



# Researching Exhibitions of South Asian Women Artists in Britain in the 1980s

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## Abstract

This paper narrates the author's research methodologies and findings relating to her ongoing project, *Articulating British Asian Art Histories*. With a specific focus on four exhibitions of South Asian women artists during the 1980s and early 1990s, it provides an overview of her primary and secondary research, and presents archival material, which cumulatively gives a richer understanding of the aesthetic and political aims of exhibitors, and the contexts in which they were working. Exhibitions of exclusively women artists of South Asian heritage were rare during this period, but close visual analysis of individual exhibitions and artworks reveals an active engagement with the specificities of the female, British-Asian experience. This article is accompanied by two downloadable resources: a complete copy of the *Numaish* exhibition catalogue (fig. 15) and a copy of the exhibition pamphlet for *Jagrati* (fig. 22).

## Introduction

In 2014, I initiated a large-scale research project titled *Articulating British Asian Art Histories*. The aim of the project was to undertake new primary and secondary research into the contributions made by South Asian diaspora artists to British art during the 1980s and 1990s. In collating and organising archival information, conducting studio visits and artist interviews, and undertaking close visual analysis of individual artworks, my objective was to gain a richer understanding of the aesthetic and political aims of South Asian diaspora artists, and the contexts in which they were working. Although the so-called “Black Arts Movement” has increasingly become an area of art-historical research in Britain, I identified an urgent need for the specific analysis of South Asian diaspora artists. Although deeply imbricated within counter-narratives of mainstream British art, and making important contributions to intellectual conceptions of Black Art, the activities of artists of South Asian heritage have largely remained on the fringes of those histories.

Superficially, perhaps, the presence of South Asian artists within narratives of Black British art histories appears secure. After all, Rasheed Araeen's work as an artist, curator, and scholar has arguably shaped this emergent field of enquiry, and his 1989 exhibition, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* and its attendant catalogue, remain for many scholars, myself

included, an important point of departure when studying diaspora artists in Britain.<sup>1</sup> Of the twenty-four artists included in the exhibition, ten were of South Asian origin, including Araeen himself.<sup>2</sup> But in using *The Other Story* as a launch for my research, its shortcomings quickly became apparent. Of the South Asian artists included, all were men, and at the time of the exhibition, all were aged forty or above. My project sought to recover from the archive the stories of a younger generation of artists, born and/or raised in Britain, who came to prominence during the 1980s. During this period, in what has become known as the “critical decade”, some young South Asian artists forged productive allegiances with artists from Britain’s African and Caribbean communities, producing work with specific anti-racist and anti-imperialist themes.<sup>3</sup> While affiliations were fluid, the self-identification of artists including Chila Kumari Burman, Allan deSouza, and Shaheen Merali as “Black” has positioned them and their work within a specific art-historical discourse set against the backdrop of discriminatory police practices and civic unrest. But many artists later found that although there was benefit in creating cross-cultural political allegiances under the sign of Blackness, as Stuart Hall noted, such an essentialised identification also enacted silences; as a collective identifier, Black “had a certain way of silencing the very specific experiences of Asian people”.<sup>4</sup>

In 2015, while rummaging in the Panchayat archive, then housed at the University of Westminster, I came across Parita Trivedi’s 1984 essay, “To Deny Our Fullness: Asian Women in the Making of History”, published in *Feminist Review*, in which she discussed the representation and status of Asian women, both historically in colonial India, and in contemporary post-colonial Britain. In her opening paragraph, she challenged her readers to “conjure up a picture of an Asian woman”. She asked: “Have the words ‘passive, submissive’, been part of your portrayal?”<sup>5</sup> Reading Trivedi’s essay, I was encouraged to think deeply about the representation of South Asian women in Britain, and how a generation of female artists were actively seeking to challenge the stereotype of Asian womanhood she described, both in what they produced and in how they exhibited their work. Although I was interested in the work of female artists, henceforth my project took on a more determined dimension: to explore how South Asian women artists were critically enacting and creating new self-representations, challenging stereotypes and articulating what being British, Asian, and female in the 1980s, meant. This paper presents my research methodologies and findings relating to exhibitions of South Asian women artists in the 1980s, and the ways in which artists sought to address the silences identified by Hall through their active engagement with the specificities of the female British-Asian experience.

Although the work of Sutapa Biswas, Zarina Bhimji, and Chila Kumari Burman was familiar to me from my postgraduate studies, it was evident from my initial literature review that the 1980s saw a generation of young South Asian female artists graduate from art colleges across the UK. Names including Nilofar Akmut, Nina Edge, Perminder Kaur, Gurmindar Sikand, and Shanti Thomas came into view. However, while finding the names of artists was relatively easy, locating examples of their work or lengthy critical analysis was more difficult. Arguably, my project inadvertently became one of advocacy; of re-orientating historiographies of the ‘Other’ in British art away from the narrative constructed by Araeen towards a messier assemblage. In undertaking what has been described as “sincere historiography”, my argument for inclusion—that female artists of South Asian origin should, indeed must, be included in histories of British art—may seem simplistic, unambitious, or inarguable.<sup>6</sup> But at a time when debates over who is included within British cultural identity are rife, the simple, albeit laborious, act of retrieval and recovery has become a politicised necessity; there are many in British public life who would question the

value of contributions made to British culture by immigrant communities.<sup>7</sup> While the impact of South Asian female artists on British culture in the 1980s may have been modest (and I make this characterisation on the basis that most artists considered below are not widely known, their work is not held in large quantities in major national collections, and they have not been recipients of large-scale exhibitions or subjects of scholarly publications), this does not render their work unworthy of attention. It should also be said that this is an ongoing project and in presenting a historiography of exhibition histories, I also point to gaps and further questions. It is hoped that I am not only making certain histories visible—opening the archive up to further scrutiny—but also encouraging those with personal archives and memories of exhibitions and artistic activity to add to, correct, or amend this patchwork narrative. The arguably more radical or challenging praxis of reading artists and their artworks through different theoretical, philosophical, or analytical perspectives is the next stage of research.

### **The South Asian Diaspora in Britain during the 1970s**

The generation of artists who came to prominence during the late 1970s and 1980s were either born in Britain, or arrived as small children. Their experience of being South Asian in Britain was thus shaped by the cultural context of the 1970s and the political and social disquiet that “coloured migration” stimulated.<sup>8</sup> The end of the 1960s and early 1970s saw the arrival of what many in Britain regarded as alarming numbers of South Asian migrants, particularly from East Africa; the Kenyan, and then Ugandan crisis of 1968 and 1972 respectively, saw thousands of displaced people of South Asian descent settle in Britain.<sup>9</sup> For many on the political right, these people were regarded as a homogenous threat, but as Avtar Brah reminds us, the term ‘South Asian’ is a label used to categorise a heterogeneous group of people.<sup>10</sup> Although nominally used to describe people originating from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, due to the legacies of British colonialism, it also includes those born in Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, and elsewhere. Britain’s South Asian community thus includes people from different social classes, religions, and castes, who consequently have different socio-economic and political agency.

Nonetheless, a common experience of South Asian people in Britain during the 1970s was that of racism, both physical and epistemic. In his landmark text of 1981, “From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain”, Ambalavaner Sivanandan charted the racism encountered by Black and Asian migrants since the 1950s and their resistance to it.<sup>11</sup> The political climate that followed Enoch Powell’s 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech, in which he foretold of a Britain overrun with Black immigrants, led to the rise of the National Front as a menacing presence on the streets of British cities, and white youths regularly terrorised Asian communities.<sup>12</sup> The *Observer* noted in April 1970, “any Asian careless enough to be walking the streets alone at night is a fool”, and racially motivated violence, commonly known as “Paki-bashing”, became regular occurrences.<sup>13</sup> Police response to attacks on South Asian victims was characterised by an unwillingness to afford protection; delays and inadequate investigations; treating the victim as the aggressor; and subjecting victims to continued harassment and persecution.<sup>14</sup> Kenneth Leech records that in 1976, the Anti-Racist Committee of Asians in East London was established to “draw attention to the inadequacy of the protection offered to Asian people by the police and authorities”.<sup>15</sup> By the late 1970s and early 1980s, “the political activism of Asian young people hit the headlines as they adopted a highly visible and militant stance against racial oppression”.<sup>16</sup> Responding to the murder of Altab Ali in Whitechapel, East London, an area home to a large Bengali community, on 14 May 1978, 7,000 people marched

