

The Way Home

Kattas as Navigation Aids

BHARTI KHER



Image courtesy: Subodh Gupta

This title refers to an installation made by Subodh Gupta in 2000. As part of the work he placed almost 200 steel utensils on the floor and interspersed them with chrome polished *kattas*.¹

These aren't strictly your typical type of gun... they are colloquially known as *kattas* in Bihar and U.P. (to those unfamiliar: handmade revolvers). Guns have an image of being sophisticated and sexy and dangerous. Heroes fire guns, round after round, killing the bad guys. We accept them as part of contemporary life now. The professionals or city elite do not keep *kattas* since their gun culture takes on a different socio/political agenda.

Kattas are the cheapest firearm you can buy. They are the stainless steel plates of crockery. Underworld operatives approach the arms dealer directly while neophytes have to go through a *dalal* (broker). They come in from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, but are made increasingly in and around Mumbai, such as Thane, Andheri MIDC, Virar and Panvel. More sophisticated arms are smuggled from Karachi, Kabul, Colombo and Kathmandu.

"*Ek kaua 15 blue mein mileaga* (One country-made revolver will be available for Rs 1,500)", said Mumbai's biggest illegal arms supplier, known by the alias of Bullet Bhai.² Bullet Bhai's mobile number isn't very difficult to get and both con and cop allegedly avail

of his services. Gangsters use him to purchase and dispose arms, while the police allegedly buy weapons off him that they plant on gangsters after encounters.

The *katta* is commonly found in homes across Eastern India. They are kept for protection, aggression and, ironically, to maintain a state of neutrality. What happens instead is that this trend has fuelled the widespread violence and intolerance that had become synonymous earlier with small towns in Bihar and now, also, with towns in Western India. Handmade, *kattas* are often crudely crafted from steel pipes that sometimes even explode or backfire, causing injury to the possessor. If you've seen the bullets they look large enough to kill an elephant.

Subodh's guns are both seductive and repellent. So obviously fake – the barrel is solid, all the way through. It is weighty though, like a real one, and has the customary top heaviness that results from crude assembly. Its beautifully contradictory... you want to hold it and stroke it. He has made the *katta* sexy and shiny and new, like the steel utensils that are commonplace but increasingly becoming the fashionable material for a new discerning class (another example of the cheap ready-made being reinvented to become exclusive by the upper middle class).

In effect these are guns that do not exist: there is no record of how many are made or how many kill or injure others. If we were to compare research and statistics in America (which – to an extent at least – was built with firearms), guns kill nearly 40,000 Americans a year, injure over twice as many and are involved in nearly a million crimes. But, like many people here, Americans have mixed feelings about their guns. Two-thirds believe guns contribute to violence. The same number believe they need them for protection as well, and the opinion that it is certainly a person's civil right to own a firearm to defend the family has led to the widespread distribution of illegal weapons pretty much all over the world.

How do you keep a gun away from its owner? An oft-quoted statistic: "a gun kept in the home for self-protection is twenty-two times more likely to kill or injure someone you know than to be used for self-defense".³

How does a gun that was never made kill an innocent person? The answer leads to a world of corporate neglect and criminal greed, to a black market in guns and an illicit business of trafficking in firearms which is capitalism at its best. Capitalism is all about return, the selling of goods for the highest return. It is a thriving, big business and these are times when there is no turning back. The way home is fraught with obstacles and dangers.

NOTES

1. Gupta, Subodh *The Way Home* (2000). Subodh Gupta can be contacted at: khergupta@sampark.online.com
2. Khan, Jake *Bombay becoming biggest illegal arms bazaar in India* (in *Bombay Rediff News*, 12 July 1998).
3. Kellerman, A.L et al "Inquiries and Death Due to Firearms in the Home" (in *Journal of Trauma, Injury, Infection and Critical Care* Vol. 45, No.2, 1998).