

Representing Difference, Imagining Co-existence: Social Harmony in the Art of Sudhir Patwardhan, Bhupen Khakhar, and Nilima Sheikh

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ABSTRACT

The paper investigates the connection between art, social inequality, and the potential for social cohesion by bringing forth the artistic practices of three Indian artists - Sudhir Patwardhan, Bhupen Khakhar, and Nilima Sheikh. While preserving dignity, plurality, historical complexity, and dissent, it emphasizes the ability to acknowledge difference, and seeing social harmony as uniformity, agreement, or conflict avoidance. The study explores Patwardhan foregrounding labor migration, and urban disparity; khakhar highlighting daily life, queer identity, and marginalized social experience, and Sheikh addressing memory, gender, displacement, and diverse cultural histories by employing an interpretative analysis of their selected works. Representation in these varied practices serves as a way to bring marginalized lives, disputed identities, and fragmented histories for visibility and comprehension. The paper contends viewing art alone as a direct tool for fostering social unity or addressing systemic inequalities. Instead, within the same visual and cultural context, its significance lies in its ability to cultivate forms of ethical awareness, urging viewers to encounter differences, question preconceived notions, and hold various experiences. Contextually, social harmony emerges not as a resolved condition, rather as an ongoing practice to navigate differences and envision coexistence.

Keywords: *Art and Society, Social Harmony, Sudhir Patwardhan, Bhupen Khakhar, Nilima Sheikh, Pluralism, Indian Contemporary Art, Visual culture, Social Inclusion*

When we think of art, often there is a moral or message the art form seeks to convey. Ever since the dawn of time, when humans began documenting and interpreting their everyday life by means of images, symbols and objects, this ability to convey a message has been a consistent phenomenon. In absence of such profound and significant tone, any art might appear merely decorative, purposeless form. The artist has incorporated meanings and values beyond their individual expression, from ancient cave paintings that depicted communal hunts to medieval frescos of collective faith, from socially influenced prints of European modernism to modern Indian artworks. In the ideas of social harmony, the power of art to depict, challenge, and transform the ways in which people come together is exceptionally timely. This paper examines the notion of social harmony, the the coexistence of diversity in

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all forms, the balance between the privileged and the representational interpretations by three India artist: Sudhir Patwardhan, Bhupen Khakhar and Nilima Sheikh; unity is not absence of conflict but the sheer possibility for lived peace and shared understanding between varied groups. However, the message of unity in art is not always straightforward or necessarily correct.

Language, location or the boundaries of narrative cannot fundamentally limit art, it expresses itself through acts of kindness, representation of marginalized lives, and calls of a variety of cultural legacies. An opportunity emerges when a spectator connects with a film, play, song or artwork, it turns into being an encounter outside of their own experience, fostering an awareness across cultural, religious, and socio-economic divides, allowing them to preserve their essential identities while becoming receptive to others.

Art education is practised across all formats of academic environments, beginning from school to cultivating the values of tolerance, open-mindedness, vividness and collaboration. Art serves as a form of therapy, in times of natural disaster or human-induced tragedy, engaging with art often heals the deepest wounds of difficult times.

METHODOLOGY

The paper uses interpretive visual analysis rather than audience research or a social-impact evaluation. The selected artworks are read through composition, colour, figure, space, narrative structure, medium, and the relationship between the visible image and its social context. The analysis draws on published art-historical and critical sources. The paper does not claim that viewing these works automatically produces social harmony; it examines how the works create possibilities for recognition, discomfort, dialogue, and reflection.

Examining the practices of three Indian artists reveals the emotional and political memories entangled with specific histories; Sudhir Patwardhan, Bhupen Khakhar and Nilima Sheikh provide specially valuable insights. Differing in style, medium and subject their themes hold a similar belief that individuals can coexist on opposing sides of numerous canvases, images and voices. Real-world policies may not have practical solutions within the art, yet it serves as a significant tool, and history shows that it could lead to division, if not hatred. Only when it is embraced by the virtues and the values of empathy and acceptance, it becomes a means for the wind driving the sails of social uniformity.

