

Reminiscing College Days with my Comrade-in-Arms, Tarun Bhartiya



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The last two months since his sudden passing on January 25, 2025, has revealed that everyone has their favorite Tarun stories and that special connection that only they shared with him, that was his gift to all of us.



Jinee Lokaneeta and Tarun Bhartiya in Delhi. Photo: Jinee Lokaneeta

My first memory of Tarun is from the first day of college. It was July 1989, when I sat in the canteen and looked up to a *kurta*-wearing comrade who walked up to me to ask me rather provocatively about my left credentials. I was both amused and intrigued by his question. This conversation started my association and life-long friendship with [Tarun Bhartiya](#) in Kirorimal College (KMC), Delhi University. The last two months since his sudden passing on January 25, 2025, has revealed that everyone has their favorite Tarun stories and that special connection that only they shared with him, that was his gift to all of us.

As innumerable obituaries emerge on Tarun's life and especially from his time in Shillong, where he built a beautiful and inspiring life (that I will regret never having witnessed beyond hearing excitedly

about it from him), with the incredible Angela Rangad and their three kids that he absolutely lived for, I want to share a little about Tarun that many of us knew in our college days.

That decade 1989-1999 was unforgettable politically. The anti-Mandal agitations against OBC reservations were taking place, Babri Masjid was demolished, and liberalisation of the Indian economy was unfolding rapidly. Delhi University was a visible hub of vibrant left and feminist student movements that Tarun was a significant part of and that phase shaped us all forever.

KMC had a tradition of left politics during that time – in fact, CPI's student wing AISF had been active in KMC and remnants of that remained, though our own little group of friends defined ourselves as independent/rainbow left. Tarun and I were both a part of Players – the legendary theatre society of KMC, with Keval Arora as the towering figure then and now. Players defined Tarun and me as we navigated the complex relationship of theatre with politics and aesthetics.

All through my friendship with Tarun, he had an ability to draw me out from my shell that I sometimes took refuge in. Despite being surrounded by so many influences – left, feminist, theatre – his influence was distinctive. When the Babri Masjid was demolished in 1992, many of us had already witnessed the rising tide of communalism and the BJP since the 1980s and the efforts by groups like [Sampradayikta Virodhi Abhiyan](#), and Sahmat to challenge them. We were all shocked, but I didn't really respond immediately with the urgency it needed. I was then the Vice President of the College – thanks to the efforts of this group of concerned students/rainbow left that Tarun was a part of. And I remember the comradely reminder that my comrade-in-arms proceeded to give me. Most of us recall that period with horror and yet, that period also defined the political growth for our group of friends from all over DU who went to hostels and immersed ourselves in community initiatives. That ability to be supportive individually and yet be ready to shake you out of your lethargy defined our friendship and it was mutual.

While Tarun believed in collectives, individual acts of courage were equally important. Years later, when he circulated a draft of his letter [returning his national award](#) for editing, I recalled his acts of courage in college to do what he thought was morally and politically right. Just as he did when we had a Sahmat exhibition in college that was torn down by ABVP *goondas* and Tarun was beaten up. That was the first time we all circulated a *parcha*/pamphlet in college condemning this act as a group of concerned students.

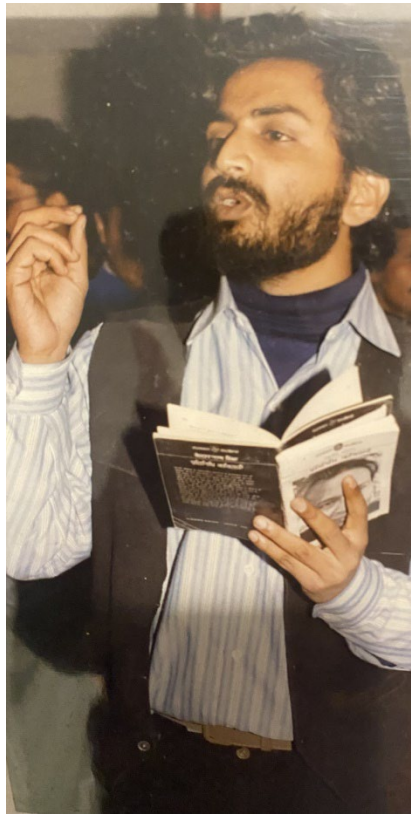
Tarun was always super fun to hang out with, provocative, mischievous and a great storyteller. And sometimes he would unexpectedly create moments of magic. An aunt once asked me to create a play for Independence Day with the young children in a resettlement colony near Delhi University.

Tarun and my first instinct was to draw upon the street theatre tradition of satirical plays. I had been a part of *Nishant Natya Manch* and Players had its own tradition of Hindi street theatre. And then Tarun said, let us not recreate the seriousness of their everyday life, let's ask them what they want to create a play about. It was of course a completely magical play filled with fairies and fun that they/we all imagined together and needless to say it was perfect.

We called each other C.I.A. – comrade-in-arms – even as it confused others due to its other meanings, but it inspired one always to push oneself as that's what he did with comrades.

Tarun and I often talked about the shared left political heritage we inherited from our respective parents. That meant us performing "*Ganga ki kasam, Jamuna ki kasam, ye tana bana badlega, tu khud tou badal, tu khud tou badal, badlega zamana badlega*" routinely at rallies but also just the ability to laugh at each other and with each other. When we met, he laughingly would say, referring

to the meanings of our respective names: young Indian (Tarun Bhartiya) meets birth of people's will (Jinee Lokaneeta).



Tarun reading poetry at Jinee's postwedding gathering, 1996. Photo: Jinee Lokaneeta

It is still hard to imagine that I/we will not get to enjoy the conversations that have continued remarkably since 1989 despite the distance that our living abroad put between us. He was one of the MCs in Sangay Mishra and my post-court wedding gathering with friends and family. He charmed the wedding gathering by reading beautiful Urdu/Hindi poetry. Tarun was extremely generous in sharing his work. His friends would get drafts of letters, of texts for his photos or precuts of his films and he would engage with even the most critical feedback.

Of course, every time, I or someone else would suggest he create a website, CV or consolidate his phenomenal body of work – poetry, photos, films and articles – but he would laugh and say no, though he had slowly started publishing his series of photographs.

Just recently as he did his first [photo exhibition in Ahmedabad](#), that his proud family witnessed, he had shared plans of publishing his book of photos and laughingly said to the *kirorimal wallahs* (our whatsapp group of five friends who have miraculously stayed in touch since college), “Finally I am mainstreaming myself.”

And one hopes that his work travels far and wide. Perhaps his own vision of his creations circulating on their own, emerging in unexpected spaces, will always exist alongside our efforts to honour his memory in more enduring ways.

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