

Book Reviews

Malvika Maheshwari. 2019. *Art Attacks: Violence and Offence-Taking in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press. xii + 373 pp. Notes, Bibliography, References, Index. ₹1195 (hardback).

Malvika Maheshwari's thought-provoking and timely study of attacks on artists in independent India is a welcome addition to the literature on free speech in India. *Art Attacks* is structured around a series of detailed case studies from the 1970s to the present—the Shiv Sena's attacks on Vijay Tendulkar's plays, the murder of Safdar Hashmi and the Rushdie controversy, the persecution of M. F. Husain, and the hounding of Taslima Nasreen. Her account of these cases is enriched by interviews with figures involved in them, both perpetrators as well as the artists whom they victimised.

The case studies reveal a grim view of the state of artistic freedom vis-à-vis the violent politics of offence-taking. Tendulkar's case is complicated, but all the others involve defeat for the artists concerned—Hashmi was killed, *Satanic Verses* was banned (and opponents of the ban targeted), Husain died in exile (many galleries refused to show his work), and Nasreen fled to Paris. The reasons are familiar and depressing: artists lack support as a political constituency; the police does not protect artists or hold violent perpetrators to account; the law is used to harass and intimidate artists, rather than protect them.

Maheshwari counsels against cynicism or despair, pointing to pockets of resistance by groups like the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust, and to the protections for artistic freedom offered by some High Courts. But it is hard to avoid the feeling that the overall picture is bleak and unlikely to improve any time soon.

Though Maheshwari's case studies involve violence in the name of both Hinduism and Islam, her primary interest is in violence by members of the Hindu Right. She questions two commonplace accounts of its nature and causes. The first account emphasises irrationality: perpetrators take offence at art because of ignorance of their own traditions, or

the refusal to understand art in context. Offence-taking leads to violence because of the ‘hurt sentiments’ of the protestors, and their failure to understand or follow the norms of democratic disagreement. The second account sees such attacks as instances of the more general anti-liberal and anti-democratic proclivities of the Hindu Right, part of its long-term plan to turn India into a Hindu *Rashtra*. Perpetrators of violence are on this account ‘footsoldiers’ in service of this larger goal.

The failure of these accounts, in Maheshwari’s view, arises from insufficient attention to empirical detail. When we focus on ‘micro-studies’ of perpetrators and why they indulge in violence against artists, we see that they are overly simplistic. Against the first account, Maheshwari points out that many of the attacks are meticulously planned: attackers calibrate their violence so as not to get into trouble, give advance notice to media houses to make sure that the violence is covered, and make careful assessments of the ways in which this violence benefits them in terms of their standing in society, or their access to political power.

Against the second account, Maheshwari makes three distinct points. First, she emphasises the heterogeneity within the umbrella term ‘the Hindu Right’. The long-term ideological goals of the RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh) are not always served by the violence of so-called ‘fringe’ groups, and the actual motivations of particular attackers seem sometimes to involve the desire for personal glory rather than that of advancing the *Hindutva* project.

Second, the language in which the attacks are justified, appeals to essentially democratic concepts such as dignity, tolerance, justice, and fairness. In Maheshwari’s view, we should not see the attacks as involving the defeat of liberalism at the hands of illiberal forces. Rather, they reveal the tensions between various competing values within the liberal tradition—for instance, between the value of free speech and the value of equal respect.

Third, electoral democracy is partly an engine for this violence, which often involves efforts to gain or maintain political power, or to climb internal hierarchies and demonstrate one’s power within particular political formations. For instance, Safdar Hashmi was attacked by a Congress-backed leader, Mukesh Sharma, while performing the play *Halla Bol* at the invitation of a CPI(M)-backed trade union during a campaign for a municipal election. Shiv Sainiks who participated enthusiastically in the persecution of Husain did so mainly out of fealty to the wishes of their leader, Bal Thackeray.

