

## Contemporary Indian Art: A Brief Survey

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### The Dilemmas of National

Identity India's first generation of postcolonial artists inherited a traumatic legacy, shaped as they were by the struggle for independence from the British empire. Through their images, they wrestled with the contradictions of modernity, as it had manifested itself in the subcontinent. These artists were predominantly urban. They belonged largely to the bourgeoisie and proletariat which had emerged in the metropolitan centers of colonial India (those sites of opportunity and self-invention where Indian intellectual and artistic endeavor was to assert itself through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). To these newly classes, modernity was an outcome of colonialism. As such, it was an ambivalent experience: if it had brought about a release from the oppressiveness of feudal culture, it had also produced a bewilderment, as the relative continuity of the traditional past was displaced by the dissonances of industrialism.

Even as it created islands of metropolitan privilege in an ocean of rural poverty, colonial modernity generated a crisis of conviction among India's artists and thinkers. In the turmoil and unease that resulted, a new spiritual and geographical homelessness became pervasive. Independence from British rule, which dawned in 1947, was coupled with the partition of the Indian sub-continent: this political and cultural division emphasized the predicament of the Indian sensibility.

If Ram Kumar conveyed the burden of postcolonial anxiety through his tragic clerks and angular workers, M.F. Husain (fig. 1) incarnated its opposite, a flight into the idyllic folk romanticism of robust earth-mothers and phallic horses. While the anguished F.N. Souza (fig. 2) virulently satirized the creatures of intrigue and lust that the new order had thrown up, Akbar Padamsee lifted the fugitive, devalored human out of the flux of history and turned him into a prophetic icon; while Krishen Khanna meditated on the draining and sluicing of emotion to which political life subjects ordinary people, Tyeb Mehta seemed mesmerized by the human figure, dethroned and stripped of all dignity, or the trussed animal in its death throes.

This early Indian modernist position drew upon a dual tension: while it was driven by the ideological compulsions engendered by the nationalist struggle, it was also conditioned by the desire to appropriate the High Modernist aesthetic as it became available to Indian artists from exemplars in Paris, London, New York and Munich.

Even as they mediated the influence of Euro-American modernism, then, these artists had also to negotiate with the more immediate pressures of the quest for a postcolonial national identity. How were they to modulate the compulsions of ideology with the dictates of the imagination? How could they achieve a reconciliation between their ambitions and the various syndromes of hesitancy, inferiority and prickly sensitivity that their situation as postcolonial subjects inflicted upon them? Their peculiar cultural position exposed these artists to the charge of elitism: they remained harried by the problem of address and audience. What imagined community were they reaching out to? What intervention, if any, were they making in that arena of human interplay, the public sphere? Such were the dilemmas which afflicted early Indian modernism.

The preoccupation with the quest for an indigenist aesthetic, to be constructed and expressed through the pictorial image, ensured that the first generation of postcolonial Indian artists remained formally conservative and thematically unadventurous. Its chosen idioms—the iconic, even heroic single image, the mythic narrative, the national allegory—were pure forms characterized by composure, as though in reaction to the confusions of experience. Within two decades, these idioms had lost, for the most part, the emancipatory and transfigurative vigor of their intention. They acquired, instead, the mannered stylization of hieratic classicism, or worse, permitted a static and picturesque Orientalism to overwhelm the fluctuations of actuality.

### The Mutinies of the Avant-Garde

To put it charitably, India's first generation of postcolonial artists had settled into the practice of a definitive aesthetic language, by the 1960s. To put it more bluntly, most of them had attained a complacent mastery over a limited repertoire of signs, and were caught off-guard when the avant-garde of the succeeding generation rose suddenly to question their ascendancy.

Over the 1960s and 1970s, a more radical generation of artists had emerged, which asserted the values of regional commitment, both in the aesthetic and the political sphere. They were impatient with the visionary landscape and the allegorical figure, considering them to be the formal vehicles of a transcendentalism that had lost contact with the artist's real cultural and political environment. Manifesting its discontent in several overlapping yet distinctive avant-garde movements, this generation denounced the first generation of postcolonial Indian artists as complacent and decadent in their image-making practice.

These challengers of the orthodox paradigm included at least four major groupings: the artists who clustered around K.C.S. Paniker at Cholamandal; the abstractionists and neo-Tantricians; the artists of "Group 1890," who nucleated around the volatile ideologue and painter Jagdish Swaminathan; and the group of painters and writers loosely confederated around the nucleus of the Faculty of Fine Arts at the M.S. University, Vadodra, some of whom later enshrined their agenda in the "Place for People" exhibition in 1981.

