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ART CRITICISM in INDIA

A BRIEF OVERVIEW by GAYATRI SINHA

Like art in the late 19th century, art criticism in the subcontinent reflects the tensions of colonialism and nationalism. In a 150 year period the critic has oscillated between these two spheres of conflict. This is until the coming of post modernism which creates almost with a sense of relief integrated spaces for Indian multi culturalism. The regional, the global, the national myth, the private fantasy, the integration of the body, the landscape, or political polemic can all be integrated.

Art criticism is a colonial import. British writing stimulated art criticism in the regional languages, in the English press and journals. Traditionally, Indian art writing was mainly in the nature of commentaries on courtly art convention and on the poetic text that inspired painting and sculpture. For instance in the 17th century Keshavadas Rasikapriya, a collection of verse on Radha and Krishna inspired 300 commentaries, and several illustrated manuscripts. The main writing on the canons of aesthetics, the Visnudharmotara Purana and the Citralakshana of Nagnajit of the 5th century, followed by the Shilpashastras are how to texts. They specify the role of aesthetics in Indian art and architecture.

Since the 20th century however, Indian art historians and critics have, like Indian artists, pulled in diametrically different directions. The underlying debate has been between derivation from the west and the negative value attached to that and the unease with which, Indian traditional sources are often regarded. The privileged position of western art, the indifference or even distaste for traditional Indian art internationally, even the colonial legacy have added to the tension. The British set up four art schools in Calcutta, Madras,

Bombay and Lahore in the 1850□ s, and Lord Macaulay urged an English education to tone up what he said was a deficient Indian training and temperament. The fact that many of the art schools still give a western education in art has fostered this sense of polarity.

In the 1880□ s some of the future dissensions were already in place. Raja Ravi Varma a princeling from the state of Kerala who taught himself oil painting upheld values of the Raj. He absorbed academic realism as a standard. His painting illustrating the myth of Mohini Rukmangada is very much in his preferred style of epic painting. He revealed the influence of Renaissance modelling as well as the romantic excesses of the Pre-Raphelites. If we look at his work Usha□ s Dream the resemblance with Manet□ s Olympia is quite clear. Emile Zola had teased Manet that since he needed a dark area, he had used a coloured servant. Instead of the black servant Ravi Varma chooses to place a dark Krishna. Ravi Varma□ s Hamsa Damyanti [in which the swan brings tidings of Damyanti□ s lover] and you can see that it echoes the romantic tones of Dante Gabriel Rossetti. /

Ravi Varma created an electic modern Hindu ideal. He humanized the Gods and set in motion a flourishing calendar art industry. The Indian National Congress had had its first meeting in 1885 and the next 20 sessions came in quick succession. The need for a visible Indian image must have been paramount and Ravi Varma was quick to grasp this. The other trajectory was the nationalist aspiration of Abanindranath Tagore of the illustrious Tagores of Bengal. He had been inspired by Ernest Binfield Havell Principal of the Calcutta College of Art to consider Mughal art as a source of inspiration. Abanindranath debunked canvas and oil used small format tempera and created his kind of limpid flowing line. We may compare a scene from the Gita Govinda by the great Pahari miniature painter Nainsukh dated 1775. This is Abanindranath□ s Gita Govinda, which comes about 125 years later. Like Ravi Varma, Abanindranath looked to history and myth as the fountainhead of Indianness. He challenged the colonial elite. In the Mughal inspiration laid out one stream of tradition followed selectively till today, by an artist like Nilima Sheikh.

Now classical and modern Indian art attracted critical analysis almost simultaneously. Studies and comments on the experiments of Abanindranath and Ravi Varma on the one hand and ancient and medieval art on the other hand are almost simultaneous, and perhaps by necessity involved the same critics. When Ananda Coomaraswamy the first historian to recognise and record the

Rajput School of painting. In 1907, Rabindranath Tagore's Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan, the seat of a national art was only two years away. Abanindranath's attempt at erasure of the British presence had already occurred. The foundations of the Bengal school of art were well under way.

Coomaraswamy like Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahatma Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo rejected a western education to plumb the depths of an Indian culture. He also represents some of the contradictory tensions of Indian art criticism. Coomaraswamy first approved of Raja Ravi Varma's realistic gods and goddesses but later he debunked his art as spurious. Coomaraswamy like Abanindranath believed in Indian sources, an Indian context. But Coomaraswamy was dismissive of modern art. He described it as narcisstic and self indulgent. He infinitely preferred the anonymous strivings of the traditional Indian sculptor who sought to infuse metaphysical feeling into stone or molten bronze. Naturally, the reaction against Coomaraswamy's views was strong among later critics.

