

SAHMAT, 1989–2004

Liberal Art Practice against the Liberalized Public Sphere

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ABSTRACT:

The article looks at the career trajectory of an anti-sectarian, nationwide, artists' platform in India, the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (Sahmat), since its inception in 1989. Sahmat's foundation parallels significant changes in India polity: the neo-liberalization of state economic and cultural policy, the rise of the Hindu right, the emergence of a new consumerist class, and significant political fragmentation. The article traces different schisms in Sahmat's history, both internal and external, superimposed onto these larger, structural changes within society. In doing so, it examines the particular convergence of aesthetic and political strategies employed by this unique organization.

Key Words ◇ art ◇ contemporary ◇ India ◇ politics ◇ Sahmat

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves and their material surroundings, in the creation of something which does not yet exist, precisely in such epochs of revolutionary crisis they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them; they borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to state the new world-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language. (Marx, 1992: 146)

On 1 January 1989, Safdar Hashmi, a well-known street-theatre artist and political activist of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)—henceforth CPI(M) or Communist(s)—was brutally beaten up while performing a street play in the poor district of Sahibabad in Delhi, India. Hashmi succumbed to his injuries later in the day. He was 34. The assailants were members of the then ruling party in India, the Indian National Congress (henceforth Congress or INC).

Inter-party, political violence is a common enough feature in Indian life, one that even acquires colourful dimensions during the usual toll of election-time fatalities. Yet Hashmi's vocation as an *artist*—a member of the

cultural front of the Communist party rather than regular political cadre—triggered a nationwide mobilization whose force was unprecedented in post-independence years. Thousands of people, including a significant component of artists, joined phalanxes of disciplined Communist cadres as they wended their way through the streets of Delhi, giving Hashmi what amounted to a state funeral (Figure 1). On 3 January, Hashmi's widow, Moloysree Hashmi, went back to Sahibabad to perform Hashmi's unfinished play *Halla Bol*, to an audience numbering in the thousands. There was significant news coverage—this in the period of the last gasps of state monopoly over broadcast media in India—and some days later, on 11 January, at a major, televised, International Festival in Delhi, the well-known leftist film actress Shabana Azmi temporarily stopped proceedings on stage to protest the murder.

What follows here is an examination of a series of initiatives spawned in the period 1989–2004 by an organization formed as a result of the extraordinary energy unleashed amongst artists and cultural thinkers in the wake of Hashmi's death. Within weeks, key players, involving Hashmi's comrades, friends, family, and acquaintances, came together to form the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, known by its acronym Sahmat, meaning 'solidarity' in Hindi and Urdu. Over the next decade and a half, Sahmat would become a crucial platform through which the national intelligentsia in India would engage both with state power and with the commandeering attacks on the Indian state by the Hindu religious right—an ironic mantle thrust upon it by historical circumstances whose dimensions will be looked at below in



Figure 1: Poster commemorating Safdar Hashmi.
Designer: Parthiv Shah, Sahmat, 1989

greater detail. The history of Sahmat also presents an exceptional instance where the *artist*—conventionally sanctioned by civil society as an inscrutable but politically innocuous entity—was, not unproblematically, framed as some kind of critical test case for more general questions of liberal freedom and the liberal state.

The examination of Sahmat's history—and this is recent history, a 'history of the present'—impinges on two disciplinary or semi-disciplinary arenas: the study of social movements, old and new, as conceived within the field of sociology, and the breakaway subdiscipline from art history, visual studies. To the extent that both of these semi- or sub-disciplines tend towards an understanding of the 'popular', I would argue that the case of Sahmat reveals the hiatuses in both disciplinary divisions of labour. Sahmat was and is not a social movement; but it certainly confronted one of the most important social movements—the rise of the Hindu right—in Indian post-independence history. Nor can it be categorized by that other catch-all expression of contemporary organizational theory: the non-governmental organization (NGO). Sahmat's demeanour was explicitly posed against the *anti-political* thrust of these 'non-government' paid-up organizations embraced by global financial and neo-developmental agencies as 'the new civil society'.

Sahmat can be described best as a *para-statal platform*, impinging on the cultural politics of the state. Conventionally, it has been NGOs which have been described as para-statal, given their definitional imperative to function alongside the state; the key rhetoric there has been that NGOs bridge (or alternatively, *create*, by displacing funding) the gaps within the state's delivery mechanisms. By contrast, Sahmat's actions were almost always *parasitical* to the state; rather than address itself to the delivery of social goods, its target resolutely remained the cultural ideology of the state, attacking and importuning it at different times to take better cognizance of its responsibilities towards its citizens. Unlike the global NGO network which often functions as an unwitting carrier of Northern aid-based propaganda, Sahmat came to see the state both as its primary target of criticism *and its felicitous patron*: significant amounts of funds for Sahmat's campaigns came from federal or state grants set up precisely to encourage civil society activism. At the same time, Sahmat did not directly append itself to any party, parliamentary, or official institutions through which political interests are conventionally broached in a purportedly democratic polity such as India's; at different times, it actively went against some of the dictates of one or another of these bodies. The contradiction here, if so perceived, is only apparent. The state is, after all, composed of the 'people' itself even as it assumes power over them; Sahmat could perfectly well assume the role as proxy element of the former (a *political* role, one repudiated by the NGO formulation) while robustly critiquing the negative elements of the latter. Conversely, sociocultural dynamics cannot be defined

as 'autonomous' from the state to the extent that the state's embrace over 'informal' societal interactions through different mechanisms—censorship, controls over artistic expression, education, tolerance of religious practices—can also be described as 'culture'. To this extent, Sahmat was *of* the state, although not *within* it; this double character would continue to define the schisms that Sahmat would confront throughout its first 15 years.

In this context, my thesis is that Sahmat's cultural politics was both the product of and an awkward attempt to manipulate the crucial paradox of politics in a transformed media environment: the secession of 'civil society' from the 'public sphere'. The genealogy of both these terms is interlinked and complex, and requires some detailed explication here in order to take the thesis to its nub. Although Marx would take exception to this, it is important to point out here that the social agreements essential to theories of civil society were explicitly conceived in the *extra-economic* sphere. In 'functional' terms, they can be considered responses to the tremendous class antagonisms set loose within the establishment of industrial capitalism in Europe. If Marx reduced civil society to a mere ideological ploy of the ruling class, it is Gramsci's vision of public opinion and culture operating as a coextensive sphere next to the economy and the state that is most palpable in Habermas's (1991) analytical reworking of civil society in his conception of the public sphere. In Gramsci's wake, Habermas appeared to set right an onerous *theoretical* problem—of the social and historical *causes* of civil society—by his *historicist* recourse to the public sphere as one coterminous with the rise of the bourgeoisie, thus purportedly subsuming the Marxist thematic of class politics.

The theoretical problems hewn in a far distant Germany will not be irrelevant in our case study here. After all, there is much in the history of Sahmat that loosely approximates the Habermasian schema of historical succession: a citizens' organization in India whose membership, as we shall see, shows a comparable progression from artistic activity at its inception to the direct political lobbying evinced in more recent years. Certainly, the resemblance of its antagonists, the Hindu right, to certain facets of European fascism has been noted by many. At least one other coincidence here cannot be taken as completely serendipitous: the translation of Habermas's book into English and the establishment of Sahmat in the very year of the demise of the Soviet Union. The former, as we know, was celebrated both as prescient roadmap and retrospective manifesto against the totalitarian state, as well as a catechism for a new form of politics; the latter, triggered as it was by the death of a *Communist* party member, can be seen as an index of the signal restratification triggered within left and liberal ranks and their transformed relationships to globalization and the state.

The theoretical proposition here will therefore point to a critical paradox within the construct of the public sphere. Habermas pegged the historical

emergence of the public sphere on the rise of autonomous media, the dominant vehicle of aesthetic–political ‘opinion’. The emphasis on ‘media’ and the programmatic force of *The Structural Transformation* is somewhat of a piece with the prophetic pronouncements about media made by Marshall McLuhan’s *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in the same year of publication, 1962. Nonetheless, McLuhan’s understanding of electronic media and the *passive* manner of their reception appeared to underscore in a programmatic manner something of a contrary thesis, one that Lyotard would later argue analytically (1988, 1994): the very impossibility of locating the causes of cultural politics in such *coequal* constructs of media-based social receptivity.

Key elements of the technological changes envisioned by McLuhan only appeared in India in the 1990s, with the relaxation of the government monopoly over television after five-star hotels in Bombay started to surreptitiously relay CNN’s coverage of the Gulf War in 1991. Underground cable operators grew rapidly in number, bringing in content from television networks abroad, most importantly Rupert Murdoch’s Star network, suddenly making visible India’s ‘potential’ as a ‘consumer market’. Coupled with a near-default of international loan obligations and subsequent bailout by the IMF—also in 1991—and the imposition of a new regime of ‘structural adjustment’, television’s potential as a consumer-training tool was patent to the government itself, resulting in increased degrees of official recognition and acceptance.

Whether this liberalization of media can be construed as an armature of the ‘public sphere’ is open to question; recognition by government was also the lever for the monitoring of content, a factor used to great effect by the BJP after its rise to power. Historically speaking, the Indian media environment has comprised a fine management of class-specific address and censorship protocols. The role of newspapers in fomenting the nationalist struggle and their apparent liberality in the aftermath of independence belie their minimal penetration of the Indian audience given the low rate of literacy. And in the aftermath of the 1991 readjustment, while television, a more expensive medium, was allowed to be privatized, radio was not. This distinction is important, since radio is the primary media tool within reach of most of India’s illiterate poor. Both community and ham radio remain prohibited to this day, while the broadcast of FM radio by a private media conglomerate—Bennett Coleman—has been celebrated as a sign of the state’s progressivism. In late June 2005, the Indian government announced that it would allow 90 cities in the country to have private FM channels, although *none* of them will be permitted to carry news programs. (To bring the point home, I could note that the level of popular penetration that the Hindu right achieved in its early phase was significantly due to its usage of the audio-cassette, reproducible inside the home rather than reliant on public media or printing establishments.)

