Arvind Krishna Mehrotra.⁴ Traffics between and across languages, in part fueled by the 'consumption', the practice, and the publishing of translation, were the norm.⁵ Many writers involved in these little mags, such as Vilas Sarang, Dilip Chitre, Arun Kolatkar, Pavankumar Jain or Gauri Deshpande actually wrote and published in English and in another Indian language. What's more, little mags often published texts in different languages. Gujarati little magazines such as *Kruti* and *Draoon Draoon*, or Marathi little mags like *Atta* and *Aso* featured texts in English or Hindi; conversely, *Vrishchik*, whose name was chosen in part because it had the same meaning ('scorpio') across various Indian languages, carried texts in Gujarati.

Little publications also often aimed, like *damn you*, to be ‘magazines of the arts’, understood inclusively. Their contributors constantly crossed and bridged disciplinary, artistic or generic boundaries. Gulammohammed Sheikh, Gieve Patel, Arun Kolatkar, Prabodh Parikh and Bandu Waze, for instance, were visual artists and poets all at once. Several littles were hence magnificently illustrated by these writers-cum-artists, by Prabhakar Barwe, Jyoti Bhatt, Jeram Patel and others. That was especially the case of *Vrishchik*, started from Baroda by the two iconic painters Bhupen Khakhar and Gulammohammed Sheikh, that became a platform for Bombay poets and artists and published artworks or linocuts in each of its issues.⁶

Pages of *Vrishchik* and *Contra 66* (another little magazine founded by an artist, J. Swaminathan, from Delhi), were filled with poems, translations and other literary texts, but also with critical pieces and reviews on literature, art or cinema, and with essays on the state of criticism in India, the role of the artist in society, or the implications of internationalism and indigenism. In these critical essays, writers often wrote about art; and artists about literature, once again highlighting the symbiotic milieu which sustained their creativity, and their conviction that they all shared similar questions and concerns, regardless of the medium used. ‘Whatever I may have to say’ about the role of painters or sculptors, ‘has a lot to do with what I consider to be my own role as a writer’ acknowledged poet Adil Jussawalla as a preamble to his damning critique of the ‘artistic profession’ in *Vrishchik* (1972b: np).

Poet, translator, editor, critic, illustrator, distributor (of themselves or of each other): the role was often interchangeable, and writers could wear different hats, or many hats at once, depending on where they published. Putting their own creative, material and financial resources in these small publishing ventures, they relied exclusively on themselves to publish – also strengthening, as Jussawalla suggested again, the direct, conspirational link between poet and

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reader: ‘We have been the only means by which poetry has been kept alive while the big publishers slept, welcome to the conspiracy’ (Jussawalla 1978: 5).

II. Anti-establishment conspiracies: ‘*everything justified except the margins*’

It is to this anti-establishment conspiratorial ethos I would like to turn to now.⁷ Often hand-crafted, cyclostyled or mimeographed, many little mags were defined by their irregularity, by their unstandardized (unperiodic and un-disciplined) character. Most were short-lived, without a fixed number of pages, and were not meant to endure, or to *establish themselves* – literally. They were ‘little’ in terms of their genre and format, often composed of ‘little forms’ such as poems and reviews;⁸ in terms of their limited readership and distribution; but also in terms of the defiant anti-mainstream stance they put forward; the de-professionalized space they cultivated.

‘Everything justified except the margins’, is a line featured on the cover of the inaugural issue (‘numbuh one’) of the American little mag *manhattan review* (1966) – a journal in which several of Mehrotra’s poems were published. This catchphrase could encapsulate the spirit of many littles. They were ‘unjustified’ typographically, with texts that were often visually ‘uneven’, that were also irregular or unconventional in typography, grammar, punctuation, spelling, and in format or layout as well. Many little magazines were hence worked out individually from the content itself, and refused to conform (or compromise) to the customary publishing or editorial requirements meant to apply to all kinds of texts indiscriminately.

But they were also unjustified in the sense that they dismissed powers of consecration that aim at codifying and policing literary legitimacy, so precisely at discriminating who or what is ‘minor’ or ‘major’, ‘literate’ or ‘illiterate’, worthy or not, in what Bourdieu has called the literary field. Hence the apparent disdain — flaunted in many little mags —, of recognition

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in the form of awards and money (many were either unpriced or with no fixed rate); distribution, and even publication: ‘you like it or lump it’ proclaimed Mehrotra in the inaugural issue of *ezra* (1967), also echoing the title of the little mag Shahane started in 1963: ‘Aso’, meaning ‘let it be’ or ‘so be it’!

Asserting their independence from extraneous sources of endorsement, they refused to be ‘justified’ by an institution, a group, an ideology, even a specific agenda. *Damn you 1*, for instance, opens on the following statement: ‘what about? long-term policy? general objectives? that’s not even funny’ (1965), while its last issue in 1968 defines itself by what it is not (‘not the organ of a hungry generation, a clan of anti-poets or a writers’ workshop’), by which the journal also signaled it would not let itself be recuperated by existing movements or schools. Speaking for themselves only, and bestowing on themselves and on each other the only recognition they seemed to need, little mag editors and contributors acted in effect, as if they were their *own* creators of literary value. These journals therefore privileged ‘untutored’, ‘untrained’, ‘raw’ voices or ‘unheard of’ writers (words repeated in their pages). ‘Preference will be given to poets who have not yet been published before ...’ wrote Mehrotra in the closing statement of *ezra 1*, while Ashok Shahane suggested that *Aso* was born from the idea of collecting texts from writers who never imagined they were writers (Nerlekar 2017b: 113). Of course, if anyone could become a poet, editor, or a publisher and if, like art, writing could happen anywhere, it’s also because using a mimeograph machine did not require specific skills, and little mags were cheap and easy to produce. They could even be printed, like the first issues of *Vrishchik*, on brown packing paper.

