

## Reflections on Art and Nationalism

Iftikhar Dadi

The title of the exhibition, *The Night Bitten Dawn*, draws inspiration from the insights of Faiz Ahmed Faiz’s prescient poem on the effects of the Partition of 1947 on the subsequent course of history in South Asia. The poem expressed the sense of weary disappointment, of dreams betrayed and unrealized, at the end of the formal process of decolonization. The dawn that was promised by political independence did not result in a new day bathed in clear, limpid light, but was *shab-gazida* or “night-bitten.” The poem perceptively suggests that the subsequent trajectories of South Asian nation-states will remain freighted by the hindrances of the colonial and precolonial eras, rather than marking a clear break from them. Nevertheless, in much of the poem, Faiz celebrates and affirms the difficult and consequential journey of fellow travelers, towards a utopia vividly evoked by metaphors of classical Urdu poetry. He ends with a fraternal call to continue this excursion, “*chale-chalo ke vo manzil abhi nahin a’i.*”

The artists in this exhibition continue this journey, producing creative and unexpected works in diverse media that address individual and collective dilemmas of South Asia in the contemporary era. They offer critiques of the present that remains weighed down by narrow identitarian affiliations, and proffer a generous vision of a future (“*manzil*”) in which independence, equality, and the fulfilment of human potential can find a better and more universal realization.

The Partition of colonial India in 1947, which resulted in the postcolonial nation-states of India and Pakistan at the very moment of their independence, continues to be of momentous consequence in the lives of millions. Despite having transpired seven decades ago, it continues to reverberate in the lives of so many of those who did not witness 1947 firsthand, yet who remain captivated by its complex aftereffects. These include the persistence of second-order memories inherited from the first generation and from literature, film, and photography; the psychic awareness of the dispersal of familial structures and friendships across hostile borders; and the loss of affective ties to specific places associated with familial memory. Above all, today, it is a synecdoche of the uncanniness of the contemporary encounter—the pull of intimacy as well as the struggle for coming to terms with unfamiliarity—with the diverse others inhabiting the vastness of South Asia in an era where exclusivist nationalism and irredentist identitarian claims still remain dominant.

Modern nationalism in South Asia has largely succeeded in sustaining ethically repugnant notions of unwanted others in the national body-politic. This nationalism works primarily at both the elite and the popular levels by foregrounding stereotypes and discouraging face-to-face encounters with the complex humanity of others. Despite this, the vital work of numerous writers, musicians, filmmakers, and artists continues to inspire others across borders and beyond narrow identitarian affiliations. The aesthetic dimension of life in South Asia is thus radically political, in the sense that it allows us to imaginatively and affectively participate in a universe where a constrained sense of belonging is positively challenged, and one’s sense of being is invited to be enhanced in open-ended ways. In the arena of contemporary art, this crucial work being performed by artists, curators, writers, galleries and museums—whether located in South Asia or beyond—is therefore of

immense significance. It is important to recognize that art provides us and the successive generations with intellectual and affective resources for rethinking our stances, and these effects may address immediate conditions or they may be latent, proleptic, or prophetic. From this perspective, it does not matter whether the art is accessible or difficult, how widely the work circulates, or what the specific identity of the artist is.

While a number of artists who experienced the Partition, such as Satish Gujral and Tyeb Mehta, did respond to its effects in their work, others approached it only in metaphorical and indirect ways;<sup>1</sup> and by and large there was a structure of experience and feeling that most artists and filmmakers sought to transcend.<sup>2</sup> However, contemporary practice by a growing number of South Asian artists—most of whom did not experience firsthand either 1947, or the 1971 liberation of Bangladesh—is now beginning to grapple with the latent complexity of Partition’s effects, which extends from grand nationalist, geopolitical, and identitarian agendas into the most personal and intimate aspects of the self.

As an artist, my own engagement with the legacy of the 1947 Partition began with a fortuitous meeting in 1996 at an exhibition in Copenhagen with Indian artist Nalini Malani, who had moved from Karachi to Bombay following Partition. We discussed an alternative “celebration” of the 50th anniversary of the independence of India and Pakistan, as well as Partition, in 1997. This resulted in an exhibition organized by Pooja Sood that traveled to New Delhi, Bombay, and Lahore.<sup>3</sup> And at the invitation of UK-based curator Alnoor Mitha, we collaborated to develop *Bloodlines* in 1997. But the work could not easily be made together—partly due to visa and travel restrictions—and its original and recent editions have therefore been fabricated by professional embroiderers in Karachi. Its recent exhibition in India is an important milestone in my continued engagement with these tangled legacies.