behind his coffin from Brick Lane to Downing Street. In response on 11 June, approximately 150 white youths “rampaged through Brick Lane shouting ‘Kill the black bastards’, smashing windows of Bengali shops”.<sup>17</sup> On 23 April 1979, the National Front held a pre-election rally at Southall Town Hall, which resulted in the police brutally quashing a peaceful counter-demonstration; eyewitnesses reported police vans driving into crowds; nearly 700 people were arrested; and Blair Peach, a white member of the Anti-Nazi League, was killed by riot police.<sup>18</sup> In addition to facing discrimination and intimidation by British authorities, South Asian women (like Asian men) suffered racism and forms of humiliation in the workplace. In 1976–1977, a strike at the Grunwick film processing plant in north London, ostensibly about the right to trade union recognition, was led by Jayaben Desai, and was undertaken by the mainly female Asian workforce unwilling to accept poor pay and degrading treatment by the white managers and owners.<sup>19</sup> The Grunwick strike lasted for fourteen months and the striking women were subject to particular forms of racial and sexual provocation as factory management sought to use their preconceived understanding of Asian patriarchy as a mode of control, arguing that those on the picket line brought shame on their families. The demonstration of South Asian female agency at Grunwick, as at the earlier Imperial Typewriters strike in Leicester, in 1974, challenged the widespread short-sightedness in Britain that failed to recognise women’s active participation in the vocal fight against workplace injustice because of racial and gender biases.<sup>20</sup> South Asian women were also engaging in social protest against domestic and sexual violence, and challenged racist practices within housing and social welfare provision. During the late 1970s, many Asian women joined forces with Black women from the African and Caribbean diaspora “in an expression of solidarity against the shared experience of anti-black racism”.<sup>21</sup> Groups such as the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD), established in 1978, and Southall Black Sisters, established in 1979, addressed the specific needs of Black and Asian women, and particularly focused on achieving justice for victims of domestic abuse, forced marriage, and honour-based violence.<sup>22</sup> At the end of the 1970s, gender-based violence and racial discrimination perpetrated against South Asian women hit the headlines. On 1 February 1979, the *Guardian* newspaper published a story on its front page, reporting that a few weeks earlier, on 24 January, a thirty-five-year-old Indian woman arriving at Heathrow had been subjected to an internal medical examination, to determine whether or not she had previously had children. On the basis of this information, it was believed possible to ascertain whether or not she was still a virgin. The outcome of this so-called virginity test would then determine the outcome of her application to enter the UK in order to marry her fiancé.<sup>23</sup> Female South Asian migrants were regarded with particular mistrust by British immigration officers who believed that fiancées seeking entry to Britain to participate in arranged marriages sought to join their prospective husbands fraudulently—in order to obtain a British passport, rather than for love. Based on an assumption that South Asian women did not engage in pre-marital sex, border officials controversially inflicted ‘virginity tests’ on women and despite government proclamations that the case reported in the *Guardian* was unique, it is known that these invasive procedures regularly took place, whether in the UK, or prior to the women’s departure from the subcontinent.<sup>24</sup> In 1980, Southall Black Sisters were at the forefront of the campaign against virginity testing.<sup>25</sup>

## **An Overview of South Asian Artists in Britain**

South Asian artists had been active in Britain throughout the twentieth century, from Mukul Dey to Anwar Jalal Shemza, who studied at the Slade School of Art in the 1920s and 1950s

respectively. During the 1950s, Shemza, Francis Newton Souza, and Avinash Chandra exhibited with considerable success at Gallery One, London, run by Victor Musgrove. The Indian Painters Collective UK, whose members included Gajanan Baghwat and Lancelot Ribeiro, was formed in 1963, and although short-lived, it provided the template for the later organisation, Indian Artists UK, known as IAUK. Established in 1976, IAUK's founding members were Balraj Khanna, Yashwant Mali, Lancelot Ribeiro, and Ibrahim Wagh; the organisation sought to support its members in their artistic careers, not only through exhibition opportunities, but also by working collectively to raise awareness of Indian arts and culture in the UK.<sup>26</sup> Despite these collective activities, given the range of thematic concerns and aesthetic preferences evident in their work, it is clear that South Asian artists in Britain cannot be classified as a group stylistically, but rather, their experiences as artists of colour, working within the particular socio-political climate in Britain, provided points of commonality. In the 1970s, while artists such as Amal Ghosh and Prafulla Mohanti were principally engaged with aesthetic concerns, centred around the modernist doctrines of colour, form, and spirituality, at around the same time, Rasheed Araeen's work took a distinctively politicised turn to performance and photography.

No study of British Asian art can omit the influential work of Rasheed Araeen. As already noted, as a scholar and curator, he is a ubiquitous presence in narratives of Black British art history, and significantly, his artistic practice has recently been subject to renewed critical analysis.<sup>27</sup> In 1975, Araeen staged his first one-person exhibition at the Artists for Democracy space on Whitfield Street, London. Established by David Medalla, the collective Artists for Democracy attempted to claim political agency in the field of art, and Araeen's exhibition included *For Oluwale* (1971–1973, 1975), a conceptual text and image work that addressed the death of Nigerian migrant, David Oluwale, in Leeds and the subsequent investigation into the Leeds police force.<sup>28</sup> On 31 July 1977, in response to the prolonged attacks on the South Asian community in east London, Araeen showcased what was described as “a live event with slides”.<sup>29</sup> His multimedia performance, *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)*, saw Araeen perform a number of menial tasks such as sweeping the floor, and then blindfolding himself, and sitting mute in front of a sequenced slide show which projected images of South Asian cafés and urban street scenes in London's East End, alongside images of mounted police, anti-fascist marches, the picketers at the Grunwick strike, and newspaper clippings reporting violence against South Asian people in London. The soundtrack included excerpts from Handel's *Messiah* which were followed by male voices aggressively chanting “Paki, Paki, Go Home”. The work sought to enact the lived experience of South Asian people in Britain, as being under constant intimidation and threat. Araeen re-used some of his photographs featured in *Paki Bastard (Portrait of the Artist as a Black Person)* in the cruciform work, *Tableau Noir* (1987). A mural of an exoticised reclining Asian woman, photographed in a Bangladeshi restaurant in Brick Lane, is surrounded by black and white images of mounted riot police protecting a meeting of National Front members at Conway Hall, London, in 1973. As Zoe Sutherland, notes, “That the police gave little protection to South Asian people—including many Bangladeshis who were brutally, and sometimes fatally, attacked by the National Front—makes this configuration particularly pointed”.<sup>30</sup>

Rasheed Araeen's curatorial intervention, *The Other Story*, provided an unprecedented, and personal, overview of post-war modernist practice, and during my postgraduate studies, the exhibition's catalogue introduced me to the work of Chandra and Souza, among others. Such is the ubiquity and importance of *The Other Story* in the story of Black British art history, that its legacies can be found in nearly every publication and exhibition on the subject, and it is always

included in bibliographies and timelines. Indeed, Hammad Nasar has argued that Tate Britain's 2012 exhibition *Migrations: Journeys into British Art* "can be read as a partial restaging of *The Other Story*".<sup>31</sup> *Migrations* included not just a number of the same artists featured in Araeen's exhibition, but also a number of the same artworks. Although Nasar contends that *Migrations* was not a conscious re-staging of *The Other Story*, its repetitions of the 1989 show raise some important questions: if *The Other Story* is being used as a curatorial template, what happens to the many significant artists who were not included, or who declined to take part? Are curators and scholars looking beyond *The Other Story* in their research of Black and Asian artists? Or does Araeen's catalogue, and the increasing availability of archival material relating to the show, facilitate lazy curating? My project aimed to go beyond the parameters of *The Other Story*, and investigate those not included in Araeen's exhibition. Having been prompted to consider the activities of women artists, it was immediately clear that *The Other Story* would be of little use. Despite its undeniable importance in constructing a narrative of Black British art history, one of the criticisms levelled at the exhibition was its noticeable lack of female, and in particular, South Asian female artists. Rita Keegan's assessment of *The Other Story* rang in my ears: "No Asian women were included".<sup>32</sup>

My literature review and archival research, discussed below, evinced that during the 1980s a generation of young artists of South Asian origin emerged and produced (politically) engaging work. But despite a rich and diverse history of art production in Britain, to date, this story has not been fully recounted. The only book specifically examining the work of British Asian artists that I have identified is *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent* (2001).<sup>33</sup> This publication was belatedly produced to accompany the South Asian Contemporary Visual Arts Festival, organised by Juginder Lamba, and staged across the West Midlands in 1993. Although a vital resource, examining the work of two generations of artists, with excellent chapters on female artists including Nina Edge and Bhajan Hunjan, *Beyond Frontiers* has had a limited circulation. Other published sources, including *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in Britain* (2005), remain important sources for illustrations and information about the activities of British-born and diaspora artists during the 1980s and early 1990s.<sup>34</sup> In 2006, John Holt and Laura Turney published their essay "The Singular Journey: South Asian Visual Art in Britain".<sup>35</sup> Although much of this essay is faithful to the narrative propounded by Araeen, in their discussion of the 1990s and early 2000s, the authors make the important point that "much of the most innovative work in raising the profile of South Asian art has occurred in the North West" and make particular reference to the organisation Shisha, and the Asia Triennial Manchester.<sup>36</sup> Eddie Chambers' book *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (2014) was published as I started my project and provides a forensic chronology of which artists were active and where they exhibited, but relatively little discussion is given to visual analysis of individual artworks or the reception exhibitions received.<sup>37</sup>

## Methodologies

Having decided to undertake a project specifically investigating South Asian diaspora artists, I visited Lubaina Himid's *Making Histories Visible* archive at the University of Central Lancaster, in Preston. I discussed with her my interest in the position of South Asian artists within the existing narratives of the British Black Arts Movement of the 1980s and consulted her archives. She alerted me to the work of Saleem Arif and Shanti Panchal, with whom she exhibited during the 1980s, but two things struck me during that visit. The first was the reproduction of Nina Edge's mixed media work, *Snakes and Ladders* (1988) on the cover of Maud Sulter's book

*Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*; and the second was a catalogue for a small exhibition called *Keepin' it Together* staged at the Pavilion, Leeds, 1992–1993, and curated by Chila Burman.<sup>38</sup> Here were two examples of South Asian women specifically engaging with the politics of feminism, and I was enthused that I was on the right track.