This was a leitmotiv of these not-for-profit publishing ventures: writing was not a *means*, used by a legitimate few, but a craft potentially available to anyone. In a sense, it was also ‘life’ itself, and explains why little magazines were often affective, non-professional affairs, born *from* and sustained *by* friendships. The Gujarati poet and little mag editor

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Pavankumar Jain suggested that a little mag like *Tantrum* (edited by Madhu Kothari in Gujarati) was *not* for people with ‘hard habits of writing and reading’. This defiantly inclusive and amateur ethos shows in the DIY appearance of several little magazines, which displayed their kinship with ‘minor’ arts or artefacts of popular culture by including songs, prospectus, postcards, stamps, advertisements, signboards, doodles, children texts or drawings, and sometimes draft-like, seemingly unfinalized texts. It also explains the experimentalism that characterized these publications. ‘At the level of the creative imagination, *all is possible*’ (italics in the text) acknowledged the editors of *Dionysus* (Pradhan and Benjamin 1965: 3). And little magazines were indeed often stretching the frontiers of literature to the limit, by publishing visual poems, concrete poems, poster poems, ‘found poems’ (in the form of shopping lists, overheard conversations, radio broadcasts, etc), and by rejecting formal diction and ornate style for colloquial, everyday speech.

Dilip Chitre equated one of Kolatkar’s ‘found poems’, the ‘Three Cups of Tea’ sequence, first published in *Aso* and written in the Marathi/Hindi lingua franca of the Bombay streets, to the denial of poetry itself: the bourgeois-academic-formalist-poetry (1967: 19).⁹ ‘Don’t you know the rules?’ is a line from the sequence. Precisely, in this anti-poem, the cultural, political and social etiquettes governing issues of hierarchy, diplomacy, discipline or decency are joyously overturned, along with linguistic and poetic conventions. The text remains ‘unjustified’, with an accordion-like layout; punctuation marks and capitals are omitted; crude vocabulary or slang (baby, wanna, guy, punk, man, cunt, fuck, etc.) is used.

‘Set like a machinegun’ (*damn you* 1968 6: np), the mimeo-machine was aimed at the Establishment, declined in different ways: ‘established’, precisely consecrated, award-winning writers; mainstream publishers and journals, such as the powerful periodical *Satyakatha* in Marathi, whose burning was staged publicly in 1969 by Raja Dhale, the Dalit poet, activist and editor of several little magazines; established formal or standardized language, which could

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take the form of the very ‘correct’, ‘starch-like’ and ‘dreadfully moralist’ English idiom A. K. Ramanujan and Adil Jussawalla railed against;¹⁰ or the ornamental and sanskritized linguistic registers in other languages, and of course other major gate-keepers of the literary field in the guise of the literary *sammelans* and the academies.

Vrishchik is perhaps the most striking illustration of little mags’ anti-establishment struggle. In its pages, ‘the establishment’ took the form of the state and its institutions, namely the Lalit Kala Akademi (the National Academy of Art, established in 1954), with which the magazine spelt out its ‘unequivocal dissent’, and the Triennale India, launched in 1968. The Akademi is attacked as a hotbed of mediocrity, and as an apathetic, complacent, self-representing and self-perpetuating body. In 1970, *Vrishchik* formed an ‘All India Committee of Protest’, and spearheaded the pan-Indian signature campaign (among whom featured Adil Jussawalla, Gieve Patel and Arvind Krishna Mehrotra) to boycott the Akademi and the second Indian Triennale.

A word here on Nissim Ezekiel, a central figure of Bombay modernisms, who nonetheless became a casualty of several little mags’ ‘blasts’. Along with other ‘middle-aged intellects in terrylene’, Ezekiel needed ‘to be dynamited’, according to Mehrotra, for more radical, avant-garde writers to be heard.¹¹ And yet, Ezekiel was in fact a prodigal mentor of many ‘unheard of’ writers at the time, and an instrumental presence in countless small ventures, for whom no magazine was ‘too raw or unestablished to be given a poem’.¹² As editor of *Quest* and *Poetry India*, which were visually and formally much more conventional than magazines like *damn you*, he nevertheless published many of his more radical modernist contemporaries in English, Bengali, Marathi or Gujarati (including Mehrotra, Kolatkar, Chitre, Suresh Joshi, Buddhadev Bose or Benoy Mojumdar), and in other more mainstream magazines with which he was actively involved (such as *The Illustrated Weekly of India*) he never failed to advertise their innovative work and publishing ventures.

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In the pages of little mags, metaphors flourished to describe this anti-establishment, anti-professional and anti-academic ‘signature’ of dissent and marginality. The magazines presented themselves as platforms for outcasts, outlaws, drop-outs, or misfits. ‘Call me a freak’ is in fact the title of a short autobiographical text published by Pavankumar Jain in the special issue of *Tantrum* he guest-edited (undated. See Fig. 2). The trope of the tramp, the vagabond or the ecstatic ‘bhakti beatnik’ is a regular feature of these publications.¹³ A quotation attributed to dissident Russian writer Yevgeny Zamyatin, and featured on the cover of *Contra 66* could sum up their spirit: ‘There can be real literature only when it is created not by executives and reliable civil servants but by madmen, hermits, heretics, dreamers and sceptics’ (Swaminathan 1967: 5-6).

