

The image features a dark background with large, light-colored, stylized letters 'M' and 'A' that are partially visible. The 'M' is on the left and the 'A' is on the right. In the lower right quadrant, the text 'for husain' is written in a light blue, monospace-style font. The word 'for' is smaller and positioned above the start of the word 'husain'.

for husain



Front & Back view of Saraswati fashioned  
after the famous bronze figure of Parvati  
of Vijaynagar. ca. 1450  
Paritosh Sen  
19/10/26

Drawing by Paritosh Sen  
for protest in defence of Husain,  
SAHMAT, Delhi, 1996

# *For Husain at 94*

17 September 2009



**SAHMAT**

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## For Husain at 94 Ram Rahman

For the artists' community in India, the predicament that Maqbool Fida Husain finds himself in evokes many emotions: disbelief, anger, fear, puzzlement and indignation. For a culture that venerates age, it is shocking that we have allowed this 94-year-old to be hounded out of his home and his *matrubhoomi*. Husain's forced exile is not just the case of an individual who has been falsely accused of religious blasphemy by right-wing groups and the Bharatiya Janata Party. It has serious implications for each of us as a citizen of the republic. The cynical stoking of religious hatred by political groups is not new to us. The experience of the partition is still raw and festering. Yet the Ayodhya mobilization in the 1990s opened a new wound on the body of the republic. Not without coincidence, the attacks on Husain started in 1996, on works by him that had been painted years before and which had been in the public realm. The new tactic, with repercussions for us as a nation, was to use the law as a means of attack and harassment. By filing cases against the artist across the country in a well-coordinated and strategically managed campaign, the right-wing enmeshed him in a legalistic nightmare. Experts made us realize that this perverse use of the legal framework could be directed at any one of us, and Husain was perhaps its first, most prominent victim.

Since 1996, SAHMAT has mobilized the artists' community on numerous occasions, and in various forms, in defending Husain. Protest marches, letter campaigns, meetings with the President of India, the Congress Party president, Home Ministers and lawyers, and a petition to award Husain the *Bharat Ratna* are some of these. In 2007, when we realized the futility of all these efforts, we decided to honour Husain on his 92<sup>nd</sup> birthday in a truly 'Husain' manner – with a birthday *mela*. The gathering at the Vitthalbhai Patel House lawns in New Delhi was memorable, with Husain joining us on live webcam from London.

Now, when he turns 94, artists are coming together in this project to make or contribute an artwork as their gift to Husain. This is, in a way, a creative protest against those who blaspheme Husain's art. It is also a celebration – of his work, ideals, history, and of the man himself. This little book, presented to Husain from all of us, is a reminder that the artists' community holds him in reverence and affection, and no cynical politics can ever change that.

## Husain – Such a Long Journey K. Bikram Singh

Maqbool Fida Husain has now been away from India for more than three years. It is because of his detractors who love to create controversies around every event where his work is attempted to be shown that we have not completely forgotten him! Therefore, in a way we should thank Husain's critics that we remember Husain otherwise he could have become a victim of the mass amnesia from which the educated middle-class of India now suffers. It may, therefore, be relevant to briefly recall the long journey of Husain.

Husain was born in 1917 (and not 1915 as commonly believed) in Pandharpur, the well-known temple town which is identified with the temple dedicated to Vithobaji and Rakhumai and with which saints like Dyaneshwar and Namdev are also identified. At the age of two, he lost his mother. His father who was an educated man and fond of English language had found a job in Malwa mills in Indore. Maqbool together with his grandfather, Abdul Husain, moved to Indore around 1919 at the end of the Second World War.

Indore of 1920's, under the Holkars in which Maqbool grew up into Husain, was a liberal place nourished by a multi-religious culture. In addition to Hindus, it had Muslims and Christians who happily lived together and shared each other's religious festivals. The Holkars, the Maharajas of Indore, participated in the Ramlila and sent the tallest Tazia to the Moharram Procession. The young Maqbool would often go to see the Moharram procession as also attend Ramlila performances along with his Brahmin friend Mankeshwar. After the Ramlila he would play as well as sketch, scenes from the Ramlila at his home. Maqbool as a child grew up in this atmosphere. That is why secularism for M.F. Husain has never been an anti-thesis of religiosity but implies respect for all religions.

Maqbool also spent a few years of his education at the Darul Tulaba Husamiya Madrasa of Baroda which was a progressive nationalist school. It is here that he discovered Gandhi as a national icon. He would be often called upon to draw Gandhi on the school blackboard. It was with the help of N.S. Bendre that Maqbool joined the evening art classes at the Indore School of Art. He did not stay on to complete his diploma. In 1934, he got admission in the J.J. School of Art after



passing the entrance exam but had to give it up because his father had lost his job due to the Great Depression. Husain returned to Bombay in 1936 and became a painter of cinema hoardings and later the designer of children's furniture and toys. This gave an insight to Husain into the world of children and an understanding of the folk art traditions. In 1947, he won an award at the annual show of Bombay Art Society. In 1948, E.N. Souza invited him to become a member of the Bombay Progressive Group of Artists and this is how M.F. Husain's career as a professional artist was launched.

The language and repertoire of Husain's art has not been formed by formal training in art or a methodical study of the history of world art. It has been primarily formed by his experience of life at every level and his wide travels in India and abroad. In the first forty years of his life as a professional artist, he made extensive use of folk motifs such as horses, village women, birds, elephants, mythology of several religions including Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and humanistic icons like Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa. This is why the common Indian easily identifies with his art and its language. His vision is essentially humanistic. Personally he is deeply religious but he is as comfortable with Ramayana as with Quran and the Bible.

Since mid-1950's, Husain has travelled extensively throughout the world and this in turn has vastly enriched his repertoire of symbols, motifs and metaphors. His forced exile that began in early 2006 has further helped him travel even though he has crossed 90 years of his life. His art and its language now demand from the viewer of Husain understanding of our rapidly globalising world in which identity-symbols of one culture are being quickly adopted and assimilated by other cultures, new myths are being constantly made and demolished. This understanding on the part of the viewer is necessary because Husain's motifs and metaphors now arise from a world in which the classical resurfaces in a simplified form in the thoroughfares of the contemporary where 'women come and go talking of Michelangelo'. His repertoire has acquired the quality of grandmother's old curiosity-chest in which the childish and the profound, the prosaic and the dramatic, the non-descript and the sensuous, the humorous and the tragic, the mundane and the heroic, the rural Indian and the globalised metropolitan share the same space. They are only linked by memory, desire, wit, humour and imagination. In his recent paintings, there is also an undercurrent of anxiety like 'a new born child held gently by a falling leaf', a metaphor of the fragility of human existence in the times of the atomic bomb. And

yet, there is no didactic element in Husain's imagery. Instead, when one sees them, to borrow Milan Kundera's expression, one gets charmed by the feeling of being dissolved into 'the running water of everyday' that continuously nourish our spirit because he is truly a gifted artist.

In his works of the last two decades, he is no longer concerned with the purity of forms and the symmetry of composition which had become the hallmarks of modernism in art and architecture. Instead, his artistic sensibility seems to have become post-modern, reflecting multiculturalism, new realities created by mass media such as cinema and television, and the simultaneous existence of the banal with the beautiful and the spiritual with the material. There is a new amalgam of styles from the classical to the contemporary with elements of wit, humour and even parody as seen in his 'Raj Series' and 'Let History Cut Across Me Without Me'. The structure and the balance of his composition are dynamic like a stream of running water. Thus Husain has evolved a language appropriate for articulating the complex stories of our times and for creating new fables. In this sense, Husain has now abandoned the language of modernism and has boldly embraced the language of post-modernism. Therefore, now it is no longer possible to separate his painting techniques from the abstract world towards which his unique images aspire. The two together create a vision, a sense of brooding mystery and hidden meanings in his paintings that are uniquely his own. The language of Husain's art and the quality of his vision that does not bother about the questions of modernity versus tradition or the figurative versus the abstract, have opened the doors for successive generation of artists to reinvent the old in the context of the new and to seek abstraction through the figurative. It is this overarching quality of Husain's work that has already won him a lasting place in the history of Indian art. The history of world art, as we know it today, has been largely written from the western point of view because the western world today dominates economically, militarily and culturally. Once this imbalance is set right, something that will inevitably happen in the coming decades, and the history of world art is rewritten from a more balanced perspective, Husain is bound to find his rightful place also in the history of world art.

Milan Kundera has argued that, "The sensation of beauty is not spontaneous, spurred by our sensibility, but instead is cerebral, conditioned by our knowing a date." In other words, it is also influenced by our "historical consciousness...so thoroughly inherent in our perception of art". In the case of Husain's art also the sensation of beauty that we experience when we see his art, is partly influenced by

our knowledge of the crucial juncture when he arrived on the art scene at the dawn of free India and our awareness of the journey of his life from the pavements of Bombay to the hall of fame. And yet, it is equally true that in 1947 several other artists had arrived on the Indian art scene who have left no mark and that all interesting life-journeys do not produce meaningful art without great talent. The simple fact is that Maqbool Fida Husain's achievement as an artist is profound, as profound as his journey of life and his talent. That is why his art will continue to nourish the human spirit for a long time to come.

Perhaps the reach of the soaring spirit of Maqbool Fida Husain as an artist is best summed up in one of his own poems:

When i begin  
To paint  
Hold the sky  
In your hands  
As the stretch  
Of my canvas is  
Unknown  
To me

Husain

## An artist and a movement Husain speaks to Thomas Abraham in London

*'Any great change in a nation's civilisation begins in the field of culture.'* – M.F. Husain

We had our own parallel national movement. We were part of the Progressive Artists Group; there were five or six painters in Mumbai and a few in Calcutta. We came out to fight against two prevalent schools of thought in those days, the Royal Academy, which was British-oriented, and the revivalist school in Mumbai, which was not a progressive movement. These two we decided to fight, and we demolished them. The movement to get rid of these influences and to evolve a language that is rooted in our own culture was a great movement, and one that historians have not taken note of. It was important because any great change in a nation's civilisation begins in the field of culture. Culture is always ahead of other political and social movements.

I was never politically active in the national movement, but I was all for it, even from my school days. When I was 8 or 9 years old in Baroda, the patron of our school was Abbas Tyabji, a great follower of Gandhiji. The school was almost a religious school, but our clothes were khadi, and we used to celebrate Gandhi Jayanti. At that time I used to do huge sketches of Gandhiji on the blackboard. I was already involved in painting, and I was taking part in the national movement, though at a different level. On the first Independence Day I was in Mumbai. While working in a furniture shop, I organised a tableau of freedom with the workers.

When the Progressive Artists Group was formed, there were only six members in Mumbai, and we used to go out and paste posters on the walls, because our paintings were rejected by the society in Mumbai, whose patron was the Governor. It was like a parallel freedom movement. Bhendre did a painting in 1942 on Quit India, at the time of the Mumbai Congress session.

The movement started in the 1930s with Souza, Raza and others. I joined in 1947. Our concern was to evolve not only art as a profession to make a living, but to do serious research to evolve a language for Indian contemporary art. It had to be rooted in our culture and all the points of reference had to be ours, but it had to use modern techniques as well. There was no point in painting like Indian miniatures, or like Ajanta and Ellora.

The group's achievement has been to change the shape of Indian contemporary art. We had no manifesto as such, it was just to initiate us. In art one has to be highly individual; even if you are in a group, each one is an individual. All of us are still working, all in our 70s and 80s. Some went to London, some went to Paris. I stayed on in Mumbai. We are still friends. We still exhibit together, we still meet together. This is unlike in the West, where because of the strong element of commerce, artists do not see eye to eye, there is competition.

**ART, INDIAN AND WESTERN:** The main difference between Indian art and Western art is that in the West, after the Renaissance, they had the Impressionists, then Cubism and so on. We, however, had already passed those stages. They were not necessary, because in our Indian folk art and tribal art, we had all these elements, and we have them even today. It is a living art form. After the Renaissance, artists in the West were concerned with depicting space and matter. We had already gone beyond that in our sculptures and paintings. When Michelangelo and others were trying to create the human form, we had passed that stage. The image of Nataraja is the highest form of art; it corresponded to the cosmos.

The West claims modern art as its own. This is wrong. It is Eastern, they took it from Japan and from Africa. Because their media are strong, they have dominated the art scene.

Also, we do not have a single person, a writer, who has a historical vision of our culture and can make people aware of it. After Ananda Coomaraswamy, there has been no such person. Luckily, in the last four or five years, we have been asserting our presence through our festivals and after Sotheby's and Christie's started auctioning our work.

**ON CONTEMPORARY AND FOLK ART:** I am a misfit in the mainstream of contemporary Indian art. It has no relevance to our culture. Its points of reference are in the West, and that has to change. The problem with Indian contemporary art is the lack of a historical perspective.

It is not only the painter, but even the general public that has lost touch with our rich heritage. That is why, in the last two years, I have taken on popular cinema with the superstar. That is another art form that is so relevant to our culture and day-to-

day life. At the same time, I don't deny that the salon and intellectual work in art are necessary, but these must be linked to day-to-day life.

Cinema has become a social phenomenon. If you remove this entertainment, what will happen to millions of people? It sustains them. There is so much poverty, but the moment the people see cinema, they start singing and dancing.

Tribal and folk art, on the other hand, are a living art form. Swaminathan has done great research into this. He brought young tribals into the city, gave them material, and exhibited the paintings parallel with Indian contemporary art. I saw it, and compared to their work, contemporary art looks pale. They have direct contact with nature, with life. You should see the way they visualise a bird or an animal.

I had done paintings of Ramayana, about 80 paintings over eight years. We took them to villages near Hyderabad on a bullock cart. The paintings were spread out, and the people saw them, and there was not one question. In the city, people would have asked: Where is the eye? How can you say this is Ram? and so on. In the villages, colour and form have seeped into the blood. You put an orange spot on a stone and the people will say it is Hanuman. They would never ask where the eye was and so on. This is living art.

ART AND THE FUTURE: I am optimistic about the future. The numbers of people doing art is growing by leaps and bounds. Ten years ago there were barely one or two galleries in Mumbai. Now there are 30 to 40 galleries that are doing well. People are buying. The quality is not all good, but it doesn't matter. In Paris at one stage, there were 50,000 painters. It is like the churning of the sea. Something will come out of it. Without the sea, there is nothing to churn. But our political system is frightening; our progress will be slow. We do not get what we deserve.