My first task was to gauge the extent to which there was significant activity by female South Asian artists within a broader and collaborative Black Arts Movement during the 1980s. I started my project by compiling lists of relevant exhibitions and a bibliography of related catalogues. To this end, the timeline of exhibitions and events, and the bibliography included in *Shades of Black* was invaluable. The online catalogues of the Stuart Hall Library, Iniva, and the Tate Library and Archive were very useful for undertaking keyword searches and generating reading lists of materials that I was able to consult during several visits. My purchase of *Recordings: A Select Bibliography of Contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British Art*, published by Iniva, was a game-changer.<sup>39</sup> This publication catalogues the African-Caribbean, Asian & African Art in Britain Archive, held at Chelsea College of Arts, and provides bibliographies for individual artists and exhibitions. With this resource, I was able to identify not only artists, and when and where they exhibited, but also reviews and other published materials. These preparatory lists were invaluable while undertaking archival and library visits.

The Stuart Hall Library at Iniva and the archive held at Chelsea were well-known collections, but during internet searches, I identified a number of other archival resources. The digitised African and Asian Visual Artists Archive, and the South Asian Diaspora Literature and Arts Archive, both available through the Visual Arts Data Service ([vads.ac.uk](http://vads.ac.uk)), were very useful for images of digitised ephemera such as exhibition pamphlets and press releases, and in some cases, also provided images of individual artworks. The University of Brunel special collections held significant materials relating to South Asian artists in Britain, although on consultation, it was discovered that much of this material related to male artists active during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>40</sup> By far the most significant collection was the Panchayat archive, then held at the University of Westminster, and now at Tate. Established in 1988, Panchayat was an arts education agency with the aim of distributing and archiving materials relating to South Asian artists in Britain. The founding members of Panchayat were all artists—Bhajan Hunjan, Shaheen Merali, Symrath Patti, Allan deSouza, and Shanti Thomas—who came together after conversations at the Slade School of Art to establish a collaborative and supportive network for South Asian arts practitioners in Britain. The collective's name, meaning “group of five”, took inspiration from the systems of Indian village governance, where the Panchayat acted and still acts as a local council. During its period of existence, Panchayat had educational, curatorial, and archival objectives, and organised exhibitions including *Crossing Black Waters*, touring Leicester, Bradford, and Oldham during 1992. I spent days in the Panchayat archive at the University of Westminster. With my digital camera in hand, I photographed ephemera relating to individual artists and exhibitions, as well as catalogues, magazines, and journals. The archive had its own idiosyncratic filing system, but significantly had files on individual artists, as well as a slide collection of artworks. The problem with working in the Panchayat Archive was knowing when to stop: everything was potentially relevant. Initially, I focused my data-gathering on artists and exhibitions that I had already identified as being of interest; this is not to say that I curtailed my curiosity, and I certainly found material on artists and exhibitions completely new to me. Simultaneously, I worked my way through the British Library's holdings of *Bazaar: South Asian Arts Magazine* and *ArtRage*, both important arts and culture magazines championing Black and Asian artists in the later 1980s and early 1990s. These magazines, along with particular issues of



*Spare Rib* (then recently digitised by the British Library), were invaluable for providing the broader context in which exhibitions were taking place. Established in 1983, the Mukti Collective published a magazine in five South Asian languages, and aimed to voice concerns of a broad female community, in a tone of defiant feminism.<sup>41</sup> Although language barriers will be a problem, I look forward to studying copies of *Mukti*, held in the British Library.

Having amassed large amounts of archival material, the next problem was how to decide which exhibitions and artists to examine in detail. In this regard, my task was helped by the fact that there seemed to be only a few exhibitions of exclusively South Asian women artists. In 2016, I presented my initial findings relating to four exhibitions of South Asian women artists at the conference, *Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain 1900–Now*, organised by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Asia Art Archive.<sup>42</sup> At that event, I limited my presentation to consider exhibitions staged within a ten-year period. These were:

1. *Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman;
2. *Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work*, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan;
3. *Jagrati: An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, 1986, organised by Symrath Patti; and
4. *In Focus*, Horizon Gallery, London, 1990, coordinated by Georgina Grange.

The only other group exhibition of exclusively South Asian Women artists that I have been able to identify is *Aurat Shakti*, a community-based photographic show organised by Mumtaz Karimjee and Amina Patel in 1987.<sup>43</sup> However, to date, I have found very little archival material regarding this exhibition but will continue investigating it as my project progresses. Indeed, I am hopeful that other exhibitions may come to light, and there is certainly scope to extend my research into the 1990s; in 1991, *A Table of Four*, was shown at the Bluecoat in Liverpool and then toured, while *The Circular Dance* was displayed the Arnolfini in Bristol before also touring. Arguably, both exhibitions were directly informed by the earlier shows.

Having identified these four exhibitions, on closer inspection of the archival materials available, I discovered some common problems. Although not all of these issues related to each exhibition, they included: the absence of an exhibition catalogue, a press release, an exhibition list, or installation images; and the problem of the exhibition venue no longer existing. Figure 1 is a visual representation of how widespread these barriers to research were when investigating my chosen exhibitions. Immediately apparent is the rarity of installation images and the ephemerality of the exhibition sites themselves.

	<i>Four Indian Women Artists</i>	<i>Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work</i>	<i>Jagrati—An Exhibition by 13 Asian Women Artists</i>	<i>In Focus</i>
<i>Exhibition catalogue</i>	No	Yes	A4 exhibition pamphlet essay	No
<i>Press Release</i>	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Exhibition List</i>	Yes	No	Yes	No
<i>Installation images</i>	Some photos of the private view, but incomplete	No	No	No
<i>Venue/ gallery still open?</i>	No	No	Yes, but in a different location	No
<i>Press/ Media Coverage</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Figure 1

Common Barriers to Research: A table showing the common barriers to research encountered by the author when investigating four key exhibitions of work by South Asian women artists in Britain.

In the absence of what might be regarded as “official” documentation, press materials became particularly important. Each of the four exhibitions received coverage in the art or British Asian press; despite being of varying length and detail, in the absence of catalogue lists itemising exhibited artworks, reviews naming and illustrating artworks are vital. However, although an image may be reproduced in relation to an exhibition preview or review, this is not a guarantee that that particular artwork was included in the show; as such these materials are used with caution.

Having identified the four exhibitions, I cross-referenced who exhibited in each (fig. 2). Mapping the participation of individual artists in these shows was revealing: only Bhajan Hunjan exhibited in all four, and this being the case, I was curious as to why she and her work is so little known within wider narratives of (Black) British art. Simultaneously, this mapping also identified *Jagrati* as a comparatively large-scale exhibition, showing by far the largest number of artists. In simple numerical terms then, *Jagrati* was identified as being worthy of further study.

	<i>Four Indian Woman Artists</i>	<i>Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Women's Work</i>	<i>Jagrati – An Exhibition by 13 Asian Women Artists</i>	<i>In Focus, Horizon Gallery</i>
Bhajan Hunjan	*	*	*	*
Chila Burman	*		*	*
Dushka Ahmed		*	*	
Jagjit Chuhan				*
Mumtaz Karimjee			*	*
Naomi Iny	*	*	*	
Nina Edge		*	*	
Nudrat Afza				*
Ranjan Shadra			*	
Shamina Khanour			*	
Shanti Thomas			*	*
Shareena Hill				*
Sukhwinder Saund			*	
Sutapa Biswas			*	
Symrath Patti			*	
Vinodini Ebdon	*	*		
Zarina Bhimji			*	*

Figure 2

Cross-Referencing Artists and Exhibitions: A table showing which artists exhibited in each of the author's four exhibitions chosen for study.

Informal meetings and interviews with artists active during the 1980s have been invaluable sources of information and encouragement; in some cases, personal recollections have been supplemented with access to private, and thus unofficial and uncatalogued archives. A colleague introduced me to Chila Burman via email. Following a period of correspondence, I visited her studio in East London, and we have had numerous meetings and discussions since. Bhajan Hunjan, who I contacted via her personal website, has been exceptionally generous and has provided access to her personal archives, actively shaping the narratives I give below. Following email correspondence with Nina Edge, I also visited her studio, during which I was able to consult her collection of books and ephemera. After sharing digital images of materials I'd found in the Panchayat archive relating to her work, Edge then went on to find additional materials relating to, and (excitingly) artworks exhibited in, *Jagrati*. In addition to Burman, Hunjan, and Edge, two of the artists who had exhibited in *Jagrati* were already personally known to me, while I contacted others via their personal or institutional websites, or social media profiles. Some artists have not responded to my enquiries. Some did not want, or found it difficult, to talk about that period of their life; others, while encouraging of the project, had little to add to the narrative I had pieced together from archival material. Of the seventeen artists listed in Figure 2, I have been in contact with ten; contacting the remaining artists is an ongoing project.

## Exhibitions of South Asian Women Artists in Britain: Case Studies

What follows is an introduction to each of the four exhibitions, based on my archival research and conversations with artists. These introductions are a first step towards narrating a richer history of British Asian art history than is currently available, and as such, are incomplete. I have found more information on some exhibitions than others, and there remain gaps and uncertainties.