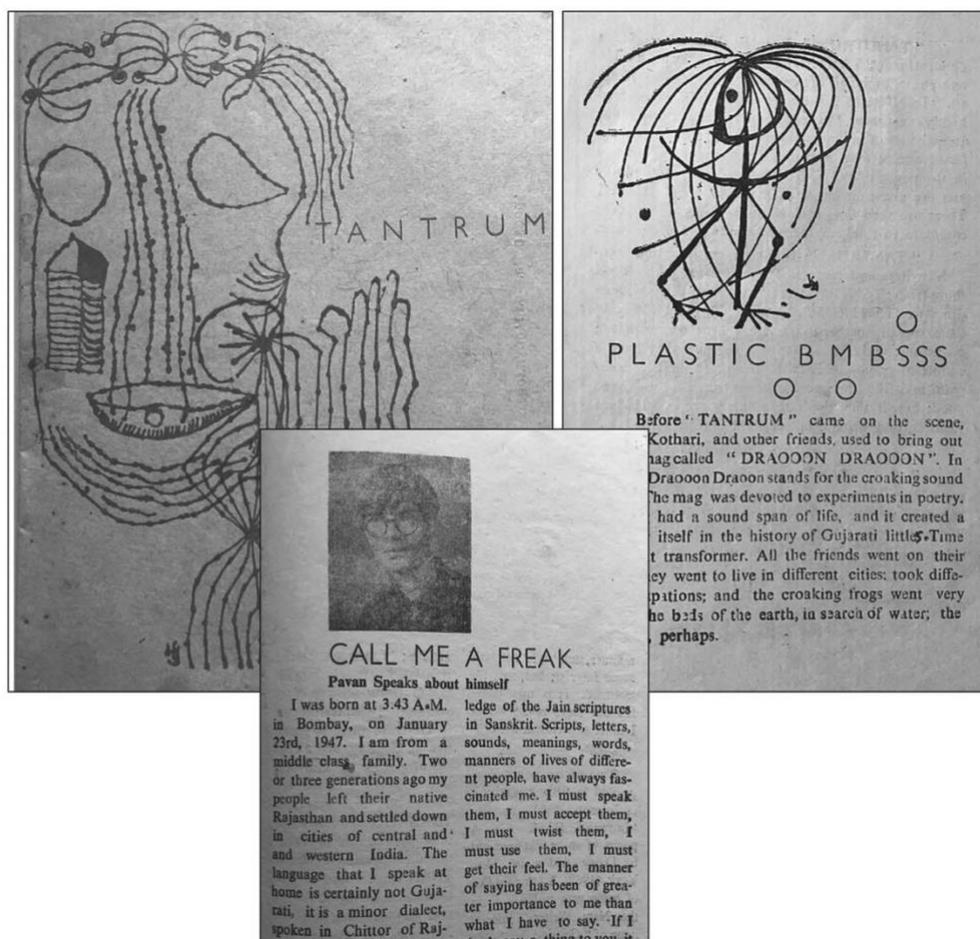


FIGURE 2.2 *Tantrum* special issue guest-edited by Pavan Kumar Jain. Author’s photograph and collage, courtesy Adil Jussawalla

Fig. 2. *Tantrum* special issue guest-edited by Pavan Kumar Jain. Author's photograph and collage, courtesy Adil Jussawalla

The demotic and heretical openness (or worldliness) of literature and art to everything that resides outside its *appropriate* frontiers was probably the most significant characteristic of the 'Hungryalist' movement, which took the Bengali literary world by storm in the 1960s. Anti-elitist and provocative, Hungryalist poets used crude, sexual 'gut vocabulary', published their poems, texts, manifestoes and bulletins on cheap paper and often read them out in the most incongruous places, like liquor shops, crossroads and graveyards. Their irreverence was such that in 1964, arrest warrants were issued against several Hungryalists on the grounds of obscenity and 'conspiracy' against the establishment. In one of their English little magazines, aptly called *Waste Paper*, the trial and conviction of Malay Roy Choudhury is described as a 'red-handed proof' of the Bengali literati's panic (November 1967: 2). Other little mags got into trouble as well, such as *Bombay Duck*, edited by R. Parthasarathy and S. V. Pradhan which claimed to thrive in utterly inhibited discussions, and quoted long excerpts of Henry Miller's *A Tropic of Cancer* in its inaugural issue (Jan-March 1965).

III. Transnational traffics, friendships and asymmetries

In many ways, these little magazines illustrate how 'minority' or 'littleness' can become less a predicament of literary production, and more a condition of worldliness and independence; a 'resource', even, to borrow from Leela Gandhi in another context. Minority, she suggests, involves a protest of what is dominant or normative, and is connected to the trope (and the politics, after Derrida) of friendship, which gestures toward all those invisible affective

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gestures ‘that refuse alignment along the secure axes of filiation to seek expression outside, if not against, possessive communities of belonging’ (2006: 10).

But little magazines were not only platforms for like-minded Indian artists to connect or affiliate with each other against inherited, ‘possessive communities of belonging’ and institutions. They could become places of dialogue and friendship with magazines outside India. Some littles in fact advertised both Indian and non-Indian magazines, and many staged their interconnection between world subcultures by publishing reviews, translations, quotations, excerpts of correspondence and occasionally lists of little publications with which they corresponded. An issue of *Poetry India*, for instance, published an ad for *damn you* announcing an ‘editorial policy / open as hell’. The ad included a long list of national and international contributors and closed on the tagline: ‘support “little mags” everywhere’. But it also advertised *klactoveedsedsteen*, the beat magazine published from Heidelberg by Carl Weissner, asking the ‘new generation’ of modern Indian poets to send him ‘strong stuff’, including drawings suitable for ‘photo-offset-repro’, and promising distribution ‘thru the major avantgarde bookshops of Europe and America’ (Ezekiel 1967 2: 2).

