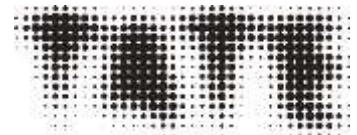


Crossing Black Waters

A conversation between Shaheen Merali,
Bhajan Hunjan and Said Adrus

24 August 2021



Shaheen

Welcome to the second of three dialogues about the Panchayat Collection. This conversation will reflect on *Crossing Black Waters*, an exhibition I co-curated with Al-An deSouza in 1992 that was key to Panchayat's development.¹ We had ambitious goals, some of which were met by the mere fact that the exhibition travelled across cities in England. Starting with the City Gallery (Leicester), *Crossing Black Waters* went on to Oldham Art Gallery, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery – Bradford Museum and Galleries, and ended up at the South London Art Gallery. Panchayat printed a flyer (fig.1) which was not only shared within the UK, but also sent to Pakistan and India to locate expressions of interest from artists.



Fig.1
Flyer soliciting participation in the *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition, 1989
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926
© Shaheen Merali
© Al-An deSouza

Aspirations for mutual work between artists, politicians and the three countries of Bangladesh, Pakistan and India were minimal, if not destroyed. In organising this exhibition, we wanted to find out how artists had responded to the representation of the partition in their work and

the insights they gained both by living with and challenging the hysterical relationships between the politicians and the news networks that would inflame prejudice, and sometimes even encourage warmongering. The exhibition *Crossing Black Waters* took place thirty years ago, opening at the City Gallery (Leicester) in 1992 (fig.2). We are recording this conversation in 2021. This year marks seventy-five years of India and Pakistan's independence. It is an apt moment to recall our experiences and understandings of the trauma of partition and how artists engaged with it.

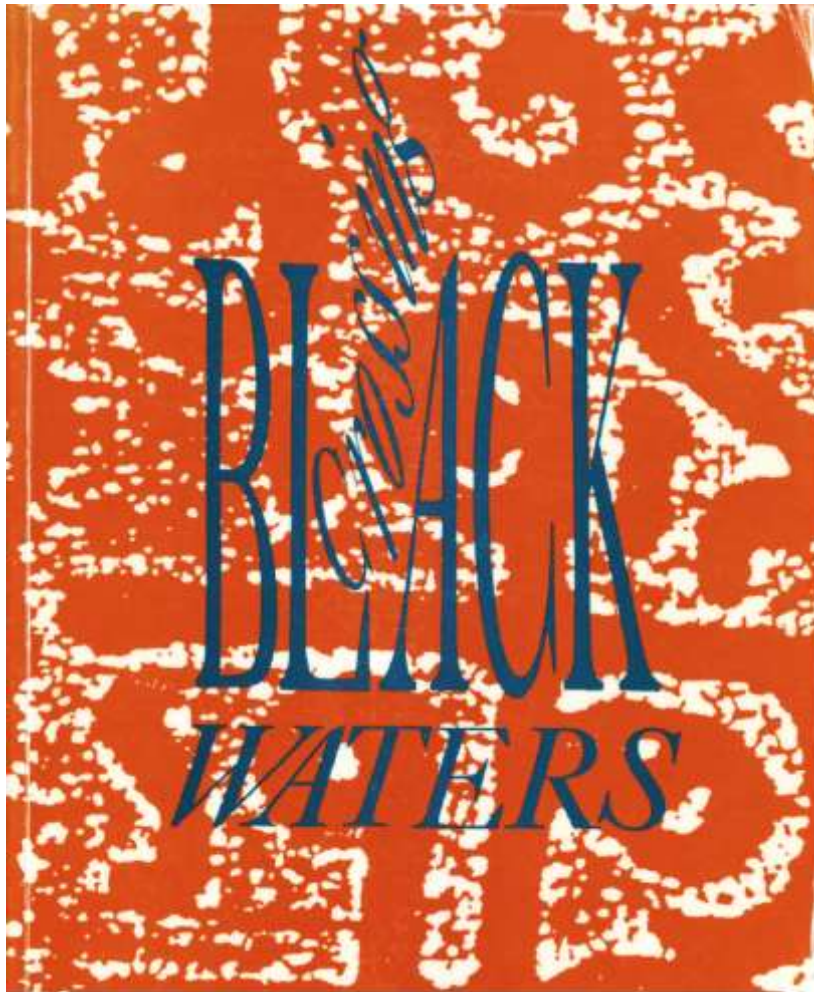


Fig.2
Cover of the catalogue to the exhibition *Crossing Black Waters*, 1992
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08140781
© Shaheen Merali
© Al-An deSouza

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was an annual surge of interest every August when Indians, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis commemorate their independence. Pakistan celebrates independence on 14 August, India a day later, on 15 August. The midnight which separates the two days is where *Midnight's Children*, the novel by Salman Rushdie, is

situated. Rushdie wrote a *Guardian* article in 2021 about his despair at the sectarianism he sees in India today.² Like Rushdie, when we started to contemplate the exhibition *Crossing Black Waters*, including the publication and the education programme, we had been intrigued by the meaning and impact of mass migration that we recall as the outcome of partition. The sectarianism was fully born that midnight. Our parents and grandparents had been so compromised by the creation of the two new nation states. Nobody was left uncompromised by the toll it took to meet the different ambitions. The new borders made the idea of freedom a difficult, if not a genuinely impossible notion to transcend. The necessity to separate was never intended as a temporary arrangement and this spawned a million more prejudices and a further culture of minority communities questioning their sense of belonging including Parsi people, Jewish people, Anglo-Indians and Christians.



Fig.3
 Pages from the *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition catalogue featuring drawings and notes by Shaheen Merali (left) and Al-An deSouza (right)
 Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08140781
 © Shaheen Merali
 © Al-An deSouza

The artists in *Crossing Black Waters* created drawings, collages and notes which were printed on transparent paper in the catalogue (fig.3). The texts which are on the other side of these images were by established writers and poets. These are collected thoughts about the Indian subcontinent, including the partition.³ *Crossing Black Waters* was an examination of two neighbouring countries, India and Pakistan, and their diasporas. Pakistan and India share long borders and unsurprisingly many other traits. Often,

both the borders and traits are grounds for contestation. The multitude existed with violence on its bodies, lanes, universities and holy places. The water cannons, the batons, the lashes, the tear gas were used not only by the British East India Company and its sepoys but also by national security guards and private armies. The partition was imbued with a profound sense of loss and created a vacuum in which remained the politically bereaved minorities, singled out for suspicion by both the state and civil society.

The preeminent Bengali poet Rabindranath Tagore questioned the very idea of freedom. Freedom, for Tagore, was not as simple as freedom from British rule – it required the ability to be honest with oneself. For him, political autonomy from the British without a commitment to truth was worthless.⁵ More than fifteen million people were uprooted in the partition, and between one and two million were killed. This informs our cosmopolitan dialogue, and it does so especially because of the critical edge and political and legal thinking of such people as B.R. Ambedkar, India's anti-caste campaigner and constitutional architect, who stated at **the moment when he spoke to Mahatma Gandhi: 'Gandhiji, I have no homeland'**.⁶ His words remain as a plea for a distinctively universalistic approach to democratic citizenship and legitimacy informed the current development of participation and accountability practices beyond the state.

Crossing Black Waters was a survey exhibition of images by independence and post-independence generation artists from the subcontinent and its diaspora that were produced forty years after the event.⁵ In the exhibition many roles were considered, including the role of the state army, its religiosity and its prejudice that divided the countries, as well as the rise of globalisation. All of this was present already in these works by 1992. Our job as curators and artists was to use a flashlight to guide the audience with us towards a rebuke that claimed the attentions of the artists. I am very glad to take the opportunity to discuss the exhibition with two of the artists whose works provided progressive political orientation with a focus on reconstructing the world. The dialogue begins with Bhajan Hunjan followed by Said Adrus. Both will discuss their own work and together we will discuss four of the thirteen artists whose work formed the exhibition: Arpana Caur from India, British-born Nina Edge, Samena Rana, who was based in the UK and originally from Pakistan, and finally Anwar Saeed **from Pakistan. The term 'crossing black waters' was used to describe the seriousness of leaving the subcontinent – the literal crossing of the Indian Ocean. The term implied that one had left the embrace of one's motherland. To speculate and examine** *Crossing Black*

Waters as a mode of including the artist's perspective and audience in Britain, I would like to introduce the first of the two visual artists whom we have invited. Bhajan Hunjan is a painter and a very talented printmaker. Alongside her studio practice, she works on public art commissions and projects in the built environment created through community consultation and participation that engages people. She has also worked as an artist-educator with diverse communities and in schools. She is one of the five founding artists of Panchayat who met to evaluate the potential for the organisation which was subsequently set up by its two co-founders in 1988. Welcome, Bhajan.

Bhajan

Thank you so much Shaheen for your introduction. I feel so humbled to have this opportunity to reflect on *Crossing Black Waters* and talk about our work. I had snippets of memory of what was happening around that time. I remember when you were trying to put this exhibition together, I remember you and Al-An [deSouza] being in an office in Hoxton, above the Space Studios Office. I think it was a tiny office. I also remember that it was always full of stuff. You just had a lot of paperwork and lots of **books. We didn't have computers in those days, but I remember the** copies of *Bazaar* magazine [laughs], because Al-An was really involved in *Bazaar*, of course. And there was always a lot to see there. I remember those days when I used to come with my stuff from Reading. I also remember, during the founding days of Panchayat, meeting in lots of different alternative spaces. At the end of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, I was working at the Slade School of Art, as a teaching assistant in the printmaking department. I particularly remember Euston Station and the Slade, but also Horizon Gallery where there were lots of exhibitions of work by British South Asian artists. People who were here long before us. The private views of those exhibitions were amazing. We met so many new people and had lots of dialogue – there was just such a buzz.