Fellini has a movie titled *And The Ship Sails On*. That describes our country. And the ship sails on.

*Courtesy Frontline, 9-22 August 1997*

## 'In Hindu culture, nudity is a metaphor for purity'

Interview of Husain by Shoma Chaudhury

*Husain saheb, what do you feel about the fundamentalist attacks against you?*

I'm not really perturbed by all this. India is a democracy, everyone is entitled to their views. I only wish people would air their views through debate rather than violence. The media comes to me looking — almost hoping — for strong statements, but I am actually very optimistic about India. I see this as just a moment in time. For 5,000 years, our work has been going on with such force, this is just a minor hiccup. I am certain the younger generation will get fed up of the fundamentalist, conservative mood in the country and change things. I didn't want to leave my home. At the same time, it's not even as if I want the conservative element to be pushed out of society. We are all part of a large family and when a child breaks something at home, you don't throw him out, you try and explain things to him. *Yeh aapas ka mamla hai.* (This is a family matter.) Those opposed to my art just do not understand it. Or have never seen it.

*Why don't you come back to India and take on the fight?*

As things stand, I cannot come back. No one has exiled me; I came away myself because I am an old man and vulnerable to physical danger. It's not just the cases. If I came back, given the mood they have created, someone could just push or assault me on the street, and I would not be able to defend myself. The only way I can come back to India, perhaps, is if the BJP comes to power at the Centre. Or maybe, Mayawati. This government has no spine. Their hands are tied. They think if they speak out or take action, they will be accused of appeasement. The irony is, out of power, the BJP uses issues like this to fan its votebank. In power, they would probably control their extreme brigades to look respectable and secular! (laughs) These are the ironies of India. Actually, it is for the courts to sort this out. The allegation that my work is obscene or hurts religious sentiment can never stand merit in a court. Perhaps, if someone filed a counter public interest litigation... It is not my place to do so.

*Why did you apologise for your art? You know more about Hindu iconography and the shastras than the goons who deface your work.*

Never. I have never apologised for my art. I stand by it totally. What I said was that I have painted my canvases — including those of gods and goddesses — with deep love and conviction, and in celebration. If in doing that, I have hurt anyone's feelings, I

am sorry. That is all. I do not love art less, I love humanity more. India is a completely unique country. Liberal. Diverse. There is nothing like it in the world. This mood in the country is just a historical process. For me, India means a celebration of life. You cannot find that same quality anywhere in the world.

*Could you talk about how your exposure and love for Hindu iconography and culture began.*

As a child, in Pandharpur, and later, Indore, I was enchanted by the Ram Lila. My friend, Mankeshwar, and I were always acting it out. The Ramayana is such a rich, powerful story, as Dr Rajagopalachari says, its myth has become a reality. But I really began to study spiritual texts when I was 19. Because of what I had been through, because I lost my mother, because I was sent away, I used to have terrible nightmares when I was about 14 or 15. All of this stopped when I was 19. I had a guru called Mohammad Ishaq— I studied the holy texts with him for two years. I also read and discussed the Gita and Upanishads and Puranas with Mankeshwar, who had become an ascetic by then. After he left for the Himalayas, I carried on studying for years afterwards. All this made me completely calm. I have never had dreams or nightmares ever again. Later, in Hyderabad, in 1968, Dr Ram Manohar Lohia suggested I paint the Ramayana. I was completely broke, but I painted 150 canvases over eight years. I read both the Valmiki and Tulsidas Ramayana (the first is much more sensual) and invited priests from Benaras to clarify and discuss the nuances with me. When I was doing this, some conservative Muslims told me, why don't you paint on Islamic themes? I said, does Islam have the same tolerance? If you get even the calligraphy wrong, they can tear down a screen. I've painted hundreds of Ganeshas in my lifetime — it is such a delightful form. I always paint a Ganesha before I begin on any large work. I also love the iconography of Shiva. The Nataraj — one of the most complex forms in the world — has evolved over thousands of years and, almost like an Einstein equation, it is the result of deep philosophical and mathematical calculations about the nature of the cosmos and physical reality. When my daughter, Raeesa wanted to get married, she did not want any ceremonies, so I drew a card announcing her marriage and sent it to relatives across the world. On the card, I had painted Parvati sitting on Shiva's thigh, with his hand on her breast — the first marriage in the cosmos. Nudity, in Hindu culture, is a metaphor for purity. Would I insult that which I feel so close to? I come from the Suleimani community, a sub-sect of the Shias, and we have many affinities with Hindus, including the idea of reincarnation. As cultures, it is Judaism and Christianity that are emotionally more distant. But it is impossible to discuss all this with those who oppose me. Talk to them about



Khajuraho, they will tell you its sculpture was built to encourage population growth and has outgrown its utility! (laughs) It is people in the villages who understand the sensual, living, evolving nature of Hindu gods. They just put orange paint on a rock, and it comes to stand for Hanuman.

*In what terms would you like your paintings to be spoken of and remembered?*

I never wanted to be clever, esoteric, abstract. I wanted to make simple statements. I wanted my canvases to have a story. I wanted my art to talk to people. In 1948, I exhibited my work publicly for the first time in the Bombay Arts Society show. I had already been painting and practising for years. Now in those paintings, I took the classical images of the Gupta bronzes — the *tribhanga* form; the sensuous and erotic colours of Pahari paintings — its deep maroons, blacks, *haldi*; and the nine *rasas*. I wanted my format to be classical, yet retain the innocence of the folk. Souza came and asked me excitedly, from where have you got this? I didn't tell him, I said, you go search it. This is what lies at the heart of the artistic enterprise.

It is in picking from what has gone before. In India, there have been so many high periods — Tanjore, Chola, Gupta... Centuries of seeing lie behind that. You cannot reinvent the wheel — your individuality, your creative eye lies in what you pick. The other thing is to find one's own rhythm and calculation: Where exactly do you place a line on an empty canvas? Where exactly do you place the dot? How much yellow should I use, how much red. If I use 1mm of red, should the blue be a half millimeter or more? An artist's voice lies in this calculation, this maths. To find your style and language takes 60-70 years of continuous work.

*Which among your paintings do you consider the most significant, your equivalent of Picasso's Guernica?*

'Between the Spider and the Lamp' (1956). I feel happy with the structure of that grouping — there is a kind of mystery about what the five women are talking about. Stories perhaps even unknown to themselves. There is something in the precarious way the woman is holding the spider on a delicate thread. A fear. I rarely draw eyes, I don't want to use eyes because to give someone eyes is to define and identify the person. I prefer to make the body expressive. To understand hand expression, I had observed Rodin's sculptures — 'Men of Calais'. To that I brought a knowledge of classical *mudras*. So much is made of culture and tradition in India, yet 60 years after Independence, art students are still made to study the body from Greek art. Dr Kumaraswamy does not even find mention. In colleges, you learn about Shakespeare and Keats, Kalidas does not find mention. This is why there is no *pebchan* in India,

no recognition of what is Indian. Things are so farcical that years ago when the Benaras Hindu University honoured Subbulakshmi, JRD Tata, Mother Teresa and me, we were given red caps and cloaks! (laughs) This was the seat of Hindu learning! The custodian of Bharatiya *sanskriti*! Is there anything that you find obscene in the world? Bad behaviour. That is all.

*Courtesy Tehelka Magazine, 02 February 2008*

# The Exile of Maqbool Fida Husain

Geeta Kapur

Should we now count Husain among the diaspora artists; does the title fit the man? Only those who know Husain will understand that he aches to come home, his itinerant imagination returns to this land with almost the naïve trust of a fakir in the generosity of the common person. Perhaps his longing may want to embrace—not the last dream of success, of which he still has plenty, but the possibility of subaltern survival back from where he once came.

Having always worked with celebratory, even triumphal markers of individual and national survival, neither his temperament nor his aesthetic has a way of expressing loss. Should we then exempt him from this burden? Overcoming our own guilt and sentiment, shall we find other ways for recounting the great irony sustained by the always affirmative, always graceful and irreversibly iconic Maqbool Fida Husain.

## The Iconography of an Artist Geeti Sen

The reputation of M.F. Husain precedes him wherever he is; he lives the script and he becomes the image. And with his passion for films and performance, why would he not play to the gallery?

Painter of signs and film hoardings, romantic, lover and maker of films, nomad, pilgrim, fakir, nominated Member of Parliament to the Rajya Sabha, awarded the Padma Shri and Padma Vibhushan, Husain has become a living legend. About fifteen years ago he was the first contemporary artist to exhibit his paintings at the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi. M.F. Husain invited Parthiv Shah, a young enthused photographer, to document his paintings. These photographs were exhibited recently at a festival organized by artists, writers and activists to celebrate Husain's ninety-second birthday [under the aegis of Sahmat] during his enforced exile from India. The extravaganza will be long remembered for its mood of optimism and buoyancy; but most of all for the intense poignancy of these photographs to recall his presence. A few signify for me stations of the extraordinary life through which he has traveled.



In one photo he appears sprawled across the steps of the National Gallery, his long legs splayed wide apart. These legs stride the world that is his canvas. With boots in the foreground pointing in two directions, he seems larger than life. Centre piece and shot from below, he is an icon framed under the sign board of the National Gallery that designates him as Parthiv puts it, "a national artist". But he counters that label by wearing boots and a leather jacket, with dark glasses that render him inscrutable, ironically reinforcing his claim to iconhood. (All 'top' movie stars and some politicians in this country wear dark glasses). There is nothing here to suggest that he is Indian. In this apparel he could be a bohemian artist, a writer or film maker anywhere in the world.

He is remote here from his images, isolated. His bony fingers

rest on the stone steps, relaxed. Fingers that are always tense to create figures that dance through space and pulsate with color. Like his spirited horses he works with the speed of lightning, waking before the birthing light to begin his drawings with the pencil, then the brush, then color. His lines fracture the surface; his canvases open to hold within them everything that breathes life.

The merging of icon and artist happened a long time ago. His physiognomy and towering presence are of course assets, contributing to the image of the patriarch. His shock of white hair falls to his shoulders, the beard accentuates his leonine features. That stubborn chin defies time: he has remained forever the same; he is without age; he is ageless, timeless. We are reassured by this image that time does not change him.

This studied nonchalance belies the truth because he has changed. Nothing suggests that his origins were far from urban cosmopolitanism, that he was born in the village of Pandharpur in Maharashtra where his aunt sold flowers beside the Vithoba temple; that he began life in Bombay as a humble painter of film hoardings. Self portraits affirm how he has evolved to his present incarnation. In one early self portrait from the 1950s he could easily be mistaken for a maulvi with his black beard and cap, looking beyond with piercing black eyes. Nothing at this stage could suggest the cosmopolitan that he has become. In a portrait some thirty years later exhibited at the opening of the Village Art Gallery when he has received national awards, he wears a general's uniform studded with badges. In that recent painting which hangs above the staircase in his London residence he appears at his dapper best, wearing a black hat with black boots and swinging a cane, with a belt inscribed with the recent date of 007. Having crossed ninety years of age, he remains his ebullient self.

I mention these three self portraits to remind ourselves that Husain engages in sartorial choices for himself. He is an exhibitionist, he loves drama and he invites controversy. He speaks and paints of India's uniqueness in its composite culture. The pictures represented here make sense of his own composite identity.

He has moved from city to city at whim wherever the impulse took him from Delhi to Hyderabad to Bombay to London to New York. His bare feet took him across continents and seas. This Husain is as much at ease wandering through the lanes of Chandni Chowk and sitting at a teashop in the ancient basti of Nizamuddin as he is striding into the Dorchester hotel in London. A second photograph by Parthiv captures this other self of Husain as the pilgrim and nomad. Here he stands next to

women and children waiting for alms, next to stacks of shoes shelved before the pilgrims enter the courtyard of the sufi shrine of the saint.

Does this habitual necessity of being a nomad/pilgrim explain why he walks barefoot through villages and deserts and hotels in London's Mayfair? His penetrating eyes look out to the viewer, sifting the dark from the light. He seems alone among the crowd, observing figures which had once infused his early paintings. In his own writings he dares to inscribe his feelings with passion:

Parthiv is conscious of the fact he was chosen for the job over other well known photographers. His brief was to photograph the paintings exhibited at the National Gallery; but he was enthused to experiment and followed M.F. around the city in his adventures. One day the photographer asked the artist to pose with his own pictures. Ready always for a bit of drama, Husain obliged to play different roles: he borrows the lights umbrella and poses with that ubiquitous object which recurs often in his paintings and films; he pays his tribute to the Pieta in a manner unexpected; he flirts with a hooker walking her poodle in New York. With each pose he assumes a different persona. In two images he invites reflection on his own identity and dilemma, of being both an Indian and a Muslim.



There is prophecy in these photo images of 1993, of darker days to come. The timing of the NGMA exhibition was significant: it was held soon after the Bombay bomb blasts of 1993, which in turn were incited by destruction of the Babri Mosque by seething masses of the Hindutva brigade. Deliberately, Husain titled his exhibition in 1993, *Let History Cut Across Me*. A few paintings in the show left an indelible imprint. One of them titled *Assassination* rendered militia men with rifles shooting from the margin of the canvas at a white dove.

When Parthiv began these experimental photo-portraits in 1993, Husain chose to use props as though it were his performance on stage. Reverting to his earliest profession as a painter of billboards, he painted black boards inscribed in red with one word that spelt immediate meaning: VIOLENCE. He stands beside this billboard

which is lit from behind, repeating the single word and highlighting his profile – and the thin-edged sliver of the board is lit so it appears as though Husain carries a sword. This masterful stroke renders him in silhouette, defining only his hands, his face in profile, and his unkempt hair radiating like a nimbus. Light is as specific to the subject as it might be in an oil painting by Rembrandt, one of his favorite of the old masters. He is no bohemian artist here, no pilgrim, but a prophet belonging to the order of the Old Testament. He seems to be aware of the potent forces gathering storm, events that were to affect him as much as they affected the political scenario.