1991 can thus be marked as a year in India of a very sudden, and simultaneous, shift of its majoritarian ethos: from a populist welfarism and nominally secular mindset to a neo-liberal actuality and explicitly right-wing polity. Given *this* 'structural' transformation—in the skewed sense propounded by the IMF rather than by Habermas—in the economic, political, and media arenas, it is uncanny that the earliest broad organizational response to this development came from a body that espoused *artistic* activity at its vanguard. As we shall see, Sahmat's operation as a forum for artists can also be framed as a case study of the crisis of *an entire national dispensation* of artistic and intellectual practice, fighting a rearguard action within a significantly transformed media and news environment. To this extent, this politics was also necessarily a *visual politics* that represents an indirect encounter with the effects of neo-liberal globalization. On Sahmat's part, its seminal work relied heavily on a new personal technological tool then wending its way into shops in every Indian bazaar: desktop publishing or DTP. And notwithstanding the varying responses, each of its campaigns was designed as a media event, with a dedicated press office and press conferences as a key mechanism of the programme.

And yet, the paradox Sahmat consistently grappled with at the close of the 20th century, quite simply, was the one that I have already referred to: *the larger the public sphere* (the arena created by disseminative media) *the smaller the scope for civil society* (the rational compacts amongst citizens in the classic sense). Thus Sahmat, seeking to renegotiate the terms of a generalized agreement amongst citizens, received its greatest definitional clarity when incidentally targeted by larger political controversies. And if the intent had been to carve out an autonomous arena of cultural politics for the 'people' outside of the dirigiste state, in the absence of major significant patrons for the large-scale projects that it undertook, Sahmat found itself—continually and sometimes humiliatingly—reliant on the funding apparatus of that very state, something which created not a few crises in its history. Starting out as an organization aimed at transforming the entirety of public consciousness in humble ways, it soon found itself propelled onto the national stage by the ebbs and flows of a single agenda—anti-communalism—both strengthened and imprisoned by it. Conceived in the dystopian euphoria of a prevailing anti-statist mood, it soon found itself reattached to the long tentacles of the state as the social contract itself accrued burgeoning pages of fine print. In proceeding along the lines of whichever definitions had brought it into being, it found itself undoing the definitions themselves. It is this manner of doing by undoing that will offer us the principal optic of viewing Sahmat's history in its first 15 years.

Beginnings

The exceptional conditions of Hashmi's death and the massive response to it have often been described by many of its members as 'spontaneous'. However, one could argue that the responses marked a sense of unease not only with a slow move toward neo-liberal economic policies and supply-side economics exhibited by the ruling dispensation from the mid-1980s onward by the Rajiv Gandhi government, but more specifically, the possibly transformed relationships of cultural patronage—cultural production in India until this point relied significantly for sustenance on the nominally progressive agendas espoused in the state-funded academies. Sahmat's emergence in 1989 resulted in, numerically speaking, extraordinary participation by the entire breadth of India's artists, from academy-style painter to classical singer, from alternative filmmaker to community theatre enthusiast, from Communist Party griot to small-town photo-journalist. Sahmat's interventions quickly laid out a new mode of artistic operation in the Indian context, bringing on board waves of voluntary conscripts from the art world, the intelligentsia, and 'cultural workers' who embraced Sahmat as a national platform for anti-state and progressive dissent. By the time of its 'Anhad Garje' (Unhindered Reverberation) campaign of 1993—its quickfire response to the Babri Masjid demolition, when all other elements of civil society and the state seemed paralysed—Sahmat was routinely pulling off tremendous logistical feats on a national scale, straddling events in several different cities (up to 30 at a time) with input and involvement from hundreds, even thousands, of artists. From certain standpoints, this made Sahmat into the *largest ever voluntary collective of artists coming together to share a single political platform*. At a certain point, there was hardly any 'name'-artist in the Indian spectrum—from Salman Rushdie then in hiding to filmmaker Shyam Benegal; from classical musicians Pandit Jasraj and Ustad Amjad Ali Khan to visual artists such as Vivan Sundaram and Gulammohammed Sheikh—who had not somehow aligned themselves with one Sahmat project or the other.

In the first two years of its functioning, Sahmat found itself running on all cylinders, impelled by the energy and excitement of its members in fashioning this novel platform. On 12 April 1989, Hashmi's birthday was christened National Street Theatre Day. By Sahmat's estimation, 30,000 street plays were performed on that day all over the country. Inactive groups were reactivated, new scripts were written by the hundreds. In the prelude to this event, Sahmat was registered as a 'Trust', a peculiar state-sanctioned communitarian organizational form warmed over from its colonial inception. Sahmat's objectives, as stated at this time, were ecumenical and non-controversial, seeking to contest the official restrictions on artistic freedoms and portraying them as a barometer of the general restraints on free expression in the public sphere. The founding document saw Sahmat

adopting the magniloquent rhetoric of pre-1990s cultural populism:¹ it saw itself as fostering cultural activity to inculcate democratic habits amongst rural and working class 'people'. Article V of the 'Objects of the Trust' is exemplary here:

To perform dramas and hold other cultural shows to educate the masses and in particular those living in the rural and working class areas, to help them free themselves from the shackles (sic) of orthodoxy, narrow mindedness, communalism, exploitation and become free and progressive citizens of India, and to improve their living standards.²

This 'narodnik' outlook suffuses most of Sahmat's early ventures. *Chauraha* was another festival of street theatre in Delhi in September 1989, while *Janotsav* was a workshop involving around a hundred artists interacting with the children and workers of a slum colony in Delhi, Mangolpuri, for over a month. The 12 April street-theatre events quickly became the forum to demand the repeal of the outdated colonial heirloom, the Dramatic Performances Act (19) of 1876, which practically gave the state strong censorial powers over theatrical expressions of dissent. As elsewhere, many amongst the progressive factions that comprised organizations such as Sahmat would have opportunity to re-examine this *perestroika*-type naivety of unequivocal opposition to the restraining powers of the state, especially after the Hindu right would reveal quite other potentials of populist politics and its relationship to the state. On its part, Sahmat would find the early earnestness of its catholic rhetoric, born in an unsure time, overwhelmed by what Hegel would have called 'the pressure of great events'.

In May 1989, for the second time in its history, the Indian National Congress's monopoly over power at the centre crumbled. Vishwanath Pratap Singh, a charismatic dissident from Rajiv Gandhi's Congress cabinet, was sworn in as the new Prime Minister at the head of an anti-Congress, minority coalition—United Front—government comprising both the Communist left and the Hindu right-wing Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the political face of the shadowy organization, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) whose members were responsible for the assassination of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. The government was to last two years; this minority government would be followed by five other minority governments,³ a period ending only with the final triumph of the BJP with its National Democratic Alliance coalition winning a majority in 1998.

One could argue that this uneasy alliance between right and left in 1989 was possible only on the ground prepared by the long and enduring tradition of populism in Indian politics, paradoxically produced by Congressism itself. (For his part, the Congress leader Rajiv Gandhi had done much to co-opt the Hindutva agenda, including starting his election campaign from Ayodhya and vowing to re-establish 'Ram Rajya' [Reign of Ram], a phrase poised to create resonance both with M.K. Gandhi, who used it often, and the Hindutva factions.) The histrionic V.P. Singh thus offered an

umbrella-figure for an already fragmented conception of the ‘people’: between Communists retaining their strongholds in east and south, the ‘cow-belt’ of North India in the hands of the strong Scheduled Caste (SC)⁴ make-up of Singh’s own Janata Dal, and the upper-caste Hindu constituency of the BJP. This political formation (minus the BJP) would also be Sahmat’s principal political patron at its inception.

On 25 September 1990, BJP generalissimo Lal Krishna Advani began the first of his *Rath Yatras* to the town of Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh, a march that was stopped only by his arrest in the state of Bihar by then BJP-coalition partner Laloo Prasad Yadav, and police firing on Hindutva activists in Uttar Pradesh under orders from yet another coalition partner, Mulayam Singh Yadav. Mechanical state censorship regarding the details of the shooting in Ayodhya gave Hindutva factions significant licence to inflate the number of casualties and narrate lurid tales of police outrages through underground media. This was epitomized in the famous ‘Jain video’ circulated across the breadth of India, made quietly available at every corner video rental store in northern India.⁵ In the discussion on the selective liberalization of media in India, I have hinted at the relationship of popular insurgent formations in different postcolonial countries to particular forms of media: say, of Khomeini to the audio-cassette, and of Hindutva or the ‘Mandal’-faction to both the audio- and the video-cassette.⁶ The 1980s in India can be described as the decade of its ‘cassette revolution’. Small, semi-legal production outfits turning out cheap audio-cassettes quickly outpaced the reach of the recording monopoly of HMV in India. With a new clientele hungry for content, pirated Hindi film and western pop music intermingled with a massive new market in different forms of devotional music and recordings of religious exegesis. At the same time, the televised broadcast of the Hindu epic *Ramayana* in serialized form was critically important in foregrounding Ram in the contemporary imaginary of most Indians. This was a key factor in Advani’s choice of Ram as the centrepiece of his campaign. Both the Jain video and provocative audio-tapes by orators such as the ‘Sadhvi’ Rithambhara and Uma Bharati reflect therefore radically new innovations in a recently proliferated medium. Riding on the back of the significant spread of this new media and oriented towards an audience not yet inured to its persuasive power, the cassettes were tremendously influential in instigating sectarian unrest and swelling the ranks of the various Hindutva outfits.

