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# Re-curating a literary utopia: creative resistance in Preet Nagar

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Ratika Singh and Samia Singh**

During the Partition of India in August 1947, the majority of the Muslim population in and around the intended township of Preet Nagar in East Punjab left for Pakistan. Pre-Partition, united Punjab had a Muslim population of 53.2 per cent, which dropped to below 1 per cent in the Indian section of Punjab immediately after Partition (Bigelow 2012, 412). Refugees flowing between the newly formed nations would help to change the cultural landscape of the newly partitioned state of Punjab, split between India and Pakistan. The hastily planned population exchange was disastrously mismanaged as violence erupted along religious lines. India and Pakistan did not receive any relief or intervention from the international agencies designed to aid refugees, as they had not yet come into existence (Khan 2007, 64). Urvashi Butalia's work in recording and collecting the experiences of this generation of refugees has become foundational for contemporary historiographies of Partition. Like other scholars of Partition, she engages with projects addressing the Holocaust<sup>1</sup> to consider how the scale, diversity and complexity of

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millions of individual stories can be accounted for in traditional historical approaches which focus on macro or structural factors:

This collection of memories, individual and collective, familial and historical, are what make up the reality of Partition. They illuminate what one might call the ‘underside’ of its history. They are the way in which we can know this event. In many sense, they *are* the history of the event. (Butalia 1998, 8)

In this chapter we focus on creative approaches to understanding what Partition means today in a part of East Punjab close to the Indo-Pak border. The broader project used creative methods in Amritsar (a city profoundly associated with Sikhism) to question how everything other than contemporary Sikh heritage was sidelined by government heritage bodies, demonstrating a steady disinvestment in the area’s rich religious and cultural history that was literally and figuratively being undermined. However, in this chapter we consider a part of the project which turned to one of the Punjabi literature’s most famous sites, a small intended arts colony formed in the 1930s. We worked around the seventieth anniversary of Partition, which was marked by formal exhibitions and some documentaries. But we wanted to divert away from didactic ways of presenting history in order to capture some of the fluid, less visible, ‘underside’ of Partition through cultural memory.

Preet Nagar, loosely translating as ‘abode of love’, was designed to be approximately halfway between two of Punjab’s most important cultural centres: Lahore and Amritsar. Both were vital hubs for a literary, musical and devotional culture which worked across conventional religious lines. Scholars of Punjabi literature such as Farina Mir have placed syncretism at the centre of understanding the experience of Punjabi culture; Mir argues that more conventional alignments between religion and identity obscure the more complex practice of faith and representations of culture in Punjab:

If the main shortcoming of syncretism as an analytic in the literary realm is that it leaves one with nothing but a generic idea of mixture, then in the study of religion the

problems with the term are compounded. In the context of scholarship on South Asian religiosity, syncretism suggests an a priori conflictual relationship between religious traditions, implies that these traditions are coherent, if not pure, and privileges pre-existing religious identities as paramount. (Mir 2012, 230)

To take this specific point and apply it more broadly, the assumption that a population exchange of Muslims for Sikhs, Hindus or Jains in Punjab could be an easy process relies on denying the intricate shared culture of places like Punjab, whose history and culture had grown out of a unique co-existence of religion, language and culture. After Partition, Preet Nagar, rather than being located at the mid-point between two vital hubs of literary and religious culture, was a few kilometres from a new international border. Populations could be crudely segregated along religious lines, but what would Partition mean for the creative and social experiments conducted at Preet Nagar? How can a language, memory, a literary culture, a shared series of cultural practice or shared sacred sites, be partitioned?

Preet Nagar was founded as an intended community by the Punjabi literary figure Gurbakhsh Singh (1895–1977), a member of the Progressive Writers' Association (founded in 1936). The Progressive Writers' Association was a prominent anti-colonial, activist-based collective of writers inspired by international modernism and socialist politics and aesthetics. The creation of Preet Nagar in the 1930s offered a site for leading figures in Punjabi literature, art and culture to meet, work and live together. The site was visited by acclaimed writers such as Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Amrita Pritam, Sahir Ludhianvi and Shiv Batalvi, to name only a few. Preet Nagar was noted by M.K. Gandhi, who said he was aware of the social and artistic experiments being done by young people there. It was visited by Jawaharlal Nehru and also by Rabindranath Tagore's envoy, the then Vice Chancellor of Santiniketan's Visva Bharati University, who called it a 'sister of Santiniketan'. As an incubator for radical social activism that challenged caste and gender discrimination in Punjab, Preet Nagar's mission of social improvement through art and

international solidarity against inequality was a distillation of the Progressive Writers' Association's vision in a single site. The literary magazine founded by Gurbakhsh Singh in 1933, *Preet Lari*, continues to be published from Preet Nagar. Today Preet Nagar exists as a village just outside the small town of Lopoke, west of Amritsar. Leaving Amritsar, the easiest way to find it is to take a parallel road via Ram Tirath towards the Indo-Pak border. Four generations on, the descendants and family of Gurbakhsh Singh still nurture the original vision of the settlement.

