

Negotiating the Contested Space of Collaborative Art Practices

An account of collaborative efforts with traditional artists

Raja Mohanty

Abstract

It takes time to understand the forces that are implicit in university education in India today. As a student in a premier institution for higher education in India, we were exposed to the notion of a colonial bias in our education that privileged English language over the vernacular. However, the bias implicit in much of our learning that privileged design over art and art over craft, became evident after I graduated with a masters in visual communication.

While designers enthusiastically documented crafts, their own practices often emphasized novelty without rigour. Contemporary art schools undertook field trips to traditional visual artists, but the traditional arts and artists had largely got demoted to the lesser position of crafts and craftpersons. The traditional found a place abroad, in festivals of India, and received some recognition through national awards – but education in these received little attention from the State. The collaboration between designers and craftpersons was often lacking the qualities of true collaboration, as it was an interaction between people with different privileges. An apprenticeship with Ghanshyam Sharma, a *pichhwai* painter in Nathadwara, led to a greater awareness of the chasm between contemporary art, design and crafts in India.

I have interacted closely with three traditions – the *patachitra* of Odisha and the art of the Gonds (a relatively newer tradition that is only as old as the art of Jangadh Singh Shyam) and with Madhubani tradition of Mithila. After the creation of a few illustrated books with Radhashyam Raut, a *patachitra* artist, Durgabai Vyam, a Gond artist, and Sharwan Paswan, a Madhubani artist, I have kept in touch with them, but not attempted any new works. This pause has given me the time to reflect on the nature of our collaboration; the essay attempts to describe some learning in this regard.