That Husain is Muslim and that he has dared to paint the Mahabharata and Ramayana has made him the defined target of the right wing politics of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The epics fascinated him as magical spectacles, returning him to his childhood in Pandharpur where he grew up to witness performances of the Ram Lila as much as the huge tazia processions at Muharram – that he has always regarded India as ‘a composite culture’ is of no consequence in the attack by his critics.



He has invited controversy by drawing the goddess Saraswati ‘naked’, (she has also been depicted naked in traditional temple sculptures from the twelfth century) and Draupadi with her body stretched across the chaupad in the game of dice in the Mahabharata. That her body was bartered by the Pandavas in the dice game has become irrelevant. Branded an iconoclast, Husain’s museum in Ahmedabad was destroyed by a deliberate act of vandalism by the Bajrang Dal. More recently his image of mapping India as the body of a woman has offended the sensibility of orthodox Hindus. That it was not he but a gallery who chose to label the painting as *Bharat Mata* is overlooked in the raging debate over this act of treason. More than two thousand cases are registered against him so that he no longer can return to his country. He transits between London and Dubai in a state of purgatory; not contrite at his supposed misdemeanours at the age of ninety-two.

It is notable that this violence against an individual artist who has been targeted and these incidents have transpired subsequent to the exhibition of 1993, when these photographs were taken.

In the most poignant photograph Husain seems enacts a drama where he is the only



protagonist. For this picture alone he selects a single wooden prop which could be taken as a chair, an easel or a cross. He kneels then, on the floor beside this easel-cum-cross and below his own painting. His long arms reach up to grip the two vertical arms of the wooden prop; his head is bowed, his eyes are closed, his face is contorted in angst. As compared with the first larger-than-life icon where he is sprawled on the steps of the National Gallery, he seems to have shrunk in size.

Above him floats his large enigmatic painting which images the Pantocrator on the day of Judgement, a prostrate figure which may be Christ deposed from the cross, and on the left Humphrey Bogart under a lamp post. Is there a connection between the martyrdom of Christ and his own (presumed) destiny?

The undisputed fact is that Husain remains a practicing Muslim, a Shia. The most fervent belief of the Shiah is in the martyrdom of Ali

and of Husain, which is his own name. He kneels down in the posture of prayer practiced by thousands of Muslims. His head is bowed as though awaits the blow of being cut – in the manner that Ali's head was cut as he knelt in prayer.

Play-acting comes to cease with this photograph, because this is Husain's own self-determined act. Was it planned in collusion with the photographer? With an uncanny premonition of what the future may bring, is he enacting his sense of martyrdom, his own vulnerability ?

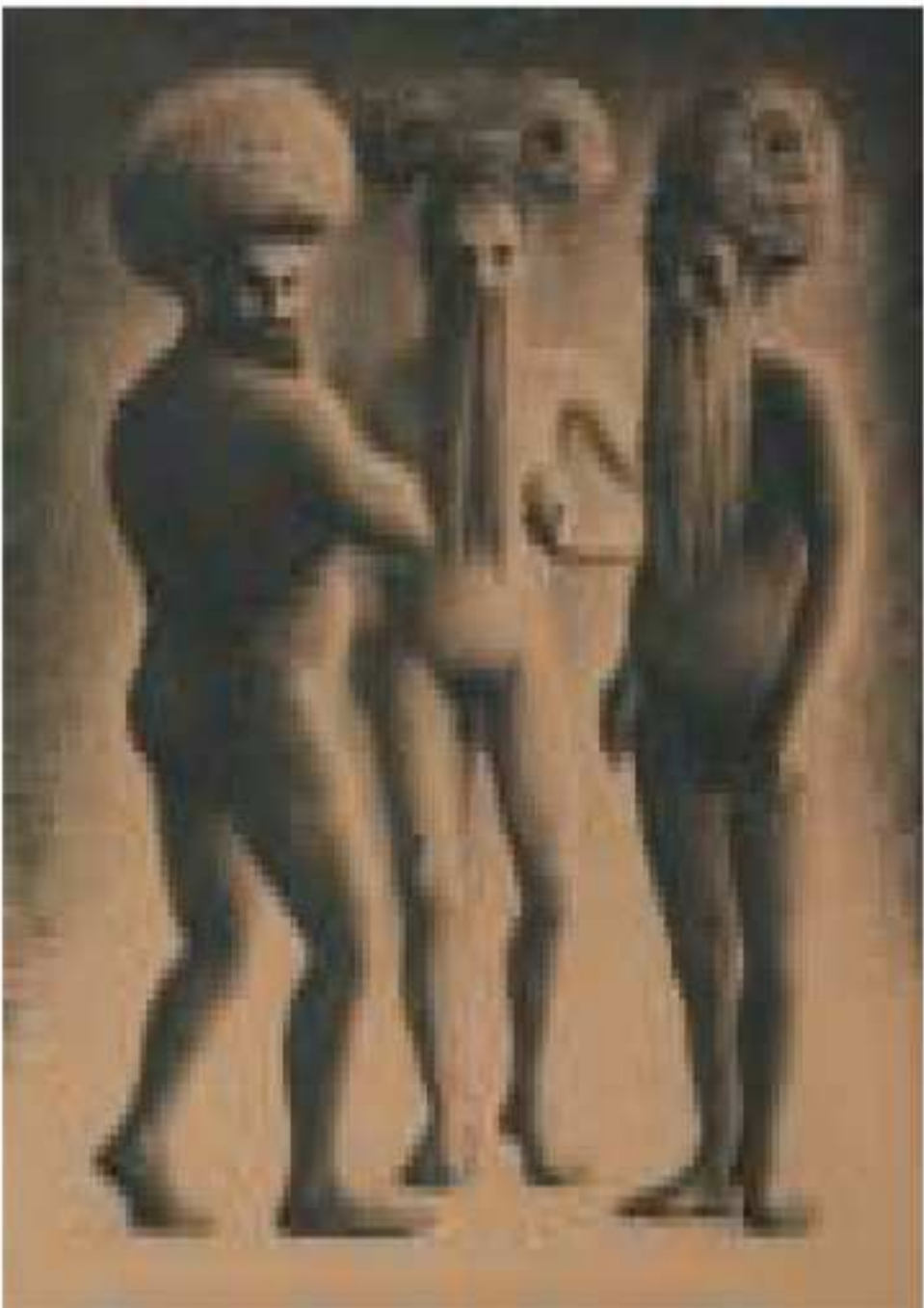
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*These photographs were vandalised by the right-wing Hindu fundamentalist group Shri Ram Sena when they were displayed at the Husain Summit organised by SAHMAT to protest Husain's exclusion from the India Art Summit, 2008.*



*For Husain at 94*





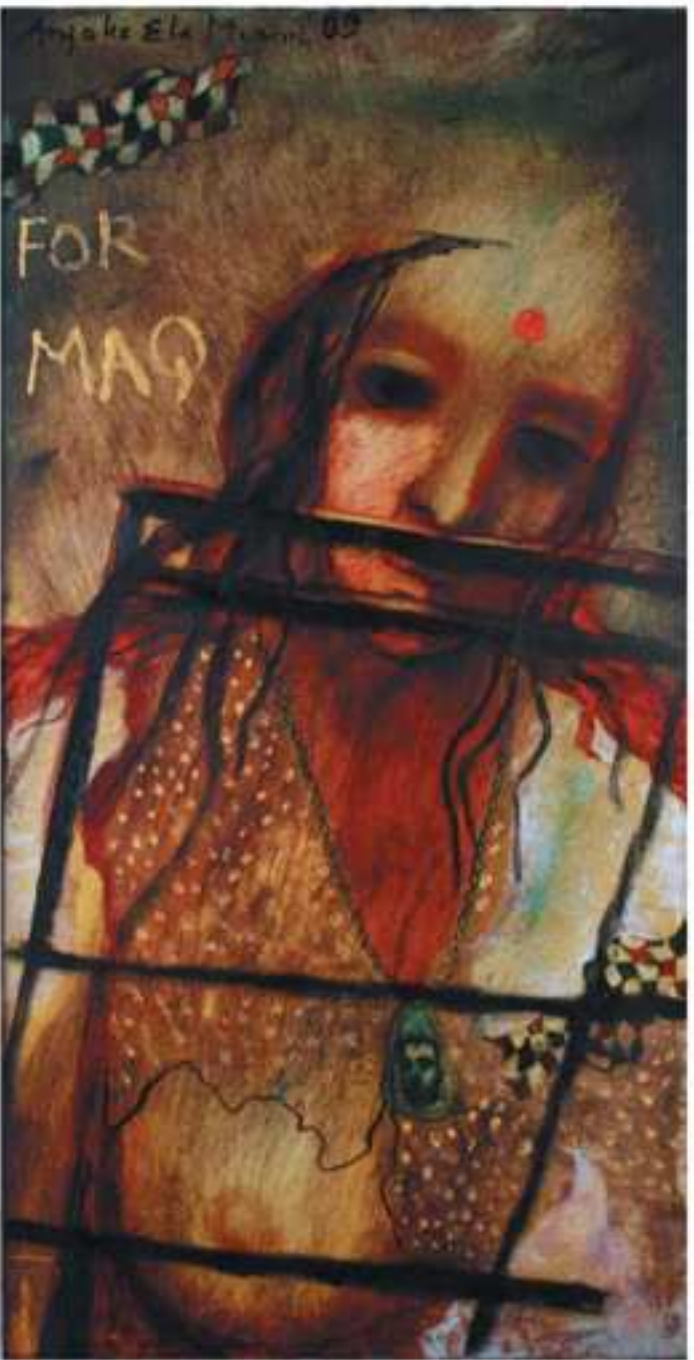






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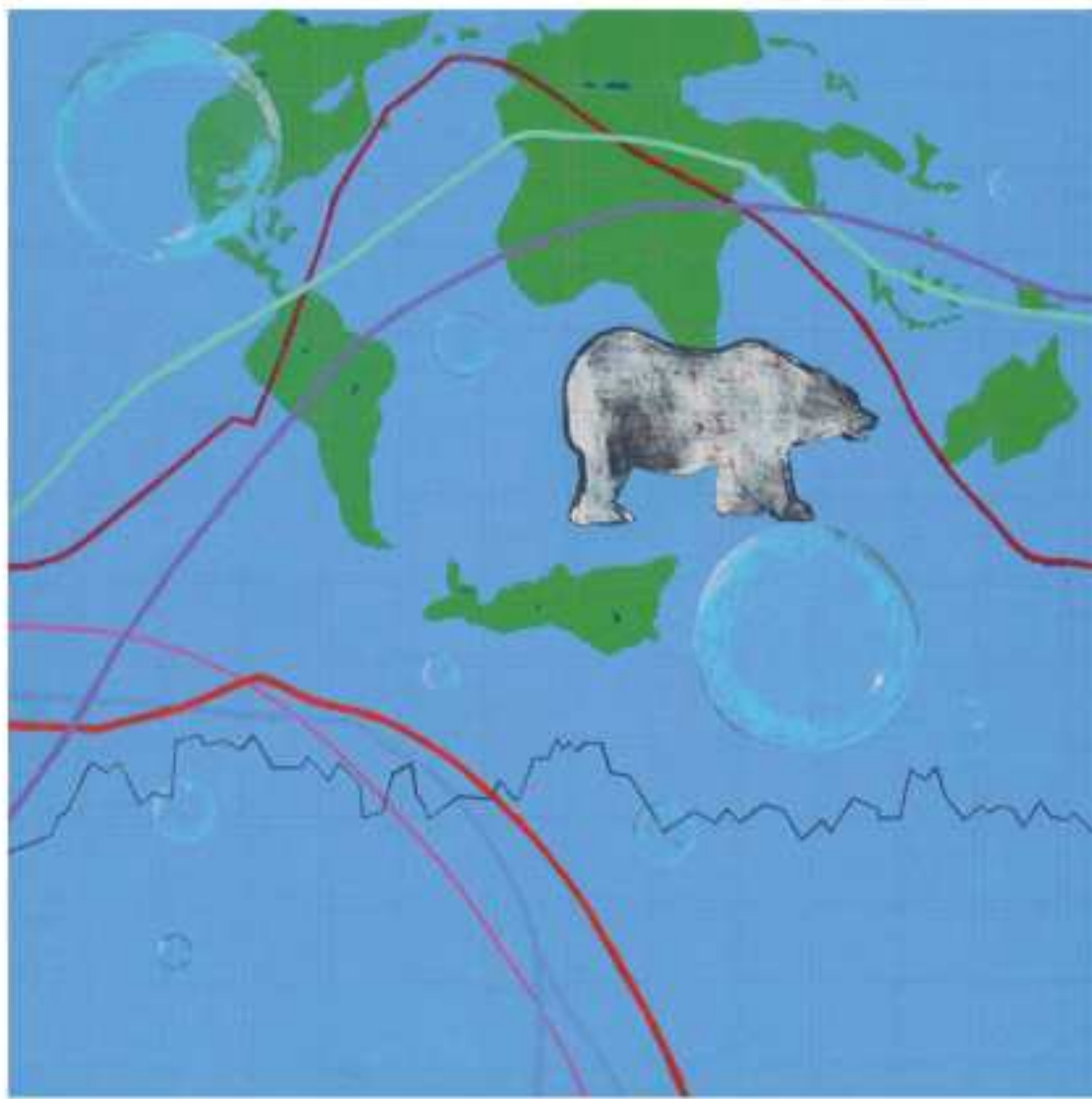




