

art

# ART MILES

Subodh Gupta  
'Spill', 2007  
Stainless steel & stainless steel utensils  
Copyright Subodh Gupta, 2010

“*The Empire Strikes Back*”, an exhibition at the Saatchi Gallery on till May 2010, covers art from both India and Pakistan. Although the exhibit firmly places the artists within the rubric of the former British Empire, ironically, most of the artists at the show prefer not to be typecast by regional affinities. *Libas* explores.

by Geeta Alvares Meneses



The Saatchi Gallery – renowned for showcasing contemporary art at its most daring and outrageous – is the collection of Charles Saatchi, and reflects his personal taste. He has been instrumental in enhancing many careers, including those of Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons and Sarah Lucas, some of the most collectable big names.

Now located at the Duke of York's HQ building (a former army barracks) on the King's Road in London's Chelsea, the gallery has seen over a million people visit the first three survey shows, namely, 'The Revolution Continues: New Art from China', 'Unveiled: New Art from the Middle East', and 'Abstract America: New Painting and Sculpture'.

An undoubted attraction is the fact that the gallery is free to the public, thanks to the backing of Phillips de Pury & Company.

The current exhibition curated by Charles Saatchi is an Indian contemporary art survey show. The 26 chosen include three Pakistani born artists and several diaspora artists from the UK and the US, who are either already highly collectable or are fast becoming so.

A presence in this show predicates an automatic thrust to international stardom. The artists include: Jaishri Abichandani (born in India, works in the US), Mansoor Ali (born and works in India), Kriti Arora (born and works in India), Huma Bhabha (born in Pakistan, works in the US), Ajit Chauhan (born and works in the US), Shezad Dawood (born in the UK to a Pakistani mother and Indian father, and works in the UK), Atul Dodiya (born and works in India), Chitra Ganesh (born and works in the US), Probir Gupta (born and works in India), Sakshi Gupta (born and works in India), Subodh Gupta (born and works

in India), Tushar Joag (born and works in India), Jitish Kallat (born and works in India), Reena Saini Kallat (born and works in India), Bharti Kher (born in the UK, works in India), Rajan Krishnan (born and works in India), Huma Mulji (born and works in Pakistan), Pushpamala N (born and works in India), Clare Arni (born in the UK, works in India), Yamini Nayar (born and works in the US), Justin Ponmany (born and works in India), Rashid Rana (born and works in Pakistan), TV Santhosh (born and works in India), Schandra Singh (born and works in the US), Tallur LN (born in India and works in India and South Korea), and T Venkanna (born and works in India).

The exhibition's title is drawn from the second 'Star Wars' film, and has been used before for a group show at the ATM Gallery in New York in 2002, which was curated by Jason Fox and Cannon Hudson. However, they had a different political emphasis. It was after 9/11, and showed how the USA retaliated. Pakistani-born Huma Bhabha showed there.

The Saatchi Gallery is at pains to emphasize that there is a slight edge to the title because of the long historical relationship with India, which they wanted to turn on its head. They wish to set people thinking about questions that are unique to India and have to do with the Raj, Nehru and Gandhi. However, the artists have also tackled politics, war, religion, sex, the environment, slums, poverty and migration.

As Rebecca Wilson, the Associate Director of the Saatchi Gallery puts it: "the work that artists are making reflects what's going on socially, politically, economically...it's boom time in India and cities are growing. In the West, we're more conscious of the power of Asia and we want to look for the next big thing."

The artists in this show – although they're absorbing traditions of contemporary art, are also hanging onto their own cultural and artistic heritage

