

## INDIA 1947-2007: A REFLECTION

Jubilee Rajiah



Figure 1: Jitish Kallat, 2003, *Public Notice*, burnt adhesive on acrylic mirror, wood and stainless steel frames, 5 panels, each 198.1 x 137.1 x 15.2, collection: Shumita and Arani Bose, New York, photographer Reena Saini Kallat, installation view at the National Gallery of Modern Art, Mumbai in 2003 (image courtesy of the artist).

Jitish Kallat's *Public Notice* (figures 1 and 2) is an apt symbolic depiction of India as it is today, more than fifty years after Independence. It is a work that is poignant and disturbing; distorted, mangled and warped, and yet large and imposing and gripping. The lofty ideals and inspirational themes burnt and inscribed on it were first proclaimed during the auspicious and momentous event of declaration of Independent India. Nehru's famous speech was delivered at midnight on the 14th of August 1947 when India gained independence after two centuries of British rule. India held its breath and throughout the land people waited with expectant anticipation for their beloved leader to deliver his speech. "And, at the stroke of the midnight hour, Nehru spoke. In English." Pavan K Varma points this out in his book *The Great Indian Middle Class*.<sup>1</sup>

Nehru's speech was elegant and beautifully crafted, and is indelibly fixed in the memory of all Indians. It is etched in history just like other famous speeches by prominent and important statesmen and political figures. The striking contradiction and incongruity of Nehru addressing a newborn Independent India in English appears to have gone unnoticed and unremarked until Varma's study on contemporary India and its overpoweringly prominent middle-class. *Public Notice* powerfully, vividly and disturbingly illustrates India as it is today. It does in art what Varma has daringly and distressingly portrayed in his book.

Nehru's speech was inspiring and evocative. "Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure but very substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will wake to life and freedom. A moment comes but rarely in history, when we step from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance."

Sixty years from that night, Varma avers that India is still trysting. India has achieved and maintained its position as the largest democracy in the world. But what has happened to the Gandhi-Nehru legacy? What has become of the dreams and desires of the newly independent India? What is the reality for the people of India? Has India indeed woken to life and freedom? Varma's penetrating insight into the heart of India, its polity and its people is frightening and painful. His book confronts and challenges, and does not grant the average middle-class Indian any comfort or credibility. He traces the beginnings of the Indian middle-class to the time of British rule. He explores the creation of this élite group by the British, who chose them and cultivated them for their proficiency in the English language. They occupied important positions of civil office under the British, and they were the professionals and the educated who established themselves in a privileged and secure world.

Whilst the vision for Independent India focused on the poor and disadvantaged, and on rural India, this was eclipsed as Varma says by the stronghold of the élite who could not, and would not internalise the legacy that Gandhi and Nehru wished to leave for India. Gandhi's emphasis was on the upliftment of the poor and illiterate, the disadvantaged and disenfranchised; and Nehru's focus was on modernity, science and technology for the sake of loosening the hold that religion had on Indians.

Fledgling independent India grappled with these ideals but the élite and the middle-class feathered their nests, and did no more than pay lip-service to making this a reality. Economic reforms in 1991 saw a rapidly burgeoning and powerful middle-class and the ever-increasing prominence of India in the global arena. Varma demonstrates with utmost clarity in his book that modernity and progress for India have become synonymous with materialism, self-service and exclusivity, with a total lack of social sensitivity and concern for the majority of Indians who are poor, illiterate, hungry, and shackled by the issues of caste, creed and colour which the middle class sheds when convenient and holds onto when it suits their purposes.

Varma's thesis fits perfectly with Kallat's installation. It is only élite and middle-class Indians who are likely to view this piece of art. Standing in front of the installation and seeing oneself reflected amongst the inscriptions forces one to come to the shocking and uncomfortable realisation that the broken, burnt and warped ideology one reads there is in fact a mirror image of oneself, of the destructive and twisted way in which Indians have actually lived and worked out their independence and freedom. The trysting with destiny currently entails despicable treatment of our poor and disadvantaged. Seen in this light, the inscriptions are a mockery when juxtaposed with communal riots, religious tensions, unimaginable disparity between rich and poor, and the tyranny of caste and class that continue to plague India.

Kallat, like Varma, convicts the educated, middle-class Indian and provokes intense shame and guilt. They are ruthlessly honest, and they are able to instruct and inspire. Perhaps the Gandhi-Nehru legacy will be rekindled, and perhaps India will truly wake to life and freedom for all its people?

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1 Pavan K Varma, *The Great Indian Middle Class* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1998).

Figure 2: Jitish Kallat, 2003, *Public Notice* detail, burnt adhesive on acrylic mirror, wood and stainless steel, collection: Shumita and Arani Bose, New York, photographer Reena Saini Kallat (image courtesy of the artist).