In response, Sahmat found itself for the first time addressing the issue of communalism under the banner of ‘Artists against Communalism’. In retrospect, this would prove to be a landmark development, with much strategic and political fallout. First of all, I would argue, this signalled a shift from the *ideology-critique* of Sahmat’s early years—epitomized in the anti-proscenium manifesto of street theatre and the workshops in Mangolpuri—to a more liberally defined *cultural politics*; in other words, from a suspicion of mainstream culture and media to an attempt to address the mainstream.

The inclusion of artists defined by their popular appeal rather than by their politics on a podium that conveyed more ecumenical tolerance than expressions of anti-ruling-class theatrical forms would effectively develop into a slow process of the forging of new ideological alliances and the sloughing off of some older ones.

This new attitude became even more palpable in Sahmat's 'Images and Words' campaign kicked off on 12 April, when the significantly leftist and community-directed sphere of street theatre was given short shrift in favour of a curatorial strategy addressing the broad, urban realm and involving primarily *visual and recording* artists. Audio-cassettes of syncretic forms of devotional music, belonging to the Sufi-Bhakti tradition, were produced and disseminated. Artists and intellectuals around the country were given a standardized format, a small square sheet of paper, on which they could communicate their expressions against the new political disposition against religious tolerance (Figure 2). The squares were then mounted on canvas sheets, 3 × 3, which were themselves hoisted on bamboo poles and carried in marches across cities. The campaign travelled to 30 cities. In each city, local interventions were solicited, empty canvases were unfurled on sidewalks at key urban nodes for those interested to create graffiti, collective pieces, or signature works. Both the expanded scale and reorientation towards an urban public sphere ironically also signalled a withdrawal from the model of direct interaction with the Delhi poor. As some critics would point out later, 1991 was also the year that Sahmat did not go back to either Sahibabad or Mangolpuri, the two venues where it had held its symbolic street theatre or 'artistic workshops' (Deshpande, 1996). At the same time, as we shall see, the network of connections that Sahmat set up at this point made it uniquely capable of responding as a *national platform* to the challenges to come.

In January 1992, Sahmat mobilized auto-rickshaw drivers in Delhi to paint secular slogans on their vehicles, a canny subversion of the traditional inscription of religious aphorisms on vehicles. This process was later repeated on taxi-cabs in communally fraught Mumbai. From 30 January 1994, Sahmat organized 'Punchline', an exhibition of cartoons by 30 cartoonists satirizing the rise of the Hindu right, which travelled to 25 cities in India. When members of the Hindu right tore down the exhibition in the city of Pune, Sahmat, working in any case with reproductions, replaced the show within 24 hours.

The assault on Sahmat accompanied a plethora of others on 'artistic expression' by the religious right; as such this established the principal context of Sahmat's operations. Attacks on Sahmat reflected myriad small acts of censorship on other artists and media, with mobs enforcing a new dictatorship of the petty bourgeoisie. State institutions and electoral bodies, the latter unsure of their electoral base in a period where Hindutva was the loudest political clarion, tacitly concurred or actively colluded with this diffuse reign of niggling coercion, vandalism, character assassination, and



Figure 2: Panel from Images and Words August 1991–March 1992

threats of violence and bodily injury. Galleries, film theatres, libraries, and academic conferences were either attacked by small gangs or censored from above.

'Hum Sab Ayodhya': Art in the Middle

The demolition of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 was the foundational gesture of this new form of politics. In critical ways, the demolition turned

the long identification of 'progressive' agendas with nationalism and the popular upside down in more ways than one. This is patent in the tremendously antagonistic responses that Sahmat incited from its campaigns in the aftermath of the demolition, particularly with its 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' (We are All Ayodhya) and 'Muktnaad' (Liberated Sound). These encounters marked for Sahmat a painful process of weaning of artistic/vanguardist practice from the cradle of the popular that had nourished it from the heyday of the nationalist movement. In the long run this would mean the slow but sure withering away of the artistic agenda itself from Sahmat's operations; as such, this withdrawal would also signal an equally sure atrophy of the popular ideal as a basis for cultural politics.

In its older terms of reference, the Babri Masjid conflict can be seen as a direct outcome of the schizoid legacies of territorial decolonization and state-formation in the aftermath of the Second World War; it is thus of a piece with the symbolic import carried by different archaeological edifices in Palestine or the Balkans. Closer to our time, it shares its ethos with the fate of symbolic structures in the eye of the geopolitically restratifying identitarian conflicts that are wedging open that very territorial arrangement of nation states arrived at in mid-20th century: the Al-Aqsa mosque, the Bamiyan Buddhas, the Mostar bridge, the World Trade Center in New York City.

At its very outset, the Babri Masjid dispute was both local and (inter)national. It has been observed that the linguistic politics of UP—between the congenital twins of Hindi and Urdu as representative languages of Hindu and Muslim, respectively—became critical in the formation of the nationalist imagination of India and Pakistan (see Ahmad, 2002; Rai, 2001). I have written elsewhere of the archaeological irony wrought in this territorial *decoupage*: the source of the Indian conception of national origin—the Indus Valley civilization—lies mostly in Pakistan, while most of the edifices and capital cities of the great Islamic empires of South Asia remain in India (Dutta, 2002). The forced placement of Hindu idols by a mob of 50 to 60 persons inside the Ayodhya mosque on the night of 22 December 1949, a clandestine *fait accompli* by which a medieval mosque became hostage to judicial arrest by a liberal, postcolonial polity, represents but one critical event in that long schism of territorial imagination.⁷ If the 1949 installation had occurred with tacit support by then Congress and pro-Hindu chief minister Govind Ballabh Pant, the Rajiv Gandhi government's decision to permit a *Shilanyas* (foundation-stone-laying) ceremony in Ayodhya, as a symbolic prelude to the eventual replacement of the mosque by temple, represents another incident of the maintenance of status quo effectively serving a majoritarian agenda. L.K. Advani's second *Rath Yatra* of 1–6 December 1992 did turn things upside down, at least in a slow, casuistic frame of reference. I will come shortly to my claim that Sahmat's response—one indicative, in my

view, of the *entire liberal response*—to the Babri Masjid demolition can be construed as also bearing a problematic relationship to that older disposition of the status quo.

As the mosque domes fell, Hindutva cadres went on rampage throughout the country. With the country's dominant Hindu middle class responding smugly to the news, and the state machinery either in collusion or paralysis, the entire left-liberal establishment went into shock. With a significant network already operational through the country, Sahmat was the only organization to respond nationally. Within 48 hours of the demolition, it had composed, designed, printed, and distributed 200,000 posters across the country, making it one of the few sources of instantaneous agit-prop. Within a month and a half, a juggernaut had been put on the road. In the thick of curfew and with cities still smouldering from the pogroms of January 1993, 'Anhad Garje' (Unhindered Reverberations) was a caravan comprising, again in the hundreds, the country's foremost classical musicians, dancers, folk musicians, filmmakers, visual artists, and academic scholars. Events comprised a mix of film screenings, public lectures, and open consultations on political strategy. A series of posters were printed under the banner 'In Defence of our Secular Tradition', incorporating paintings from India's premier artists, and disseminated in the thousands as a form of superior propaganda (Figure 3). 'Anhad Garje' focused on India's Sufi-Bhakti traditions of song and poetry, attributed as the syncretic fount of the subcontinent's classical and folk traditions. Graphic and architectural designers moved with the show, designing venues, producing banners and artwork to transform the environment of each venue where events were staged. In two months, the show threaded its way through the riot-hit belts of Mumbai and Gujarat—Surat, Valod, Vadodara, and Ahmedabad—in addition to Surat and Lucknow.

Matters came to a head later in the year, when Sahmat launched its paired programs 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' (We are All Ayodhya) and 'Muktnaad' (Liberated Sound) in August 1993. 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' was an exhibition conceived as a public enunciation of the complexities of historical contingency and arguments. Comprising a plethora of historical, political, social, and anthropological details testifying to the complexity of society in the Ayodhya region, the objective was to produce a picture of pluralist syncretism in opposition to the monolithic mythicisms being forwarded by Sangh ideologues. A series of panels, incorporating visuals and text, was designed; cheaply reproduced, the show was simultaneously inaugurated in 17 cities (Figure 4). The physical panoply of public pedagogical material was accompanied by a string of press releases, which initially invited only perfunctory media attention. If the straightforward juxtaposition of word and image was Sahmat's attempt to craft a new visual pedagogy as a response to the transformed media environment, then the formal lack of imagination here can be termed plaintive at best. Its political weight still lay

