

Mapping the Fall of a Dome and Last Supper on the Streets: An Artist's Dialogue with His Times

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Abstract: This paper throws light on contemporary Indian life with reference to a painting produced using the visual language of maps. This work, in the form of a map, brought to the fore the images of a violated Muslim body and the dome of the demolished Mosque of *Babri* at its centre. It combined images from particular historical contexts with texts in English and Malayalam and visual symbols from the cyber world. It attempted to delineate the exclusionary Indian social history where minorities were targeted based on their beliefs, food habits, and clothing. It is argued that the violent discourse of nationalism based on xenophobia has been spreading nationwide with the proliferation of mobile phones and the internet. The painting tried to expose the supposed neutrality of cartographic science and smart phones by weaving them together in the wake of violent nationalistic discourse and activities spread across the country. The cartographic visual framework is an appropriate artistic strategy to engage with the violence unleashed on people with different denominations within their country's geography. It critiques the demand for authentic national behaviour based on the majority religion's perspective in a country with many faiths co-existed for centuries.

Practical Implications: This paper discusses a painting that critiques the violent social landscape of India. A highly varied visual culture that constantly shapes societies requires research-oriented image-making with social responsibility and ethical concerns. This study offers a model for critical image-making practice for the culture industry.

Keywords: Anthropomorphised Cartography; Cyberspace; Food Habits; Homeland; Violence

1. Introduction

This paper discusses one of my paintings titled '*mapping the fall of a dome and last supper on the streets*' (**Figure 1**). The painting is conceptualized as a map that allows the viewers to undertake an itinerary back in time to historically analyze the sites of germination of violence and critically engage with their present in the context of homeland. The work is premised around violent incidents of the recent past in the Indian social landscape and its filiation to past cataclysms like the partition of India that resulted in chronic wounds in peoples' minds. The work meticulously weaves together a map of two parallel geographies. First is the natural geography with land, water, air, and its flora and fauna in which the people as citizens imagined and materially experienced their life in a homeland, and the second is the virtual geography of the cyber world in which we recently started living simultaneously. The complexity of violent actions and speeches performed and delivered in the real geographical locations used and misused in the virtual spaces for targeting weaker sections within the country is addressed through this work. The unifying mission of Indian nationalism is transforming into an exclusionary mission against its minorities. This painting interrogates and exposes Indian society's day-to-day production of



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Mapping the Fall of a Dome and Last Supper on the Streets

discrimination and violence online and offline. I incorporate various conceptual and visual strategies in this work (discussed in detail in the following sections) to open multiple thresholds for the spectators to generate critical insights.



Figure 1. Medium- Brick powder, Glitter powder & water color on paper (Dimensions- 5x 4 feet).

2. The rationale for using the map as a visual language

The map of India in the minds of the Indian populace is not a mere cartographic image; instead, it is etched as an anthropomorphised cartographic hybrid image (*Bharatmatha*) over more than a hundred years (Ramaswami, 2002 & 2010; Sen 2002) in the process of “imagining” (Anderson, 1983) the nation. The dominant Hindu religion’s pantheon has guided this anthropomorphizing process (Ramaswami, 2010; Sen, 2002). This exclusionary image-making during the colonial era, perceived and perpetuated as the norm, eventually revealed its limitation in an independent India imagined as secular and democratic. The anthropomorphized map emerged in the early twentieth century, traversed through colonial and post- colonial India, eventually forming and transforming the social psyche. I considered the familiarity and popularity of maps with anthropomorphic imaginaries among Indian viewers as a threshold to enter into an artistic dialogue. Therefore, I chose an anthropomorphized map as a creative strategy to critically engage with the social landscape where I work as an artist.

3. Violence: A tool of ‘othering’ by delegitimizing the differences

Violence is a part of human nature and civilization (Pinker 2012), and it has been recurring across societies against religious, ethnic and sexual “others” (Bowling, 1998; Bauman, 1989; Horowitz, 1985; Onken, 1998). How it had been executed and understood was diverse in different periods and among different societies (Hanagan, 2003) and produced “its own socio-politically determined forms of violence as well as its own codified discourse on the phenomenon” (Hanssen, 2000). According to Tripathi, “Violence is generally understood as an intentional act that is carried out with a purpose to inflict physical, social, economic, political or psychological harm” (Tripathi, 2016). ‘Homeland’ is also a concept that nurtures and legitimizes violence to maintain power and to control large masses of people by those in power. In a nation-

state with diverse societies, every ethnic, religious, or political group has their imaginary homeland with the same cartographic boundaries but with some groups excluded mentally.