We also had an exhibition before *Crossing Black Waters* at the Tom Allen Centre, Stratford, which showed a lot of our contemporaries. Going back to *Crossing Black Waters*, I remember the wonderful catalogue, how much effort you put in to get artists and writers together. You got different writers to write about artists. I had never met Joyoti [Grech] but it was amazing that she wrote about my work without having met me and had that insight into it. I think that was brilliant because those partnerships carried on for so many years. I actually worked on projects with Joyoti after the exhibition. The wonderful tracing paper in the catalogue, I thought that was amazing; all the drawings which became inserts in the

catalogue. My work *Confrontation* (fig.4) was right in the middle of the catalogue.

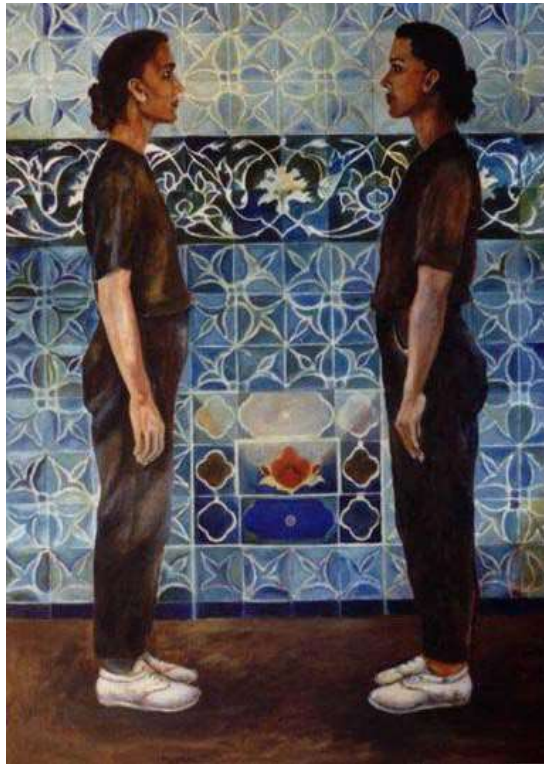


Fig.4
Bhajan Hunjan
Confrontation 1990–1
Acrylic paint on canvas
Approximately 920 x 1220 mm
© Bhajan Hunjan

Shaheen That is where it belonged.

Bhajan [laughs] Thank you very much. This painting was roughly three by five feet and was in acrylic paint. Its title, *Confrontation*, says a lot. It was one of my very blue paintings – I'd never really done a painting which was so blue. There was also *The Dialogue* (fig.5) which was made around the same time. I thought it would be useful to give a background to this work which was part of the series I made in the early 1980s into the 1990s. These works used lots of portraiture, including self-portraiture. I was aware that there were no positive representations of South Asian women in contemporary British painting, media, or generally in the arts. I think there was a real urgency in me to actually look at portraiture. These works were really about identity and self-representation. They indulged in analysis, especially self-analysis, because my earlier work had dealt a lot with the subconscious. There were two opposing factors here: what was happening outside us and what was happening inside us. What was really important about some of these earlier works was the gaze, for instance

in *The View Within* (fig.6). The gaze was really important because it was direct, unapologetic [chuckles] and non-passive. It was about really looking out and dealing with what was out there.



Fig.5
Bhajan Hunjan
The Dialogue 1990
Acrylic paint on canvas
Reproduced in the exhibition catalogue for Southern Arts, Winchester Gallery,
Winchester 1990
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133632
© Bhajan Hunjan



Fig.6
Bhajan Hunjan
The View Within undated
Lithograph
Reprinted in Bazaar magazine, issue 7
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133632
© Bhajan Hunjan

In *Confrontation*, the figures stand in front of this very intricate, decorated wall with a repeated pattern. An artist's statement I had written around this time read: 'Pattern is very prominent in my work, and it acts as a screen or a partition ... which ... existed in those kinds of Indian architecture.' If you go to places like Jaipur, you see havelis or balconies with walls covered in decorative, very beautiful patterns. These were places where women could look out, but nobody could look in. They acted both as an enclosure, a window, [and they also represented] a view from within. This lithograph, *The View Within* (fig.6), talks about that. These enclosures sometimes became barriers, ones that were outside us in the form of racism, sexism, and invisibility, because a lot of the time we were just ignored, as if we just did not exist. This was happening in the spaces where women worked, and on the streets, and we all knew about Enoch Powell's famous speech in 1968 when we came to this country. For us South Asian women, this also existed within our domestic and living spaces in the form of patriarchy. There were cultural expectations and traditional taboos. These paintings are about inner questioning, resistance and empowerment. For me, it was about empowering myself through the action of painting. As an artist I have felt that I have never been in a position to write about my work and I have left it to others a lot [chuckles], so I am going to highlight two issues. Firstly, I am going to read what Joyoti Grech, who was a writer and poet, said about my work:

Bhajan Hunjan's work is a reassertion of self, her own and that of her sisters. She observes and she shows herself in the process of observation, she draws on the spiritual and the organic, and she does not see herself slotting into any category. She claims recognition and acknowledges it as a common right on her own terms.⁷

I will also read what Al-An deSouza said about *The View Within*:

A recurrent theme in Bhajan's work is the series of enclosures, sharp geometrical forms, bars, grids, squares and trapped and threatened organic undefinable forms. The meanings are clear. These enclosures, these restrictions imposed by society are ever present and complex. Any attempt to escape these prisons requires not only dismantling the outer structure, but also their internalised emotional effects.⁸

I think that was quite important. Lastly, I will talk about the screen which was installed in the exhibition. I did that piece of work especially for *Crossing Black Waters* because as we know in Hindi or Punjabi, 'black

waters' meant **Kala Pani**, which was a taboo around leaving the homeland, while we were born outside the homeland. In this piece of work, the portraits were monoprints on tissue paper, and I had an image of my grandfather from his passport as well as my portrait. **My grandfather's** passport photo was from a special category – a protectorate or some kind of heading for people who had travelled from the subcontinent to East Africa. This was in 1927, and it was issued in Lahore, and my uncle, who was fourteen, travelled with him. The footsteps which I have used on the screen and in my earlier works referred to this kind of migration. Some of us who were in this exhibition were from East Africa so we were **migrants, but coming to the UK we were 'twice migrants', to use the phrase given to us by Parminder Bhachu.**⁹

Shaheen Can I just bring up one thing that you brought out which we do not often talk about, especially in the contemporary arts – as second-generation **contemporary artists, let's say compared to the people that you** mentioned in Horizon Gallery as first-generation artists. Specifically, Joyoti Grech's idea of spirituality as a common right. The idea of the subcontinent in the West is about its relationship to spirituality, which in many ways we inherited as an image, through The Beatles and through the various other events that happened in the 1960s in Britain. A lot of the work by artists of South Asian descent – which is a homogenising term in its own right, and maybe even a colonial term – was possibly tainted with western ideas about spirituality. Do you think that your work, which could be seen psychologically, was actually termed spiritual instead?

Bhajan No, I think there is an overlap. I was brought up within a Sikh home and actually the Sikh philosophy is very free in its message: it encourages the freedom of an individual to be whatever they want to. Through the freedom of the philosophy, it gave you a right to break the boundaries as long as you respected your humanity and that of others. I think that was the core of the spiritualism which has been quite important to me, and I think it has overlapped with psychology. In order for you to get to that place you first must tackle your own demons and restrictions. In this discipline we are always questioning ourselves. The painting *The Dialogue* (fig.5) was very much about that. The character on the left is looking out, but the one on the right is probing the other to move on, to have strength to deal with restrictions. Both *The Dialogue* and *Confrontation* were about that internal conflict, questioning oneself and wanting to empower oneself.

Said I was going to add something in relation to identity, broadly speaking – this double portrait or self-portrait in your work. You touched on the British context of colonialism in India, and then East Africa, where some of us were born. In a sense it is always the authorities trying to define you, and I think here you are asserting yourself as an individual through your spirituality, through visual representation, self-representation. Historically, it is always others who want to represent you, for instance the authorities – **and we talked about your grandfather's British passport**. He probably had a certain reaction to the terminology or code that profiled him as a British colonial or Commonwealth citizen.

Bhajan When I came here, I was considered a British overseas citizen [laughs]. You have done work around the passport as well, Said. Those documents were so important to us, we treasured them. Without them we were stateless. I think that is why we protected that identity and being East African, we went through the dilemma of our African identity, our Kenyan or Ugandan identity, or Tanzanian in your case, Shaheen. We were in a double-edged situation, part of the colonial game, little pawns that were moving from one part to the other.

Shaheen I think *Confrontation* was one of the first pieces of work where I saw sneakers being used on a human body. Not many people were using them. They were still running shoes, not shoes to be worn for daily use. This also talks about mobility, just like the plastic bag took on a specific meaning about mobility to a certain extent in the diaspora/globalisation. A lot of artists used the symbol of oversized checked bags, referring to the plight of millions of refugees. The sneaker in its own way has a very specific connotation in your work, and in this particular work is not about exercise, it is about being able to take flight.

Thank you very much, Bhajan, for those ideas, those thoughts and for sharing your remarks. I would now like to introduce our second guest, Said Adrus, who is based in London and Reading. He works predominantly in film, printmaking and installation. He has also worked with Bhajan on public art projects, including the Cultural Mapping Public Art project in Leicester. Said was Nottingham-based for a very long time, which is especially interesting in terms of the mid-1980s and the formation of political Black art events. Said co-founded the Asian Artist Group (AAG – ‘Aag’ in Hindi means flame or fire) with Gurminder Sikand and Sardul Gill in 1984 in the Midlands. He has been very active mainly in the UK, but also in Switzerland where his family lives. He has exhibited throughout Europe and his work was presented at the second International Istanbul Triennale in 2013 as well as the seminal

Transforming the Crown exhibition at the Caribbean Cultural Center in New York in 1997.

