

Tribal, Traditional and Urban Art Practices : Contextuality and Transcendence

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Abstract

Contemporary arts practice sought out the label of post-modernism to describe itself. The modernist stance, caught up with its longings for centredness, created peripheries that came to be associated with the "Other". A scrutiny of contemporary arts reflects its dialogic attempts to dissolve this uneasiness with centres and peripheries. The creative chaos of such a multi-polar world would perhaps be understood better in retrospective - in a subsequent era. The paper seeks to examine the works of selected contemporary artists in India in order to understand how their language is tempered by its rootedness in the ancient culture of India and their exposures to global currents. The three different milieus that the paper explores are: tribal artists who have migrated to an urban setting in central India; traditional artists in their village in eastern India; contemporary urban artists in western India. While the development of ideas is clearly based on interactions with the art-works and the artists, the paper seeks to draw upon theories of art proposed by integral thinkers - in particular the writings on aesthetics by Aurobindo Ghosh, the twentieth century Indian mystic-philosopher-poet, to understand the developments in visual art practices.

Keywords: visual arts, tribal, traditional, urban-art, plurality.

Introduction

This paper, seeks to understand the contexts in which contemporary arts of twenty-first century India, operate. It also attempts to study the relevance of tribal and traditional visual arts in India in the contemporary climate and the consequences of encounters between postmodern cultures and more ancient mindsets. The visual arts scenario in twenty-first century India continues to be characterized by a great degree of diversity in its art works and in the outlooks professed by art practitioners. The research suggests that there is a need for developing multiple frameworks and models that can best accommodate the plurality of views and approaches.

The three different milieus that the paper explores are:

- i. Tribal artists who have migrated to an urban setting in central India.
- ii. Traditional artists in their village in eastern India.
- iii. Contemporary urban artists in western India.

Each section begins with a brief overview and then focuses on the work of a specific artist as an illustration for some of the ideas that are discussed.

i. Tribal artists who have migrated to an urban setting in central India.

There has been the tendency amongst many well-meaning schemes for 'tribal-upliftment' that seeks to re-contextualize their skills by developing products for urban consumption. In this regard, the negotiations between the mainstream and the marginalized bear an uncanny resemblance to the encounter between the colonizers and the colonized. In both cases, the 'other' is perceived as intrinsically weaker and even backward. There is an element of regarding the tribal-other as 'exotica'; simpletons who follow quaint practices and whose world-views are primitive. The myth of progress that accompanies modernity becomes the unquestionable axiom by which it judges the mythologies of the 'ignorant' other. The fundamental basis on which the negotiation is often initiated deserves greater scrutiny so as to ensure that the starting points for mutual understanding

does not rest on the assumed superiority of the new-age myth of progress.

The Gonds are a tribal community living in central India (the states of Madhya Pradesh, Chhatisgarh, Orissa and Andhra Pradesh). Jangadh Singh Shyam was a Gond, who moved from his village of Patangarh to the city of Bhopal, because of the encouragement from Jagdish Swaminathan, an artist-activist, who championed the expression of some of the marginalized tribal communities, in the 1980's. Swaminathan played a key role in setting up Bharat Bhavan, an artists' centre, that sought to foster an atmosphere in which visual artists of different orientations (from tribal communities as well as urban-educated artists) could work together. The centre has a collection of canvases painted by tribal artists that hang alongside the works of urban artists. Far from being a sentimentalist who would constrain Jangadh, the Gond artist to continue working with vegetable dyes and mineral colours, Swaminathan encouraged Jangadh to use acrylic colours. Over the years, Jangadh articulated a unique visual vocabulary that had references to tribal practices and culture, but was quite different from the motifs painted by the tribals on their village huts. This experimentation on the part of Jangadh was clearly in response to the ambience in which he found himself. Swaminathan's initiative is noteworthy in the manner in which it allowed the flowering of creativity of an artist who would otherwise have continued to be a stereotypical 'tribal artist'.

However, Jangadh Singh Shyam's life ended on a tragic note, when he committed suicide, while staying in Japan. The reasons for this drastic step are far from obvious - though the sense of alienation in having moved so far away from his tribal roots, must have had a bearing on the decision. What is noteworthy is the legacy left behind by Jangadh. In an interesting account by the poet Udayan Vajpeyi, Jangadh's visual innovations are accorded the status of a new idiom, that Vajpeyi labels as 'Jangadh kalam'. This artistic innovation is as meaningful for the younger generations of tribal artists (Ramsingh Urveti, Bhajju Shyam, Durgabai, Subhas Vyam) as cubism was for a whole generation of artists. These are tribal artists who have migrated to the city of Bhopal and have developed their unique vocabularies that have enriched the diversity of visual arts in India.