Proposing a trenchant critique of their predecessors, these groupings argued for an engagement with art from an alternative subjectivity and historical logic. They demanded the recognition of various alternative modernisms that had emerged during the twenty years that India had been independent.

K.C.S. Paniker's art began in a celebratory lyricism, but he ironized this potentially transcendental emotion by recourse to graffiti-like markings, mock-ritual formulae and quasi-scientific notations entered on a palimpsest-like picture surface (fig. 3). Paniker's interrogations of the past were aimed, as later Prabhakar Barwe's quite distinct surrealist evocations of the landscape as a museum of dying ideas would be, at demarcating a terrain where the twentieth-century Indian artist could engage his mixed heritage in fruitful encounter.

The abstractionists and neo-Tantrician painters—who included Vasudeo S. Gaitonde, Nasreen Mohammedi, Laxman Shreshtha, Biren De, Ghulam Rasool Santosh and S.H. Raza in his post-Progressive phase—similarly sought a model of liberation from the onus of description and ideology. They found it in the sacred diagrams of the heterodox cults of Tantra, the free play of calligraphic forms, the austere purity of line and the sensuous, even rhapsodic expressiveness of color divorced from objective meaning. In recent years, these preoccupations have reached their optimal zenith in the volatile hieroglyphics of Prabhakar Kolte and the taut harmonics of Mehli Gobhai.

J. Swaminathan's stentorian manifesto for "Group 1890," written in 1963, read:

"We reject the vulgar naturalism of Raja Ravi Varma and the pastoral idealism of the Bengal School, down through the hybrid mannerisms resulting from the imposition of concepts evolved by successive movements in modern European art on classical, miniature and folk styles, to the flight into abstraction in the name of cosmopolitanism, tortured alternately by memories of a glorious past born out of a sense of futility in the face of a dynamic present and the urge to catch up with the times so as to merit recognition..."<sup>1</sup>

For Swaminathan, a truly contemporary Indian art could develop only if it broke through the metropolitan barriers of art school and gallery, and immersed itself in the potent resources of folk and tribal art (fig. 4). One of Swaminathan's most abiding and memorable literary images is that of the first artist-magician standing before the sun, symbolic of the numinous aura of ancestral memory: the oracular influence of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko is clearly at work in the heroic conception of the primitive, the primordial and the sublime which informs this perspective.

The style of disruptive syncopation and surrealist anarchy that Swaminathan inaugurated, later veined with the energies of eroticism, has come to fruition in the work of Manjit Bawa, Jeram Patel, Himmat Shah, Laxma Goud and Mrinalini Mukherjee.

The fourth of the avant-garde tendencies under review here—commonly though somewhat inaccurately described as the "Baroda Group"—is embodied by Gulammohammed Sheikh (who had been a member of Swaminathan's "Group 1890"/fig. 5), K.G. Subramanyan, Bhupen Khakhar, Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan, dissidents who rejected what they perceived as their predecessors' limited and vacuous transcendentalism, their artistic failure of nerve.

Propelling themselves away from the grand fictions of indigenist symbology and abstract idealism, they asserted their desire to engage with the immediate and necessarily hybrid realities of their society; under the sign of such wizards of Pop Art and Neo-Dada as David Hockney and Ron Kitaj, Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, some of these dissidents (Khakhar and Sundaram among them) insisted on painting the local in autobiographical gestures, as a private sphere of emotion approached through subtle fables and crafty parables.

In accentuating a provisional locality—the sense of a particular place that can nevertheless carry a freight of emotional and ideological associations which link it to the wider world—these artists expanded the space of art to include a dimension of dialogue and with its nuances of solitude, terror, nostalgia and intimacy, the recognition of the unique human (as against superhuman) presence as the first step towards the revolutionary transformation of the world, a secular redemption.

It is in the art of Gieve Patel and Sudhir Patwardhan—who branched off from the "Baroda Group" during the 1980s—that the affirmation of the human predicament reaches its most delib-

erate pitch. They believed that to paint the human being (with all its vulnerability, confusion and determination to survive) implies an empathy and an ethical, even political responsibility towards the subject of representation. Similarly, to paint a particular territory—recording its transition (and one's own) across a period of tumultuous personal and historical change—is to approach the landscape with participatory and loving attention rather than an exploitative conquistador ambition.

This is how, as they painted autorickshaw drivers and workers, railway porters and fisherwomen—immortalizing their proletarian resilience without romanticizing their tragedy—this constellation of artists opened up for themselves a possibility of social and political action. In the same period, painters like Bikash Bhattacharjee, Jogen Chowdhury (fig.6), Ganesh Pyne, Arpita Singh and Manu Parekh also arrived at a figurative idiom in which the human figure held out the gifts of surreal satire, erotic vigor or simply a riddle-like disquiet.

