



Alain Willaume

Learning to be...

Learning to be Global

On a recent trip to India, Patel discovered that his ancestral land is no longer the exotic place that he had anticipated. The India of his dreams, a *timeless India*, has quickly been transformed by rampant modernity. A direct consequence of the shifts in India's economic policy, since the early 1990's, has resulted in a country being led towards globalisation: proliferating prosperity; asphyxiated cities; modern technologies; obsessive consumerism and segregated rural areas and cultural integration, which has, in part, been generated through television. *Mother India* has taken on an ambiguous character, and in turn, become a hybrid. The reality with which Patel was confronted, destroyed the romantic notions he had of India, his beloved chimera and the home of his cultural origin.

Learning to be British

Patel is not at home in his *cultural homeland*. Whilst fluent in Gujarati and fully versed in the rituals and customs of the Kori Patels, Patel is seen as a tourist, be it in Pune, Mumbai, Indore, or even in his own village of origin Kalthan. Betrayed by his accent, his clothing, or his excessively Indian mannerisms, Patel is viewed as an authentic British citizen, another young *sahib* from a faraway land, filled with the dreams and illusions of a country that no longer exists.

Patel's artistic practice is the product of a profound engagement with Hindu culture, yet despite many efforts to *Indianise* his *British karma* they have somehow proven futile. Patel has found India to be an independent, indifferent country, even alien in its very nature. Confounded and surprised to realise that he is more of a foreigner in India than in the UK, Patel has arrived at the conclusion which many gurus convey to their Western disciples: "quickly return home and utilise the lessons that India taught you, because we do not need you here."

Learning to be Indian

Learning to be Indian is what Patel is searching to achieve in his engagement with India. Using his body as the canvas, he investigates and utilises symbols associated with Hindu traditions: materials (henna, pigments), colours (saffron, yellow) and sounds (*tabla*), thus constructing and asserting claim to a coherent world, attuned to the warm and ancient shade of his interpretation of Indian culture. In choosing to decorate his body, in-line with given rituals that are inspired by the Hindu tradition, he stages his *British* – and deliberately *spiritualist* – interpretation of his parents country of origin, and of that of his ancestors.

Learning to be Patel

Drawing on the conclusions of his Indian journey, Patel, in his most recent body of work *Kori Patels*, decided to deny himself the comfort of his own 'narcissistic' practice. He turned the lens away from his own body and onto, or against his family, who have been settled in the UK since 1967. Just like any other act of severance – motivated as it may have been by love – lead Patel into fundamentally uncharted territory. In this series, Patel utilises a *cruel and tender*

documentary gaze. The gaze employed is both neutral and devoid of formal photographic devices, as a means to explore and develop an understanding of the Indian mindset within a Western context, indeed that of Patel's own. After establishing a dialogue with his family around portraiture, he photographed each of them surrounded by photographic paraphernalia, almost to the point of incomprehension and rejection on their part. Patel openly admits that the dialogue, negotiation and insight that he hoped for had not taken place, and that once again he has become a stranger to even those whom are his closest family members. However, at the very core of his practice and research remains a sense of complete dislocation, dispersion and extreme...Diaspora!

Learning to be Hetain

Patel's images seem somehow abandoned by their subjects – as if they are fleeing. Conversely the subjects are excessively 'present' and excessively 'posing'. In undertaking the challenge of immersing his autobiographic gaze within the depths of his family, Patel clearly reveals a truthful relationship with his *cultural homeland*. This is conveyed in a way similar to Indian photography's employment of narrative within an autobiographical framework, to express a deeper sense of the outside world.

Throughout, Patel demonstrates a respectful relationship for, and with his family, but in doing so he asserts his independence from them also. This works for him in several, simultaneous ways: it satisfies his appetite for the *exotic* that his family have instilled in him, it reveals a numbers of questions, misconceptions and taboos that still remain between India and the UK whilst providing an insight into the damage induced by the *Westernisation* of his home country also. Continuing to struggle in his quest for a greater understanding of his origin and ultimate sense of place, Patel is driven by the constant desire to bond with his *cultural homeland*, the India of his dreams, the *timeless India*.