The London Jungle Book

The 'London Jungle Book' that emerges from collaboration between Bhajju Shyam, one of the young tribal artists, and innovative publishers, Gita Wolf and Sirish Rao, is a wonderful example of a tribal artist's response to contemporary civilization. In this work, Bhajju Shyam, a Gond tribal travels to London and narrates his experience of traveling from his village of Patangarh to London, as a visual travelogue (to the accompaniment of words by Wolf and Rao, 2004). The book is a reversal of sorts, in its reference to Rudyard Kipling's Jungle Book; while Kipling evokes the colonial encounter with the exotic Oriental jungles, the 'London Jungle Book' "returns Kipling's gaze with an equal sense of wonder, adventure, humour and directness of expression." (Jain Jyotindra; 2004)

ii. Traditional artists in a village in eastern India.

There appears to be a long hiatus between the terracota seals and bronze figurines of the Indus Valley civilization and the appearance of highly stylized frescoes at Ajanta (2nd century BCE). The frescos and sculpture at Ajanta mark the beginnings of visual art to popularize the Buddhist religion. Early Indian art is inspired by the teachings of Buddha and Mahavira; and the use of art for popularizing religion was later adopted during the revival of the Hindu view. The Hindu iconography derived much of its essence from mythology - in particular the two epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata. Since there were several thousand gods who animate the religious ideas of the Hindus, traditional visual artists had ample opportunities to develop an elaborate vocabulary. The spurt of temple building activity in the tenth century CE was accompanied by the development of a highly classical approach to sculpture and painting. While there has been a definite disintegration of traditional religious beliefs from the tenth century till today, one does find evidence of the immense skills of traditional stone-sculpture even today. Traditional visual art practices in India are steeped in roots that are religious; traditional art did not exist without its religious context, till perhaps the beginning of court-art in the Mughal court. One does find examples of the lives

of ordinary people in some of the Ajanta murals. However, it is with in the Mughal miniatures that flora and fauna, court scenes and royal hunts and the lives of rulers begin to make an appearance in painting.

The two significant encounters altered the course of the visual arts in India. The first was the contact with the Islamic civilization with the coming of the Mughals in the 16th century CE and the next was the encounter with the Western civilization, a few centuries later.

The early Islamic conquests of India were largely mercenary; the Mughal encounter was different because they chose to settle down in India and the confluence of the Hindu and the Islamic cultures was a period of cultural and artistic renaissance in India. Architecture, music, literature as well as the visual arts found royal patronage in the Mughal courts. It was during this time that distinctly secular subjects began to appear in the ateliers of artists (though the frescos of Ajanta also depict the lives of ordinary people in addition to the religious themes). The 'secularization' of the basis for art-making and the diminishing role of the sacred and religious, can also be attributed to the developments in the field of science and medicine and the new-found respect accorded to individual liberties.

The colonial encounter was however disastrous for many of the traditional art practitioners. The fissure caused in the education system due to the flawed approach to education during the colonial era is a tendency that has continued even in post-colonial times. As a consequence of the disregard for the traditional arts, they were demoted to the position of 'crafts'. The growing presence of new technologies evident in the industrialization was another cause for the new power distinctions that created a divide between the sophisticated urban artist and the traditional artist who was regarded as skillfully adept but lacking in intellect and conceptual abilities. It is in recent times, when there has been an increasing recognition for the hand-crafted sensibilities of the traditional artists, though there needs to be a renewed effort in restoring the self-confidence of marginalized communities who are reduced to the status of unthinking artisans.

It is likely that the spread of information technologies will create conditions that foster a renewed interest in the innate human tendency for handiwork and that the facelessness of globalized production methods shall also engender a parallel movement that encourages a more personal production-consumption relationship.

The patachitra-art tradition

One of the traditional arts that is practiced even today is the art of patachitra (pata refers to the specially prepared cloth on which the paintings are done). The art derives its essence from the worship of Lord Jagannath in Puri in eastern India. Over the centuries the artists have eked out a living by selling painted scrolls of the deity at Puri, to the pilgrims. The practice has seen fluctuations in demand and in recent times has received support from the State. In its current form, the artists rely on an emphasis on excessive ornamentation; the themes have remained the same over centuries. Though there continues to be a sense of devotion amongst the pilgrims who visit Puri, there are changes evident in the socio-economic and cultural forces at play in contemporary Orissa. It is likely that in order to making the tradition a living one, artists would need to respond to the changing nature of world-views.

