

Have a voice, will speak

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Let's find out how the art community is reacting to the change in the political climate

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* Artist M.F. Husain was forced into exile and breathed his last in London. Even now gallerists have to think before mounting his works, particularly in public spaces.

* Mumbai-based Subhash Awchat and Goa-based Subodh Kerkar have been attacked by right-wing associations for their mythological paintings.

Now add to these numerous attacks on writers, filmmakers, theatre practitioners and you will get a sense of how vehemently the agenda of cultural nationalism is being pursued by the right-wingers in our country. Call it

The democratic process gives power but also snatches it away with equal force. So I feel political parties, when in power, do have the force of authority but less elbow-room to be irresponsible

JITISH KALLAT



BROKEN IMAGES A photo frame of M.F. Husain lies smashed after the exhibition of Husain's works and photographs organised by SAHMAT was vandalised by Shri Ram Sena in 2008 FILE PHOTO: V.V. KRISHNAN

fear psychosis, if you like because many would argue that we have begun assuming even before the Narendra Modi-led NDA has taken over the reins but the past instances (see box) of cultural hysteria do leave many in the art community concerned.

Balbir Krishan appears a bit alarmed but not shaken at the political developments. Having already suffered at the hands of society, family and khap panchayat in Baghat, resilience is his companion now. "After cheating myself for a long time, I decided to fight back and a lot of people supported me in that struggle. Now, if I backtrack and if compromise starts showing in my

art, those who supported me will feel let down so I won't do that. I can't change my expression but now I will have to be cautious about how I say it because I am with someone and I can't put his life at risk. Gender and sexuality are the issues that I engage with and will continue to work with," says Balbir.

Mumbai-based Shilpa Gupta, known for her interdisciplinary art practice that probes consumerism, terrorism, security, borders, has a somewhat similar take. "Whenever freedom of voice is suppressed, it emerges even stronger. Artists will become adamant if their voices are muffled. When Godhra happened, film-

makers became really active. I think art practitioners will be even more alert and do provocative art because they don't shy away from confrontation. I think it is the organisers who will be a little wary," expresses Shilpa, whose latest work was based on 1278 unmarked graves found in Kupwara.

Equally unrelenting would be Myna Mukherjee, Director of Engendered, Delhi, a transnational arts and human rights organization. "We are concerned but despite that we will step up our programming. Since our funding doesn't come from here, we aren't bothered on that front. But the whole idea is not to be provocative. The point is

that if you want to bring about a permanent change in the country, it will only happen through art and culture," says Mukherjee, who responded to the brutal rape of the physiotherapy student with a mega art show called "Persist Resist". This year the second edition of the affair plans to extend the conversation to sexuality.

Kishore Singh, senior art critic and Delhi Art Gallery's (DAG) head of exhibitions and publications, isn't particularly concerned with the BJP coming to power even though DAG came under attack by the women's wing of VHP for showing nudes. "We have had fringe elements with a fundamentalist approach under every

regime, and it is this that needs to be feared. I don't think we can morally pre-judge the BJP when the Congress has done precious little for creative freedom. One can only hope that creative freedom will not be curtailed, or a bit built, in the creation and dissemination of art, literature, theatre or cinema. Art has found no mandate in any party manifesto, showing how low it is in a pecking order in which governments must tackle hunger, poverty, development and creation of infrastructure."

Even if the art fraternity is concerned, they aren't as vocal about it as photographer and activist Ram Rahman. "We are worried and we — artists, gallerists, writers etc. — have been speaking to each other discussing the issue. It is more worrying because they have a clear mandate this time unlike in the time of Vajpayee (Atal Bihari Vajpayee) when there were checks with allies being part of it. I think it is going to be different. They are going to implement their agenda through cultural institutions, grant giving bodies, educational institutions. Look at what Nazis did to Germany in such a short time. They dismantled the Weimar Renaissance in cinema, painting, music and Germany never recovered from it. An exhibition like 'The Body in Indian Art' is unlikely to happen under the BJP rule," says Rahman, adding that Sahmat, a powerful avenue for freedom of expression, will continue to stand for progressive values and resist if voices of dissent are suppressed.