Our work in Preet Nagar between 2017 and 2019 used the village's history as an artists' colony with a radical humanist, socialist vision as the starting point for an interruption of mainstream methods in representations of Partition history. Rather than presenting text and image from archives that reify the experiences of individuals, our aim was to draw on personal memory alongside other kinds of 'living' archives, such as the practice of particular craft communities who were descendants of Partition refugees. By placing the strongest emphasis on inclusive creative processes, our hope was that the outcomes would *look* and *feel* different from museum and mainstream representations of Partition. Partnering with Srishti Institute of Art and Design (Bengaluru), one of India's leading schools of art and design, we were based at Preet Nagar and worked extensively with local communities on collaborations that celebrated all forms of creativity, from everyday vernacular creativity (such as telling stories or weaving) to more formal craft and song. Alongside this, we worked to identify the economic potential for communities of using these forms of creativity. This writing brings together a range of voices and perspectives on our work. In this chapter we seek to outline how the utopian politics and aesthetics of a 1930s literary organisation and community can equip us to respond to the experience of social and cultural rifts in the present. We are attuned to the refrains comparing the populist politics and social unrest of the 1930s to our current times. What can we take from the

past moments of creative insurrection against rising nationalisms and religious conflict to design more inclusive communities that can challenge social orthodoxies which reproduce discriminatory privilege? This chapter is written as a collective, but this does not mean our views are homogeneous or that our approaches and ideas are the same. The diversity of practice in this chapter demonstrates how different types of knowledge and practice came together and learned to cooperate within a single site: Preet Nagar.

Oral history projects have sought to gather the testimony of individuals who experienced Partition to form an ongoing project of memorialisation and remembrance (Butalia 1998; Menon and Bhasin 2000; Raychaudhri 2019). Amritsar's recent city redevelopment allocated space to a new Partition Museum, opened to coincide with the seventieth anniversary of Partition. While these projects have used storytellers and artists to engage with the story of Partition, it has been a project of facilitating memory or generating artistic interpretations or representations of Partition. Our work in Preet Nagar sought to make a radical departure from these modes by moving out of urban contexts and by focusing on how a community heavily impacted upon by the refugee crisis of Partition could creatively engage with that legacy to produce cultural and economic opportunities for the present as well as the future. Who deserves art? Who owns it? Who gets to profit from art? We were interested in questioning this.

We shared a collective commitment to Preet Nagar, but we came from different backgrounds and perspectives. Poonam Singh, the current editor of *Preet Lari*, is married to Rati Kant Singh, the manager of *Preet Lari* and the brother of Sumeet Singh, a former editor of *Preet Lari*. Poonam Singh, the daughter of Sheila Didi, the Indian-Kenyan anti-colonial activist and Madan Didi, the poet and trade unionist, is also a trained theatre practitioner and, like her husband, carries a family story conditioned by resistance and activism. Poonam Singh and Rati

Kant's daughters, Samia Singh and Ratika Singh, are the fourth generation of the family who have lived and worked at Preet Nagar. They both attended Srishti and through this project developed an internationally minded and influenced art practice that was designed to be compatible with local, grassroots-driven ideas of creativity, just as earlier generations have done at Preet Nagar through their work on international socialism. Raghavendra Rao KV had taught at Srishti. His experience as a teacher, of producing public art and art which responds to trauma uniquely placed him to help design the residencies at Preet Nagar. Anne Murphy's research on the literary history of Punjab and Punjabi, a tradition dissected by a border and language politics, directly intersected with Preet Nagar's history. Churnjeet Mahn's role in the project came from her work on travel writing in its most expansive sense. This includes writing about the experience of migration, displacement and exile. And like many families, especially diaspora families from Punjab, it was only through an active engagement with the history of Partition that her own family spoke of the experience of Partition for the first time.

Much like the original Progressive Writers' movement, we shared some international alliances on this project. The Partition of Ireland in 1921 and the Partition of Palestine in 1947 offer a larger framework through which to think about how contemporary communities living alongside the legacy of British colonial retreat have used creativity to think across or against border lines and the walls of the nation. Much like the work in the UK in Peterborough, we think about how everyday creativity can be understood in the context of resistance and how it can help with making every day liveable for communities living in the hostile conditions of social inequality. And, like the work on the creative economies, we ask who gets to access professional creative networks and why. The everyday work of *Creative Interruptions* in Punjab was to connect the history to the present, to connect creative pasts to creative futures.

This chapter is designed to give a deeper understanding of how Partition impacted on Punjabi literature and culture, and how our work in Preet Nagar today reconceptualises the vision of the Progressive Writers' movement to use art and creativity as a tool for challenging social inequalities and creating ever more inclusive societies. The next section of this chapter draws on the larger literary and political history of Preet Nagar in order to discuss the emergence of the Progressive Writers' Association, its connections to Punjabi writing and the impact of Partition on Punjabi literary and cultural production. We move to the experience of Preet Nagar today. We draw on the experience of living and working at Preet Nagar to outline the challenges and the importance of developing art-based activism in rural Punjab now. What are the repressive structures and forces Preet Nagar speaks out against today? What is the role of art in resistance to inequality? Environmental and social issues come together in the discussion of the dark side of the Green Revolution in Punjab. We then discuss the development of a grassroots festival outside the formal structures of arts funding in Punjab. For example, in a discussion of metal workers we describe the transformative process of a dwindling community of brass workers viewing themselves for the first time as artists rather than labourers, and how this new status and confidence has allowed them to canvass for better pay. Working against the trend of commercialising 'traditional' crafts through indigenous craft fairs, we discuss how creativity can give communities greater ownership of their work.

## **The emergence of the 'progressive'**

In an extract from the Weekly Report of the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, on 2 January 1936, it was noted regarding the founding of the Progressive Writers' Association in that year that:

the membership of the association is believed to number about twenty, most of whom probably do not realise that they are merely the tools of those behind the scene and that the association is, in fact, merely a recruiting ground for members of the Indian Students' Secret Communist Group in London. (India Office Records 1936)

The manifesto for the organisation was included in the report, with more comment regarding its ties to 'a Moscow-sponsored concern' and 'the British branch of that International'. The report continues:

It has been said above that every effort is being made to conceal the Association's communist inspiration and intentions, but the veil has been lifted a little by a press announcement which summed up the proceedings of the conference and declared that the new literature of India must deal with 'the basic problems of existence to-day – the problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection – and characterize all that drags us down to passivity in action and reason as reactionary. (India Office Records 1936)

The report notes that the Association's journal, *New Indian Literature*, was 'comparatively mild', but argues that concern is still needed: 'the word "progressive" in the Association's title is most significant in this connexion; it may be taken that its literature and policy will be "progressively" revolutionary'.