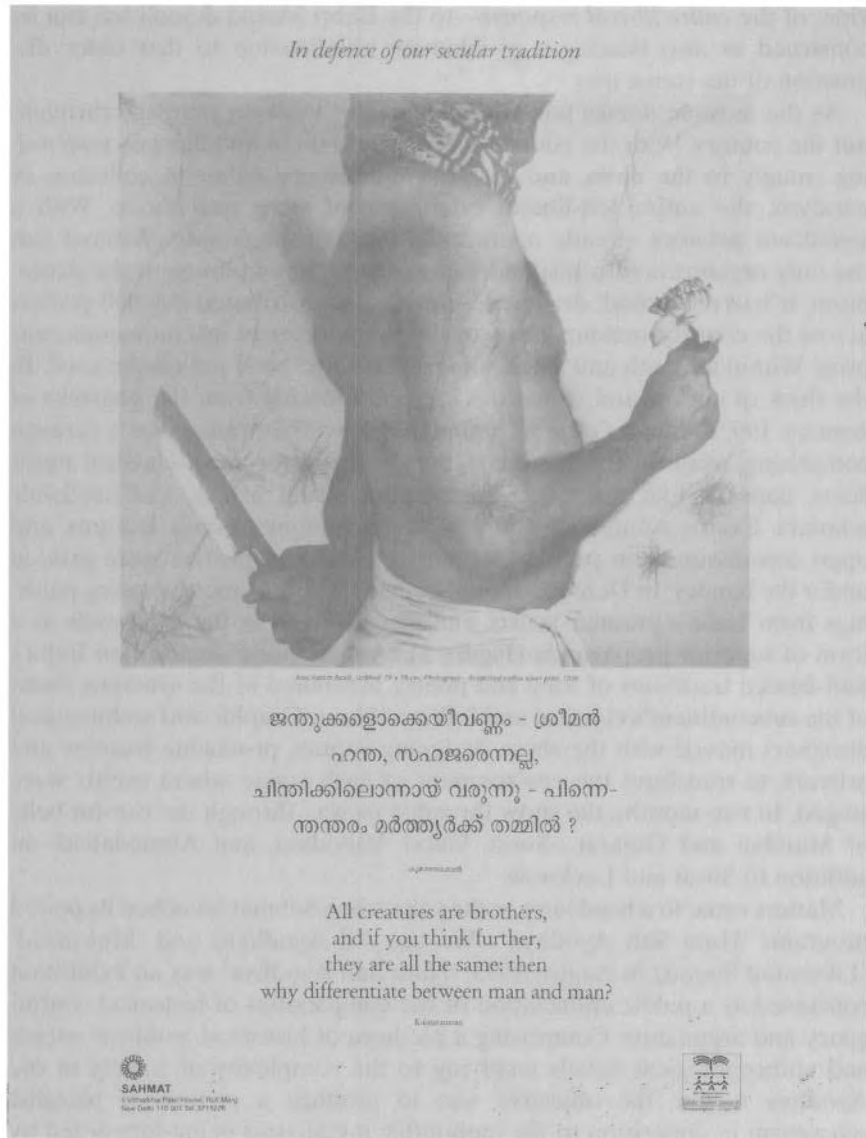


Figure 3: Artwork designed for Anhad Garje and after, Sahmat 2003

in the formal devices of the old politics: in the ability of civil society groups to lay claim to and symbolically occupy public places.

It was, ironically, the response of the Hindu right which would catapult Sahmat's intervention into a more potent media debate. The Ayodhya issue had been an attempt not to transform the very polity of the state but an



Figure 4: Panel produced for Hum Sab Ayodhya, Sahmat, August 1993

attempt to monopolize the public sphere. Zealously protective of this potential monopoly in Delhi, the BJP-affiliated Vishwa Hindu Parishad militia attacked the show and tore up the panels. The pretext was a panel, written by eminent historian Romila Thapar (now the US Library of Congress's first Kluge Chair in Countries and Cultures of the South), that simply referenced the different extant folk and textual variations of the consortship of the royal couple of Ram and Sita.⁸ The paragraph seized on by the VHP was this:

The *Dasaratha Jataka*, dating back to somewhere between 4th and 2nd century B.C., is probably older than the one by Valmiki [author of the version adopted by latter-day Brahminism]. In this version, Sita is not the wife but the sister of Rama. At the end of the exile when Rama returns to Ayodhya, Sita is made queen-consort of Rama and they rule jointly for sixteen thousand years.

Sahmat was scurrilously out to cast the Hindu gods in incest, the cry went. This was patently bogus but spectacularly effective. Elected BJP representatives, including future prime minister Atal Behari Vajpayee, raised the issue in Parliament and the press. Hindutva gangs vowed retaliation and mayhem; Delhi police, using illiberal, colonially derived provisions against public unrest that often put the burden of proof on the *first accused*, irrespective of culpability, shut down the show. It indicted Sahmat in the courts of fomenting communal unrest, initiating proceedings on a dozen different, concocted counts. Along with 'Hum Sab Ayodhya', Sahmat had

planned to hold a nightlong event of music, dance, theatre and readings on the banks of the Sarayu River in Ayodhya/Faizabad on Independence Day, 15 August 1993. Called 'Muktnaad', the proposition of the festival was to wrest back the symbolic territory of Ayodhya for a plural, syncretic nationalism. In the face of stiff opposition from the right, and some from the left, Sahmat decided to go ahead with its programme. UP, it must be noted, was still under President's rule. With support from the Congress government at the centre and a threatened assault from VHP militia, 'Muktnaad' was held under heavy police protection, the air thick with tension. Hundreds of artists performed, while the audience ran to 3,000.

The conflict was to have some unexpected and critical fallout in the context of national politics of the next decade. 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' unwittingly offered the BJP an opportunity to bring Ayodhya again to the forefront of public debate and the legislature, this time even claiming the place of aggrieved party. If the long-term debate on the provocations of Thapar's statement about the relationship of Ram and Sita and 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' moved to the courts, in the short term the debate shifted to the usual innuendos and insinuations about 'people's sensitivities' and 'questions of faith and belief'. Scholars were substantially thrown by the character of the dispute that developed. The debate, no longer ensconced within scholarly concerns about verifiability, centred rather on the appropriate bounds for public discussion and the delicacy of the popular mind.

For their part, the Hindutva arguments were ones of bad faith, less interested in resolving the dispute itself than using the dispute to foreground itself in the public eye. Given a degree of success for the BJP on this front, a significant element of the secular/liberal factions of the political class and public intellectuals castigated Sahmat for its lack of foresight. The realpolitik scrimmage that ensued was to have tremendous consequences for various electoral parties; the story offers a seminal case study of the complexities of patronage in the public sphere.

Forged in the high ideals of fiscal autonomy that also underpinned the decolonizing state, Sahmat's founding principles forbade it from accepting funding from abroad. In the context of the 1990s, this was a clear critique of the perceived collusion between foreign aid and neo-colonialism. In the absence of any private, corporate, or other institutional support for the arts, however, Sahmat turned to state funds for the Ayodhya programmes. It received a sum from the Human Resource Development ministry, then under senior Congress leader Arjun Singh. Both the HRD ministry and Sahmat justified this transaction on the grounds that advocacy of secularism was a state interest. At that time, Singh was one of the contenders for prime ministership within a significantly weakened Congress. Taking advantage of the Sahmat controversy, Prime Minister Narasimha Rao, manipulator par excellence, cast Singh as an intemperate attention-grabber, effectively sidelining him within the Congress. The effect deepened the

serious disunity within the party, from which it would not recover for the next 10 years.

The other development was more unexpected. It came ironically from the left, Sahmat's primary and ideological patron. The formation of Sahmat can be located in a long history of non-party cultural and intellectual groups propounded by Communist parties around the world. In India, Sahmat can claim a string of precursors, the most important being the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA).⁹ Such organizations can be seen as a bridge between the party and catechumens from the very classes that the Communists militated against. And yet, the post-perestroika formation of Sahmat, occurring at a time of significant *leftist* dissolution with the party order, also caught a mood of internal, amorphous dissent *within* the Indian left. One long-term Communist and Sahmat supporter confided in interview that the energy of the events around Safdar's death acquired the force it did because of a significant stroke of luck. Key Communist leaders were far away in Kerala; had they been in Delhi, they would have tried to monopolize and discipline events.

At the risk of looking hypocritical, most Communist leaders perforce defended 'Hum Sab Ayodhya' in public fora. However, with the long shadow of anti-Congress opposition hardly dissipated, and Safdar's murder by Congress thugs a more recent memory, many quietly seethed at what they saw as Sahmat's sell-out to the Congress. A furtive campaign of aspersions and angry whispers was under way. The axe fell in early 1996, after Sahmat had accepted an invitation to sensitize Delhi police cadres against their own communalist predilections. Sudhanva Deshpande, a young communist ideologue and son of G.P. Deshpande, one of Sahmat's founding trustees, wrote an article in the *Economic and Political Weekly*—India's premier scholarly journal—accusing the organization of becoming a culturally legitimizing face for both the police and the Congress:

In this case, in fact, the reality was so concrete that one wonders how Sahmat never quite saw it. Quite aside from the fact that Sahmat was taking money from a government run by Safdar's murderers, there was also the specificity of Ayodhya itself. In attempting to reclaim Ayodhya for secular forces, Sahmat was being funded by the same government run by the same party that had, during the crucial days of December 1992, by its very inaction connived with the forces of fascism to ensure that the tragedy of [the demolition], in fact, did take place. It suited the Congress perfectly well to have an outfit with impeccable secular credentials at the doors of its government asking for largesse.¹⁰ (Deshpande, 1996: 39)

G.P. Deshpande resigned from the board of Sahmat's trustees. In subsequent—published, well-publicized, and reported—debate, Communist Party ideologues went further. Party member Ajay Kumar described Sahmat as a 'BJP puppet in the making' and suggested that it was using communalism as a 'bogey' to promote itself. From Sahmat, the entire Hashmi family resigned from the CPI(M) party; Safdar's widow Moloyshree had on the other hand

been in a process of withdrawal from Sahmat, continuing her work with Janam within the Communist Party.

The resulting altercation—with others racing to Sahmat's defence—did nobody any good. If the 'socialist' foundations of the Indian state had impelled significant arrays of post-independence intellectuals and artists to seek platform alliances with the electoral left, this would decreasingly be the case. In any case, the 1990s were an era of proliferating institutional support, the ideological aims of which—corporate and financial philanthropy, transnational aid, and the like—the communists were preternaturally, often rightly, suspicious of. The Sahmat incident marked a critical focalization of the growing distancing of the bulk of India's artists and intellectuals from formal party affiliation. If the norms of politicization had been the source of the Communists' concern, then the Sahmat affair only accelerated the depoliticization—defined by those very norms—of the artists and intellectuals from its fray. But in critical ways, events also brought to the fore a significant crisis in the relationship of the artists, academics, and intellectuals with the long-standing dispensation of state and culture—the relationship of secularism and religion must necessarily be seen as a displacement of that dichotomy—if anything their foundational *raison d'être*.

