



**Woh kehte hain na "jahan bhi pyar mila main uske sath ho gaya": I love people where ever I get warmth. Of course 99 per cent Indians still love me, but politics has always had in the history a detrimental effect on creativity.**



**India with its policy of free expression cannot accept blatant insult to its heroes. Will M.F. Husain show the same spirit with Islamic heroes and would he, then, be able to retain his Qatari citizenship? Why do we have different criteria for Salman Rushdie, Taslima Nasreen and Husain?**



# WHO MOVED M.F. HUSAIN?

He towers over the Indian art world, putting most other artists in the shade. And yet he's almost child-like at times in his belief that he can repaint the canvas of the world, reorder the universe, and that there's no better reward for his legions of fans than a piece of his art, a piece of himself. Wandering down the streets of a chilly New York, barefoot as always, and lost — he couldn't remember the name of his hotel — he was noticed by a young Indian businessman from Bengaluru who took pity on the ill-clad, shivering man looking longingly into the window of a bakery.

Ashok Fernandes bought him a steaming cup of coffee and anything else he wanted to eat at the diner and left. Years later, while he had forgotten his encounter with India's iconic artist, Maqbool Fida Husain on a visit to Bengaluru, hadn't. He thanked Fernandes in the only way he knew how — painting a wall in his new home. Big canvas. Big heart. Today, the gentle giant who brought colour into Fernandes' home, and that of countless others, has finally signed off on the country of his birth, trading a not-so-liberal India for the patronage of a sheikhdom in the Gulf that is using Husain's shoulders to transform itself into the Middle East's patron of the arts.

The sprightly but ageing Husain, ever mindful of his place in the artistic firmament knows that with the BJP's goons snapping at his heels at every turn, his project — 100 years of Islamic art — commissioned for several million dollars and to be hung at Doha's Museum of Islamic Art — designed by Pei — must take priority. As he told a private news channel, he cannot afford to get distracted. Clearly, this past week has been an unsettling one for liberal India. First,

**PEOPLE WHO GO TO TEMPLES TO WORSHIP THE SAME FIGURES BEGIN TO HAVE A PROBLEM WHEN AN INTERPRETATION OF IT IS HUNG IN SOMEONE'S LIVING ROOM. ARE WE INDIANS JUST PLAIN HYPOCRITES?**

Husain's acceptance of Qatari citizenship after years of self-imposed exile following the brouhaha over his paintings of bare-breasted goddesses that saw the Hindu right see red. And then, violence in several Karnataka towns which left two people dead, over an article purportedly written by Bengali writer Taslima Nasreen on Prophet Muhammed's views on the veil.

Both raise questions that India must answer. They highlight how the many cultures that inhabit this country of nearly 1.2 billion people co-exist, and yet collide at the slightest provocation. This seething resentment by Hindu and Muslim hardliners adduces how fragile India's religious and cultural fabric really is. It makes us question whether this social fabric that was once celebrated for its variegated hues, is in danger of achromatizing.

It makes us question whether anyone other than an artist or a writer, regardless of what authority he or she commands or assumes, should be able to dictate what the artist or author should deal with and what they should leave unstirred?

"We are supposedly a democratic country, but an artist does not even have the right to think here," says

acclaimed Bengali artist Jagannath Paul who believes that style cannot be dictated, "We are surrounded by art, but sadly don't know how to interpret it. Everything is taken at face value. When I look at Hussain saab's painting, I don't look at whether it is a goddess or a layman, whether it is a fully-clothed figure or a stark-nude depiction; I look at the confidence of his brush strokes and that makes me realise that this man has God speaking through him. Why will he insult that same God?"

"If we have the power to think of Radha and Krishna, or Parvati and Shiva, why can't we draw them?" Paul asks. Come to think of it, people who go to temples to worship the same figures begin to have a problem when an interpretation of it is hung in someone's bedroom. Are we Indians just plain hypocrites?

Jogen Chowdhury, one of the most important painters of 21st century India, believes that it goes deeper than hypocrisy — it is the 'Talibanisation' of India. "What is shocking in India is the growing intolerance of people towards creative people's freedom of expression. The majority of people are waging a war against creativity, Taliban-style, all because one section of the citizenry who are religious fundamentalists see offence in harmless words and brush strokes. We have become an intolerant society", says Chowdhury.

Perhaps it is not just religion, either. For, in India, through the millennia, gods and goddesses have not just been worshipped, they have also been the inspiration for art and literature; religion has not just been temples and churches, it has been the shelter for artists and writers. Is it the venality of politics, then, that has tainted Indian sensibilities?

## IS THIS ABOUT RELIGION?

Not so, says Padma Shri Shashi Deshpande, an award-winning author. "The majority of people do not want creativity to be stifled," she said, adding "Most people understand that one cannot 'create to order' in a Soviet Union-like ambience. But in this country, if you speak in favour of creativity, you are dubbed an 'intellectual', in an India, where political and economic power (which can be wielded only by a minority) trumps intellectual power and freedom of the majority!"