The Swiss art historian Heinrich Wölfflin suggests in its Baroque phase of development an art can be regarded as painterly, whereas at the peak of a renaissance, art is linear. While the renaissance artists have sought to achieve a harmony between the parts, the Baroque artist seeks to subordinate the parts and emphasize a dominant element. When one observes a traditional art such as patachitra that is past its peak, one notices the tendency amongst artists to rely on excessive ornamentation as the means of achieving visual differentiation. This is in contrast to its earlier practice of emphasizing the vigour of line and harmony of colours and composition.

Changing World-views

Aurobindo Ghosh, the twentieth century mystic-poet-philosopher suggests that the future shall witness a curve in the rational approaches that shape contemporary thinking (War and Self Determination; 1930).

Ken Wilber, a contemporary American philosopher observes that the predominant world-view has undergone several changes. Beginning with the archaic, it has transformed to the animistic, the mythical, the religious and is now primarily rational in its essence. Wilber suggests that there is no reason to believe that the currently prevalent world-view that may be described as rational / logical / scientific is the last step in the evolutionary process; and suggests that more spiritually oriented approaches could shape the mindset of future civilizations. In an insightful essay on art and aesthetics, Sri Aurobindo observes that art has three roles. The first is the sensual-aesthetic that fulfils the need for the appreciation of beauty; the second role is the intellectual-aesthetic in which art becomes an instrument for intellectual stimulation and clarity; the third and the most subtle is the spiritual-aesthetic. According to Aurobindo, it is this orientation that shall shape the future not just of art but of humanity at large.

The Circle of Fate

The research on this traditional art, also led to the creation of an illustrated book based on a story that can be regarded as spiritual rather than religious in its essence. Observations of the practices of traditional artists in the village of Raghurajpur in Orissa (eastern India) led to the conclusion that it is the belief of the artist in the subject matter of the art that leads to the infusion of a living-spirit into the artwork. One may observe that there is a certain similarity between this observation and the notion of 'auras' suggested by Walter Benjamin. Though Benjamin ("mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual."; *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*; 1936) develops the notion of auras with the intent of explaining the declining importance of a work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction, the reverse would also hold true. It seems reasonable to suggest that in a post-modern age of distributed and localized production and global consumption, there exists a possible place for objects that are infused with a living spirit.

iii. Contemporary urban artists in western India.

A brief historical overview

The city of Mumbai (Bombay) was once a sleepy village spread over seven islands on the Arabian sea. Its natural harbour transformed it into a bustling port and Bombay (along with Calcutta) became one of the nodal points through which a synapse took place, between traditional India and the industrial modernity that was taking shape in Europe. It is near Calcutta, that Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel laureate envisioned Santiniketan, the centre for the artistic renaissance in Bengal, In recent times, the other metropolises in India - Delhi and Bangalore have been favoured outlets amongst artists, but it is Bombay and Santiniketan (Calcutta) that symbolize two key movements in the development of contemporary urban art in India.

From a more individual standpoint two other signposts mark the development of contemporary Indian art - those of Raja Ravi Verma and Amrita Shergil. Ravi Verma was amongst the early Indian painters who learnt to paint in the realistic-western tradition of oils on canvas. Though the technique was not traditionally Indian, the subjects chosen by Verma were (they were mostly drawn from Hindu religion and mythology). Amrita Shergil, studied at Paris but returned to India and chose subjects that she encountered in India. In this sense, both artists, though they adopted new approaches in terms of techniques, were still responsive to their environments. Ravi Verma became a visual spokesperson for the principal community in India (by choosing subjects from Hindu mythology); Amrita Shergil's subjects can be said to echo her keen sensitivity to the condition of women and the lives of ordinary people.

In the worldview of the urban Indian artist, Santiniketan is associated with an engagement that sought to build an artistic idiom that drew its strengths from indigenous culture. Thus the artists at Santiniketan, under the tutelage of Rabindranath's cousin, Abanindranath, looked to folk art and the frescos at Ajanta for their inspiration. Rabindranath's own vision was far more in tune with the emerging world view and the interaction with Bauhaus in Germany and artists from Japan are clear pointers to that vision. In spite of this and the presence of artists like Ramkinker Baij, who developed a distinctly personal approach, the

Santiniketan experiment is associated with a 'revivalist' attitude.