Modern Punjabi literary work reflects a generally progressive (*pragatīvādī* or *taraqqī pasānd*) set of commitments (Singh 1987), in keeping with the broader connections of modern vernacular literary production in South Asia to a broader history of leftist politics (Gopal 2005, 22). And so this Intelligence Report was in many ways accurate: the Progressive Writers' Association was indeed begun in 1936 with a commitment to critical engagement with and reconstruction of the past and present, towards the production of a future that would exceed the constraints of the present; allied organisations such as the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) followed suit (Gopal 2005, 14).<sup>2</sup> This occurred without, at least at first, a strict adherence to leftist party politics, but these did explicitly shape organisations and individuals increasingly over time (Gopal 2005, 17–18, 20). Progressive interests did not, and still do not, characterise all modern writing; by the early 1940s the increasingly narrow ideological commitments of



‘Progressive’ writers alienated those that did not adhere to its defined programme.<sup>3</sup> But it was overall a foundational context for the late colonial literary world and marked the production of modern literature even among those who challenged a leftist ideological status quo.

We use this example of a state-centred perspective to remind us of the varied ways in which the Progressive movement was received: here, literary activity was construed as ‘threat’. It is crucial, however, to subverting such a mode of engagement to engage with something quite radically other, which defined the Progressive Writers’ movement for its *participants*: the idea of ‘hope’. Modern literary formations in late colonial India embraced a wide range of political and social imaginaries that sought to change the world for the better.

As a movement, the Progressive Writers’ movement was diverse, reflecting the diverse literary heritage of South Asia. While Punjabi has been the popular and vernacular language of Punjab, it has not always been its official language. For example, today, while Punjabi is a widely spoken language within West Punjab (in Pakistan), it is not an official language and is not widely taught in schools. In East Punjab (India), Punjabi is one of the official languages used in government and schooling. The portrait of Punjabi’s status and use as a language becomes more complex when considered in the colonial context. To understand the multilingual environment of Preet Nagar, and the strategic importance of Punjabi’s spoken and literary status, we must turn to colonial language practices.

Work by Farina Mir has revealed the history of what she calls a ‘Punjabi literary formation’ in colonial Punjab, formed outside of direct state control and expressive of a local and yet cosmopolitan vision of being Punjabi (Mir 2010; Diamond 2011). This vision, steeped in a non-religiously inflected sense of *panjābīat* or ‘Punjabiness’, is one that ran counter to the more divisive religiously defined identities also found in colonial Punjab – and which figured in the

partition of the province between Pakistan and India in 1947. As Mir shows, Punjabi literary production flourished in the colonial period despite, and indeed because of, not benefiting from patronage by the state, where ‘communalism was promoted, wittingly or unwittingly, by state and civil society’. Instead, ‘other community affiliations’ flourished in the world of the *qissā* – that is, the world of narrative storytelling akin to the earlier Hindavi *prem-ākhyān* tradition – because of ‘the relative autonomy that colonial language policy itself produced for Punjabi literary and print cultures’. With this contribution, Mir allows us to see how limited understanding had been of colonial-era Punjabi language publishing, and how much moved far beyond the religiously bounded publishing that had been given prior attention in scholarship. Beyond the *qissā* and other diverse forms of literary production (Mir 2010, 14, 15, 24),<sup>4</sup> however, the language also was engaged towards the production of modern literary works as a part of a global conversation in the latter part of the period. It has thus provided a vehicle for the expression of *panjābīat* – the underlying ethos of Mir’s ‘Punjabi literary formation’ – in multiple terms and is as strongly associated with modernist and progressive literary developments as it is with continuing storytelling traditions.<sup>5</sup> The infusion of modernist philosophies and progressive politics placed Punjabi literary production in a unique position to connect vernacular forms of song, folk music and storytelling to international themes on the relationship between the individual and authoritarian or repressive regimes.

After the Conference of Indian Progressives in Lucknow in 1935, Punjabi novelist and short story writer Kartar Singh Duggal (1917–2012) tells us that ‘the old concept of art for art’s sake was formally abandoned ... [marking] a conscious shift in new writing in Punjabi from the portrayal of the privileged to that of the under-privileged’ (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 117).<sup>6</sup> This was accompanied by new interests in dialect and new literary forms, including narrative fiction,

although poetry at first predominated and continues to, in Pakistan, in Punjabi. The modern form of the novel began to emerge by 1898, with Bhai Vir Singh's well-known, originally serialised, novel, *Sundarī*; it was Vir Singh's poetry that was, in fact, most fully modernist in orientation; his novels exhibited a range of performative and historiographical influences, and generally served the author's interests in articulating modern forms of Sikh subjectivity. This was a period of tremendous change and transformation, as Duggal notes above, and writers across languages were at the forefront of imagining social life in new terms. Nanak Singh (1897–1971), generally accepted as modern Punjabi's first great and truly modern novelist, for example, was centrally concerned with social reform; in this, he was accompanied by the great Munshi Premchand (1880–1936), who wrote in Hindi and Urdu and was one of the founding figures of the Progressive Writers' movement. These paths into Punjabi's progressive literary movements bring us to one of its central and defining figures, Gurbakhsh Singh.