British dismissal of Indian art and aesthetics also made the Indian art critics position unenviable. John Ruskin believed ' the Indian will not draw a form of nature but an amalgamation of monstrous objects . He said of Indian art ' To all facts and forms of nature it wilfuly and resolutely opposes itself; it will not draw a man but an eight armed monster, it will not draw a flower but only a spiral or a zig zag . The critic Sir George Birdwood said ' painting and sculpture as fine art did not exist in India . Birdwood believed that the future of Indian artisans maybe rendered by western design instruction. The 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition in London had only reinforced this idea of the passive, perpetuative type of Indian craftmanship ' skilled but neither creative nor manly nor modern. British orientalism justified the need for British rule in every aspect of Indian life. Art was no exception.

So the Indians fought back. In Bengal Annada Prasad Bagchi started the first art magazine called the Shilpa Pushpanjali. The Times of India ran a vigorous art column from the early 1900's in Bombay. The Bengali journal Prabasi, and Bharati, the magazine run by the Tagores were also influential. These journals took up the challenge of questioning colonial stereotypes, of the progressive versus the static, the creative versus the decorative, the active versus the passive.

By the 1900's the emphasis was firmly on nationalism. These sentiments could not derive from the Raj and translated directly into an art that defied western influence. Words like Hindu and

Aryan became current. If Indian art was judged unscientific by Europeans, Indian artists and critics now upheld its ▯ spiritual▯ qualities. Again art was considered a binding force in a nation so divided in its languages, desperately in need of unity against the British. Of course there were unintended ironies. The first book on artistic nationalism The Rise of the Fine Arts and Artistic Skills of the Aryans by Shyamacharan Srimani in 1874 was dedicated to Locke. However Indian assertions were important. In 1920, the Indian Society for Oriental Art brought out Rupam, an English art journal edited by O.C. Ganguly. In its pages, writers like Coomaraswamy, Ganguly and Asit Haldar fought the theory held by Vincent Smith and James Ferguson that Indian art imitated and descended from the Graeco Roman tradition.

By 1905, when Abanindranath painted Bharat Mata or Mother India, the idea of the potential new nation had taken root. Abanindranath▯ s followers continued in this quest for the historic mythic subject that suggested a composite, grand past. His followers spread the idea of a nationalist art across the length and breadth of India. Abdul Rahman Chughtai [Joy & Sorrow], practicing in Lahore, K.N.Majumdar [Woman Plucking Flowers] in Calcutta, Sarada Ukil in Delhi [Girl with Chati] and K.Venkatappa in Bangalore [Radha & the Deer] followed the same ideology of Swadeshi. They believed in an Indian art unpolluted by the British presence.

But change was inevitable. A pure untainted India sealed off from the international arena was a contradiction to India▯ s own quest for modernity. Indian artists were caught in the cleft stick of the need for nationalist values on the one hand and modernity on the other. Fervent argument grew around the idea of a nationalist art. Hemen Mazumdar an enormously successful artist of the 1930▯ s and 40▯ s famous for his female nudes, quoted in his magazine Shilpi, questions about ideals and nation. ▯ If your pictures are not worthy enough to be imitated by the nation, what good are they to the nation at large? one reader wrote to him.
The critics of the nationalist period ▯ Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Havell, were followed chronologically by Stella Kramrisch, American art historian who had been invited to Rabindranath to Santiniketan. Kramrisch was very selective in her involvement. She commented briefly on Nandalal Bose but did not make Indian aspirations for modern art a subject for study. An example of one Nandalal▯ s panels [Butter Milk Churner] on ordinary Indian life, painted for the Congress session of 1937 was part of a commission given to him by Mahatma Gandhi. Another example of Nandalal called Chaitanya under the Garuda Stambha,

reveals his exaltation of the spiritual national ideal of a pure, Indian tradition.

The catalyst for change came from within. The Bengal famine of 1943 which devastated a third of the population of Calcutta convinced a group of artists that the time for sentimental revival had passed. In their manifesto of 1943, the Calcutta Group said Art when it ceases to have an immediate social function either loses all vitality or becomes a passionate research into problems of form . This engagement with form resulted in their use of expressionism and cubism. Even more influential was the Progressive Artists Group of Bombay, which formed in 1947. Its manifesto written by F.N. Souza said their objective was to bring about a closer understanding and contact between different sections of society . Their modernism is demonstrated by Husain s drawing of Khajuraho after he visited the temple site in 1957. He introduces a modernism which sought to encompass the Indian subject in a modern stylistic.

