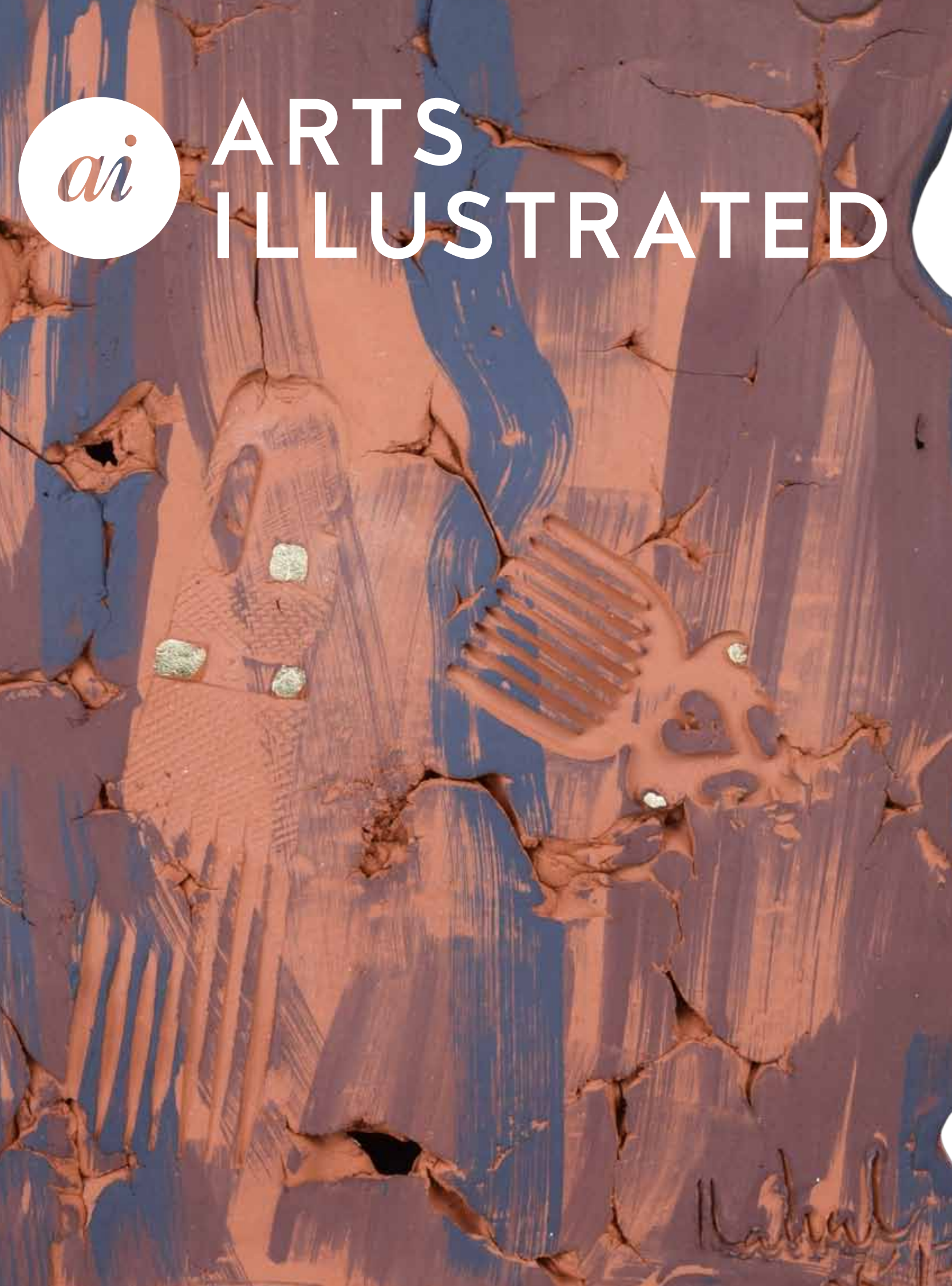




# ARTS ILLUSTRATED



*Natal*

---

### *Editor's note*

---

It was a rainy Sunday afternoon, a rarity in water-starved Madras. The room, a small one with divans in the corner, recliners at the back, bean bags, cane and wooden square stools strewn around, was full. It was a Pop Philosophy class – Episode 5 to give it the full Star Wars effect – by Warhorse, a group of young, dynamic change-makers trying to revitalise the space of education and learning. This particular episode of Pop Philosophy (the series was about finding connections between philosophy and pop culture) was whimsically titled 'Ai-Ai-O' – it was on artificial intelligence and the questions it raised about ethics, morality, and, well, humanity, while we are at it.