Indian social and political landscape operates as a breeding site for exclusionary narratives and accompanying violence that threatens its official democratic and constitutional values (Hansen, 2021). Intercommunal riots persist in India (Banerjee, 1990) as a result. Politically manufactured seeds of hatred against those who belong to other religious or political beliefs, castes, and linguistic and ethnic groups are sowed in people's minds for immediate political or economic gains (Brass, 2003). This othering process within one's homeland generates fear and unleashes violence against citizens of different denominations. It intensified into a new phase in India, especially after the late 1980s through the 2000s (Hansen, 2021; Jaffrelot, 2003). The manufacturers of this extreme right-wing violence propagate that differences of any kind within the nations' boundaries are a threat, and eradicating such differences is the duty of the 'authentic' citizen. This delegitimized India's slogan of 'unity in diversity' elaborated extensively by Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru in his 1946 book 'Discovery of India' and further taken as a slogan for the independent India. Today's right-wing agendas replace it with violent actions that envisage a nation with a monolithic religious, ethnic, and cultural identity. This results in large groups/communities intolerance towards people with different lifestyles, food habits, and beliefs. This intolerance often pops up in Indian socio-political geography and the newly emerged cyber geographies where violence is exchanged between groups. This mainly affects the lives of ethnic, religious, linguistic, and sexual minorities. Violence over vulnerable communities supported by deep-rooted structural inequalities such as caste and class are a strategic tool to spread fear and insecurity, thereby maintaining the status quo (Chatterji, 2019; Thorat, 2019). This is the context from which my art practice is informed and forms its visual and conceptual frameworks.

4. Representation of Violence in Art

Various artists across the globe addressed different kinds of violence in their works. One of the most influential paintings about military violence in twentieth-century Western art was Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* (1937), a symbolic protest of the artist on the fascist violence unleashed on the Spanish people (Berger, 1980; Ray, 2006). 'Third of May' (1814) and eighty-five prints titled 'Disasters of War' by Francisco Goya were path-breaking works that depicted the violence on Spanish people by Napoleon's army in 1808 (Carr-Gomm, 2005). Anita Glesta is a New York-based artist who witnessed the 9/11 terrorist attack, worked with the survivors, and later made a comparative work with the survivors of the *Guernica* massacre to understand the parallels in these two traumatic, violent events and their effects on people (Spens, 2013; Koziol, 2007). Nancy Spero's 'War series' (1966- 70) was another work in the second half of 20th century that dealt with the horrors of the Vietnam War (1955- 1975) (Frizzell, 2020; Lyon, 2010). Penny Siopis is a contemporary South African artist who draws inspiration from seventeenth-century Dutch 'Pronk' still life paintings to address the colonial decline and the violence experienced during protests against the apartheid system (Law, 2002; Vos, 2015). Her paintings done during the state of emergency in South Africa (1985- 1989) are relevant here as an artist's social critique takes place in response to her times. Australian artist George Gittoes works on political violence and the wars such as Vietnam war and its effects on Cambodia and the long-lasting civil wars in Vietnam, and Rwanda. His outputs were in diverse formats such as films, paintings, installations and graphic novels. *Bullets of the poets* (1987), *Miscreants of Taliwood* (2011), *Rwanda Maconde* (1995), and *Night Visions* (2010) by Gittoes are some examples that depict the details of massacres of war sites and refugee camps (Dillon, 2011; McKenzie, 2010; Spens, 2013).

