

INDIAN ART

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The eight month long Festival of India, recently launched in London with a concert of classical music, is one of the most ambitious if not most expensive festivals to have been mounted for some time. The festival originated from a suggestion by the British High Commissioner to India in 1977, and has been organised by the British and Indian governments and their associated cultural institutions. It is reported that £1m has been spent in each country to mount and subsidise exhibitions in addition to the £400,000 raised by business and other patronage.

At the inaugural press conference the festival chairperson stated that their objective was to develop 'a better understanding in this country of the spirit, the traditions and indeed the whole meaning of India'. The Indian High Commissioner in a more down to earth speech hoped that the festival would inform people in Britain, especially those who have grown up since India's independence in 1947, about his country's heritage and post-independence achievements.

There is certainly a great deal of material on show relating to India's history and heritage. In keeping with the establishment norms of what constitutes culture, the major proportion of the main exhibitions consist of displays of sculpture, painting, manuscripts, books, photographs, and etchings, together with performances of classical dance and music. These exhibitions range from an attempt to illustrate Indian concepts of the world through paintings and sculpture drawn from many different historical periods (In the Image of Man) to modern paintings and photographs of India by European and Indian artists. Indian folk culture and crafts also find a prominent place in the festival, with displays of costumes and handicrafts, an exhibition with artisans demonstrating their techniques of working in wood, stone and metal, and idealised recreations of a bazaar and a village.

In contrast, the attempts to portray some of the realities of modern India pale into insignificance. The Science Museum in London has mounted a display showing some of India's past contributions to medicine, mathematics and chemistry, with a small section illustrating some contemporary developments such as the production of

new foodgrain varieties, the space and nuclear programmes, and attempts to improve the quality of village life. The fact that India is an important industrial country would not be apparent from the festival but for some of the items in the science exhibition, and another exhibition of design in India since the 1940s. Only one exhibition deals with the domination that Britain exercised over India for nearly 200 years, and the subsequent development of relations between the two countries and peoples. No attempt seems to have been made to illustrate some of the social complexities of modern India which make it a country of such contrasting impressions, but perhaps the retrospective festival of films by Ritwik Ghatak to be shown later this summer will make some amends in this direction.

While these exhibitions contain many interesting and beautiful objects and are undoubtedly well worth visiting, the overall impression is that much of what is on show would have been perfectly comprehensible as a Festival of India to a visitor at the beginning of this century if not earlier. They might have been surprised at some of the elements of modernity, but would have been at home with the displays of ancient art and village crafts which tend to reinforce notions of India as a strange and exotic place. Miss Quested of EM Forster's *Passage to India* would have found her 'real' India at last, distinct from the 'unreality' of everyday life. The siting and form of the festival also obstruct the purpose of enhancing British people's understanding of India. All but the bazaar and artisans' exhibition will only be shown in London, while practically all the events take the form of passive visual displays of objects.

A less evident but potentially more fruitful aspect of the festival is the wealth of educational material that is being produced and publicised with the help of a specially appointed Educational Coordinator. This material ranges from teachers' day sessions at some of the exhibitions to holiday activities for schoolchildren, and day conferences for 5th and 6th formers on ancient India, and post-independence achievements. Again, sadly, it seems that most of these activities will only be accessible to schools in London, although handbooks and information packs together with sets of slides and videos will enable teachers elsewhere in the country to organise activities about India. Seminars are also being held on the position of women in contemporary India, relations between Britain and India, and many museums and galleries will be organising special talks and films or slide shows. The



Line engraving of a Fakir at Benares, from *India Observed* exhibition at the V&A Museum, London

BBC is also putting on some special schools broadcasts in connection with the festival.

The main festival began to be organised from the perspective of importing Indian culture to show to the British people, ignoring the presence of long established Indian communities here. In 1980 Indian artists of all kinds banded together to form the Committee for Associations and Artists, which has organised a Festival of India-in-Britain in conjunction with the main festival. Events announced so far place the emphasis on community cultural events, with plans for South Indian, Gujarati, Pun-

jabi and Bengali gala nights, a Punjabi sports festival, and other open public activities over the summer. A dance workshop and a series of Indian plays have also been organised. Again, most of these events will take place in London, but the CAA hopes that Indian groups elsewhere in the country will take advantage of their lead and organise similar events. It seems that events like these, together with the educational spin-off from the main festival, will contribute far more towards developing an understanding of India relevant to the needs of the 1980s than most of the major exhibitions. •

Bhupen Khakhar Death in the Family 1978.