Confronting History

After the surprises of Ayodhya, the mid-1990s saw Sahmat engaged in a slightly different, significantly less energized, and certainly more constrained holding operation. With the popular and media temperament moving steadily to the right, and its own political backing in some doubt, Sahmat's efforts at this point indicate a tortured renegotiation with older and newer constructs of national and liberal space. The mid-1990s mark the high period of the expanded Indian public sphere—the worlds of different media, the mobilizational venues of fora and marches, being not so much monopolized as browbeaten by Hindu-right ideologues and gangs. With the viability of public dissent under a cloud, and a swathe of law suits filed by the Delhi police after 'Hum Sab Ayudhya', indicting it of sectarian incitement against public order, Sahmat's programmes show an attempt to foreground a centrist liberalism, perhaps not so much with regard to the proliferating voices of runaway public opinion, but rather for itself.

For the long term, Sahmat shifted gears into a project and an associational frame that would prove prescient within a few years. 'Hum Sab Ayudhya' had been a crossover forum for historians to mobilize the norms of a text-intensive profession towards the devices of visual display. Even as there was an exponential increase of broadcast media and the new marketization of printed media, Sahmat's effort here—the inspiration from

Leninist avant-garde posters of the early Soviet years is palpable throughout its oeuvre—was to propound an artistic mobilization of this precipitously transformed public sphere, making the product haplessly (in McLuhan's terms) Gutenbergian in ethos. Not that this was irrelevant; as we shall see, the response from the right was equally redolent of the textual protocols of the state apparatus. Indeed, the events over 'Hum Sab Ayodhya', inasmuch as they took on the censorious dimensions of older dirigiste politics, signalled an anxiety over content and controls over content in a truant media atmosphere.

Nonetheless, the new alliance composed of historians—Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib—and artists like Vivan Sundaram and Ram Rahman provides a fascinating archive, in the new mediatized environment, of an attempt to craft a visual hagiography to build national consensus. Sahmat's programmes to celebrate some rather uncontroversial events from the national independence movements—Jallianwala Bagh (Figure 5), the anachronistic redescription of the 1857 Mutiny as a 'nationalist' movement, the martyrdom of militant Udham Singh—must therefore be seen as attempts to recapture the nationalist media from the ultra-nationalist grasp. Involving text-intensive visual posters, intermixing visual documents with archival and interpretive content straight from the pen of the historians, the nostalgic format is as indicative of visual/scholarly practices that yet had to find their moorings in contemporaneity as much as a contemporary moment whose moorings appeared severely out of joint.

Sahmat's rediscovery of 'mail art', a strategy warmed over from different utopian projects of the 20th century, is an index of this unhinged time. As the daunting logistics of collective public campaigns like 'Anhad Garje' and 'Muktanaad' became, on the one hand, practically daunting, and on the other, both fraught and exhausted, Sahmat's strategy of building solidarity on its single platform shifted towards virtual means. Three campaigns, 'Postcards for Gandhi' (1995), a collection of stamps designed by various artists (1997), 'Gift for India' (1997)—the latter two on the 50th anniversary of Indian independence—solicited contributions from artists by mail. The sensibility here is of a low-bandwidth artistic *gemeinschaft*—a prelude to the era of *Wired* magazine and the World Wide Web-based activism that would characterize the late 1990s.

The tele-activism envisaged in this network-formulation was at some distance from the global techno-circuitry already being wired into cities like Bangalore and Hyderabad at that time—one that only a later generation of 'media' artists would capitalize on. Sahmat's efforts here were rather to recover the syncretic ghost of the old Indian nationalism and, in Marx's words, to 'borrow their names, slogans and costumes so as to stage the new [national]-historical scene in this venerable disguise and borrowed language' (Marx, 1992: 147). The leftist and progressive factions' reconsecration of Gandhi as national hero at this point surely counts as a

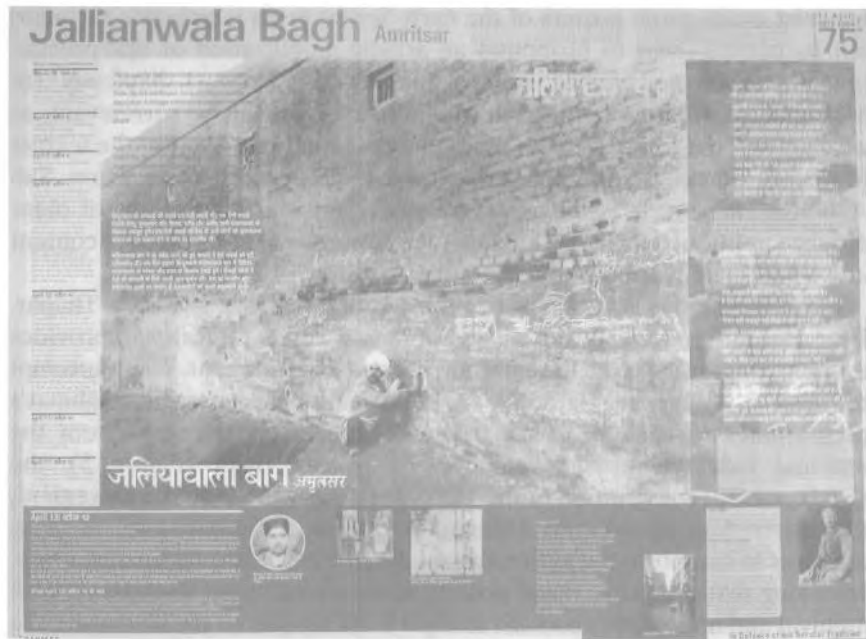


Figure 5: Poster for the 75th anniversary of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.
 Designer, Ram Rahman, Sahmat 1994

historiographic benchmark of this period, given the long history of the left's distrust of Gandhi's religiosity and his ideological consanguinity with the elite factions of nationalism (see e.g. Josh, 1992: esp. ch. 2). This distrust was strongly shared both by social justice movements—the Dalit (lower-caste) movement is a significant case in point—and the Hindu right.¹¹ Indeed, there is some irony here to Marxist historian Irfan Habib's new hagiography of Gandhi produced for the Sahmat campaign 'Addressing Gandhi' in 1995. Some context can be cited here. The Hindu right was advancing its own pantheon of Hindu conservative heroes—Vallabhbhai Patel, Shyama Charan Mukherjee, Vinayak D. Savarkar—within the national movement. Unlike Nehru, Gandhi was a modern icon that was of tradition; the resurrection of Gandhi speaks equally strongly to the resurgent status of 'tradition' within both left and right discourses in the 1990s. The retreat to nationalism and 'good' traditions in the aftermath of the significant question mark placed on those terms by Marxist, subalternist, gender-based, and identity-based paradigms by some of those very factions thus certainly appears retrograde, but it also cues us into their uncomfortable indoctrination into what might best be described as a 'lag' between the methodological concerns of radical historiography posed against history itself on the make.

'Postcards for Gandhi' was a collection of 100 postcards designed by 100 artists, commemorating his penchant for communicating by postcards. 'Gift for India'—a mail-art show where international artists were invited to send in formatted work commemorating India's decolonization—also represents attempts to craft rhetorical and visual idioms to seize the all-important 'nationalist' shibboleth from the ultra-nationalists. Indeed, as economic wherewithal was precisely up for auction in the dissolution of the command economy, historicity and historiography were also up for grabs as validating narratives for different forms of agency.

Historicity became a critical vector of state policy after the BJP's victory in the national elections of 1998 at the head of the new National Democratic Alliance. A significant appointment in the new cabinet was the Human Resources Development (HRD) minister, the Hindutva ideologue Murli Manohar Joshi. Joshi's mission was unambiguous: to dismantle the established 'secular' or 'Nehruvian' make-up of the pedagogical state apparatuses (the all-important Department of Education is part of the HRD ministry). Critical to this structure are a series of institutions that catered to the Nehruvian model of concentrated expertise and research, organizations whose products would offer the models from which textbooks and teaching material would be derived and devolved down to the village-level school: the University Grants Council (UGC), the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), the Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), and the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). Representing a convergence of civil service functionaries and academics, both indifferent and talented, these institutions were nonetheless charged with the function of updating school curricula in accordance with new research paradigms. Joshi began a rapid purge of the staff, projects, and grant priorities of these institutions. Textbooks were changed, monies directed at scientific research were diverted to the 'alternative paradigms' of astrology and fortune-telling, start-up schools in the rural sector were reprogrammed to deliver Hindutva ideology to India's largest demographic faction.

Sahmat's already-established relationship with key historians made it a natural platform for activism, once again by an hitherto state-patronized faction least used to advocating publicly for itself. At the beginning of the 1990s, the artist had appeared as the innocuous, sanctioned, figure from which an unhinged liberalism could be recentred in the face of an amorphous and ill-defined, pandemic, cultural politics from the right. With the BJP in power and therefore an established exponent of proliferating 'speech-acts', the anti-communal struggle moved towards more concrete refutations and legalistic contests on points of fact and form. Not coincidentally, this phase of Indian politics runs parallel with the rise of issue-specific social movements, public interest litigations (PILs), and the reworked province of the courts. With this transition, the artists moved away from the

centre; somewhat shakily, the professors, scientists, social scientists, and lawyers moved in.