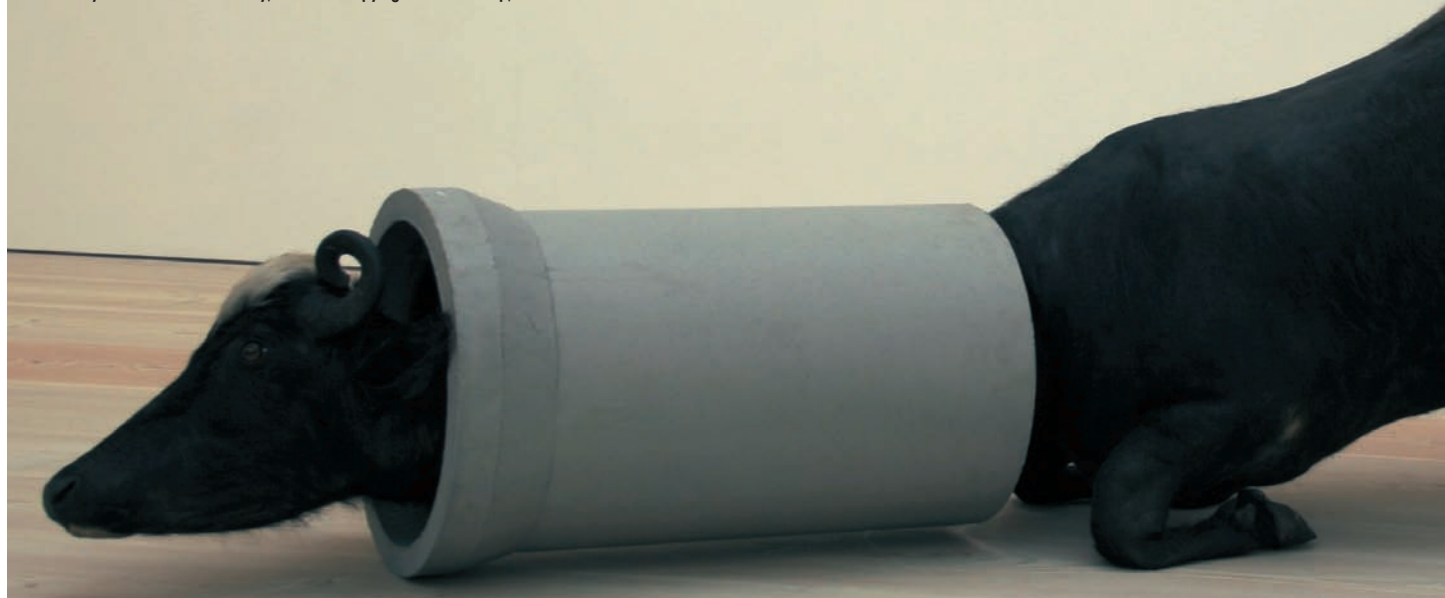
**Bharti Kher**  
**'Hungry Dogs Eat Dirty Puddings', 2004**  
 Fibreglass and plastic  
 Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London  
 Copyright Bharti Kher, 2010



to produce an interesting range of work which speaks to the West and that's why this show is happening now.

Interviewing some of the artists, it was interesting to observe that the majority resented being typecast by nationality and almost all thought of themselves as universal artists.

**Huma Mulji**  
**'Her Suburban Dream', 2009. Mixed media**  
 Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. Copyright Huma Mulji, 2010