Indian artist Gargi Raina's work titled "Constructing the Memory of a Room 2007" portrayed the violence, terror, and pain associated with the Gujarat riots (2002) using the metaphor of a big nail pierced on a whitewashed wall of a house with patterns of Gujarat's map on it (Achar, 2008). Ghulam Muhammed Sheikh, artist and poet born in Gujarat addressed the violence and the trauma of Gujarat riots and the demolition of Babri Masjid in his series of works titled 'Kavaad/ Home' (2008). "Alphabet stories" was another work of his in which he used words of daily usage in Gujarat to rewrite the meaning of those words and their undertones after the riots. Violence based on religion has been occurring in India for a long time, and this has been reflecting in art. Large-scale violence and bloodshed following the partition of 1947 and the very formation of India and Pakistan continue to inform the visual culture of both countries. Reena Saini Kallat's work titled *Crease/ Crevice/ Contour* (2008) portrayed the violence on the bodies of Hindu and Muslim women abducted during partition. She addressed the psychological trauma they underwent after the exchange of these women between nations a few years after partition, when some of them had begun lives with their abductors as wives. (Adajania, 2009). *Pinjar* is a 2003 Hindi movie directed by Chandraprakash Dwivedi addressing this Hindu- Muslim issue during the partition based on a 1950 Punjabi novel of the same title written by notable poet and novelist Amrita Pritam. All the artists mentioned here showed a sense of social commitment and a critical approach toward the times they were/are living in and producing work. This social role of an artist is of prime importance for me as I engage in making artworks in my social contexts. A critical approach toward history and its repercussions in the present social life informs my practice more significantly.

5. The work

Architectural styles and food habits are part of the identity of people who live in a society. It reflects their beliefs, ways of life, and culture at large. The imagination about homeland encompasses all these factors in the contemporary world. “Cultural nationalism” (Hutchinson, 2013) in a country like India, where diverse cultures co-exist and produce hybrid cultures over centuries, creates tensions within everyday lives. Hansen (1999) points out that; The Hindu nationalists desire to transform Indian public culture into a sovereign, disciplined national culture rooted in what is claimed to be a superior ancient Hindu past, and to impose a corporatist and disciplined social and political organization upon society (p. 4).

The claim for authentic national cultural identity (synonymous with religious identity) is at work in India's political, social, and cultural lives. It reflects in the mundane performances and gestures of peoples' actions and even larger political decisions. Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) enacted by the Indian government on 12th December 2019 was an example. Though the act was intended to accept Hindu, Christian, Parsi, Buddhist, Jain and Sikh immigrants who flow to India due to religious persecutions from neighbouring countries, it omitted the acceptance of Muslims, Sri Lankan Tamils, Rohingyas and Tibetan refugees. This triggered huge protest across the country from the minorities and people who believe in secular and democratic values. The burden to prove the authenticity of one's citizenship in a country where he/she belong to a minority community is cumbersome. Larger political decisions like CAA can legitimize demonising of Muslims across the world and India in particular. It also normalizes the immense violence of powerful groups over weaker sections in the society. The “xenophobe or ethno centrist and the ideologically motivated right-wing extremist type” (Willems et al. 1993) are the perpetrators and the active legitimisers of these acts. Religious minorities and people of underprivileged castes are often the victims.

In this work, I use an Islamic architectural motif from the façade of a 16th-century tomb in Multan (Rizvi, 2011) to fill the human body's contours of the map's central image. The portrayal of a Muslim body with a cartographic visual framework is an artistic assertion in a popular visual culture that Hinduized anthropomorphic national maps have dominated. This suffering body represents people under constant threat in a place where they have been asked about the legitimacy of their citizenship in their homeland based on their religion and food habits. Food and dress are reasons for discrimination and for even losing life. Food or dress might be of personal implication, but architecture, especially a religious one, resonates with a larger community and its identity. This work titled “Mapping the Fall of a Dome and last supper on the Streets” is drawn from one of the most violent images in independent India, the demolition of *Babri Masjid* on 6th December 1992 and the mob-lynching images and videos that circulate through social media in the present day “Digital India” (Thomas, 2012). The violence executed in public places in villages, small towns or cities is pumped through social media to propagate fear among the potential targets at any corner of the country (Jaffrelot, 2017). The Internet boom in the country has helped the local acts of violence spread its message of fear nationally. The discourse on nationalism and patriotism has reached the domestic space of homes and delegitimized centuries-old food habits (Bengali, 2015). The internet transformed citizens into netizens, and the netizens took part in virtual violence pumped through social media (Pohjonen & Udupa, 2017; Bromell, 2022). The right wing in India has frequently evoked the terrifying memories of the *Babri Masjid* demolition to threaten minorities nationwide, online and offline today.