Both Sahmat's 'Dastak' (Ten so far, or Admonition)—its commemoration in 1999 of 10 years of activism—and 'Dastak II' of August 2001 demonstrate clearly this transition within the anti-communalist movement. While artists did contribute to 'Dastak', it was clear that the principal weight lay in the three-day sequence of declarative manifestoes laid out by academics, scientists, media-persons, and public intellectuals in a series of talks.¹² 'Dastak II', titled 'Convention against the Communalization of Education', delivered a political coup-de-grâce which was to have significant consequences for Indian politics. For the first time, Sahmat assembled on the same stage historians, scientists, parliamentarians, and state education and chief ministers belonging to Congress, the Communists, and Dalit parties such as Laloo Prasad Yadav's organization in Bihar. In marked contrast to their erstwhile mutual antagonism, Congress and the Communists came together on the Sahmat podium to produce the impossible: a joint manifesto attesting to a shared political principle. Three painful years later, this same political configuration and alliance would wrest back power from the BJP at the centre. An old Congress functionary who had funded Sahmat during the grim days of 1993, Arjun Singh, would be re-appointed as HRD minister. From a history hewn in the heat of dissent, Sahmat would again find itself close to the loci of state power. And as Singh went about weeding out RSS-ideologues from the same institutions that the BJP had sought to transform, the BJP's remaining education ministers from the states staged a walk-out from a parliamentary forum, accusing the government of behaving like 'Sahmat-type anti-nationals' (Majumdar, 2004).

No execration could have been worn as a grander epaulette. Yet this backhanded encomium did not come without its price. In January 2003, Shabnam Hashmi, sister of Safdar Hashmi and the non-Communist half of Sahmat's two executive arms—the other being Dr Rajendra Prasad, card-carrying CPI(M) member—resigned from Sahmat over long-term differences that had come to a head in the aftermath of the 2002 anti-Muslim pogrom in the state of Gujarat by Hindu right-wing militia. Aside from possible personal issues involved, this damaging split can also be read in terms of a more inherent duality that had been pointed out by many observers: whether Sahmat was a *political movement* or a *platform for cultural politics*. Unlike 1993, when Sahmat had been the default forum for an entire national configuration of cultural actors to converge, the anti-communalist movement of 2002 had now spawned many offshoots. As Hashmi navigated the political minefield on the ground in Gujarat in an attempt to document the horrendous atrocities, Sahmat, as an organization, stayed back in Delhi, unsure of its mission. 'Où est Sahmat?', one might have asked during the genocidal days of Gujarat in 2002. For Hashmi,

Sahmat's *raison d'être* was its ability to wade into the thick of violent political maelstroms; other Sahmat members were concerned about Sahmat becoming a relief-providing organization—admittedly a task it was ill-equipped to do—rather than a national platform aimed at bringing political questions to the attention of the media and the political powers-that-be. In the long run, Sahmat's internal recalibration of purpose would lead to yet another organizational transformation: its informal tie-up with the Bombay-based investigative and litigational front Communalism Combat. This new-found synergy shows Sahmat receding gracefully from the ambition of its early days to share more of a support structure with other, sometimes more active, players.

The almost classic hiatus between 'tactics' and 'strategy' marked by Hashmi's departure would split the core of the group itself. In a sense, the split—quiet and unreported in the press—offered an uncanny resemblance to the Sudhanva Deshpande episode, Sahmat's earlier major organizational crisis. It is important to understand here that the very interpersonal dynamics that provided the key strengths of this tightly knit organization also became its major points of fracture. As such, these developments reflect less the history of a group of particular individuals than a signal instance of organizational dynamics under extremely and consistently high political pressure. Still, by contrast with Sahmat's multi-pronged and multi-disciplinary executive body, the majority of NGOs that have flourished in the wake of economic liberalization have tended to be largely single-person-led, single-agenda, and strongly hierarchical concerns (Rajendra Prasad describes this as the 'anti-political thrust' of the NGOs¹³).

Art, Politics, and Religion

Nationalism everywhere appeared on the global scene as a theory of cultural management. Its social claims were always contested by its older forebears and newer progeny: the insouciant areas of kinship, religion, sex, and custom. The liberal state's hold over religion and the customary sphere has always been two-handed: that of the ideologies of secularism and rationalism adopting a process of incessant intervention into theological understanding while simultaneously professing disinterest. The political avant-gardes who advocated the separation of state and temple did not discard religion, but effectively sought to redefine it through a process of continual casuistry. The codification of personal laws and the procrustean relegation of religion to the private sphere, at the very moment that the private sphere was being sanctified as the very fount of political and economic interest, had the effect of producing religion as a secondary state waiting in the wings. Religion has thus always been a *central*—albeit

left-handed—*fixation* of the liberal state; the effect has been not to abolish religion but to remake it in its own mould, with its accompanying values of ‘self-interest, *realpolitik*, and . . . [the] security [state]’ (see Nandy, 2002: 40).

In India, the colonial separation of state and temple, mosque or church, came not from the new aspirations of new commercial classes but rather the colonial state’s effort to render a potentially preformed, pre-political, constituency as *heterogeneous* to the rationale of the state. The separation of temple and state in the colonial polity primarily took the path, therefore, of a greater formalization of different religious practices into concretized ‘separate spheres’, thus effectively fragmenting the constituency of the colonized. Modern secularism, in its specifically Indian sense, was the *nationalist* response to this divided polity, invoking a cross-religious syncretism rather than an anticlerical movement. More a strategy of political consolidation, secularism—notwithstanding the impressive record of reformative, monotheistic, and atheistic movements prior to independence—hardly connoted the kind of theological recalibration ‘within the bounds of reason’ witnessed in Europe in the 18th century. As studies on the subaltern construction of Gandhi as a saintly ‘Mahatma’ have shown (see Amin, 1984), religion both bolstered the nationalist movement and signalled a cognitive asymptotism with it at every turn, which the nationalist leadership could not entirely bridge or manage.

Thus, Congress’s massive mandate at the time of independence had been won on significant playing to religious symbolisms and expectations by its rank and file. Party cadres remained immured in, indeed built upon, the rubrics of nativism, ethnicity, and religion. It was the ideological dregs, and by no means demographically diminished, of this repressed, recessive, private constituency that would stage a rearguard action with a vengeance in the new politics of *Hindutva* in the 1990s. And while its contrapuntal energy is undeniable, it is hard to judge whether the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement was a retrograde revolution ‘turning things upside down’ in the general class-based sense or a fair-weather convergence of new and old forms of the dominant—the urban unemployed, small traders, petty bureaucrats, intellectuals disaffected with Nehru–Gandhian dirigisme, kulaks in the mofussil—invoking older forms of social hierarchy to stake new claims upon the neo-liberal disposition within the state.

At the outset, the response of the artists and intellectuals used the same humanist clichés which had managed religion in the old nationalist denomination: ‘All religions are the same’, ‘God is one, whether Allah or Jesus or Krishna’, and so on. The Sufi-Bhakti tradition invoked in ‘Anhad Garje’ and ‘Muktnaad’, in this sense, was Sufi-Bhakti *redux*, invoking the domesticating nostrums of a ‘good’ Hinduism and a ‘good’ Islam—a *maladroit* attempt by (mostly) agnostics to produce theological commentary at the precise point that the contest over religions had shifted substantially to the

political sphere. (The post-hoc resurrection of Gandhi after his second—this time symbolic—burial at the hands of the Hindu right at this time also had the aura of this affected piety.)

It is important to observe that this strategy was a fallback not only towards older political forms of cultural management, but the role of an entire artistic ‘mode of production’ whose foundations lay precisely in that frame of management. Geeta Kapur (1993) has argued that in India (as in countries like Mexico), the collaborative interests of art practitioners and political activists in the anti-colonial struggle evolved at the time of independence into a ‘sanctioned’ institutional space for artists. Organizing themselves into *national aesthetes*—the new institutional and para-institutional directorates of culture—the artists and state apparatuses were ensconced within a relationship wherein art was given the task of crafting a ‘national allegory’ through which the postcolonial state could seek parity through a civilizational narrative. ‘The very liberalism of the state absolve[d] the left initiative on the cultural front.’¹⁴ Even those explicitly opposed to state patronage—Safdar Hashmi, for instance—also saw themselves invested as national surrogates shoring up the state.

More importantly, ‘the national state privileges culture . . . above art . . . as a means of cohering contemporaneity’ (Kapur, 1993). This is in direct contrast to the postwar West where the dominance of corporate and private sponsors produced a plethora of response in the ever-proliferating sites and forms of art practice. In India, since the welfare state consistently coded its actions within an idiom of the ‘people’, political radicalism by artists did not adopt any strategies of formal or radical political opposition to the fora provided by the state itself. Even radically left fora such as the Indian People’s Theatre Association demonstrate a porous relationship with the state’s cultural apparatuses: the world of the Lalit Kala, Sangeet Natak, and Sahitya Akademis, the National Schools of Drama and Film, and the entirely state-supported artistic professoriate.¹⁵ Within the ‘visual arts’, consequently, we see very little production outside the classical conventional dichotomy of painting and sculpture. There was no variant of the ‘anti-museumatic’ devices employed by artists throughout countries where corporate philanthropy had moved in to take the place of primary patron of art.

This institutional domiciliation both positioned the artists away from the production of dirigiste propaganda and had the effect of constraining artistic discourse within the state’s monopoly over media. *It is important to note that this institutional imbrication defined the very forms of artistic practice itself.* In the first four decades after independence, modernist visual art in India is overwhelmingly marked by the comparative absence of both private patronage and a significant disciplinary culture of art history, unlike its ideological forebears and counterparts in the West. With state patronage an existential necessity and the absence of the continuous formal

degradation of artistic media announced early on in the West in the work of artists such as Marcel Duchamp (and his re-canonization in the postwar context), modernist Indian art shows very little deviation from the classical strategies of mounting the artwork: the rectangular canvas and sculpture in the round.