This is in contrast to the artistic vision of the progressive group in Bombay (that includes the well known painter M.F.Hussain). In the refreshing burst of energy that a newly independent India enjoyed, the artists at Bombay sought to enter into a conversation with the currents that engaged artists in the arena of the international art-world. There were exciting movements in Europe - and the cubist experiment inspired the Bombay artists much more than the traditional art which was regarded as 'revivalist' and outdated. Over the years, the Bombay artists, shaped the cubist influences to suit their own inclinations and some of them are clearly inspired by the ethos of traditional art in India. S.H. Raza, a member of the Bombay group who now lives and works in Paris, attributes his colours to influences from his native state of Madhya Pradesh.

Another school of significance that shaped urban Indian visual art is Baroda, where artists such as Ghulam Sheikh, Bhupen Khakkar, and K.G.Subramanyan played a key role in articulating their sense of national and artistic identities after independence. While Ghulam Sheikh drew the inspiration from traditional miniature art, Bhupen Khakkar's work was path-breaking for it externalized alternate sexualities and underlined the importance of an artist's quest for a personal identity while continuing to be engaged in the understanding of identities in the social and national spheres.

Performances, Video Art, New Media Practices and Art Installations

It is these experiments that shaped the visual languages of the succeeding generation of urban artists who were catapulted into the international stage after the liberalization of India's economy towards the end of the twentieth century. The exchange of cultural and artistic ideas that accompanied the economic diffusion led to the adoption of internationally prevalent art forms such as performances, video and new-media art and installations. Amongst the younger artists, who have studied in Bombay and Santiniketan, what is clearly evident, is a newfound playfulness. At the same time, earlier practices of painting and sculpture continued to receive patronage, suggesting that the inclusion of new possibilities of artistic expression was reflective of a society that could accommodate these. This receptivity is a pointer perhaps, to a changing role of art in contemporary times.

Trash: An art installation by Vivan Sundaram

For a recent exhibition at Mumbai, Vivan Sundaram, one of India's acknowledged contemporary artists, had put together "Twelve Bed Ward" - twelve iron bedsteads that had soles of shoes salvaged by rag pickers, strung together as a statement on trash generated in times where excessive consumption has created considerable pressures on the environment. The space in which these beds had been organized had incandescent lamps hanging over each of them, was suggestive of beds in a hospital room or even maybe a concentration camp. This exhibition inspired a response from Rehaan Engineer, a theatre artist who directed a performance of an excerpt from a piece by Howard Barker's "UND" (1999).

This event evoked a fair degree of incomprehension amongst the viewers and raises interesting questions about contemporary art. It is not unusual for the contemporary urban artist to allude to references drawn from an entirely different culture, space and time. Very often, such referencing is a manner of stating a sense of longing for a certain ideology in times that appear to be bereft of ideologies. It appears that the gallery visit becomes meaningful in its cathartic-echoing of the incomprehension's that accompany urban living in a megapolis like Mumbai. We visit the gallery not so much to stand in awe as we once did at the sight of majestic cathedrals and elegant temples and statuary but to regain our sense of being in the presence of that we cannot understand. The sense of wonder that characterized our admiration of the art of a previous era, is substituted by the brief sense of not being able to understand, in a world where everything stands explained.

Clearly, much in contemporary art is intended for an audience more specialized and discriminatory. The universal has given way to a specially cultivated vision. For those who regard the arts as having a key role to play in human destiny, the new ways of appreciation suggest a far more intimate way of seeing than

ever before.

Contextuality and Transcendence

Linguists hesitate to accord the visual arts the status of a language. Presumably, the visual defies codification of its grammar. Yet the immediacy of communication achieved by the visible and in most cases, its near universality accords it a special place that is of definite interest to any student of human communications. It is this strength inherent within the visual arts that leads to near universal admiration for the great works of art. In its early developmental stages, one fundamental quality that bestowed greatness upon a work of art was the success of the artist in capturing a nuance while adhering to a grammar that required a talent for faithful representation. Though not all art produced by the ancients strove for representational accuracy, there is a discernible emphasis placed on achieving a sense of communication even to those uninitiated in arts and their appreciation. This concern is echoed even in the spirit of the European Renaissance (and for that matter in any attempt that seeks to recover some lost idealistic ground), If there has been a significant departure in the nature of the visible language of the visual arts in recent times, it is largely in its reaction to the representational.