Anjolie Ela Menon



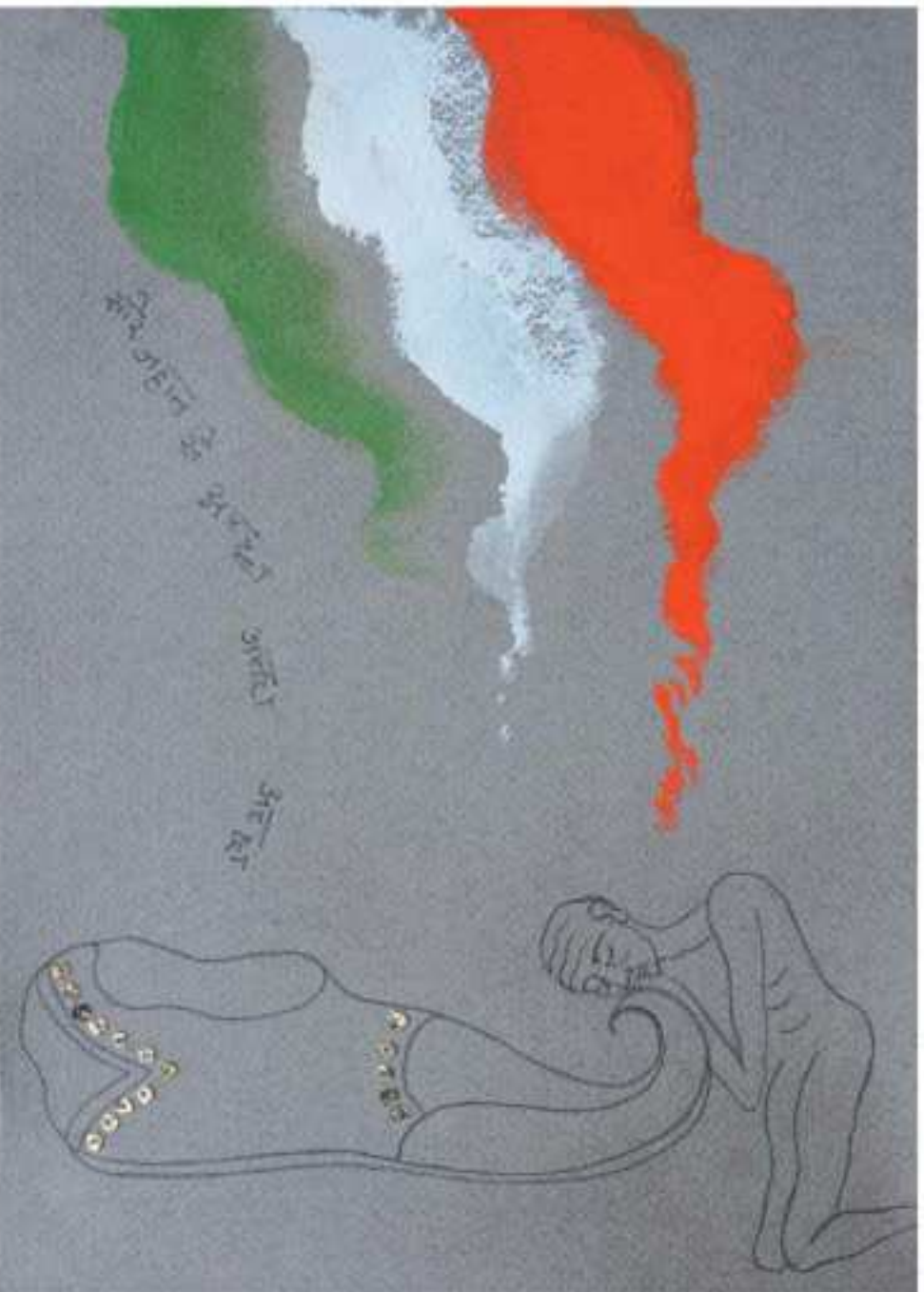




Bubbles & Bears



# Arpana Caur



Hunger

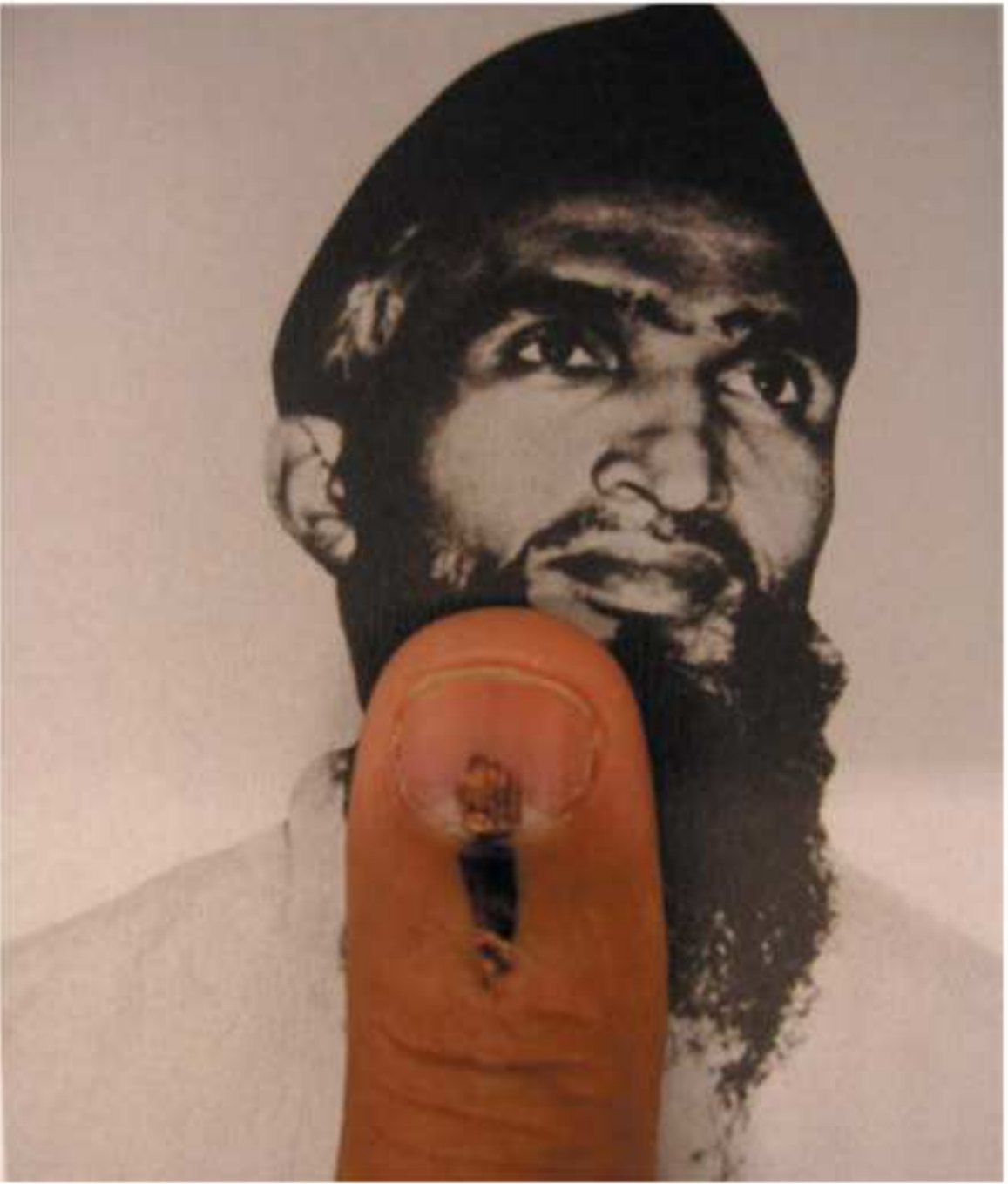


Arun Kumar H.G.

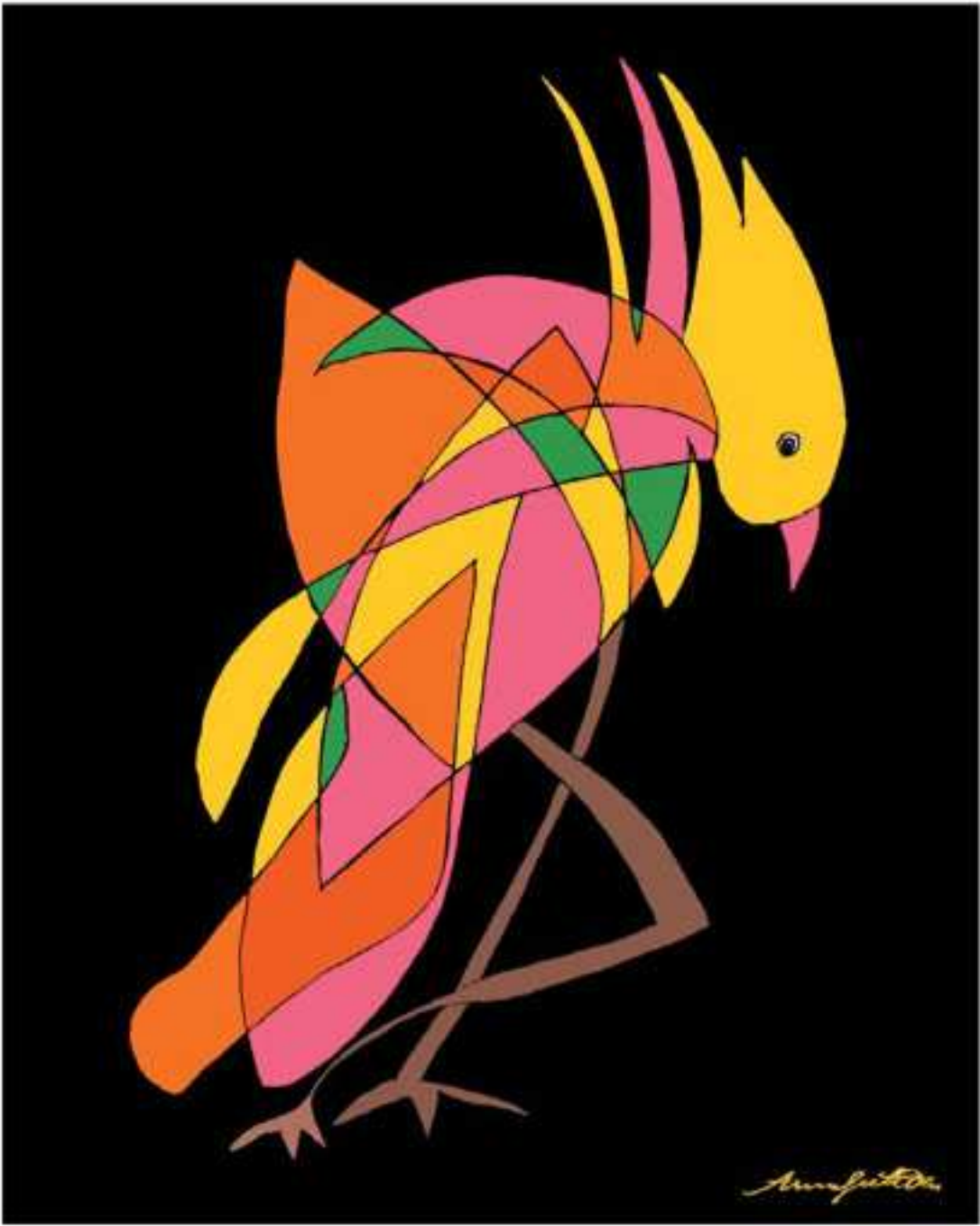


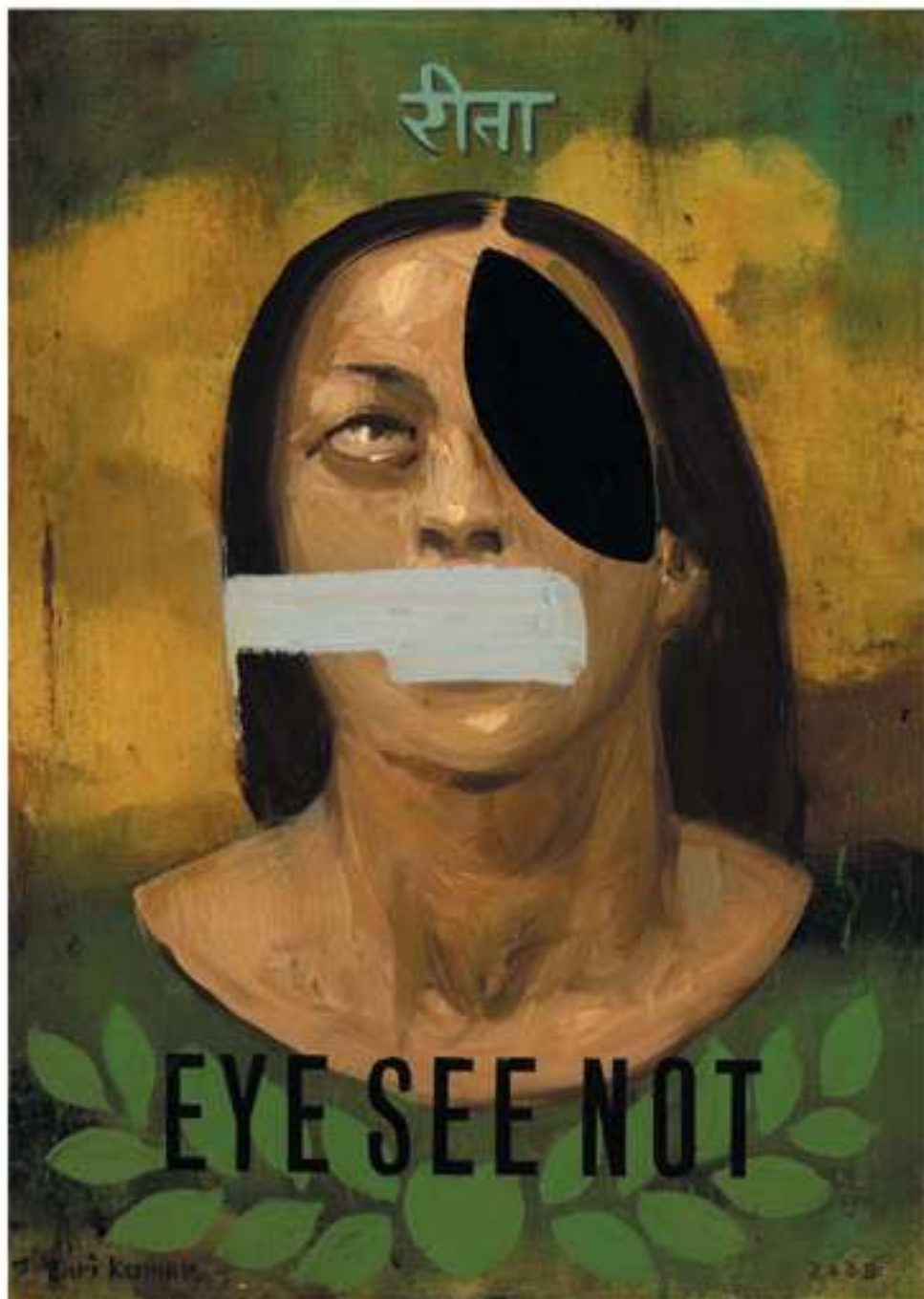


Atul Dodiya









My dear Husainsaab,

17 July, Madar 4014 - 2, 119 Coffs Parade, Bondi NSW 2008

Through the gap between the floor and the screen, sitting behind the desk in Rindok art gallery, I would see your bare feet through the glass door before I saw the whole of you emerge from behind the screen.