This is not the place to rehearse the entire panoply of formal devices that evolved in the West as a reaction to the format of the vertical canvas in the post-Second World War era. Relevant here are the continual efforts by artists in Europe, the United States, and some parts of Latin America to evolve new formal and semantic strategies whose polemical force often attacked their very institutional grounding in the 'white box' of the gallery. I have hinted at the fact that the *civil society movements in India were primarily the responses to the denudation of the political sphere rather than the cause for it*. Sahmat's campaigns mark a parallel phenomenon in the arts in that an entire formation of artistic practice came to practise its art *outside the gallery*. Once again, this should be seen as the reflection of *institutional attrition* rather than a reaction against its overwhelming ideological power. The artwork itself acutely demonstrates both the effort to address new media sensibilities and the hampering hand of the old aesthetic forms. Shoehorned inevitably but innovatively into a public arena and field of visibility very far from the formal apparatus of the 'white box' gallery, the work produced for 'Artists Against Communalism' and 'Anhad Garje' is ironically—perhaps equally inevitably—reliant on the semantic tools and themes of the romantic/nationalist canvas (see Figures 3 and 4). The format of the flat canvas was not questioned, while the concerns of the paintings remained more or less unchanged from its former manifestations: the problems of subjective individuation; the link to a *volkish* and past tradition; the dynamics of figure, surface, gesture, texture; all of these still indicated the allegorical 'this means that' semiotic instruments of classical figuration. This observation is voiced, of course, not to disparage the tremendous oeuvre turned out in academies such as the Baroda school in its 'high period' in the 1960s and 1970s (Sheikh, 1997), but rather to note the formal conundrums faced by a formation of artists in a precipitously changed institutional context. In any case, it would be impossible to discuss the formal characteristics of the hundreds of artworks that were produced for different Sahmat campaigns; what interests me here is what might best be described as the formal tendency of an entire artistic 'class formation' and the manner of its deployment. The innovation of 'Artists Against Communalism' came not from the content of the canvases themselves but the manner in which they were hung, carried on bamboo biers through urban streets by a phalanx of protestors, most of them non-artists who bore the artwork on their shoulders as if some hieroglyph of their own aesthetico-political sensibility. None of Sahmat's subsequent artwork was to make a comparable claim on the urban firmament: the posters designed for 'Anhad

Garje', the postcards for Gandhi, and the 6 × 6 inch boxed format of 'Gift for India' relied on their dissemination entirely on their reproduction by print. As such, they can be seen as examples of superior advertising or propaganda; certainly their production was mostly carried out in advertising firms whose principals were key protagonists in many of Sahmat's campaigns. The formal limitations of the work are patent at the point of the historians' advent onto the Sahmat stage—in 'Hum Sab Ayodhya', 'Udham Singh', '1857 Mutiny', and 'Jallianwala Bagh' (Figure 5). Their contributions could only be accommodated as blocks of small-print historiography inserted into the posters themselves, the proverbial 'thousand words' *added to the picture*.¹⁶ If Sahmat's designers here cited Dada and Constructivism as their ideological forebears, there was none of the disjunctive, randomly associative techniques of collage that marked the political claims of those earlier movements. Notwithstanding their significant beauty, their intent was to serve as conventional, didactic boards rather than to question the norms of reading and visuality itself. In time, the direct character of the historians' battle with the BJP apparatus would sidestep the recourse to artistic figuration.

The hybrid condition of the older canvas format and newer forms of spatial deployment were also the outcome of another need where Sahmat's strategies can be said to be the most innovative: funds. The art market was a key reason why Sahmat's artistic formats did not precipitately forsake the painterly image and switch to the forms of 'installation art' with which its political agendas might have most contemporary resonance. As opposed to pure works of propaganda, the painted canvas could be sold as property to art collectors and well-wishers. Here again, Sahmat's experience demonstrates a schismatic tendency between the new and the old. The political solidarity of the artists was manifested in the act of the gift rather than by the 'message' of the artwork itself; through this, Sahmat could mobilize the support of an entire array of artistic practitioners, many of whom had explicit reservations of the political communicability of art. The artwork thus contributed became both the image of expressive diversity and the financial means for its propagation. This idealism was not without some unwitting downsides. As one Sahmat-affiliated designer confided, the decision to sell all the canvases at a *fixed price* rather than at auction—an otherwise commendable gesture of a coequal solidarity amongst artists—often benefited art collectors close to Sahmat's inner circles who could reserve the work in advance of the most saleable artists at a substantial discount from their market price.

By the time of 'Muktnaad', the scale of Sahmat's operations had become too big to be borne by the sale of paintings alone. The outcome of the resort to state support has already been recounted; nonetheless, the 'contraction' in Sahmat's scale of operations in the late 1990s did not lead to a similar scale engagement with the artistic world as before. I have suggested that

much of this weaning can be located in the new forms of expertise and dedicated disciplinarity required by the anti-communal movement. At the same time, artistic practice itself had travelled some distance from the days when the defence of liberal state institutions might be seen as an important site of struggle.

By the late 1990s, the transformed institutional framework of the liberalized state was manifesting itself in the art world as well. The new wave of Indian artists had by now developed the forms of media and installation art that were more at home in the transnational traffic of biennales, triennales, and 'global' fora such as the Documenta XI curated by Okwui Enwezor (the last staged in four different 'platforms' in the South, including New Delhi). These new formal strategies and geographical venues offer us a cue into new lineaments of economic change; 'Third World' art has become both the qualifier and the carrier of global informational traffic. For their part, Indian artists have embraced a role both as new native informants *and* interlocutors and objectors against the general exoticism by which aesthetics in the Third World are often framed. Within India itself, smaller collectives and new private galleries have emerged, directed at more focused objectives, often hooked into and formatted according to funding patterns from the North. By 1999, both Sotheby's and Christie's were having auctions devoted exclusively to 20th-century Indian art (see Christie's, 1999). This new mobility certainly brought with it a new kind of institutional politics. It is also true that, to the extent that artists have discovered these new arenas, they have also withdrawn from the provocative claims upon public space that Sahmat—and artists through it—was able to make in the early 1990s. The younger generation of Indian artists has generally failed to develop the kind of radically political art espoused by practitioners such as the Polish-born artist Krzysztof Wodiczko or the guerrilla street strategies deployed by artists accompanying the street protests of Seattle, Washington, DC, or Genoa as part of the anti-globalization struggle.

As for Sahmat, two shows, 'Ways of Resisting' in January 2001 (Figure 6), and 'The Making of India' in November 2003, had artistic work as their primary input—a harkening to the old days—but the scope was nowhere close in either scale or comprehensiveness to its earlier excursions. 'Ways of Resisting' was—not surprisingly, given the changes noted—a selective compendium of existing installation-type artwork already exhibited elsewhere by the artists concerned; localized in one major Delhi gallery, its force was largely documentative, encompassing a diverse array of formal sensibilities that had been brought to address India's continuing confrontation with sectarian strife.

In this study, I have attempted to make the point that the Sahmat case study can be seen as an instance of the tremendous challenges faced by the 'liberal' arts in the era of liberalization. In the older dispensations of the welfare state, the universalist 'civilizing ethos' of the artists was ironically

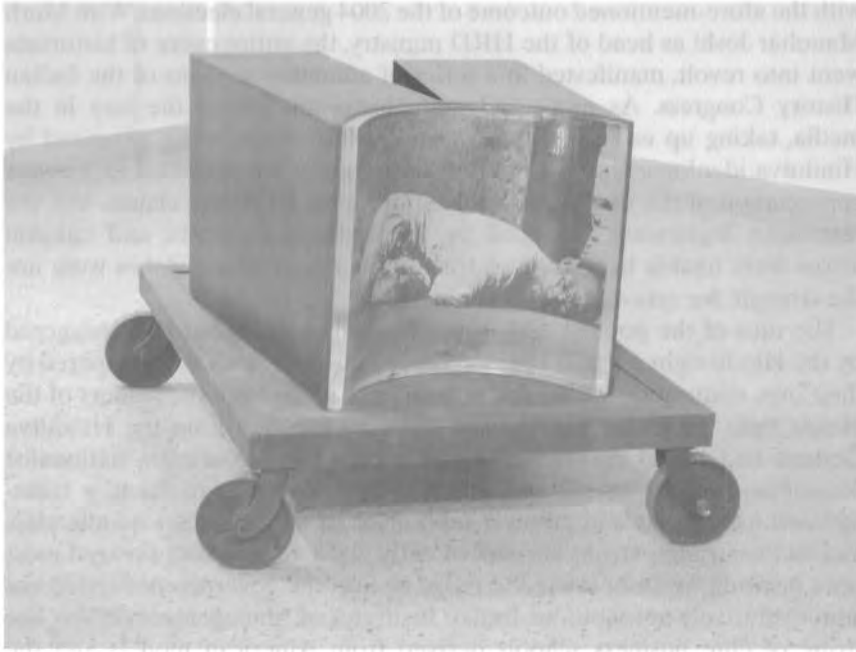


Figure 6: Vivan Sundaram, *Gun Carriage*, in *Ways of Resisting*. Curator: Vivan Sundaram, *Sahmat*, December 2002–January 2003

nested within a salon-like environment—art philosophy *dans le boudoir*. It was this internalized world—with its publicly *unknown* but densely intricate history of institutional engagement—that was yanked out into the open by the bad faith arguments of the Hindu right during the ‘Hum Sab Ayodhya’ fracas. Hitherto, the intellectuals and artists’ sensibility of religion had operated entirely within the state’s paradigms of cultural management; M.F. Husain’s modernist hagiographies of Indian goddesses were well within this framing. For *Sahmat*, the effort had been to reground civil society frameworks on the old ecumenical idealism rather than to invest real interest in religion; the interpretive tack inevitably took aim far wide of the mark. These shielded sensibilities and its attendant panaceas rapidly foundered when faced with both new discursive formats and the force of the new, politicized religion. Oddly enough, it was the leftist and progressive factions who appeared to be arguing for the doctrine—in the name of ‘tolerance’—of separate spheres warmed over from the colonial ancien regime. And, as elsewhere, it was the religious right that was deconstructing the Enlightenment’s domestication of religion within the state.