***Four Indian Women Artists, Indian Artists UK Gallery, 1981–1982,*  
organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman**

The exhibition *Four Indian Women Artists* at the Indian Artists UK Gallery was organised by Bhajan Hunjan with Chila Burman, and included examples of their paintings and prints alongside wooden sculpture by Naomi Iny and ceramic works by Vinodini Ebdon (fig. 3, fig. 4, fig. 5, fig. 6, fig. 7). The show ran from December 1981 until February 1982, and in a conversation, Hunjan recalled that she was “invited by members of the Indian Artists UK (IAUK) to curate the show”, which was “the first one in their new premises at Audley Street”, in the basement of the Indian high commission.<sup>44</sup> Hunjan was, in her recollection, “the only woman on the board”, and as such it fell to her to organise a show of women artists. Vinodini Ebdon and Naomi Iny were known to the group, although both lived outside London, and Hunjan knew Burman, as they had both studied at the Slade. Hunjan recalled, “The selection of women artists was not planned ... but grew organically as these were the only women on IAUK’s books”. Significantly, feminist scholars Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock identify *Four Indian Women Artists* as the first exhibition of Black women artists in their book, *Framing Feminisms: Art and the Women’s Movement 1970–85*, although, frustratingly, they refrain from discussing its content.<sup>45</sup> Nonetheless, Burman agreed that the show in itself was intended as a feminist gesture.<sup>46</sup>

This exhibition of work by four Indian women artists is the first major exhibition to be held since the inauguration of the centre. The work encompassing as it does, sculpture, printmaking, painting and ceramics indicates the diversity of the four artists, although all are of Indian origin, syncretism both the Indian tradition of T.A.K.K.A. and its involvement in, and contribution to, the cultural life of the United Kingdom. It is a remarkable example of the multi-cultural environment that is possible in art. Three of the artists completed their postgraduate studies at the Slade School of Art. The work in the exhibition demonstrates a sophisticated and professionalised with the inspirational backgrounds of their Indian Culture. The result is an exhibition of great diversity, originality and freshness.

HALL RECORD - HUMAN				
1	100000	1986	01 The Great race	1986
2	100000	1986	02 Asylum	1986
3	100000	1986	03 Indefinite	1986
4	100000	1986	04 Psychical	1986
5	100000	1986	05 Asylum 2	1986
6	100000	1986	06 Race of life	1986
7	100000	1986	07 Our Asylum 2	1986
8	100000	1986	08 Indefinite 2	1986
9	100000	1986	09 Indefinite 3	1986
10	100000	1986	10 Asylum 3	1986
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90	100000	1986	90 Indefinite 83	1986
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*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, Press release/ exhibition statement

*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, list of artists and works.

[illegible]

*Four Indian Women Artists.*  
Indian Artists (UK) Gallery,  
1981–1982, organised by  
Bhajan Hunjan and Chila  
Burman, Chila Burman and  
Vinodini Ebdon CVs.

*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman. Bhajan Hunjan CV.

*Four Indian Women Artists*,  
Indian Artists (UK) Gallery,  
1981–1982, organised by  
Bhajan Hunjan and Chila  
Burman. Naomi Inv CV.

Of the four artists, Burman can most easily be identified as challenging the oppressive parameters placed on South Asian women and since the earliest stage of her career has been outspoken in her advocacy of feminist politics. The exhibition's list of works notes that she exhibited seventeen works including *Bloody Cages* (1980), *Orgasm* (1980), and *Ban the Bomb* (1981)—the titles of which are suggestive of her thematic concerns. Although partial, a series of photographs taken at the exhibition's opening provides an insight into its content (fig. 8, fig. 9, fig. 10, fig. 11, and fig. 12). From these images, it might be surmised that the works on display did not uniformly exude radical feminist action; it would perhaps be hard to make a case that Ebdon's ceramics were expressions of subversive descent in the way that Burman's prints were intended as politicised gestures. However, Iny's *Angel* (1978), reproduced in *Echo*, the newsletter of Minority Arts Advisory Service, is deserving of further scrutiny and could potentially be positioned within discourses of feminist soft sculpture (fig. 13).





Figure 8

*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of Chila Burman with one of her body prints.



Figure 9

*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of Bhajan Hunjan with one of her paintings at the private view.



Figure 10

*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of Naomi Iny with one of her sculptures.



Figure 11

*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, photograph of the private viewing with the artists and the Indian high commissioner and his wife.



Figure 12

*Four Indian Women Artists*, Indian Artists (UK) Gallery, 1981–1982, organised by Bhajan Hunjan and Chila Burman, installation photograph.



Figure 13

Erroll Lloyd, 'Four Indian Women Artists', *Echo: Living Arts in Britain's Ethnic Communities*, No.48, April-May 1982, p.14–15, newsletter published by the Minorities Arts Advisory Service (MAAS).

Although the show was by all accounts modest in size and without any well-known participants, it was reviewed in the magazine *Arts Review* by the writer and curator, Caroline Collier. This was in many respects, remarkable; of the four exhibitions under consideration, at the time of writing, this is the only known review to be published in what may be regarded as a mainstream art

publication. Nonetheless, it is plausible that the decision to review the show was made because it coincided with the magazine's editorial focus on the 1982 Festival of India, rather than any explicit desire to support diasporic women artists. For Collier, the show examined “the power of emblems, and raise[d] questions about the nature of symbols”.<sup>47</sup> Interestingly, Burman's prints, which focused on urban Liverpool, depicting barred windows and metal grills, or made with graffiti-like marks, were viewed as symbolic equivalents of Hunjan's prints evoking regenerative seed pods and highly textured sawdust paintings presented in a colour palette of reds and umbers, reminiscent of scorched earth.



Figure 14  
'Indian Artists U.K. Present Four Indian Women Artists Show', *New Life*, 29 January 1982, 10–11.

*femaleny dead hair.*<sup>49</sup>

This elision of femininity with generative, primal forms could be regarded as reductive, but conversely these concerns with natural forms and life forces may equally indicate how this generation of artists were engaged with feminist concerns, as outlined in Lucy Lippard's *Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory*.<sup>50</sup> Certainly, Collier's review seemed to evoke the aesthetic intersection of feminist concerns and natural forces. Further research concentrating on specific works by Ebdon and Iny, and their artistic practices, is required to fully gauge the potency of such an intersectional reading. Nonetheless, I would suggest that in asserting their identities as artists, and in the acts of making, and of pursuing artistic careers, *Four Indian Women Artists* should be regarded as a manifestation of feminist agency and a challenge to those who thought that Asian women could not, or should not, be artists.

In a review of the show in the British-Asian newspaper, *New Life*, an unnamed journalist explained that the show aimed to demonstrate how this generation of artists, trained in British art schools, were combining that training with “the richly imaginative and inspiring seedbed of their Indian origins” (fig. 14).<sup>48</sup> This in itself was a new way of thinking about and representing second generation migrants: as part of, and making significant contributions to, British cultural life. However, in their description of the show, the journalist also reverted to female stereotypes, writing:

*One senses as soon as one enters the exhibition that one is in a—dare one say it without being labelled sexist?—women's world. ... Thick earthy coloured paint swims with primaevial commencement, worms or sperms struggle into age-old beginnings ... Womanhood in dark shiny wood or pallid puffy stuffed material, eyes the world from under long swathes of very real and very*



## ***Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan***

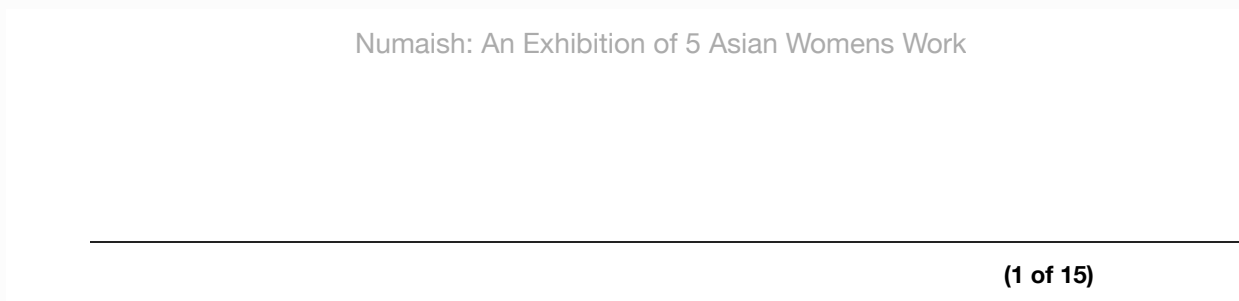


Figure 15

*Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work*, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, exhibition catalogue.

*Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work* at the People's Gallery, 1986 was organised by Bhajan Hunjan, and sought to highlight the creative diversity of Asian women artists. Hunjan recalled that the show was staged at short notice in response to the availability of funding from the Greater London Council (GLC), which also enabled the production of an exhibition catalogue (fig. 15).<sup>51</sup> The exhibition showcased work made in sculpture, stained glass, print, ceramics, and painting, produced by Dushka Ahmed, Vinodini Ebdon, Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, and Naomi Iny. Hunjan recalled that, by 1986, she had met a widening circle of artists and was subsequently able to include a larger number of artists, in comparison to the earlier *Four Indian Women Artists*. Little is known of what was included in the show and the catalogue does not contain an exhibition list; however, it is known that the show did not have a specific thematic agenda, but rather sought to showcase the work of the participating artists. Some of the artworks displayed were illustrated in a review published by *Asian Times*, and further research into the individual artists may help identify which other artworks were exhibited and provide a greater sense of the variety of artistic practices that it presented (fig. 16, fig. 17, fig. 18, fig. 19, fig. 20, and fig. 21). It seems, however, that the exhibition was staged opportunistically, in response to available funding rather than developing from considered curatorial interests. To what extent then, can this show be regarded as exemplary of the ways in which minority artists were corralled and contained by quangos and funding bodies during the 1980s?<sup>52</sup> Might this be an instance of an art exhibition being used as tick-box exercise, paying lip-service to equal opportunities through ad hoc funding?



Figure 16

*Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work*, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, full page review; Naqi Ali, 'Sauntering through the Gallery of Creativity', *Asian Times*, Friday 11 April 1986, 14 and 21.



Figure 17

Bhajan Hunjan, *The Choice*, 1985, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 76 x 51 cm.



Figure 18

Bhajan Hunjan, *Within*, 1986, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 76 x 51 cm.



Figure 19

*Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work*, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, photograph of Mother and Child, wood sculpture by Naomi Iny.



Figure 20

*Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work*, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, photograph of Grey Vexed Mermaid, ceramic sculpture by Nina Edge.



Figure 21

*Numaish: An Exhibition of 5 Asian Womens Work*, People's Gallery, 1986, organised by Bhajan Hunjan, photograph of sculpture by Naomi Iny.

## ***Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists, Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, 1986, organised by Symrath Patti***

Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists, Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, 1986, organised by Symrath Patti.

(1 of 9)

Figure 22

*Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, 1986, organised by Symrath Patti, exhibition pamphlet.

*Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists* was held at the Greenwich Citizens Gallery, Woolwich, in 1986, and included the work of Dushka Ahmed, Zarina Bhimji, Sutapa Biswas, Chila Kumari Burman, Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, Naomi Iny, Mumtaz Karimjee, Shamina Khanour, Symrath Patti, Sukhwinder Saund, Ranjan Shadra, and Shanti Thomas. Organised by the artist Symrath Patti, who had recently started work at the newly opened gallery, the exhibition aimed to connect “the work of these artists to the experience of the Asian community; enabling the artist to develop a dialogue within the community to raise issues of artistic and political relevance”.<sup>53</sup> *Jagrati* had originally been conceived as a thematic show concentrating on the issue of domestic violence, but during the planning stages, it expanded its remit to a broader consideration of the experiences of Asian women. Nonetheless “the experience of fragmentation and isolation” was central to the show and many of the artworks presented solitary female figures.<sup>54</sup>

Although a formal catalogue was not produced, Fay Rodrigues was commissioned to write an extended essay introducing the show, which was accompanied by a list of exhibited works (fig. 22).<sup>55</sup> Introductory texts in four different Asian languages were also available at the gallery during the exhibition.<sup>56</sup> In her essay, Rodrigues referenced the murders of Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur as points of departure for the exhibition. Balwant Kaur was murdered by her husband at the Brent Asian Women’s Refuge in 1985; and Gurdip Kaur (no relation) was murdered in Reading by her husband and brother-in-law in 1986. Southall Black Sisters organised campaigns “to ensure the proper prosecution” of those who had perpetrated these murders.<sup>57</sup> By overtly identifying these tragedies, the exhibition may be regarded as being in step with feminist activism at the time; Shaila Shah noted in 1988 that: “The Asian women’s movement in Britain has, for some years now, targeted domestic violence as a prime focus of their fightback for liberation”.<sup>58</sup> While domestic abuse was not exclusively experienced by Asian women, a host of culturally specific factors meant that it was a problem that particularly needed to be addressed: language barriers, institutional racism, and the perceived role of traditional culture and religion within the home, all impacted on how Asian women were mistreated by organisations including the police and social services.

The works by Dushka Ahmed and Bhajan Hunjan (who worked at Sahara, the Asian Women’s Refuge in Reading during this period) should be properly regarded as artistic interventions aimed

at focusing attention on abuse. Reproduced in *ArtRage*, the mural by Dushka Ahmed testifies to the murder of Asian women within the home (fig. 23).<sup>59</sup> Enlarged and overlapping black and white newsprint offers a disturbing visual cacophony that conveys “the grim reality of the physical and mental abuse which women suffer”.<sup>60</sup> Headlines shout “Family Plotted Murder”, while in the centre, the eye of a defiant woman stares out at us. Like many of Bhajan Hunjan’s portrait paintings, *Tribute to Late Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur—Victims of Domestic Violence* (1986) is divided into two parts (fig. 24). On the left is a framed image of a woman, dressed in a shalwar kameez, looking out directly at the viewer. She is upright, dignified, and seemingly self-assured. Adjacent to her is an orb of glowing orange, emanating rays of red-orange light. While Ahmed’s mural conveys fury, in Hunjan’s contemplative work, the figurative and symbolic combine. Although this orb could pessimistically be regarded as symbolic of the blood shed by victims of domestic abuse, I prefer to see it as a torch: the women burn brightly in our memory.



Figure 23

‘Jagrati—An Exhibition by 13 Asian Women Artists’, *ArtRage*, no. 15 (Winter 1986): 24–25.



Figure 24

Bhajan Hunjan, *Tribute to Late Balwant Kaur and Gurdip Kaur—Victims of Domestic Violence*, August 1986, acrylic and mixed media on canvas, 76 × 51 cm.

However, *Jagrati*, which means “awakening” in Hindi, also sought to move beyond the narrative of honour killings and victimhood commonly associated with the representation of South Asian women. Other forms of feminist resistance were explored, and the presentation of powerful and independently minded Asian women as a dominant theme of the show was perhaps an inevitable response to its initial conception. For example, the locations within which South Asian women could assert their visibility and agency were addressed in *City Tempo* (1985) by Shanti Thomas, in which a woman is shown apparently retreating from the looming city skyline (fig. 25). St Paul’s Cathedral, the Bank of England, and St Bride’s Church jostle for space among the newer towers of London’s financial centre. This is an interesting painting, for despite the dark, oppressive sky and the precariousness of the urban infrastructure, the woman herself seems self-assured and part of her environment: her red briefcase and newspaper could indicate that she works in the City, and her backwards glance connects her with the buildings in the distance. And at the same time, however, her hasty retreat suggests that she has not given herself to this particular urban environment wholeheartedly.



Figure 25

Shanti Thomas, *City Tempo*, 1984 (featured in the Commonwealth Institute, Exhibition Poster, 1987), painting, 101.6 × 76.2 cm.

Nina Edge was also keen to undercut expectations of Asian womanhood and utilised humour as a mode of subversion. Edge had recently graduated from college in Cardiff when she participated in *Jagrati*. Slightly younger than the other artists, her approach to image making “did not adhere automatically to the radicalisms of the previous generation”, and initially her contact with other Black artists was stimulated by her concern with making rather than politics.<sup>61</sup> Nonetheless, her work has been noted for its ability to combine the wry, humorous and mischievous, with a knowing and cutting critique; what John Brady has described as “combining the qualities of a smile and a stare”.<sup>62</sup>

Edge contributed two sets of work to *Jagrati*. The first was a series of four figurative pen and ink drawings, *Searching for Flowers in the Tandoori Garden*; *Chips on her Shoulders—Her Arms Fell Off*; *Trying not to Offend My Parents*; and *Paki Goes Home on a Piece of Spit* (fig. 26, fig. 27, fig. 28, and fig. 29). These were somewhat tongue-in-cheek, addressing the realities of growing up in Britain, and addressing essentialising racial stereotypes through humour. For Fay Rodrigues, these works, “make witty tragi-comic comments on the situation of Asian women. There is a light, ironic touch bordering on self-parody, which belies the poignancy of her work”.<sup>63</sup> Edge’s other contributions to the show was a series of eight abstract monoprints: *The Jewel* (fig. 30); *The Crown* (fig. 31); *Fingerplate* (fig. 32); *We Three Things of Orient Art* (fig. 33); *Diamond Coloured* (fig. 34); *Diamond Skin Rug* (fig. 35); *Gem* (fig. 36); and *\*Ink is a Girl’s Best Friend \** (fig. 37). Each utilised a diamond-shape motif and through their titles referred to the ways in which British imperialists ‘orientalised’ India. The fact that these non-figurative works were included in *Jagrati* indicates that both the artist and organisers were conscious that activism and critique could take a variety of forms. On one level, Edge used the diamond to reference the beauty of Indian decorative patternwork, all the while undercutting visual pleasure through her titles.





Figure 26

Nina Edge, *Searching for Flowers in the Tandoori Garden*, felt pen and paper collage.

Figure 27

Nina Edge, *Chips on her shoulders—her arms fell off*, felt pen and paper collage.



Figure 28

Nina Edge, *Trying not to offend my parents*, felt pen and paper collage.

Figure 29

Nina Edge, *Paki Goes home on a piece of spit*, felt pen and paper collage.



Figure 30

Nina Edge, *The Jewel*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.