It was in the gap, between the time I joined Rindok after art school and the time I left waiting for the gallery, that I grew to recognize the many-hued shades of your personality. As

I ruminate, certain moments nudge their way to the forefront:

When we worked side by side on Mahabharat catalogue for your Sao Paulo biennale show. You drawing and I writing, page by page, your life sketch. At year 1961, you began the sketch for your Japan show. As you drew the arched high I saw the rising sun in my mind and thought, "yes! that's what should come here."

And it did! You drew it! When I mentioned this, you said "of course, great minds think alike." Ha-ha-

One morning of 27th March,

I don't remember how, but I asked for some paper and



my birthday, you walked into the gallery, you came to know it was my birthday, pulled out a pen from your pocket.

In no time you sketched my portrait and with a 'happy birthday', handed it to me. But that wasn't the end of the story: "if you remind me each year on 27th March," you said, "I will send you a drawing from wherever I may be." I had no doubt you meant every word you said. I even practised for days on end, to acquire the ability to catch quicksilver. But alas, to no avail! I just could not achieve the knack which would ensure my success at playing 'catch-me-if-you-can' with you.

I salute your evergreen spirit Husainsaab, and wish that the brush-wand you wield in your hand continues to create magic for many years to come. Happy Birthday!

Bharati Kapadia  
17-7-2008

## Bharti Kher





FROM MY PHOTO ALBUM SHANTINIKETAN. 1989-2009





Durga Kainthola

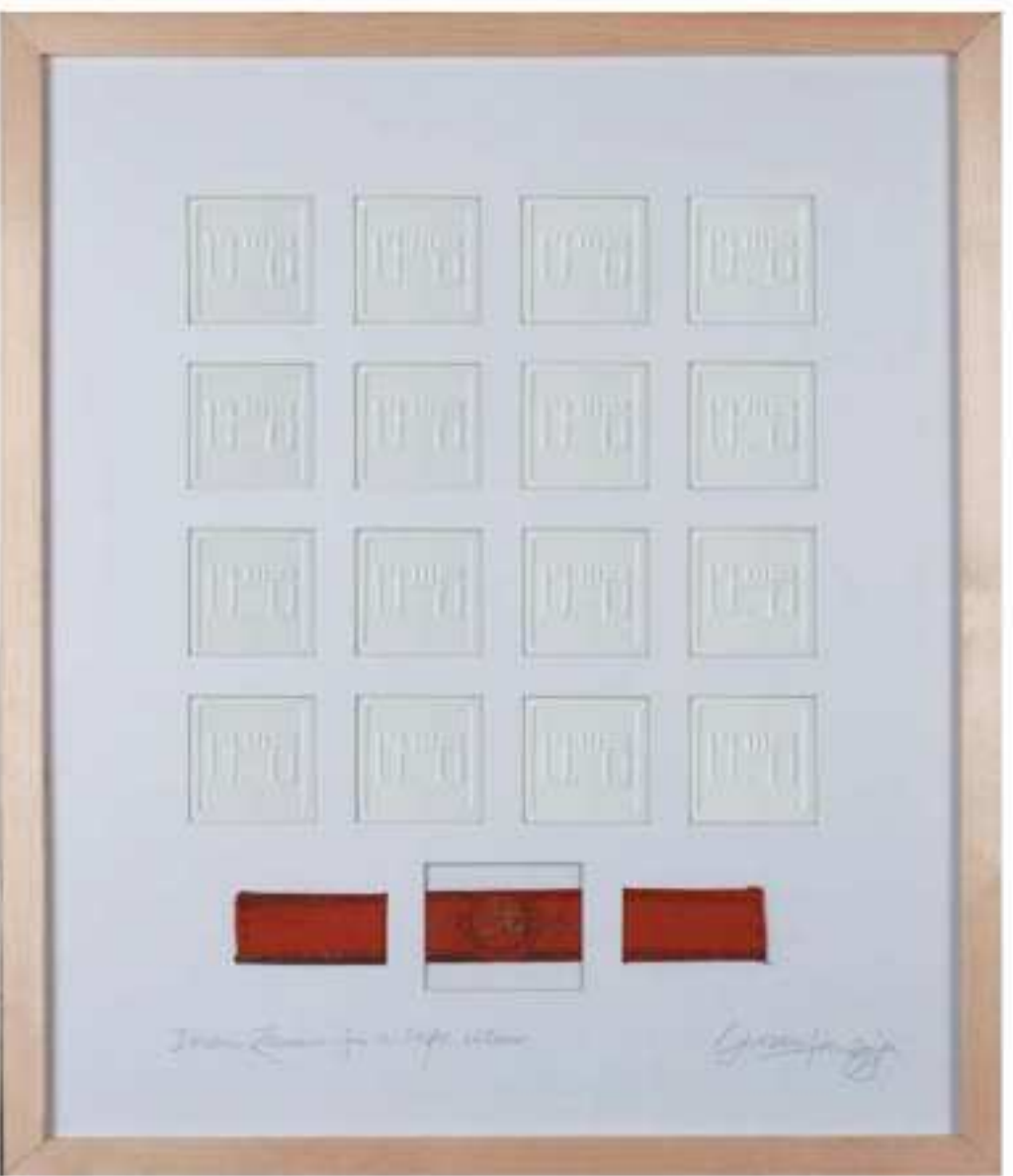


Death of Her Son

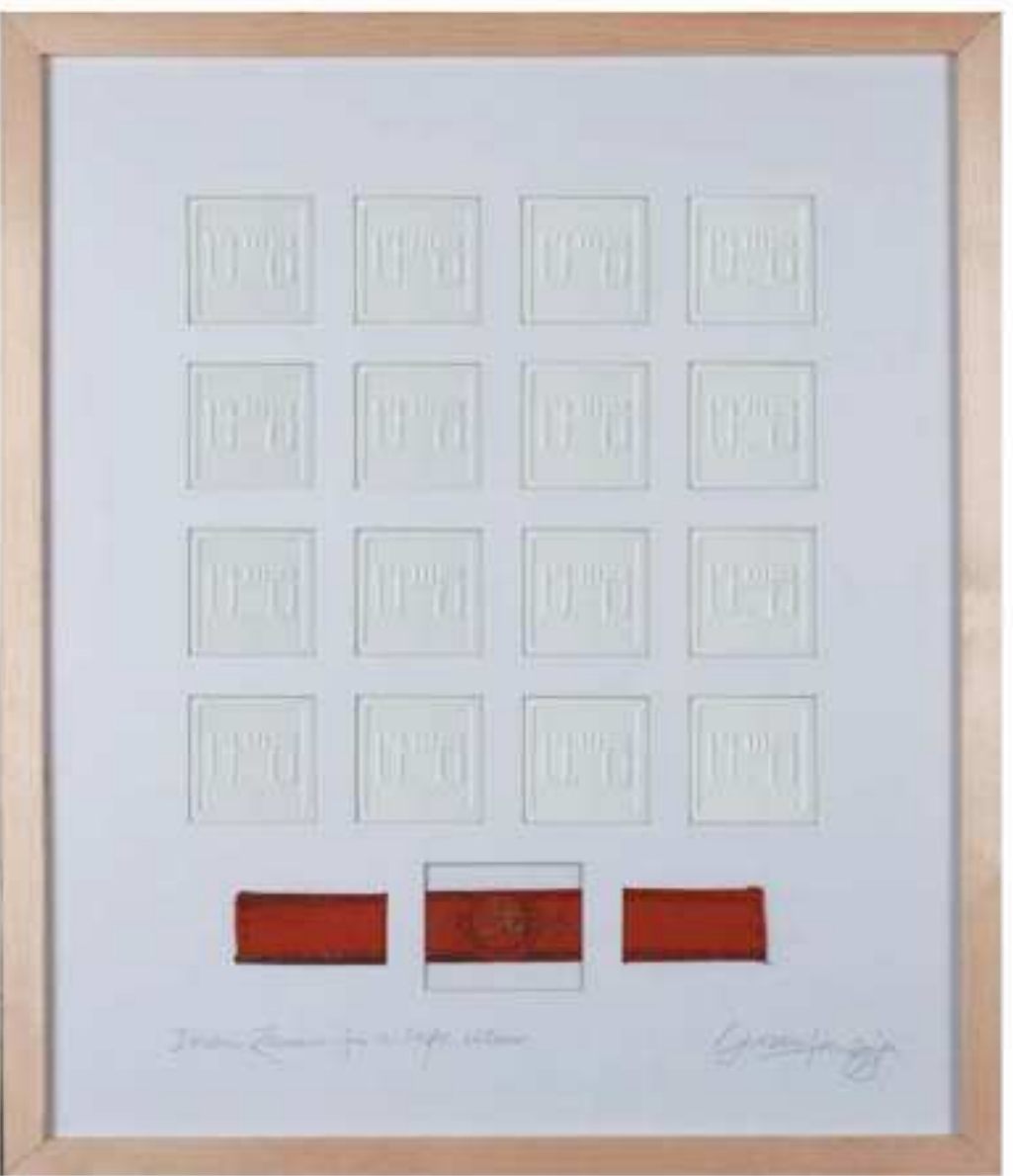


*Badnaseeb Zafar*





Gazanfar Zaidi



Gazanfar Zaidi



Between the Devil and the Sea

# Gulammohammed Sheikh





Sujan Singh Park,  
Delhi, 1957

Hafeez Ahmed





Hafeez Ahmed



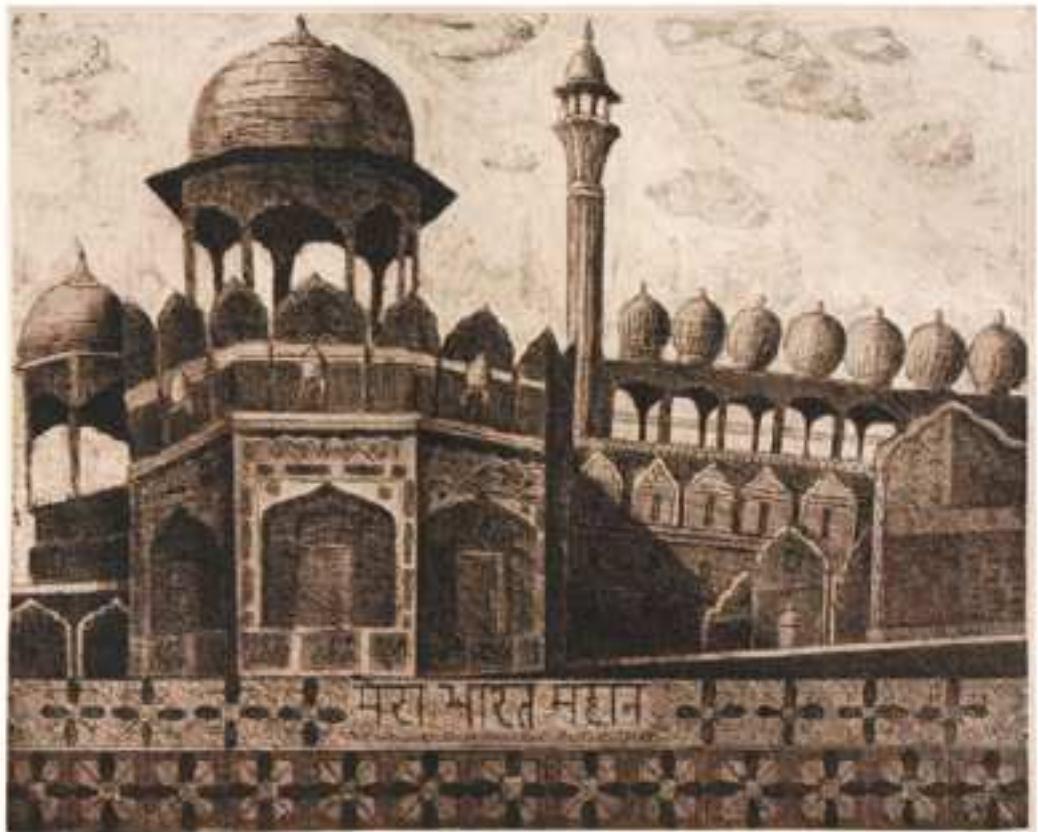






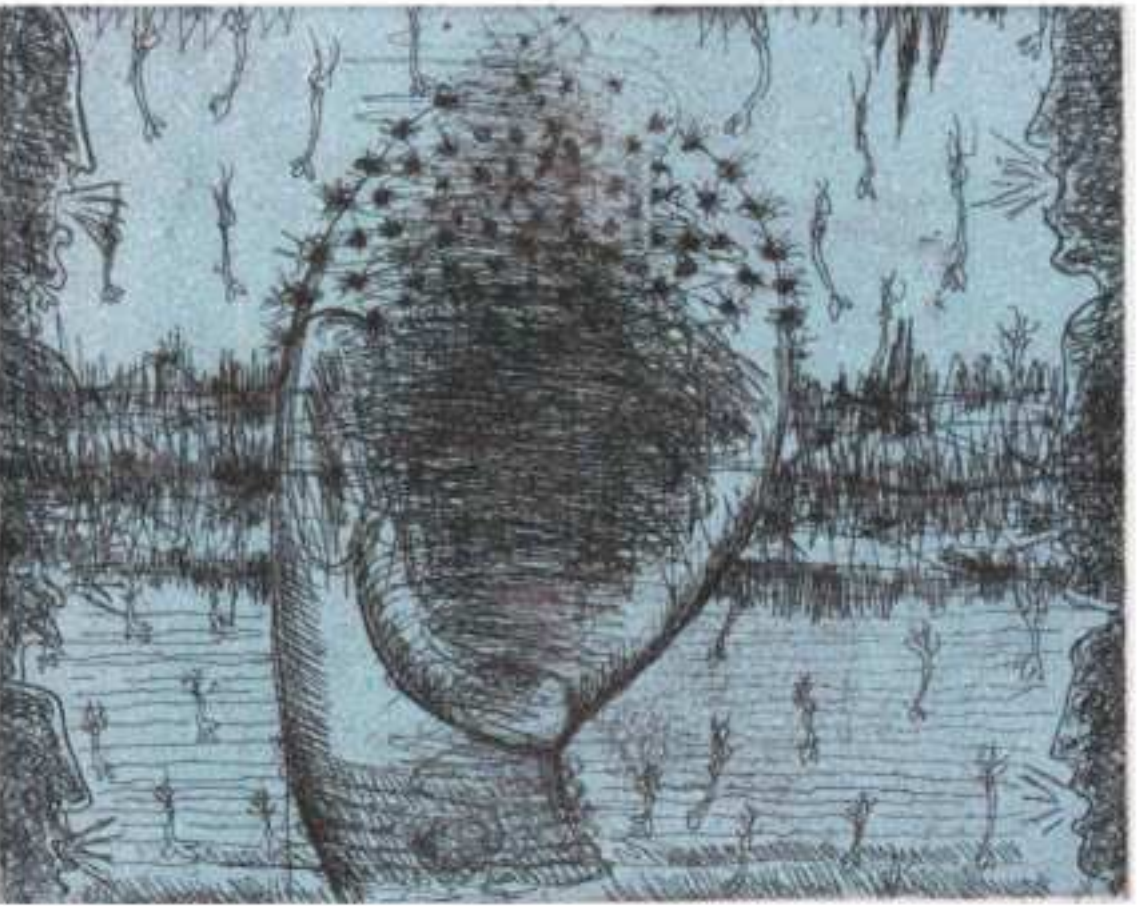


Birds



Red Fort II

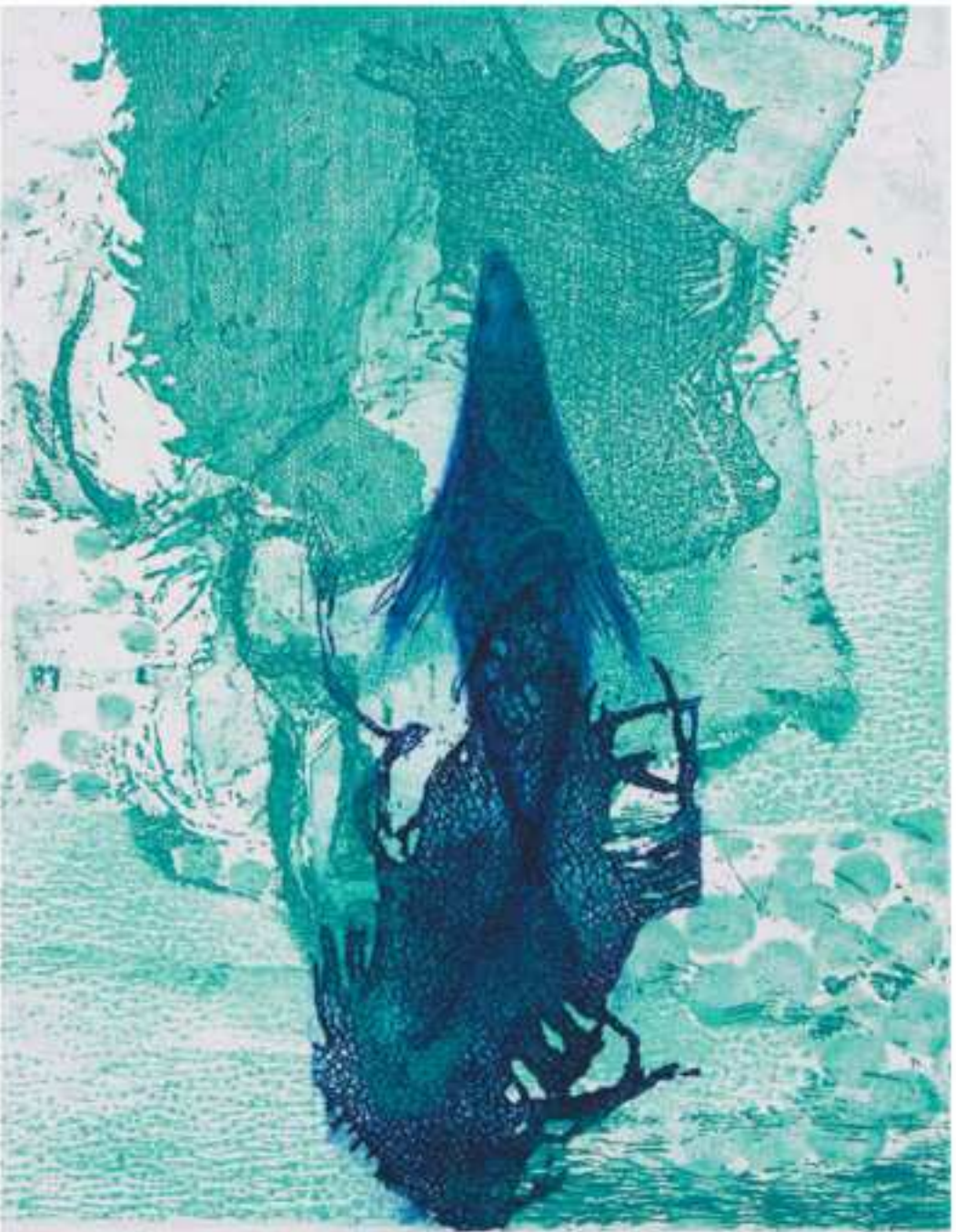




Kaushal Sonkaria



Kavita Nayar





## Kiyomi Talaulicar



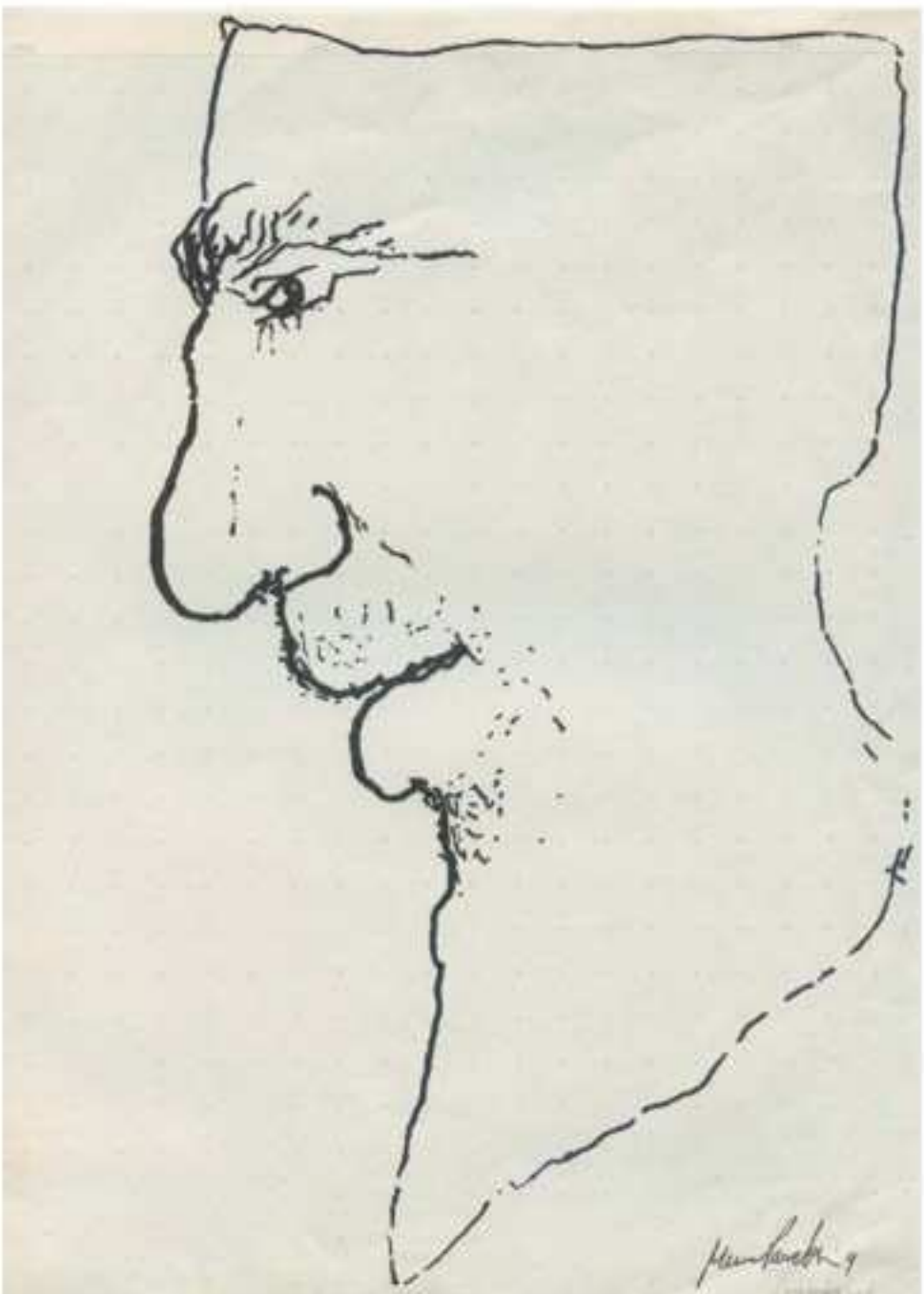


M.S. Prakash Babu





Manisha Parekh







Looking Out

## No Destination

Justice exists  
No more than heaven exists

One preaches messages of love and tolerance  
The other teaches slogans of rights and defiance

Both point directions  
Without destinations

And we fools follow  
paths of imagination.

## Staying Sane

Locked into precarious sanity  
we thrash at chains  
that bind us  
to nothing  
by a hair

Madness is one answer  
death another

both as fleeting  
as breaths of air.

Let the anger out  
Yell, scream, shout.

Air doesn't care  
if ear-drums tear

So yell, scream, shout.

Locked jaws seal vile bile  
Spew stomach  
Gag drain.

