

London art gallery closes M.F. Husain exhibition after paintings vandalised

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On May 22, London's Asia House Gallery shut down a major exhibition by 91-year-old Maqbool Fida Husain, India's most famous contemporary artist, after three men entered the gallery and defaced two of his paintings—*Durga* and *Draupadi*.

The exhibition, "M.F. Husain: Early Masterpieces 1950-70s," was opened on May 10 by Indian high commissioner Kamalesh Sharma and scheduled to run until August 5. Damage to the works, which were sprayed with black paint, is estimated to be at least £200,000. According to one press report, the gallery was denied insurance for the Husain exhibition following the attack.

While no one has admitted responsibility, the London-based Hindu Human Rights and the Hindu Forum of Britain, which are linked to right-wing fundamentalist formations in India, had demanded closure of the Asia House exhibit, claiming that it contained "obscene images of Hindu goddesses". The Hindu Human Rights group had also planned a demonstration outside the gallery on May 27.

A statement by British-based Indian academics denounced the Hindu Human Rights and the Hindu Forum of Britain. It declared that these organisations were using "the same tactics" as Hindu fundamentalist organisations in India and were "undermining India's constitutional right to freedom of thought and expression".

Awaaz South Asia Watch, a web site that monitors religious hatred in South Asia and Britain, pointed out that the Hindu Forum of Britain had "actively supported or defended" the activities of the Hindu supremacists Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the associated World Hindu Council (Vishwa Hindu Parishad or VHP). These organisations are notorious for fomenting communalist attacks on Muslims and anything deemed to be "insulting Hinduism".

Economist and Labour peer Meghnad Desai described

the vandalism as "an outrageous attack on artistic freedom in the British context" and claimed that, "the objection to Husain is not the so-called obscenity of his paintings. It is because he is a Muslim and hence the desire of some Hindu groups to deny his artistic freedom to take Hindu gods and goddesses as his theme."

Notwithstanding these statements, there has been little reportage in the British media, apart from one article and a couple of letters in the *Guardian* newspaper. Nor have any leading British artists or intellectuals condemned the vandalism of Husain's work or the show's closure.

At the same time, Asia House has capitulated to the Hindu chauvinist agitation and expunged all reference to the Husain exhibition from its web site. When contacted by WSWs reporters, Asia House cultural director Katriana Hazell would only repeat that the show had been closed for "security reasons" and that the situation was "complex". Hazell refused to elaborate or comment on the questions of artistic freedom and on her attitude to demands from the Hindu fundamentalists.

M. F. Husain has been painting for more than 70 years and is internationally acclaimed for his work. Some of his paintings include naked images of various Hindu deities as well as mythical Indian characters, which aroused the wrath of the Hindu fundamentalists. (For examples of Husain's art see http://www.contemporaryindianart.com/m_f_husain.htm and <http://www.mfhussain.com/modules.php?name=coppermine&cat=2>).

According to Husain, whose aim is to create new forms of secular Indian art, the *Durga* painting "celebrates the joy, the colour of life and has no intention of causing any offence to anyone." As he has constantly explained, ancient 5,000 year old Indian temples depict "pure and uncovered" images of deities and that "nudity is not nakedness [but] a form of innocence and maturity ..."

In a comment published before the exhibition, he declared: “For the last 50 years, an enlightened body of Indian painters has been engaged in reconnecting the reality of the ancient cultural heritage to our time. As in every human endeavour, faith is at the core of it all. With great care and reverence for all faiths, the Indian sub-continent has evolved a unique secular culture. I am a humble contributor towards the creation of a great Indian composite culture.”

Vandal attacks by religious extremists against Husain first began in October 1996, when Bajrang Dal members (the youth section of the RSS-VHP) forced their way into the Husain-Doshi Gufa Art Gallery in Ahmedabad and destroyed about 23 tapestries and 28 paintings by Husain, including his *Hanuman* and *Madhuri Dixit* series and a depiction of the Last Supper. Their pretext was Husain’s controversial 1976 “nude” sketch of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of art and knowledge.

Two years later in 1998, Husain’s home in Bombay was broken into and damaged by fundamentalists protesting over his paintings of Hindu deities Hanuman and Sita.

As well as targeting Husain, Hindu extremists have also attacked Indian historians, artists and filmmakers. In early 2000, for example, filmmaker Deepa Mehta was forced to abandon production in India of her film *Water*, which dramatises the plight of Hindu widows and “inter-caste” relationships, after Hindu fundamentalists destroyed film sets and threatened the cast and crew in Varanasi. The movie was eventually shot secretly in Sri Lanka and released in Canada in late 2005.

In India’s Gujarat state, where the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) holds power, the organisation’s youth wing have recently mounted protests against Bollywood actor and producer Aamir Khan and forced cinema owners to ban screenings of his latest film *Fanaa*, a Bollywood romance.

Khan was singled out not because of anything in the movie but because he has publicly opposed Hindu extremist violence and campaigned for decent compensation and relocation for the 35,000 people who will be displaced by Narmada Dam project.

Early this year fundamentalists once again turned their attention to Husain, mounting street protests and demanding legal action over *Mother India*, Husain’s painting for Mission Kashmir, an organisation that raised funds for victims of the October 2005 earthquake. The painting depicts a naked woman combined with the map of India. Shiv Sena (Army of Shiva) party leader Bhagwan Goel publicly declared that he would pay a half-

million rupee reward for anyone who cut off one of Husain’s arms.

In late March a court in Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, ruled that Husain had “offended” Hindus and asked police to register a case against him. The order came following a VHP petition, alleging that the artist had portrayed Hindu gods and goddesses in an “objectionable” manner and was “disturbing communal harmony”.

These blatant violations of Husain’s democratic rights, however, became even more serious in May when India’s central government, the ruling Congress-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA), joined the assault.

On May 5, a few days before the opening of Husain’s London exhibition, the UPA instructed Mumbai and Delhi police to take “appropriate” action against the 91-year-old, declaring that his work had the potential to “hurt religious feelings”.

This directive, which came from the Home Ministry, after consultation with the government’s Law Ministry, is unprecedented. It is the first time Husain has been targeted by the Congress-led regime, which claims to be secular and oppose Hindu fundamentalism.

The UPA moves against Husain were no doubt a key factor in encouraging those who vandalised the London exhibition and clearly demonstrate that the Congress-led government has only tactical differences with the Hindu fundamentalists.

Despite Congress’s posturing as a secular movement, a claim that stems from its role in the struggle against British colonial rule, it has always exploited communalism at key crisis points. That the Congress government has bowed down to the Hindu fundamentalists on this most basic democratic question—freedom of expression—is a reflection that it is facing a deepening political crisis.

Congress’ surprise victory in the 2004 Indian elections reflected widespread hostility against the BJP-led government and its pro-market program. Two years on, the UPA is imposing the same economic measures which are widening the gulf between rich and poor. It has joined the anti-Husain campaign in a bid to prove own communal credentials and undermine the ability of the BJP to exploit the issue.



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