

Hounded by Hindu right, India's best-known painter takes Qatari citizenship

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India's best known and most celebrated visual artist, Maqbool Fida (M.F.) Husain, last month accepted an offer of Qatari citizenship—a poignant protest against the Indian state's and political elite's complicity in his harassment and victimization by Hindu fundamentalists and supremacists.

Now aged 94, Husain has been a painter for the past seven decades. He is also a photographer and filmmaker. His paintings have been shown to great acclaim in India and abroad.

Since 1996, when a Hindi-language magazine initiated a hue and cry over paintings Husain made in the 1970s that depict naked Hindu deities, he and his works have been the target of frequent violent attacks. Husain has also been subjected to a never-ending campaign of legal harassment that has enjoyed the support of much of the judiciary and political establishment—the purportedly secular Congress Party, as well as the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and Shiv Sena.

While the Hindu right by no means restricts its communal and obscurantist campaigns to attacking Muslims, the fact that Husain is a Muslim by birth and has declared himself a protagonist of a secular and composite Indian culture is unquestionably a major reason for their targeting him.

Fearing physical attack and legal prosecution, Husain fled India in 2006. Since then he has lived in Dubai and summered in London.

According to press reports, Husain did not request Qatari citizenship, but accepted it when it was offered him by the Gulf state's ruling family.

As India does not allow dual citizenship, Husain's acceptance of the Qatari offer amounted to renunciation of his Indian citizenship. On March 8, the painter met with India's ambassador to Qatar to turn over his Indian passport.

In an interview with the Doha edition of a Malayam-language newspaper (*Gulf Madhyamam*), Husain voiced his "love" for his "motherland," but said India had "rejected" him.

"When Sangh Parivar [Hindu supremacist] outfits targeted me, all kept silent. No one, including political leadership, artists or intellectuals came forward to speak for me."

Husain said he was confident that the vast majority of Indians support him. "Only 10 percent of people, including some politicians, are against me."

"India's continuing governments could not protect me. So, it is very difficult for me to stay in such a country. Politicians are eyeing only votes."

"Now," he added, "they are asking me to come back.... How can I

trust a political leadership that refused to protect me? Is there any surety that I would be given protection in India?"

Husain termed the campaign against him "a move against art and the artist's self-expression."

He said that he had "never intended to hurt anyone's sentiments through the art. I only expressed my soul's creativity through art. Art's language is universal language. People who love it beyond all narrow viewpoints are my strength."

Husain's remarks are a heartfelt and entirely justified condemnation of the Indian state and elite.

The Hindu right was long a marginal force in India. But in recent decades, the Indian bourgeoisie, coincident with its turn to anti-working class "market reforms" that have increased social inequality and economic insecurity, has promoted all manner of communal and caste-ist politics.

India's legal and political institutions have allowed Hindu supremacists to commit communal atrocities—most notably the razing of the Babri Masjid (mosque) in 1992 and the 2002 Gujarat pogrom—and mount vile, anti-democratic campaigns—such as the targeting of the painter Husain—with impunity. The BJP is currently the official opposition in India's parliament and was the dominant partner in the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition that governed India from 1996 to 2004.

In September 1996, a Madhya Pradesh-based monthly *Vichar Mimansa* published a reputed exposé under the title "M.F. Husain: A Painter or Butcher." The article denounced a 25-year-old painting Husain made of Saraswati, the Hindu goddess of art and knowledge, terming it an outrage that Husain had depicted her in the nude. (In fact, the painting is highly stylized, showing only the contours of the female form.)

Subsequently, the "Minister for Culture" in the neighbouring state of Maharashtra, the Shiv Sena leader Pramod Navalkar, initiated criminal charges against Husain on the grounds that his painting promoted religious enmity and insulted religious sentiments and beliefs. Three days after the charges were filed, youth mobilized by the Bajrang Dal (the youth section of the World Hindu Council or VHP) forced their way into an art gallery in Ahmedabad and destroyed 23 tapestries and 28 paintings by Husain, including a series of depictions of Hanuman, a Hindu mythical figure known as the monkey-god, and of Madhuri Dixit, a popular Bollywood actress.

Two years later in 1998, Husain's home in Bombay was broken into and damaged, this time ostensibly over his "blasphemous" paintings of Hanuman and Sita, characters in the Indian epic Ramayana.

In 2006, the Hindu right mounted street protests demanding legal

action over the painting “Mother India,” which Husain did for Mission Kashmir, an organization that raised funds for victims of the October 2005 earthquake in the Kashmir region of India and Pakistan. The painting depicted a naked female that was blended into the map of India. Shiv Sena leader Bhagwan Goel then publicly proclaimed that he would pay a half-million rupee reward to anyone who cuts-off one of Husain’s hands.