I use the framework of a map to portray the violence-ridden socio-political landscape of my homeland by bringing together history, architecture, the human body, food, and the cyber landscape. Brick, the construction material used for the three-dimensional architectural structure, is crushed into powder to depict the dome on a two-dimensional map surface in this work. Use of brick powder as a medium to create the image of a fallen dome of a Mosque is crucial here. The brick is an ancient three-dimensional artefact made using human intellect and labour to build civilizations. As an essential construction material, brick can be seen as a metaphor for ‘creation.’ For this work I broke a brick (three-dimensional) into powder first and then used it as a medium to draw the two-dimensional image of a dome that once existed in real three-dimensional space. This destruction of the brick is in itself a violent act that alludes to destroying the hard human labour and intellect involved in its making. The paradox of making a medium to create an image by unmaking another artefact is crucial in this work (considering the violent slogans to destroy a mosque to construct a temple). This paradox within the image making process adds to the holistic and historic reading of the work. The image of the dome made of this brick powder opens a new visual threshold for the spectator to undertake a new experiential reading of the ‘destruction’ of a mosque's dome to ‘construct’ a temple and the eventual violence across the country. The work stresses on what Mitchel (2009) clearly distinguished between a ‘picture’ and an ‘image’ where the former is an object that can be destroyed. My work brings forth this potential of ‘image- making’ that can carry cumbersome memories, faith, vigilance, identity, and collectiveness in a society where divisive forces are omnipresent.

6. Smart Phone: A Visual Cue to Cyber Violence

The smartphone image is the visual trope for the violence-ridden cyber landscape mapped in this work. As the necessities of people, such as food and clothing, along with one's spiritual shelter, became a reason for violence within the discourse of homeland in real and cyber worlds, this map projects itself as a way to find the routes through which violence travels in contemporary India. The line between the real and the virtual worlds gets blurred unprecedentedly and establishes a hybrid atmosphere that perplexes life. The influence of pre-existing social, political and economic inequalities makes this possible (Harmer & Lumsden, 2019). The virtual world becomes more real than the real world as its problems transcend the real flesh and breath of people's lives. Pumping fabricated realities endlessly into targeted people's lives to manipulate their cognitive structures using cybernetics is an underlying reality of contemporary times. People unaware of the power structures that design the ready-made realities pumped through the supposedly neutral electronic gadgets are vulnerable to manipulation. Udappa et al. (2021) pointed out that, huge numbers of dispersed, unorganized, "ordinary" online users participated in online extreme speech practices, regimes engaged in the organised production of disinformation by using the very infrastructure of globalization around flexible, precarious, and outsourced labour (p.1 - 2).

This process within the virtual world engineers hate among different sections of society, eventually transgressing people's real lives with unprecedented speed. Hate achieves its solidarity in a cyber-world and gets viral instantly, resulting in online and offline exchanges of violence. The live streaming of violence performed on streets is used and reused as "symbolic violence" (Hanagan, 2003) or "expressive (to demonstrate power over individuals in given situations)" (Heitmeyer, 2003) for multiple political purposes in contemporary times, thereby creating mass hysteria or fear among targeted sections in a society such as ethnic, religious, caste and sexual minorities (The Indian Express, 2016). Anyone who walks on the streets or sleeps at her/his own home could be the victim of these violent performances by another group without any prior information. Muslim community, in particular, is demonised in social media hate campaigns based on interreligious marriage, food habits, and dressing styles (Mirchandani, 2018; Awan, 2016).

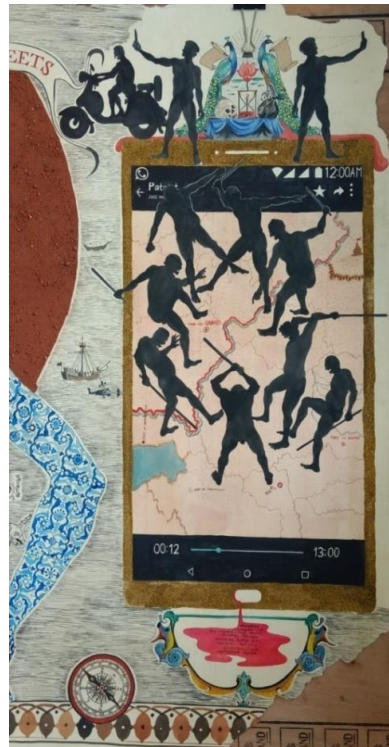


Figure 2. Detail of the painting depicting the smart phone.