Under the influence of the artist and teacher K.G. Subramanyan (whose background and sensibility relate him strongly to Santiniketan, the legendary academy of the arts associated with the Tagorean renaissance/fig.7), the "Baroda Group" also acquired a respect for unorthodox methods and materials, especially those employed by "traditional" artisans and the purveyors of bazaar kitsch. This particular attitude has been transmitted to the next generation of artists—in conjunction with Swaminathan's denunciation of the hierarchical distinction made by bourgeois taste between artists and craftspersons—and manifests itself through the extension of the range of skills now available to the metropolitan artist.

#### A Jigsaw of Hybrid Signs

The artists who have come into their own during the 1980s and 1990s have no experience of colonialism; they do not exhibit any of the apologetic guilt at being artists, the anxieties of cultural identity which haunted the generations immediately preceding theirs. Many of them profess a post-modernist orientation: having recovered for themselves a buoyant confidence in relation to the world, and to the archive of the world's cultural heritage, these painters, sculptors and installators would have no hesitation in endorsing the new internationalism that Salman Rushdie outlines in his essay, *Imaginary Homelands*:

"Art is a passion of the mind. And the imagination works best when it is most free. Western writers have always felt free to be eclectic in their selection of theme, setting, form; Western visual artists have, in this century, been happily raiding the visual storehouses of Africa, Asia, the Philippines. I am sure that we must grant ourselves an equal freedom."<sup>2</sup>

It is this internationalism which enables India's younger generation of artists to survive and flourish in a time of upheaval. It allows them to tap into the "information state" and subvert the cultural imperialism that the global market order has insinuated into India; it imparts to them the dexterity and finesse required to make their way across a consumerist pattern of patronage and yet savor the possibilities of cultural renewal. These are the instincts that equip them to carve interstitial spaces in a nation-state bedeviled by internecine power struggles, low-intensity warfare and collapsing infrastructures.

At the same time, and as an outcome of the same processes of globalization, the artists who constitute this generation are no longer necessarily products of the metropolis. They emerge from various centers and circulate among them: Mumbai, Vadodara, Calcutta, Chennai, New Delhi, Lucknow, Visakhapatnam. Recognizing their cultural identity to be unstable and in flux, they are almost prodigally experimental in the formal languages they adopt. Practicing a diversity of idioms, they are markedly multi-disciplinary in propensity; often, they abandon the painterly frame altogether, to express themselves through the assemblage and the installation.

As against the compositional bias of their predecessors, this generation prefers the risky procedure of improvisation, applying itself to graphics, mixed-media assemblages and installations. This choice is not without its own dangers: if the composition suffered from the innate peril of the formula, the improvisation often flattens out into the high finish of the designed image, a seductive mail-order concept gleaned from the generic glossaries that are presented through exhibition catalogues emanating from New York and Venice, Paris and Kassel.

Mediating history through the exhibition space, these younger artists have adopted an array of montage techniques to address contemporary experience. Bizarre as these altered conceptions of space and context may seem to viewers habituated to an earlier and more reassuring style of painting, these audacities signify a nascent aesthetic, one that must invent new modes of editing a cosmopolitan reality. In this existential jigsaw, the television image is as important an element as the quotation of the Jehangiri miniature.

### The Principle of Play

Where their predecessors explored the tragic-classical or hymnal-revolutionary elements indwelling within the modern, the postmodernist sensibilities under review emphasize playfulness, morphological fluidity, semantic instability. They allow their sources to carrom off one another, provoking the viewer into participating in the artwork rather than passively consuming it. To present the diagnosis succinctly, the contemporary Indian artist appears to be unlearning the reflexes of homo ideologicus and giving himself or herself up joyfully to the instincts of homo ludens.

The artwork is now often seen, not under anticipation as a prevalued artifact, but as an unpredictable act of intervention between the frame and the world. As such, it negotiates with the site of its location, enunciates various relationships between art and reality. This assertion of art as a conceptual signifying practice—rather than as a mode of entertainment or of moral edification—is an argument which many younger artists consciously put forward.

At the same time, impulses from the older disciplines continue to be transmitted in mutation. The classical genre of figures in the landscape, modified to suit the exigencies of a dramatically altered environment, finds its fulfillment among artists like Atul Dodiya (fig. 8) and Apurva Desai. Dodiya has made the passage from photo-realism to a montagist narrative, in which compositional coherence is deliberately made unstable by the levity of a floating allusion. Desai evokes the lightness of suburban being through painted photographs of the industrial landscape nibbling at the fringe of the expanding city. While the oeuvres of Sudhir Patwardhan and Gieve Patel may be seen as a strong background influence on Desai, Bhupen Khakhar's whimsical manner has played a significant role in Dodiya's painterly development.

