

“Art history, philosophy and literature are not institutionally valued in Pakistan so people don’t pursue them. It’s a vicious circle” – Iftikhar Dadi



*The Art and Modernity panel at the LSE Pakistan Summit 2017 was chaired by academic and artist Dr Iftikhar Dadi. Following the session, he spoke to **Sonali Champion** about modernism as a global aesthetic, the lack of art history education in Pakistan and the inspirations for his own art.*

SC: Today’s panel was about art and modernity in Pakistan. Would you say that South Asian modernism is distinct in the global context?

ID: If you look at the history of modernism, what we think of as ‘mainstream’ (or European modernism) actually came out of an encounter with the aesthetics of the rest of the world. Think about the impressionists or Van Gogh, who drew on the Japanese print, or Picasso and African art. Think about the rise of abstraction by artists like Mondrian or Millet, artists who were looking at anthroposophy and theosophy. Matisse and Paul Klee drew on Islamic and North African art. European artists are actively looking at the rest of the world.

So I argue that modernism is already a kind of global aesthetic. It’s no surprise that artists from all over the world will also participate in it. On the other hand, of course the background you bring will also shape the way your art develops and how you interpret modernism. So of course, if you speak a certain language, grew up in a certain place, or were trained a certain way, all of those have a bearing in terms of how you develop as an artist.

Having said that, South Asia is enormously diverse in terms of the languages spoken, the religions practiced, the professions people follow, the unevenness in the places where they live. So we can’t say that there is one identifiable ‘South Asian’ modernism. I think umbrella labels are important because they help you categorise, but we have to be careful that they don’t imprison you and homogenise the phenomena that is being examined. A good analysis will be sensitive to both levels.

The panel reflected on developments since the birth of Pakistan. Could you reflect on how new imaginations developed in this country? Did this contribute to state building?

Pakistan came about as a nation in 1947. It was a product of both independence from the British, but also separatism from India. There was a ‘newness’ to it, even the word Pakistan didn’t mean anything, it was an amalgamation of the names of the geographic regions that formed Pakistan.

Let’s take the case of India: if someone says ‘I’m an Indian’ it might mean two things. It might mean ‘I have citizenship of India’, or it might mean ‘I belong to India as a civilizational entity’. However you might feel about belonging to the nation state, you nevertheless have affiliation with the longer civilizational history. That’s not the case in Pakistan, because the word doesn’t really have a civilizational history. So the formation of Pakistan was very specific.

In the book I published a few years ago, *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia*, I argued that in fact the modernist practices that emerged from the 1950s-80s were not really concerned with the nation state. The artists sought to find value in their art in other ways. This included having a relationship with literary forms, with philosophical forms, rather than with nationhood per se.

At the beginning of the panel you noted the absence of courses on culture in Pakistani higher education. Why is it missing and what is the impact of this gap?

What I find very striking is that the artists I examined in my book were actually quite well read. Many of them were writers themselves and they would meet with poets and novelists and so on. Something happened in Pakistan in the 1980s-90s which affected the education system. Some people blame political oppression but I think that is too simple an answer. It's a deeper issue, and the upshot is that right now there is not a sufficient culture of teaching theory or art history, even in the art schools. Art schools in Pakistan are quite good in one way, because people are trained pretty rigorously and many of the best artists in Pakistan are also teachers. So that's definitely a good thing. On the other hand, the students are not really exposed to art history, to sociology, to philosophy, to literature. This is also the case in the universities more widely. These things are not valued, and since they're not institutionally valued people don't pursue them. It's a vicious circle.

Turning to your own art, how does your research and knowledge of Pakistan art history actually inform your work?

I've worked as an artist for 20 years with my partner Elizabeth, who is American but lived in Karachi for about 8 years. We locate our work at the intersection between what might be called conceptual art and pop art. The notion of the popular is one we find quite fascinating. We find that society today is really characterised by all sorts of popular media, popular forms and we are very interested in engaging with that.

Many of our works deal with issues of modernity, or our experience of ourselves as shaped by architecture, by media, by cinema, so we often explore those junctures, dislocations, and questions of identity that crystallise in strange ways, even through Hollywood narratives or the spaces around us that are created that appear cinematic. So our work is really an engagement with that. It's not engaged with the history of Pakistani art per se. In fact, along with other artists who emerged in the 1990s, we are identified as being part of a distinct movement called '[Karachi pop](#)', so in that respect we are seen as among the pioneers.

Cover image: Boating, by early 20th century modernist Jamini Roy. Credit: [Edwin Binney 3rd Collection/The San Diego Museum of Art](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Watch the *Pakistan @ 70 Art and Modernity* panel in full [here](#). You can also see a short video with Iftikhar Dadi talking about the role of art and its relation to society [here](#).

This article gives the views of the interviewee, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors



Iftikhar Dadi is an artist and Associate Professor at the Department of History of Art and Visual Studies, and Co-Director of the Institute for Comparative Modernities at Cornell University. Iftikhar frequently collaborates with the artist Elizabeth Dadi and their works have been exhibited in many international galleries around the world. He has authored several books including *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010), *Anwar Jalal Shemza* (edited; 2015) and *Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space* (co-editor; 2012).



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