An image of a mobile phone interface that displays a video of a violent mob dancing around, beating a site which is cartographically divided into two as if someone is lying on the ground, is depicted on the right-hand side of the painting (Figure 2). The absence of a person on the ground cartographically demarcated where the violent men dancing with weapons is deliberately created to urge the spectators/thinkers to open their inner eyes too to see beyond what is shown. Two men of muscular and younger physiques who were lost in taking 'selfies' next to the mob as if cheering the violators and a man on a scooter passing by without interfering were also portrayed alongside the mob lynching. This lack of shock and

Mapping the Fall of a Dome and Last Supper on the Streets

passivity or the voyeuristic pleasure of the public in cheering on the atrocities perpetrated on marginalised communities (Hansen, 2021) is suggestive of the mundaneness and legitimacy of such acts in the Indian public sphere. This violent act depicted as a display of a smartphone was decorated with the images of two peacocks (national bird) and a lotus (national flower) juxtaposed with an hour glass (suggestive of passage of time) and a black plastic cover used in meat shops (Figure 3). People who are self-proclaimed guardians of nation and its culture circulate mob lynching videos with different patriotic captions attached to it by framing people from minority communities as violators of the majority's customs and beliefs along with national interests (Pandey, 2019).

The time displayed on the mobile phone is 12 am, which alludes to the beginning of the day of August 15th 1947, the year of Indian Independence and the aftermath of partition. The partially visible name of the sender of the video on the top left-hand side indicates the word 'patriot.' I marked the locations on the cartographic surface with the word 'banned' prefixed with 'you are', 'they are' and 'she is'. All these textual cues juxtaposed with the visuals surrounding them revealed the paradox in the meaning of independence and the experience of it in real life. I used the mobile phone as a visual and conceptual cue within the framework of cartography to expose the complexity and inseparability of people's lives in real and virtual worlds. More than any other medium, such as newspaper, radio, or telephone, mobile phones can "spread scandal, exploit the gullible and coordinate crime, violence, espionage, and terror" (Jeffrey & Doron, 2013). Between the real and virtual worlds stand the electronic gadgets with all their fancy colours and designs as a spectre that haunts Indian society's socio-politically weak. In the last two decades, the proliferation of mobile phones and the internet in India enabled people to connect unprecedentedly, effacing the time-distance gap. But it also contributed equally to the divisive narratives across the country by spreading hate exceptionally.

