



**Vivek Menezes**

In his landmark book *The Idea of India* (2007), Sunil Khilnani argued that ‘the presumption that a single, shared sense of India – a unifying idea and concept – can at once define the facts that need recounting and provide the collective subject for the Indian story has lost all credibility.’ He noted that despite ‘all its magnificent antiquity and historical depth, contemporary India is unequivocally a creation of the modern world’.

That’s still not the end of the story, however, for ‘it is too simple to see India as pure invention, a complicitous by-product of the opportunities presented by the British Raj and the interests of an aspiring nationalist elite. It is less radically novel’.

Khilnani’s view was that ‘the dissimilar agrarian regions of pre-colonial India did share intelligible, common cultural forms, derived from both Brahminic traditions and non-Brahminic sources. The storehouse of shared narrative structures embodied in epics, myths and folk stories, and the family resemblance in styles of art, architecture and religious motifs – if not ritual practices – testify to a civilizational bond, that in fact extended well beyond the territorial borders of contemporary India’.

This, of course, is the archetypal Nehruvian reasoning. ‘The ancient, the eternal and the ever-new’ (and inevitably female) proto-nationalist vision that the country’s first Prime Minister described most poetically in his *The Discovery of India* (1946): ‘She was like some ancient palimpsest on which layer upon layer of thought and reverie had been inscribed, and yet no succeeding layer had completely hidden or erased what had been written previously’.

As we all know, that endlessly expansive idea of India has come under increasing siege, almost to the point of erasure. While occasionally appropriated by the contemporary state – as in the Olympics, when a Manipuri victory is vociferously claimed for the nation – it is more often excoriated by ascendant majoritarianism (as when the mass of everyone else in Manipur is slurred for allegedly insufficient patriotism).

**No broad-stroke definitions**

Thus, this cultural terrain functions like quicksand for virtually anyone attempting broad-stroke definitions of who and what is Indian. Such grab-bag approaches almost inevitably fail, even when done by someone as meticulous as Khilnani himself. His *Incarnations: A History of India in 50 Lives* (2016) wound up being bafflingly – and, in the final measure, infuriatingly – dominated by upper-caste North Indian men, falling far short of its own stated aim of ‘telling India’s story through fifty remarkable lives’.

Given this context, I started reading Vidya Dehejia’s handsomely produced *India: A Story Through 100 Objects* with a fair amount of trepidation that even this renowned scholar (the 79-year-old is the Barbara Stoler Miller Professor of Indian and South Asian Art at Columbia University) would flounder in her attempt to ‘open readers’ eyes to the diverse facets that worked in tandem over time to create the rich multicultural medley that is India’. To my surprise and relief, that is not the case at all. On the contrary, this new book is an outright masterpiece.

To be sure, there are several areas where I would have chosen differently. Dehejia includes five entries for ‘India through British Eyes’, which seems like five too many to me. Her one solitary culinary item – the temple food of Tamil Nadu – similarly leaves me cold. But those are the tiniest of quibbles, because in every other way *India: A Story Through 100 Objects* is a riveting, stellar and sure-footed romp through the awesome breadth of India’s cultural history.

‘This book is a people’s story,’ writes Dehejia in her introduction, ‘the story of merchants and traders, of crafts people, jewellers, and artists, of thinkers and path-breakers, but also of kings and queens’. Her objective is ‘to tell a different type of story of India that is, of course, placed in the context of dates, but in which chronology and dates, monarchs and battles, do not dictate content’. She says, ‘Objects speak to us; they speak about us; they have a story to tell’.

**Windows to the past**

This approach is called material history, in which, as Williams College history professor Aparna Kapadia says, “what we might call fragments are one way in which missing stories and voices can be brought into mainstream history.”

Speaking to me over Zoom from Massachusetts, Kapadia explains that “we are accustomed to thinking about history through monumental structures or even written texts/administrative records commissioned by rulers. These tell us important stories about the past but [only] from the perspective of the people in power, those who had the resources to commission such projects. If a certain social group has not left what we consider ‘hard’ records behind, they tend to be left out of conventional historical accounts. This is why objects can be windows into worlds that we might otherwise miss.”

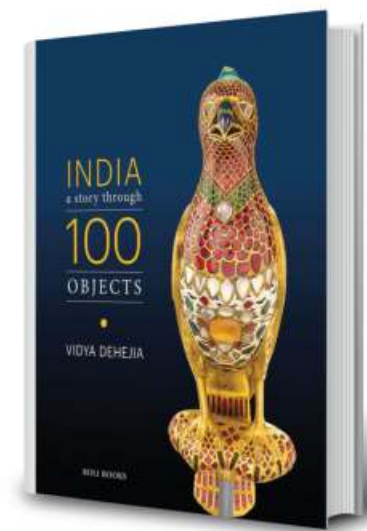
Dehejia echoes this when she writes: ‘Down the ages, India has been a multifaceted culture that has always had room for varying priorities and differing points of view, and I trust this open-minded attitude will emerge clearly from the objects presented’.

She meets that goal in substantial measure: Object #60 is an exquisite carved sandstone jali window from the 16th-century Siddi (expatriate African) Saiyyid mosque in Ahmedabad. #66 is a glorious, gilded 19th-century Kettubah marriage contract from Kochi’s ancient Jewish community, and #69 showcases the drink from China that became ubiquitous in India, via an excellent



**Vignettes** (Left) A painting shows Sultan Ibrahim Adil Shah playing the tambur, 1604, Bijapur; (below) Dehejia’s book *India: A Story Through 100 Objects*; and (centre) an exquisite carved sandstone jali window from the 16th century Siddi Saiyyid mosque in Ahmedabad.