The paper examines how selected works by the three Indian artists reveal social differences through the portrayal of labour, everyday life, sexuality, existence, gendered memories, displacement, and diverse cultural narratives. Social harmony is not a direct outcome from their artistic approach, rather their works encourage ethical reflection on the ways of living that have been long ignored, minimized, or excluded from conventional narratives. In this context, harmony is perceived not as a lack of conflict or uniformity, but as the ability to observe and recognize diversity without diminishing dignity, historical intricacy, or dissent.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ART AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH SOCIAL HARMONY

In regards to provoking social inquiries, artists have responded to surrounding practices with different art forms like drawing, painting, sculpture, printmaking, installation, campaigns, digital works and various other media. In The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological

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Reproducibility (1936), Walter Benjamin observed that beyond the pristineness of art, mechanical reproduction diminishes the 'aura' of artwork, redirecting the experience of art towards the masses and moving away from the elitist perception of aesthetic pleasure, thereby politicizing aesthetics as well. Indian thinkers and authors like Rabindranath Tagore, advocated the practice of art as a space bridging the personal and collective, in which creativity represented liberation. The aesthetics of his creations intertwine with ethical choices of living connecting simplicity, and non-violence, fostering awareness of the dignity of others with having craft and design at the forefront.

It emerged from the intersections of an engaged global modernism, nationalist project, regional customs, and the practices of redefining art in contemporary terms. With an intention to move away from the abstraction of 1950s Indian art, figurative artists such as Sudhir Patwardhan, Bhupen Khakhar, and Nilima Sheikh sought a pedagogical turn: art should not be separated from society rather be connected with it, inhabited, filled with familiar themes and everyday subjects.

Driven by Memoir and Identity these transformations may be internal or they might be externally linked to broader factors like class caste, gender, politics, and economy. Artists often convey realities through metaphors, symbols and complex imagery that only reveal their value after detailed analysis. At the center of such expressions lies an urge to disrupt, contest, and eventually generate concepts needed for harmony and rejuvenation. Historically, artists have had a conflicted relationship with both themselves and the society they exist in. This tension arises as they are constantly examining the fundamental thoughts of all kinds of cultural practices, whether it is religious beliefs, sexual behavior, or political power. Despite their troubling responses through their means and mediums, these acts have enabled the possibility of counter-imageries, institutional spaces where differences of thoughts and opinions can engage with each other, not by the means of violence but through dialogue.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL CONTEXT

Studies on modern and contemporary Indian art provides the historical context for this discussion. Dalmia (2001), Kapur (2000), Mitter (2007), and Zitzewitz (2014) positions Indian modernism within the intersecting narratives of colonialism, nationalism, local traditions, creative advancements, and social dialogue. This context is significant as the current paper does not view the three painters as distinct moral voices. Their practices evolved within artistic domains where figuration, narrative identity, and social context emerged as essential tools for navigating the relationship between art and real-life experience. Wyma (2008) further situates narrative figuration including the works of Patwardhan and Khakhar, in discussion regarding artists intervention, representation and the political potential of modern India art.

The paper also depends on the narratives of art as both social and epistemic practice. Sherman and Morrissey (2017) argued that engaging with artistic works can foster self-awareness, awareness of others, and reflection upon preconceived ideas and beliefs. This in any sense does not mean that a painting intrinsically changes the viewer or resolves conflicts. Instead, it urges for a more thoughtful assertion: artworks could develop possibilities for attention, interpretation, discomfort, acknowledgement, and dialogue. Recent findings regard, arts participation, social unity, and well-being suggest that social unity arises from participation, relationship, and community settings, rather than solely from artistic content (Sonke et al., 2025). This distinction is essential as the present study examines representation in artworks, rather than the measurable social effects of a community-art program.

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In this context, social harmony acts as a concept of interpretation. It relates to cultural context in which different social roles can be represented, felt, and discussed without being confined to a single idea of national, religious, gender, or class identity. The phrase therefore maintains tensions and conflict as elements of social life. It enables the analysis to explore how visual methods expose unequal situations, which stories gain public recognition, and how diverse histories can remain open to interpretation.

Case Study 1: Sudhir Patwardhan - Reflections on Urban Realities

Sudhir Patwardhan (b.1949) is frequently referred to as the voice of India's evolving urban landscape. His artworks portrayed construction workers, labourers in buses and chawls, and everyday people maneuvering through the chaotic city expanse of Mumbai, unlike the media depictions of celebratory representation of India's liberalized cities.

Trained as a pathologist before fully committing as a full-time painter, Patwardhan turned his gaze to individuals who are foundationally building the cities yet remain invisible within them. A connection between his medical and artistic practice has been noted by the critics - as a pathologist, he examined the bodies with care, as an artist, he observed the body politics in the city at large.

