

A private eye on India



A photo from *Private* and (right) a work by Balaji Ponna

Patriotism and nationalism are sentiments looked upon with suspicion today. Balaji Ponna's exhibition titled *Black-Smoke* at Bose Pacia looks askance at current

trends to glorify India as a nation without any flaws through his largish canvases in which he uses familiar motifs and strategies — mostly maps — to perpetuate India's image in a certain manner in popular media.

Balaji is from Andhra Pradesh, and he exploits cartography to create maps of India on



eyewitness

which are scrawled slogans that are usually raised by politicians and jingoists to pander to popular sentiments, and ultimately rouse the rabble.

But that is just the larger picture. For these are meticulously painted canvases, and the details reveal the real picture.

Countless landless peasants crowd around the surface in one. In another the flag of India is like a huge carpet being rolled out of existence by people of often conflicting faiths. The icons of great Indi-

ans are lost behind a layer of soot. Balaji makes subtle use of textual and visual puns to drive home his point. The imagery in these paintings is richly varied. He does make use of popular strategies as an attention-getting tactic but through this he explores the meaning of nationalism.

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