The resonances of Raza, Gaitonde and Nasreen Mohammadi continue to be heard in contemporary abstractionism. Divergent though their approaches are, Vilas Shinde, Sunil Gawde and Vijay Shinde are united by the fact that they work within strict geometric principles of rotation and parallelism. An element of design reinforces their conceptions: the motif is conserved, not dissipated in their paintings. Chittrovanu Mazumdar, Achuthan Kuddallur, Bhagwan Chavan and Shambhavi stand, by contrast, for that branch of non-representational art which accentuates an expressionist handling, calligraphic play and the dilution of the motif.

### The Storyteller's Games

The role of the storyteller, who spins the world into a web of tricky allegories, is one that appeals to many of the artists in this brief survey. In the works of Amit Ambalal and Anandajit Ray, we encounter fable, proverb and folktale, each knocked off-center by a caricatural spin. Ambalal may be viewed as an exponent of the Bhupen Khakhar—Gulammohammed Sheikh tradition of narrative painting with a twist; Ray's surrealism owes as much to the Hollywood action film as it does to the more grotesque forms of science fiction.

Across genres, many younger artists share a stylized, hieroglyphic surrealism that they derive from their precursors, and which expresses itself either in witty, condensed episodes or through the anti-heroic figure, isolated or moored in a tableau. C.S. Douglas, Surendran Nair, Baiju Parthan and Jitish Kallat (fig. 9) dwell, for instance, on the thresholds between the worlds of ancestral knowledge and contemporary disquiet. When they portray existential situations, they condense the mural-scale theme in the miniature format, deploying the figure as a heraldic device. They draw their inspiration from archaic tablets, lost scripts, arcane symbologies, contemporary posters; they also share a concern with the ceremonial dimension of painting. Their works are sustained by afterlife rituals, liminal spaces, totemic presences and playful, whimsical games.

Individual as their quests are, Surendran Nair, Anandajit Ray, Baiju Parthan as well as Tushar Joag, Kausik Mukhopadhyay and Jitish Kallat are united by certain tendencies: their works flirt with the viewer, who participates as fully as the artist in the process of activating meaning. Rejoicing in paradox and interactivity, these artworks draw on an intriguing gamut of concerns and formal techniques. They draw narratives from popular culture and cosmology, autobiography and shamanistic ritual, the artifacts of daily life and the formulae of magic.

A Dadaist, anti-aesthetic impulse is most noticeable in Joag and Mukhopadhyay: knocking the art-work off its pedestal, they shift the viewer's focus from product to process. Parthan and Kallat also emphasize the act of making: they reveal the stitches, scratches and marks of the maker, which encode both an artisanal roughness and a tender lyricism. Many of them construct their forms as experiments in recycling and metamorphosis: Parthan works with acrylic, thread and toys; Joag with wood, brass and perspex; Mukhopadhyay with toys, wooden boxes and electrical apparatus; Kallat with photographic inks, glycerin and starch.

These artists are united in their recovery of play as a serious principle of construction, as the first move towards the creation of a parallel reality. These artists create a space, therefore, in which argument and theater, ritual and circus can all take place, often simultaneously. Here, they dispute received mythologies and bring contemporary mythologies into being, however fragmentary and notational they may be.

Having chosen such figures as Duchamp, Francis Picabia, Schwitters, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns and Rauschenberg as their ancestors, these artists celebrate the quirky, the quizzical and the private meaning. They question the ceremonial relations that bind the self to the world; the joyous fantasies of sexuality are contrasted with its fearful obsessions, in their works. The human figure is repeatedly interrogated and dismembered, translated into cybernetic form; its hopes are contained, its terrors spill over.

### A New Ecology of Paradox

The chief debt which this new artistic subjectivity owes to its predecessors is a metaphorical energy, an energy of symbolic address that enables these artists to rupture their agenda of contemporaneity with the memoranda of tradition.

In this process of aesthetic mediation, the artist taps the circuit of exchange which connects dichotomies at every level in Indian culture—by organizing a dialogue between the contrary principles of the classical-hieratic and the vernacular-demotic, the canon and folklore, the ascetic and the voluptuous, anguish and play. Replenishing themselves through this free, subversive dialectical interplay, these artists yoke aesthetic desire to political agency, connect pleasure to labor, the carnival to the machine. While the forms of industrial civilization bulk large in their artworks, so, too, do fetishes retrieved from ancient temple complexes.

