Part IV

Art After Independence

The subcontinent’s independence was achieved in 1947 at the cost of partitioning the country into two separate states, India and Pakistan. Yet again, in 1971, Bangladesh was created out of East Pakistan. There are certain broad trends in art and architecture in the postcolonial period. International modernism, which had made only a hesitant entry into India before Independence, gathered speed after 1947. In the 1950s, artists enthusiastically joined the global ‘race’ for abstraction, and yet, in keeping with the Indian tradition, few artists fully renounced the human figure or the narrative. The first challenge to semi-abstract art came in the 1970s and continues today. Representational art was reinstated in the 1970s, but it was now tinged with irony or political overtones. This was a reflection of greater politicization of art and the influence of postcolonial writings and the women’s movement on art. This was also the period when global modernism came under attack as subcontinental artists began to reassert their cultural identity. Many of the artists of this generation discovered their roots in the soil and the common people, seeking to obliterate the distinction between high, elite and low, ‘subaltern’ art.

India

Architecture

The first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru, dreamed of creating a secular state, based on economic and social justice, which would offer moral leadership to the Third World. A modernist whofavoured state intervention in all spheres, symbolized by the Five Year Plans, Nehru played a proactive part in a national art policy headed by the Lalit Kala Akademi (an officially sponsored artists’ forum) and the National Gallery of Modern Art in the capital. Nehru gave a boost to artists by suggesting that one per cent of the cost of a public building should go towards its decoration with murals and sculptures.

Modern architecture had arrived in India before Independence but it was to be found not in official buildings but in commercial ones. Art Deco cinema halls, office buildings, and apartment blocks in Mumbai and Calcutta, built from the 1930s, were its most imaginative examples.
International modernism in public architecture was, however, consciously inaugurated by Nehru in a bid to look to the future rather than the past, recently sullied with blood and strife. In 1951, he invited the French architect Le Corbusier to design the capital at Chandigarh for the new truncated state of Punjab (most of Punjab was now in Pakistan). Le Corbusier’s uncompromising functionalism consciously broke with the past ‘historicism’ of imperial architecture. This was followed by the avant-garde architecture, with a ‘whisper’ of the Mughal, of Louis Kahn in Ahmedabad (and Dhaaka in Bangladesh). The era saw the debut of leading Indian modernist architects, among whom Balakrishna V. Doshi (b. 1927), for instance, worked with Le Corbusier. As with modern painting and sculpture, the international style gave rise to the problem of accommodating the national within the global. Modernist architecture abhors superficial surface decoration, an attitude reinforced by the use of modern materials such as concrete, glass, and steel. There were tensions between the modernist canon and the Indian visual language, which has historically rested on decoration. What caused anxiety among post-Independence architects was this: how could they avoid pastiche, namely the attachment of Indian motifs to essentially modernist architecture? Apart from the fact that elaborately decorated nineteenth-century buildings have faced disgrace in the twentieth, ‘historicist’ Raj edifices were perceived as flaunting a meretricious orientalist imagery.

Misgivings among Indian architects gathered force in the 1970s and 1980s as part of a wider questioning of modernism as being exclusively western. Charles Correa (b. 1930), an internationally acclaimed Indian architect, articulated the problem facing architects in India as ‘the necessity to simultaneously both rediscover India’s past and invent its future.’ Correa found the solution in the revival of earlier practices, exploring the functions of Indian buildings, rather than their decoration, in his search for authenticity [127]. A pioneer in low-cost housing in the Third World, he developed two concepts inspired by Indian climate and ideas: ‘open-to-the-sky’ space and tube houses that conserve energy in a hot, dry climate. He has also used open courtyards and clusters of huts for the Gandhi Ashram in emulation of Gandhian values and explores the indigenous planning of space in the vaishnava-mandala. Balkrishna Doshi, on the other hand, borrows Mughal structural features, and Uttam Jain (b. 1934) is another architect who has introduced indigenous modes of building in his work. The architectural historian G. H. R. Tillotson pleads for a revival and not reproduction of Indian craftsmanship in building, which he feels is lacking in modern buildings in India. Yet, in the final analysis, what matters is how effectively modern and local elements are synthesized in an architecture that works.