In the early days Said had a studio with us at Panchayat, as did Rita Keegan, Keith Piper and Perminder Kaur. I remember him being around when the Asian-American artist Ken Chu was installing his work for *Extreme Unction* (1994), one of the exhibitions that we curated near Spitalfields Market in East London. Of course, Said was involved both as an artist and an educationist at the City Gallery (Leicester) where *Crossing Black Waters* started. His recent films have included a number of works which look at his relationship to Kampala, the capital of Uganda – the project is called *Retracing Kampala*. One of the films was called *The Riddle of Bakuli*, and Bakuli, as far as I remember, was a bowl. Am I correct?

Said Bakuli is a neighbourhood in Kampala, but a bakuli is also a bowl [chuckles]. The name was actually Berkeley, historically, apparently. And then through pronunciations naturally Berkeley became Barkley, which became Bakuli.

Shaheen I'll hand over to you now, Said, to talk about *Mais Noir*, the mixed media work which was selected by Leicester City Gallery for its education pack, as were the other works including Bhajan's which we just talked about.

Said Thank you very much Shaheen and great to hear Bhajan elaborating on her practice and *Crossing Black Waters* contribution. I will start with the work titled *Mais Noir*, which translates from French as 'But Black' (fig.7). I must add and stress that this particular image is actually one aspect of the overall installation which was in the exhibition *Crossing Black Waters*. It had several panels, and most of them were computer-generated images, the result of early days of laser copying, enlargement and experimentation within those media. I created this particular panel, which was quite large, and it represented a body but fragmented, forming an almost life-size work.

SAID ADRUS

STATEMENT OF WORK.

Adrus uses an 'urban' language, a flowing mix of youth and popular cultures, referring to an experience of alienation and dispossession. Style and language are used purposefully as critiques of a repressive power structure, questioning concepts of "justice", "sovereignty", and "nationality".

His most recent work, through the medium of computer graphics, again appropriates a 'street-wise' language but one which is normally associated with metropolitan advertising and consumption.



"Mais Noir"

Computer generated image

1991/1992

THEMES: Immigration, identity, law and justice.

MEDIUM: Painting, computer graphics.

FORMAT: Discussion, slide talk, practical.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Gujarat, India (Born in E.Africa).

COMMUNITY LANGUAGES: Kaatchi, Gujarati, Urdu, Hindi.

Fig.7

Information sheet on Said Adrus from the *Crossing Black Waters* education pack produced by City Gallery, Leicester, March 1992, featuring an image of Adrus's *Mais Noir* 1991-2

Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926

© Said Adrus

My work titled *Public Enemy or Public Guardian* (fig.8) was part of a series of works about justice, equality, racism in the 1980s and 1990s, subsequent inaction and silence or absence. *Public Enemy or Public Guardian* was inspired by the family of Shamira Kassam. My painting about a poem titled 'Arsonist' by Saqib, an East London poet, depicted violence against Asian women, families, individuals. This family was murdered by an arson attack and nobody has been found guilty. I was playing with the phrase 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil'. I think we talked a little bit about this being sculptural, the bricks were painted with words, letters. I used tourist ephemera including police helmets and darts with the Union Jack on top. The painting element was included in

a couple of exhibitions in the 1980s. It depicts the 'public guardian or public enemy' as three bobbies, the policemen who are supposed to be protecting us. They are in between guardian and enemy, in this dilemma, a situation that was really critical from our vantage point as Black people, or members of the South Asian community.



Fig.8
Said Adrus
Public Enemy or Public Guardian c.1980–90
Floor installation
Photograph of the work in the *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition at City Gallery, Leicester, March 1992
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926
© Said Adrus

Mais Noir (fig.7) partly emerged from my experimentation with printmaking. I trained in printmaking and painting at Nottingham Trent University in the early 1980s, and made a lot of photo-based imagery, photo silkscreens influenced by American artists, pop artists, as well as British artists including Richard Hamilton. I was trying to experiment with line and drawing with this computer-generated imagery in the early 1990s, so I had that history of working with printmaking and had experimented extensively. At that early stage I could not afford high tech equipment and did not have access to resources that would produce high-level computer-generated imagery. But it was in its infancy at that time anyway, so there were ways you could experiment with printouts from your personal printer, or go to the Copyart workshop in King's Cross, London.

Shaheen Where Al-An deSouza worked?

Said Yes, Al-An worked there.

Shaheen And Rita Keegan was there as well.

Said Wow, brilliant. I worked there extensively, especially during the *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition. There's another image from this series which was in *Crossing Black Waters*. It's more representational. Like Bhajan, I am not fond of writing that many statements or even reading them out unless it is essential. I wrote something in reference to my early series of works *Identitet Nationalitet* that were about portraiture, legal categorisation, and representation through documents including passports. I wrote:

We know who we are... We know where we're from... We know where we're going... The racist bureaucracy of many European states has tried to define and confine the Black people who live within those societies. We are not simply British, French or German citizens, we are stamped as 'coloured' or from the colonies, somehow perhaps second class. This state racism, which influences attitudes at large too, somehow tries to suggest that as Black people here we should have an identity crisis, that all of us do have an identity problem.¹¹

It gives you the sense that you are second-class citizens. In my case, some of my family members were born in Switzerland. We found out that even if you were born in Switzerland, and one of your parents was not a citizen of those countries, you would not be automatically given the right to Swiss or German citizenship. In my early days, arriving from East Africa, I was based in Switzerland and went to a school where I had to carry different identity cards and documents. I still had a British passport from East Africa, so the early series of my artwork [about identity and nationality], *Identitet Nationalitet*, which preceded these particular works dealt with this notion of portraiture, the ID, and representation. I was trying to give a background to my work through this thematic. Some of my printmaking or painting was image and text, but some of it involved figurative representation.

Black artists and curators including Eddie Chambers used to come to Nottingham. We were all students and there was a lot of political consciousness, and the Blk Art Group was very active. I was a witness to that, partly because I was within that framework and lived with young

Black artists including Keith Piper and Donald Rodney. A lot of the work was image and text, and undoubtedly artists would get influenced by one another. **It's a long conversation to be held in the future: who used image and text first, how and why?** That integration of texts was quite prominent. **This was an era which we call the 'critical decade' – the 1980s – just before *Crossing Black Waters*.** This was when Black artists of African, Asian and Caribbean origin, the younger generation, had a variety of exhibitions and projects that took place across Britain in regional museums and galleries, and various groups emerged in London and the Midlands. I was flying from Birmingham where I did my foundation course to Nottingham where I studied for my BA, so these two works had this history embedded in my practice.

As I said, I was trained mainly as a painter and printmaker with a European-American art historical background. There was very little documentation from India or Pakistan of contemporary art and exhibitions. We had very little access to resources, artists and creative practitioners. We had more access to popular film and music from India and to a certain extent from Pakistan, and much later British bhangra music and Jamaican reggae. In my practice I was extremely involved in community engagement and community work within the Midlands, especially the East Midlands – Nottingham, Leicester and Derby. I was fortunate enough to be given the first Asian traineeship in community arts. **There were two, initially started by the Arts Council's initiative with the regional East Midlands Arts.** It was an open call and I applied for it and at some stage, through a rigorous process, I got it. The artists had to work primarily within the community context, it was a training programme for one whole year. Very interesting, challenging, partly funded by the Gulbenkian Foundation.

There was one traineeship for African-Caribbean artists which was based in Birmingham and mine was at Nottingham Community Arts Centre. My practice involved simultaneously working with the Indian Community Centre and young people, doing creative community youth projects. These projects addressed issues faced by young people, the police, or generational issues. This work might today be termed social engagement or social practice. At that time in 1984 I co-founded the Asian Artists Group (AAG) with Gurminder Sikand and Sardul Gill. We did a few group shows around the East Midlands and one exhibition at the Commonwealth Institute in London. My work titled *Causam Investigato Si Posteris* (fig.9) shows a young man with an army figure character and part of a skull. I believe it was painted in the late 1980s. There are a couple of versions.



Fig.9
 Postcard featuring Said Adrus, *Causam Investigato Si Posteris* 1992
 Acrylic paint on canvas
 Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926
 © Said Adrus

Shaheen It has got fire as far as I can see!

Said It is a large canvas, and unstretched. I did these paintings with this Latin phrase 'causam investigato si posteris' which means 'search out the cause if you can'. The uprisings in the early 1980s in cities including Birmingham, London and Southall, against racism, against police brutality, influenced me. I was experimenting with the media's bias, so I tried to create imagery. Even when you join the army in the US or UK your loyalty is questioned. This figurative work was short lived, but it was my technique around that time. I had fun doing it.

I did some challenging work about exile for an exhibition which toured a few cities including Nottingham, Manchester, and the Chapman Gallery at the University of Salford. I started using jute sacks. I had worked with collage before, when I was involved in printmaking and painting. This installation with jute sacks was immersive due to the video and sound components. The jute bags in their rawness, the hessian material was a reference to my personal and political exile from East Africa. Each bag

represented one year. There was a review of the installation when it was shown in Zurich in 2001. Initially it depicted twenty-seven years from 1972 to Nottingham in 1999, so there were twenty-seven bags in that installation. There have been different iterations. In some cases, audio and video pieces or looped moving images accompany the jute bag. A couple of these moving image works were computer-generated. I wanted to experiment with some sort of material like jute or hessian because I was coming from printmaking where you really get your hands dirty, and turning to media application and experimentation was too clinical. I used this opportunity to create a more immersive work.

Shaheen I remember making work using tea, and of course like jute, it has a very specific relationship to the Indian subcontinent. You know as well as I do, a lot of the export material from India used jute (as a packing material) and it ended up in the West. It was a cheap material, which it still is – if you go to somewhere like Kolkata the jute mills are everywhere. And of course in East Africa we had sisal which had direct connection to...

Said Hessian. Exactly.

Shaheen I am just wondering about how instead of using sisal you used jute to talk about yourself.

Said Well, sisal was used: the bags were jute but the strings used to tie them were sisal.

