

Why India triumphed at Venice and flopped in Osaka

The state is a poor representative of the country

8月 13, 2026 03:43 上午



THE KINDEST thing that can be said about India's pavilion at the Osaka World Expo last year is that it was authentic. It opened more than two weeks late. It was chaotic. Its displays of ancient temples and ancient paintings looked like something from an ancient tourism-promotion advert. And, naturally, it included "inspiring talks and speeches" by Narendra Modi. As one Japanese visitor who lives in India put it, "The disorganised parts...were very Indian, so if you want to feel the vibe of India, I definitely recommend you go."

So it was with some apprehension that this columnist stood at the threshold of the India pavilion at this year's [Venice Biennale](#), which runs until November. This was India's first appearance at the world's pre-eminent contemporary art show since 2019. On that occasion the government had instructed curators to take inspiration from the 150th anniversary of Gandhi's birth. It was a theme that only a bureaucrat could have dreamed up: unoriginal, unimaginative and above all unlikely to get anyone into trouble (the art itself was praised). This year's effort was overseen by the same ministry—of culture—that mounted the Osaka debacle.

Ashoka need not have worried. The pavilion is a triumph. Curated by Amin Jaffer, director of the Al Thani Collection in Paris, it brings together five artists to consider the meaning of home as India undergoes a dramatic physical transformation. Two works steal the show. Sumakshi Singh's "Permanent Address" recreates in delicate silk, cotton and nylon her grandparents' home in Delhi, since demolished to make way for something new—a familiar story in every Indian city. And Asim Waqif's magnificent "Chaal", a tangle of hundreds of gigantic stalks of bamboo, nods to the ubiquitous scaffolding material of a country permanently under construction.

The result is a show that does expertly what Osaka did hamfistedly. It draws on India's traditions, in this case crafts and local materials, and ties them to the country's modern condition. Its achievement is to represent India in a way that feels authentic—this time for the right reasons. Reviews have been gushing. India features in several lists of pavilions not to miss.

How does the same ministry, working under the same political masters, produce such divergent results just one year apart? The easy answer is that the official in charge changed in the interim. The Indian state produces lumpy outcomes because so much of it depends on individual capabilities rather than institutional processes. But a more substantive answer lies in what Vivek Aggarwal, the newish secretary of culture, actually did. Namely, less.

The Osaka project was top-down. It was awarded to a private firm, cancelled without public explanation and then executed by the culture ministry's own arts body. The Venice pavilion was a collaboration between the government and two of India's leading art institutions. The Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre, a lavishly funded and superbly connected organisation in Mumbai, brought its influence and expertise. Serendipity Arts, a non-profit best known for its annual festival in Goa, handled programming. The government dealt with paperwork, logistics and the inevitable extra costs. Some 12 tonnes of bamboo for Mr Waqif's work had to be airlifted to Venice after the Iran war disrupted shipping.

Mr Aggarwal's background is in finance and infrastructure, which may have helped. He knew what he did not know. The government trusted its partners, leaving decisions about art to the art people. Its only real demand was that the show represent a diversity of voices. Though pavilions with a single artist tend to be more coherent, it wanted artists from different regions and working in different indigenous mediums. Other than that it granted Mr Jaffer complete artistic freedom.

The success at Venice has encouraged the culture ministry to reaffirm its commitment to public-private partnerships. Mr Aggarwal says he has already written to Venice about reserving a space for the next art biennale in 2028. He is planning a big arts event in Delhi later this year, roping in galleries and foundations, and a revamp of how India's hundreds of historical monuments are managed. The idea is to make heritage and the arts bigger contributors to the economy. The Indian state too often tries to do too much with too little. On the rare occasion that it trusts Indians to deploy their ample talents, the results are dazzling.■