Semi-figurative art
The reception of modern art in India is encapsulated in the comments of the German art historian Hermann Goetz. Indian art, he argues, had faced a crisis during colonial rule, which ended with the rise of modernism, when ‘the best artists started again on their quest for true art, not from a superficial imitation of the past, but from an understanding of the basic principles underlying all genuine creations’. The 1950s to ’70s were dominated by non-figurative art, a global phenomenon. The backdrop to it was the politics of the Cold War; the ‘free world’ artists identified with formalism and abstraction, while
The Bombay Progressives

M. F. Husain, K. H. Ara, F. N. Souza, and S. H. Raza, the founding members, became the most successful artists in the decades following independence. They were inducted into modernity by three refugees from the Nazeer: the Expressionist painter Walter Langhammer, who joined the Times of India in 1936 as art director, became their mentor; Emmanuel Schleisinger, who set up a pharmaceutical concern in Bombay, became their main collector; and Realy von Leyden, who joined the Times of India as art critic, championed their cause. The three emigres joined forces with the radical novelist Mulk Raj Anand and Kekoo Gandhi, owner of the influential Chemould Gallery: in 1910 other members were S. K. Bakre and H. K. Gade, later joined by Krishen Khanna and V. S. Gaitonde. Souza, the most articulate one, enunciated their formalist credo: "elemental and eternal laws of aesthetic order, plastic co-ordination and colour composition." Progressive artists had kindred spirits, many of whom trained under Andre Lhote, including Akbar Padamsee (b. 1938) and Jehangir Sabavala (b. 1934) from Bombay, Ram Kumar (b. 1924) from North India, Nirode Mazumdar (1926-42) and Paritosh Sen (b. 1918) from Calcutta, and Zubeida Agha (b. 1922-27) from Lahore in Pakistan.

Apart from S. H. Raza, Indian artists with European experience returned to India to mould the post-independence artistic milieu. By 1950, the centre of gravity in modern art had shifted from Paris to New York and London. And yet what these artists brought back with them were semi-figurative styles based on post-war French developments in abstraction. They introduced the pleasure of colour and texture in a country where until then narrative and meaning had been paramount in painting. Ram Kumar, who had been associated with radical political groups in France, chose on his return themes of social injustice and alienation, treated with a dark palette and with snatches of Cubism. He soon moved on to abstraction in his vision of Benares as a configuration of shades and textures, the colourful city reduced to stretches of clay, sand, and sky. Jehangir Sabavala, a craftsman and perfectionist, became engrossed with the possibilities offered by Cubism after his return to Bombay, developing over the years a lyrical form of semi-figurative work.8

Krishen Khanna (1925-), who gained prominence in the late 1960s, was born in West Punjab, which is now in Pakistan. After studying in England, he moved to India where he worked for a commercial bank for a while. In 1960 he became a full-time painter. A politically committed artist, he has been an active member of the Artists' Protest Movement. The American-Indian artist R. B. Kitaj's powerful political statements made a deep impression on him. Khanna began in a semi-figurative style but, partly because of his belief in the political role of art, the image never disappeared from his work. [128]. An exception to the general non-figurative trend was Satish Gujral who was also born in West Punjab and went to the Mayo College of Arts in Lahore. He left Pakistan in 1952 for Mexico where he worked with the Marxist muralist Siqueiros, before settling in India. Gujral's paintings in the 1960s had a strong Mexican social realist flavour with brooding sculpturesque figures.9

Mayooh Fida Husain (b. 1915)

During the first three decades after Independence, the most successful artists were the one-time Bombay Progressives, Husain, Souza, and Raza; the last two were also the first Indian diaspora artists. From a poor Maharastrian family, Husain rose from being a humble painter of hoardings advertising Hindi movies to the undisputed leader in modern Indian art "in the range of his themes [and] the quality of excellence which he has maintained over three decades."[129] Flamboyant, courting controversy, displaying a generosity of spirit, Husain epitomizes the optimistic Nehruvian era itself. The high point of his career was the Sao Paulo Bienal of 1971, where he exhibited alongside Picasso.[130]13

With his prodigious output and relentless experimentation, he remains an enigma to the critics: "They have barely been able to
128 Kristian Khanza
In this modern reworking of the theme of Christ at Emmaus, Khanza uses a limited range of colors to create an atmosphere of subdued drama.

