Gujarat: Art Under Hegemony and Censorship

Hiren Gandhi *and* ***Swaroop Dhruv*** *in conversation with* ***Critique Collective***

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Artistic self expression is one of the first exercises of human freedom. The freedom to create art though, is often stamped with dominant ideologies and power relations. Rich and powerful try to buy and co-opt the artist; they may also put direct constraints in the form of censorship. The most effective and prevalent way for dominant ideologies and power relations to influence art is via hegemony, when such ideologies and relations get internalised by the artistic community so deeply that they escape its collective self-reflexivity. The most effective censorship is self-censorship. Art in the Gujarat of twenty first century, the first and the most successful laboratory of Hindutva, is passing through such a state of willful submission and denial. Critique brings below an interview with two veteran artists of Gujarat. Hiren Gandhi is a theater artist and activist. Swaroop Dhruv is a poet. They have resisted the force of hegemony in their art and fashioned counter art forms to assert their artistic freedom.

Critique (Henceforth C): Hiren bhai, please tell us first how the uniquely Gujarati popular culture like large scale participation in Navratre festivals, or lively urban openness which any one from outside notices, have affected your artistic endeavours? To an outsider these are signs of an open and vibrant culture, but to an artist living in Gujarat how do these influence her/his creativity?

Hiren Gandhi (Henceforth HG): When we started theater in 1970s the cultural environment of Gujarat gave us a lot of space. The concept of Modernity was entering Indian theater, it presented immense freedom to young artists like us, and we learnt a lot while coming to grips with it. Normally people say a play is written and seen. However, in our workshops we would start with an idea brought up by anyone of us, generally arising from concerns raised by modernity in the context of urban life then, and then all of us would stand around and start playing out characters to explore how that idea can be expressed in theater. So, the theater group Aakanth Sabarmati, of which I was a part for five years, and a group of poets called Hotel Poets, had enough space for our creativity.

C: You mentioned concerns raised by modernity. What were these? Issues related to individuals in society, or other types of concerns?

HG: Freedom was one main concern. At that time equality was not such a big issue, but we did talk about ordinary people's lives. We did not clearly understand the role of capitalism, but we confronted questions arising from the penetration of market psychology into human relationships. Other points like the autonomy of a person, or that everyone is different, these kind of issues were also raised.

C: What kind of reactions your theater got from different social classes? Because modernity raises very specific issues, not always appreciated, or even understood by the society at large?

HG: Oh, the reception was very encouraging. We would travel all over Gujarat. We would do shows in drawing rooms, college halls, wherever there was audience, and we would perform without stage. Our audience would be small, may be fifty or so, but it was very responsive.
C: So that was the time when a small theater group could go anywhere in bastis and would find audience? It is hard to imagine a social reception like that in a huge city like Delhi now.

HG: Let me correct, we would not go to bastis.

C: Say, middle and upper middle class colonies.

HG: Yeah, that is correct. Our group Aakanth Sabarmati and Hotel Poets were apolitical, they were not concerned with Nav Nirman movement, for instance. I participated in that movement on my own as a student, not as part of a theater group. We were talking about modernity standing separately from any political activity. However, as anti-reservation movement and communal riots spread in 1980s our artistic expression became more political.

C: So, would you say that during nineteen eighties there was a transition in the form and content of your art. How differently your art was received after this transition?

HG: There was a big difference. But before that, I would like to explain how we got into politics in the first place. Our personality had evolved in search of modernity. In 1984 we wrote a play in

Gujrati on Bhagat Singh, and when we tried to perform it the state theater censorship department raised objections to parts of it which it thought were against Gandhi. Not just the government, but people from civil society too raised objections; there were Gandhians, conservatives, people from theater too. We were attacked in newspapers with allegations that in the context of the agitation for Khalistan in Punjab and after the Operation Blue Star we are spreading the ideology of terrorism.

C: Now that we are talking about state censorship; when you were performing plays inspired by modernity, were there problems with censorship then too?

HG: There were no problems with censorship. That modernity did not touch the ground. There is a technical point too. Theater censorship comes when a play is performed in public auditoria. We have been performing many plays since then, as long as they are not in public auditoria there is no censorship.