Figure 31

Nina Edge, *The Crown*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 32

Nina Edge, *Fingerplate*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.

Figure 33

Nina Edge, *We three things from orient are*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.





Figure 34

Nina Edge, *Diamond Coloured*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.

Figure 35

Nina Edge, *Diamond Skin Rug*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.



Figure 36

Nina Edge, *Gem*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.

Figure 37

Nina Edge, *Ink is a Girl's Best Friend*, 1984, monoprint, 53 × 40.8 cm.





Figure 38

Symrath Patti, *Sketches for a Memorial*, 1986, collage with acrylics pastels and pencil, 42 × 59.4 cm.

In July 2019, I made contact with the exhibition's organiser, Symrath Patti. Discussing her own contributions to the exhibition, it became clear how published resources are only useful up to a point. Her gouache and paper collage, *Sketches for a Memorial—Yaadgari* (1986) addressed themes of arranged marriages, sexual violence, and desire (fig. 38). The blue head of Krishna is overlain with images of brides in their wedding gowns, surrounded by swirling, saturated colour. Patti asserted that colour was used emotively in her work and informed responses to it.<sup>64</sup> However, having

only seen *Sketches for a Memorial—Yaadgari* in black and white reproduction in *ArtRage*, an appreciation of the importance of colour to


interpretation had been impossible. It was only when Patti sent me a colour reproduction of the collage that this facet of the work became clear; it also became evident that the image in *ArtRage* had been incorrectly reproduced in verso. This example reiterated to me the importance of having access to correctly orientated, colour images in order to undertake nuanced critical readings of artworks.

There is still much work to be undertaken on *Jagrati*. Numerous questions remain, including: what happened to Dushka Ahmed's mural, and what more is known about the Greenwich Asian Womens' Art Group that commissioned it? What was the audience response to the show, and did it receive any reviews in the art press? Did the seminars, planned to accompany the exhibition, take place? Who spoke at them and what was discussed? Symrath Patti has alerted me to the existence of an archive relating to *Jagrati* held at the Women's Art Library, Goldsmiths, University of London. Materials held in the archive include the minutes of organising meetings, photographs of individual artworks, and a visitors' comments book. All of this material, in addition to Patti's own recollections of the exhibition will unquestionably shed light on the aims and aspirations of the exhibition, and provide additional information regarding its content and reception. I look forward to consulting this material in due course, in the knowledge that in doing so, more questions will arise.

### ***In Focus*, Horizon Gallery, London, 1990, coordinated by Georgina Grange**

During its years of operation between 1987 and 1991, the Horizon Gallery worked to promote the work of South Asian artists. In 1990, it made what Eddie Chambers has described as “by far [its] most important curatorial intervention”, by staging a series of four consecutive exhibitions under the collective title *In Focus* (fig. 39 and fig. 40).<sup>65</sup> These exhibitions were a direct response to Rasheed Araeen's *The Other Story*, and significantly, eight of the sixteen exhibiting artists—exactly half—were female. The press release for the *In Focus* exhibitions noted that an “important group” of Asian women artists “is not represented in the Hayward show”, and went on to explain that the *In Focus* shows “are designed to give a representative view of the work of Asian artists living in Britain”.<sup>66</sup> Reiterating the *In Focus* press release in her review of the *In Focus* exhibitions, Veena Stephenson, writing in *Bazaar*, explained that “particular emphasis was

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**14th February 1990 – 2nd March 1990**  
**Mumtaz Karimjee, Zarina Bhimji, Nudrat Afza, Pradipta Das**


**7th March 1990 – 23rd March 1990**  
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*In Focus*, Horizon Gallery, London, 1990, coordinated by Georgina Grange. poster.

Figure 40

Unknown author, 'In Focus—4 Exhibitions', *Black Arts in London*, no. 122, 1-31 March 1990, 9.



Figure 41

Shanti Thomas, *Sleeping Woman*, 1985, painting, 121.9 × 152.4 cm.

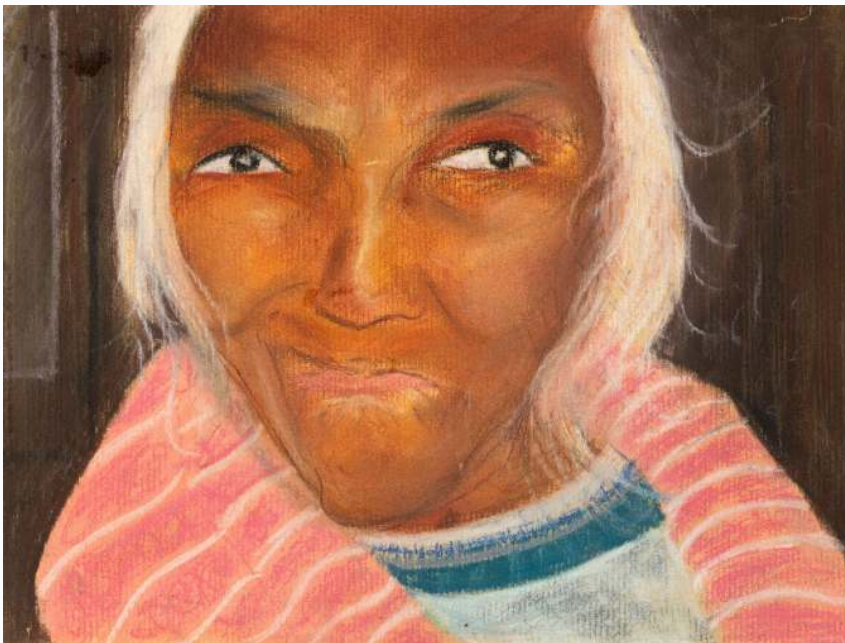


Figure 42

Chila Kumari Burman, *Ma Ji In Basti Sheik—Punjab*, 1989, pastel drawing, 29.7 × 42 cm.



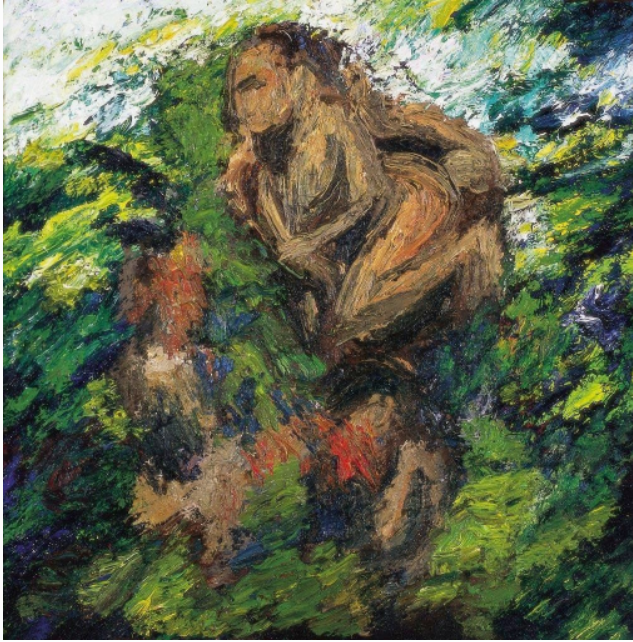


Figure 43

Jagjit Chuhan, *Yakshi*, 1987, oil on board, 48 × 48 cm.



Figure 44

Bhajan Hunjan, *Peacock Feather*, 1990, acrylic on canvas, 91 × 122 cm.

The second show included photographic work by Mumtaz Karimjee, Zarina Bhimji, and Nudrat Afza; Pradipta Das was the only male artist in this display. Each artist addressed themes of memory, history, and sexuality, and proposed the possibility of articulating dissent through the medium of photography. Nudrat Afza and Pradipta Das presented documentary images taken in Europe and South Asia respectively, while Zarina Bhimji presented an installation, combining

images with “scattered text, dried flowers and crumpled muslin on the floor”.<sup>71</sup> Mumtaz Karimjee presented work from her series *Notes from the City of the Sun*, in which photographs depicting Chinese landscapes were accompanied by poems by Gu Chen, Shu Ting, and Bei Dao, which the artist herself had translated.<sup>72</sup> These landscapes were described as “images of mist, colour, and purely artistic”, while the poems were written by scholars closely associated with the pro-democratic movement, and were understood by the artist, and Chinese audiences, as acts of contestation.<sup>73</sup> Although more research on her work needs to be undertaken, it is clear that Karimjee’s body of work should be regarded as an investigation of how dissent can be articulated through aesthetic means.

The third *In Focus* exhibition included works by male artists Yashwant Mali, Shafique Uddeen, and Sohail, and the female artist, Shareena Hill. This exhibition included paintings, drawings, photography, and installation, and Hill presented recent paintings depicting magnified domestic utensils, including *Juicer* (1990) (fig. 45).<sup>74</sup> The fourth and final exhibition included recent works by an older generation of male artists, Suresh Vadak, Amal Ghosh, Prafulla Mohanti, and Ibrahim Wagh.