It would be another of these concatenated ironies that would perhaps finally check the progress of the Hindu right and its advance on the state,

with the afore-mentioned outcome of the 2004 general elections. With Murli Manohar Joshi as head of the HRD ministry, the entire cadre of historians went into revolt, manifested in a series of animated sessions of the Indian History Congress. As more and more historians joined the fray in the media, taking up each obscurantist and absurd claim being advanced by Hindutva ideologues, public opinion significantly came around to a better appreciation of the intricacies of historiographic work and claims. Yet, the rationalist arguments advanced by intellectuals, scientists, and cultural actors were unable to gain much traction in a field whose stakes were not the struggle for rationality as such.

The turn of the popular tide in this limited public sphere was triggered by the Hindu right itself. If the progressive intellectuals were hampered by their own maturation within the state apparatus, so were the leaders of the Hindu right. From the very outset, different organs within the Hindutva factions had found themselves at odds between favouring a nationalist dirigisme—both economic and cultural—and appealing to the new transnational aspirations and cultural supremacy of an ascendant middle class and its expatriate patrons abroad. In early 2004, after having ravaged most state institutions, Joshi started to move against the government-funded but administratively autonomous Indian Institutes of Management (IIMs), the string of elite business schools derived from American models and the apples in the eye of India's 'globalizing' classes. If the corporate media had formerly professed lack of interest in the casuistic field of historical and scientific curricula, allowing both left and right to slam it out in the public forum, there were no such compunctions on its part when directly faced with a potential threat—the possible resurgence of the old command economy *from the right*—to its own interests. Editorials, op-eds, and television anchors weighed in to universally deride the HRD ministry on its attack against 'globalization'. The long-standing engagement of the historians and intellectuals was conveniently co-opted onto that bandwagon; still a committed organization of the left, Sahmat was conspicuously quiet in this new skirmish. By the time of the Congress-left victory of 2004, the debate over the institutional control over education and culture had moved instead to questions of their decentralization and autonomy rather than their liberal or illiberal direction.

Sahmat, exhausted by the engagements of the older politics, had very little to offer on this front. With Shabnam Hashmi's exit, it constituted itself as a smaller, more organizationally circumspect, lobby group. The headiness of the first five years could not have lasted, in any case. We are, after all, speaking of a platform that could, at one point, draw on the solidarity of artists running into the *thousands*. I have tried to demonstrate that Sahmat's strength in the early years was a direct index of the temporal discomfiture of an entire national dispensation of intellectuals and artists suddenly confronting a severely ruptured institutional configuration that faced

imminent dismantlement or appropriation. As the moment of national politics moved from the preservation of a general cultural politics to direct contestations over a hijacked state apparatus, the collaboration with artists also receded into the background.

With its primary antagonist throughout the bulk of its history—the Hindu right—now mostly in tatters, and its principal patrons for the moment constituted as the new ruling dispensation, it is hard to predict the future of Sahmat as an organization. But given its past, it seems clear that its continuing vitality as a movement will necessitate similar kinds of reverse-gear encounters with the cultural politics of dominance as those of the last 15 years.

NOTES

This article is part of a book project (Dutta, forthcoming) that is being carried out, in part, at the instigation of Sahmat itself; the idea was to document, understand, and critique the trajectory of a significant movement and its relationship to contemporary history. Sahmat generously allowed me to look at and catalogue its archives, and its members were unusually candid in looking back at their history in a series of taped interviews. My utmost gratitude to Ashok Kumari, Shabnam Hashmi, Rajendra Prasad, Ram Rahman, Vivan Sundaram, Geeta Kapur, and Indira Chandrasekhar, whose long-term friendship, generosity, and support have made this project both possible and plausible. The catalogued Sahmat archives are available at Sahmat offices: 8 Vithalbhair Patil House, Rafi Marg, New Delhi 110 001, India.

1. I use 'populism' here not necessarily in a denigratory sense but as a reference to the long history of the specific characteristics of populism in modern political culture from the French Revolution onwards.
2. Sahmat Deed of Trust, dated 8 Feb. 1989. Document signed and registered in the name of trustees (litterateur) Bhisham Sahni, (dramatist) Habib Tanveer, (film, stage, and television actor) M.K. Raina, (artist) Vivan Sundaram, (theatre actor and widow of Safdar) Molyshree Hashmi, (theatre writer) G.P. Deshpande, (brother of Safdar) Sohail Hashmi. Of these, Molyshree Hashmi would quietly remove herself from Sahmat activities, G.P. Deshpande more vocally so in 1995 (see his son Sudhanva Deshpande's intervention in 1995, at n. 10).
3. The Chandra Sekhar government, the Narasimha Rao government, the Atal Behari Vajpayee government, the Deve Gowda government, and the Gujral government.
4. Scheduled Caste is here shorthand for what is known as the Scheduled Caste, Scheduled Tribes, Backward Caste, and Other Backward Caste factor in Indian polity and politics.
5. After the police shooting, a New Delhi based studio, Jain Studios, produced a video 'documenting' and accusing the genocide of Hindutva activists by Uttar Pradesh police, highly inflating the actual number of dead. The video, remarkable for its actual inability to come up with hard evidence and its substitution

- by anecdotes by myriad 'eye-witnesses', is significant for the persuasive effect it had on large parts of the population, many of whom were just being introduced to the audio-visual device of video itself.
6. For an excellent beginning, see Manuel (2001). Ch. 10, 'Cassettes and Socio-political Movements' has pertinent sections on the 1989 elections (on the Janata Dal's use of audio-cassettes) and Hindu-Muslim conflict.
 7. Two books document the long history of the *Ramjanmabhoomi* movement in great detail: Mukhopadhyay, 1994; Noorani, 2003. The latter, a 2-vol. compilation of archival documents—pertinent legal findings, archaeological publications, news reportage, government correspondence—is by far the most thoroughgoing resource for scholars.
 8. On Thapar's appointment to the Kluge Chair in 2003, Hindu right-wing organizations linked to the Sangh Parivar in India organized to oppose the appointment, labelling her a leftist and Marxist whose scholarship should not be supported by the US government. The throwback to events of 1993 cannot be underplayed here.
 9. IPTA was founded as an adjunct of the Communist movement in the 1930s with the aims of battling what it saw as the twin evils of fascism and imperialism. Its influence in the first decade of independence can be most palpably seen in a series of theatre movements and, most influentially in popular terms, Hindi cinema, encompassing the work of prominent stalwarts such as Bimal Roy, the Kapoor family, music directors such as Salil Chowdhury, lyricists such as Sahir Ludhianvi, etc. A comprehensive history of the tremendous organizational history and influence of the IPTA still remains to be written. For some brief excerpts, see Bhattacharya (1983). Different aspects of the IPTA's influence also receives a potted treatment in parts in Rajadhyaksha and Willemen (1994).
 10. The article was republished in the progressive Hindi publication *Udbhavna*, where other authors joined the debate from various corners of the ring. See *Udbhavna* (Jan.–June 1996), with essays by Rajendra Sharma, Sudhish Pachauri, and others.
 11. Perhaps the most brilliant examination of the making of 'Gandhi as Mahatma' has been presented in the third volume of *Subaltern Studies*, most notably Shahid Amin's (1984) examination of events in Gorakhpur district (in present-day Uttar Pradesh) in 1921–2. See Guha (1984).
 12. Sahmat published five books as part of its campaign to draw attention to this issue: *The Saffron Agenda in Education: An Exposé* (Nov. 2001); *The Assault on History: Press Reportage, Editorials and Articles* (Jan. 2002); *Against Communalisation of Education; Essays, Press Commentary, Reportage* (March 2002); *Saffronised and Substandard: A Critique of the New NCERT Textbooks* (Dec. 2002); *Plagiarised and Communalised: More on the NCERT Textbooks* (Dec. 2003).
 13. Author's recorded interview with Prasad.
 14. 'In India, as in other post-colonial countries (in Mexico, for example), artists have taken this institutional support for granted, nurtured as they have been through the anti-imperialist struggle on the idea of a benign national state. The nation's artists are provided with a sanctioned space to struggle with, and to resolve, the riddles of language and sovereignty. They for their part seem to assume, even unconsciously perhaps, their responsibility to decode these terms

- and reconstitute them in what would be a national but modern art. Indeed, while testing the existential implications of the modern in the context of the nation Indian artists have been eased by state patronage into a metropolitan identity' (Kapur, 1993: 18).
15. For a full list of the various cultural bodies founded by the Indian state, see *India 2004: A Reference Annual*, reported annually by the Publications Division of the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.
 16. It would be a while later that Sahmat activist and member Vivan Sundaram would develop other strategies to carry the historiographical archive in forms other than text. His installation in the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta in 1998, entitled 'Journey towards Freedom: Modern Bengal', in addition to his work on riot victims—*Gun Carriage; Mausoleum*—and on the modernist artist Amrita Sher Gill bear testament to a significant and long-standing engagement with historiographic strategies.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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