Some of these small publications in fact testify to the transnational communities of friendship established at the time. In *Contra 66*, for instance, J. Swaminathan, published Octavio Paz, to whom he became close when Paz was the Mexican ambassador to India until his resignation in 1968, in protest of the Mexican government’s bloody repression of the students’ movement.¹⁴ Mehrotra maintained a close correspondence with Howard McCord and Douglas Blazek, and they published each other in their respective little mags. Allen Ginsberg corresponded with Malay Roy Chaudhury and befriended the Bengali Hungryalists, making sure their manifestoes, their poems, and later their arrest received worldwide attention. In Bombay, Ginsberg also became friends with Ashok Shahane and Arun Kolatkar, whose partial translation of ‘Kaddish’ was published in *Aso* in 1963. In his letters to Ginsberg in the early

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60s, Shahane in fact talks about those who ‘joined the army’ of little magazines, and about himself, Kolatkar and Ginsberg as ‘spy-poets’. The anti-establishment ‘conspiracy’ was also formed transnationally.

Hence if texts by Ginsberg, André Breton, Octavio Paz, Antonin Artaud, Carl Rakosi, Vasco Popa, Cesare Pavese, Hans Arp, Jean Genet, or John Berger, as well as excerpts from letters by Eric Oatman, James Laughlin or Lawrence Ferlinghetti, appeared in these little mags, it wasn’t just the ‘world’, world literature or world magazines coming to India, but Bombay, Calcutta and several other places in India materializing on the global map of ‘little mags’. Poets such as Mehrotra, Kolatkar, Malay Roy Choudhury, Pritish Nandy, Srinivas Rayaprol and others published texts in *Evergreen Review*, *Manhattan Review*, *Kulchur*, *City Lights Journal*, *Salted Feathers*, *Intrepid*, *measure 3*, *Ole’*, *Delos*, and other littles, like the iconic English-Spanish countercultural magazine, *El Corno Emplumado*, published from Mexico.¹⁵

Some of these publications, then, did travel the world, or at least were *staged* as destined to do so, with prices featured in rupees, pounds or dollars, and readers of *damn you* encouraged to ‘smuggle’ the mag in all the countries of the world. A passage from Mehrotra’s correspondence with Howard McCord offers a humorous snapshot of these clandestine modes of circulation — and funding! Although little mag editors often claimed that money was not an issue, little magazines were constantly struggling financially. And if Mehrotra regularly sent poems and issues of his own magazines for McCord to sell in the United States, other less literary artefacts were ‘trafficked’ between borders. In December 1966, Mehrotra sent McCord 100 greeting cards with Indian gods destined to be sold and help the ezra-fakir press stay afloat. A few months later McCord wrote to say that this being ‘a bad, broke month’, he could not send along ‘bucks’ with his letter, but suggested that Mehrotra follow in Malay Roy Choudhury’s footsteps. The latter had apparently devised a stratagem to fool the post-office and include

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charas (the local name for cannabis, presumably more marketable than Indian gods!) between the pages of his little magazines (7 September 1967).

Many of these publications thus relied on underground or informal circuits of communication, circulation and funding, on friendships and seemingly random discoveries.¹⁶ ‘We just move around the place, and when there is no world to make us happy, we dish out DY. some goes places, some just hangs from the clouds, some is kept hidden’ (‘statement’, *damn you* 1967 4: np). And yet, as suggested, the ‘carefree, unruly’ attitude flaunted by many little mag contributors, their apparent indifference to consecration or publicization, did not mean that they were not *also* claiming to disrupt conventional cartographies of literature and asserting their place in the world geography of letters. The *damn you* statement quoted above is in fact immediately followed by the manifesto-like aphorism: ‘damn you eating the corners of literature’.

It is finally important to keep in mind that these conspirational traffics were not necessarily exclusive of (or distinct from?) more institutional or politically-conditioned networks. The transnational circulation and affiliations of a little magazine like *Quest*, for instance, modelled on *Encounter*, and sponsored by the CIA-backed Congress for Cultural Freedom, depended in part on a formidable publishing artillery. More generally, the immense broadening of literary horizons which also coincided with the ‘paperback revolution’ in the 1950s and 1960s, and a ‘feverish activity in translation’, was precipitated by the Cold War when both blocks were engaged in devising programs to translate and disseminate works of literature that were deemed useful in promoting an ideology and countering the opposing side’s ‘propaganda’. Yet, radical or dissenting Indian voices also *used* available Cold war funds and spaces — like the little magazine, partially coopted by American cold war authorities — to bend them to their own projects and needs.¹⁷ Even Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, in his first letter to Howard McCord on October 16 1966, described the USIS (the United States Information

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Service) as the place to visit for aspiring Indian writers with an editorial project in mind and no cash! USIS, in a sense, *was* compatible with *charas*.

Here are the last enlightening lines of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra's opening statement in *damn you 6*:

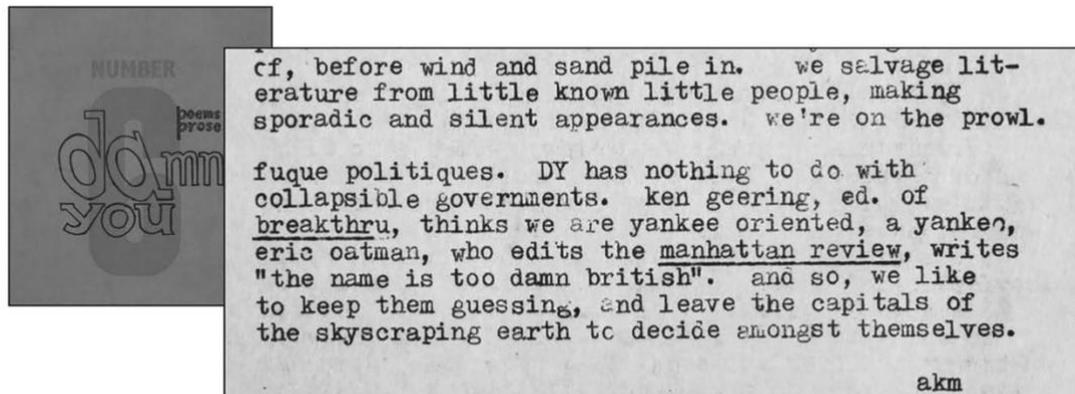


FIGURE 2.3 'Statement', *damn you 6*. Courtesy Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