Gurbakhsh<sup>7</sup> Singh *Preet Lari* was the founder of the journal *Preet Lari* ('Chain/Garland of Love', providing him his epithet), which was published in Punjabi in the Gurmukhi script, Hindi in the Devanagari script, Urdu in the Perso-Arabic script (called 'Shahmukhi' in Punjabi circles today) and in English. Preet Nagar was founded as a refuge: a place to engage and embody the ideals of 'universal kinship', according to his son Hridaypal Singh, as Gurbakhsh Singh's 'own version of Thoreau's *Walden*' (Walia, 2008). Mohan Singh, Nanak Singh and Amrita Pritam – other greats in the first generation of modern Punjabi writers – were among those who were a part of the Preet Nagar landscape, as were masters of the short story Kartar Singh Duggal (quoted above) and Kulwant Singh Virk, among many others. For many, the site represents the progressive spirit of Punjabi literature in the broadest terms, encapsulating the spirit with which Gurbakhsh Singh wrote and lived. He was trained as an engineer and pursued

advanced study in the US – where he began writing, in English – before returning to India to take up his career and, later, to begin his career as a writer and editor. His early work was influenced by the thought and works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and others. In time, he also came to be strongly influenced by Left and anti-colonial thought and politics. His founding of Preet Nagar can be seen to reflect his commitment to social change and communal living, and the social reconstruction of society along progressive lines.

Gurbakhsh Singh *Preet Lari* engaged with the *qissā*, rewriting them as modern stories, but more broadly engaged in wide-ranging experiments with a range of modern forms, from the novel to the essay or commentary (Singh n.d.). As an author, he is well known for his two novels and an impressive number of essays/non-fictional prose and short stories, and drama, for his one full-length play and several one-act plays. Gurbakhsh Singh *Preet Lari* is perhaps best known for his ground-breaking book *Anviāhī Mān* or ‘Unwed Mother’ (first published in *Preet Lari* in 1938, and later independently in 1942), which portrayed the trials of a woman who falls for a young man wrongly condemned to death and suffers condemnation and vulnerability for carrying the child who results. The valorisation of an idealised love that moved beyond social constraints was a hallmark of his work and philosophy, but was also centrally configured to challenge social norms related to gender (with some question of how fully the implications of such a challenge were embraced, as Parvinder Dhariwal (2009) has explored). The concern that Singh expressed in this novel and other works, such as *Khulhā Dar* (1947), for the status of women and their plight in a patriarchal society was indicative of a broader interest among Gurmukhi Punjabi authors in critiquing gendered social relationships through fiction; this accompanied a concern for unequal social relations and exploitation. But Sant Singh Sekhon and Kartar Singh Duggal and have argued that what he was most popular for was his ‘non-religious, secular thinking and

polite, refined tone and manner’, which are most fully represented in his wide-ranging non-fiction essays in a biographical or autobiographical mode, on human values and qualities, criticism, or on contemporary times (Sekhon and Duggal 1992, 365). He described his vision of an ideal world in several works, such as *Changerī Duniyā* (1947) and *Navīn Takri Duniyā* (1950).<sup>8</sup> After Partition, Preet Nagar found itself in the midst of one of the twentieth century’s largest refugee crises. It never recovered its geographical status as a key hub on the road between Amritsar and Lahore, but its significance as the location for *Preet Lari* persisted. The descendants of Gurbakhsh Singh kept the magazine going, speaking up for the cause of women and the dispossessed and exploring development in a new globalised world, but the golden days of Preet Nagar’s almost nine-year utopian experiment before the Partition were essentially over.

## **Revisiting the ‘progressive’ now**

In the first part of the chapter we focused on the literary and political heritage of Preet Nagar. This was the heritage that surrounded us throughout the project. One of the original Preet Nagar houses built in the 1930s has undergone a full restoration and is the home of the current editor and manager of *Preet Lari*. Off the beaten track, Preet Nagar is known well locally, but it is not the hub it used to be. Literary periodicals have suffered, especially with the advent of the internet and social media. Despite this, *Preet Lari* maintains its reputation in Punjab (in India and Pakistan) and among the Punjabi diaspora as a well-known and well-respected outlet for Punjabi writing. However, much has changed. During the project we would spend evenings sitting on the veranda of the house in Preet Nagar and participating in one of the quintessential pastimes of Punjab: discussing place and politics. Preet Nagar had been founded on the spirit of creativity, cooperation, community and equality. What had changed?

The very sense of community and cooperation as an ingrained value system of village life in Punjab suffered a death blow when the Green Revolution of the 1960s broke the necessity for it; from helping each other with irrigation from the canals, to bringing ploughs to plough one another's fields, or even asking for tractors and tubewell water. Individualism replaced this, with everyone who had some land going to the banks to get a tractor and tubewells financed. Growing more crops than they needed for themselves from the yield of new seeds and methods of cultivation resulted not in an increase in gentility but in brashness. The accumulation of wealth was a priority, even if it risked the land for future generations. Traditional methods such as crop rotation and knowledge about the soil in particular regions, and its relationship to seasonal flooding and weather changes, were replaced by pesticides and aggressive boring for water to support crops not naturally suited to much of Punjab. The abundance of dairy farming has drastically changed not only the diet but also the economy of Punjab. The prioritisation of profit over sustainability has caused an environmental crisis. Many of the historic trees and sand dunes of Punjab have been replaced by arable land.

Technology has revolutionised farming, but advances in technology have made another significant change to the landscape of Punjab. The 2001 Indian Census showed that there were 798 live female births, as compared to 1,000 live male births. Action by the Indian government helped to drastically change these figures by the 2018 Census, but the illegal use of technology to screen for female foetuses continues.

