Hussain Offers An Apology
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ART

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Furor over Saraswati

He drew it twenty years ago, and no one seemed to mind. But when Vichar magazine in Bhopal recently published it in an article entitled, "Is this man a painter or a butcher?" Maqbool Fida Hussain found himself in the center of a storm. At issue was his sensuous nude drawing of Goddess Saraswati in which She is seated near a lotus and peacock and with a vina discreetly placed across Her lap. Irate Hindus demanded an apology, and Bajrang Dal cadres trashed Hussain's exhibit in Ahmedabad, destroying 16 works. A few years ago Hussain, a Muslim, came under fire for other nude paintings of Goddesses and of the Mahabharata's Draupadi.

Press reports are contradictory as to Hussain's reaction. On the one hand, India Mail (UK) said the artist issued a public apology, "If any of my works has hurt the sentiments of some, which is not at all deliberate or intentional, I feel sorry and apologize." The same week India Today quotes him mocking, "Were these people asleep for 20 years? This kind of thing is dangerous. They are stupid. I can laugh at them. The matter should go to the high court to establish what is art and what is obscenity. My countrymen don't understand their own culture."

The Shiv Sena, who hold political sway in Mumbai, are considering legal action. "If Salman Rushdie can be censored for Satanic Verses [which was banned in India], the majority community too can seek action against Mr. Hussain," said a party spokesperson. Iqbal Masud, writing in the Times of India, strongly defended the banning of Satanic Verses, over which there were deadly riots in India. Critical of Hussain, he wrote, "I find the erotic depiction of Saraswati distasteful and the argument of its defenders--that Hindus have been sensuous throughout history--greatly flawed. Hussain has always thrived on sensationalism to remain in the public eye, which is tasteless and dangerous."