C: But you must have performed in public auditoriums before the play on Bhagat Singh?

HG: Not the plays inspired by modernity. I had done experimental theater and plays like Harsh Vardhan in public auditoriums.

C: What were the objections about the play on Bhagat Singh, besides that it was a pro-Sikh terrorist?

HG: That was the attack from civil society. Government censorship raised specific objections on two sequences dealing with the execution of Bhagat Singh a day before the scheduled time. In the political climate of the day, Gandhiji and Congress were important players. Gandhi-Irwin pact was signed. There was public debate that Bhagat Singh's life should be spared under the pact. Censorship had objections to two sequences on Gandhi Irwin pact and Bhagat Singh's execution. We put forth our case with the help of history books, even the official history of Congress by B Pattabhi Seetaramaiyya. But they were not ready to listen to any argument. They had only one argument that Gandhiji is the father of the nation. That was the beginning of our political journey. Our movement against theater censorship received good response from all over India. There were debates at places like the JNU in Delhi. For sometime even Gujarati

newspapers that had criticised our play responded positively to our movement against censorship.

C: What was the response from artistic community?

HG: We artists were doing it for the first time. As a protest we even did one show in a public auditorium in the presence of police. But gradually we noted a change. Our other play Raj Parivartan in 1987 was also banned. All our artists were amateurs; we did not use to pay any money. Television was coming in a big way around that time, and many of our artists were looking for a career in television. When we were black-listed they naturally got scared that they will not get any work in the television. Also, our friends who used to do theater with us were not thinking politically. Only the few who thought politically stayed with us, the remaining team disintegrated.

C: How did established artists who were not part of your group respond? Did they take a stand?

HG: No, they always opposed us. Movement against theater censorship rose again in 1990 when we were doing a play written by some one else. Theater censorship is only in Maharashtra and Gujarat. We managed to rope in commercial theater too. But the Maharashtra government played a trick. They declared that they will not charge entertainment tax on tickets less than rupees five hundred. The commercial theater lobby deserted us. Gujarat government also took the same step. The anti censorship movement collapsed.

C: So, your political theater sharpened against social movements enjoying popular support like the anti-reservation movement, and communalism. Your theater did not emerge along with a popular movement. Did you ever feel that you were saying something that people did not want to listen?

HG: After 1984 we started doing theater in poorer neighbourhoods, bastis and villages. The response was good there. In the established artistic circles and among urban educated classes we had little impact. Issues were more complex. Two of our plays which were banned and the other that was opposed by the state government, on Bhagat Singh and Raj Parivartan, and a play we wrote in 2003, Suno Nadi Kya Kahati Hai, faced government opposition not because they

directly dealt with politically hot issues of the day like communal riots, but due to the broader political stand they took.

C: Did you feel artistically isolated due to your political plays?

HG: Never. After middle class based artists left us, we started doing plays in poorer neighbourhoods, and traveled to villages. We stopped doing the proscenium theater that required a stage. We initiated street theater and other forms like theater of the oppressed of Augusto Boal. We started doing theater workshops in bastis. Then we learnt that theater does not always require trained actors, that it can be performed with non artists too.

C: So, the art does not stand apart from life, but becomes a part of it.

HG: Yes, they would raise questions from their life, in their own ways, and that process itself would become theater. On 26th January 2001 the Kutch region of Gujarat state suffered a devastating earthquake. The rehabilitation policy became a contentious issue after the phase of immediate relief got over. An NGO working in 138 villages there contacted us and we wrote a play around rehabilitation of earthquake victims and undertook a campaign to take that play to every village. During daytime the NGO workers would talk to villagers, record their demands and write representations. The play would be staged in the evening, and next day morning we would move to another village. We named our campaign Lok Adhikar Manch. After we left the area four groups of people who had suffered due to earthquake emerged spontaneously, sat on dharnas in front of government offices and forced the government to change its rehabilitation policy. Interestingly, they all called themselves Lok Adhikar Manch, though they were not connected with us in any way. That was a good experience of our theater playing a positive role in people's lives.