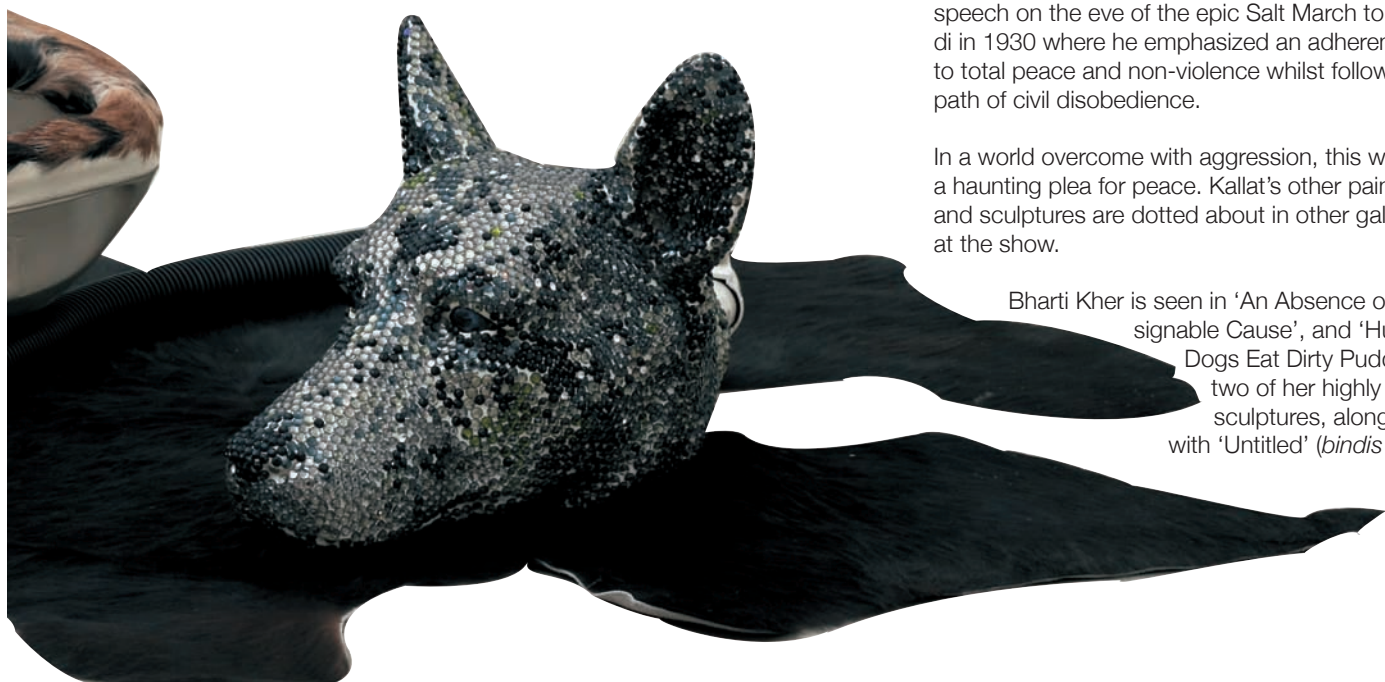
*However, as so many non-European artists are being treated as brands in the current hyped art world, these artists too have been branded by the market as ‘commodities from South Asia with a huge marketable value’*

However, as so many non-European artists are being treated as brands in the current hyped art world, these artists too have been branded by the market as ‘commodities from South Asia with a huge marketable value’.

Jitish Kallat, whose solo show opened at the Haunch of Venison Gallery on February 15, (attesting to his huge marketability as a new art star) has Gallery 1 to himself for ‘Public Notice 2’. Consisting of 4479 bone-shaped fibre glass sculptures, it recalls Mahatma Gandhi’s historic speech on the eve of the epic Salt March to Dandi in 1930 where he emphasized an adherence to total peace and non-violence whilst following a path of civil disobedience.

In a world overcome with aggression, this work is a haunting plea for peace. Kallat’s other paintings and sculptures are dotted about in other galleries at the show.

Bharti Kher is seen in ‘An Absence of As signable Cause’, and ‘Hungry Dogs Eat Dirty Pudding’, two of her highly rated sculptures, along with ‘Untitled’ (*bindis* on



Yet it is true that contemporary Indian art is ‘hot’, and being typecast as such is a positive boon in this globalised world. On the other hand, some Pakistani artists have found that their biggest fans are Indian patrons and they are now gaining greater international recognition because of this.

Her use of *bindis* poses a challenge to women entrenched in tradition. Bharti Kher opened a solo show at Hauser and Wirth on March 20, 2010.

She is seen all over the show, but also with her husband Subodh Gupta in Gallery 8, where his iconic cooking utensils (both installations and



Schandra Singh in front of ‘The Lazy River’  
Photo by Geeta Alvares Meneses



Shezar Dawood in front of Tumblewood pieces  
Photo: Geeta Alvares Meneses

*“I would love to have the luxury to be seen as an artist. When labels are attached to your work, whether Pakistani, South Asian or Indian, the viewfinder becomes a bit narrow, although there is no denying the importance of the region you belong to; and it will reflect in my work. Art is not a nationalist activity”, Rashid Rana observes*

paintings) including ‘U.F.O.’ and ‘Spill’ occupy pride of space.

Gupta has achieved global fame with dizzying figures paid for his works at auctions and solo shows at famous international galleries. He occupied pride of place with ‘Line of Control’ under the cupola in



Bharti Kher  
‘An Absence of Assignable Cause (The Heart)’, 2007  
Bindis on fibreglass. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. Copyright Bharti Kher, 2010



Huma Mulji  
‘Arabian Delight’, 2008  
Rexine suitcase, taxidermy camel, metal rods, wood, cotton wool, fabric. Courtesy of the Saatchi Gallery, London. Copyright Huma Mulji, 2010

Tate Britain during Altermodern, the fourth Tate Triennial, and has also had a professorship at the prestigious Beaux-Arts in Paris.

