



# LSE Pakistan Summit 2017

## Working Paper #2

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1. Philanthropy and Institution Building
2. **Art and Modernity**
3. The Constitution of Pakistan
4. Development and its Dividends



## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	2
Panellists .....	2
Introduction .....	2
Modernity and the modern .....	3
Social commentary and censorship .....	4
Creative approaches to protest .....	5
Reclaiming public space .....	5
Recommendations .....	7

## Executive Summary

Pakistan’s engagement with art has often overlapped with a certain modernity embedded within the particularities of its evolving society. At the LSE Pakistan Summit Art and Modernity Panel, experts from the field of fine art, cinema, broadcast media and advertising discussed the ways in which different art forms had engaged with and reflected social issues since 1947, how they have fundamentally impacted on the country’s sense of selfhood and identity. In addition, the speakers explored the key role artists (in the broad sense) have used their creative expression to protest and challenge existing narratives.

## Panellists

**Ali Nobil Ahmad**, Post-Doctoral Researcher at the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin.

**Farida Batool**, Artist and Co-Founder of the Awami Art Collective.

**Ali Rez**, Regional Creative Director, Middle East & Pakistan at Impact BBDO Dubai.

**Fasi Zaka**, Political commentator, television anchor and radio talk show host.

The panel was chaired by **Iftikhar Dadi**, 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.

## Introduction

Intellectual discussions around art and creative expression are all too few and far between in Pakistan, but panel chair Dr Iftikhar Dadi noted that these forms of expression have been “nothing less than a key form of freedom” over the last seven decades. Despite attempts to restrict expression, this freedom has manifested in diverse modes and mediums, and was initially largely restricted to the domain of the elite. However, by the 1970s and 80s popular forms appealing to mass audiences, such as television and street/public art were being produced, democratising cultural expression. In addition, developments in technology made these creations increasingly accessible.

Today the spread of the internet, new media and mobile devices mean that more Pakistanis than ever before can consume and interact with different forms of art. Connectivity has taken debates which were previously restricted to the national sphere into transnational and subnational spheres, creating new shifts and

challenging previously entrenched ideas. This, combined with the liberalisation of the electronic media under Musharraf, offers a vibrant environment for artists, filmmakers and creators.

Cultural expression has been heavily influenced by the social, political and economic transformations since the birth of Pakistan. In some cases this has been indirect, with artists exploring dilemmas of identity and the self, in others creatives have grappled more explicitly with social issues. As Dr Dadi put it, "Culture, I would argue, has never been peripheral to society and politics in Pakistan, but it needs to be analysed in its complexity".

A key reason for the dearth of academic discussions in Pakistan relates to the lack of research on cultural forms. Dr Dadi noted that although there are a number of good schools teaching art practice in Pakistan, there are no higher education institutions offering undergraduate degrees in art history or cinema studies. He highlighted that panellist Dr Farida Batool teaches art theory at Masters level at the National College of Art, but that she is one of only a handful of academics focussing on this area. As a result there is limited analysis of developments and as a result cultural forms continue to be viewed as peripheral to the 'real problems' in society. This in turn means there is no demand for courses focusing on more theoretical approaches so the problem persists.

## Modernity and the modern

The notion of modernity and the modern was interrogated in a variety of ways throughout the panel. Focussing on cinema, Dr Ali Nobil Ahmad indicated that ideas of modernism in cinema tended to be shaped by European trends in the 1950s and 60s i.e. aesthetically experimental and politically utopian like French New Wave, Italian neo-realism, and Soviet films which were beginning to break away from socialist realism. Filmmakers in Pakistan during that period were more cautious, they might draw on modernist literature by authors such as Sadat Hassan Manto or Rajinder Singh Bedi for inspiration, but the film versions would tend to shed the modernist elements. For example, there would be no experimenting with form, naturalism or the avant-garde.

However, although it is difficult to say there was a modernist movement in Pakistani cinema, there were individual experiments. Dr Ahmad cited [\*Jago Hua Severa\*](#) (Day Shall Dawn), a film about East Pakistani fishermen written by poet Faiz Ahmed Faiz and directed by A.J. Kadar, who used Walter Lassally, a leading cinematographer associated with the British New Wave. He also highlighted Jamil Dehlavi, who embodied the auteur with a distinct vision and created films which explored themes of sexuality, nature and religion. The imagemaking in his two early films *Towers of Silence* and *Blood of Hussain* had an abstract quality to it, echoing the distinct aesthetic of modernist films in Europe.

