

BJP-led government censors painting at India's National Gallery of Modern Art

Our correspondents
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India's Bharatiya Janatha Party (BJP)-led government has again intervened to impose its communalist agenda in the field of art. During August culture ministry officials demanded the withdrawal of a painting from an exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) in New Delhi, the country's premier contemporary art gallery.

The picture, painted by Surendran Nair and entitled *An actor rehearsing the interior monologue of Icarus*, depicted a naked Icarus, the Greek mythological figure, on top of the Ashoka Pillar. It was part of an exhibition by 25 young Indian artists entitled "Combine—Voice for the New Century" and scheduled to open in early September.

The Ashoka Pillar dates back to the reign of Emperor Ashoka, who ruled India from 273-232BC, and depicts four lions mounted on a circular abacus with a wheel at its centre. It was adopted as India's national emblem following the end of British rule in 1947.

Two days before the exhibition was scheduled to open, Culture Ministry Secretary P. V. Vaidynatha Ayyar instructed NGMA director Mukta Nidhi Samnotra to remove the painting from the exhibition, claiming the national emblem had been portrayed in a "less than reverential manner" and could prompt objections from nationalist elements.

Samnotra, with no background in art and an appointee of the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance government, agreed with the directive. She said she would also remove a fabric drawing of nude women by Rekha Rodwittiya, Nair's companion, and work by sculptor Rejendar Tikku.

The NGMA director is one of an increasing number of officials plugged into key positions by the government because they openly advocate or are prepared to comply with the BJP's communalist

program. Last year the government retired several leading secular-minded historians from the Indian Council of Historical Research (ICHR) and replaced them with BJP allies. ICHR head B.R. Grover is a supporter of the extremist Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Forum). Only one member of the ICHR's three-member governing body is a trained historian.

When exhibition curator, Prima Kurion, and organiser, Amit Gupta, objected and asked Samnotra to reconsider her decision, the NGMA director threatened to personally remove the art works. Outraged over this blatant attack on artistic freedom, all the artists involved in the exhibition withdrew their works in protest.

Nair, who is well known internationally, uses a mixture of traditional and contemporary imagery, including cinema posters and political graffiti, in his work. He told the Indian media that his painting was "an allegorical means to suggest the need for reflection on our ties" and added: "I cannot understand how my painting of the Ashoka pillar with the Greek mythological character Icarus standing on top of it can be constituted as a slight to a national symbol."

Other artists denounced the government censorship, which came less than nine months after Hindu fundamentalists forced the closure of film director Deepa Mehta's production of *Water* in Uttar Pradesh.

On September 6, Ghulam Sheik, an eminent artist and a member of the NGMA's advisory committee, resigned his post in protest. Sheik wrote to the NGMA director declaring that: "The unilateral decision to remove a painting from an approved and authorised show on unsubstantial legal, moral or aesthetic grounds indicates an unfortunate absence of sensitivity to artistic vocabulary." He said NGMA authorities had ignored its own advisory body on the matter.

Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat), an alliance of artists and intellectuals opposed to Hindu fundamentalism and cultural nationalism, issued a press release expressing solidarity with the artists who withdrew their work. “Under the present dispensation,” the statement said, “the liberal ambience is so vitiated that not only the political leadership but bureaucrats have abrogated to themselves the right to decide as to what constitutes national or anti-national.”

Government censorship of artists and intellectuals is not an isolated incident but part of a growing pattern of fundamentalist attacks on artistic and intellectual expression and democratic rights throughout India.

M.F. Hussain, one of India's most prominent artists, is due to face trial this year for allegedly “disturbing communal harmony”. The charges were laid after he painted nude portraits of Hindu goddesses in 1996.

In October last year two historians were removed from the Prasarbharati (government-owned television broadcasting) board because they opposed an increase in Hindutva ideological propaganda via the numerous television serials on Hindu gods. Hindutva is a supremacist anti-secular doctrine that claims India is a Hindu nation with the state structure and all aspects of life organised accordingly.

In February this year, after Hindu chauvinist thugs wrecked Deepa Mehta's *Water* film set and the Uttar Pradesh state government banned production of the film, the BJP-led government stopped publication of two volumes of *Towards Freedom*, a collection of documents edited by eminent historians K.N. Panikar and Sumit Sarkar. The volumes, which had been commissioned by the ICHR, were suppressed because they exposed the reactionary role of the Hindu Mahasabha and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) during the struggle against India's British rulers in the 1940s.

More recently, in August, the government tried to stop “Dust on the Road,” an exhibition of contemporary Indian art in Toronto, Canada. Sponsored by the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute, the exhibition included posters with headlines such as: “Caste and creed as pawns on the chess board”, “What RSS stands for is militant nationalism” and “Ideology that killed Gandhi controls the BJP”. Rajnikant Verma, India's High Commissioner in Canada, publicly condemned the show as “a work of fiction rooted in jaundiced

imagination” and ordered the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute to disassociate itself from it. The government also stopped funding to Indian Studies at the University of Western Ontario, which hosted the exhibition.

The censorship of Nair's painting at the NGMA and other artistic work is tied to a definite political agenda. Under conditions of growing social inequality and rising levels of poverty, the government is attempting to stop the emergence of a mass opposition to its policies by dividing India's working masses along religious and caste lines. This involves the creation of a social climate where it is impossible for artists, filmmakers, writers and other intellectuals to do any serious work that might challenge the government's fundamentalist program.



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