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emeralds were shaped to fashion its beak, crest and talons’.

**Problems of representation**

Dehejia chose to open her book with a quirky double-fold timeline labelled ‘A Story of India’, which begins with an empty space marked ‘Prehistoric period’ then sweeps fast through the Indus Valley and *Rigveda* stretches, and accelerates after Vasco da Gama arrives in Calicut in 1498 (in a rare misstep, that milestone event is illustrated with a 17th-century monstrosity from Goa, where the Portuguese explorer never set foot). It ends, rather intriguingly, with the first India pavilion at the 2011 Venice Biennale.

Back then, in parallel to what Dehejia has now bravely essayed (and Khilnani took a shot at with *Incarnations*), Ranjit Hoskote had asked in his curatorial essay for the India pavilion titled ‘Everyone agrees: it’s about to explode.’ ‘In what way can any selection of artists or art works ‘represent’ a nation?’

His asymmetric – and ultimately persuasive – approach was ‘to mark a sharp rupture with these pre-existing notions of how India’s national art scene should be represented [and] to disclose artistic practices from locations other than those synonymous with the Indian art market: practices that transit among disparate economies of image production, traverse asymmetric cultural and political situations; that are nourished by diverse circulations of philosophical ideas; and that grow, often, from improvisational forms of research and collaboration’.

About Dehejia’s project, Hoskote wrote to me, ‘I think Vidya Dehejia has achieved a high and brilliant degree of success in a project that is every bit as fraught with peril as you say it is, in terms of how to represent India across its historical and cultural complexities, its tapestried narratives with all their surprises and continuities’.

He pointed out that, ‘when faced with such a mandate, an editor or a curator must remain true to her or his primary philosophical convictions and ideological commitments. For me, in Venice and elsewhere, what is paramount is the compelling power and versatility of confluence as a cultural phenomenon and a resulting robust cosmopolitanism as a value to be cherished in life and art. In Vidya’s work, I have always sensed a deep devotion to that centuries-long interplay from which Indian civilisation has gathered its strength, which has always been a transcultural strength’.

For Hoskote, the choice that struck him most deeply was #35, the 1604 painting, *Saraswati Plays on a Vina*, by Farrukh Husain, a Persian painter active in the Adil Shahi royal atelier at Bijapur. The painting spoke to him, he said, ‘of a common ground of belief and practice across religious lines, of the healing power of music and the arts at large, of beauty and devotion’. A line from Ibrahim Adil Shah’s *Kitabe Nauras* runs across the top of the panel: ‘Ibrahim, whose father is guru Ganapati and mother the pure Saraswati’. Said Hoskote: ‘This entry reassures me that Vidya has India’s liberal and inclusive tradition very strongly in mind and heart’.

The writer-photographer-columnist is the co-founder/ curator of Goa Arts and Literature Festival.

**ART & HISTORY**

# Hundred ways to highlight India

If you had to tell the multi-layered story of India through material objects, which would you pick? A new book by cultural scholar Vidya Dehejia tries to do just that and comes up with some breathtaking pieces



Dehejia’s most inspired choice has been to ignore contemporary nation-state boundaries and highlight instead the ‘busy thoroughfare’ of ancient trade and cultural networks from and across the subcontinent

silver tea service made by P. Orr & Sons in turn-of-20th-century Madras.

Dehejia’s most inspired choice has been to ignore contemporary nation-state boundaries and highlight instead the ‘busy thoroughfare’ of ancient trade and cultural networks from and across the subcontinent. I loved her #42, a marble gravestone from Aden that is now in the British Museum but was originally shipped out from Khambat (aka Cambay) in the 16th century. And #40 is an extraordinarily powerful 14th-century Ganesha from Indonesia, which is ringed by carved human skulls because ‘during the thirteenth century, eastern Java subscribed to a tantric form of worship of both Shiva and the Buddha that included esoteric rites in which skulls played a role’.

As one might expect from the author of the landmark *The Body Adorned: Dissolving Boundaries between Sacred and Profane in India’s Art* (2009), perhaps the best single contribution to the canon of Indian art history, Dehejia’s refined eye singles out an astonishing profusion of genuinely sublime objects. From a limestone hand-axe carved

on the Deccan plateau over half a million years ago – ‘so admirable in form that the possibility of their having served also as ritual objects may not be ruled out’ – to M.F. Husain’s *Passage through Human Space (Mahatma Gandhi)*, and Mrinalini Mukherjee’s knotted hemp sculpture *Yakshi*, it is a breathtaking exploration.

There are some unexpected highlights: #10’s ‘exquisitely granulated gold pendants [which] appear to have been high fashion during the second and first centuries BCE’; the ‘table-cut emeralds of different shapes and sizes’ in the Sarpech ornament photographed by Raja Deen Dayal on the turban of the youngest son of the last Nizam of Hyderabad at #12; an eye-poppingly opulent bejewelled pachisi set from Rajasthan (#50); and at #54, Shah Jahan’s enamelled falcon, where ‘to create the feathered effect’ a number of ‘gems were cut in varying shapes while sapphires and



**Icons** (From top) Ornate rose-water sprinkler (17th century); wooden priming flask (18th century); ivory powder horn (17th century); bird-shaped silver monstrosity (17th century); Maratha helmet gilded with turquoise (17th century); and (far right) Subodh Gupta’s stainless steel installation *Spill* (2007) — all feature in Dehejia’s book.