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# Portrait of an artist in the rains | Indian artists on monsoon inspirations

Rabindra Sangeet and Bollywood songs to train rides and art. Six creators share monsoon-drenched memories and inspirations

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Clockwise from top left: Garima Gupta, Debashish Paul, Orijit Sen, Sheetal Mallar, and Gaurav Ogale

Rains have always sparked artistic imagination. Vincent Van Gogh's rain lashed over empty farmland in intense, slanted lines; miniature artists in the Mughal and Rajput traditions drew dark clouds over lush green fields in which Krishna and his *gopis* danced; and in a meta commentary on individuality, René Magritte poured his own bowler-hatted self from the sky in *Golconda*.

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The arrival of the monsoon can turn us all into pluviophiles, but perhaps it affects artists more than the rest of us. We asked six artists from across India what the season means to them.

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## **Garima Gupta**

*Artist and researcher, Mumbai*

I moved to Bombay late September of 2012 and everyone warned me of the awful October heat. I braced myself for the worst. But October decided to spare me that year; it rained every evening! Tucked in the lane flanked by a Portuguese church on one end and Siddhivinayak on the other, I watched people walk in either direction to their place of worship in pouring rain. Older couples hand in hand, wet crows that hung upside down from electric cables, lush green rain trees. Had it not been for that monsoon, I may have never learnt to love Bombay.



**Good and bad:** I am an August born and the memory of the monsoon starting with a roar around my birthday is deeply embedded. Sometimes I have to stop and remind myself that untimely rains are wrecking standing crops and causing damage. But then we as a people have also abolished all possibilities of joy because guilt and shame are dominating our thoughts. We don't pull up our authorities when things fall apart, but will learn to kill our only chance of joy.



From *Our Conspiring Hosts*, a series of paintings inspired by the Amazon rainforest after a storm



From 2023's *Our Conspiring Hosts*

**Rainy day favourites:** I love the Bollywood songs from the 1970s and 80s, where the protagonists are enjoying the rains. There's something about that simple joy that gets me every time.

## Orijit Sen

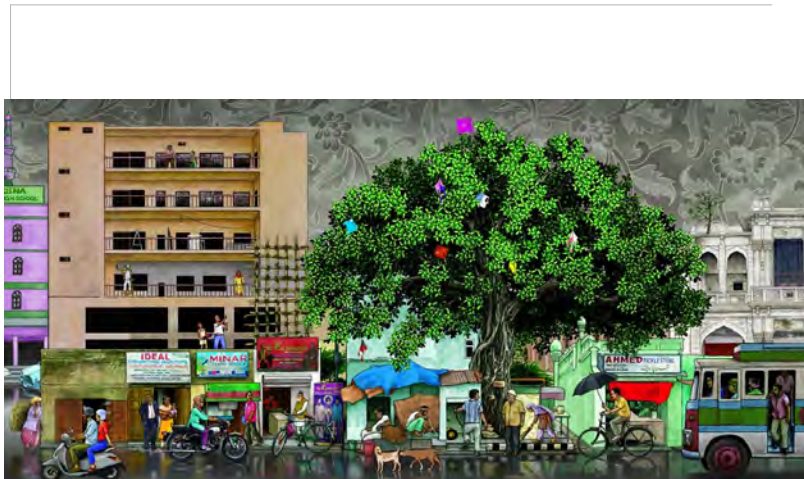
*Artist and graphic designer, Goa*

One of my most vivid memories is travelling on the now defunct metre-gauge train that used to run between Vasco da Gama station and Miraj Junction during the height of the monsoons. I stood at the doorway of my carriage as it crossed a bridge halfway up the swollen Dudhsagar Falls. Even at a distance, I could feel the fine spray flying off the roaring body. In the time it took us to cross the bridge, I was drenched from head to toe!



Orijit Sen, walking in the rain

**Fresh eyes:** As an artist, I experience the monsoons as a transformative season. The colours of landscape change dramatically from shades of ochre, olive and brown, to deep, saturated greens. The quality of the light is indescribable, as it comes reflected off water bodies or refracted through millions of water droplets hanging off the foliage. I find the colour palette in my work is always influenced by these dramatic seasonal changes.