129 Maqbool Fida Husain
Mother Teresa II, 1980s.
Husain uses 'collages' of bold colors bounded by nervous outlines and random associations of fragmentary images in order to make political and cultural statements. He often paints a series of works to develop his monumental themes, recycling forms by remaking Eastern and Western cultures, distilling essences, and deconstructing icons.

Geeta Kapur, on the other hand, feels that:

[one] can only ask of him what his own work had promised; authentic understanding of the traditional—the 'typical' Indian. Having recognized [it] something of a brilliant intuition, having embodied [it] in a series of lucid and memorable images, he let go of [it], too soon and too easily.

Francis Newton Souza (b. 1924)
A Catholic from Goa, Souza joined the Bombay art school in the last days of the Raj, only to be expelled for taking part in student unrest. The 'angry young man' of Indian art, Souza drew the attention of the Bombay police by exhibiting a full frontal nude of himself. The most articulate among the Bombay Progressives, Souza declared: 'Today we
paint with absolute freedom [with regard to] contents and techniques, almost anarchic, save that we are governed by one or two sound elemental laws of aesthetic order ... We have no pretensions of making rapid revivals of any school'.

Sayed Haider Raza (b. 1922)
Childhood memories of mysterious Indian forests drew Raza to landscapes, a rare subject among post-Independence artists. Another product of the Bombay art school, Raza discovered German Expressionism through Langhammer and Rudy von Leyden. His cityscapes progressed from an architeconic view of Bombay to an appreciation of its moods, seasons, and colours. In 1956, some years after moving to Paris, he became the first Asian artist to win the Poët de la Critique. The French critic Jacques Lassaigne marveled at his timeless landscapes and uninhabited cities suspended in the air beneath a dark sun. From the 'transfigured nature' of his early years, Raza moved on in the 1960s to paintings inspired by ancient Indian Upasnshadic philosophy and the Tantric cult [131].

Tantra and modern art
The esoteric and mystical system of Tantra makes use of elegant diagrams (yantras), based on geometrical and abstract forms, as aids to meditation (see chap. 3). Tantra and its ideas of the vital force operating in all living beings had attracted the pioneering abstract painters, particularly the circle of Kasimir Malevich. But it was in the 1960s, when the Indian art historian Ajit Mukherjee brought a historic exhibition of Tantric art to the West, that it gained wide publicity; its elegant designs appealed to a modern sensibility nourished on abstraction, while the prevailing sexual revolution eagerly embraced Tantric religious sexuality. Nirode Mazumder, a product of Lhote's studio who specialized in the rhythmic treatment of geometrical semi-figurative shapes, was an early neo-Tantric painter. Others such as G. R. Santosh, Bien De and K. C. S. Panikkar were also discovering for themselves the artistic possibilities of Tantric.
In this Tantric work, a series of colours is orchestrated around the bindu, the focal point of meditation, considered the ultimate source of reality in Indian philosophy. Raza conjures up a world of Rajasthani colours—blazing vermilion, mustard yellows, Prussian blues, and ochre blacks—in his painting.

pre-eminence as a painter of landscapes and Hindu mythology, became venerable figures in Pakistan. The Pakistani artists showed a particular aptitude for calligraphy and colours and probably felt more at home with abstract design, but the figure continued to be a dominant subject with them.

Because subcontinental artists, irrespective of their religious affiliations, had partaken of the same artistic ideas and movements and had faced very similar problems of responding to the international avant-garde, we can trace very similar developments in the three parts of the subcontinent. As with the younger Indian generation's impatience with the Bengal School, a non-figurative generation was emerging in Pakistan that challenged the earlier artistic concerns. Speaking on the role of international modernism in Pakistan, the art historian Akbar Naqvi remarked that he wished to explore closely 'how much Pakistani artists took from Europe and what did they leave out'.

In 1949, the modern movement in Pakistan was launched with an eye
to developments in American art but with scarcely any knowledge of the neighbouring Bombay Progressives, for instance. And yet interactions did take place. The moving spirit behind the Karachi Fine Art Society was an Indian diplomat. In the 1940s, the Bengali artist B. C. Sanyal's Lahore School of Fine Art had introduced a modicum of modernism in the Punjab. In the initial years of Pakistan, Anna Molka (1917–92), an energetic East European married to a Pakistani artist, joined the department of fine arts at Punjab University. An Expressionist painter herself, she encouraged modern art. The first major modernist painter was Zubeida Agha, who is discussed in the next chapter in the section on female artists.

