A Need for Restraint:

Working with indigenous artists

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Introduction

These notes are organized in two parts - the first presents some observations from my interaction with traditional and tribal artists and notes about my own work. It suggests that the art-craft dichotomy is damaging to the living traditions that embody art practice in non-urban situations and provides an overview of the history that has led to such a situation. Every art has a craft associated with it, and every craft has its internal logic and outlook. To regard the urban artist as a special creature, gifted with talent and originality, is in the long run harmful to the diversity and richness of human experience and expression. Since the very definition of an indigenous artist seems to imply a certain disadvantage, it is important to observe a restraint on the part of all of us who seek to work with them.

The second part provides a brief history of art making in India and examines the situation in which the indigenous artist operates.

Part 1
Western Art, Indian Art, Traditional Art

In the 1990s, I began working in Chennai, as a freelance illustrator and graphic designer for publishing houses - Orient Longman and Macmillan. I also used to do illustrations for Junior Quest, a children's magazine published by Chandamama publications. I later moved to Bombay where I designed and illustrated a book based on 'Bharat Ki Chaap' - a film serial on the history of science and technology in the Indian sub-continent, published by Comet Media Foundation. It was during this time that I interacted with Eklavya and also did a stint of teaching in the Visual Communications programme at IDC, IIT Bombay.

Having lived largely in an urban milieu, the influences that have shaped my art making have come from books and exhibitions of art as it is practiced and taught in an urban scenario. Maurice Sendak, the American writer and illustrator; Leo Lionni and Mercer Mayer who are also writer-illustrators were amongst those who influenced me. I was also drawn to the work of many painters and greatly admired the work of Monet and Matisse. It was much later that I began to study the work of Indian artists; and gradually came to understand that there is another art that practiced in India that is quite different from the art one sees in urban centres.

I learnt printmaking at the Kanoria Centre in Ahmedabad and then worked under the guidance of Ghanshyam Sharma, a pichhwai painter in Nathdwara. I also came into closer contact with the pata-chitra tradition of Orissa.

After the awareness that most of our exposure is to art that is Euro-centric, I visited the Ajanta caves and started looking at the visual world of India with a different eye. In the past few decades, urban artists in India have sought to engage with notions of identity and this has led to a new vitality in their work. Many have sought to draw inspiration from the traditional arts. The traditional artists themselves – and there are the miniature painters in Rajasthan; the Madhubani artists in Bihar; pata-artists in Bengal and Orissa; Kalamkari in Andhra Pradesh; Glass Painting in Tamil Nadu – have developed a classical idiom that they adhere to. In addition to painting, there are other traditional arts – embroidery, metal casting, stone carving, weaving, pottery. Then there is the expression of tribal communities, such as the Warlis, the Sauras, the Gonds – which have come to regarded as 'tribal art', though for a tribal community the notion of art as a separate activity is not correct. Some of these communities have learnt to cope with the altered conditions in which they find themselves, by practicing their 'art'.

The institutionalization of art education – since independence, created a new breed of artists, quite different in their outlooks and approaches from the indigenous artists who are often labeled as 'craftspeople'. Such notions need to be re-examined for art is an activity that can happen at various levels.

Tribal, Folk and Traditional artists

The term 'indigenous' often implies that the indigenous artist is primarily a skilled craftsperson who lacks the intellectual ability and sophistication of the urban-artist. Clearly, the urban-artist has a better exposure to world events and is often volubly articulate. 'Indigenous art' has been accorded the status of a craft and reduced to repeating itself endlessly; thereby losing a living vitality that characterizes the efforts of an artist.

Ironically, the pictorial language of the urban-artist has often a quality that makes it faceless, unless accompanied by verbiage. To this end, cutting-edge urban-artists have to rely on a patronage that starts resembling a power-game that has little to do with art.

Indigenous art, because it was not based on individuality and personality of the artist, was spared some of the angst and agony that afflicts the urban-artist. This is not to suggest that the work of the indigenous-artist lacks individuality, because each artist brings to the work, his or her own understanding of line, form and colour. Even in indigenous art one can often identify a work as belonging to one particular artist.