Fig. 3: 'statement', *damn you 6*. Courtesy Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

These little mags were also about claiming a space for what is usually considered too insignificant to get noticed: the 'little known little people', the 'corners' of literature and the world and all its 'forgotten territories' (an expression used in *damn you 4*). With its brash disregard of the consecrating 'capitals of the skyscraping earth', Mehrotra's text presents itself as a formidable declaration of emancipation and seems to corroborate Eric Bulson's comment that little mags created a decentered literary universe (2016).¹⁸

Yet these dismissals, along with many of the East-West traffics of the time, were not devoid of ambivalence. Even though Mehrotra, in the above statement, brushes aside Eric Oatman's and Ken Geering's judgments about *damn you* being 'too yankee oriented' or 'too damn british', mentioning them was also signaling that he belonged *to* and was recognized *by*

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littles in the West. A desire to emancipate oneself from Western models often coincided with a desire to be recognized by Western models – however countercultural.

It is important to recall here that the ‘curse’ of belatedness, influence and mimicry has always plague Indian (and more generally postcolonial) modernisms. This was the time when many modernist writers and artists were being told that they were derivative, outdated, or inauthentic — both in India, where in the wake of India’s freedom struggle, modernism was often suspiciously perceived as an offspring of the West and where cultural nationalism was virtually required of Indian artists, and in or vis-à-vis the West, where Indian modernists were often told to go back to their folk or classical – i.e. *authentically Indian* – art. Little mags and their contributors were struggling to shake off these different assignations, expectations and representations. They were also struggling to escape the ‘Little Englands and Little Americas’ to which some felt confined or doomed;¹⁹ and struggling to hone a voice of one’s own, both distinct *from* and interconnected *to* world voices and modernisms.

Interestingly, Ginsberg himself had a particularly heated exchange with Abu Sayeed Ayyub (who headed the ICCF in Calcutta in the 1960s, and whom Ginsberg had solicited to help Malay Roy Choudhury) which illuminates some of the debates that were happening at the time on the provenance and idioms of modernism, and on the curse of influence mentioned above. If Ayyub actually denied the Hungryalists the epithet of ‘writers’ (only ‘immature imitators of American beatnik poetry’), Ginsberg in turn refused to qualify their poetics as either imitative or obscene, instead pointing precisely to the *transnational* modernist syntax of opposition articulated simultaneously in various corners of the world. Quoting one of the lines with which Ayyub had taken umbrage (‘Fuck the bastards of Gangshalik School of Poetry’), Ginsberg wryly claimed that it was ‘common parlance ... from cafes of Paris or Calcutta to old manifestos by Tristan Tzara’.²⁰ If the interest shown by the Beats, and more generally by several

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American little magazines, for Indian writers, was not always free of clichés about India, they did acknowledge radical Indian little mag contributors as their own.²¹

We therefore see an alternative – and synchronous – geography of letters taking shape through a shared modern idiom, linking, as Mehrotra suggested, Prévert in Paris to Lawrence Ferlinghetti in San Francisco, to Kolatkar in Bombay: ‘it’s the same casual tone, the language stripped bare’ (Zecchini 2017b: 202). Challenging the suspicion of belatedness or mimicry, many artists and writers were actually – just like other modernists the world over – poaching, cannibalizing and appropriating everything they had access to.²² I’ve often discussed the voracious curiosity of all these writers and artists who staged themselves as indiscriminate gluttons or ‘rag-pickers’, and also talked about the formidable food-chain of reading-recycling-(re)writing where modernism originates. Both translations and quotations, which flourished on the covers of these little mags and in the intertextual fabric of many of these texts, are signs of this palimpsest-like assemblage or bricolage of world literature or world art.

They were also a means, for these writers, to choose both their ancestors and their contemporaries. You are less born into a world (as lineage *and* as cartography), than make it new, and make it *for* you. Remember the line: ‘when there is no world to make us happy, we dish out DIY’, or the ‘homemade worlds’ many little mag writers were claiming to invent. These citations, then, also had a ‘world-making’ function. Original, national or ‘natural’ filiations are converted into affiliations, connections that are invented rather than inherited (Said 1983: 23), and that were either transnational or corresponded to a remaking of what an ‘Indian poet’ or an ‘Indian artist’ was supposed to be.

IV. The ‘street-fighting’ years: Little Magazines and the struggles outside

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This worldliness has other (more political) resonances as well. New poets, wrote Anil Saari ‘will write about dejecta and disease – more appropriate to India than DDT-ed verse’ (1966). Obviously, here, ‘DDT-ed’ verse is made to correspond to the unchallenging, appropriate verse of the establishment, the opposite of the avant-garde. But Adil Jussawalla also hints at another dimension of this ‘purgation’ process in ‘Boys and Girls in Purdah’ (1972a). ‘Art with its balls removed’ is the art that is curtain-filtered and state-sanctioned (‘what filters through the curtain is only fit for nothing but the international shit-pot’), especially the material disseminated by international agencies like USIS or by the ICCF. As Serge Guilbaut (1983) and Greg Barnhisel (2015) have shown, modernism was indeed turned into a cultural-diplomatic weapon by American cultural authorities during the Cold War, which contributed to defanging modernism and taming its privileged medium, the little mag.

