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Far Pavilions

Why India must participate in the Venice Biennale

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01 June 2015



Shilpa Gupta replicated the length of the India-Bangladesh border in cloth for the collateral show *My East is Your* COURTESY MARK BLOWER

IN 2013, at the 55th edition of the Venice Biennale, the artist Dayanita Singh stood between the German and French national pavilions, flanked by the two countries' culture ministers, with a sinking feeling. Regarding the sea of people before her as she received plaudits for her work, Singh noted that "through the blur of hats and jackets, the few Indian faces I could see were friends I'd invited myself"—the artist Subodh Gupta, the writer Aweek Sen and the art historian Kajri Jain. "There were no Indian

officials,” Singh told me in a recent interview. “It showed where we place our contemporary art.”

Singh, one of India’s leading photographic artists, doesn’t endorse a nationalist agenda. In fact, like many others in the art world today, she believes the idea of national pavilions at Venice—the world’s oldest and largest biennale, and one of the most prestigious events in the contemporary art world—is outdated. Nevertheless, the lack of an India pavilion at what is pegged as the “Olympics of the art world” made her feel “a little bit ashamed.”

When the current, 56th edition of the Biennale opened on 9 May, India was missing once again. In 2013, that absence was perhaps more pronounced because, in 2011, the Indian ministry of culture had managed to put together a national pavilion for the first time in the Biennale’s now 120-year-old history. The poet and art critic Ranjit Hoskote, who curated it, eschewed marquee names for radical choices, such as the Guwahati-based duo the Desire Machine Collective. But when the time came to follow up on this grand debut two years later, the pavilion did not materialise.

Some of the reasons floated for this in art circles were a change in the administration of India’s cultural bodies, and a lack of time to prepare. In 2013, Bharti Kher was among the artists who expressed exasperation at the state of India’s basic arts infrastructure. In an impassioned email circulated amongst friends in the art fraternity, she wrote, “As I sit these mornings and look at my mailbox something about where I’m from bothers me as the news from the Venice Biennale filters in: pavilions from Angola (population 19.6 million, civil wars 1975 to 2002), Azerbaijan (9.173 million), Bangladesh, Tuvalu (population 9,847)...yes smaller than Lajpat Nagar! Iraq, Kuwait, Maldives, Montenegro...special participations from Palestine, Tibet... We didn’t bother to make it happen. Again.”

Why the outrage? While several international biennales have sprung up around the world in the last two decades—Sharjah, Berlin, Gwangju, and India’s Kochi-Muziris Biennale are only a few examples—the Venice Biennale, which dates back to 1895, remains the most important of them all. Commercial art fairs, whose numbers have also increased manyfold, are good for business, but it is really the biennales that allow artists, curators, museum directors, art journalists, critics and others to chart

the latest routes in contemporary art. At Venice, there are coveted prizes, too—for Best National Participation, Best Artist and Promising Young Artist—but by being invited to exhibit there, you've already won the art world's equivalent of the Pulitzer.

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In the Venice Biennale's ongoing edition, which closes on 22 November, Indian artists have a substantial presence, despite the official absence. Notably, the Raqs Media Collective, KM Madhusudhanan, and the duo of Rupali Gupte and Prasad Shetty, are all featured in the prestigious Central Pavilion, curated by the director of this edition of the biennale, Okwui Enwezor. The theme of the central pavilion is *All the World's Futures*, and Enwezor's choice of artists points to shifting paradigms in contemporary art: Raqs works at the intersection of media and art, Madhusudhanan is a filmmaker, and Gupte and Shetty are architects.

With the Indian government's non-participation, private patrons have stepped in to fill the gap. The Delhi-based art collector Feroze Gujral conceived and sponsored the exhibit *My East is Your West*, with the Indian artist Shilpa Gupta and the Pakistani artist Rashid Rana. The exhibit, an official collateral event of the biennale, explores the essence of divided people; Gupta takes forward her ongoing inquiry into the borderlands of Bengal, while Rana addresses ideas of dislocation. Another collateral event is *Frontiers Reimagined*, put together by the New York and Hong Kong-based dealer Sundaram Tagore. This exhibition, which features artists from 25 countries, includes Delhi-based Olivia Fraser.

With curators increasingly opting for transnational approaches, several South Asian artists have work in national pavilions not their own this year, as Singh did in 2013. That year, the German pavilion's curator, Susanne Gaensheimer, decided to forsake quotidian formalities like passports or citizenship and freely select artists with strong ties to Germany (Singh's photo books are produced by the legendary German publisher Gerhard Steidl). "What does identity mean today to those who do not belong, who are not members of any family or nation?" Gaensheimer asked in her foreword to the German show's catalogue. France and Germany even contributed space in each other's pavilions in 2013 to reflect, as stated in a press release, "an art world in which the dialogue between cultural spheres has much greater influence

than the impermeability of national borders.” This year, in an exhibition titled *The Great Game*, the Iran pavilion features artists from the subcontinent—including Bani Abidi, TV Santhosh and Riyaz Komu—as well as artists from Afghanistan, Iraq, the Central Asian republics, the Kurdish region and Iran, in an attempt to address the flows of power and influence across these parts of Asia.