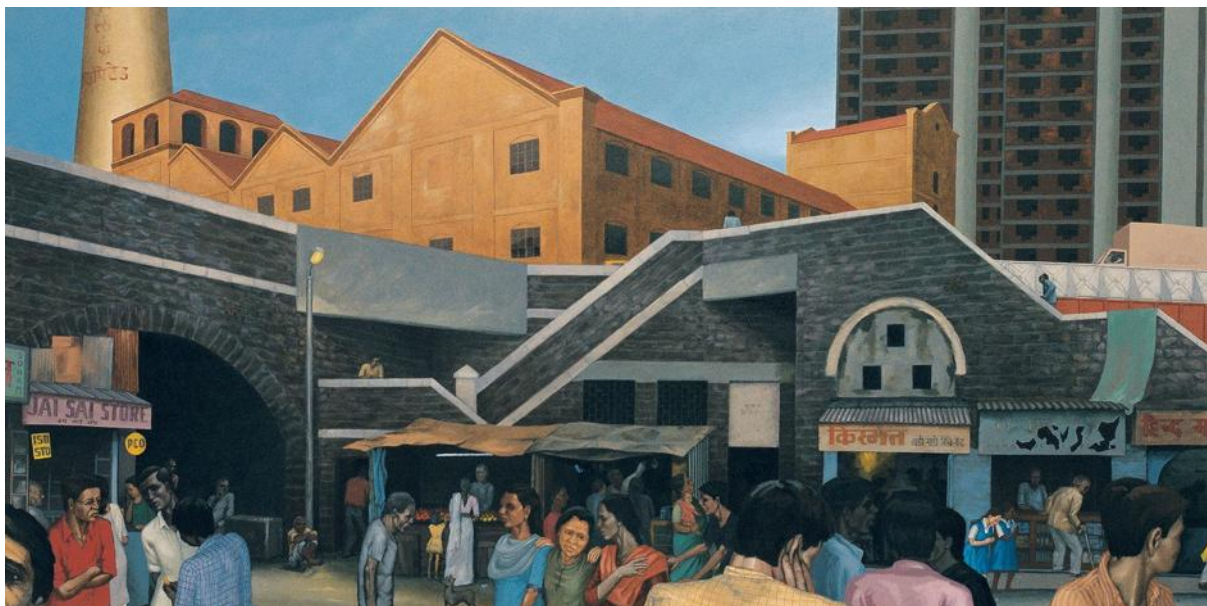


Figure 1. *Lower Parel (2001), by Sudhir Patwardhan. From Mumbai: Sudhir Patwardhan's NGMA retrospective celebrates 45 years of his love affair with the Maximum City, Architectural Digest India. Retrieved from <https://www.architecturaldigest.in/content/mumbai-sudhir-patwardhans-ngma-retrospective-celebrates-45-years-love-affair-city-dreams/>*

His images emerge from the layers textured of the city life, with a particular emphasis on migrant workers, and the marginalised in pieces like *Lower Parel* (2001). In his painting *Man with Cart* (2003) or *Cafeteria* (2005), the portrayed figures are not passive, they embody hope and courage even amidst challenges. The individuals he depicts are situated on the streets, buildings, workplaces, and bustling communal areas. They inhabit the city as active social participants whose labor aids in the growth and daily operations. Body movements convey, waiting, fatigue, engagement, focus, and exertion through body language. Congestion and isolation coexist. Individuals that share the same physical space might be emotionally

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disconnected suggesting that closeness in urban settings does not by default foster equality or sense of belonging. Color and compositing gives an emotional weight to these depictions without making them appear like documentary records.

Patwardhan's work highlights the structural inequities coded in class hierarchies in regards to wages, living conditions, and social respect. The representation of laborers and immigrants compels the society to confront its own apathy. His works also presents a subtle autobiographical inquiry: having abandoned a secure profession to pursue art, what is his self-perception in relation to the people he portrays? What is society's perception of him as a cultural worker? Patwardhan's works don't directly lead to social cohesion, yet they definitely inspire the audience to recognize dignity, vulnerability, and a shared urban experience.