Gallery 3 is dedicated to Pakistani born Huma Bhabha’s six sculptures. Winner of The Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum Emerging Artist Award in 2008, Bhabha is fascinated by science fiction and likes to see how far she can go exploring ideas of primitivism, futurism and the abstract in the making of sculpture out of humble discarded materials such as styrofoam, clay and wood, “working on innovative ways of making it and adding to the language and history of sculpture”.

Her work has open ended associations and is more about art. She likes to create “landscapes of human debris” and deal with “a formal healing or the resurrection of ruin”.

Grotesque monsters and caricatures meld with the abstract in her work. ‘Untitled’ is reminiscent of a body bagged, prostrate praying figure with two hands outstretched and a tail at the back atop an altar plinth. Darkly witty, it is a monument to the victims of war.

‘The Orientalist’, cast in bronze, is a portentously intimidating regal figure.

Bhabha is quick to emphasize that she doesn’t believe in borders or nationalism. As an artist she is free to move anywhere.

Displacement, migration and the ‘Arabisation’ of Pakistan into just another Middle Eastern state by removing its South Asian heritage, is what most concerns Huma Mulji’s practice. ‘Arabian Delight’ consists of a taxidermied



camel jammed into an oversized rexine suitcase. Saatchi bought this before its acquired notoriety at the Art Dubai Fair in 2009. The organizers asked for it to be removed as it offended their sensibilities. They claimed that the camel was a national emblem and found the work insulting.

Perhaps it also reminded them of the child jockeys imported in from Pakistan to participate in cruel camel races, often leading to their untimely deaths.

Mulji dwells on the absurdities of a society in transition and describes it as “living 200 years in the past and 30 years in the future all at once”. Her ‘Suburban Dream’ depicts a stuffed water buffalo forcing its elongated head through a concrete water pipe at the mercy of humanity in a degrading position. This unexpected juxtaposition explores chaos and change in the society that has produced it.

T V Santhosh’s lurid green, orange and red photo negative canvases use an intentionally shocking use of colour to draw our attention to the themes of global terrorism. ‘Tracing an Ancient Error’, and ‘Stitching an Undefined Border’ are large paintings and depict a world on the brink of an apocalypse. Both works deal with the border issues between Pakistan and India and the effects of terrorism on its helpless victims.

He asks “What are the political strategies behind this violence and who is the real enemy in the context of terror?” Santhosh shows that news recorded generated images have the potential to manipulate our understanding of what is present. In financial terms his works have been reaching dizzy heights.

Shezad Dawood’s concern with being a liberal Muslim South Asian are reflected in the tumbleweed sculptures named after the ‘Ninety-nine Beautiful Names of God’ from the Sufi cosmology, intended to describe every aspect of the divine. The four displayed are: ‘The Bestower’, ‘The Majestic’, ‘The Judge’ and ‘The Protector’.

Made of tumbleweed (imported from Kansas), the pieces are illuminated by a different coloured neon light within a Perspex box placed upon a black monolithic plinth.

Islam spread via the desert like the tumbleweed (also a metaphor for the colonization of the American West). The plinth points to the Kaaba, to Malevitch’s Black Square and to Stanley Kubrick’s ‘2001, a Space Odyssey’, where Neolithic man is awed by its presence. It is the realization of negative and positive space, of light and dark and the colours encompassed within.

His works play with the idea of accretion and there are always several layers of meaning within, working in an evolutionary process, often in tandem. He calls them “rhizomatic”, and they are the synthesis of a personal heritage, encompassing East and West with all its attendant sophistication. Dawood enjoys the witty interplay of cowboys and Indians (South Asians inextricably mixed into this practice). > 191



A portrait of Huma Mulji



Huma Bhabha  
'The Orientalist'

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conscious and physically fit, and enjoys various types of outdoor activities that include walking, swimming and skiing. Princess Sarvath was the first woman in Jordan to receive a black belt in Taekwondo. She is also the Honorary President of the Jordanian Badminton Federation.