C: The 2002 communal killings form a watershed in the recent history of Gujarat. How did it affect your theater? What new forms did you try? What kind of reactions did you receive?

HG: Even while the rioting was going on my daughter's college friends contacted us and we wrote a street play and took it to neighbourhoods which had seen the worst killings. At many places Hindu audience would express their guilt. After a month and a half we took the play to

camps where displaced Muslims were staying. When the play would move to events of the 27th February, many women and girls in the audience would faint. College students performing the play felt very disturbed by this, and we had to stop the play after three days. A team from NIMHANS, Bangalore along with its Director was in Ahmedabad. They were doing mass counseling for the riot victims. The director knew me well. When I told him of our experiences with the play, he told me that women's reaction was normal and that play was doing the role of a public counselor; the women had to be taken back to those events to help them recover from shock and regain mental health. After his encouragement we started performing the play again. In 2003 we decided to work with young men and women of oppressed communities. This followed from our understanding of Augosto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed, I talked about earlier. Theater can be performed by non-actors too; it should provide a forum to the oppressed to critically reflect upon their real life experiences. Every year we would select about 15 young people from working class neighbourhoods of Ahmedabad; Dalits, minority, including 2-3 from upper castes, and train them in basics of theater but also discuss social issues like patriarchy, communalism, and castiesm; how do these influence different people, and how can these be combated. We paid special attention to internal group dynamics as a transformative process. The idea was that through theater they would speak to society about their condition, and would also tell it about the kind of alternate society they wanted. In 2004 we formed a repertory with these 'artists' that performed about 23 plays in five years. From the point of view of theater technique the new thing we tried was staging the play mainly through Chorus. Our people were not trained actors, but music could be picked up relatively easily. We did not want audience reactions to be focused on characters, but on questions the narrative brought to the fore. Performance in the Theater of the Oppressed is designed to force audience confront critical questions and consequences of their actions they may confront in their real life. The narrative is brought to a decisive point and stopped and audiences are asked what they think characters should choose, and even invited to enact out roles that follow. It is completely the opposite of entertainment based escapist art. Audience response to our plays was intense. Once we took our play 'Char Kahaniyan', based on the lives of four women from different communities, to a girls college run by an Islamic trust. The principal thought his students were so hesitant in public that our play would not work, but we said, 'give us a chance. If we fail we shall pack up and leave.' One hour play went on for four hours, at every critical point young women in audience would provide a number of alternate choices and eagerly follow their consequences, they would raise questions, argue out their case, search for answers; we had to stop only because it got dark. We faced

opposition too. Our first play 'Suno Nadi Kyha Kahati Hai' based on the displacement of working class bastis for riverfront beautification plans of the Government was banned by it. In non-dalit and non-minority areas, sections of the audience would ask us about Afzal Guru, why he should not be hanged to counter our anti-communal stance. We stopped the programme in 2010. We felt that instead of getting towards a consciousness of universal principles like equality and freedom, most conscious of our trainees were veering towards what can be called identity politics, they were beginning to see themselves as Dalit activists, minority activists, etc. depending upon their background. We felt we had missed something, and not been able to intervene in the wider society to the extent we thought we could. With this experience, and in the context of 2002, we have now decided to explore Modernity, what forms can it take in India, how can it be realised?

C: Do you find yourself completing a circle, returning back to a search for Modernity from where your theater journey started in 1970s? Or, you think that the kind of Modernity you are exploring now is different from your initial concerns.

HG: How, and in what ways is it different from our earlier search is difficult to say at the moment. We have just started the process.

C: Now we would like to raise analogous issues of art and life with Swaroop behn. Theater is a public art. Poetry like the one Swaroop Behn writes is personal. Does Gujarat has the culture of public recitation of poetry like kavi sammelan and mushaira in some other parts of the country? If it has, then where does her poetry fit in it?