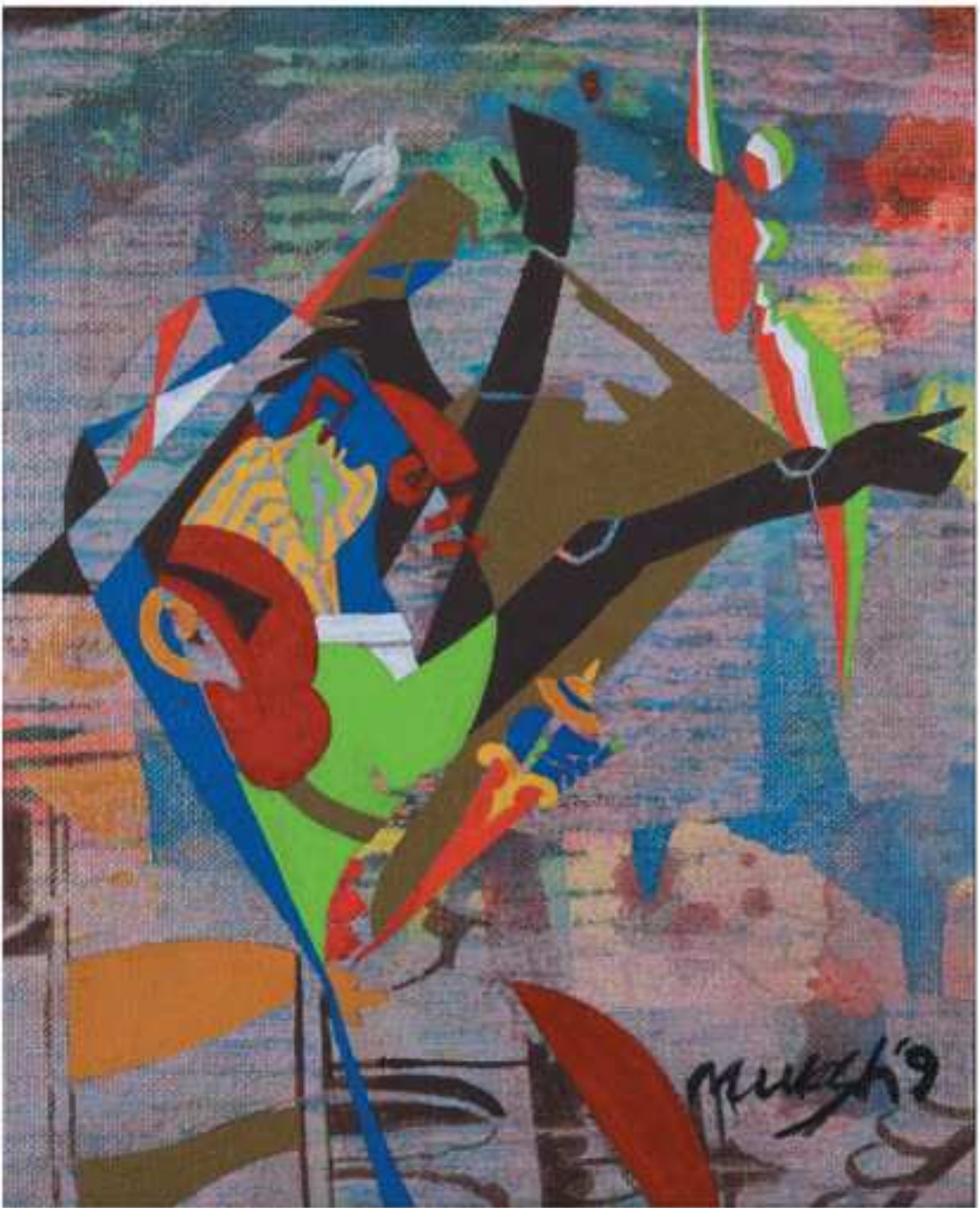








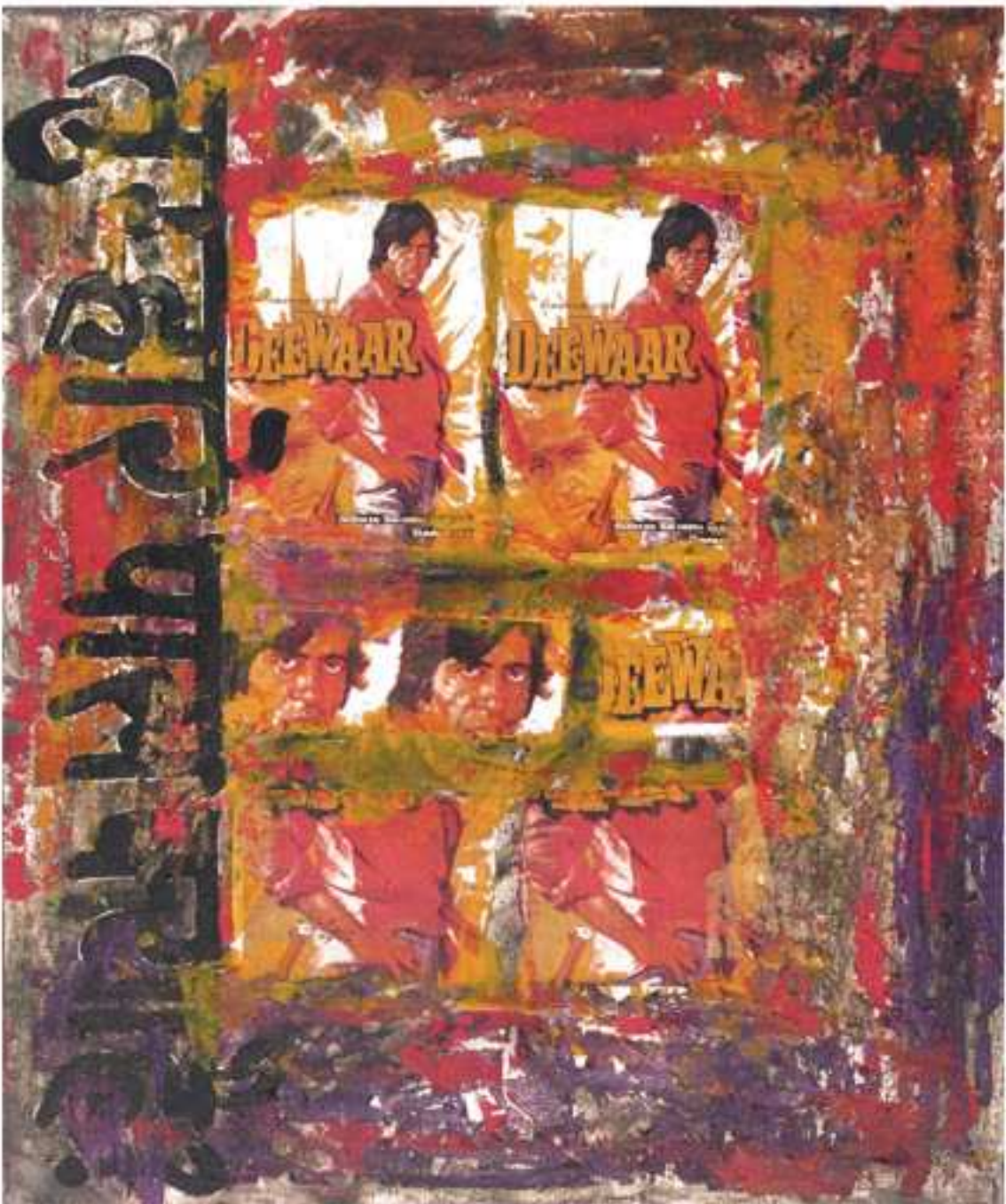
Mukesh Sharma





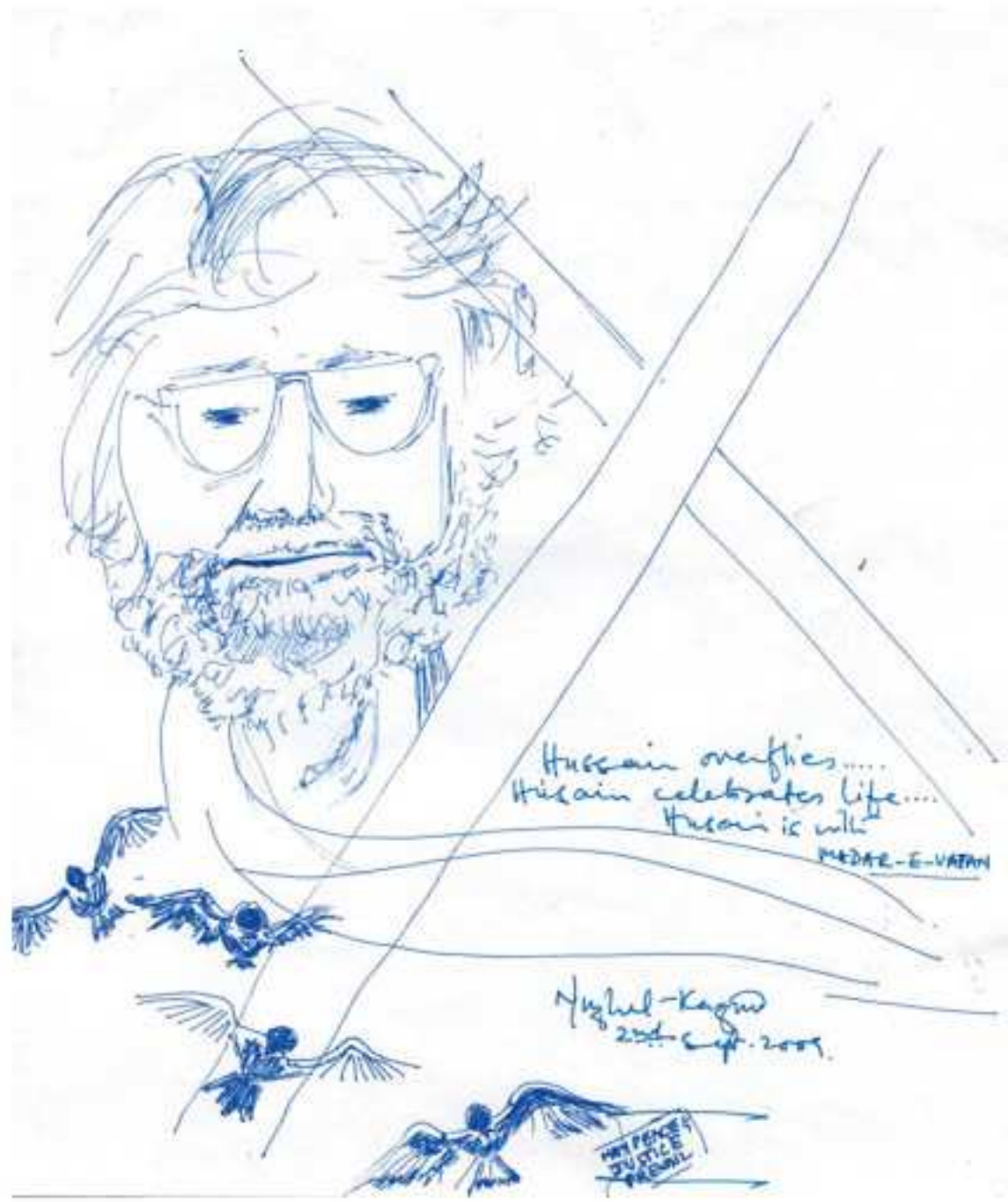


Nida Mahmood & Raoul Chandra





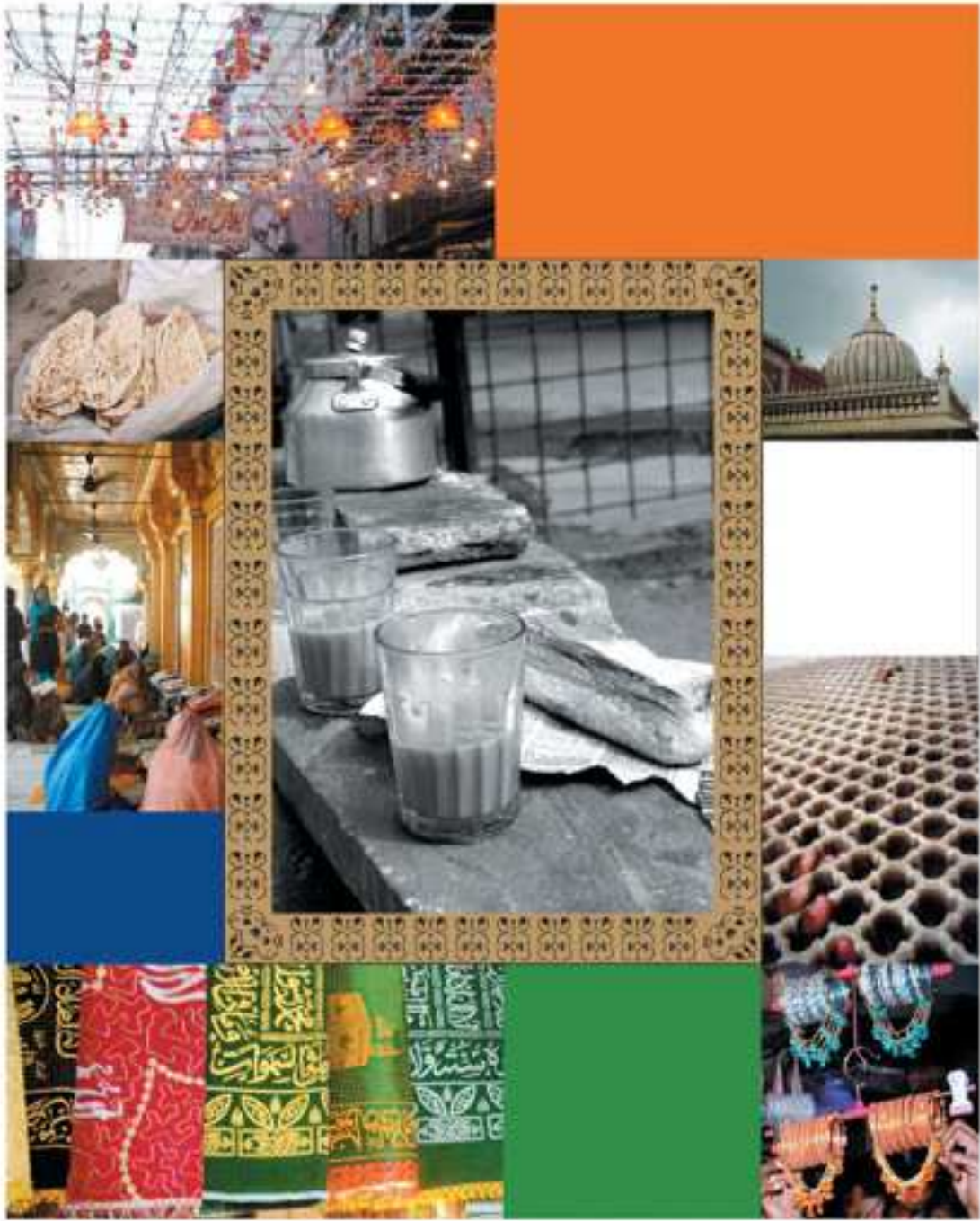






Pallav Chander





# Prashant Panjari & Itu Chaudhuri



The Wall,  
Ahmedabad  
2002





Priyanka Dua



I See U.