In the 1950s a group of artists formed the independent Lahore Art Circle. In 1952, Cubism was introduced by Shakir Ali (1916–73) at the National College of Art. A mystical painter and an inspiring teacher, Ali gave a lead to the younger generation through his Group of Five. After his training at the Bombay art school, Ali had worked at André Lhote's studio in Paris. He then spent a period in Czechoslovakia learning textile design. His development from traditional art through Cubism to colouristic canvases was cut short by his early death. Among successful painters, the portraitist Ismail Guljee (b. 1926) from Sind province enjoyed lavish state sponsorship. Impressed by the visiting American painter Elaine Hamilton, Guljee enthusiastically plunged into action painting, creating dazzling surfaces enhanced with gold and silver leaf and calligraphy. However, he did not relinquish his lucrative portrait commissions. It is often forgotten in tracing the trajectory of modernism that there have been serious and talented naturalistic artists, as evident in the landscapes of Khaled Iqbal (b. 1929), Zulfiqar Haider (b. 1939), Shahid Jalil (b. 1948), and Ijazul Hassan (b. 1940), to name the best-known ones.

Sadequain Naqvi (1930–87)
It is against this background of nascent modernism that Sadequain, the celebrated Pakistani artist and a prizewinner at the Paris Biennale of 1961, made his debut. Sadequain's versatility ranged from fine calligraphic miniatures to monumental paintings, although it is in public murals that he created a permanent niche for himself. In the words of the poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Sadequain was a visionary whose phantasmagoric creations expressed the emotional and social unity of all material things caught up in an upward struggle. Descended from a family of calligraphers in North India, Sadequain joined the Progressive Writers and Artists Movement in the 1940s. He then spent a period in Paris augmenting his skills. A short spell in the barren, cacti-ridden desert terrain by the sea at Gadan, near Karachi, became Sadequain's epiphany. In the ensuing allegorical works on the labouring man's spiritual struggle, the spiky cactus came to be a metaphor for the human condition; when it was accompanied by Kufic (a decorative form of Arabic script) calligraphy, it represented the fall of man [134].

Between 1966 and 1970, the political situation in Pakistan worsened. In 1976, Sadequain's exhibition in Lahore was greeted with violent protests by conservative elements. Under threat in his final years, Sadequain's defiance died down. He turned to more neutral calligraphy, especially taghra (word pictures), combining abstraction with meaning, one of the first modern artists to use it to explore painterly texture. Sadequain's use of Islamic calligraphy was part of a growing trend in Pakistan, culminating in the calligraphic competition at the Islamic Summit in Lahore in 1974, followed two years later by a German–Pakistan conference on the subject. This phase of Sadequain's work, however, is seen by some as a retreat from his earlier social commitment. Disillusioned, before his death the artist visited India, where he was received with enthusiasm.

Ahmed Parvez (1926–79)
The prolific and controversial Ahmed Parvez is considered to be one of the four 'touchstones' of Pakistani art. Parvez was born in Rawalpindi on the North West Frontier. His parents' separation caused deep problems in his personal relationships but it also fuelled his precocious creativity. Parvez was discovered by Shakir Ali and the modernist
Shahid Sajjad (b. 1936)

Of the sculptors in Pakistan—a rare breed—the mystical Shahid Sajjad is by far the most outstanding. He has been described as a primitivist, at odds with civilization and its discontents. Ever restless, he started his career in a printing firm, only to abandon it soon after. He spent some years with a sculptor in Japan, learning bronze casting through a painful process of trial and error. At the end of his training he came to develop a respect for the tools and materials as traditional artists did. To Sajjad, spontaneous experience and the intimate relationship of craft with life were the vital elements in an artist’s armoury. Sajjad returned to the wood produced in northern Pakistan, a material khitabto considered unsuitable for carving [136]. He applied automotive paints and the blowtorch to this material in order to leave deep scorched marks and patterns on its surface and to expose the inner grains. Sajjad’s early sculptures give the impression of totemic figures, his work progressing to heroic reliefs. One of his most important works expresses a political allegory: a thick garment with deep folds, but without the body inside, hangs from the gallows, a poignant comment on the Pakistani leader Zulfiquar Ali Bhutto’s execution.39