Swaroop Dhruv (Henceforth SD): Gujarat had two types of public poetry. One was a mushiara type forum, popular till seventies, in which poetry in Gujarati mixed with Urdu, and in Urdu was read. In fact, besides Urdu, Gujarati is the other language in which ghajal form was well developed. It developed in late forties and was doing very well. The other places for public poetry were the Gujarati kavi sammelans, which continue till today. I was very junior in that earlier phase. I was called for public programmes organized by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, and read at the big commercial stage of IIC in Mumbai. That was the art for art's sake phase of my poetry. It was said that I expressed the psychology and feelings of a modern woman. They did not call me a feminist; they considered me a modern woman poet. But when feminist academicians and theoreticians like Shiren Khudkechkar, and Meera Desai saw my

poetry of the time, they said it was an individual, modern, urban woman expressing herself. From that point on I was branded a modern feminist poet. The establishment, that is, the established artists did not like feminism. Even today there is an a-grade poet, she will be reading in a programme today, and writes very well, she openly says she is not a feminist, and would not like to be one. She expresses women's voice, her poetry has a desire for freedom, but she would not like to be called a feminist. So, ever since I was perceived as a feminist poet, I lost the public poetry stage in Gujarat. But I gained lot of appreciation outside. I was called to the Asmita Collective in Hyderabad, went to Delhi, Pune, my poetry was translated into English. In 1986 Gujarat Sahitya Sabha called me, but the situation became very awkward, and I felt that I was exiled from the established Gujarati poetry.

C: That is, you were writing in Gujarati, but there were few readers of your poetry in Gujarati.

SD: Particularly with my poetry after the 2002 pogrom, what I write about Gujarat, about my kind of Gujarat, they do not like it. They do not appreciate it.

C: The 2002 killings would have affected your art as a poet. Also, do you feel that the distance between you and others, i.e. the so called establishment poets, which was already there because of you calling yourself a feminist, increased?

SD: Yes. But another thing also got very clear, that my kind of poetry has a place and is needed. In fact, in one way my readership expanded. I gained readership among ordinary people. At times I feel that the younger generation that has come later, the Dalit, minority and village youth who have migrated to cities, they like my poetry a lot.

C: The established literary writers and poets and writers do not want to write on, or even take notice of the kind of issues you raise in your poetry. From one perspective they work under self-censorship. What effect does this phenomenon have on the kind of art they produce?

SD: Like being colour blind, these artists can not register some colours of life. They are incapable of identifying some unique aspects of life in today's society. So, they are the losers. After the 2002 riots I made a programme of taking some women Gujrati poets to camps in which displaced Muslim women were living. But they said, 'What is the purpose? It is the same old

story. You see only one thing'. Did they think that by confronting the life of displaced Muslim women I had become blind to some other part of the reality of Gujarat? Or, were they scared that confronting these women will destablise some comfortable myths they had about Gujarat, and about themselves? When future historians will look at recent events like the Bhuj earthquake and the 2002 pogrom, then they would find that almost no Gujarati artist has expressed his/her feelings on these events. There is dead silence. The present literature is not registering the current history of Gujarat. The state under Modi, Gujarati civil society and art, as if in unison they all talk only about Gujarati Asmita.

C: So, would you say that the art scene, which perhaps in 1970s was very lively with artists expressing and debating new kinds of issues, is now almost dead?

SD: I feel an upswing of literature is around, but this literature is about soft dreams of middle class life, about the beauty of nature and creation, about death, or life after death. People also write about the love between Radha and Krishan. And this literature is getting very popular. Another development is Gujarati light music. Many singers are now singing Gujarati songs in programmes in small towns, or even outside India where ever there is Gujarati samaj. So poets are now writing poetry that can be sung. And Gujaratis are also singing ghajals.

C: These ghajals are in Gujarati mixed with Urdu.

SD: Yes, there is a contradiction at this point. The big award in ghajals is Wali Gujarati Samman.

C: The BJP has been in power for more than fifteen years now. Do you find that there has even been a direct effort by the state government to impose censorship?

SD: There is no censorship, but there is co-option. They are giving awards, fellowships, and travel grants to go to America. The government uses other kinds of weapons to encourage writers and poets to write the same kind of literature.

C: Now a question about Gujarati newspapers and television channels. What kind of news do they carry?