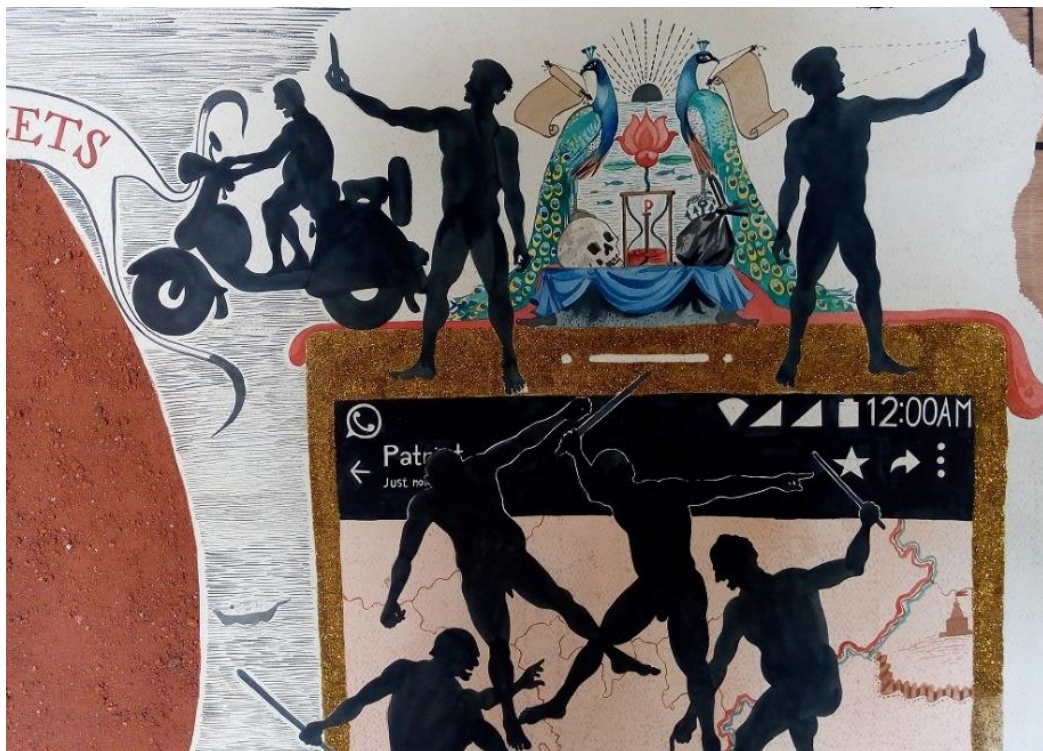


Figure 3. Detail of the painting depicting lotus, peacock and black plastic bag.

7. Texts on the Map: A Halt for Rethinking with the Images

The mapping framework used for this work allowed me to incorporate written texts and images. This "Scripto- Visual" (Iggulden, 2007) strategy made the work into a site for the viewer to engage multi-dimensional. I used words to mark locations on the map's surface and as scribble poems of social satire. One such poem written on the map demands a different point of view from the viewer to read it as it is written sideways (Figure 4). The viewers have to physically alter their position or tilt their heads to read the verses. The verses also incorporated visual logos of popular mobile phone applications

Mapping the Fall of a Dome and Last Supper on the Streets

and the mirroring of particular words to break the norms of reading a text. This specific way of using texts and images in a painting's site designed as a map poses inevitable halts for the viewers as they undertake their itinerary through this work. Every halt intends to start afresh in terms of seeing the work and thinking through it.

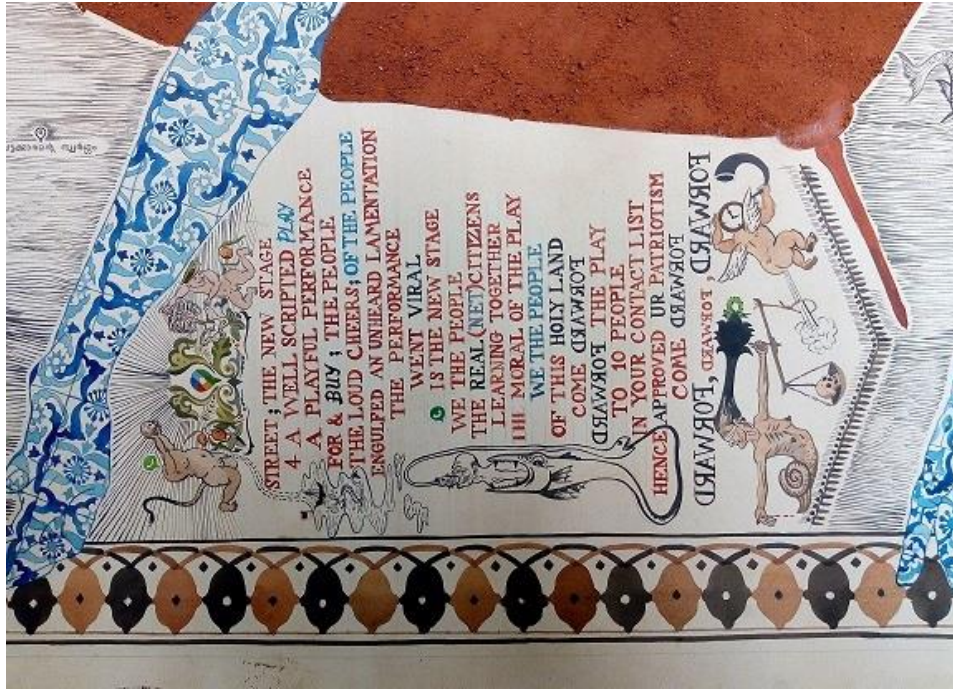


Figure 4. Detail of the painting depicting the poem written vertically.