That is also how we must understand Geeta Kapur’s indictment of the commodified and standardized (i.e. ‘stylized’) form of mainstream International avant-garde art (that must be ‘new’ and ‘advanced’, but that should neither be obscure nor disturbing) promoted by institutions in India, and abroad (Kapur 1971: np). In a ‘continuingly Anglo-American colony like India’, Adil Jussawalla noted again, art is not just selected, but trivialized or, indeed, *castrated*: the violence and the morally painful, the inventive and the demotic, the aesthetically and politically radical are kept at bay (1972a). In the same text, Jussawalla called for the ‘living acid’ of literature and language to dissolve the curtain. In many ways, the turn towards the Beats, towards Central and East European poets, towards alternative Third-World, African or Latin American writers, and towards *bhakti* are different facets of this quest for ‘untrivialized’, more challenging literatures and countercultures.²³

A whole insurgent counter-library was surfacing in the 60s, both in India and the world, and Jussawalla’s influential *New Writing in India* anthology (1974) must be read in that light. Destined to challenge the neglect of Indian writers on the global literary map, *and* the clichés

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about 'Indian literature', Jussawalla offered a categorical dismissal of the paradigm of 'influence' or 'parasitism'.²⁴ He also chose to showcase works of literature that were characterized by their thematic and formal boldness and did not shy away from the 'social evils' and political struggles of the world.

That is another defining feature of the worldliness of these magazines. Like Geeta Kapur, Adil Jussawalla attacked the elitism and the escapism of the art establishment in India, its bourgeois defensiveness and abdication from 'social responsibility' (1972b). He satirized those who promoted 'decorative' art featuring fishermen and tribals, while refusing to acknowledge the revolts of the landless, Dalits or Naxalites: 'We can safely hang them up in our living rooms with no fear that they might ever want to hang us'. 'Eating the corners' of literature, then is as much about salvaging art where it's not supposed to be, in the seemingly trivial, un-DDT'ed, even obscene or filthy (the many 'waste papers' of literature and culture) ; than it is about opening literature to the 'troubles and turmoil of the world' outside – an expression used by J. Swaminathan in an article where he likewise criticizes the mannerism of Indian art (1966: 9-14).

It would therefore be erroneous to take the seemingly non-committal attitude of some little mags at face value. 'Fuque politics' (a line from the statement of *damn you 6* quoted above) is less the refusal of politics, than the refusal to be pigeonholed into neat, predictable political or ideological alignments, including Cold War ones, and the refusal – again - to straightjacket literature, or submit it to extraneous sources of evaluation.

In the 50s, 60s and 70s political and social turbulences, both in and outside India, were of course pressing upon art and texts in myriads of ways. In a global context, this was the height of the Cold War which subjected many postcolonial countries to the 'competitive courtship' of the United States and the Soviet Union. It was also the years of an international Counter Culture, youth movements, student protests and anti-Vietnam rallies. In India, more specifically, the

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1950s-70s are often described as a period of widespread disenchantment born from the betrayed promises of Independence, and of social and political unrest, illustrated by the Naxalite insurgency in the late 60s, and by the Emergency (1975-1977).

These ‘street-fighting years’ (Ali 2018) reverberated in the pages of little mags, many of which identified with the Counterculture of the times, with anti-imperialist, Third World struggles, and with those of the landless, Dalits or Naxalites of Jussawalla’s article. As F. N. Souza wrote, again in *Vrishchik*, the struggle against the Lalit Kala Akademi is only one among many battles: ‘Now *Vrishchik* should fight the barriers on temple entry and let loose a nest of scorpions’.²⁵ In this damning indictment of casteist-Brahmin segregation, we hear echoes of the Dalit struggle. Dalit activism and Dalit literature in fact also emerged from the defiant oppositional ethos of the little magazine movement. All four founders of the ‘Dalit Panthers’, an anti-caste political and cultural movement formed in 1972 in Bombay, were writers and two of them, the poets Namdeo Dhasal and Raja Dhale (whose burning of *Satyakatha* in 1968 was also meant to be a revolt against the upper-caste establishment) were active little magazine editors and contributors. Raja Dhale was a close friend and collaborator of Ashok Shahane, and both Dhale and Dhasal have acknowledged their debts to Marathi little magazines such as Shahane’s *Aso*, or the pioneering cyclostyled *Shabda* launched in 1954 by Arun Kolatkar and Dilip Chitre, among others.²⁶

Internationalism was an important feature of these street-fighting times and the Dalit Panthers in India echoed the ‘Black Panthers’ in the United States, which also took root in the United Kingdom with the formation of the British Black Panthers in 1968. The BBP included Indian writers and artists connected to the little magazine movement in Bombay, such as Farrukh Dhondy, Mala Sen or Vivan Sundaram (celebrated modern Indian painter and Geeta Kapur’s husband). Adil Jussawalla was very close to all three, and dates the beginning of his political awakening to the time he spent in London in the 60s, like other writers and artists who

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later contributed to the little mag scene in India, such as Eunice de Souza (who lived for some time with Farrukh Dhondy and Mala Sen), Gulammohammed Sheikh (who remembers starting his collection of little magazines in London), or F. N. Souza. Jussawalla's Marxist education was consolidated upon his return to Bombay, where he joined a progressive Marxist youth movement (PROYOM), that brought out a journal called *Lalkaar* (meaning *Challenge*) to which he contributed. Several PROYOM cadres were actually jailed and tortured during the Emergency.²⁷

In the pages of many little mags, local and global political struggles were constantly correlated. In *Vrishchik*, an editorial published after anti-Muslim riots, and entitled 'Against Communalism' called for artists to mobilize against communalism (which, as the editors noted, also plagued art and literature), and connected the horrors happening inside and outside India: 'horror is the word ... whether it is an entire marriage party burnt alive during the communal riots or South Vietnamese prisoners held like animals in "tiger-caves", starved, choked and forced to drinking their own urine' (Khakhar and Sheikh 1970 7-8: np).