The 1947 Partition was also the original impetus for the *Lines of Control* project—and the one that impelled London-based curator Hammad Nasar to question the strange and haunting absence of artists who would address it directly. The importance of 1947 and 1971 for younger artists became very evident to me in my involvement in the *Lines of Control* project, first as an artist, and later also as co-curator. The exhibition eventually included the work of over 30 artists and groups, and also included *Bloodlines*.<sup>4</sup> The insistent questions and ethical demands that the artworks in *Lines of Control* raised—in a probing but fragmentary manner—were articulated and further illuminated by critical insights in a symposium, and more durably in essays in the *Lines of Control* publication that brought the works of artists in proximity with the research of scholars who offered insights into many of the questions that the artworks make visible.<sup>5</sup>

The resurgence of artistic engagement with the question of Partition undoubtedly has something to do with the resonance of what theorist and film scholar Bhaskar Sarkar has identified as the latency of the “Partition experience” on the psyche. This experience is not to be conflated with simply witnessing or experiencing events firsthand; rather, it has a “spectral or negative presence,” and a “temporality all its own, one that runs alongside and yet is out of sync with the present.”<sup>6</sup> Sarkar further notes that this structure of experience is “marked by deferral, gaps, and uncertainties, providing no guarantee of

the eventual assimilation of the experience within a coherent history, or of therapeutic closure.” The experience, then, is not only individual, or belonging only to those who witnessed it directly, but extends its effects collectively to society in strange ways and works insidiously across generations.

Contemporary cultural and artistic practice is uniquely placed to address this second-order predicament as it executes a modality of address that seeks neither metaphorical sublimation nor adherence to established artistic form nor legitimacy via the “national modern.” The contemporary work of art offers no transcendence and no attempt to redeem events and crises into a utopian metaphor. Rather, it resolutely refuses all claims to authenticity and insistently maps the multiple dislocations and antinomies of the social field.<sup>7</sup> It is characterised by its being both *fully immersed in-its-time*, yet also *simultaneously out-of-joint with it*, and therefore not bound by the “timeliness” of its demands or by the sense of “reasonably” addressing only what is politically and socially pragmatic. Much of contemporary art ethically critiques our conceptions and practices of modern institutions, such as the nation-state, which were meant to usher us into an enlightened new age, but which can no longer suppress the violent memories of their founding or their inassimilable exclusions and remainders.

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My own awareness of the significance of Partition is artistic and scholarly in the professional sense, of course; but above all, it is deeply personal. Growing up in Karachi during the 60s and 70s in a family with parents who had both migrated from India after 1947, I grew up with many recollections of a familial and social life that was intangible and distant to our life in Pakistan. My mother’s family, which had been based in Lucknow and Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, traces itself as members of the Rohillas, and to quintessential middle-class doctors, professionals and civil servants that Aligarh University produced for a couple of generations. They were deeply invested in Urdu language and literature. On the other hand, my father’s immediate family was based in Bombay, but the extended family was from the small town of Godhra in Gujarat. The numerous members of the Gujarati-speaking “Godhra community” that had migrated to Karachi formed an elaborate labyrinth linked by intermarriages, and they were above all interested in trading and other business activities. I recall seeing very few historic or current photographs of family life from India, and at this time, long before the era of instantaneous electronic communication and intensified image circulation, my relation to these sites and events of familial history was uncanny. Members of both sides of my family have remained in India; many others migrated to Pakistan and subsequently to Canada, the US, Europe, and the Middle East, forming a dispersal that can no longer be gathered in any stable territory that is “home.”