The outlook that the art takes precedence over the artist characterizes an earlier era. The spotlight on individuality is clearly a characteristic

of our times; and this often weighs excessively on the individual to stand out in a crowd. Writers such as Chogyam Trungpa, have suggested that the art of future societies will place an emphasis on the spiritual. Such art will seek to do away with the aggression that has crept into artmarketing.

Working with Indigenous artists

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to work with traditional artists from Nathadwara and Bhubaneswar and tribal artists now based in Bhopal.

During a visit to the Orissa State museum I met with Radhashyam Raut, a young painter trained in the patachitra tradition. The meeting with Radhashyam was quite by accident, and we met because he wanted to sell me his work. I initially declined his offer, but then changed my mind and visited his village that is near Bhubaneswar. I was very impressed with the extraordinary sense of detail and we got around to a collaborative effort for creating an illustrated book.

This later extended to another collaboration in writing and publishing with Sirish Rao Tara publishers. The book 'Circle of Fate', came out of this collaborative effort and is an exploratory step in evolving new possibilities for traditional artists.

I first saw the work of the Gond tribals who settled in Bhopal on the walls of Ekalvya's office. The magazine 'Chakmak' and some of their other publications featured works by these artists. During a visit to Bhopal, I met with Durgabai, a Gond artist who has come to paint in the tradition that Udayan Vajpeyi calls as 'Jangadh Kalam', in memory of the Gond painter Jangadh Singh Shyam. Swaminathan, during his travels in Madhya Pradesh, met Jangadh and got him to come and work at Bharat Bhavan. The unique pictorial language created by Jangadh was imbibed by many of the younger Gond artists. It was an idiom that was distinctly different from the art they practised in their villages. The artists drew upon their repertoire of stories to create some remarkably striking content.

Impressed with their work, I had invited Durgabai and her husband Subhas Vyam to Mumbai, to work on a book that was based on a story that was somewhat different from the creation myths with which they were familiar. I hoped that for them to encounter a new idea would encourage them to experiment.

The story 'When the Fury Cools' has elements that are drawn from different cultures. It speaks about how the earth was created from the Sun and how people were created from the earth. And as the earth was fiery and molten within, so also were the people born out of the earth. This is not quite like the Genesis according to the Gonds, but Durgabai and Subhas could identify with this. The story went on to say that because the earth was molten within, it erupted in volcanoes; and so did people, who like the earth were furious within. Though the notion of volcanoes was an unfamiliar one, the analogy with angry outbursts was helpful. And so Durgabai and Subhas went on to create the illustrations for this tale. The story goes on to suggest that only volcanoes that have cooled and have snow falling on them, give birth to rivers that sustain life. So also, people when they have cooled down, sustain others.

Later, Durgabai went on to paint some of her experiences of travelling in suburban trains in Mumbai. It is important for us to not label indigenous artists as artists who have a unchanging visual vocabulary, but regard them as artists who can respond like urban artists to their immediate environments. Any art practice has a craft associated with it. It is only when indigenous art practice is given the legitimacy of its outlook, does it exist in its own right. Unless this is done, the tradition cannot be a living tradition - and a tradition is meaningful only when it is living.

The joy of a handcrafted book

I started making books, and publishing them myself because it was fun making them; and they allowed me to communicate ideas and experiences. Making them by hand, with the help of techniques such as screen-printing, rubber-stamps, the use of photocopies and in recent times digital technologies, has been rewarding. Other methods of replicating images such as linocuts, woodcuts, and etching become available as possibilities for handcrafted publications envisaged as limited editions.

My first book 'Three Stones Three Children and A Pillow' was based on an incident I had witnessed outside a roadside teashop many years ago. After having written the narrative, I did many drawings and these were not conceived of as 'illustrating' the text, but as drawings that sought to speak of the same experience in their own terms. I published this work as a screen-printed edition with the funds that I had. The experience of making a book was immensely rewarding, and though I did sell a few copies, I ended up gifting away most of the forty limited copies that had been printed. The joy of gifting a handcrafted book was another discovery.

Though a limited edition implies exclusivity, for me this was a side effect. I have often wondered if it would give me as much joy to see my book in a shelf amongst several other titles in a bookshop. Perhaps it would, perhaps there is something to be said for sharing ideas with lots and lots of people, though there is something to be said about gifting a handcrafted work that connects the maker and the receiver in some special way. Later I came to know that there did exist a tradition of artist books - books created by artists as limited editions - and was glad that I had stumbled on a similar effort.