On May 22 of the same year, London’s Asia House Gallery shut down an exhibition of Husain’s work just days after it opened, in response to the defacing of two paintings depicting the Hindu goddesses Durga and Draupadi. British-based Hindu fundamentalist groups aligned with the VHP and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) had been campaigning for the exhibition to be shut down.

In a comment published before the exhibition, Husain explained how in his work he has sought to combine traditional Indian art with contemporary modes of artistic expression: “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.”

Only a few days prior to the opening of Husain’s aborted London exhibition, the home minister in India’s Congress Party-led United Progressive Alliance (UPA) issued orders to the Mumbai and Delhi police to take “appropriate” action against Husain, because his work has the potential to “hurt religious feelings.”

To Husain it was no doubt a major blow that a government led by the Congress Party, which postures as a champion of secularism, and propped up by the two Stalinist parliamentary parties and their Left Front, should lend its support to the Hindu right-fomented campaign against him. Soon after, the painter became, in his own words, an “international gypsy.”

In 2007, there were, according to Husain, more than 900 criminal cases outstanding against him in India: “Matters are so legally complicated that I have been advised not to return home.”

By this point, the UPA-led Law Ministry had declared that it had determined that prosecutors would have a “strong case” against Husain if they charged him with deliberately hurting religious feelings, and a lower court had ordered the seizure of his property after he failed to obey a summons..

India’s Supreme Court ultimately stayed the property seizure order and, after lengthy proceedings, it ruled in September 2008 that Husain’s paintings are not obscene. In the latter judgment, the court made the obvious point that Hindu-inspired art, including the walls of many ancient temples, are replete with nude figures.

The Supreme Court’s tardy intervention in defence of Husain’s fundamental rights as a citizen and artist has not prevented his opponents from continuing to use the courts to harass him, nor prevented them from otherwise continuing to whip up animosity against him and his works. This has included denunciations of his painting “The Rape of India,” created in response to the November 2008 terrorist attack on Mumbai.

It should also be noted that some of Husain’s works, including a 2004 film, *Meenaxi: A Tale of Three Cities*, have been the object of protests by Muslim fundamentalist groups.

Husain is by no means the only artist to be targeted by the Hindu supremacist right, with the connivance of government authorities. To name only a few of the better known cases: in 2000, the Indo-

Canadian filmmaker Deepa Mehta was forced to abandon the attempt to shoot her film *Water*, which depicts the plight of Hindu widows, in India; the same year the BJP-led national government ordered a painting by Surendran Nair removed from an exhibition at the national gallery of modern art; in 2006 Gujarat’s BJP state government effectively banned the screening of the film *Fanaa* because its star, Aamir Khan, had criticized the displacement of tribal people to build the Narmada Dam.

In recent weeks, the Shiv Sena has been leading a virulent campaign laced with threats of violence against the latest film of Bollywood star Shahrukh Khan, *My name is Khan*. Khan, a Muslim by birth, ran afoul of the Shiv Sena because he supported the right of Pakistani-born cricketers to play in the Indian Premier (cricket) League. The Shiv Sena campaign has failed, however, to stop large numbers from flocking to see the film.

Notwithstanding his stature as an artist, Husain’s decision to renounce his Indian citizenship has provoked scant comment from India’s politicians and media. The Hindu right is no doubt pleased, and the rest of the political elite has no answer to his charge that they failed to defend him and core democratic principles.

Congress politician Satyavrat Chaturvedi refused to comment on Husain’s change of nationality saying it was “his individual decision.” Later Foreign Secretary Nirupama Rao called Husain “the pride of India” and urged him to return. Congress General Secretary Digvijay Singh termed Husain’s decision a “big defeat...for those who believe in communal harmony,” but sought to deny any Congress responsibility for Husain’s plight. “There was no problem to the government from Husain,” said Singh, “but when the heart of an artist breaks up, it takes long time to heal it.”

BJP spokesperson Najma Heptullah said, “he [Husain] was a very good artist, but that art should not hurt the religious sentiments of people,” thus reaffirming and approving the Hindu right’s campaign against the painter.

N. Ram, the editor-in-chief of the liberal Chennai-based daily *The Hindu*, conceded that Husain’s renunciation of Indian citizenship should shame India’s elite. “The Congress-led government...has done no better than the preceding BJP-led governments in protecting Mr. Husain’s freedom of creativity and peace of mind.”

A personal friend of Husain, Ram writes of “first-hand experience of the harassment and terror [Husain] faced from bigoted mobs. I received him in Mumbai on his return from the first of his temporary exiles and saw what insecurity and uncertainty this creative genius had to endure in rising India.”

The poisonous communal atmosphere promoted by the Indian elite is stifling artistic freedom and creation, incubating animosity and violence, and creating the climate for still greater attacks on the democratic rights of the Indian people.

The *World Socialist Web Site* urges workers in India and around the world to defend Husain’s right to live and work in India free from all state persecution and communal harassment and violence.



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