Motherland with  
Om Flag and Trishul

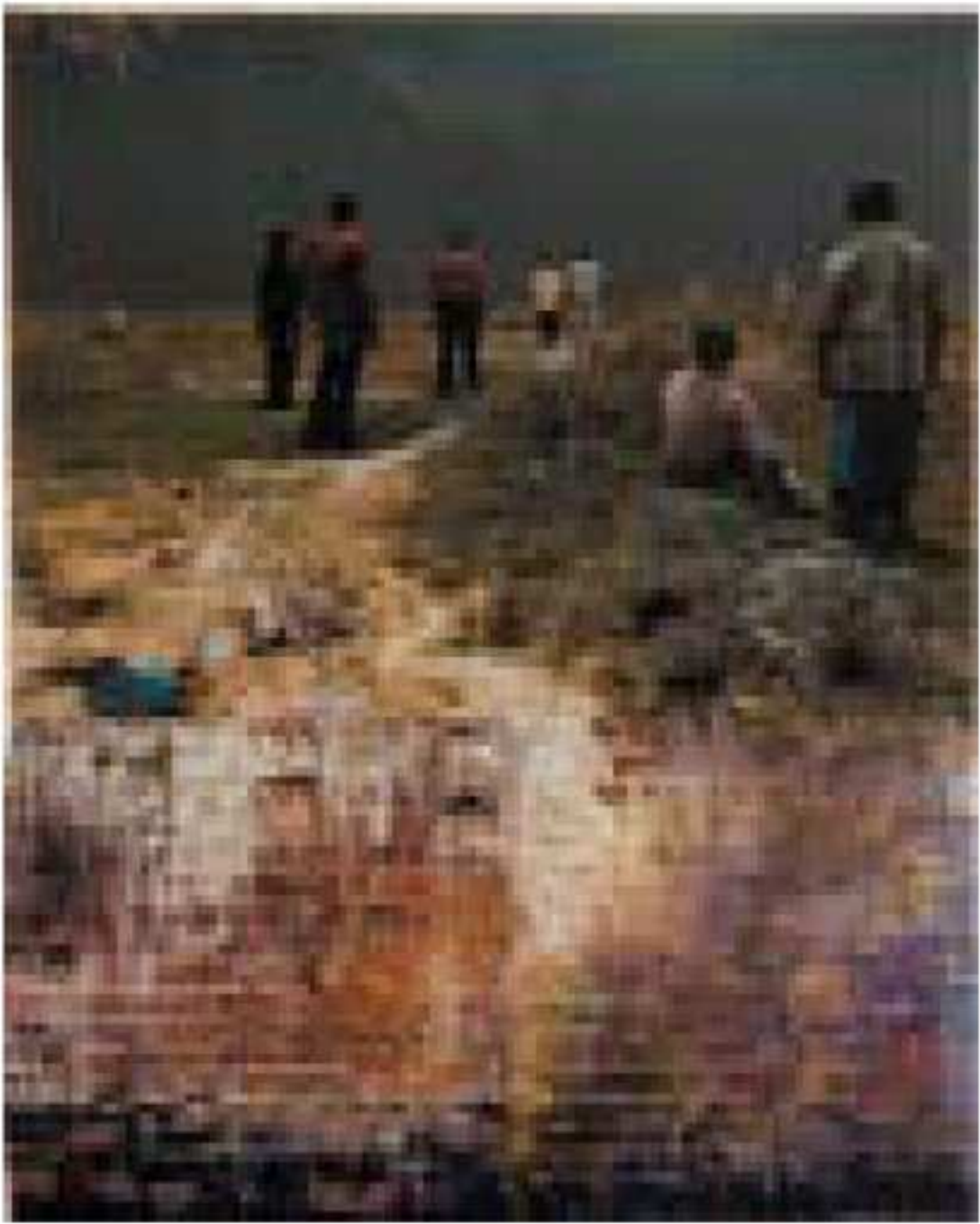
Raja Jaikrishnan



Grief of Valley



NGMA, Delhi 1993





Alliana




Rekha Rao

Richard Bartholomew



1960s, Courtesy Pablo Bartholomew



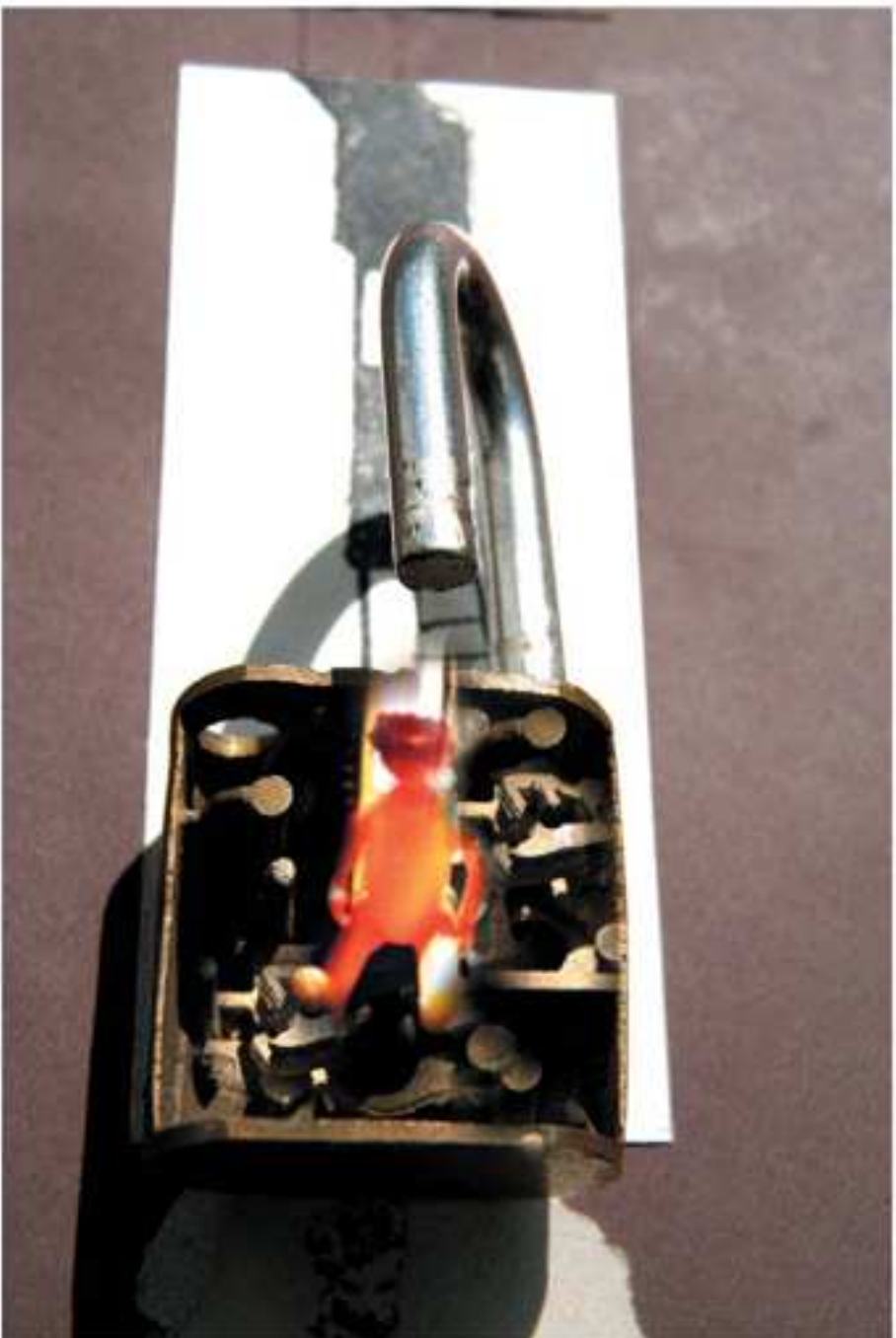
When I was six my father showed me two prints, one of the Mona Lisa and the other of MF Husain's drawing of a steed...he asked me to choose the one I liked better. The lady's smile appeared pale and wan; her gaze slightly vacant while the horse was galloping towards me, glorious and free, a fearless untamed spirit. With no hesitation, I pointed at my preference, much to everyone's amusement.

Many years later, at a holi celebration in Hyderabad, my mother in law introduced me to Husain and told him I was an artist. He smiled and edgily asked the hostess, Mrs Anju Poddar, for a black pen. In his confident hands the pen moved like a wand and the ordinary sheet of white paper flared into life right in front of my eyes. I watched curiously as Husain put the first mysterious marks, which quickly unshackled in swirling black lines the beautiful, magical horse rising dangerously high in defiance. He signed it with flourish, as everyone else waited hopefully, to me. That afternoon has stayed in my mind for its spontaneous generosity, the mastery of one's craft and a crinkled mischievous smile brimming with energy. There is nobody who can threaten these into submission or oblivion. After all the rivers, sunrises and art shows I have walked through since then, I have come to believe that art is the only reality and yes, that choice made in a six year old, I still stand by it. Happy 94th birthday, Husain Sahb.

With affection and regard,  
Saba Hasan

"Songs from the Woods" - mixed media by Saba Hasan





Dear Maqbool



Jumhe dekhkar uthaya ye kalum kyu kar ,  
Ek haat hai aqfaul , kehna kyu kar .

Jarra jarra no raamne hua zaahit ey zhanara\_ .  
Wo naqshay amal tera mujhmein kyu kar .

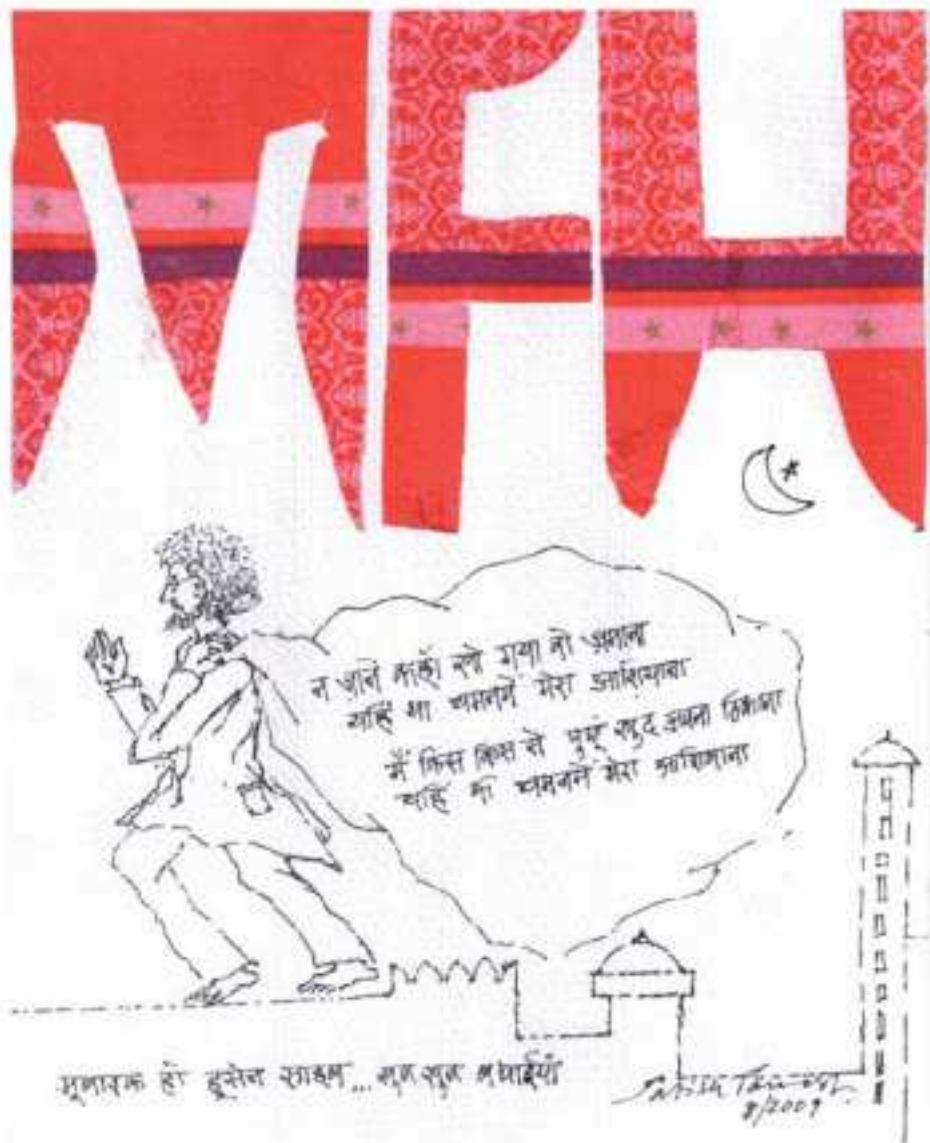
Kiya rangi ne aashikaar hasti ko mere .  
Jafsoor mere fann ki majhmasa ne kyu kar .

Kadar ho ey naudayee , keemat ne ho paye maal .  
Maaz karti hai har tasveer , kharidaar khud ne kyu kar .

Ye mardebaardosh faqat hochmand sahit ,  
Dada Maqbool Fida Humse baraar ne kyu kar .

  
Samjo Hussain









Shobha Broota



Subodh Gupta









**Humayun's Tomb**


Americans—talking about AIDS and distributing condoms. Nobody believes them. They're always telling us what to do.





Homage to M.F. Husain





*Your Long Shadow...*

*To the man who is known to  
everybody and knows everybody,  
Casts a long shadow  
and holds a brush dear.  
Moves with rapid steps and  
works ceaselessly.  
Inspires a generation and  
teaches many valuable lessons.  
Leaches leach to suck  
lifelblood out of him, but he  
moves afar to make a life of his own.  
We salute you on your Birthday  
and raise a toast to your eternal youth.  
We wish and pray you are here on  
your next birthday and every after  
that.*

*Best Wishes,*

*Vijay Sekhon*



*Hamara Hanuman*



Illusion





Neo-Camouflage





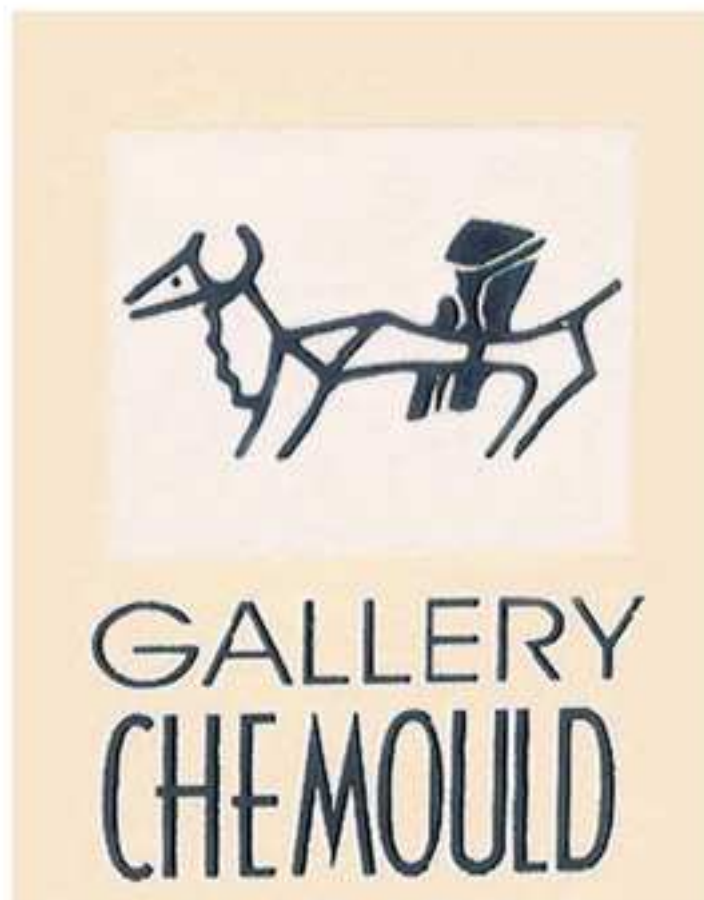
A very Happy Happy  
Birthday to  
Hussain Sahab  
Viswanadhan

# Vivan Sundaram



Barefoot with Husain

Salgirah Mubarak



Logo Designed by M.P. Husain in 1964

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Fort | Mumbai 400 001

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Logo designed by M.F. Husain in 1989



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# Salgirah Mubarak



Logo designed by M.F. Husain in 1989



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Krishen Khanna, Husain and Ram Kumar  
at Vadehra Art Gallery, Defence Colony, New Delhi

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Logo designed by M.F. Husain in 1999

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Telephone +91 (44) 4211 2545

Email: [gallery@sumukha.com](mailto:gallery@sumukha.com)



# Join Us

October 2, Tuesday,  
5 pm onwards  
SAHMAT  
VP House, Rafi Marg



## Artists Celebrate Husain at 92



Bands • Cinema • Painters • Poetry • Food  
Photo exhibit



*Rummana Hussain & M.F. Hussain at SAHMAT's 'Anhad Garje', Mumbai, 1993*