Others also picked up on the notion that Pakistan has interacted with modernism in a unique way, precisely because the context was very different to that in Europe. Dr Dadi noted the avant-garde in Europe was a reaction against established institutions, whereas in post-colonial contexts those institutions are not durably founded so modernist creative expressions manifested themselves differently. He noted, for example, a 1977 work entitled [\*Qalandar\*](#) by the painter Sadequain, who frequently drew inspiration from Islamic poetry but painted in a style which shared many similarities European modernist painters such as Picasso.

Ali Rez, in contrast, engaged with the panel theme by focussing on modern solutions to challenges Pakistan faces today. Hailing from a background in advertising, Rez brought insights from his work on coming up with creative campaigns to challenge existing narratives. For example, he talked about a recent UN Women campaign where the brief was to tackle the issue of violence against women. When the creative team looked at existing campaigns against domestic violence they found that they tended to perpetuate the image of women as victims. They therefore decided to flip things on their head, and launched a multifaceted campaign entitled [#BeatMe](#), which invited viewers to beat women, but at things they were good at.

The campaign featured powerful images of Naseem Hameed, the fastest female sprinter in South Asia, Samina Baig, the first and only Pakistani woman to climb Everest and the Seven Summits, chess champion Mehak Gul and a number of others. Although it polarised audiences, many people who had escaped abuse responded positively to the strong depiction of women. In the wake of the campaign, Rez also noted that brands were taking up more positive messages of empowerment in their own advertising, which was a welcome shift.

## **Social commentary and censorship**

In his remarks, Fasi Zaka traced the evolution of censorship in Pakistan through the lens of political satire. He noted that everyone still cites *Fifty Fifty* and *Alif Noon*, comedies that aired in the 1980s, as the peak of television satire and argued that this actually stemmed from restrictions on freedom of expression:

“[There was a] relative degree of strictness on what you could comment on, you could not actually do anything overt, [which] created a sense of timelessness because it captured what was essentially the larger themes.”

Since liberalisation, satire has in some ways plateaued. There’s a greater degree of topicality, which results in programmes having a shorter shelf life, and as the medium has grown, the amount of money available has fallen and gestation periods have shrunk. However, it is notable how comedy programmes have borrowed from international formats, for example the Daily Show, and “indigenised” them, bringing in elements of Pakistani theatre such as *jugat bazi* (a form of exchanging puns).

Zaka noted that the shift in recent years has been away from suppression by the state: “One of the things that has emerged now is that the state’s role in censorship is fairly fixed. To a degree it’s predictable, one can live with it”. What is more worrying is the rise of self-censorship. A social contract of unwritten rules is understood by all players has become embedded in TV news reporting. Both the anchor and the reporters know what the no-go areas are; if they have to speak on these topics they know the language and euphemism to enable them “[to say] something incredibly important in the most unintelligible fashion”.

Another challenge, particularly in the age of social media, comes from individual who take it upon themselves to police others according to their own agendas. In this context, the need for satire is questioned, less by the state and more by those who view it as disrespectful, or object on the basis of other things such as the inclusion of women comedians. In the most extreme cases this turns to violence – Dr Ahmad made reference to incidents of mobs burning down cinemas in reaction against films perceived as anti-Islam or morally degrading.

Zaka identified this trend as almost more disturbing than state censorship and argued that in order to protect the space for art and satire there needs to be a more coherent and robust defence of free speech. He hypothesised as efforts to combat hate speech and extremist literature have evolved (however imperfectly), expression at the liberal/secular end of the spectrum is being curbed as well. This can only be challenged with a more sophisticated discussion around what constitutes free speech.

## **Creative approaches to protest**

Ali Rez talked about his work tackling the American use of predator drones to target areas in the north of the country. Although they claimed to target individuals, the reality is that the strikes resulted in civilian casualties and psychological trauma. Traditional protest was proving ineffective: marches on the street with banners and placards were not galvanising wider support or reaching US policymakers.