Two globalized local struggles were in fact mobilizing countercultural energies worldwide, and figured prominently in the pages of Indian little mags: Vietnam, and Bangladesh. A huge 'concert for Bangladesh', organized by George Harrison and Ravi Shankar was held in New York in August 1971, and Ginsberg wrote his poignant long anti-war poem, 'September on Jessore Road', after receiving photos of the atrocities sent to him by Ashok Shahane, who was the first to publish the poem as a broadside from India.²⁸

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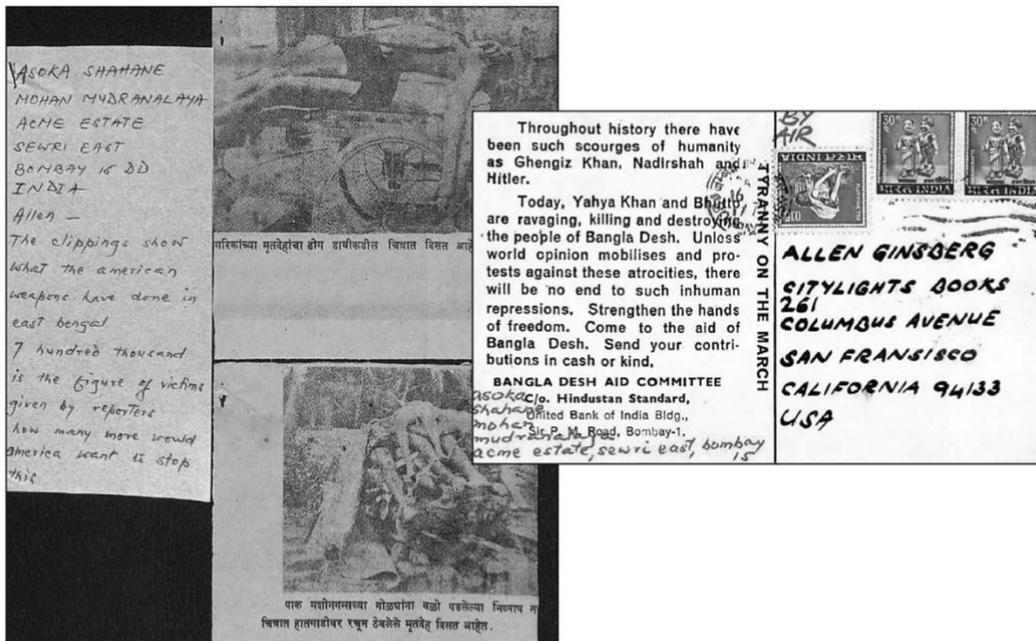


FIGURE 2.4 Some of the images sent by Ashok Shahane to Ginsberg. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries,²⁹ and Peter Hale/Ginsberg Estate

Fig. 4. Some of the images sent by Ashok Shahane to Ginsberg. Courtesy of the Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries,²⁹ and Peter Hale/Ginsberg Estate.

In many little mags, both struggles were framed as the resistance of the little peoples, or young nations of the world, to the ‘Big Nations’ or ‘great powers’. *Vrishchik*, for instance, published letters sent by an American GI in Vietnam that were introduced by a few lines suggesting these documents ‘mock at the fake capsules of humanity presented to us by the glamorous propaganda of the Big Nations’, while advocating an anti-imperialist call to arms (Khakhar and Sheikh 1970 6: np). The war in Bangladesh is likewise presented as evidence that ‘so called giant nations’ have slept over the ‘mass-scale butchery of unarmed innocents’ (Khakhar and Sheikh 1971 6-7: np).

Conclusion

In postcolonial little magazines many of the most innovative or radical Indian writers and artists found their voices, while clearing spaces (that would not have existed otherwise) for themselves. Ezekiel remembered the disdain of editors when he went from publisher to publisher with his manuscripts or ‘looked in vain for review space’ in the 60s (Ezekiel in *Anklaseria* 2008: 222). Little magazines provided him and countless others with that space, and in their pages other non-mainstream genres, forms, voices and modes found a home: critical, at times provocative essays, translations from Indian and world languages, Indian poetry in English, and many of the radical, ‘raw and unestablished’ writers or painters who used the freedom these publications gave them to challenge the status quo, and craft a modernism they could call their own.

Their ‘space-clearing gestures’ also illustrate a conception of literature which was not walled in exclusive frontiers (be they linguistic, generic or geographical), and not blunted or isolated from the world outside – the ‘everyday’ and the ‘street’ in its many forms, including the street-fighting struggles of all those who, in the 60s, stood up against forces of repression and discrimination.

These little magazines were ‘space-clearing’ or worldly in another sense as well: their anti-establishment ‘littleness’ paved the way for the future consecration of many of those who showcased their work or wrote (sometimes exclusively) in them.³⁰ Writers like Arun Kolatkar, Bhalchandra Nemade, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra or Namdeo Dhasal, and artists like Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh and Bhupen Khakhar did not remain in the ‘rain shadow region’ of literature and art, but are today recognized as the most significant modernists of their time.³¹ The fugitive or minor lives and works that seemed to dwell ‘at the other end of permanence’ (Mehrotra, *ibid*), are in fact remarkable, memorable – and worldly.

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¹ Bombay was a breeding ground for small collaborative publishing ventures and for modernisms in India, but the story of postcolonial little mags could be told from other vantage points. As suggested below, the Bombay little magazine scene was connected to other cities, including Calcutta, Baroda, Delhi, or Allahabad. Some of the material used in this essay draws on 'The Worlds of Bombay Poetry' double special issue (Nerlekar and Zecchini 2017a), in which many visual documents are included, and on my ongoing work on Indian modernisms, such as my monograph on Kolatkar (2014).