Case Study 2: Bhupen Khakhar - Commentary on Everyday Life

A painter who intertwined the mundane with the seemingly trivial aspects of life in small-town, Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003) holds a place of an important voice in Indian art history. While Patwardhan emphasizes urban-life challenges through first-person accounts, Khakhar reflects on identity, sexuality, and everyday intimacy all existing in our daily life. His practice was influenced by calendar art, popular film posters, shop prints, and folk practices. During the post-independence India, Khakhar quite audaciously depicted queer desires at a time when homosexuality was criminalised and socially unacceptable. The iconic *You Can't Please All* (1981), a striking record of his personal conflict within societal expectation.

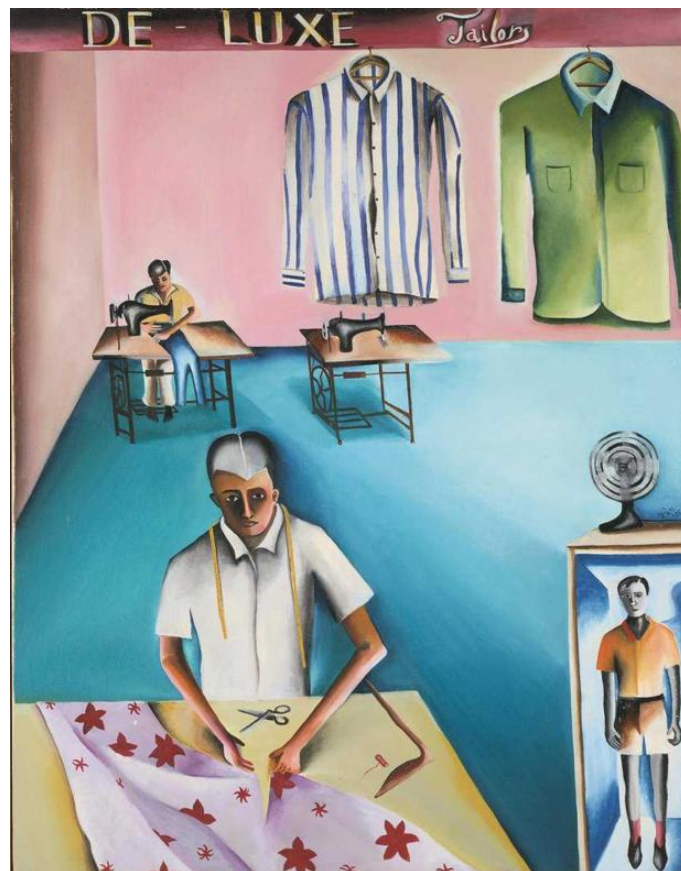


Figure 2. *De-Luxe Tailors* (1972), by Bhupen Khakhar. Howard Hodgkin Collection. From Tate. Retrieved from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/bhupen-khakhar-2406/five-things-know-about-bhupen-khakhar>

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He broadened the domain of Art and social cohesion by revealing its limit, by rining in marginalized voices and bodies. His humour is highlighted by his non-academic and artistic painterly approach by vibrant colours, distorted perspective, flattened planes, whimsical figuration, ambiguous form boundaries and brushstrokes, along with complex storytelling, that renders his work not only hopeful but also undeniably joyful, ironic, and resilient, holding viewers to it who otherwise often feel the disconnection with modern abstraction. The flattened space, a significant element of his work, often appears staged. The viewer does not gaze at the scene from a distance but engages in a social setting. Such theatrical setup indicates that identity is conveyed through everyday behavior, attire, professions, and physical presence.

The lively colors in his painting emphasizes the visual importance of ordinary and overlooked people, they set the atmosphere, direct focus, and add emotional depth to the setting depicted. The humor holds back the images from being documentary and prompts the viewer to acknowledge societal contradictions regarding respectability, longing, desire, class, and sexuality.

The typical and queer depiction of the bodies is crucial to his visual approach. Khakhar's characters are mundane, non-heroic and not glamorized; and they might appear vulnerable, awkward, exposed, or hesitant. He situates queer identities within familiar domestic and social settings, meaning that they are integral to daily life unlike a separate community. The interior spaces hint on feelings of intimacy and restrictions, demonstrating how individual experiences are heavily influenced by societal norms. His representation often elevates the lives of barbers, watchmakers, store clerks, and acquaintances, to much greater prominence. By not inserting himself in these worlds, khakhar tells his story along with that of his community.