When Princess Sarvath first came to her new home as a young bride, Jordan was still recovering from the 1967 war. She remembers what a different city Amman, the capital, was. She feels now that the city has lost its soul, and I tend to agree with her. It had a charm all its own in the old days. It has now been put into fastforward with huge malls and an ostentatious display of nouveau riche wealth bypassing a simpler way of life, losing a lot of values along the way.

In the early 70's, different groups of insurgents wanted to make Amman the 'Hanoi of the Middle East'. During the unrest, the palace had come under constant fire, one night taking 37 hits from rockets aimed straight at it. When the water supply was cut, the princess gave buckets of water from the swimming pool to the soldiers. As it is the custom in the subcontinent to stock up supplies for six months, the practice came in very handy during those troubled times. His Majesty, The late King Hussein would often drop in for meals when the firing became intense and movement became restricted. At the time, Princess Sarvath was expecting her second child and had made contingency plans in case she had to deliver her baby at home. She could not contemplate the fact that if the skirmishes flared up again while she were in hospital she would be separated from her little girl and husband.

My late father wrote a book titled "The Hashemite Arab Army". His description of those dark days between 17th to 25th September, 1970 included the following: "The supreme commander, King Hussien, who had bent over backwards to accommodate the PRM, but had been thwarted at every step by the extremists in the organization, established his command post at Hummar Palace, a few miles to the west of Amman. By the King's side were his brothers, Prince Mohammad and Crown Prince Hassan, the latter fresh from Harrow and Oxford with a First Class Honours degree in Oriental History. Crown Prince Hassan's brave and imaginative plans for the economic

and social welfare and betterment of the Jordanian people had to be shelved for the while, as in the following eight days the Hashemites were to face the most serious challenge of their troubled history".

They all survived to live another day. Prince Hassan, with his young wife by his side, and with her encouragement, helped fulfill many dreams for a better Jordan.

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His closest allegiance is to being a conceptual artist. He works across a variety of media and in "different contexts with different cultural narratives and symbols; how they recur and then refresh themselves through different contexts. Very much a process of mapping different points on a compass towards a structural understanding rather than a nationally based understanding".

There is an historical narrative which goes through Dawood's work. The idea of a formal equivalence rather than the clash of civilizations is "actually far more striking than any perceived tension or opposition. Equivalence creates attention whether in a formal or political register". The artist sees himself as a mystic and operates from this position as he always feels there is a parallel authorship.

US born and educated Chitra Ganesh rates humour as a very important element in her work although there are lots of obvious images of violence to which she gives a polemical quality by using appropriate imagery from the Amar Chitra Katha comics.

Her large work 'Secrets', and the comic book configured 'Tales of Amnesia' reflect how Indian globalization has impacted on the cultural production of her work.

She sees the title of the exhibition as an obvious reference to American colonialism, and says: "As an American I appreciate it because they don't have a sense of it or that they are doing it as we speak". She sees "it" as a reference to the current culture of "Star Wars".

For her, Indian art is a relationship between the market created by capitalism, which takes the cultural and eclectic and turns it out. It reflects where we are in the world and how globalization has impacted the cultural production. This is true of punk culture and Chinese art which the market has "absorbed and spit out".

"I view myself as an artist, as a queer, as a New Yorker and also as an Indian. My parents were very much so. They were born and raised there. They left when they were 30. In the 70's, those who left couldn't have attained what they did in the US by staying in India."

She says that the violence and eroticism that she presents through the comic book genre already exists in fairy tales, but she is just presenting it differently. Very influenced by the Surrealist movement, she uses different disjunctions: cultural and national heritage and the comic book.

"What kinds of femininity we express and how to shake that up" is what Ganesh is about.

American born Schandra Singh "thinks of herself as a contemporary artist who happens to be half Austrian and half Indian". Aspects of her culture come through her work but she doesn't go there specifically to do her art nor does she think of Indian issues. Although humour is important in her work, the element of anxiety predominates.

Certainly her large canvases 'Lazy River' and 'Neha' (the only work she has made of an Indian person), both show grotesque characters trying to get away from anxiety, albeit sceptical about it.

"I'd like to be perceived as an artist, not as an Indian artist...I like to think of my work as a human condition...and that's what I'd like to be expressing."