Shaheen These little decisions artists made at this particular time about the connotations of material, how we brought certain geographies into place, are really interesting. A lot of information about these choices is missing due to the lack of cohesive texts about certain installations or certain framings of work in terms of the geopolitical and the notion of globalisation – by which I mean the trade of people, ideas and materials.

Said In terms of the reference to commodification, it is interesting how the materiality and trade of art has led artists to make more indirect statements. I have always been interested in the commodification of fine art and the emphasis given to it today, whether through the prism of Frieze or commercial galleries. The object, the painting, has become a **trading entity. In fact, it is a shareholder's equity. In the particular case of coffee and tea, people like myself, Bhajan and Shaheen, and Al-An too – who was from Kenya – we were brought up around these materials. You could see them in shops and on farms. They were commonly used. At the same time, they represent trade between India or East Africa and the**

West. Trade that continues today. Our lives as individuals, nations, communities are embedded in this trade. The notion of moving cargo is quite interesting: the bag represents human beings moving from A to B. The bags represented mobility.

Shaheen I would like the three of us to discuss four key works from the exhibition *Crossing Black Waters*. Each of the works, which we collectively selected, articulated how the artists in the wider culture realm had realised images in the contemporary conditions that you both talked about. The four artists are Arpana Caur, Nina Edge, Samena Rana and Anwar Saeed. What we need to discuss is what the selected artists invented visually. A lot of what they were doing was magnifying the dysfunctionality and maybe the cruelty that afflicts South Asia.

Arpana Caur's outstanding contribution to *Crossing Black Waters* was a series of paintings that marked a violent relation to patriarchy. These included *Threat* (fig.10) and *After the Massacre* (fig.11), which were produced in 1989 and 1992 respectively. In terms of gender, **Arpana's** work talked volumes about misogyny and the violence against women that had increased after partition, as it did across the world. It persists within the contemporary era and it really was very important in terms of historical violence and Indian **subjectivity**. **I think of Arpana's works very much** in terms of her relationship to the idea of the Emergency in India (1975–7), and the desperation at the time of the Emergency that was part of the way that the subcontinent's culture started to evaluate itself differently. A number of those artists talked about emergency politically, as a state. Arpana, as Bhajan knows, feels very strongly about Operation Blue Star which led to the attack on the Golden Temple in 1984, and at the time of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.¹⁰ But of course the idea of emergency carried on more recently within the coronavirus pandemic in 2020 when we had the oxygen emergency. I felt **Arpana's work** was strangely prophetic, that she was observing her own country. For me, her place in *Crossing Black Waters* was about her relationship to being hidden, that comes through especially in works such as *After the Massacre* (fig.11), where a woman is hiding from two soldiers. This metaphor provides a very important way to engage with the cultural signs which were known to come from Indian feminism. Bhajan, can you talk a bit more about Arpana, whom you have known for a very long time?

ARPANA CAUR

STATEMENT OF WORK

Caur's large, vibrantly colourful paintings create their own iconography around women's historical and contemporary experience. Some of her work, with its frozen, suspended figures, has a stillness, which clashes disconcertingly with the vivid colours and threatening sense of disaster; a device which creates paintings which are both attractive and daring in their content.



"Threat"

Oil on canvas

1989

THEME: Women's oppression, mythology and contemporary life.

MEDIUM: Painting on canvas and glass.

FORMAT: Discussion, slide-talk, practical.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: India.

COMMUNITY LANGUAGES: Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi.

Fig.10

Information sheet on Arpana Caur from the *Crossing Black Waters* education pack produced by City Gallery, Leicester, March 1992, featuring an image of Caur's *Threat* 1989

Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926

© Arpana Caur



Fig.11
 Arpana Caur
After the Massacre 1992
 Oil paint on canvas
 Photograph from the *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition catalogue
 Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08140781
 © Arpana Caur

Bhajan

I first met Arpana in 1979. She was one of my first Indian woman artist role models. I think that what happened in 1984 – you mentioned Operation Blue Star and what happened when Indira Gandhi was assassinated, what happened to the Sikh community, not only in Delhi but all over India, is important to note. In 2017, there finally was a book published by a writer called Pav Singh, entitled *1984: India's Guilty Secret*. He described this time really well:

Over the four days, an estimated 8,000 Sikhs, possibly more, would be **slaughtered by rampaging mobs in the world's largest democracy**. To put the sheer scale of this destruction into perspective, the figure cited is broadly equivalent to the civilian death tolls of the Northern Ireland conflict, Tiananmen Square and 9/11 combined.¹²

I remember in 1989 when I went to India and stayed with Arpana, she was talking about how scared they were – she and her mother were inside in their home, hidden and not really able to make any sound. They did not know who to trust. The authorities turned a blind eye to what was **going on**. There are plenty of reports now, including in Singh's book, of the authorities turning a blind eye. In this case, the police who were meant to protect you were not there to protect you. *Threat* (fig.10) is very

much about this fire, this heat, this violence that was happening all around. In this body of a woman, we see the artist, Arpana, who does lots of self-portraiture, and she is in shock, just looking down at how she could fall prey to this male violence which is beneath her. So yes, it was a very traumatic time for Arpana and she did produce a series of paintings around this time.

Said In terms of its extremely powerful depiction, figuratively, any kind of notion of self in portraiture within an overall broader composition is quite interesting. In *After the Massacre*, there are very bright colours, primary colours, for her kurta and it strikes so well with what I mentioned briefly about the police brutality in some situations, for instance in this urban situation in Britain that I had gone through. People with authority or in power can abuse their own positions, and the question is whether they are guardians, or they are protectors, especially the army and the police. I think I am correct in saying that Arpana was a self-taught artist, which is almost unheard of nowadays in terms of exhibiting artists. A lot of people go to colleges and the college art education has become very important. I think she might have gone to several courses, but does not come from this fine art background, so it is quite interesting to see how she developed her own visual vocabulary.

Shaheen **But isn't that part of the importance of this work? That it needed to be made, regardless of whether Arpana was in a college or an institution?**

Said Yes, that is true.

Shaheen That it can actually come out with the power and the striking glory by the use of colours for Indian figuration. This work allows one to understand the vulnerable minorities, which in actuality are the majority. I mean, we are talking about women as a minority still in India, treated as a minority because they are women! This division is very dystopic in terms of how India succumbs to its own prejudices towards its own people.

Said Added to that is the issue of communities and perhaps religion, which you touched on a little bit in your introduction, Shaheen. It also relates to what we are going through now in India with the regime of Narendra Modi and his notion of us and them against what you call minorities, or certain communities. This tension is still lingering. Unfortunately, every few years or every decade sees another kind of confrontation, or something emerges and then this whole community who are part of this nation are ostracised and attacked. Bhajan did mention Punjab, a particular community in terms of the language and culture. Related to a

head of state, like Indira Gandhi and the assassination, it's very sad in that sense: how power from the top can be totally abusive.

Shaheen Absolutely. I wanted to ask Bhajan to talk about two photographs that were both taken in London, as far as I know. In the first one (fig.12), Bhajan is in the middle and Arpana is on the right. Maybe we can start with that image and what was going on then. Where was it taken and what was happening?

Bhajan It's Arpana on the right, me sitting at the back, and then on the left there is Naazish Attaullah, who was the head of printmaking at Lahore College of Art. It is amazing that we have got people from three countries here. We have Arpana from India, Naazish from Pakistan and myself in the middle. We were at Samena Rana's apartment and it looks like Samena might have taken that photograph.



Fig.12
Photograph taken by Samena Rana of Nazish Ataullah, Bhajan Hunjan and Arpana Caur at Samena Rana's apartment, London, 1992
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133632
Courtesy Bhajan Hunjan

Shaheen Yeah, in Islington, London.

Bhajan Yes. This is probably just after the *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition. An interesting thing is that they were not able to communicate with each other, being in Pakistan and India, and yet London provided that safe haven for these conversations to happen and for artists to come together.

This was especially the case for women, because we were almost starved of those conversations. When I first met Arpana in 1979 I remember she had a show at Maria Souza's gallery, which was called Gallery 38. Maria was the ex-wife of the Indian artist Francis N. Souza, so there is a lot of history there. Some of Arpana's earlier work was images of women, but they were very dark in terms of colour and in terms of content, and they were very brown and black paintings. Then here we have Naazish, who was the head of printmaking and she was quite a frequent visitor. During her visits to London, she visited the Slade School of Art and was friends with Barto dos Santos and Peter Daglish, who taught at the Slade. I wonder what the joke was here, because we were all laughing at something [laughs].

Shaheen There's this historical moment in which *Crossing Black Waters* was trying to bring together two continents and three countries, separated but in a way deeply rooted to each other. A cultural network like this appears and we realise how much networking was going on outside of what was controlled nationally between India and Pakistan. That border was possibly the most guarded border in the world at one point, and possibly is, as well as the one dividing the state of Kashmir. We can move to another network which is shown in the second photograph (fig.13). Can you talk a bit about that?

Bhajan That's an image of Nina Edge and myself. I have been thinking about that image because you can see it looks like we are in a schoolhouse, maybe a workshop that was being run. Then you see all these dyes – batik dyes, because that was what Nina did, and she delivered lots of workshops. But what I particularly remember about that time is that Maud Sulter was the person who brought us together. She had organised a coming together of women artists and practitioners who were able to deliver workshops. I don't particularly remember whether they were community workshops or whether they were workshops which were just encouraging women artists to interact with one another. I particularly remember Ingrid Pollard being there, Claudette Johnson, and Marlene Smith and perhaps Simone Alexander. These are just some of my memories of the time. I think I actually got to know of Nina through Maud, who was an amazing artist and person who brought women of colour together. Later, she worked on her publication *Passion*, which I have here. Nina Edge's image is on the cover.



Fig.13
 Bhajan Hunjan and Nina Edge at a community artist workshop organised
 by Maud Sulter in North London, 1991
 Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133694
 Courtesy Bhajan Hunjan
 Photo: Vivienne Owen-Winch

Shaheen

These are such important conversations that we have not had about networks, both international and national. They do not seem to be part of British art networks nor do they seem to be part of the British Council's recollection of what was going on in different parts of the world. I think this is a fantastic set of images through which we can talk about our relationships and/or interrelationships.