Now two things happened here. With the appearance of this group in Bombay patronage for the arts passed out of Calcutta to the new mercantile class in Bombay. Bombay had emerged as the financial and industrial capital of the new India. The city was hungry for images that reflected the idea of the modern and this is directly where an artist like Husain achieved ready fame.

The other change was the shift in art critical values and the emergence of two foreign emigres, Rudy von Leyden as The Times of India art critic in Bombay, and Charles Fabri in New Delhi. von Leyden espoused European abstraction and encouraged the Bombay Progressives in that direction. He found willing support in Krishen Khanna, Tyeb Mehta and V.S. Gaitonde among others. In 1947, Marg the important magazine for the classical and contemporary arts was introduced in Bombay. In 1963, the Lalit Kala Contemporary the official organ of the Department of Culture was introduced. The critic of modern art, who believed in modernism in the Indian context had been born. Mulk Raj Anand editor of Marg was unequivocal in his support of the Progressives in Bombay, Karl Khandalawala, a specialist in the Indian miniature projected Amrita Sher-Gil as the first Indian modern.

Perhaps inevitably, the readings of classical art, and early modernism were questioned. The Bengal school was roundly trashed by Sher-Gil, who believed that the real India was yet to be visually represented. It is also the approach of early critics and historians that came into question. In his book, Much

Maligned Monsters [1977], Partha Mitter accuses Coomaraswamy of obfuscating the analysis of Indian art in metaphysics, of turning to European yardsticks to explain Indian art. So the zone of contest covers not western derivations but also interpretations of traditional Indian art.

Even with Independence and the formation of different groups, what emerges is a constant tension of interests. When Geeta Kapur wrote Contemporary Indian Artists in 1978, she said in her introduction that modern art in India attracted an embarrassed self-derision typically post-colonial in mentality. Of the six artists on whom she wrote, three were clearly western in their orientation, the other three Indian.

What is at the root of this constant self examination? Artists and art critics have oscillated between what is loosely described as Indianness and internationalism. On the one side has ranged the desire to carry the idea of Indian aesthetics forward. This has included Indian abstraction, which received a real fillip in the hands of K. C. S. Paniker s and J. Swaminathan in the 1960 s. [Re: Paniker s Words and Symbols of 1966 and the work of Swaminathan]. Swaminathan was also an influential writer who criticized Indian artists for their successful imitations of the schools of Paris and New York. There was also the use of Tantra symbology by artists in the north and the south, which sought to interpret the geometry of the yantra, the mystical diagram. This is typical of the work of Biren De a leading artist of the school. Critical opinion in the 1970 s infact reflected a growing inwardness in art and criticism. Geeta Kapur at the 1971 Indian triennale appealed to artists to oppose internationalism and expose the galleries and government institutions that encourage such cultural titillation . J. Swaminathan said that International triennales made us susceptible to being swept away by the stagnant influences of the western civilization which had run its gamut.

Within two decades however, vexed questions of nation and identity are resolved or silent. The polarities of internationalism and indigenism are no longer seen in conflict. Clearly third world polity has changed dramatically in the last decade, accommodating divergent elements. Also the spirit of post modernism, if not actual post modernist practice allows for a non hierarchical equation of categories. Kitsch, myth, regional, folk, tribal, post colonial, gender, political polemic can come together on the same platform, and reflect Indian multiculturalism. We can quickly look at some examples of the electic use of different sources. Arpita

Singh s subversion of the goddess Lakshmi If we contrast Ravi Varma s oleograph of Saraswati, followed by Singh s Feminine Fables] foregrounds the middle aged desexualized nude. In Surendran Nair [Corollary Mythologies/ Cosmic Mythology] the Yogic body becomes the locus or site for symbols of consumption, materialism, myth and cultural association, in contrast it with the traditional Yogic sculpture of Gupta art. In Gogi Saroj Pal s [Sihanvlokan] the use of the iconic eye of the temple deity is taken out of its context and used as formal device in installation. And finally, Ravi Varma s Galaxy of Musicians, and Nalini Malani s painting Rethinking Raja Ravi Varma in which the play of western and Indian elements, of a revaluation of values after a passage of time is clear. In such a scenario perhaps for the first time Indian art breathes a little easy, even as art criticism stretches to comprehend and accommodate the unpredictable elements and energies that now conjoin in Indian art.

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5. Nainsukh Gita Govinda Kangra 1775-80
6. Abanindranath Tagore Gita Govinda
7. Abanindranath Tagore Bharat Mata
8. A. R. Chughtai Joy & Sorrow Water Colour 1942-45 & Wash on Paper
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