² Kapur 2001. This essay is in many ways also a tribute to Geeta Kapur's trailblazing work.

³ See Nerlekar & Zecchini 2017a, especially interviews with Gulammohammed Sheikh (69-82) and Gieve Patel (25-32).

⁴ Personal email to the author, July 24th 2014.

⁵ Many little mags, such as *Poetry India; Vagartha*, started in 1973 from Delhi by Sujit and Meenakshi Mukherjee, or *Kavi* (later *Kavi-India*) founded by Santan Rodrigues in 1976 from Bombay, aimed at forming a bridge between different Indian languages by publishing translations.

⁶ See the extraordinary *bhakti* special issue of *Vrishchik* (1: 11-12, September-October 1970), illustrations of which are reproduced in 'The Worlds of Bombay Poetry'.

⁷ I discuss the image of 'conspiracy', used both by Adil Jussawalla and Octavio Paz in 'Translation as Literary Activism: On Invisibility and Exposure, Arun Kolatkar and the Little Magazine "Conspiracy"' (Zecchini 2017c).

⁸ Little magazines could however devote whole issues to one stand-alone poetic sequence. From some magazines also sprung small presses: the ezra-fakir press from *ezra*; Vacha Prakashan from Bhalchandra Nemade's Marathi *Vacha* (started in 1968); or Atta Prakashan from Raja Dhale's Marathi *Atta* (started in 1964). *Vrishchik* also brought out texts as 'vrishchik publication(s)'.
⁹ This poem, which exists both in English and in Marathi, and also has a song version, illustrates the linguistic and generic traffics or cross-pollinations discussed earlier.

¹⁰ See Adil Jussawalla (1972a), and AK Ramanujan who writes that for Indian writers in English 'the starch is always showing on the collar. He can't be carefree, unruly' (2001: 44).

¹¹ See Mehrotra's letters to Howard McCord in 1966 ('Hungry Generation Archive', Northwestern University Library). Also see the damning article written by Anil Saari on Ezekiel entitled 'The T S Browning of Byculla, Bombay' (1966, np).

¹² 'Interview' (Imtiaz and Anil Dharker 2008: 43). Mehrotra has since revised his earlier harsh judgement. See Zecchini 2017b.

¹³ Arvind Krishna Mehrotra explains that what attracted him to *bhakti* was what attracted him to the Beats: 'the outspokenness, the transgression, the free thinking, the upturning of social norms, the use of everyday speech' (in Zecchini 2017b: 201). I have discussed elsewhere the lifelong engagement of many little mag contributors with *bhakti*, in which they seemed to recover their modernity, often translating *bhakti* 'poets' and recasting them as countercultural figures.

¹⁴ See my interview with Sheikh (Zecchini 2017a) for details on Octavio Paz in India.

¹⁵ After the project of editing a special *klacto* issue fizzled out, *Intrepid* brought out a special Indian poetry issue guest-edited by Carl Weissner (Spring 1968), and *measure 3*, edited by Howard Mc Cord published a 'Young Poets of India' issue in 1972. Rayaprol started the little magazine *East and West* in 1956 and regularly corresponded with William Carlos Williams (See Rayaprol 2020).

¹⁶ In the course of a conversation in Bombay, Ashok Shahane also remembered how the only available copy of Burroughs' *Naked Lunch* was circulated clandestinely among Bombay writers and artists in the 1960s.

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¹⁷ See Zecchini 2020 and 2022. That is also why I argue for a connected history of the anti-establishment little magazines like *damn you* or *Contra 66*, with magazines that appear more conventional, such as *Quest*.

¹⁸ Indian little magazines are scarcely discussed in Eric Bulson's otherwise influential book. Chapter 5 on the 'postcolonial little magazine', only looks at magazines from the West Indies and Africa, and the first chapter includes only a few pages on pre-independence magazines from Calcutta.

¹⁹ The expression is Adil Jussawalla's (1972b, np).

²⁰ These letters are available here: <https://fr.scribd.com/document/272080664/Letters-Related-to-Hugryalist-Movement>

²¹ See for instance Mehrotra's humorously critical review of Ginsberg's *Indian journals* aptly titled 'An Innocent Abroad' (in *measure* 3, 1972: 91-92).

²² The 'stealing metaphor' is abundantly used by Indian modernists, including Mehrotra and Kolatkar, but also Gieve Patel or Gulammohammed Sheikh (see their interviews in Nerlekar & Zecchini 2017).

²³ Jussawalla also organized the 'Dangerous Animals' series of readings at St Xavier's in Bombay in the 70s (Zecchini 2020).

²⁴ Since some forms, like 'free verse' have spread all over the world, 'it would only be fair to call their use in India 'parasitic' if all international cross-influences and borrowings went by that name' (1974: 18).

²⁵ 'How I Hum the Song of Bhagwad!' (*Vrishchik*, August-September 1971)

²⁶ See Nerlekar and Zecchini 2017a, especially Raja Dhale's interview (Bhat-Behere 2017: 138-146).

²⁷ For a discussion of PROYOM and the political ferment of the 1960s and 70s, but also of the reading and print cultures of Bombay see: '[We All Have A Genuine Fear of Violence](#)' (Zecchini 2018). Also see Nerlekar and Zecchini (2017b).

²⁸ See in particular Shahane's interview (Nerlekar 2017b).

²⁹ M0733, Alan Ginsberg papers, Series 1, Box 173, folder 34, Shahane.

³⁰ That is why Anjali Nerlekar talks about these littles as the 'originary spaces of the canon' (2016: 190).

³¹ Expression used by Mehrotra (2019: xiv).