Although archival material is scarce and does not give a complete picture of the exhibitions, the critical reception of the Horizon shows seems to have been generally positive. Probyn’s review for *Spare Rib* focused on the first two exhibitions and their predominantly female participants (fig. 46). However, while ostensibly a review article, Probyn says little about the exhibitions, highlighting instead the barriers faced by women artists, suggesting that, “The very need to hold an exhibition of Asian women artists in a more modest setting than the Hayward Gallery ... defines the meaning of Black women’s struggle in the world of art”.<sup>75</sup> In the short text, she relayed her conversations with Chila Burman and Shanti Thomas, and reflected on the status of Asian women. Burman is cited as being frustrated by the fact that male artists fail to recognise the struggles Asian women experience in getting to art college, in the face of disapproving or uncomprehending parents, while Thomas is presented as being concerned with finding a balance between both the positive and negative life experiences of women.

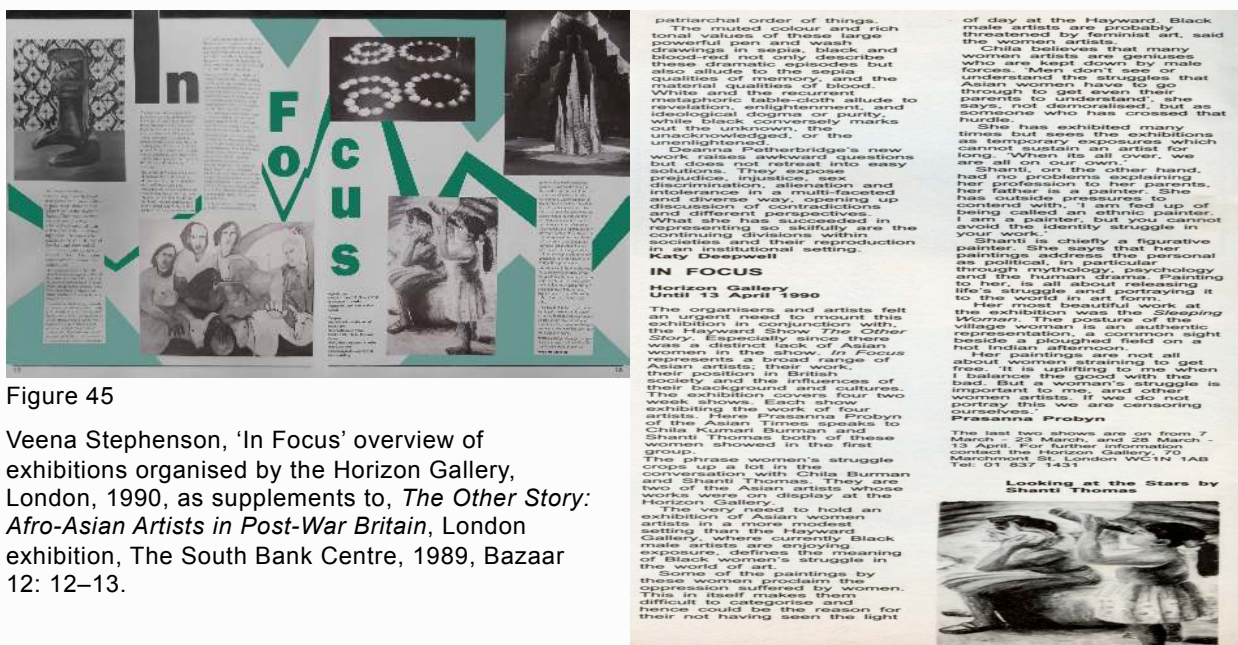


Figure 45

Veena Stephenson, 'In Focus' overview of exhibitions organised by the Horizon Gallery, London, 1990, as supplements to, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain*, London exhibition, The South Bank Centre, 1989, Bazaar 12: 12–13.

Figure 46

Prasanna Probyn, 'In Focus: Horizon Gallery', *Spare Rib*, no. 210 (March 1990), 42.

## Final Thoughts

In creating new images of South Asian women, artists including Dushka Ahmed, Chila Burman, Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, and Shanti Thomas challenged audiences to reconsider long-held stereotypes regarding South Asian femininity, and their work should, I argue, be regarded as acts of reclamation, empowerment, and self-definition. For these artists, art---the mediums of painting, sculpture, and printmaking---offered a space for reflection and reconstruction; and for social commentary and critique from within a British social, political, and aesthetic context. Considered collectively, the exhibition case studies demonstrate that while ghettoised in many respects, during the 1980s and into the 1990s, women artists of South Asian origin worked and exhibited collaboratively, curating their own shows in environments that supported their aspirations as artists, as women, and sensitive to the specificities of their identities as South Asian. Comparing *Four Indian Women Artists* (1981) and *\*Jagrati* (\*1986), separated by five years, it is evident that there was a shift—not only in how these artists represented themselves as artists, but also in how exhibitions were conceived. By the mid-1980s, it was not enough to simply exhibit and exhibitions such as *Jagrati* were expressions of social activism. By 1990, the *In Focus* exhibitions at the Horizon Gallery sought to demonstrate the depth and breadth of artistic practice among artists of South Asian origin and the four exhibitions collectively extended the narrative of diasporic artistic practice in the UK as presented in *The Other Story*. Nonetheless, while the conceptual drivers of exhibitions may have changed and developed over time, underpinning each was a concern for the ever-present need to promote minority artists in a mainstream (white) art world that was ambivalent to their work. The Horizon Gallery had intended that the *In Focus* exhibitions be re-articulated as a touring show. Although this plan failed to come to fruition, in 1991, the gallery did produce a loose-leaf

catalogue, compiling information about each of the sixteen exhibiting artists, plus information on an additional ten artists.<sup>76</sup> As mentioned above, in 1991, there were two touring exhibitions of female South Asian diaspora artists; and in 1993, the South Asian Visual Arts Festival took place across the Midlands. It would seem then, that at the start of the 1990s, South Asian diaspora artists were gaining access to, and visibility within, mainstream institutions and were significant in number. But if this was the case, why then, are so few artists of South Asian origin included in mainstream narratives of British art? Why are the same handful of artists discussed in published narratives of Black British art? Why is it that so many artists, exhibitions, and projects have been so emphatically forgotten? My research continues...

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sarah Victoria Turner and Hammad Nasar for inviting me to present my research at the conference,\* Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain 1900 to Now,\* and for their continued support whilst developing this article. My research has been richly enhanced by conversations with numerous artists, especially Chila Kumari Burman, Jagjit Chuhan, Nina Edge, Bhajan Hunjan, and Symrath Patti, who also provided materials from their personal archives for reproduction here. Research for this paper was undertaken during a Mid-Career Fellowship funded by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and I am grateful to all at the Centre for their intellectual and practical support.

## About the author

Alice Correia is an independent art historian. Her research examines late twentieth-century British art, with a specific focus on artists of African, Caribbean and South Asian heritage. She has worked at Tate Britain, Government Art Collection and the Universities of Sussex and Salford. She has held fellowships at the Paul Mellon Centre for the Study of British Art and the UAL Decolonising Arts Institute. She is a co-chair of the British Art Network's Black British Art Research Group and she is the editor of *What is Black Art? Writings on African, Asian and Caribbean art in Britain, 1981–1989*, Penguin Classics, 2022. With Derek Horton, she curated *A Tall Order! Rochdale Art Gallery in the 1980s at Touchstones Rochdale*, 2023.

## Footnotes

1. Rasheed Araeen, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (London: The South Bank Centre, 1989).
2. The ten South Asian artists were: Saleem Arif, Avinash Chandra, Avtarjeet Dhanjal, Iqbal Geoffrey, Balraj Khanna, Ahmed Parvez, Ivan Peries, A.J. Shemza, F.N. Souza, and Rasheed Araeen.
3. See David A. Bailey and Stuart Hall, "Critical Decade: An Introduction", *Ten.8 Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 4–7.
4. Stuart Hall, "Old and New Identities", in Anthony D. King (ed.), *Culture, Globalization and the World-System: Contemporary Conditions for the Representation of Identity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 56.