HG: Almost the entire Gujarati media is pro-state. Rather, it is pro-Modi. Only some older newspapers, which perhaps have been left out of state advertisement dole, some times take a line against Modi. But their opposition too is from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad perspective.

C: So, Gujarat is not an instance of censorship, but the way the civil society, media and artists all speak in the language of consent, it is a case of hegemony.

HG: Yes, that is right. But we have to understand the social basis of this hegemony. Our play on Bhagat Singh was most vehemently opposed by Gandhians. The state only wanted to ban the play. The active attack came from civil society groups. I and Swaroop Behn see this reaction in the broader context of the culture of Gujarat. There is a kind of continuity here. When we were with Narmada movement, even then we were branded anti-Gujarat. At that time there was Congress Government of Chiman bhai.

C: So, at least among upper caste influential sections of Gujarat there has been clear understanding since long that whosoever is against us has to be opposed directly; there is no need to appreciate the other viewpoint, or debate and discuss.

HG: Yes that is in the culture here and has been around for long.

C: So, the openness of urban space, including the presence of young women and men in the public space, and the narrowness of culture, they are simultaneously present.

HG: Two three things are important on this point. Gujarat has long sea coast, and people have been trading with other countries of Asia and Africa for long. They have had good exposure to other cultures. The dominant culture here has been of mercantile trading groups. The third point for historical understanding is that Gujarati did not have its own local rulers, mainly it was ruled from Delhi, or other groups like Marathas ruled it. Gujarati sheths would give money to Mughals, as well as to Rana Pratap, their main motive was their trade. Trading class took many socially progressive steps. Non religious schools were opened in the early nineteenth century; Gujarat had some of the first municipalities in the country. A trader sent is daughter to study in 1837; even son of a servant was funded to study. But for deeper political and social reform there

was great hesitation and opposition. Dayanand Saraswati was from Gujarat, but he was completely unsuccessful here. People like him were thrown out. Gujarati trader has never preferred the social boat to rock too much.

C: But Gandhi was accepted with open arms!

HG: Oh! Gandhi is a typical Gujarati. If you seriously consider what he says and writes, he speaks the language of a typical Gujarati bania.
C: Swaroop Behn, what would you say about the socio-cultural scene these days?

SD: Like other parts of India superstitions and religious following has increased. The most tragic aspect of these is that they are increasing even among the socially oppressed classes. Like today is May the First, but even the workers of oppressed groups do not feel proud in being members of a working class, they take up non-rational belief systems like the caste much more easily. What we call identity politics is at its peak. Every day we hear about regional caste sammelans.

C: Recently, on the occasion of the six hundred years of the establishment of Ahmedabad you had organised cultural functions separately from the Government celebrations. Tell us about them and the role of people like Mallika Sarabhai.

SD: During that function we highlighted the synthesis of Hindu and Muslim cultures in making of Gujarati culture. There was a programme of Dalit poetry after the closure of textile mills in the city. It was a joint programme with Mallika Sarabhai. She is progressive and emancipated. However, the mahajani culture of Gujarat, its broad minded humanitarianism, paternalistic kindness and philanthropy, eulogizing Gandhi and Kasturba, these themes became dominant.

C: But didn't that programme counter the hegemonic discourse about Gujarat under Modi? What was the public reaction to it?

SD: Cream of Ahmedabad came. It also got popular appreciation. The programme had entertainment value. Popular stories about the history of Ahmedabad were presented. There were costume dramas, Ahmedabad you see, has a very festive and colourful past. One more thing, after the programme many newspapers have started giving importance to issues of heritage,

particularly architecture. Islamic buildings like Jumma Masjid are receiving attention, and they have to admit that the architecture of Ahmedabad is a result of the synthesis of Hindu and Islamic traditions.

C: What has happened to plans to change the name of Ahmedabad, the old BJP plank?

SD: Oh! The Karnavati plan has been shelved. Now they have taken up mahajani Amdabad, the colloquial pronunciation of the city name, against supposedly Islamic Ahmedabad. So, efforts to banish Ahmed Shah, the founder of the city, from Ahmedabad are still on.