And before my teenage years, in 1971 the Bangladeshi struggle for independence from Pakistan precipitated war between India and Pakistan. During the war, many bombs were dropped on Karachi, including a couple in our residential neighborhood, just a few hundred meters from our house, creating a terrifying sound and shattering many windowpanes of

our home. The next morning, we joined a crowd of residents as they stared in stupor at two destroyed homes whose genteel domestic furniture and decorative curtains could be glimpsed through the collapsed walls and concrete rubble, evoking a very disturbing scenario. My school had also been bombed. Despite the effects of war all around us, after the war, the Pakistani government refused to formally acknowledge the loss of East Pakistan and did not recognise Bangladesh as an independent nation-state diplomatically until 1974—during these years of non-recognition, imported books and atlases would have the name “Bangladesh” crossed out in black ink by the government censors. For someone still in middle school, this was all very puzzling and unsettling.

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Over the years, as I have sought to make sense of these experiences, I have come to realize the degree to which aspects of this experience resonate with others from South Asia and indeed from other postwar nation-states. The decolonization process, which created new nation-states along Westphalian lines, also ended up shaping the lives and imaginations of their citizens and their subjects. In doing so, other affiliations that communities and societies had developed from premodern eras were denied. But my distrust of the closures of the nation-state was also shared in many ways by Americans I met after I arrived in the US to pursue higher education.

My artistic work over the last two decades has involved an ongoing collaboration with Elizabeth Dadi. Elizabeth grew up on the West Coast and studied in San Francisco during the 80s, in an environment that had already been deeply transformed by political and social activism from the late 60s onwards, and was characterised by profound skepticism of the global imperialist role of the United States during the late Cold War. She studied art at the San Francisco Art Institute, which at that time had a very supportive and open environment for critical thinking and for conceptual, new media, and performance art. Both of us had thus arrived at a juncture where we understood that the art of the present needs to address these quandaries of the self in a divided world, and where the claimed certainties of national belonging needed to be interrogated through artistic practice. Our media-saturated environment creates paradoxical effects: it legitimates official closures through the selection and repetition of powerful narrative forms and affective sensory registers. But simultaneously, popular, counterpublic, and vernacular material and media cultures also persist and become amplified. Together, these often competing narratives can create immersive and distracting experiences in ways that prevent a critical understanding of the world-picture. Elizabeth and myself have been collaborating on artistic practice for two decades, and our work can be placed at the intersection of conceptual art, pop art, and popular culture.

In our view, the work of contemporary art ought to interrogate both the blindness of official narratives, and the spectacular immersions of popular cultures, by bringing conceptual rigour to a dialogue with the sense and affect of the popular. The latter term denotes not only the art of mass culture in postindustrial societies, but also the rich

materiality of urban street life in cities of the global South, and especially in South Asia, where one encounters bright plastic artifacts from various sources in dense juxtaposition, and where lights, decoration, and signage play a vital role in orienting one's consciousness and in establishing a relation to the specificity of place. As an example, one of our recent works, the *Efflorescence* series (2013-ongoing) constitutes a chapter in our continued investigation into how our consciousness is shaped in the era of mediated biopower. *Efflorescence* uses the language of pop art and commercial signage in a large-scale commentary on sovereignty and the nation-state: the series consists of giant neon flowers that are industrially fabricated, each the national symbol of a country or region with disputed borders. In their giant scale and their graphic industrial character, the works confound expectations as to what delicate flowers should look like. The specific flowers referenced in this series are supposedly sacred national symbols, but grow widely, across nations and even across continents. The works speak to the arbitrariness of nationalism and its borders—their mesmerizing light and shape also evokes the lingering seductive power of nationalism on our imagination.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> And according to film scholar Bhaskar Sarkar, popular Indian cinema after 1947 situated the experience of Partition in “displaced, allegorical forms.” Bhaskar Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation: Indian Cinema in the Wake of Partition* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>2</sup> As Sarkar notes, the issue was not forgetfulness; rather, “there was a surfeit of . . . mostly disturbing memory that stretched the limits of credibility and haunted people in inchoate ways.” Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, 28.

<sup>3</sup> Mappings: *Shared Histories* (1997-98) showed the work of three Indian and Pakistani artists each. Pooja Sood, *Mappings: Shared Histories ... a Fragile Self: September 1997 to January 1998* (New Delhi: Eicher Gallery, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Iftikhar Dadi, and Hammad Nasar, eds. *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (London; Ithaca, NY: Green Cardamom; Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, 2012). The exhibition in its early manifestations was shown in London, Karachi and Dubai. The expanded show was exhibited at the Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art at Cornell University (2012) and at Duke university's Nasher Museum of Art (2013-14).