Ultimately, khakhar's artistic discourse and its contribution in perceiving harmony resides in his reimagining of what is considered social. By portraying tradespeople, queer identities, and middle-class settings within the same visual space, he challenged existing hierarchies, allowed humorous contradictions to coexist, while reminding us that marginalized voices can be recognised through art.

Case Study 3: Nilima Sheikh - Take on Pluralism

Nilima Sheikh (b.1945) engages with history, memory, gender, and displacement; she adds a distinct layer of dialogue as one of the significant contemporary feminist voices in India. Sheikh's selection of mediums is also crucial to the context of the discourse regarding social inclusiveness; physical paper scrolls combining mainly tempera with stencils and calligraphic script, juxtaposing oral poetry and accounts from witness (eyewitness testimony). The format of scroll is not merely an aesthetic choice for referencing Indian art, but it was a distinct method of experiencing time, also a way to experience history not as a fixed picture but one that unfolds over time, allowing the viewer to observe, pause, reconsider and connect.

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Figure 3. *Hunarmand (2014)*, by Nilima Sheikh, from the *Each Night Put Kashmir in Your Dreams* series. From Asia Art Archive. Retrieved from <https://aaa.org.hk/en/programmes/programmes/nilima-sheikh-each-night-put-kashmir-in-your-dreams>

Her perspective to pluralism is particularly important, plurality in her practice operates as a tool for constructing and examining history itself rather than a mere harmonious existence of pre-established identities. She brings together oral and historical, regional visuals, personal memories, and contemporary political issues, while ensuring that no single source becomes an ultimate authority. She deliberately develops intricate and incomplete narratives, in order to

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challenge the idea of a singular historical truth and proposes that there is a continuous definition of history through memory, testimony, cultural heritage, and personal experiences.

This methodology holds value in a continuous engagement with Kashmir, instead of representing Kashmir exclusively through the familiar lens of conflict, Sheikh focuses on the region's literacy, artisanal, spiritual, ecological, and cultural stories alongside the experiences of violence and displacement. In *Each Night Place Kashmir in Your Dreams*, references to Agha Shah Ali's poetry are interwoven with literary and historical resources, regional dialects, and carefully illustrated landscapes. It creates an intricate cultural landscape, for coexistence between beauty and brutality, desire and grief, longing and memory and political truth. The series has been described by the The National Gallery of Modern Art as a contemplation on centuries of literature about Kashmir.

Sheikh's feminist perspective is crucial in her refusal to separate the personal from the historical. In her works, the stories of women examine the construction of history, the acknowledged experiences and the marginalized voices; they are not merely depicted as victims. When *Champa Grew Up* (1984-85), her earlier works emerged after the dowry-related death of a young woman in Baroda. This played an important role in the evolution of feminist practice in Indian art. In her continued work, women's experiences, oral narratives, labor, vulnerability, displacement, and memory emerged as sources of knowledge that contributed in shedding light on border systems of violence.

Sheikh's pluralism is more than representational and figurative; it is axiomatic to a certain extent. For this, one needs to understand the bond between image and text to start with. Then comes the relationship between shared memory and personal history. You also need a grasp of the connection between traditional approaches and modern politics. Sheikh's intentions are not to give her viewpoints on the differences, but her reflections talk about coexisting within unfinished histories. As a result, her work becomes a major talking point in deliberations on social inclusivity. Having this kind of diversity should not influence us to give in on the differences but instead should focus more on developing spaces for these distinct voices to thrive together.

Comparative Discussion: Three Forms of Social Difference.

There are three practices or viewpoints discussed here that together approach social harmony using different forms of attention. First is through the reflections of Patwardhan, whose focus is on labour migration and consequent spatial disparities of metropolitan life. Next, there is Khakhar, who highlights the daily experience of the queer community in art. These thoughts challenge the existing system that keeps certain bonds and bodies hidden while allowing others to be in the public eye comfortably. Sheikh comes with the third perspective, where she recognises the importance of shared memory, movement, gendered accounts and traditional visual practices. These three radical perspectives are not similar, but each stance confronts the cultural and social expandability of certain historical narratives, societies or personalities.

Subsequently, the comparison between these three forms of social difference offers a different perspective now. The claim that art only offers unity does not stand true anymore. Such practices have the ability to question societal perspectives, and that is why it is necessary to discuss them. How a worker, queer person, migrant, woman artist or displaced group is treated should be treated as intellectual concepts. By using their visual language, one can come up with different contexts for observation. By recognising separate accounts, taking a rendezvous with

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complex histories or drawing attention to an ignored city are some of the ways their visual language serves this cause. With this perspective in mind, social harmony cannot be seen as a comprehensive condition characterised by creations or illustrations. It can be achieved when there is a conscious effort to respect diversity and the innumerable different situations that people have to go through.

