

ME AND MY CITY

THROUGH THE LENS



Birds of a feather

The view of a lake near Rann of Kutch, Gujarat.
PHOTO: VINEESH VASUDEVAN

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CULTURE CAPSULE



Theatre performance

Watch Pankaj Kapoor and his wife, Supriya Pathak perform in a Hindi play titled Dreamz-Seher. The play is set against the backdrop of Kasauli.

Where: Experimental Theatre, NCPA, Nariman Point
When: February 5
Timings: 4pm and 7pm

ACT OF FAITH

Bangalore-based playwright Abhishek Majumdar's latest production, set in the 8th century, looks at the roots of Hindu philosophy



Sandeep Shikhar in a still from the play



Ipshita Chakraborty and Shubhrajyoti Barat

NEW SHOWS

Muktidham will be staged at Prithvi Theatre, Juhu, on February 4 and 5, at 5pm and 9pm.

Kaushani Banerjee

SEE

After the success of Gasha, Hayavadana and Kaumudi, Abhishek Majumdar's latest play, Muktidham, opens in Mumbai this weekend after a run at Bangalore's Ranga Shankara. The fictionalised piece is laced with historical facts, and is set against the backdrop of a Matha (Hindu monastery), in a fictional town called Beerpur. The time period is 8th century AD, when the Pala Empire ruled the east and large parts of northern India. Mass conversion to Buddhism was the call of the day. "We studied most of the Hindu texts such as the Vedas, the Manu Smriti, and their

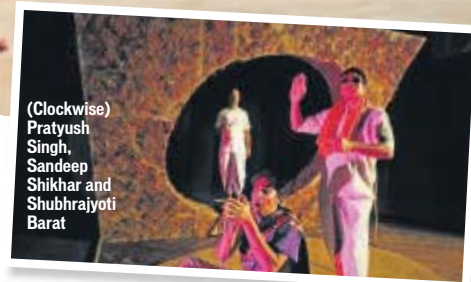
various interpretations. There are various plays from that period. I studied both online and physical books as a part of the research [for the play]. Vandana Menon collaborated with me on it," says Majumdar, who has written and directed the play.

TELLING THE TALE

The story revolves around a Hindu temple town that is surrounded by Buddhists. "Acharya Nath, the head of the Matha, is going to take samadhi (die and achieve salvation). His major concern is about what he is going to leave behind, because he lives at a time when everybody is slowly turning to Buddhism. There are two possible

successors — Yuyutsu, who believes in opening the doors of the temple to the lower castes, and Agnivesh, who believes in raising an armed resistance to fight Buddhism. The play explores the conflict between the two possibilities," elaborates Majumdar. The play features Kumud Mishra, Shubhrajyoti Barat and Sandeep Shikhar, among other theatre actors.

While Muktidham explores deep questions of religion, the playwright is not a believer in religion himself. "I am an atheist, and the biggest challenge for me was to write this play as a believer [of God]. The play isn't a debate between atheists and believers. It took me two years to get myself to think as a believer," says Majumdar.



(Clockwise) Pratyush Singh, Sandeep Shikhar and Shubhrajyoti Barat

Speaking about his own beliefs, he says, "I think every religion asks three questions — how we were created, what happens after death, and what should be our moral code of conduct. However, I think that the track record of religion is poor when it comes to providing answers to these questions. Secondly, there is so much evil done in the name of religion; so many people have been oppressed by it. But I understand people need it as it helps them remain grounded."

MIRRORING SOCIETY

The play revolves around two characters who represent different ideologies and pits them against each other. Majumdar, through this play, highlights how the right wing came into existence, in a similar fashion, "There are so many kinds of believers. Often, one particular kind [of believer] claims that a certain way is the only way to be part of a religion; that no other kind of religious

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ABHISHEK MAJUMDAR, PLAYWRIGHT

engagement is good enough. I think that is still mirrored in today's society. Religion is not devoid of politics. It is a structure of power. For example, the moment I say I have faith in someone without any scientific reason, it's already political, because it means I have assumed the position of subservience, without actually having any proof to back my reasoning. Politics is ingrained in religion. One cannot claim to be Hindu and say they do not believe in casteism," says Majumdar.

SENSITIVE TOPIC

However, religion often proves to be a sensitive point in conversation. Does Majumdar fear any backlash? "Every playwright is making plays — whether they're set in 8th or 25th century, to look at where we are now. Sometimes, the best way to look at things is to go to some other place. Then we can have a distance, and we can understand why we are where we are. You see, theatre is a place of questions. It raises questions that are sensitive. Some people will be okay with it and some may not be, but that's what plays are all about," he says.

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