As Natasha Ginwala, a curatorial advisor and public programmes curator for *My East is Your West*, pointed out to me in an email, the Venice Biennale has a long history of subverting the nation-based format; an example from 2013 was the expertly curated Lithuania-Cyprus Pavilion. Hoskote’s 2011 Indian pavilion, titled *Everyone Agrees: It’s About to Explode*, referred to diasporic modes of art-making in a South Asian context. Besides the Desire Machine Collective, it also featured work from the Aligarh-born and New York-based Zarina Hashmi, and the Kolkata-born and Amsterdam-based Praneet Soi.

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In this context of such inquiries, the idea of a national pavilion may seem tired. But in fact, with an increasing presence of transnational artists and curators (for instance, Enwezor, the biennale’s first African curator, is of Nigerian origin and based in Munich and New York) and a flood of collateral events, an India pavilion would have been all the more relevant. An Indian artist may be highlighted in the German pavilion, or a Pakistani and an Indian artist may collaborate on a joint collateral exhibit, but these cannot stand in for support by the state. This is not about endorsing patriotic fervour. An India pavilion needn’t even have Indian artists: I propose one with artists from Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and Pakistan, exploring their view of India—or anything else. But wherever the artists are from, the question of what India wants to say to the world today, in art historical terms, must be answered by a considered curatorial statement.

To appreciate the critical impact a national pavilion could have, consider the biennale’s structure. The event takes place primarily at two official sites in Venice: the Giardini di Castello, which houses the Central Pavilion and the national pavilions; and the Arsenale. In recent years, a whole lot of collateral events have flooded the city. Some of these, such as *My East is Your West*, are “official”—a fee of close to

≈25,000 and approval from the biennale's curator grants you inclusion in the event's official literature. Some national pavilions are supported by private organisations or individuals: the billionaire Victor Pinchuk, for instance, is supporting the Ukrainian pavilion this year, as he did in 2007 and 2009; the United Arab Emirates pavilion is backed by an Abu Dhabi foundation.

“Several countries such as Taiwan, Central Asian Pavilion and the Catalan Pavilion are actually ‘collateral events,’” Ginwala wrote, but “once you are here the audience treats you the same as a country pavilion.” She clarified that *My East is Your West* was never intended to fill in for an Indian pavilion, although “Gujral had spoken informally with government officials so they were in the know.”

Technically, the Indian government, specifically the Lalit Kala Akademi, can provide a letter of support to a collateral exhibition to make it an official national pavilion. In 2005, Peter Nagy, the founder of the Delhi's Nature Morte gallery, asked the Indian government to authorise as a national pavilion an independently organised show titled *iCon: India Contemporary*. The exhibition grew out of an artists' residency at California's Montalvo Arts Center, and featured pieces by Ranbir Kaleka, Nalini Malani and the Raqs Media Collective. “That was the foundation for our project in Venice,” Nagy told me recently. “We found a space to use and it was larger than we had anticipated, so we added three more artists. The project was entirely funded by us.” Nature Morte and its partner, New York's Bose Pacia gallery, “tried to get a letter from some branch of the Indian government” but to no avail. They ended up paying to hold the show as an official collateral event.

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Based on the success of *iCon*, a private foundation in Venice invited the organisers to host an India pavilion in its gallery space in 2007. “Again, we tried to get support and approval from the Indian government but were unsuccessful,” Nagy said. The desire to leapfrog the “collateral” branding, he said, stems from the fact that while there are several standout collateral events, the Venice Biennale is becoming more like an art fair, with lots of private initiatives piggy-backing on the main event. “It is too much going on at the same time. A lot of the other things going on dilute the main exhibitions.”

For a country to endorse a private exhibition can be a tricky matter, as personal and commercial agendas can then be confused with public ones. But if the government's arts bodies are not up to the task of support and sponsorship, perhaps the Indian state ought to institute an independent arts council to evaluate the merits of participation in international arts events. We certainly have capable minds to tap—Hoskote, for one, was selected to be on the five-member jury at this edition of the biennale.

If India aspires to truly participate in international cultural dialogue, a pavilion at Venice could be a powerful tool of cultural diplomacy. There may be no other platform that gives contemporary culture the same level of importance as economics, sports and politics. A country that has an artistic history dating back centuries, that produces contemporary artists celebrated around the world, and that has an art market worth upwards of ₹1,200 crore, is conspicuous by its official absence from an event of this prominence.

The Venice Biennale matters. In 2013, even the Vatican put up its own pavilion, featuring multimedia works inspired by the Book of Genesis. Even god, it seems, wants to be there.

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