I was drawn into this world of science-fiction-meets-reality, of human-like robots and robot-like thoughts, of impossible ideas becoming possible futures, and of a time where everything can be simulated, even our senses.

It seemed like serendipity, that I was there in this man-made world (a whole new meaning to that phrase now) with this issue of Tactile Art fermenting in my head. Were we looking at this idea of 'sense perception' from a soon-to-be-obsolete platform or did it just up that urgency quotient on memories, ancient like the earth, that reside inside our skin, in our bones, in our blood? And more importantly, did it even belong to us?

We looked at this aspect of tactility, and therefore its manifestation in art, through myriad lenses – through nostalgia, movement, visual suggestions, through the politics of identity, the power of legacy, the promise of technology, and even the subtlety of music. And through words, of course. In each of our stories, the individual has collided with the collective in unpredictable ways, like asteroids briefly stepping out of their orbits, showing us unexpected beauty in the destruction of platitudes we often surround ourselves with, and a tenderness with which to arm ourselves for the future we are heading towards.

This issue of AI (the irony does not escape me) is like that assiduous earthworm going in and out, in and out, the entire physicality of its being making the soil soft and moist, so ideas can be planted better.



Praveena Shivram  
praveena@artsillustrated.in

---

### *Cover Artist*

---



When I started my journey with clay, I found it rewarding to make pots people could use. The anatomy of a bowl, its size, proportions and points of transitions allowed for endless discovery of balance and rhythm. Gradually, as I focused more on the form and character of the pot, utility and function took a back seat. My work became more sculptural. I started to 'reinvent' things from nature with my own visual language. The works are often a delicate balance between wheel-thrown components and slab-constructed additives. Developing these two methods simultaneously allowed a fresh creative approach that promotes exhibiting the contrast of the medium – wheel-thrown representing symmetry and rigidity; and hand-built components showing the organic and fluid nature of the clay.

For the cover of this issue of Arts Illustrated, I have used the terracotta clay fired to 1020 degree centigrade. I have brushed stains and white clays, as well as used gold-leaf on the surface. My process of creation manifests a kind of behaviour that is a potent mix of the ritualistic, intuitive and spontaneous. It involves the unconventional use of ordinary objects and motifs. The process becomes evident in the art work itself. I have referenced familiar, yet mundane, domestic objects, which are repurposed in the overall rendition. The ultimate aim is the dematerialisation of the form... 'nirguna' or the attribute-less. The clay object has picked each dent and slap, creating undulations and cracks, creating an experience open to be interpreted. Is it a microscopic detail of something organic, or is it a spatial view of a landscape? Is it a sculpture, or is it a painting? It asks to be felt, giving a glimpse into how I created the piece, albeit a fraction of it.



*Rahul Kumar*



# Sky Capers

A sensory journey remembering Babu Khan, the greatest kite maker of India, and the legacy he left behind

SUPRIYA SEHGAL

The 18th century Jal Mahal in Jaipur rises from the middle of the mirror-flat waters of the sprawling Man Sagar Lake in a most ethereal manner, giving regulars and visitors hanging by the cornice something to sigh about on a daily basis. A mere glimpse of it can put the urban stress of the city to ease. Pushy traders try to distract one with puppets and toys, and the commercial hustle of snacks and ice creams sets the place abuzz. But so stunning is the structure that it is easy to fix your gaze on the island palace and stay adrift.

Located just behind the lake and its divine occupant are the Karballa Grounds, a stimulating contrast to the time-stopping tranquillity. Here, something else brews, even in the blazing heat of the afternoon. One is welcomed by the sound of a roaring 'ouuuutttt' long before setting foot on the dusty expanse, which lies in the snug embrace of crumbling, plaster-less walls of lower income group homes. Garbage mounds lie as toppings on the pale, grass-less makeshift

cricket pitch for youngsters. Undeterred by the severe hand of the sun, games ensue and decisions are yelled with gusto.