<sup>5</sup> For instance, Sumathi Ramaswamy analysed the intensive visual, cartographic activity engendered by the Partition and features the remarkable work of the “barefoot cartographers” who continue to produce bazaar prints that visualise India and South Asia in ways that are often at variance with official mappings. Naeem Mohaiemen sensitively examined the historiography of 1971, pointing out its lacunas and absences, including its contradictory effects on everyday lives and also the way in which various political groups have deployed the narrative of Bangladesh's liberation for their own ends. And Aamir Mufti's essay offered an extended reading of the life and work of Zarina Hashmi as an exilic artist whose abiding references to the visual outlines of a home and to the Urdu language are situated with reference to “a life lived on the verge of disappearance but with a strange resolve and repudiation of oblivion.” The essays are included in Dadi and Nasar, eds. *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space*.

<sup>6</sup> Sarkar, *Mourning the Nation*, 30.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Smith, “Introduction.” In *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*. Edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 1-19.

## House Divided: A Cultural Reshaping of Partition in Contemporary Times

Rakhee Balaram

THIS LEPROUS BRIGHTNESS, THIS DAWN WHICH REEKS OF NIGHT...

*Is it barbaric to write poetry after partition?* Adorno's statement about Auschwitz and the creative act can be reinterpreted in light of the events of South Asian partition where poetic verse accounts for unspeakable trauma in contemporary times. Understanding the significance of the *barbaric*, the foreigner, the other, becomes essential to the painstaking work of recovering histories, narrating stories, bringing to light buried truths and coming to terms with the past. The artist Amar Kanwar's installation work in the garage of “Gujral” House, constructed in the 1960s in the wake of Nehruvian nation-building pays tribute to the poetry of spoken by a resonant voice that echoes through a hole in the wall. In a city of refugees, Kanwar captures the rebelliousness and the anti-institutional splitting and puncturing of the architecture of Gordon Matta Clark as much as he brings to mind the light streaming from a hole in the wall in Alan Saret's *The Hole at PS1, Fifth Solar Chthonic Wall Temple*, divesting it of the sublime. Kanwar strips these forms of their earlier meaning, and in so doing, charges them differently to reconstruct a history. The artist creates an installation with a projected window streaming between two concrete walls broken by a hammer. The house is private. The house is political. And a rupture in the wall and the space created between two garages in a now abandoned house in Jor Bagh come to signify the hope and pain of partition.

Such symbolic gestures can only allude to the deferred meaning of the actual event—displaced over time and deflected into the meaning making of installation art to capture it. A simple and sonorous voice of the past gives rise to a moment in time; itself deferred to the 1980s from an incident in 1947. Reverberations of time resound in the present. In Kanwar's installation, the sound of Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz rings out in a verse spoken in his own voice from 1983, a year before his death, as a testament to *Subh-e-Azadi* or the dawn of freedom.

These same words were triumphantly proclaimed at the time of Pakistan's first broadcast on August 13-14, 1947. The freshly minted Pakistan Broadcasting Service, or Radio Pakistan, was one of the new jewels of infrastructure that came with Partition.<sup>1</sup> The radio station broadcast a message of triumph first in Urdu by Mustafa Ali Hamdani, close to the midnight hour to usher in the new dawn:

السلام علیکم  
ہم لاہور سے بول رہے ہیں۔ تیرہ اور چودہ اگست، سن سینتالیس عیسوی کی درمیانی رات بارہ بجے ہیں۔  
طلوع صبح آزادی

GREETINGS! PAKISTAN BROADCASTING SERVICE. WE ARE SPEAKING FROM LAHORE. THE NIGHT BETWEEN THE THIRTEEN AND FOURTEEN OF AUGUST, YEAR FORTY-SEVEN. IT IS TWELVE O'CLOCK. DAWN OF FREEDOM.

Midnight, the hour itself a ‘partition’ between night and day became symbolic of the events to follow; dawn was announced before sunrise. Culturally, midnight would mark a generation as Salman Rushdie paid tribute in his *Midnight's Children*, or interpreted more broadly by