Abstraction has always been an important quality in the abilities of the talented artist - it is apparent in the elegant simplification of the human form in Indian sculpture that deliberately avoided the Western penchant for anatomical accuracy in order to emphasize alternate concerns that may perhaps be called as "other-worldly". Many cultures, including the Egyptian culture, exhibit a keen interest in realms that do not belong to the 'here and now'. Abstraction, in this sense becomes a tool to move away from the real and the representational to address the demands of subtler truths; however such abstraction appears not to lose sight of the need to achieve a communion with the viewer. In times more recent, the nature of abstraction that appears to have seized the imaginations of artists worldwide, irrespective of their cultural moorings (or perhaps the lack of it!) is of a different kind. Whether it is Kandinsky seeking to liberate colour, or Rothko seeking to speak of unspeakable things, the essence of the modernist's tendency towards abstraction seems to emphasize a delight in a language so personal that the only thing it offered for popular consumption was a sense of colour. On one hand the contemporary abstractionist, denies any interest in content, and seeks to be contented with a logic that is internal to the colours and forms, in a manner that is almost narcissistic. On the other hand, the contemporary abstractionist is also perhaps aware of the limitations of such exclusivity of visual grammar that almost deliberately cuts-off the uninitiated.

A possible basis underlying the modernists love for such exclusive abstraction, could be regarded as the visual artists part-protest, part-celebration of the visual language itself. Unwilling to use the visual for any cliché-ridden content or message, the contemporary abstractionist reserves it for a personal salvation. Such a stance, does serve the artist for awhile; till the coldness of abstraction that is without a living warmth and spirit, starts becoming an impediment and once again a hint of figuration begins to manifest amongst the totally abstract logic. In this sense, contextuality and transcendence may be regarded as reflective of the polarities of figuration and abstraction, between which an artist's language subtly oscillates.

In spite of the broad similarity of choice for either abstraction or figuration, there does appear to be differences that creep in on account of the immediate milieu in which an artist works. Thus in an age where a certain homogeneity might be apparent between artists belonging to widely different traditions, there continues to be a sense of the local that does differentiate the works of artists who otherwise share a similar concern. The contextuality of an artist's work, appears an almost natural outcome of being sensitive to the immediate surroundings; whether a particular work transcends its immediate temporal and spatial origins, depends on the artist's ability to touch upon some invisible principle and make it visible - an aphorism observed by none other than Paul Klee in his notebooks. Perhaps it ought to be borne in mind, that unlike in an earlier epoch, when patronage for the arts came from either a religious order

or the state, the contemporary artist is to an extent freed from the demand to make sense to a body of stakeholders.

Conclusions

An artist in the pursuit of some hidden principle, or an artist playing with some innately understood visual logic, may produce works that achieve transcendence through a realization that becomes apparent to a viewer in an entirely different geographical space. It appears that the diffusion of cultures is likely to create associations that transcend national, political, linguistic and cultural boundaries. If anything, it is this sharing of knowledge systems and the coalescing of cultures into a world-culture that may emerge as the marker of our times. In such a scenario, many of the earlier forms are bound to be rediscovered in an innovative and playful manner; though it is also likely that the attempts at remixing may throw up variants and mutants that are crude approximations of the original forms that are imitated. An example from popular contemporary culture may be the widely available audio cassettes of re-mixed music that is actually a crude imitation of some original composition, superimposed with a racy beat. Such music is often played by auto-rickshaw drivers (a cheaper version of a taxi, on the streets of India). In the arena of popular visual arts, one notices the appropriation of images for a wide variety of purposes from sophisticated magazine illustration to ritualistic tribal motifs reduced to de-contextualized decorative patterns on walls and fences in an urban space.

Thus it appears that one characteristic of the visual in contemporary usage, will be an often un-informed appropriation at the popular level. At a more sophisticated level the confluence of visual cultures is likely to result in a hybrid sort of an art that will to an extent suffer from a degree of homogenization. It is the rare artist who shall perhaps be able to assimilate the exposures to the world cultures and fashion some new visual language that is of relevance. The widespread dissemination of video editing tools, makes the cinematic language, a very attractive form of visual art. Clearly, the greatest threat to the visual arts lies precisely in the possibility of widespread abuse; it has been observed that one of the markers of the urbanization process is an increasing visuality of the culture. One of the reactions to over-burdening the visible with meaning and information is a movement towards abstraction and minimalism - though the minimalism that is sought need not necessarily be austere.

An interesting possibility that opens up in this scenario of a world-culture is the reflex movement for preservation of local idiosyncrasies. It is likely that many of the traditional visual arts that are languishing for want of patronage shall witness a renewed interest.

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