"That is why Taslima is hounded for voicing a personal opinion on the 'burqa' and M.F. Husain is being hounded because a Muslim man 'wrongly' represented religious iconography of a community that is not 'his'. To stop such shameful incidents from re-occurring, only the law of the land should rule, not religion or inter-personal politics. As long as the constitution allows it, the written word or the painted picture should not be restrained." A pioneer of the parallel Kannada cinema, Girish Kasarvalli, who made controversial movies like Ghatashradha (whose content made the Brahmin community see red) and Hasina (where social ills in society were portrayed through a Muslim couple's life), says that it is not the content that matters but the conviction with which you say your story. "I stood by what I believed in and that is why my movies never saw any opposition or hatred. The reason why M.F. Husain faces this dilemma

today is because when he made the movie Meenaxi, he withdrew it after a while because he didn't want sections of the Muslim community to get offended. And because he withdrew it, when he later offended the Hindu community, the Hindu right wing expected him to do the same." However, issues which seem religious are not as simple as clash of two beliefs; they deal with inciting, manipulation and underhand power games played by the political and religious heads.

Today, *maulvis*, *swamijis*, priests and MPs are all the same," says Girish. "We must not get carried away by these emotional manipulators and instead open a debate, if unsatisfied with a creative outcome," he advises. While artists are cornered and forced to either play politics or themselves become pawns in a political game, the common man is starved of artistic output. But if you look at the history of artistic expression, whenever there has been a state-imposed ban, art has found another way to thrive.

Says author Anita Nair, "Censorship excess cannot stifle art. But what is scary in the M.F. Husain and Taslima Nasreen situation is that it is the mob, the masses, which are retaliating. But we must realise that an offence has not triggered this mass hatred towards arts. A mob being what it is, will not even question. It's the hidden agenda of other political and religious elements that influence mob mentality that is to blame," she says.

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### Art sans frontiers

Interpretation of mythology is the right of every artist and I exercise that right, but I would never draw nude religious figures because I know it will create controversy and I cannot risk that.

— RAMESH GORJALA, who paints Hindu mythological figures.



My awards are not for a Hindu artist or a Muslim artist. It is for an artist. This entire Husain issue is being blown out of proportion. The man is 95 years old and has as many cases against him. How will he defend himself? Why should he defend himself? I believe that people who are deeply rooted in their faith will never act out in such a manner, especially for a painting. In art, nothing is taboo. I will keep collecting and promoting a hundred Husains.

— H.K. KEJRIWAL, art connoisseur.



The constitution of India is a solid body and has the capacity to protect everyone. It is the job of the Central and state governments to extinguish elements that create uncalled-for violence, whether they are politicians or religious heads. Having said that, I feel Indians should also stand their ground and take the legal path if they feel that their sentiments are hurt. The legal path, albeit longer, is the right path.

— MILIND DEORA, MP



Artists have a moral responsibility not to hurt anyone's sentiments. Satire is different from ridicule.

Through satire you are able to point out social ills without rubbing people's faces in it, whereas, ridicule is about making them feel foolish.

— Anita Nair, writer.



## Written word transmogrified

SRIKANTH

Just what is it that provoked mobs to protest violently, leading to the death of two people in Shimoga and arson in other parts of Karnataka?

The first notion that intolerance showed up following the publication of translated version of Taslima Nasreen's article — which was critical of the burqa tradition — in a Kannada daily, has been complicated by subsequent developments.

A day later, an Urdu daily published a commentative

report on what appeared in that Kannada newspaper.

While Taslima had this to say: "The incident that occurred in Karnataka on Monday shocked me. I learned that it was provoked by an article written by me that appeared in a Karnataka newspaper. But I have never written any article for any Karnataka newspaper in my life. The appearance of the article is atrocious. In any of my writings I have never mentioned that Prophet Muhammad was against burqa. Therefore, this is a distorted story," the story didn't end

there. Three days after Taslima's denial, people demanding action against the Kannada daily turned violent in Hubli, adding to confusion over the provocation for violence and arson.

These protests eclipsed the question of artist and Indian icon M.F. Husain's citizenship as well as the irony of how a writer from a neighbouring country can lead a protected life here while a famous painter, damned by Hindu zealots, is forced to live elsewhere.

### Husain — valued, venerated



M.F. Husain is the biggest brand ambassador of contemporary Indian art. And he is a towering international figure whose works are being sold worldwide. His brand value has nothing to do with the controversies that hound him. He is beyond any political boundaries. The demand for his work has not diminished despite arrival of many new artists. The ongoing show at our gallery of his graphic works is the first exhibition in the City of Joy ever since he left Indian shores. A limited edition of 100 pieces on display has been economically priced at a maximum of Rs 40,000 as against the usual astronomical price tags, for the simple reason that the medium employed by the artist here is in his own words "a social form".

RAKESH SAHNI, director, Gallery Rasa (Kolkata)



A painter of Mr Husain's stature can neither be a thing of the past nor a man of the moment. He is a man for all seasons and will remain so with his remarkable contribution to the rich heritage of Indian art. Calling him a spent force would be undermining his genius. It's a myth that he has lost ground and much of his brand equity back home. Who's got the right data and statistics to prove that all leading art galleries in town are doing away with a Husain exhibit at every single show they host?

HIRAN MITRA, Kolkata



Husain remains the biggest icon of contemporary art, not only Indian but global. It's shameful that we are trying to limit his awesome art within the boundaries of religious politics. Actually, it is wrong to even judge Husain by sales of his art, which is beyond commercial parameters, in fact beyond time. Husain's art will remain a great inspiration to young minds.

K. PUGAZHENDI, artist and professor of painting, Government College of Fine Arts, Chennai