8. Language: A Statement of Identity in a Multilingual Homeland

I used written text in English and Malayalam languages in this work. Malayalam is a language exclusively spoken by people of the south Indian state of Kerala. It is considered as a regional language of a population of less than three and a half crores. In a vast country like India, with a population of more than one hundred and forty crores, with many languages and dialects, Malayalam speakers of this tiny proportion are equally crucial in politically, socially, and culturally “imagining” (Anderson, 1983) the nation. According to the independent India's constitution, every language, culture, ethnicity, and religion difference is legitimate (Indian Constitution Article 29, 1950). English is the common official language that bridges this multitude of linguistic differences in India, yet every language has its place, irrespective of how many people speak it. The politically powerful religious and linguistic majority's tendency to delegitimize differences that have been existed for centuries resulted in social upheaval. Interstate and intra- state conflict between languages and even regional dialects of the same language connected to national, ethnic, and religious identities is a phenomenon across the globe (Suleiman, 2004; Kearney, 1978; Brass, 2005; Agnihotri, 2017). Suleiman observes that language conflicts are not mere linguistic issues based on claims of superiority; instead, they are conflicts between speakers of languages who fight for resources and values in their contexts. (Suleiman, 2004). Using Malayalam texts in this social context is relevant for me as an artist from Kerala. The presence of Malayalam texts along with English is not mere words. Instead, they primarily operate as a visual statement favouring inclusivity, upsetting xenophobic tendencies in the act of seeing.

Meanings of the locations marked in the painting using Malayalam script translates to (1) Heaven of human hunters (2) The birthplace of hatred (Figure 5). Another Malayalam phrase that accompanies the image of a small boat with people on it translates to ‘those who search for the lost heritage of glory in the depths of the ocean.’ These texts on the map are sites where viewing and reviewing the images occur.



Figure 5. Detail of the painting depicting Malayalam texts.

9. Conclusion

Maps have never been neutral, scientific visual representations of territory. People in power, religious authority, monarchy, or nation-states always used them as strategic tools. My works also used maps as an artistic strategy to critique my homeland's social and political landscape. Maps can go beyond the explanations of a given territory as it has been making, remaking and unmaking the peoples' perception about themselves and 'others' within a territory. The painting featured here explored the potential of maps to elaborate multiple dimensions about the issues it addressed. Narratives on geography and homeland are the most explosively perilous among all kinds of violence in India. My work constantly reminds the viewers/ citizens about the pitfalls of assimilating maps as a neutral, unbiased representation of the geography of the homeland. Instead, it exposes the manufactured nature of maps, and by extension, borders, and identities, by bringing together cartographic visual cues from various periods to address the present issues. The process of juxtaposing different images, texts, and other cues from diverse sources relevant to the context of the work is the artistic strategy of constructing an appropriate aesthetic that enhances the core narrative. This work combines historical events with present-day actions in the cyber landscape that perpetuate xenophobic tendencies by exposing the constant threat of inequalities.

The work discussed above is a juncture from which further critical interventions through image-making currently happen in my art practice. As an art practitioner-researcher, I approach each work as an intense site of inquiry into something I see and experience subjectively as a person with a psyche formed out of societal exchanges of thoughts and values. Through my works, I constantly dialogue with the social, political, and cultural realms that form, inform, and reform myself in a dynamic national landscape. This landscape is erupting with insinuations on the authenticity of citizenship and the legitimacy of everyday lifestyles and habits of diverse populations inhabiting it. The social responsibility of artists in democratic societies is pertinent as societies are largely shaped by the process and products of artistic activities. I locate my practice in the realm of the 'social' and envisage the process of making art as a driving force that shapes and directs the trajectories of societal values.

Artists have a huge role in producing societal values and ethics by actively participating in critical artistic production. The work in discussion is imbued with the route through which violence pops up in the Indian social landscape in contemporary times. Art can add fuel to the existing violent situations as well as settle things as it can touch the social psyche in unique ways. My work accommodates knowledge, emotions, critique, data, aesthetics and anything and everything relevant to the context of the particular work. Images and texts form a series of thresholds for the viewers to enter into the work to interact with and interrogate the social situations that the work addresses. I make maps to help myself and others to travel back and forth in time and to undertake a critical assessment that can amend the breeding discourse of hatred within us. This work is an artistic step towards a larger collective project undertaken by humanity across disciplines.

10. Limitations and Future Scope

This work has limitations as it couldn't bring out the full potential of the symbolic and new cultural meanings of images representing the cyber world. Since it was the first among a larger series of paintings that juxtaposed cartography and cyber world, and the interlinks to violence in the Indian social landscape, highlighting multiple dimensions within a single pictorial field had its constraints. An in-depth inquiry towards the cyber world that informs artistic experiments is required to further develop forms/images and correlative theoretical frameworks and critically understand the much larger and diverse world of real/ cyber violence.

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