Maheshwari concludes that ideology and offence-taking are only a part of the explanation for why violence against artists takes place. Attackers are driven by a complex set of motives: they need not be personally offended by the art, and their incentives (for fame, power, etc.) are not necessarily ideologically driven. The violence is made possible in the first place by the criminalisation of politics, and the general failure of the police to uphold the authority of the state (her respondents are not martyrs to their causes; their violence is limited to what they think they can get away with). In the particular case of the Hindu Right, Maheshwari argues that her micro-studies undermine the claim that attacks on artists or artworks in the name of ‘Hindu’ sensibilities are part of a more global decline of secularism and the ascendancy of Hindutva.

While these points are well taken, the very choice of methodology—the focus on the micro-study of individual attackers—risks obscuring some larger home-truths. Let us grant Maheshwari’s empirical claim about the motives of individual attackers. Even if they are driven by self-interest rather than by ideology, their self-interest does *in fact* lie in mobilising violence in defence of ‘Hindu’ dignity; they are politically protected regardless of the party in power (while their victims are not); and they are able to justify their actions in a democratic lexicon which can also be mobilised in service of the idea of a Hindu *Rashtra* (e.g. a conception of democracy in essentially majoritarian terms).

It seems to me perfectly apt to describe these facts about the broader context *within* which these individuals act as one in which artistic freedom has suffered at the hands of Hindutva majoritarianism. The micro-studies show us the mechanisms through which this has happened, but they supplement—rather than supplant—the existing accounts.

The most important lesson of Maheshwari’s book, in my view, is one which she mentions but does not develop in detail. This is the fact that violent attacks against artists are justified in the name of democratic ideals. It would be easy to dismiss this as bad faith, but I think she is right in thinking that the appeals to democracy and constitutionalism by perpetrators should be taken seriously. They point to a more general failure to articulate the value of artistic freedom, and how it relates to other liberal ideals such as mutual respect and tolerance.

This is a theoretical, not a practical, failure. Theoretical clarity is not of course enough to resist the violent suppressions of artistic freedom which Maheshwari describes. But battles for artistic freedom must also

be fought at the level of ideas, and its defenders have yet to take up the challenge. *Art Attacks* is an invitation for them to do so.

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Haley Duschinski, Mona Bhan, Ather Zia, and Cynthia Mahmood, eds. 2018. *Resisting Occupation in Kashmir*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, vi + 302 pp. Maps, Figures, Notes, References, Index. \$79.95(hardback).

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Resisting Occupation in Kashmir is an edited volume of 11 essays about what entails occupation in Kashmir and how might that be ethnographically grasped. As the editors state in the Introduction, these essays attempt to grapple with the questions of ‘late modern occupation’, which combines militarisations with humanitarianisms, in themselves contradictory—but nonetheless real in Kashmir. The essays achieve a spectrum of contexts—a wide range of ethnographic locations and issues, which in my opinion is the strongest contribution of the volume. The tragedy of occupied Kashmir comes to the full forefront in these essays, but very importantly, in its diverse and multiplicative horror.

As is inevitable in short reviews, mentioning any of the essays does not do enough in representing detail or intent. Briefly then, in no particular order, Duschinski and Hoffman write about the political association *Majlis-e-Mushawarat* in Srinagar and their use of memory as a negotiating motif, among others, in rendering law, justice and jurisdiction. The *Brogpas* of Ladakh and their genealogical reaches to Aryan purity provide the narrative that Bhan uses to connect ideas of genetic tourism, racial purity and Hindutva co-optation. An articulate police officer speaks with Fazili and expresses the double-sided experience of empathy and complicity when he is both of the ‘Kashmiri’ people and also part of their constraining machinery. Zia narrates a biographical tragedy in Afzal Guru’s life story, which ultimately produces a ‘terrorist’s’ body sentenced to death, symbolically congealed as a threat annihilated and of a nation protected. His is a body unlike those of the raped women that Kazi writes about—the rapes that are widely known, politically charged and publicly lamented, yet disappeared from the registers of accountability and justice. Faheem’s essay makes broad strokes of the many moments