One such stifling afternoon in May, I found myself standing at the mouth of the field, just where the tennis ball had rolled in for a 'four'. Although impressed by the athleticism Indian boys naturally muster for cricket, no matter what the weather, I was there to find a different troupe of sportsmen.

To my left, at the far end of the amoeba-shaped field, a group of six elders stood, looking up at the cloudless sky. Shading their eyes with the flat of their palms, necks craned skywards, they were startled to see an unlikely visitor when their gaze dropped. The dual confusion was settled when I told them that I was looking for the *patang dangal* (kite playgrounds), and they explained their posture; they were gauging wind patterns. Amused that someone had come to explore the art of kite flying in Jaipur, out of season, they ribbed on my 'big city' intolerance towards non-air-conditioned

places and asked me to stand in the shade till they started their daily ritual.

But I smiled politely, and spilled my questions without wasting any time. Were they regulars? How many clubs were there in Jaipur? How many people to each club? When did they practice? When were the annual competitions? Did they make money? Was there any betting? What was the biggest championship? And who out of them possessed Babu Khan's kites? The last question triggered a smile on several lips. On the floor, close to their feet, lay large, flat, squarish suitcases, hoarding their most prized possessions – the kites. The eldest gentleman, Rafiq, flipped open his case and let the label of 'Babu Khan' peer at me. We all bent down on our haunches around the suitcase and inspected the artistry of not one, but about 10 handmade kites – each with a unique design.

Soon, more men joined the group. Some boys even left the riveting cricket game midway and

circled around us. Rafiq spoke passionately about the master craftsman with reverence. Appreciation poured in from others in the group. Most of the elders had flown kites with Babu Khan, and missed his astute skills both creatively and sport wise. Sadly, Khan died in 2014 at the age of 76.

We moved on to the specifics about the kites – ‘*addha*’ (half) or ‘*pauna*’ (three-quarters), depending on the size. The strings are specifically sourced from Bareilly. Rafiq and his kite cadre include 150–200 people in Jaipur. These are serious hobbyists in the city who have formed over 12 teams that fight each other every year at the annual competition during Makar Sankranti. On other days, the enthusiasm comes in the form of playground practices in the afternoons, when business in their shops is slow. The daily duels are known as *dangal*.

