

# Yoda Press: A Manifesto

Arpita Das 2019

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Yoda Press was set up in the winter of 2003 and published its first title in the fall of 2004. From the beginning we were clear that our publishing list had to anticipate something new and unprecedented in Indian publishing and yet represent what we believed was as much a truth about India as what was being depicted by mainstream publishing. We were indeed influenced, even inspired, in such a decision by the work done by the first South Asian feminist Press, Kali for Women, which had come into being in the mid-1980s.

In the early 2000s in New Delhi where we were based, the LGBT movement was quietly gathering strength and was a few years away from pouring out on the streets of the capital with a force and voice that took the entire city, even the country, by storm and led to some of the most historic legal pronouncements and judgements in the history of modern India. At the time that we were setting up Yoda Press, however, no other publishing house was interested in queer writing. A young, dynamic, articulate, and nuanced generation of queer activists was passing out of law school and social work departments at that time, and reading their writing, mostly on the internet, we were certain that this was a list that needed our attention. We published our first LGBT title in the list in 2005. It was called *Because I Have A Voice: Queer Politics in India*. For the first time, twenty-seven members of the LGBT community came together in a nonfiction book where they wrote stories of activism, personal narratives of coming out to their families, transgender narratives of oppression at the hands of the law, and academic explorations into being queer in India. The book acquired cult status, very quickly becoming something of a manifesto for the LGBT community here, and remains in print till today. We had set out in 2005 with the intention to publish at least one title in this list every year. Fourteen years on, we have published seventeen.

Having initiated the LGBT list in collaboration with a young activist who would soon become one of the most important voices of the movement, Gautam Bhan, the rest of our list drew fuel and inspiration from it. We focused on genres such as popular culture, city writings, and new perspectives in Indian history, and every title in these lists, just like those in the LGBT list, was driven by one clear intention, that it smashed some aspect of patriarchy or a belief or mindset held dear by it. It was, and remains, our belief that many of our books would only make a difference in a country like India if they were available in at least one other Indian language, Hindi. In the case of three of our titles, therefore, one on the transgender community of the southern part of India, another on the fraught issue of relocation and rehabilitation of slum communities, and the third on the aftermath of communal riots in a part of North India, we published the Hindi edition before the English one, with the intent to reach out to that part of the readership, which was

most directly affected by the subject of the book and hence would be benefited most by the publication of the book.

Post 2010, we began to feel that political dissent was a list we wanted to actively develop. The intent emerged out of the socio-political reality of the country and the rising right-wing wave which soon transformed into a full-blown right-wing national government in 2014. One of the ways in which we decided to do this was through graphic anthologies. We had already published a very successful graphic book on masculinities in India in 2009 called *A Little Book on Men*, another one that continues to remain in print till today, and drawing on that experience, we decided to publish the first graphic anthology on the Indian Partition. In a collaboration with the Goethe Institute, this book called *This Side That Side* came out in 2013 with more than forty storytellers and illustrators from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as contributors. The project was curated for us by one of the best-known graphic novelists of India, Vishwajyoti Ghosh, and the book received a glowing pre-publication blurb from Joe Sacco. Emboldened by the success of this ambitious endeavour, we launched a graphic anthology series called First Hand in 2016 which brings together graphic narratives on stories based on on-the-ground reportage in the country on issues such as climate change, violence against women, migration, the nexus between corporations and governments, the LGBT movement and queer identity, and so on. The second volume in the series came out earlier this year, focusing on the important issue of exclusion of various communities in India from even the basic standards of humane living, in partnership with the Centre for Equity Studies based in New Delhi. Our partnership with this prestigious organization started back in 2015 and has grown into a relationship of synergy and mutual trust. We now publish their very important annually produced *India Exclusion Report*, and also have a series of smaller books with them looking at areas of conflict in India, such as Muzaffarnagar and Kashmir.

Another list we have built is one on the Muslims of South Asia. These are mostly academic titles, and recently we have published two landmark titles on gender in Pakistan and another on Muslim women in India. The focus in this list has been around how the Muslim community in South Asia is as heterogeneous a community as any other, and yet, with the growing Islamophobia in the world as well as in this part of the world which insists on giving them a ghettoised identity, the challenges they face in continuing to engage with the society they are part of and the polity that is increasingly partisan toward them.

Having been a nonfiction publisher for the first decade of our existence, we decided to start a fiction imprint in 2017. We were very clear, however, that our fiction titles, like our nonfiction ones, would challenge the accepted idea

of how fiction should be written or what it should focus on. Our first fiction title was an experiment in speculative short fiction focused on bibliophilia, which was shortlisted for the prestigious Jan Michalski Prize for World Literature last year, and our second title was a translation to English of an award-winning Malayalam novel based in Mecca by the great Muslim author from our southern state Kerala, Khadeeja Mumtaz. We have now published six titles in the fiction list.

In the past couple of years, we have been getting more interested in the writing around mental health and psychotherapy in India. While both the practice and pedagogy around these subjects are now at a fairly mature stage in India, reading lists for students as well as go-to references for interested readers mostly contain books written by Western authors. Going forward, therefore, we are keen to develop a robust list, both academic and trade,

on psychology and the psychotherapy practice in India, both among the middle class as well as the underprivileged sections of our population. We have published three important books in this list over 2017-18 and intend to bring out one every year from now on.

A few days ago, the Supreme Court of India put out a historic judgment which decriminalized homosexuality in India for the first time since the country was under colonial rule. Two of our titles were cited multiple times in the body and footnotes of the judgment, just as another had been cited in a landmark judgment in 2016 recognizing the transgender community. Our LGBT list which has continued to thrive and change over the years in keeping with the changes in the movement now has more memoir and fiction.

The cycle appears to be complete, and another set of titles is all set to go to print.