What price?
 Incomplete
 Inverse the
 Union Carbide

806,000 ; Sleeping
 400,000 ; Looking
 10,000 ; Drowning
 2,000 ; Dead
 50,000 ; Inhabited
 60,000 ; Treated
 77,000 ; Blinded
 100,000 ; Flaw.

Seven years
 Dosed to state
 Not one dollar
 Paid to date.

Figs.14a–b
 Nina Edge
Bhopal 1989
 Batik and text
 2300 x 2400 mm
 © Nina Edge

This is a good segue to our next artist, Nina Edge, and her work *Bhopal* (figs.14a–b). It is a large-scale batik [alongside text]. *Bhopal* was produced in 1991. It is one of her early works and focuses on the notion of environmental racism. Here we have a piece of history, really. The 1984 Bhopal disaster is one of the largest industrial accidents to happen in the world. It involved a megacorporation called Union Carbide India Limited, and of course megacorporations had a very specific role and place in the modernisation of Asia and of India in particular, and provided a great amount of stability for a large number of people through employment. They were very powerful, but they were always under-scrutinised. A lot of people who were employed by Union Carbide India Limited at that time were living very close to the pesticide plant in Bhopal. A gas leak occurred at the plant on the nights of 2 and 3 December 1984, and around thirty tonnes of highly toxic gas were released. The death toll was somewhere between 3,800 and 16,000 people. Over 600,000 people were exposed to the deadly gas cloud that night. It was a vast amount of people and for decades nobody was charged with responsibility for the incident.

What I think was very important about including *Bhopal* in the exhibition was that it talked about a shared condition going on all over the world. This was not just happening in India or in Pakistan, but also happening in Nigeria and in Indonesia.

Large megacorporations were working with local workforces that lived next to these spaces. In Bhopal, a lot of people who were living next to this pesticide plant were sleeping and the deadly gas was travelling near the ground and affected them, making a large number of people blind as well. So here we have another notion of the gaze, to return to your earlier idea, Bhajan. The return of the gaze here is partially or temporarily blinded, and maybe we can talk about the relationship of that to this particular piece of work. Part of the work was placing a certain amount of text next to the work, and it talked about those very figures, the numbers of those affected (fig.14b). Of course, compensation at that time, until 1992, was not paid to anybody or any persons affected, and the possibility of compensation went even quieter when Union Carbide was bought by Michigan-based Dow Chemical. So, it is a tragedy. It is effectively a work about a mass tragedy. I remember you saying, Bhajan, that when Nina produced these batiks (and there is more than one batik), people said, 'What is Bhopal?' They didn't actually know of the largest industrial incident on earth.

Bhajan When I spoke to her about why she did this work, she said that she had produced three small batiks about it and people did not know about it. It was almost because it remained removed, it was effectually placed away from you even when you could see the seriousness of the tragedy. But when we are not involved, we can just put it away and say, 'Well, it has nothing to do with me, it's away.' She said that made her do a piece of work which was so large [laughs] and was right in people's face, and with all the facts as to what had happened. It is interesting because she is saying, 'At what price?' In her text on this particular work she had written very clear instructions about how it should be exhibited so that the audience get to know the seriousness of the situation. It is interesting because Nina, in her cynical way, has always given the work the title 'an eye for an eye'. Obviously, there was no justice after this particular incident almost like the killings of the Sikhs in Delhi. A lot of things just go past the authorities when these disasters happened. The other thing that Nina was really interested in, and maybe we can talk about it, is the techniques that she used and why she used batiks. I do not know if you want to add anything about *Bhopal* before I say anything about that?

Said I do not recall that much actually except it was a large piece of work. I felt it was interesting as it was a textile work, and I know Nina's work in terms of certain ceramic or mixed media work that she had done around that time. Textiles and batik are associated with women's work. You both are suggesting that Nina was reclaiming that with very global political subject matter, a thematic of total disaster, a huge calamity in the context of the subcontinent by an artist based in England and of South Asian origin. The medium (batik) itself is quite interesting, as part of the overall *Crossing Black Waters* exhibition, in that it was not only painting or printmaking, or installations, and that in itself is interesting; this perception of certain media and imagery. You had mentioned spirituality earlier, Shaheen and Bhajan. We see the use of batik as part of awareness and political consciousness. It is about the eyes, and I had used eyes myself in some of the paintings depicting violence. I like this notion of visibility and invisibility.

Shaheen There was a visual charge to the use of batiks. I also used batik and the idea was to reclaim a traditionality, especially in the diaspora. We had traditions which were important to us. It is very strange that when Anish Kapoor used powder in sculpture it became a very valuable asset for him and for traditionists. Yet when people worked with traditional mediums like batik, for instance, or even other textile-based materiality, they were not seen to be interesting as a version of art-making. It was actually a version of a life, or a lifestyle. It was dedicated to the memory of

ancestors, or in memory of gender – so it was identified with identities rather than with the history of western art. So, there's both a gendered and a racialised representation – or modes of representation – that occurred when I changed from batik to installation. I had a completely different relationship to the arts and to being exposed.

Bhajan Before we move on, I just want to read what Nina had written, just a very small quote. She said:

I make things out of clay and colour, cloth and colour and words. If a person makes things out of canvas and colour, they can be called artist. If a person makes things which are not vessels out of clay, they might be called a sculptor. The same person making clay vessels is more likely to be trapped in the definition of a ... crafts-person.¹³

She was really interested in the idea of the hierarchy of techniques. Batik and clay really fell to the bottom and there was never a critical analysis like you have of painting and what you call higher art in terms of its elitism.

Shaheen Sure. In the third discussion of this series, we discuss the Third Havana Biennale, the subject of which was tradition and modernity. Of course, tradition and modernity was also a title used for one of the first Bangkok Biennales curated by Apinan Poshyananda. It was something which had to go through the Third World to reappear in Southern World globalisation, for it to return possibly into British consciousness.

Moving on, the third artist we're going to look at is Samena Rana. Of course, we were all close to Samena in one way or another; it was impossible not to get close to Samena because she embraced everybody that came into her orbit. It always felt when you were near to Samena that she had just fallen in love because she was so enthusiastic [chuckles] about life and the world, and she wanted to protect that feeling through everything she did. This idea of love was very immanent around her. She worked very hard and she was very confident.

SAMENA RANA

STATEMENT OF WORK.

Rana's series of photographs record what appears to be the aftermath of an act of violence viciously cutting through a young girl's aspirations.

The images are an explicit comment about society's disabling attitudes towards race, gender and physical ability.



"Fragments of Self"

Photograph

1990

THEME: Gender, disability, family herstory.

MEDIUM: Discussion groups, photography, slide-talk.

FORMAT: Discussion, training.

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Pakistan

COMMUNITY LANGUAGES: Urdu, Punjabi

Fig.15

Information sheet on Samena Rana from the *Crossing Black Waters* education pack produced by City Gallery, Leicester, March 1992, featuring an image of Rana's *Fragments of Self* 1990
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926

There were two series that she made, *Flow of Water* and *Fragments of Self*, and I would suggest that *Fragments of Self* are self-portraits (fig.15). As curators we were perplexed by *Fragments of Self* because Samena had developed a very unique way to capture images. Unfortunately, later on in 1992, when *Crossing Black Waters* was touring, Samena passed away; it was a very early death. But these images stayed with us and they became seminal and central to *Crossing Black Waters*. The series show her need to recompose from materials that were in her wheelchair

accessible apartment in Islington. Different things floating and possibly sinking in water. She was very inventive. She had very limited access both in terms of her own body but also the equipment that was around her, and she adapted a lot of the equipment that she used. For instance, as part of her photographic process, she had a way of putting a shutter [pump] in her mouth. She could not use her fingers fully so using her mouth was part of what went into taking the image. Of course, she was up and down working with photo labs in London to try to get the best out of what she was doing. She was very serious as a photographer.

The images that she created ended up being incredibly beautiful and alluring. She often used lace and silk and imitation jewellery from Lahore. She explored this materiality with images of her family in a bathtub full of water. She sat in her wheelchair and took photographs looking downwards. These were really difficult compositions in their own right, but of course Samena was a darkroom fan. She was a fan of the darkroom in terms of making photography, but also the disco. She used to go to discos in her wheelchair and make sure that everything was made accessible. She was a fantastic person who took her agency seriously. As a wheelchair user it was an arduous everyday struggle to make everywhere accessible. Of course, a lot of the work she did was about the relationship between a world made around ableism and the disregard of the (dis)abled community, and the nonchalant reaction of able people to people living with (dis)ability.



Fig.16
Samena Rana
Photograph 5, from *Reflection Series* 1992
Estate of Samena Rana, Keeper Shaheen Merali

The image *Photograph 5* from the *Reflection Series* (fig.16) was taken when there was a large group of people with (dis)abilities protesting by blocking the Telethon events, which were two events in 1990 and 1992 held to raise money for people with (dis)abilities. People with (dis)abilities despised these events because they felt they were patronising. Do you have memories about Samena and this work at that time?

Bhajan Definitely, because she also produced *Bottom Drawers* which were series of things like jewellery, which included some very serious work featuring a broken mirror and a knife. There were a lot of images of objects referencing violence, whether towards women or other groups of people. Our mothers always had a bottom drawer, where they carefully kept some things for when their daughters would get married. That was the pun in the title *Bottom Drawer*. This series was beautiful and the images were amazingly sensual. I remember meeting her just before and after *Crossing Black Waters* and having some amazing conversations with her. She had also started a course at the University of Westminster at the time which she was extremely excited about. When she wrote the word **disability**, she put the 'dis' in brackets and 'ability' after that. She was turning things around and I know that at the ICA, she challenged their lack of access for people with (dis)abilities. She made some headway with those arts organisations that did not have access for people with (dis)abilities.