Relative Understandings: Harmony in Coexistence

When you look at the works of Nilima Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar and Sudhir Patwardhan, they jointly take you to different directions of social harmony. Patwardhan, being a modern realist, graciously awakens people through his works. His dramatic gesture under the National Memorial Arch illustrates how he believes that his efforts have paid off. He truly believes that bringing about such changes is the cornerstone of the nobility of his work. In another world, Khakhar fuses the accounts of marginalised identities, thus putting back the spotlight on the fact that any existence or cohabitation lacks true harmony if there is no 'other' in it. Then comes the perspective of Sheikh, where she is direct but in a subtle manner. With more boundaries emerging, divisions too increase. In such a world, she wishes to challenge the victim-perpetrator contradiction and further establish a varied perspective, which is traditional and historical. When this outlook is based on female subjectivity, the old-school memories should work as the basis for reestablishing societies that thrived as a single unit in peace. However, the sad part is that one cannot see harmony in the works of Patwardhan and Khakhar. Similarly, Sheikh's work can also be positioned as artificial or fake in many cases.

The Role of the Viewer

The relevance of art takes shape when it interacts with the viewer, so that becomes more important than creation itself at times. Therefore, to create art with a viewer's presence in mind is an artistic practice that should never be forgotten. To be precise, it questions the response that you can get for your art. Be it Sheikh's manuscripts or Patwardhan's workers or Khakhar's fans, all come from different backgrounds and materials. Some use oil, some casein and some watercolour. However, these differences do not stop the artists from enchanting their viewers with their artworks. When a viewer forms a connection with the artwork by forming new thoughts in their minds, only then does a creation truly come alive. As a result, it is safe to say that art creates an interpersonal space, but without any vocal interaction between the artist, the art and the viewer. This is where true harmony exists.

The intent and act of observation is crucial, yet it cannot be assumed to be uniform. One can respond with recognition, discomfort, curiosity, disagreement, or indifference, that is often shaped by the situational context in which the work is shown and received and viewer's personal experiences. Thus, the social significance of art lies not in the assured moral teaching but in the potential for continued analysis and reflection. This thoughtful narrative refrains from exaggerating the influence of representation while holding the importance of visual culture as a space where social meanings are challenged.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, the comfort of art within a social harmony lies in its ability to humanize, to dignify, and to connect us through our shared vulnerability. This harmony does not emerge from uniformity or silence, but is rather discovered in the diversity. As cultural theorist Homi Bhabha (1994) asserts, instead of enforcing purity, communities will be destined based on their

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ability to navigate hybridity. Patwardhan's workers, Khakhar's companions, and Sheikh's various histories together hint us on a potential future, where harmony is a recurring effort in cultivating vision, memory and empathy and isn't a constant state.

Art does not erase, but reveals potential ways to tackle inequality and violence in a thoughtful way: through acceptance and not through denial and avoidance. These artistic work and practice differ widely from the mainstream culture of Indian society that attempts to hammer in various shapes, and their persistence clearly symbolizes current divisions. They show how social harmony is not absent of disagreement, coexistence with difference is possible, and in fact harmonious behaviour can genuinely be benefited with respect towards various ethnic groups. As we know art is inherently slow, dense and ambiguous, there is no claim that policies and politics can provide quick fixes, they create opportunities for coexistence that require development. It is crucial to cultivate a mindset that in its core aligns with the principles of justice and peace. That utopian idea of aesthetic peace may not offer immediate and concrete solutions, but it does succeed in keeping a faith alive and parallelly gives humanity an ability to focus their spirit on such a vision.

LIMITATION AND CONCLUDING CLAIM

This paper brings forth an interpretive claim in discussion. The selected body of artwork cannot address inequality, sectarianism, violence, or exclusion by themselves. The paper also does not prove that the viewers become more socially harmonious with their interaction with the works. Its primary function is to present how visual methods can make social disparity evident and culturally interpretable by representing labor sexuality, memory, gender, and displacement. These depictions can lead to the cultivation of a space for moral reflection, while its effect remains influenced by the audience, institution, context, and the power dynamics.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

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