5. Parita Trivedi, "To Deny Our Fullness: Asian Women in the Making of History", *Feminist Review: Many Voices, One Chant, Black Feminist Perspectives* 17 (Autumn 1984), 38.
6. See comments by Geeta Kapur and Saloni Mathur made during discussion at the *Showing, Telling, Seeing: Exhibiting South Asia in Britain 1900–Now*, a conference organised by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Asia Art Archive, 30 June–1 July 2016, panel seven: Other Stories, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwskwS4PcLk&feature=youtu.be&list=PLf4F3b0ZQ-HkvRFBRNEQZEy0gcxU6NeIs> (accessed 20 August 2019).
7. For examples of recent contributions to debates on the constitution of Britishness see, Nikesh Shukla (ed.), *The Good Immigrant* (London: Unbound, 2017); Reni Eddo-Lodge, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018); and Afua Hirsch, *Brit(ish): On Race, Identity and Belonging* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2018).
8. See Ian R.G. Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-Racial Britain* (London: Routledge, 1997).
9. See Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Race in Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 78–79, 85–87.
10. Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge, 1996), Chapter 3, "Gendered Spaces: Women of South Asian Descent in 1980s Britain", 67–83.
11. Ambalavaner Sivanandan, "From Resistance to Rebellion: Asian and Afro-Caribbean Struggles in Britain", *Race and Class* 23, no. 2/3 (1981–1982), 116.
12. Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality*, edited by John Wood (London: B.T. Batsford, 1969), Chapter 13, "Immigration", reproduces the "Rivers of Blood" speech in full, 213–237.
13. *The Observer*, 5 April 1970, as cited in Kenneth Leech, *Brick Lane 1978: The Events and Their Significance* (Birmingham: AFFOR, 1980), 8. See Louise London, "The East End of London: Paki Bashing in 1970", *Race Today* 5, no. 11 (December 1973).
14. See "Police Against Black People: Evidence Submitted to the Royal Commission on the Criminal Procedure by the Institute of Race Relations", *Race and Class*, pamphlet No. 6 (London: Institute of Race Relations, 1979).
15. Leech, *Brick Lane 1978*, 8.
16. Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora*, 43. See also, Anandi Ramamurthy, *Black Star: Britain's Asian Youth Movements* (London: Pluto Press, 2013).
17. Leech, *Brick Lane 1978*, 10.
18. Vivek Chaudhary, "Forty Years on, Southall Demands Justice for Killing of Blair Peach", *The Observer*, 21 April 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/apr/21/southall-demands-justice-killing-of-blair-peach-1979> (accessed 15 August 2019).
19. For a useful introduction to the Grunwick strike, see <https://www.striking-women.org/module/striking-out/grunwick-dispute> (accessed 18 May 2019).
20. For more on the Imperial Typewriters strike of 1974, see <https://strikeatimperial.net> (accessed 21 August 2019).
21. See Brixton Black Women's Group, "Black Women Organizing", *Feminist Review: Many Voices, One Chant, Black Feminist Perspectives* 17 (Autumn 1984): 84–89.
22. See Southall Black Sisters, <https://southallblacksisters.org.uk> (accessed 22 August 2019).
23. See Evan Smith, and Marinella Marmo, "Uncovering the 'Virginity Testing' Controversy in the National Archives: The Intersectionality of Discrimination in British Immigration History", *Gender & History* 23, no. 1 (2011), 161.



24. Anon, "Asian Women Subjected to 'Virginity Tests' at Heathrow", *The Telegraph*, 9 May 2011, see <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/immigration/8501872/Asian-women-subjected-to-virginity-tests-at-Heathrow.html> (accessed 26 September 2017).
25. See Hannana Siddiqui, "Black Women's Activism: Coming of Age?" *Feminist Review* 64 (2000): 83–96.
26. See Minutes of the IAUUK meeting 30 November 1978, reproduced in *The Roots of the Indian Artists' Collectives*, exhibition catalogue (London: Grosvenor Gallery, 2019), <https://www.grosvenorgallery.com/usr/library/documents/catalogues/therootsoftheindianartistscollectives.pdf> (accessed 15 August 2019).
27. See *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective*, touring exhibition initiated by Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2017, and the accompanying exhibition catalogue, Nick Aikens (ed.), *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2017).
28. See Courtney J. Martin, "Sculptor, Performer, Critic: Rasheed Araeen, Circa 1970", in Nick Aikens (ed.), *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2017), 177–190.
29. See poster promoting performance of *Paki Bastard*, 29 October 1977, 2B Butler's Wharf, London, included in Araeen's retrospective at Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven.
30. Zoe Sutherland, "Dialectics of Modernity and Counter-Modernity: Rasheed Araeen's Cruciform Works", in Nick Aikens (ed.), *Rasheed Araeen: A Retrospective* (Zurich: JRP/Ringier, 2017), 196.
31. Hammad Nasar, "Notes from the Field: Navigating the Afterlife of the Other Story", *Asia Art Archive*, <https://aaa.org.hk/en/ideas/ideas/notes-from-the-field-navigating-the-afterlife-of-the-other-story> (accessed 2 May 2019).
32. Rita Keegan, "The Story So Far", *Spare Rib*, February 1990, 36.
33. Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent* (London: Saffron Press, 2001).
34. David A. Bailey, Ian Baucom, and Sonia Boyce (eds), *Shades of Black: Assembling Black Arts in 1980s Britain* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
35. John Holt and Laura Turney, "The Singular Journey: South Asian Visual Art in Britain", in N. Ali, V.S. Kalra, and S. Sayyid (eds), *A Postcolonial People: South Asians in Britain* (London: Hurst & Company, 2006), 329–339.
36. Holt and Turney, "The Singular Journey", 339.
37. Eddie Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art: A History since the 1950s* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014).
38. Maud Sulter (ed.), *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity* (Hebden Bridge: Urban Fox Press, 1990).
39. Melanie Keen and Liz Ward (eds), *Recordings: A Select Bibliography of Contemporary African, Afro-Caribbean and Asian British Art* (London: Iniva, 1996). See [https://issuu.com/artslondonlibraries/docs/recordings\\_-\\_a\\_select\\_bibliography](https://issuu.com/artslondonlibraries/docs/recordings_-_a_select_bibliography) (accessed 15 August 2019).
40. Since undertaking this research, the South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive has moved to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. See <https://sadaa.co.uk> (accessed 15 August 2019).
41. See Laurel Forster, *Magazine Movements: Women's Culture, Feminisms, and Media Form* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), Chapter 5: "'Our Culture in a Racist Society': Mukti".
42. For a recording of my presentation, see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-\\_Ty58l498E](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_Ty58l498E) (accessed 21 August 2019).

43. See Mumtaz Karimjee and Amina Patel, "Aurat Shakti", *Ten.8 Critical Decade: Black British Photography in the 80s* 2, no. 3 (Spring 1992): 62–63.
44. Bhajan Hunjan in conversation with the author, 23 October 2015.
45. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock (eds), *Framing Feminism: Art and the Women's Movement 1970–85* (London: Pandora, 1987), 64.
46. Chila Burman in conversation with the author, 10 September 2015.
47. Caroline Collier, "Four Indian Women Artists: Bhajan Hunjan, Naomi Iny, Chila Kuman Burman, Vinodini Ebdon (Indian Artists UK Gallery, London: Exhibition Review)", *Arts Review* (UK) 34, no. 2 (15 January 1982), 18.
48. Anon, "Indian Artists U.K. Present Four Indian Women Artists' Show", *New Life* (29 January 1982), 10.
49. Anon, "Indian Artists U.K. Present Four Indian Women Artists' Show", 11.
50. Lucy Lippard, *Overlay: Contemporary Art and Art of Prehistory* (New York: The New Place, 1983).
51. Bhajan Hunjan in conversation with the author, 23 October 2015.
52. See Richard Hylton, *The Nature of the Beast: Cultural Diversity and the Visual Arts Sector: A Study of Policies, Initiatives and Attitudes, 1976–2006* (Bath: Institute of Contemporary Interdisciplinary Arts, 2007).
53. Fay Rodrigues, *Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, exhibition pamphlet (Woolwich: Greenwich Citizens Gallery, 1986), 1. Panchayat Archive.
54. Rodrigues, *Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, 2.
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57. Ranu Samantrai, *AlterNatives: Black Feminism in the Postimperial Nation* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 150.
58. Shaila Shah, "We will not Mourn their Deaths in Silence", in Shabnam Grewal, Jackie Kay, Liliane Landor, Gail Lewis, and Pratibha Parmar (eds), *Charting the Journey: Writings by Black and Third World Women* (London: Sheba Feminist Publishers, 1988), 281.
59. Dushka Ahmed, *ArtRage* 15: 25–26.
60. Rodrigues, *Jagrati—An Exhibition of Work by Asian Women Artists*, 4.
61. John Brady, "UKasian: Nina Edge", in Amal Ghosh and Juginder Lamba (eds), *Beyond Frontiers: Contemporary British Art by Artists of South Asian Descent* (London: Saffron Press, 2001), 105.
62. Brady, "UKasian: Nina Edge", 107.
63. Rodrigues, *Jagrati—An Exhibition by 13 Asian Women Artists*, 4.
64. Symrath Patti, in conversation with the author, 18 July 2019.
65. Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art*, 125.
66. As cited in Chambers, *Black Artists in British Art*, 125–126.
67. Veena Stephenson, "In Focus", *Bazaar South Asian Arts Magazine* 12, 12. For further discussion on the omission of women from *The Other Story*, see Homi Bhabha and Sutapa Biswas, "The Wrong Story", *New Statesman and Society*, 15 December 1989, 40–42. Reprinted in Steve Edwards (ed.), *Art and its Histories: A Reader* (London: The Open University, 1999), 269–273.
68. Jean Fisher, "The Other Story and the Past Imperfect", *Tate Papers* 12 (Autumn 2009), <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/no-12/the-other-story-and-the-past->

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69. Prasanna Probyn, "In Focus", *Spare Rib*, March 1990, 42.
70. Stephenson, "In Focus", 12. Jagjit Chuhan, email correspondence with author, 11 January 2016. Bhajan Hunjan, in conversation with the author, 6 September 2019.
71. Stephenson, "In Focus", 12.
72. Mumtaz Karimjee, in conversation with the author, 3 June 2016.
73. Anon, "In Focus—4 Exhibitions", *Black Arts in London* 122 (March 1990), 9.
74. Stephenson, "In Focus", 12.
75. Probyn, "In Focus", 42.
76. See Horizon Gallery, "Press Release: InFocus Restated", 1991, SADAA: South Asian Diaspora Arts Archive, <http://sadaa.co.uk/archive/art/horizon-gallery/infocus-restated-press-release> (accessed 15 August 2019).

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