Shaheen Absolutely. She was also involved in the London transport protest [the Campaign for Accessible Transport in 1990], and chained herself to a bus because there was no way for somebody with a wheelchair to get on. Her work was ground-breaking not only as a photographer, but also as an activist.

Said She would campaign and was quite activist with notions of ability or (dis)ability, and would not take no for an answer. With reference to *Fragments of Self* (fig.15) and that image, I just used computer-generated **imagery in my talk, and you can see that in Samena's image**, this is before Photoshop got really big, and the manipulation of each image in terms of colour and form. There is so much of this manipulation on every cover of a magazine now, for any kind of visual representation in the print press. **But Samena's image** is like old style analogue printing and photography – the layering. In one way you see these different types of fabrics, whether it is silk or various others that are sensitive, and the colour and the pattern, and the overlap with water or the domestic environment, and at the same time a little bit of her archival work comes in.

Shaheen It is quite innovative.

Bhajan She was able bodied until she had her accident and she came to Britain to get operated on due to her badly damaged back. I think what we see in her photograph that was used on the cover of *Everything* magazine (fig.17) is her as a child before her accident.



Fig.17
Cover of *Everything* magazine, no.12, February–March 1994, featuring Samena Rana, *Memories I–III date*
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133794
© *Everything* editorial
© Samena Rana

Shaheen Those photographs were taken by her father. Of course, it was a violent dispute that led to her (dis)ability, so there is a lot of traumatic history here. There is a personal history, a history of protest and a history of aesthetics. There is a great amount that we can read into her work. Her artist page used Urdu poetry – her daily salutations were through Urdu poetry. And she was an exemplary host – she was not a cook but would order foods for anybody who came to her house. She created a fantastic


network by having such a large, empathetic presence – a network not only for artists, but also poets, filmmakers, and lot of people from Pakistan would visit her, and she would invite other folks to come through, and then you got this fantastic mix that was Samena Rana's world.

ANWAR SAEED

STATEMENT OF WORK.

Saeed, teaches and paints in Lahore, traditionally the cultural capital of Pakistan. He ironically reconstructs the nationalist vision of an idyllic moghul history, infusing this with the stark reality of recent colonial and post-independence oppression.

In other more dreamlike works, Saeed considers a nations aspirations for the future out of a troubled past.



"Dream Scape"
Collage, pencil and ink
1987

THEME: Moghul empire and the court, fundamentalism.
MEDIUM: Collage, photography, painting, drawing.
FORMAT: Discussion, practical.
COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: Lahore, Pakistan.
COMMUNITY LANGUAGES: Urdu.

Fig.18
Information sheet on Anwar Saeed from the *Crossing Black Waters* education pack produced by City Gallery, Leicester, March 1992, featuring an image of Saeed's *Dream Scape* 1987
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08159926
© Anwar Saeed

Let us now move on to Anwar Saeed, who is based in Pakistan. There are two works to consider here: *Dream Scape* (fig.18) and the drawing that he submitted for the *Crossing Black Waters* catalogue (fig.19). I was trying to think about how he has managed to record the oppressive presence

in which many artists had to operate, especially in Pakistan. Even at art colleges you were not necessarily always free. *Dream Scape* is very much about hiding and the hidden. Again, it's a bit like Arpana Caur for me. What are we looking at? Is it a figure hiding their consolation? Their grief? Is that a hanging body?

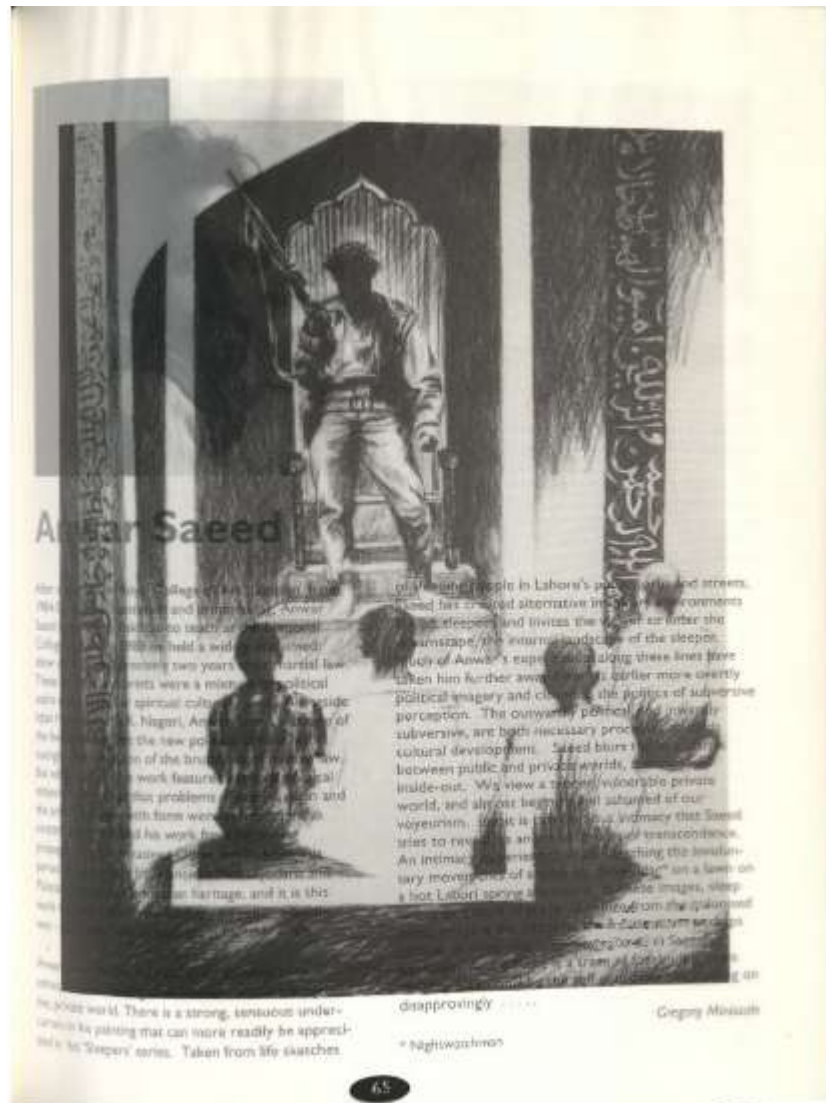


Fig.19
Page from the *Crossing Black Waters* catalogue featuring a drawing by
Anwar Saeed
Panchayat Collection, Tate Library 08133803
© Anwar Saeed

That moon was part of the work – the cycle of the moon was part of a number of images in *Crossing Black Waters*. In a strange way we are looking at two sets of witnesses in these two images. The one in *Dream Scape* has witnessed the grief of somebody who passed away, somebody that they were close to, maybe an unrequited love. In the image for the catalogue, there are children sitting in a madrasa; there's a minbar, which is the place where the priest would have given their sermon, which has

been occupied by a soldier with his gun raised to the heavens. None of the faces are available for our pleasure. This is not about pleasure, it's about consolation, it's about reality. It is a reality check and Anwar is very courageous in allowing us to look at the notion of borrowed and maybe even stolen time. The catalogue image answers all. As far as we have worked it out, that text on the right-hand side is not actually Arabic, it is contemplative, suggesting Arabic font.

Said It is doing a visual calligraphy, actually.

Shaheen Yeah. There's a notion of failure that's very pervasive in both these images. There is a general sense that they have failed, whether it's a soldier or the person who has committed suicide or the one who has been hanged. The failure that we feel within those two images is of the little consolation we feel for those who live the misery in their daily lives. It is an incredible image for me still, it's very powerful. I wonder if you feel the same.

Said Yeah. I still recall the exhibition. I was working in the education sector, and on the education aspects of *Crossing Black Waters*. I saw the works before they went up in the display in Leicester. In Anwar's case there is a very strong drawing technique and rich figuration. The lack of visibility is referenced and appears in the work as a face with missing features, for example. They are a bit ambiguous or almost wearing a mask, or are kind of hidden. Simultaneously, the work is so contemporary and reflects the imagery of popular media that we have today, for example, in that region including Afghanistan, with the guns and the ammunition. These works are about authority and the army, about who is in control. At the same time, this minbar that you both mentioned, this pedestal where this central figure is standing with this gun is this so-called Eastern architecture, whether it remains a sacred space, religious or whatever is questioned. *Dreamscape* is in a way archival, like sepia imagery. I had done a project titled *Lost Pavilion* about Indian soldiers and particularly the Muslim soldiers in Horsell Common, Woking, and their graves and the destruction of the graves of the Muslim soldiers in there.¹⁴

Shaheen Is this in Britain? The desecration of the graves?

Said Yes. In a sense the visual depiction is interesting now that I see it with a different perspective, I see how architecture is depicted in their world and in the context of the life, the authority, or tension in day to day lives. Your visibility, invisibility... are you decidedly trying to be ambiguous wearing a mask or covering? Or the way the depiction occurs in art, in the drawing

for the catalogue – and this ambiguity of text, calligraphy as well. That brought out a lot of questions, rather than providing us with answers as an audience. Then of course there was accompanying text in some cases that was produced by one of the galleries. But it is this notion of people in power, as in authority in government, and the militarisation of Pakistan in particular, which had many generals and army figureheads who were part of the ruling of the nation post-independence. It has captured this history.

Shaheen Bhajan, if I can turn to you to address this. We also came out of East Africa, all three of us, with the military and aspects of the military, especially with Said with the Ugandan Asians who were sent into exile in 1972.

Said By Idi Amin.

Shaheen What was happening post-independence in East Africa, or even in Africa more widely, and in Asia, meant there were similarities in relationship to the notion of power, the notion of changing: how power changes with the army and the status of the civilian. Do you have any memories of that or do you read any of that in relationship to these images?