"I would love to have the luxury to be seen as an artist. When labels are attached to your work, whether Pakistani, South Asian or Indian, the viewfinder becomes a bit narrow, although there is no denying the importance of the region you belong to; and it will reflect in my work. Art is not a nationalist activity", Rashid Rana wryly observes.

Uniquely perceived as the Pakistani rock star of the art world, his photo based work uses micro and macro imagery to produce beautiful yet illusory work, cleverly camouflaging disturbing images when viewed close up. His practice consists of pushing the boundaries of the Grid and Abstract Expressionism through the putting together of composite images by the use of software. He aims to push the limits of what software can do to achieve his "ideas led" practice.

His documentation of contradictions and paradoxes is shown as the 'Veil Series I, II & III'. For the West, it represents a submissive suborned creature. "For non-Western men (because of the easy



Huma Bhabha  
Untitled  
Photo by Geeta Alvares Meneses



accessibility to pornography) it shows a distorted image of Western women", says Rana. The series is made up of pornographic images of women taken from the web.

Rana's seminal 'The World is Not Enough' depicts an impossible view of piles of garbage and detritus digitally stitched together to make it look like an impossibly beautiful accretion from a non-existent aerial viewpoint, reminiscent of the aesthetics of the Abstract Expressionists and post-consumerist culture in the US. His work has fetched six digit figures.

"Enjoy", he says jokingly, whilst emphasizing that his work is the immediate experience of the visual culture around him. He is not interested in going into the past.

According to the Saatchi Gallery "the rapid flourishing of this art scene on the one hand and the recent economic downturn on the other have prompted critical questions about Indian culture and globalization in a country torn between a proudly independent mindset and a dependence on global consumption".

However Jitish Kallat is of the view that "these pieces actually travel and gather Art Miles, and as they gather Art Miles in different locations, they shed and gain meaning".

The exhibition shocks, beguiles, questions and educates, making it a unique experience.

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private person by his own admission, and makes no bones about the personal commitment to the project, which took seven years to do.

"That I enjoyed doing it has been my own reward. Of course there is a cer-

tain satisfaction in having worked at creating a model of a language. I am not saying that the model is good or bad but the vocabulary has been made available. I feel that there is a tremendous amount of classical Urdu literature waiting to be revealed to the Western world, and so if anyone wants to work on that they should know that there is a vocabulary for that. Then, there is the hope that after reading the translation, readers would turn to the original text."

Farooqi's Lahore visit came at an opportune time...the coming into print of his second major translation complete with all the accents and punctuations. You guessed it - "Tilism-e-Hoshruha" (Farooqi just completed the first volume) is an extension of the Amir Hamza corporate. The original "Hoshruha" by Muhammad Hussain Jah is in eight volumes spread over a thousand pages, but page numbers appear irrelevant to the man who finds certain adventure in introducing vocabulary like Fairy Face for *Pari Chehra* just so that classic Urdu text may have no reasons for being ignored.

Visiting home grounds recently as part of an ambitious project of setting up a public library system in Pakistan, Farooqi's vision is to follow this up with small kiosks in different cities where "readers would be able to get books delivered". A new idea he agrees, but "very doable". That is when curiosity forces one last question: was not home-ground Pakistan good enough a launching pad for translating classic Urdu literature? "I moved to Toronto in 1994 merely for professional reasons." Bidding adieu to Karachi, Farooqi finally found in the city of Toronto the sort of peace that was required to introduce his friend 'The Lord of the Auspicious Planetary Conjunction, The Conqueror of the World, the most Munificent and Bountiful, Amir Hamza' to the world at large.

Farooqi who worked as a journalist in Karachi before moving to Toronto claims up front, "I come from a middle

class family and moving to Canada has not been a migration. We moved there so I could have a reasonable sense of security, which is essential for my work...that the work I am doing will get to be finished on time. I need this sort of assurance in my personal life. Moving to Canada for me has been like moving to a more work conducive environment, where sustained intellectual activity can be done."

Historical narrative once again, in line with the traditions of yore when men of letters moved on to newer pastures in search of intellectually stimulating climates...Baghdad to Damascus, to Mosul to Kirman and then Tehran! But in those days it was plundering conquerors who forced the migration of intellectuals...in contemporary Pakistan, a playful hide and seek of electric power can do the needful!

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