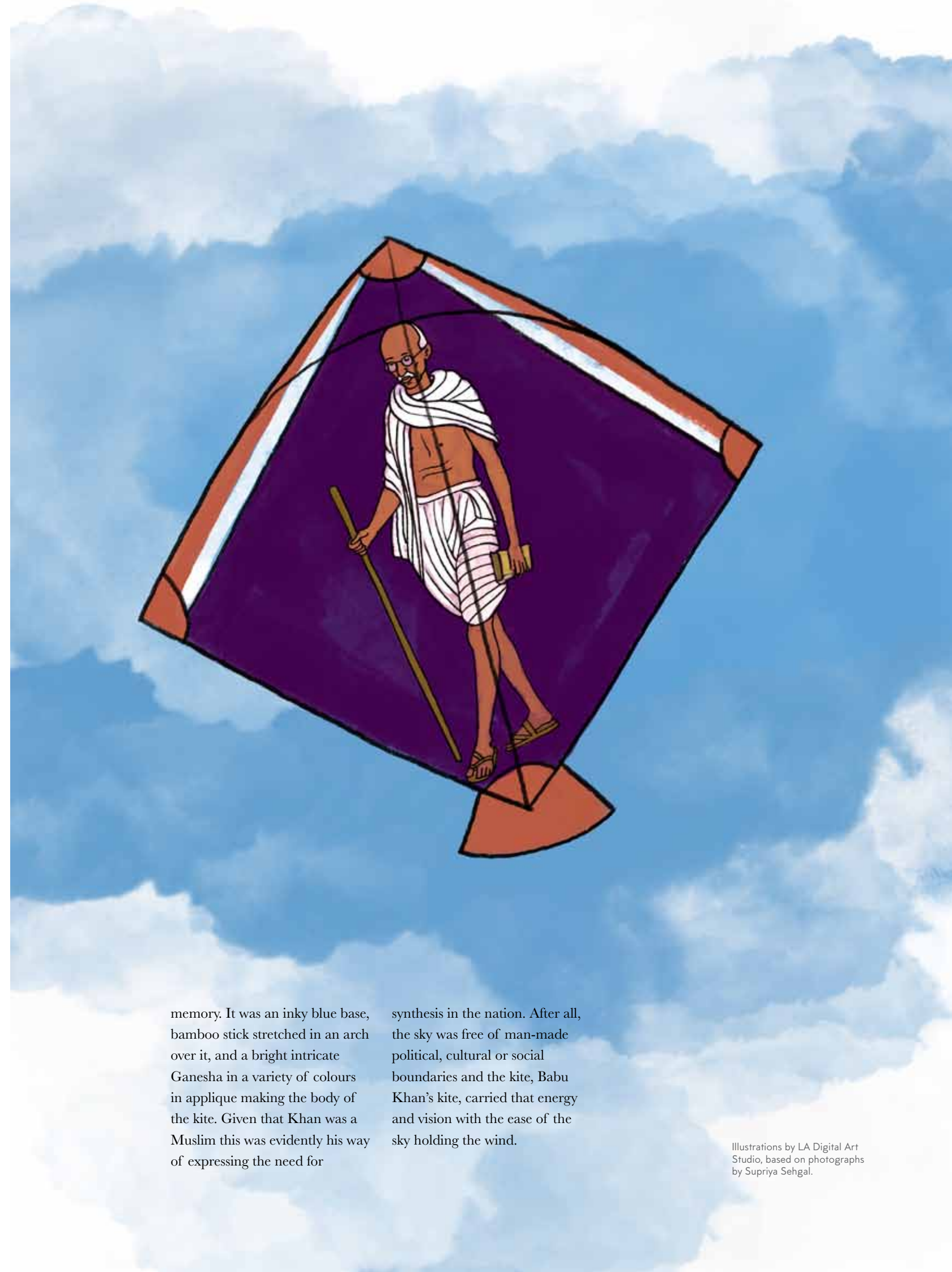
As I was getting educated about the business of kite flying, someone spotted Feroze, Babu Khan’s grandson, and hollered for him. The youngster came close and on the insistence of others in the group, offered to take me home, where his grandfather’s legendary kites were enshrined in different steel boxes.

The love for Babu Khan is not confined to the Karballa Grounds alone. His name still resonates in the entire Badanpura area where he lived for many years. We navigated the snaking streets on a bike – a maze that I could never retrace my steps back on. As we went in deeper into the

Badanpura area, I saw that the art of kite making has been kept alive. Feroze and his brother too run a small shop in the slimmest street around the house.

In Feroze’s modest home, large steel boxes were pulled out from under the bed. Each kite crafted by Babu Khan was preserved with a sealed plastic covering. These were his signature canvasses of art and tools to impart strong messages of secularism. Too afraid to damage any of them, I asked Feroze to hold them up for me to see. Nationalistic themes, birds, cartoons, Mahatma Gandhi, various Hindu Gods, Taj Mahal,

Medina and Indian motifs dressed the delicate paper of the ruthless fighter kites. His delicate applique work was particularly famous. The designs were not drawn on the kites, but individual coloured papers were cut out and stuck together to make a seamless base. Feroze even pointed to a photograph I had seen in several articles about him; Babu Khan handling a string with 100 kites on it. It was the biggest draw for onlookers who came to see only Khan show his kite-flying prowess. While this was often his claim to fame for the outsiders, the reticent Feroze spoke of his true love – the message behind the kites. There was one that stuck in my



memory. It was an inky blue base, bamboo stick stretched in an arch over it, and a bright intricate Ganesha in a variety of colours in applique making the body of the kite. Given that Khan was a Muslim this was evidently his way of expressing the need for

synthesis in the nation. After all, the sky was free of man-made political, cultural or social boundaries and the kite, Babu Khan’s kite, carried that energy and vision with the ease of the sky holding the wind.

Illustrations by LA Digital Art Studio, based on photographs by Supriya Sehgal.