Bhajan I think the closest I came to this was my experience of the attempted coup in Kenya in 1982. I was supposed to fly back that day. I remember that our neighbour came in the morning and said, 'You shouldn't be going to Nairobi airport because the army is everywhere and there's been an attempted coup.' The looting had already started and we could see what was happening around us, but that's the closest I have come and it is not a pleasant experience.

I think Said probably went through something similar during the expulsion of Asians from Uganda. But what I see here in Anwar's image is almost the acceptability of the people who are sitting, whether it is out of fear, whether it is total submission. You see these which are on either side – parallel, vertical lines. It is interesting how he has tried to frame that. I am sure that when he was making this work, he was probably observing what was happening in Pakistan during the military rule, but also hoping for things to improve. I think when we work through ideas, we are hoping that somehow things around us would shift and change. You see along the way that things shift and change and get worse [chuckles] in the world. You can only stand back in shock to see how far we have come as humanity, and we hope that the general consciousness of the public is getting to a higher level so that we are able to deal with

conflict in a different way. As Said says, I think it gives rise to a lot more questions than answers.

Shaheen

Thank you Bhajan and thank you Said for those remarkable insights. We have known each other for around thirty years, and we have been part of the British, European and the global art world for that time. In many ways we have developed our ideas about ourselves, about others, about time, about space through different terms of engagement, different lenses. I would like to ask two questions, or frame our discussion in two parts. The first part is very much about how the discourse that came out of South Asia – and *Crossing Black Waters* as discourse – occupies space within Britain or within global history, or rather does not occupy anybody's attention, which is maybe more the reality. Because at that time in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, there was a great amount of pride around being somebody from South Asia, of South Asian descent, or somebody from Africa, which the three of us are. Of course, South Asian is as broad a label as political Black to categorise a very large group of people, a heterogeneous group of people. Regardless, we used the term South Asian and we also used the term political Black.

In that time, we shared ideas with people from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. We were imbued with a great diaspora which included the Caribbean, North America, Asia and Australasia. Especially in the 1980s, the critical decade from 1981 to around 1992, it seemed that there was an end to our invisibility in Britain. That was my feeling. Through making large-scale series of works and in our attempts to make public spaces and histories much more multicultural. I think the bronzes commissioned by Birmingham City Council from Dhruva Mistry in 1991, just one year before *Crossing Black Waters*, made it seem like somebody had been able to overcome the institutional racism and invisibility by being very present in the middle of a British city. But at the same time, we were all reading *Third Text*, *Bazaar* and *Artrage*, and it was brilliant to hear Rasheed Araeen's ideas and editorship, and to hear from Ziauddin Sardar, Jean Fisher, Sarat Maharaj, Homi Bhabha, Stuart Hall – amazing, charismatic people around us. Of course, there was a seminal publication that went well before all of that, which was Naseem Khan's report, *The Arts Britain Ignores*, which was published by Community Relations in 1976.¹⁵ At the same time we had the brilliant A. Sivanandan who was a director of the Institute of Race Relations. It felt like we had our backs covered. Then there were the legal battles which were going on to make sure that we did not get into trouble with the police or the legal system including the struggles by the Bradford 12, the Southall Black Sisters.¹⁶

- Said Free Satpal Ram, ADF campaign.
- Shaheen Absolutely. All of that was happening.
- Said Both campaigning and activism at the same time.
- Shaheen We were making references to Pakistani poet and writer Faiz Ahmad Faiz. A lot of people were. I remember he wrote, **'Friends, our blood shaped its own mysterious roads'**, in the poem **'Dawn of Freedom'**, published in August 1947. Now, all of a sudden, we seem to be equally manufactured again as a minority. We do not find ourselves in the midst of any discourses. In a sense, we have moved from the crash of community arts to the withdrawal of funding for community spaces, even youth work or work with people with (dis)abilities. All of this was taken away around 1994, through various legal structures. The impact which we thought we were having on Britishness – on its pedagogic relationship to social practices, which to a certain extent contributed to the built environment you talked about, Bhajan – all of that seems to have had such little traction. There has not really been another survey exhibition in the thirty years since *Crossing Black Waters* that looks at Britain in relationship to the subcontinent, not really. Jane Farver curated *Out of India* at the Queens Museum in 1997 and you have commercial galleries in India and sometimes in Pakistan that show artists from India and Pakistan. But the artists in the diaspora have hardly exhibited in India or Pakistan. How do you feel about all of this? Where are we?
- Bhajan There was still excitement when *The Other Story* happened, and we had Horizon Gallery doing parallel exhibitions called *In Focus* because they felt that there were other South Asian artists who had been totally ignored.¹⁷ There was not a single South Asian woman artist in *The Other Story*. After that, as you say, things started closing down; the Horizon Gallery shut down. There was the Black-Art Gallery, Seven Sisters Road, Finsbury Park and the Drum in Birmingham.
- Then Iniva (the Institute of International Visual Arts) came about and we thought, **'Oh, maybe we will be there. [Laughs] Our work will be looked at,'** but I am afraid it was not. We still had to oil our wheels, still had to earn our bread, so we went in different directions. For me, being a daughter of a man and a woman who both worked with their hands was one reason I went into printmaking. I thought, if I could not do anything else I could at least teach a technique, you know? That has always been an amazing fallback for me because you had to come up with something that you could offer which was special. I always feel there's a time in the

career of an artist when they can be nurtured, when they need patronage for their work to grow and for them to mature. We did not have that patronage. We just did not have that fallback, apart from our own peer group. And I think everybody at that time was trying to survive, and some friends and artists gave up and did not carry on. In my case, I did some collaborations with Said at the time in public art and what we called community arts –

Said You forced me actually.

Bhajan – [chuckles] which nowadays might be called social interaction or social engagement.

Said Social mapping.

Bhajan **That's right. That was part of the cultural mapping project in Leicester** when we did the sacred spaces. There were still local authorities like Leicester City Council that had Public Art Leicester, led by people like Jasia McArdle whose heart was in the right place. They knew that they somehow had to work with communities. We started working with communities and our work grew in the built environment. We worked equally hard in those sectors and for our work too, whether it was participatory or whether it was community consultation. But then the Regeneration Project started to happen, which was good as we were, I am glad to say, somehow at the right place at the right time. **What we didn't have was any exposure within the mainstream, or in terms of the private sector, in commercial galleries.** Said talks about commercial galleries in Switzerland and places, but I think in Britain we were just totally invisible and there was an indifference towards our work. Because there was a time when the artists in India and Pakistan got much more limelight.

Said Commercial exposure.

Bhajan Yeah. Some of the artists from Britain went to India and got more [chuckles] recognition so that their work got into the slightly higher bracket. But I think as British South Asian artists, a lot of us were ignored, or we just did not have any spaces in which we could keep on showing our work. Then, this whole curatorial world came about where the shows had to be curated and it was the famous curators who actually put certain shows together. Before that there were times where we could actually walk into a gallery with a portfolio. Those days were gone and it did not

happen like that anymore. Somehow, we were still waiting to be discovered [laughs].

Said You mentioned public art: I think we were doing British art as British artists in Leicester, and you did it in Slough.

Bhajan Yeah. Absolutely.

Said I know Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* took place a few years earlier, in 1998, before the *Sacred Spaces* project in Leicester, which was 2001 and 2002, post-millennium. We were working within a particular setting which was public art, and we were working in the traditional British or European context where a famous artist, Henry Moore or whoever, gets commissioned and then goes to Newcastle or Glasgow. Even Dhruva Mistry was at the Royal College of Art and had a gallery that did the negotiations with Birmingham City Council. He had a massive commission of stone and bronze sculpture within Victoria Square in Birmingham. But in the community consultation we were doing work just like any other British artists, so it was British art. That is one of the key points that is actually quite contentious. Do we produce art? It reminds me of one of my paintings called *The Labelled Story*. South Asian, Black, the terminology changes every few years. But I think, Bhajan, that with community consultation and work, we were almost British in a sense.

Shaheen Dhruva Mistry and Antony Gormley are, to a certain extent, two people who have large pieces of work in the public arena outside of London.

Said Who have been exposed outside London, yeah.

Shaheen Gormley's work, *Angel of the North*, is very much part of British history and the way it is written, and the role that it plays. Mistry no longer plays a role in British history, it is hardly recalled, it is never part of discussions about seminal public artwork. Is this a form of racism? Is it a bias? Is it discrimination? Is it prejudice? Is it an oversight?

Said Yes, it just could be the same thing that we are all talking about. Bhajan mentioned the gallery system, which has a long history. It is a different conversation but not entirely different and it is related to our old discourse. The notion that the curated show of *Crossing Black Waters* took place is similarly unrepresentative within the context of exhibition histories on British soil. But I think within the context of British soil, *Crossing Black Waters* took place as an exhibition inside the gallery system. A lot of the educational work took place inside the galleries and

at schools and through outreach work. But with the public art that myself and Bhajan did, that community consultation was our history, if you like. All three of us, me, you and Bhajan, have done this for all sorts of reasons. Remember that teaching was limited as well.

Not many artists were doing PhDs or MPhils, which are quite popular now, and the system has changed in terms of research practice. However, we were all teaching – I've taught at Nottingham Trent, Bhajan was teaching in different places at colleges, Shaheen, you have been involved with Central Saint Martins and the University of Westminster. So, community experience was part of our practice which, in the 1980s, was learned in so many different ways. We were working just like our peers, white artists or any other artists in Nottingham or Birmingham. Do you know what I mean? They were in similar circumstances to us.

Bhajan When I first started, we were collaborating with musicians, theatre companies and other practitioners. Those collaborations were already happening. I then started working with concrete and ceramics and making permanent features which had participatory elements. Then, they grew, because people get to know how you work. I have worked with lots of women's groups along the way which became great spaces of strength because we were empowering each other, not just ourselves. When we talk about working in the communities, we were not just giving, we were exchanging skills.

Said Sharing.

