

# Fear of the future

RUPESH DUTTA

Shivji Panikkar has not been able to erase memories of the incident seven years ago when members of the right-wing VHP vandalized an art exhibition in his university in Gujarat for alleged obscenity. Panikkar, former dean of Baroda University's fine arts faculty, who was suspended for four years, believes that art and creativity can never flourish in a "dictator's government". He had faced flak from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP) in May 2007 for the alleged "vulgar" depiction of Hindu gods in paintings made by his student Chandra Mohan as part of his final year fine arts examination. Mohan was arrested while Panikkar was suspended for four years.

The paintings were not open to the public and meant only for restricted viewing. But VHP goons entered the exhibition hall, vandalized the paintings and got the young artist arrested.

"If art has to flourish, it should exist in complete freedom or else it loses its room to enlighten people. Every time an Indian artist has tried to exhibit his or her creativity, the government in power influenced by 'fundamentalist ideology' has curbed it," said Panikkar, who was dean of the Arts and Aesthetics University of Baroda, also known as MS University.

Describing Mohan's paintings, Panikkar said: "Of the three paintings, one depicted goddess Durga in a child-birth position with the devil emerging from inside her. The second painting was of a cross floating above a commode; and the third showed phallic symbols with erotic sculptures floating around it."

On May 9, 2007, Panikkar and Mohan were attacked by leaders of VHP on the ground that Mohan's paintings "hurt the religious sentiments of the Hindus and the Christians".

Panikkar had come out openly in support of his arrested student. A local Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) leader, in the state where Narendra Modi is chief min-

**"Freedom of speech and expression, arts and creativity will seriously be hampered if a fundamentalist ideology-influenced political party comes to power in the 2014 Lok Sabha polls," thinks Shivji Panikkar, former dean of Baroda University's fine arts faculty**

ister, had demanded the dean's suspension.

"I was kept in suspension for four years, which traumatised me mentally and morally. Chandra Mohan and I had to go underground for 10 days after being threatened by the VHP workers," Panikkar said.

Chandra Mohan's career was left in the lurch after he was denied the final year result. In addition, the Gujarat High Court barred him from travelling abroad for any kind of education-related matters.

"Nothing can be more saddening. Such incidents clearly show

that though India is the biggest democracy, communal forces openly challenge the freedom of speech and expression and make every attempt to curb it," Panikkar said.

Pannikar and Mohan are not the only ones to have been attacked by right wing groups for their artistic expression. Padma Vibhushan awardee MF Hussain too had to flee the country after Hindu nationalist groups objected to his alleged obscene paintings of Hindu gods. He was compelled to live his remaining life in exile abroad, where he died in 2011.

Ashok Vajpayee, former chairman, Lalit Kala Academy shared: "There should never be a limit to freedom of speech and expression. By creating barriers for the arts and creativity the fundamentalist groups who talk of culture are themselves responsible for diluting the Indian culture."

"Nudity in Indian art has been a long tradition, especially in religious art. After all, it is a part of art and creativity," said Vajpayee, adding that arts and politics are two different subjects and should never be mixed.

Asked about the perils, arts and creativity would face if a political party influenced by fundamentalist ideology comes to power, Vajpayee said such a government may not raise the issue themselves, but "instead many of the hooligan groups working for those parties will do the things for them".

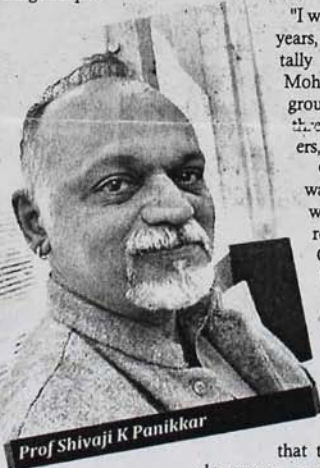
Under Vajpayee's chairmanship in 2012, artist Balbir Krishan, a gay painter from Uttar Pradesh, was assaulted by these groups for his solo exhibition at the Lalit Kala Academy for alleged depiction of explicit gay paintings.

In 2013, the VHP's women wing, Durga Vahini, protested outside the prestigious Delhi Art Gallery against a retrospective on modern nude art featuring the paintings of prominent artists like Ravi Varma, Hussain and F.N. Souza.

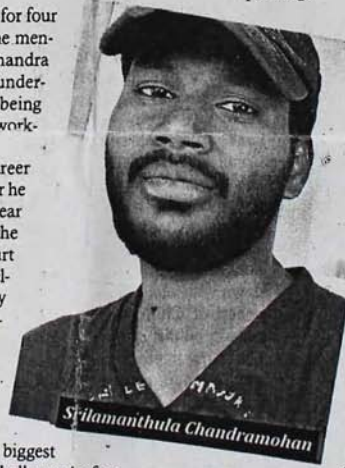
Kishore Singh, head, Publication and Exhibition, Delhi Arts Gallery, told that even if political parties fully support right-wing groups that have in the past attacked and tried to curb the freedom of speech and artistic expression "there is immediate need to change the minds and

thoughts of such individuals".

"With the passage of time, the people who do not understand arts and creativity have become intolerant. There is a sense of fear among such individuals that the arts and creativity is spoiling the culture," he said. "It is not just by the efforts of the government or the people that such attacks can be curbed; it is the judiciary that needs to intervene to stop such attacks," he added.



Prof Shivaji K Panikkar



Chilamanthula Chandramohan