The area around Preet Nagar today abounds with economic activity, a result of the relatively recent economic reforms, globalisation and the free market economy. A plumber, electrician, mechanic, carpenter, mobile phone seller, typist, printer, doctor, medical lab technician, physiotherapist are all professions available within five to ten kilometres. However,

the experience of economic mobility is not universal. High rates of poverty and an endemic drug problem are part of every village and town in the area. There is poor educational attainment, especially in underfunded government schools, which increasing numbers of Punjabi middle-class households opt out of. In this context, creativity is far more than visual or representational art, it is the art of everyday existence in the context of precarity and insecurity. People are innovating to solve problems every day of their lives, especially where resources or products might not be available or may have to be created from scratch. For example, a customised hybrid between a motorbike and a rickshaw, a *gharukka*, can transport several people in an area like Preet Nagar, where public transport is not always reliable. Daily life requires *jugaad* (creative work-around using basic resources or ‘hack’) solutions. As Punjab has adapted, so have the subsequent generations of Preet Nagar adapted to the changing audiences and needs of the people who read *Preet Lari* and the people who live in and around Preet Nagar.

The Preet Nagar Artist Residency programme was developed as a way of connecting new generations to the original vision of Preet Nagar. Drawing on existing initiatives developed at Preet Nagar such as the *Preet Sainik* (the Volunteer-Guardians of Love) and an Activity School (a residential and co-educational school), the residency was designed to host artists for varying lengths of time. Food was provided from the on-site farm and artists were encouraged to meet villagers and actively engage with their environment. The residency offered a format that was translatable for contemporary artists and creative practitioners but drew its inspiration from the original vision of Preet Nagar, which was to have creative work and manual work coexist in order to promote an understanding of social codependency and interrelatedness. Running the residency always posed challenges, as there was no access to the professional resources or equipment offered at some other artist residential sites. However, the residency also never

charged the high fees of some other residencies. Festivals and events held at Preet Nagar have been designed with inclusivity and progressive social values as a guiding principle. The Preet Nagar Residency has been designed as an alternative site for international artistic collaboration, one which sits in stark opposition to larger commercial art scenes and festivals in India.

Since the 1990s, the growth of biennales and large-scale festivals, such as the Jaipur Literary Festival, has demonstrated how commercial interests have successfully monetised Indian culture for the consumption of a growing international audience: ‘produced by itinerant curators and nomadic artists who pay lip service to local concerns while addressing an increasingly mobile global spectatorship, biennials resemble multinational corporations in the sense that their sphere of action, power, and control transcends national boundaries while they are selectively benefitting from national frameworks of support and validation’ (Blom, quoted in D’Souza and Manghani 2017, 23). While the state has recognised the economic potential of international and tourist-facing art events, the lack of community-level, educational or state-level investment in art has created a bifurcated understanding of art and its production in government policy and public discourse.<sup>9</sup> The development of art in India has become dependent on its ability to adapt the powers of commercial forces that can be managed and understood in the market economy (Ciotti 2012).

Art is still considered a luxury in India; the former patronage of the feudal class has not been replaced with the infrastructure and networks to foster and protect the role of the arts and humanities. The aspirations of a young person from an ordinary background to study art will not be fostered by education or cultural example. The artisan, someone who incorporated artistic practice into everyday life, is mostly reduced to daily labour in order to earn a living. For a villager in Punjab, art is still something for museums, exhibitions to be appreciated by the



wealthier classes. It is a leisure activity or sign of social capital for the middle classes. It is not connected to local communities.

## **Collaborative artist residences at Preet Nagar**

The art that was created during two residencies that occurred in the months of October and November 2018 was varied in terms of medium, approach and scale. Artists were from different backgrounds and at different points in their careers. There were five students from Srishti Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore pursuing their Masters in Contemporary Art Practices and Digital Filmmaking. And there were emerging and mid-career artists creating art that expanded their art practice and yet, at the same time, commented on the specifics of the given subject. Everyone was asked to engage with the history of Partition. For some, that meant talking to local villagers who were, themselves, Partition refugees. For others, it involved researching forms of craft that moved when the border was created. And for others still, it was about imagining how to creatively represent the idea of borders or of lost language and place.

Although there was diversity in the kind of art that was created, some connected with others either in terms of the theme or in terms of chosen medium. Recent alumnus of Srishti, Gavati Wad, worked with moving image as her medium, and so did Masters students of the same institute. Her video piece represents an amalgamation of theatre performance with local actors from a nearby village with whom she worked during the residency: art performance and still images and the students' work were leaning towards documentary-style work (Figure 6.1). In Wad's words:

*Auzaar* is a film that questions the idea of division and the tools used to implement it, through a collage of video performances. The legacy of religious politics left behind by the Partition in 1947 continues to be re-invoked in modern day Indian politics. In recent times, questions of national identity and performances of patriotism have forced

people to pick a side once again. Lines of distinction are constantly resurrected and reiterated to benefit those in positions, and possession of power.

**[INSERT FIGURE 6.1]**

In one of the documentaries, titled *Virah*, Sreshta Suresh tries to understand the difficult phase of the separatist movement in the Indian Punjab in the mid-1980s through interviews with a resident of Preet Nagar. The audience is offered a sense of more recent struggles in the space where Preet Nagar is situated. In his documentary-style video *Living in Memory*, Athul Jith explored the history of Preet Nagar through interviews with individuals connected to Preet Nagar and its founder, Gurbakhsh Singh. He used archival photographs and video clips along with the interviews in a classical fashion. Nina Celada uses her interactions with contemporary Punjabi writers living in three different countries (who are connected to each other by the Facebook group of the magazine *Preet Lari*) in her work *Around Preet Nagar*. In Nina's words, her film 'shows how Preet Lari offers a platform to Punjabi writers in South Asia and abroad, and the vital importance of social media to connect people, memories, literature and action across borders'.