Modern art in Bangladesh

The Partition of India led Zainul Abedin (1918–76) to emigrate to East Pakistan (renamed Bangladesh after the War of Liberation in 1971). One of the most distinguished artists of Pakistan and claimed by some critics to be its first modernist, Abedin had trained in Calcutta and was part of the Progressive Artists Group in the 1940s [136]. In 1948, he was appointed by the government of East Pakistan to head the newly founded art school in Dhaka, which became the focus of the modernist movement in the 1950s. The Government Art Institute followed presently, and in 1953 the first All Pakistan Arts Exhibition was held in Dhaka, in which West and East Pakistani artists took part.40

Not only Abedin but S. M. Sultan (1915–94) and other contemporaries of Abedin had trained in the art schools of Calcutta. Of these, Abedin and Sultan continued with the Calcutta schools’ concern with rural life, and Abedin’s ‘naturalist’ style was later regarded by some critics as conservative.41 Other artists in the 1950s wedded folk forms with bold simplification. The drawings of Quamrul Hasan (b. 1921), who had been involved in the village regeneration movement in pre-Partition Bengal, combined rural motifs with geometrical forms, seeking inspiration in the simplicity of village clay pots and dolls. Safiuddin Ahmed (b. 1922), a versatile graphic artist, whose rural themes included Santhal women, took up abstraction after moving to Dhaka. Anwar ul-Haq (b. 1958) specialised in landscapes. Murtaza Bashir (b. 1953) progressed from socially committed imagery to abstraction.42 This shift towards non-figurative art was spearheaded by

Group of Five. But it was in London, he claimed, that he at last found himself. Not only did Parvez create art out of waste products and rejected pieces, but he used his own bodily waste in his art.43 However, his wide range of media included the sensuous use of pastels during his ‘abstract-lyrical’ outbursts. His praise of nature in a tachiste vein is recorded in the painting Untitled (Orchard) of 1970. In 1976, Parvez pictured his own body in the form of a cross, a man with an orange-like head with the molten fire of the sun behind him, in a mystical-erotic riot of jewel-like colours. Similarities with the English painter Alan Davie, who also uses glittering, gem-like colours, have been noted by critics and also acknowledged by the painter himself. Parvez died tragically in poverty without fulfilling his promise.
the younger generation, who admired the works of Zubeida Agha, Shakir Ali, and Sadequain. Among this generation, Mohammad Kibria has been a particularly sensitive artist in exploring subtle textures in his mixed media works.

The watershed for the artists of East Pakistan was the War of Liberation in 1971 that created Bangladesh. While it was a period of great suffering, it also offered a new national identity and a new optimism, which had a profound effect on art and artists. The private language of abstraction was felt to be inadequate for expressing the political struggle as it demanded readily intelligible and affecting images. Later, the leading artists of Bangladesh, including Abedin, were to produce works based on their own experiences of genocide and resistance ranging from the abstract to the figurative.\(^7\)

In the general atmosphere of optimism that followed the founding of Bangladesh, the young state stepped forward as a patron, establishing academies and art galleries. These were to support artists through exhibitions and publicize their works with monographs and other publications. Among these, the most important is the Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, the official sponsor of Bangladeshi art. Every year since 1974, the Academy has organized a national art exhibition and an exhibition devoted entirely to young artists.\(^8\)

The most significant development since the 1980s, as also seen in other parts of the subcontinent, has been the marketing of art and the expansion of art galleries, subsidized by private concerns. In the 1960s there were only the Arts Ensemble Galleries in Dhaka. After 1971 galleries proliferated in the capital.\(^9\) Since the 1990s, as poverty, political instability, and forces of conservatism have overwhelmed Bangladesh, there is a feeling that the optimism of 1971 has gone sour. Some critics complain that once again artists are returning to a personal language of abstraction, abandoning social commitment as earlier feelings of unity begin to fade.\(^4\)

The War of Liberation produced a remarkable artist in Bangladesh. Shahabuddin (b. 1950), who showed promise in his student years, joined the armed struggle for independence, an experience that deeply coloured his mature work. He left for Paris in 1974, where he received further training, and has lived there since. From 1979, Shahabuddin began exploring the expressive potentials of the human form, as recalled from his war experiences. His most striking works are his male figures in motion, which he uses to great effect in capturing the drama of the struggle and eventual victory [137].\(^5\)