Over the years, I have published a few other books. 'The Parable of the Raintree' was written by a friend, Jogesh Motwani and illustrated by me - though perhaps it was more collaborative than that - I did contribute to the writing as much as Jogesh contributed to the drawings. We made a special edition of this book as a contribution to the efforts of the Narmada Bachao Andolan, when they were raising funds in Bombay.

'The Student' is a story by Anton Chekov. I was touched by the story and did some drawings for it that interpreted some of the passages in it. For this book I used colour photocopies of art-works for replicating the images.

'An Old Hat - A Silly Tale' was a flippant take on the age-old battle between words and images. I had initially planned to 'print' the text using rubber-stamps but later chose to hand write the text.

'1 2 3 4' is a poem. I made thirty copies of this book – though each copy was unique.

I came across some of the books published by Tara publishers in Chennai. 'Tiger on a Tree' is a particularly delightful book. Tara's inclination for handcrafted books was something unique amongst publishers. We collaborated on a very interesting project is mentioned earlier. While most handcrafted books turn out to be relatively expensive, they have a value that cannot be measured in pure economic terms.

Part 2
A Brief History of Art in India

The cave art in Bhimbetka, is amongst the earliest examples of the art making impulse. During moments of intense experience, we transcend our personal selves. The impulse to share such experiences leads us to create. For the cave dweller hunting was often fraught with danger, and perhaps the first artists on the walls of their cave shelters recaptured the adventure.

There seems to be a leap in representational abilities between the cave art of Bhimbetka and the murals of Ajanta. This art was deeply religious as well as secular in its content and was patronized by kings who were benevolently disposed to the teachings of the Buddha. Painting, sculpture, and illuminated manuscripts characterize the spread of Budhhist and Jain teachings in India.

After the revival of Hindu beliefs, the Hindus also adopted the visual language and over centuries evolved an elaborate iconography. Temple building, wood carving, stone carving, metal casting, slowly acquired a classical stature. The Shilpa Shastras laid down principles that were imbibed through a long period of apprenticeship with master artists.

The Mughal era, brought about interesting assimilative influences between Islamic and Hindu aesthetics. Secular architecture that combined temple architecture with Islamic domes and minarets began to make an appearance. Miniature paintings influenced by Persian masters flourished as the Mughal kings and nobles commissioned royal portraits, and paintings of gardens and expeditions. Once the Mughal court withdrew the patronage to artists, the artists migrated to Rajasthan, Himachal and Kashmir. The Rajput rulers continued the Mughal tradition of portraiture and documentation of royality. Painters also looked to inspiration from works such as Geet Govind and stories from the Hindu epics.
The Kangra school of painting developed a lyrical quality that reflected the beauty of the Himalayan landscape. These influences did reach the eastern and the southern states, though certain indigenous art practices continued to exist. The Deccan miniature paintings bear their own signature, just as the glass paintings at Tanjore have a unique identity.

When the colonial masters were establishing art schools they disregarded the traditional arts. The Santiniketan experiment stood out as a critique of colonialism in the cultural sphere. Ananda Coomaraswamy's efforts, altered Euro-Centric perceptions of Asian art. Some of the European artists more sensitive to art practice encouraged Indian artists to develop their own approaches.

The Progressive Art Group in Bombay, sought to fashion itself along entirely different lines and entered whole-heartedly into a dialogue with the modernist movement in the West - most notably, with the cubist movement of Picasso and Braque, Hussain, Raza, Souza - took up the cubist expression as their starting points, but fashioned their own visual languages.

Tagore laid stress on the relevance of local knowledge and art traditions. The Santiniketan artists looked back to the frescos of Ajanta. Sadanga - the six limbs of painting as taught at Santiniketan were- Rupa-Bheda (the distinction between various forms); Pramanani (correctness of proportions); Bhava (emotion); Lavanya (artistic sense and restraint); Sadrisyam (similitude); Varnika-Bhanga (colouration that leads to the delineation of forms).