Bhajan Those women actually went on to do bigger things in their own lives, whether it was within their own careers or whatever. The arts actually became a central, very pivotal part of their lives. Years later, I am still in touch with so many women that I have worked with in the past, including women facilitators, whether they worked for different galleries or museums, were artist educators or were officers in local authorities who worked with communities. There was an entire network in public art that was forming, and there were public art organisations like Public Art Southend.

Said The big YBA [Young British Artist] stars went for the big funding to make public art, including Tracey Emin. They had big galleries supporting them, Anish Kapoor was one of them. Actually, I was in Nottingham and there's a big mirror dish, a huge commission from all sorts of funds. They had never really worked in public art with consultations, and they probably don't even today. For our generation of artists who were working very

much with the grassroots, that funding and that practice is almost eliminated. Public art can only exist with big names now. Around the country, whether it's in Liverpool or a festival in Manchester, people like Thomas Heatherwick get massive commissions because they've got this infrastructure. It is exactly what Shaheen mentioned about certain galleries that focus on certain artists in India and Pakistan, that the commercial galleries from the West and India were pushing them. They did not emerge from a public institutional background, but from this private patronage. What is happening with public art is a very interesting history.

Shaheen In David Graeber's last essay, 'After the Pandemic We Can't Go Back to Sleep', he says that we're 'going through a brief moment of questioning' after the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁸ We have reached this particular moment in 2021 when we are in the spirit of self-reflection and self-assessment, because we have all gone through this collective relationship to the pandemic which has changed the art world, and has changed us in the art world. It might have changed the art world – which is the art market, as you are describing – back into an art world which is supposedly about caring and restructuring to rework its ideas so that it is not completely commercially led and commercially biased. Instead, it might be a place of reflection, a place where community engagement becomes more central.

Bhajan Every practice, or every life, has seasons. We made certain work at a certain time, whether it came out of a studio-based practice during the time of *Crossing Black Waters*, or the shared practice of creating public art projects. Somehow after the 2008 financial crash, funding became available. Now that has all come to an end and we have retreated and reflected. Having thirty or forty years of practice behind us, we started looking at our archives and how we can tap into what we have done in the past. My works were behind curtains and under beds for so long and suddenly I feel I need to bring them out, to look at them and reflect on them. I do not think I could recreate those works because they were products of that time, children of that time.

Creative people create from wherever they are in their life. We all create through our relationship to our environment and the people around us with our own practice. This keeps changing as time goes on. We do not always look at experiences in a linear way. Maybe we are supposed to go through certain experiences at certain points in life. I would like to see it that way, it would be very boring just to be stuck. It is wonderful to see how today will turn into tomorrow and what tomorrow will bring with it.

I think we still need those open hearts and minds to see what is out there and how we can deliver, exchange and carry on with these conversations.

Said The pandemic has had an effect on my practice and creativity. I welcome documentation that started some time ago of my work. Like you said Bhajan – documenting, archiving, and having a dialogue with a younger generation, an exchange. I am doing a residency here in Switzerland with a much younger generation on issues of race and community, so I can share my experiences. Currently, we are faced with a system that relies on individual success and ‘stars’ or celebrities. I hope another, more collective way of working and being emerges that counteracts this individuality.

Shaheen Absolutely. The curator, thinker and art critic Okwui Enwezor called this Westernism, the importation of ideas from the West implemented as they were in governance and even in architecture.¹⁹

I am going to conclude by saying thank you very much Bhajan and Said. This dialogue has been a long time coming. The key objective of this research was to examine the histories of self-assertion and to investigate an alternative narrative of British modern and contemporary art. My concern was to bring to an academic and cultural discourse a theoretical understanding of the work of a small yet important group of political Black and Asian artists. All of their work, their ambition and their approach serve to create a public awareness of what Achille Mbembe has called the radical loss.²⁰

Institutions are trying to work out how to acknowledge how racism has affected British art and shown their involvement by releasing public statements. We are meant to trust this process, which began in the pandemonium of the pandemic, just as we were meant to have trusted the process in the 1980s and in 1990s in the midst of Thatcherism and in the levelling of the trade unions. How do we quantify the changes being made, or being suggested, for future generations? Releasing a few images or making a few exhibitions or having one or two case studies or visiting a few archives and collections or idiomatically inserting certain texts on websites – is that enough? Are we in the same position we were in in the 1990s, where we had to trust the processes undertaken by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) or the London Arts Board (LAB) or the Arts Council? What happened to the various commissions and their findings?

Why was the value, pedagogic and otherwise, of political Black arts and artists discarded in the decades on either side of the millennium? Naseem Khan's *The Arts Britain Ignores* demanded long-term change that had to start in the 1980s and 1990s. We never witnessed this change. Why has it taken protests against racial injustice in the US to trigger any introspection and allyship towards Black and Asian artists in the UK? The multiple deaths of Black women and men, of refugees and migrants in the UK and the EU, the high-profile case of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 and the permanently postponed inquiry into the 2017 Grenfell Tower fire have all failed to be recorded for posterity in the incredibly selective British cultural history. Perhaps now is the opportune moment to correct this pattern of erasure – to try harder and work towards a better art world.

NOTES

¹ Al-An deSouza was formerly known as Allan deSouza.

² Salman Rushdie, 'Salman Rushdie on *Midnight's Children* at 40: "India is No Longer the Country of this Novel"', *Guardian*, 3 April 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/apr/03/salman-rushdie-on-midnights-children-at-40-india-is-no-longer-the-country-of-this-novel>, accessed 23 November 2022.

³ The Indian subcontinent has millions of households ranging from the extremely poor to the cynical working and middle classes, and then the insatiable minority whose empires stretch across state borders, businesses that are based on extraction and import. Although we call it the Indian subcontinent, many would disagree with the use of this term, but this was the land that after independence became India and East and West Pakistan and later became Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

⁴ See Subhranshu Maitra, *Education as Freedom: Tagore's Paradigm*, New Delhi 2014.

⁵ See the transcript of the meeting between Gandhi and Ambedkar at Manibhavan, Malabar Hill, Bombay on 14 August 1931, edited and reproduced in Dhananjay Keer, *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission*, Bombay 1971, pp.164–7, <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00ambedkar/timeline/graphics/gandhi1931.html>, accessed 23 November 2022.

⁶ The artists included in the exhibition were: Said Adrus, Anand Moy Banerji, Arpana Caur, Al-An deSouza, Nina Edge, Sushanta Guha, Bhajan Hunjan, Manjeet Lamba, Shaheen Merali, Quddus Mirza, Anwar Saeed, Samena Rana and Sashidharan.

⁷ Joyoti Grech on Bhajan Hunjan in *Crossing Black Waters*, exhibition catalogue, City Gallery, Leicester, Oldham Art Gallery, Oldham, Cartwright Hall Art Gallery – Bradford Museum and Galleries, Bradford, and South London Art Gallery, London 1992, p.52.

⁸ See Al-An deSouza's essay printed in the information leaflet for Bhajan Hunjan's solo exhibition, *Bhajan Hunjan: Recent Works* at Horizon Gallery, London in 1989, <https://vads.ac.uk/digital/collection/SADAA/id/4692/rec/1>, accessed 3 April 2023.

⁹ Parminder Bhachu, *Twice Migrants: East African Sikh Settlers in Britain*, London and New York 1985.

¹⁰ Said Adrus, Artist's Statement, *The Magazine*, August 1989, p.6.

¹¹ See 'Operation Blue Star and its Violent Aftermath', *Live History India*, 3 August 2022, <https://www.livehistoryindia.com/story/eras/operation-blue-star-violent-aftermath>, accessed 16 February 2023; and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1984_anti-Sikh_riots, accessed 16 February 2023.

¹² Pav Singh, 'Why I Wrote "1984: India's Guilty Secret"', *Baaz News*, 2 November 2021, <https://www.baaznews.org/p/1984-indias-guilty-secret>, accessed 3 April 2023; and Pav Singh, *1984: India's Guilty Secret*, London 2017.

¹³ Nina Edge, 'Your Name is Mud', in Maud Sulter (ed.), *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*, London 1990, p.159.

¹⁴ See *Said Adrus's Lost Pavilion 2006*, booklet, 2006, https://www.emel.com/attach/Pavillion_Said_Adrus_book_copy.pdf, accessed 24 November 2022.

¹⁵ Naseem Khan, *The Arts Britain Ignores: The Arts of Ethnic Minorities in Britain*, London 1976.

¹⁶ See Anandi Ramamurthy, 'Resisting Racism: The Bradford 12 Defence Campaign', *Our Migration Story* website, undated, <https://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/resisting-racism-the-bradford-12-defence-campaign>; and Zeenat Moosa, 'Southall Black Sisters: 30 Years of History Making', *Asian Today*, 4 September 2009, <https://www.theasiantoday.com/index.php/2009/09/04/southall-black-sisters-30-years-of-history-making>, both accessed 24 November 2022.

¹⁷ *The Other Story* was an exhibition of Asian, African and Caribbean artists working in post-war Britain that was held at the Hayward Gallery in London in 1989–90. See "'The Other Story", 1989', research microsite, *Afterall*, 2018, <https://www.afterall.org/exhibition/the-other-story>, accessed 24 November 2022.

¹⁸ David Graeber, 'After the Pandemic, We Can't Go Back to Sleep', *Jacobin*, 4 April 2021, <https://jacobin.com/2021/03/david-graeber-posthumous-essay-pandemic>, accessed 22 January 2023.

¹⁹ Okwui Enwezor, 'The Black Box', *On Curating*, no.46, June 2020, pp.428–34, <https://www.on-curating.org/issue-46-reader/the-black-box.html#.Y395KHbPO2x>, accessed 24 November 2023.

²⁰ Radical loss is characterised by the ways in which colonialism, imperialism and power relations between Britain and its former colonies have affected institutions, and how our understanding of history has in turn been shaped by how these institutions decide on programming or how they settle history. Achille Mbembe, 'The Society of Enmity', *Radical Philosophy*, no.200, November–December 2016, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/the-society-of-enmity->, accessed 20 January 2023.

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