The sculptors, especially, have occupied this new ecology of paradox: they have steered away from the stable Rodin—Moore—Arp—Hepworth style of the academy and the post-Ramkinkar Baij (fig.10) radical manner that have long dominated Indian sculpture. Instead, they have embraced a set of freewheeling idioms which recover indigenous materials like terracotta while also employing completely contemporary ones like fiberglass; which re-model the monumental on the basis of clues offered by such "artisanal" forms as puppetry and toy-making.

This formal inventiveness, too, may be seen as the legacy of K.G. Subramanyan; it is reflected in substance, as these sculptors operate playfully through allegory and satire, gentle wit and barbed irony, recycling the banality of streetside detail or rewiring mythic symbolism.

Thus, Ravinder G. Reddy's great terracotta and fiberglass heads, mock-deities coated with goldleaf and pink paint, deliberately juxtapose the iconic High Art of the temple with the kitsch baroquery of the marketplace. N. Pushpamala, who works against a preferred backdrop of Minimalism and *arte povera*, registers a continuing history of violence and oppression through an alphabet of weapons, an array of burnt books. Sudarshan Shetty's high-spirited assemblages present themselves as unified sculptural entities, but function as giant fairytale toys. What results from these maneuvers is the informalization, the democratization of the image.

### The Persistence of Utopia

The myth of Utopia emerges as a recurrent theme in the work of many young artists in India today. These imagined elsewheres, versions of the landscape deployed as visionary tropes, include the vista built up in abstract collage, as practiced by Ajay Desai, and the composite wastescape shaped by the antagonism between the forces of rural community and industrial development, as practiced by Akkitham Vasudevan. It would also include the landscape graphed as a map for expeditions to other planets, as practiced by Rm. Palaniappan: this art, combining as it does a vocabulary of arcane scientific motifs with a *sotto-voce* metaphysics of transcendence, draws its impetus from that of K.C.S. Paniker.

Pursuing the vein of interrogation by autobiography into the domain of the female self, artists like Rekha Rodwitiya, Jayashree Chakravarty, Jaya Ganguly and Anju Dodiya report visions in a mirror clouded by the conflict between private desire and public role.

Rodwitiya's project is to retrieve the symbolism of woman's fertility and regenerative power. Chakravarty, on the other hand, delights in the levitating, Chagallesque figures of lovers; Ganguly's part-human, part-vegetal chimeras expose a harsh aspect of female sexuality. Anju Dodiya (fig.11) addresses the deep unease of gender personae, of being a woman painter; she alludes, in her images, to Frida Kahlo as well as to Amrita Sher-Gil (fig.12). Whether through hallucination, reverie, or the staging of an interior psychological theater, these painters engage in conscious acts of self-

dramatization that constitute a resistance to patriarchal norms even as they open up unprecedented domains of pleasure.

On the other hand, a persistence of concern with the classic themes of socialism characterizes the work of other sculptors, who—while embracing the liberation offered by the marriage of High Modernist sculptural conceptions with the forms of the marketplace—nevertheless persevere in a vision of art as a revolutionary act, as an instrument of deliverance.

Under this rubric come sculptors like N.N. Rimzon and Alex Mathew, whose image-making practices are situated in terms of a broadly Marxist perspective: they operate from a “progressive” aesthetic which takes for its goal, the furthering of an indigenist contemporaneity backed by the templates of myth. In this, they are inspired by the art of Ramkinker Baij, the Santiniketan master, from whom they inherit a reverence for the heroism and saintliness of labor, the symbolism of toil and renunciation, an awareness of the perennial opposition between praxis and hedonism.

In this panoply of hybrid signs, we may discern the directions that Indian artists will take in the twenty-first century. Certain features are clear: for one, India’s younger artists have chosen quite deliberately to de-classicize the practice of art through the creation of new vernaculars; by projecting themselves through such eclectic strategies, they lay an insistent if imperious claim upon the viewer’s attention. And yet, they are reluctant Duchampists, balancing precariously on the seesaw between artistic convention and viewerly feeling. While they wish to project images that have a sensuous appeal to a wide audience, they are also tempted to tease the viewer, to employ techniques of evasion and surprise; they desire, simultaneously, to console and shock their parent culture.

#### Notes

1. J. Swaminathan, essay in the catalogue of “Group 1890” inaugural exhibition, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1963.
2. Salman Rushdie, “Imaginary Homelands” in *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Granta/Viking Penguin, New York, 1991, p.20.