Samia Singh and Ratika Singh, who manage the residency, are committed to using art as a vehicle for social change and artistic experimentation. They both worked with non-profit organisations to create products that could help to sustain and develop the communities. Samia Singh created *Weaving a Future Picture of Punjab* in collaboration with members of a not-for-profit organisation, Kheti Virasat Mission (KVM), in Indian Punjab. She created a few landscape paintings of a view that she has been watching over her years growing up in Preet Nagar. The colour palette from the painting was used to create *Khes*, a blanket. In her words:

Those colours and memories of the land around Preet Nagar are the fabric of the painting and the khes, along with the accompanying items. It marries the traditional craft of khes-making with more contemporary forms of art, both coming from, and evoking, Punjab.

Ratika Singh created a photo essay titled *Or They Will Not Exist* (Figure 6.2). The project represented a part of her larger effort to interact with local craftspeople and find a way to connect the modern market and traditional craft without compromising the quality of the product. Her works in this show took the form of photographic and video portraits of the few remaining craftspeople of Jandiala Guru (Amritsar) and the tangible and intangible heritage of the craft.

**[INSERT FIGURE 6.2]**

There were two works that looked at Partition and its influence on contemporary life, a longing for the lost world and its understanding. Rachita Burjapati and Manvi Bajaj, both Masters students in Contemporary Art Practices from Srishti, created objects. Burjapati's installation worked as a sort of lamentation on the absence of Persian words and Farsi script from the modern-day Punjabi language in Indian Punjab. Her work consisted of woven texts on a mesh that stood with the help of a stand. With directed lighting, the installation created a brilliant play of presence and absence of words: the painted words in Perso-Arabic or *nāstalīq* script on the mesh disappeared in the shadow, but the words in Gurmukhi that were woven on the mesh appeared in the shadow below. Only Gurmukhi, the piece shows, has been given a place. Bajaj created work that focused on the loss of home and belonging that Punjabis faced as they moved from the region that became Pakistan to the Indian part of Punjab. Her work also explores the loss of memories that she feels as a part of the third generation of a family that migrated. She created a 'book' made of fabric with woven thread that forms disconnected lines and a book with stained and burned-out sheets of paper with drawn lines. She invites her audience to go through the books, to find what is lost.

Two sets of work by Shashank Peshawaria, an emerging artist and alumnus of the Royal College of Art (London), and Taha Ahmed and Kanza Fatima, who worked collaboratively as an

artist–curator duo, employed photography to articulate their assessments of contemporary Punjab in relation to Partition. Peshawaria created two sets of work. The first, *A Borderless Picture*, was made in collaboration with Saiyna Bashir (Pakistan) consisting of a series of ten photographs showing rural Punjabi landscapes from both sides of the Indo-Pakistan border (Figure 6.3). These images, captured in the spring and early summer months of 2018, invited viewers to think about their assumptions and potential biases as they tried to distinguish which pictures are of the Indian side and which of the Pakistani side. His second work, *Same Difference*, is a video installation. Peshawaria installed a television monitor in wheat fields around Lopoke and Preet Nagar (both villages in Punjab, India) from 18 to 20 March, 2018. The monitor displayed video recordings of fields in the Pakistani Punjab provided by Furrukh A. Khan (Lahore University of Management Sciences). In the artist’s words:

This was an attempt to integrate, symbolically, the two partitioned sides of rural Punjab through a physical joining of the screen and the fields, intended to incite passersby and the local public to reflect on what is shared with the land beyond the border – rurality, ecology, agriculture, fauna and labour.

**[INSERT FIGURE 6.3]**

Taha Ahmed and Kanza Fatima created *Drawn into Two, Which Way Home?* a photo essay that looks at, in the words of the artist and curator, ‘freedom at the cost of a division’. Ahmed and Fatima’s photographic project is a visual journey in a transformed landscape of Punjab which mirrors that captured in the story ‘Toba Tek Singh’ by writer Saadat Hasan Manto (a writer from the late colonial period who created searing portraits of the Partition of Punjab.) Ahmed and Fatima say:

‘Toba Tek Singh’ is located in a lunatic asylum and thus takes the theme of partition to the world of the insane highlighting the political absurdity of the Partition itself and at the same time lodges a note of protest against the powers that be, who take such momentous decisions as splitting a country.

Two works were created with major contributions by two local young women, Roma and Roshan, from marginalised communities, in their making: Krishna Luchoomon's work titled *Muffled Stories* and Rao KV's *Duje Passe Ton [From The Other Side]*. Luchoomon focused on the art-making process itself: collecting fabric worn by people from various social backgrounds facing different kinds of discrimination in the villages surrounding Preet Nagar. The local women contributed by stitching together various worn cloth components into a large-scale fabric that was suspended from the ceiling, allowing audiences to walk around it (Figure 6.4).

Luchoomon says:

My project is not only a reflection on the troubled history of partitioning of Punjab, it also addresses the partition that is currently happening in the name of religion, ethnicity and national identity in many corners of the world.

**[INSERT FIGURE 6.4]**

The two young women contributed to the creation Rao KV's piece by creating embroidered text in Gurmukhi and Shahmukhi that said *Duje passe Ton* (from the other side) on two *phulkari* fabrics. Rao KV created a video that consisted of interviews of two individuals from Preet Nagar – Nirvel Singh, an older man who experienced the Partition as a young boy, and Rati Kant Singh, grandson of Gurbakhsh Singh and manager of *Preet Lari* magazine. Through these interviews Rao KV tried to capture experiences of migration, loss and nostalgia, as well as of a renegotiation of and coming-to-terms with a difficult past and present. This, he says, is connected to his larger project *Mending Cracks*, which looks at trauma, memory and healing. The video was screened in between the embroidered fabric pieces.