From the point of view of the Bombay group the Santiniketan artists appeared as romantics and revivalists. But they did provide a counter-point to the mindless academic style of the Company Art Schools that were established in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras,.

Over the years Santiniketan evolved its own traditions. Ramkinker Baij created his sculptures using concrete and imbued them with a fluidity that depicted the life of the Santhal people with whom he associated closely. Jamini Roy found inspiration for his elegant simplifications of form and his use of colour from the tribals in Bengal.

Later, the Faculty of Fine-Arts at Baroda, became an energetic school that grappled with notions of nationalism and identity. Ghulam Mohammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakkar, K.G.Subramanyan, played the role of articulating new approaches and concerns.

A new generation of artists in Bombay, Baroda, Delhi, Madras and Calcutta began to transcend national boundaries and exhibit their works in international galleries and museums. Global forces and emerging art markets led to an acceptance of Indian art and artists on an unprecedented scale. With the world attention focussed on India, art-activity flourished. It also acquired a pan-Indian character that blurred the earlier distinctions between schools of art in the metropolises. There continues to be subtle differences between urban artists in India, but these appear more as individual efforts to strike-out idiosyncratic paths.

The Contemporary Indigenous Artist

K.G. Subramanyan in his work 'The Living Traditions of India', observes that 'most of us in the modern art world have a slightly exaggerated image of our creative independence'. Subramanyan or Manida as he is affectionately known, suggests that 'taking our cue from what is happening in the sciences, where every few years new discoveries and inventions render obsolete previous concepts, values, tools and technologies, we venture to think that our innovations too will wipe out our history...if art, too, has to have a real presence in today's society, it has to allow the creative individual to be in live contact with his environment and through it the larger world - and there will be numerous creative individuals of this kind at various levels of expression. This alone makes a living tradition.'

Earlier, one could lay the blame on colonial masters for neglecting indigenous art practice. We have ourselves to blame for continuing the legacy of division between art and craft. Art education in India continues to suffer from disengagement with its own past. While art history lessons do touch upon indigenous art, there has come about a sharp distinction between indigenous artists and their urban counterparts.

Verrier Elwin, Kamaladevi Chhatopadhya, Jagdish Swaminthan are amongst those who sought to bridge this divide. However, the mindset that once characterized the colonial masters, continued amongst the western educated bureaucracy of an apparently 'free-nation'. The government did make efforts to support the visual arts by setting up the Lalit Kala Academy, but its efforts were often dissipated in political intrigues. The indigenous artists continued to be the practitioners of a nostalgic art, to be paraded as 'Indian' in international fairs, but largely excluded from art practice and education within India. The mindset that creates educational approaches that divide the intellectual and conceptual learning from the learning of skills, is reflected in notions of high and low art.

Conclusion: The need for restraint

It has been observed that the passage from colonial rule to independence did not bring about an independence from the mindset of ruling over those, less powerful. The hankering after power was an old-habit and the new rulers turned to feed on their own people. The new elite was eager to embrace (and often just imitate) the modern; it showed little respect for knowledge that was indigenous. While the West, in its sensitive quarters has begun a critique of the modernism that seeks a more responsible role for the future, developing economies with their enormous populations seem to be far-removed from any sensible engagement about the fate of their future communities.

The mindless adoption of capitalist modes of production and consumption only means a repetition of mistakes that one could have learnt from. There is little evidence of such effort in the scramble for wealth and status that masquerades as a new found creativity of the Indian people. Future growth can only be through the bridging of divides that continue to exist; and at times even deepen, as a predominantly young nation appears to lack a willingness to learn from its own history.

It is important that editorial vision and content shapes publishing efforts, instead of basing themselves entirely on economic parameters. It is easy to get swayed by the importance to reach out through effective means to the millions without access to books and education; such benevolence often hides one's own shortcomings and by neglecting the inner to the pursuit of some outer goal, we fall prey to the illusions of ideology.

To neglect the outer during the pursuit of the inner has been another traditional practice in India – and this practice is now under scrutiny too! To reach out is important, and it is equally important that to choose what to reach out with. It is senseless to publish in large numbers and expect 'education' to come about through this, because the silent message we give out is not through our words but through our lives. Though a meticulous care underlying the choice of content and the manner of production is required, a traditional restraint would not be out of place!

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