Rez and his team, which included the independent French artist JR who specialises in street art and social issues, therefore changed tack. On discovering that it was common for the drone operators to refer to their targets as 'bug splats', they focussed on reaching the person who pulled the trigger. [#NotABugSplat](#) involved rolling out a giant portrait of a young girl in one of the target areas. It was so big that on the ground it was hard to tell what it was – the pixels were too large. However, it was designed to be big enough to be picked up by satellites, so drone operators flying over would see the child staring back at them, turning the tables on who was watching whom.

The project earned media coverage worth an estimated US \$182 million. All the major news agencies picked it up, and it became the iconic image of resistance against drone attacks – it appeared in media and NGO reports, on the cover of academic books and protest posters in the US. It also contributed to a significant shift in policy away from the US use of drones in Pakistan.

Not A Bug Splat is a very clear form of protest, but others offer more subtle critiques of their environment. Dr Ahmad emphasised how Dehlavi's *Blood of Hussain* offered a powerful critique of the Zia-ul-Haq coup. Zaka indicated that satire seeks to point out problems and contradictions to give them higher resolution and call for change. Dr Batool described small sculptures of women which she made out of razors to question in a satirical way how the power of women's sexuality somehow seems to engulf the figure in gender and even policymaking debates.

## **Reclaiming public space**

Patriarchal norms coupled with political repression and/or everyday violence during periods of Pakistan's history has led to restrictions on public space, who is seen as 'allowed' to occupy it, and for what purpose. Zaka also identified a tendency towards ahistoricism as dictators and even elected leaders have sought to refashion identity and revise Pakistan's independent history according to their needs and vision. Several of the panellists discussed projects which sought to take back that space and identity.

Dr Farida Batool in particular talked about the work of the Awami Art Collective, a group of artists, activists, and academics that she co-founded. The group have done

two major projects in Lahore, both of which sought to reclaim space and history, albeit in different ways. *Hum jo tareek rahoon main maray gaye* (We who were slayed in the dark alleys – a title taken from a Faiz Ahmed Faiz poem) was an installation in Bagh-e-Jinnah, Lahore, where the artists created a circular canopy out of bunting in the centre of the park. Each triangle had a news story with a date, printed to look like a typical Urdu newspaper clipping, each noting an incident of violence over a 30-year period, from 1986 to 2015. People were invited to walk under the canopy and remember, reconnect and rethink. By highlighting atrocities against Shi'ites, Sikhs, Hindus, Ahmadis in the name of blasphemy, or against others in the name of politics invited visitors to see this issue as having a history which pre-dated September 11<sup>th</sup> or drone strikes and invite a wider discourse and rejection of that violence.