Art exhibitions typically take place in galleries and museums, in urban spaces with access to certain kinds of audience: paying visitors and art enthusiasts. However, there have been efforts across the world, although few, to have art workshops and exhibitions in rural spaces, held both by art organisations and by individual artists. In this context, it seemed natural to offer a 'mela'

(meeting or festival) as an experience for audiences who were not familiar with visiting exhibitions of art and those that were, but not in the context of a festival (Figure 6.5). The exhibition of art that was created as part of the residency addressed intellectual questions regarding Partition, memory and a certain sense of loss. The other aspect of the mela was exuberant celebration of life and local traditions – kite flying, doll making and folk dance. These two aspects, although opposite in nature, created an environment for people to take part in the mela with ease. The idea was also to develop diverse future art enthusiasts and not to assume that an audience for art can exist only in big cities. Through the mela, a curiosity has been sown into the local audience.

**[INSERT FIGURE 6.5]**

Art residency programmes all over the world typically have two models: one where the residency is situated in an urban context with accessibility to galleries, studios, etc.; and the other where it is situated in a rural, rather exotic and picturesque location where artists experience tranquillity. Laura Kenins writes in her rather hard-hitting essay critiquing residencies: ‘Subscribe to any art mailing list and every week brings a new crop of application deadlines for residencies, ... Some are urban, while others appeal to a desire to get away from it all and work in beautiful natural environments’ (Kenins 2013). The Preet Nagar Residency, however, does not fall easily into either one of these poles. We did not run a commercial residency, and through a process of co-designing a call by the team, interviewing candidates and asking people to engage with the specific history and politics of Preet Nagar, we differentiated ourselves from mainstream offerings. Artistic resources at Preet Nagar were basic, there was no internet (not in order to provide peaceful surroundings, but because it was not available) and residents lived in simple surroundings. Our goal was to bring artists from various places and backgrounds to Preet

Nagar, a rural environment which possesses a tranquil and beautiful landscape, but which also carries a heavy history and collective memory of Partition and trauma. As some artists had very little knowledge of Partition and its effects in the Punjab, placing them in such an environment made them find answers to their own questions, as confusing as they might be. The process was one of searching and finding a suitable medium and method to express what was found.

At the final exhibition, a group of local young men stood in front of the exhibition. One young man asked the group what it was about. Before reading the Project statement, one of the other men shared his understanding of the exhibit as the ‘stories and lives of all these people seen together as one from a different perspective’. Throughout the process we were committed to democratising access to art, indeed, to seeing art as a right and requirement of democratic values such as equality. Bringing artists from across India and the world to a local village always had an element of risk in it. Would the artists engage with the history of Preet Nagar and draw something from its history of creative activism? As well as drawing craftspeople into the artistic process, we decided to create a forum that could design a more inclusive experience for everyone in Preet Nagar.

## **Mela: democratising access to art**

In a world where art and various forms of expression and storytelling are the luxurious privileges of few and the art world is seen to belong to the elites, the gathering became, by the very nature of its being a mela, a platform in which everyone had different kinds of ownership. There were no paid tickets and no charge for food. This was a place for anyone who wanted to engage with the arts. By being held in the village of Preet Nagar, the exhibition belonged to the local village because it was held in a field and a house everyone knew. Members of the village contributed to

designing and supporting the delivery of the weekends in February 2018. As the size of the mela grew, so did the number of opportunities for local people to contribute. In total, approximately fifty people living in or locally to Preet Nagar gained employment in time-limited projects or commissions during the residencies and mela. The exhibition displayed art in the fields and open spaces, as well as in exhibition spaces built specifically for this festival by transforming a cowshed and a large chicken coop into gallery spaces that provided for quality exhibition of the art pieces, giving emphasis to the viewer's experience. We took the art out of the conventional gallery space and brought it to the people.

Young women working professionally as tailors in the local market collaborated with artists. For the first time they worked not on sewing garments but on putting together a narrative or concept in textile. They were excited about this possibility and were inspired by the works. Later, when the completed works were exhibited at the mela, they proudly brought their friends and family, telling them that they had worked on the exhibit. Working with local youth and skilled individuals from the area, the visiting artists would explain their concepts and pieces of work. The local collaborators had questions for them as well as skills which they could share with the artists. In this participation there is always something for both sides to learn. Such participation and collaboration bring new dimensions to storytelling, moving away from single stories or perspectives.

A family of craftsmen at Jandiala Guru, who are the eighth generation of skilled craftsmen working with brass, participated in one of the artist's works. They were later invited to have a stall and speak about their practice. They had good sales and saw that visitors were genuinely interested to know more about their craft. They were moved by the respect they received as artists themselves. Gaurav, a craftsman present at the stall, told us that it was the first



time he felt like he was indeed an artist. His work had always been seen as labour, and his fee had always been paid by the standard counting of the number of hours worked and the weight of the metal used. He was moved that purchasers were not interested in bargaining for his creations but approached him as any other artist whose work was on show. He and his family later told us that they felt inspired and better positioned to ask for a respectable fee, refusing to be looked upon as labourers rather than artists and craftsmen.