Part of Sen's Hyderabad series, *The Kite-Eating Tree* is a cropped detail of a street in Shah Ali Banda in the Old City after a shower of rain.

**Works that inspire:** One of my favourite painters is Nainsukh of Guler, a master who lived in the 18th century. One of his paintings shows a woman in a bright orange *odhni* running towards shelter as a dark cloud gathers overhead. Her clothes are billowing in the breeze as lightning flashes in the sky. The entire composition is so full of energy, motion and drama. I used to have a print of this artwork on my pin up board.

## **Debashish Paul**

*Performance artist, Varanasi*

In Banaras, when the water climbs, we head to the Nepali *mandir* on Tulsi Ghat, which is located at a height. You can see the whole valley move. When I came to Banaras for my Masters in 2019, the monsoon had just begun. On my first evening here, I found two young boys conducting the *aarti* at Tulsi Ghat, and I was infatuated with one of them. I'd visit daily for six months just to see him; I'd watch the way his body moved and transformed. That became the inspiration for my first performance work, *Beyond the Body and Gender*.



Debashish Paul



*Beyond the Body and Gender*

**Rainy day favourites:** I have a deep appreciation for Rabindra Sangeet. In Tagore's songs, such as 'Aaji jhorer raate', 'Megher Pore Megh Jomechhe', and others, I can vividly see my village, in the Nadiya district of West Bengal, where we'd make boats out of banana leaves and fish in the streets when the rains came. In the monsoon songs, you feel as if you're soaring in the sky and smelling the rain.

**Sheetal Mallar**

*Photographer and artist, Mumbai*

After these brutal summers, I find the monsoon really romantic. The city is so chaotic, and this season is cleansing in so many ways. We have a lack of public spaces, we don't have much of a park culture. So places like Carter Road, Bandstand, and Worli Seaface are really nice now.



Sheetal Mallar

For photography, the monsoon helps you create a mood. The light is more beautiful, the colour palette of the sky and the trees changes. Moody, stormy, melancholy feelings — the season's really emotive. But I also find myself doing a lot of my drawings and paintings in the monsoon, for which, unlike when taking pictures, I feel I need to go more inwards.



**Rainy day favourites:** I love to swim in the rain, and go for long walks — I own two pairs of gum boots. Songs like Shubha Mudgal's 'Ab Ke Saavan' and Billie Holiday's 'Stormy Weather' sound sweeter. And it's the time to feast on plates of *bhajiya* and *samosas*.

### **Gaurav Ogale**

*Multi-disciplinary artist, Mumbai*

My monsoon memories are a montage: standing drenched outside Sassanian Bakery in Mumbai, enveloped by the smell of freshly baked *khari*; experiencing the first showers on our *barsaati* in my hometown Pune; the smell of the ironed *rasai* (quilt) at my grandparents home. I love visiting Panchgani during the rains, and the monsoon in Berlin.



Gaurav Ogale



*Dusk Lake*

**Rainy day favourites:** I love the way Orhan Pamuk captures *hüzün* (melancholy), especially the way he talks about the winters in his book *Istanbul: Memories of a City*. It's a lot like what the monsoons mean to us in this part of the world. I find similar connotations between the monsoon and life — longing, memory, seasons, love, identity — in the works of artists such as Anju Dodiya, Arshi Ahmadzai, Hashim Badani; in films like *Water* by Deepa Mehta, Wong kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love*, Mira Nair's *Monsoon Wedding*, the underlying melancholy in Sergei Parajanov's *The Color of Pomegranates*, and in the music of Kumar Gandharva, Blaze Foley, Anika Pyle."

**Mithu Sen**

*Conceptual artist, New Delhi*

Hypothetically and romantically, I'm always viewing the monsoon through a poetic lens — where poetry becomes unpoetry and reveals its politics. The world is breaking down. We are marked by communication breakdowns, democratic system failures, market disruptions, and the collapse of language. When language is out of order, it becomes a tool for me to focus on its fragmentation.





Mithu Sen | Photo Credit: Atul Dodiya

**Rainy day favourites:** I love *Meghe Dhaka Tara* by Ritwik Ghatak. The name always reminds me of an unknown monsoon cloud that obscures the stars.

*The writer is an independent journalist based in Mumbai, writing on culture, lifestyle and technology.*

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