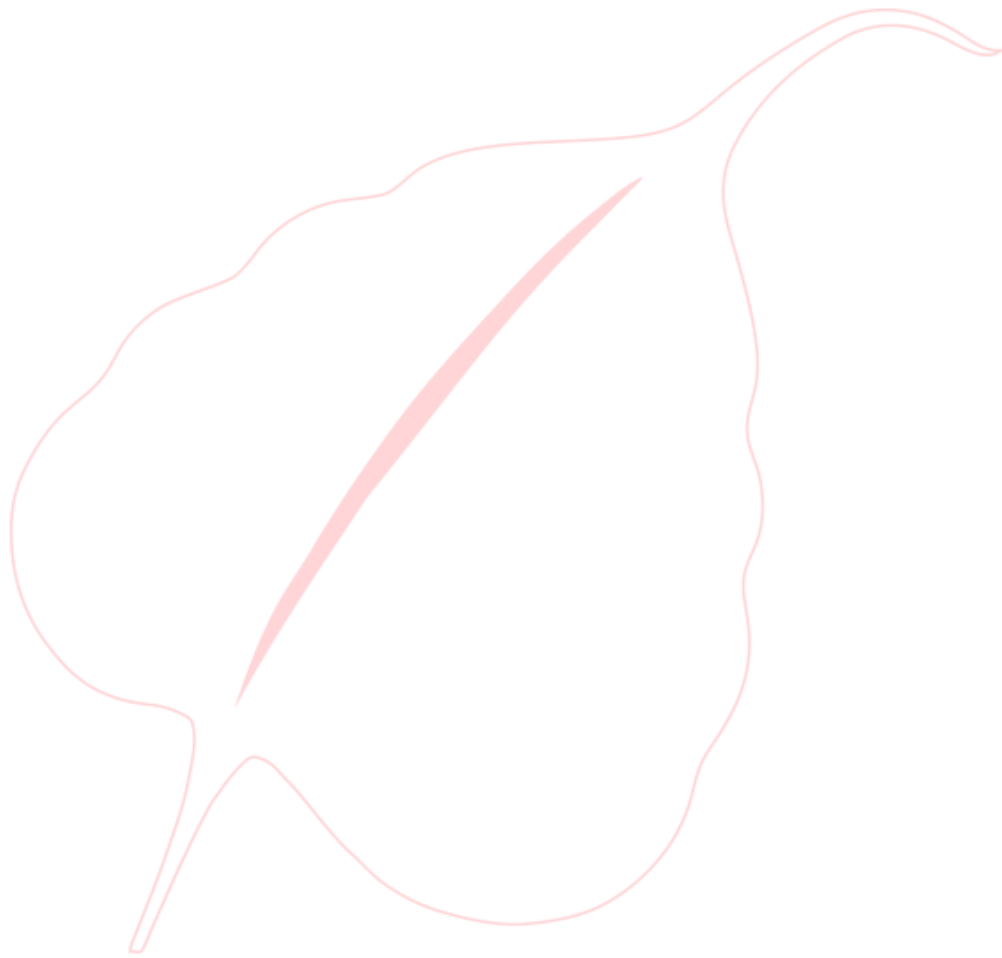
The Bagh-e-Jinnah installation got permission and funding from the Punjab Government, something which Dr Batool felt was important because the project sought to engage policymakers as well as the public to challenge the collective amnesia. However, their second project sought to protest the Punjab Government's ban on Basant in Lahore, a secular festival with food and music, where people flew kites from their rooftops. In this case, the government were not going to be supportive – they would not even permit anyone to use the image of a kite. Instead, the Awami Art Collective asked people living in the Walled City for access to their roofs so that they could install lines of light across the buildings. At Taxali Gate they then held a performance, engaging the community with music and dancers to celebrate the memory of Basant. Again, the installation took back space and history, as well as challenging the government's development of the city without respect for Lahore's heritage.

Some of the projects discussed also explored the rights of particular groups to inhabit space. The audience was introduced series of works entitled *Henna Hands*. Beginning in the late 1990s, created by Karachi-based artist Naiza Khan who used hand-shaped plastic *mehndi* stencils and henna paste to create nude female figures on public walls in Karachi. Dr Dadi highlighted how the work was simple, and yet multi-layered: using a stencil rather than creating the designs freehand alludes to the decline in craft practises towards mechanisation; the focus on henna – traditionally applied to women's hands for weddings and festivals – hints at "the opening out of the interiority of women's space into public space". As the henna is not a permanent dye it also faded over time, echoing to the transient presence of women in public spaces.

In addition, the figures frequently appeared in gendered or politicised spaces, interacting with the existing marks and notices. For example, one confronted a handwritten sign and poster claiming a section of pavement for an informal sector barber, while another turning her back on Urdu graffiti announcing a march for the glory of jihad. Dr Batool noted she was inspired by Khan in her own work, particularly her 2012 [Kahani Eik Shehr Ki \(story of a city\)](#) lenticular print work, which reflected her observations and engagement with her environment on a walk through the city of Lahore.

## Recommendations

- There is a need to strengthen and expand art theory and history education in Pakistan. This could be done by introducing more of these elements into art courses, teaching aspects of it at school so young people are introduced to the concepts early on, and offering more dedicated university courses on cinema, media studies and art history
- Greater art theory education would contribute to the expansion of research into different cultural forms, which would help change perceptions that they are peripheral to social developments/problems. Protecting the formal spaces for art, from cinema halls to galleries, and making funding available for young creative and community art projects would also contribute to this goal
- The rise of social media and the liberalisation of the media has created new spaces for expression, but this has also created a need for greater dialogue about what free speech is and protecting it in the Pakistani context
- The power of creative approaches can enact change should be recognised and harnessed. Whether it is an comedy series questioning the government, or an advertising agency bringing its commercial skills to a social issue and inspiring behavioural change, or motivating brands to move away from stereotypes in their own promotion
- That said, the purpose of art is not always to solve a problem. Even making it visible is an important step, whether by reminding people of their rights, or highlighting the absence of minorities or women in certain spaces, power relations are made obvious and can therefore be challenged. Artists must therefore continue to explore creative forms of peaceful protest



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