In another project an artist worked with women from the village of Jairo on traditional weaving crafts through a local branch of the KVM NGO. Six women aged from forty to seventy-five years participated in the artist's project as professional collaborators. It was the first time for the eldest woman, a great grandmother, to complete a commissioned project. She had knowledge and experience of procuring wild cotton from beside local ponds, of spinning it into thread and dyeing and weaving the threads into colourful rugs and khes. The NGO reports that knowledge of weaving practices in local families is in decline, as it is not practised by the younger generations. This has contributed to the decline in women's mental health and wellbeing. Weaving was a social activity, where female members of the family would sit and weave together. It was also a form of regular exercise as well as of socialising. The NGO held a stall at the mela and invited the women weavers to come and talk about their works. The weavers reported feeling pride in talking about their creations, the different motifs and stories told in their rugs and the age-old practice of their craft.

During the mela, musicians from the region travelled to the mela to hold concerts. Folk songs, new compositions, *qissā* and lyrics were performed together, thereby bringing the literary and the vernacular cultures of Punjab together. All the food, decorations, printing, entertainment, etc. that became part of the mela were produced locally. This provided the people with a deeper

sense of ownership. The stage manager, the chef, the printer, the tailors, etc. were all professionals from the village, the neighbouring villages and a few from the city of Amritsar. Women were in leading roles during the project at every level. The women in charge of the residency home and kitchen took great pride in organising the event and participating in the dances, and confidently led other women to join in the fun and celebration. What the mela demonstrated on a local level to Preet Nagar's community was that art can be a tool of social, economic and cultural development.

## Conclusion

Art can work as a socially progressive tool, but communicating this message in Punjab is difficult. The kind of employment generated, and the involvement and participation the project received, were inspiring not only to us and our participants, but also to larger organisations in Amritsar who took an interest in our activities. This was a very different model of development from all other models we have seen reach the villages around us. It worked on a different level from the government schemes which take a top-down approach that focuses on immediate and measurable success and impact. We could not accurately measure our impact until we had been given an opportunity to create and collaborate in new, risky ways which could, ultimately, fail.

An example of this came in the form of the *algoza* (a pipe-like instrument) player who lives in Preet Nagar. He is economically marginalised within Preet Nagar but is a proud person. He creates his own employment in various ways. One such way is to collect the large amount of *jamun* (a type of astringent plum) fruit that falls from the trees and rots away or gets trampled on. He collects it and dries it and takes it to the city herbalists. Similarly, he carves out art pieces from scrap wood; this and his *algoza* playing added to the festivity of the mela, giving him a

pride of place and a sense of self-worth as well as a new visibility within the village. The women working in the kitchen of the Preet Nagar house numbered about eight. They participated in the folk dancing during the mela, contributing songs from their own home villages and those of their mothers. During the weekends of the mela they were workers, but they were also performers and artists. We could not have predicted these outcomes, this sense of ownership and pride, at the beginning of our process.

Like the founders of Preet Nagar, the residences and the mela found a way to use creativity to connect people to progressive and inclusive politics. By stretching the definition of art to include the creative practice of people normally marginalised from the creative economies, we found new routes for the recognition and legitimisation of artistic practice which moved beyond manual labour. By creating a mela, we collectively created a creative forum which created space for professionally developed visual art work, along with vernacular and folk creative practice, song, music and dance. Instead of limiting visual art work developed by artists with international training to the exclusive galleries of cities like Delhi and Amritsar, we not only made this work free to view, but invited people to talk, laugh and critique the work – in other words, to break down some of the usual reverent atmosphere of professional galleries.

Our work took place in the margins. We were not part of mainstream or larger economies related to art and artist residencies. We were not located in an urban centre. This afforded us certain freedoms. We were not beholden to a gallery or sponsorship and our success depended on scales of participation. The more people in the village and surrounding areas who participated, the more capacity we could build and the larger the audiences would be. Without a marketing budget, it was word of mouth and an interest in Preet Nagar that attracted over a thousand people to come to the mela. Nuns from the local convent school, highly educated and privileged figures,

visitors from the Punjabi diaspora, everyday workers, families and children from a variety of backgrounds; the Mela aimed to create an egalitarian spirit by bringing people together as an audience, guests of the house regardless of their background. Feedback from the mela tells us that, as an experiment, it was a success. It interrupted the life, economy and daily rhythm of the village. It generated new aspirations and future visions. Its sustainability, however, in the context of chronically low funding for the arts in Punjab, poses a problem that needs to be answered with even more robust examples of art's potential to create progressive, inclusive and creative social structures where art is not placed in opposition to work, but is seen as part of a continuum of every person's daily practice in life.

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## **Notes**

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- 1 The Holocaust, and language associated with it is referenced in Partition Studies and literature (see, for example, Butalia's use of James Young in Butalia, 1998). A more recent example can be seen in the language of pogroms used by Mira Kamdar, among others, to describe the violence directed at Muslims which erupted at the beginning of 2020 (Kamdar 2020). These connections form part of the implicit and explicit network of associations between the violence of Partition and ongoing tensions understood as being between religious groups, which are then utilised by the state.
- 2 IPTA was founded in 1943.
- 3 The Urdu short story writer Sadat Hasan Manto quite famously parted company with the 'progressives'; for discussion see Murphy (2018).
- 4 Punjabi was used for the traditional forms that Mir focuses on, such as the *qissā*, as well as for religiously marked discourses of debate and reform, historical inquiry and theology, and sometimes for utilitarian work in the period, with considerable diversity of types of literature in both Shahmukhi and Gurmukhi, and with strong parallels among work in both scripts (Murphy 2018).
- 5 For a useful, succinct overview of South Asian modernist and progressive literature, see Singh (2010).
- 6 This paragraph draws on general information provided in Murphy (2015).
- 7 Often spelled in English as 'Gurbux'.
- 8 This paragraph draws on Murphy (2020).
- 9 An example of this can be seen in the attempt to create a People's Museum in Amritsar in one of the converted historic gates of the city. Despite a positive reception from the media and some municipal officials, the site was closed after two months to be repurposed for private commercial use.