

**Revisiting Modern Art in India
prior to Independence:
A capsule account of beginnings, confrontations,
conflicts and milestones**

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Abstract:

The present text is at best a brush up to refresh the account of modern art during the most crucial phase when India was approaching Independence from the colonial rule. Tracing back to Mughal period the article tries to re-locate the story of modern art pregnant with discontinuities, conflicts and high points. Beginnings, be it art or science, have often been a matter of contestation. There is no brief history still that could establish the beginning of time. Same is the case with the beginnings of modernism in art whether it is East or the West. In India we can notice how Rajput painting deviates from Mughal realistic/naturalism and assumes a more idealized and mannered outlook. At a certain point it may also seem a matter of discontinuity to see Rajput painting closer to Safavid (which was the main point of departure for Mughal painting) in its love for pure lines and color. The shifting positions of revivalist and anti-revivalist stands shared by the artists of Bengal School further enhanced the complexity of the evolution of art. In its early phase the urgency of finding an indigenous alternative to the Victorian academic realism assumed a nationalist 'revivalist' tempo, which was subject to serious criticism. And later the students of Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), the founder of Bengal School, in Santinekatan preferred the immediate and empirical over the historicist oriental sense of Indian modern. The story of art as a non-linear and considerably conflicting historical discourse becomes more complex in the failures or myths of modernism deliberated in the postmodern theories.

Key words: Modern Art in India, The beginning of modern art in India, Nationalistic Art and Colonial Period in India, Mughal Art, Bengal School, Progressive art movement in India.

Beginnings, be it art or science, have often been a matter of contestation. There is no brief history still that could establish the beginning of time. Same is the case with the beginnings of modernism in art whether it is East or the West. The older text books on art negotiate with the term “modern” referring back to early Renaissance in Europe where Giotto is seen as a revolutionary for breaking with the crude Byzantine style of medieval times. His major break and contribution lies in bringing the technique of drawing accurately from life, which brought the European notion of “modern” close to the classical Greco-Roman concept of imitation.

Throughout Renaissance until the advent of Romanticism, (which revolted against the hegemony of classical ideals), the concept of “modern” found its major associations in the classical/realistic tradition. However, with the passage of time the word “modern” assumed different and often contradictory meanings. It meant as much a thing of now as it became a thing of the past. Moreover, it also became possible to perceive art not as a linear and deterministic progress but rather a fluid and circular phenomena, which unlike West, is generally considered very much central to eastern/Asian thought and sensibility. It is interesting, for instance, to bring in the element of contingency and shock while referring to different events of European modern art. The naturalistic realism, which, more or less, guaranteed the modernism of Renaissance to break with the perspective-less traditions of the medieval past was, with more force and explicitness, deconstructed by the analytical cubism, the most articulate point of 20th century modern art – questioning the forward looking avantgardist stand of modernity. As we know between Renaissance and early 19th century Realism, (both sharing the

ideals of truth and accuracy), the nature of art saw many shifting points of discontinuity and contingency, for instance, in the moments of the Mannerist intervention and Baroque accesses. Similarly, in India we can notice how Rajput painting deviates from Mughal realistic/naturalism and assumes a more idealized and mannered outlook. At a certain point it may also seem a matter of discontinuity to see Rajput painting closer to Safavid (which was the main point of departure for Mughal painting) in its love for pure lines and color. The shifting positions of revivalist and anti-revivalist stands shared by the artists of Bengal School further enhanced the complexity of the evolution of art. In its early phase the urgency of finding an indigenous alternative to the Victorian academic realism assumed a nationalist 'revivalist' tempo, which was subject to serious criticism. And later the students of Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), the founder of Bengal School, in Santinekatan preferred the immediate and empirical over the historicist oriental sense of Indian modern. The story of art as a non-linear and considerably conflicting historical discourse becomes more complex in the failures or myths of modernism deliberated in the postmodern theories.

Comparatively, if the sense of 'modernity' is generally attributed to Renaissance Florence (c.1400-1600) for encouraging an impersonal state, urbanism, individualism, and objective approach to nature, then it is Mughal India (1526-1757), roughly of the same time, for anticipating similar values. It is difficult to understand 'why this burgeoning 'modernity' in Mughal India failed to take firm roots.' (Mitter 2001, 107) Whether it was the Hindu caste system or the monarchy of the Mughal court for restricting the dissemination of ideas borrowed in exchange with other developing civilizations 'modernity' in India was subjected to a snail pace as compared to the Europe. However, the open-minded and pluralistic approach of the Mughal painting, especially in history painting and portraiture, shares some of the major concerns identified

with the classical/realistic values of Renaissance art. In the same vein later Rajasthani and Pahari paintings strike a deep chord with the western Romanticism for sharing concerns like epic legends of romance, lyricism, a sense of immediacy and individualism. One of the major reality checks for Indian art was during the colonial era where the direct exchange with western culture replaced the Mughal Rajput naturalism with Victorian illusionistic art. The highly ambitious patronization and strategic policies of dissemination devised by the British Raj was one big thing, (the one thing that Mughal lacked) which prompted the local artists to adapt to the new genres like oil portraits, naturalistic landscape and academic nudes. On the other hand this direct contact and access to the foreign influence gave rise to the construct of nationhood, which anticipated a nationalist movement of resistance and colonialism. “The period is characterized, as the noted art historian Partha Mitter states, “by a dialectic between colonialism and nationalism and the construction of cultural difference in a rapid globalization of culture.” (Mitter 2001, 171) The local artists or ‘native artists’, (as they were initially called to segregate from the elite) on the one hand found sufficient avenues to make a living and on the other hand felt disconnected from their own heritage. With the passage of time the rise of national movement triggered a certain sense of discontent for illusionistic art and artists once again, but this time with a sense of anxiety, turned to the pre-colonial indigenous past. This seesaw between the tastes, genres and influences is characteristic not only of Indian art but, more or less, of the whole global art scene of the nineteenth century – a zeitgeist. At this point of crisis it was Raja Ravi Verma (1848-1906) the most successful academic artist who came to the rescue by providing a different and more articulate perception of ‘modern’.

The recent developments in Indian art criticism anticipate a more complex and open-ended position of modern

in India. Ravi Verma's contribution for assimilating western technique to articulate Indian subjects by means of which he constructed images of gods from the epic mythological text was suddenly perceived as 'modern'. (Sinha 2003, 1) Verma's paintings gained a huge national popularity partly because he was able to cater the sentiment of the masses by painting theatrical presentation of Hindu mythological subjects and partly due to his ingenious marketing strategies for starting a printing press in Bombay in 1894, which made it possible to make as many copies of his paintings as was demanded. And soon mass-produced oleographs got even more multiplied in the form of bazaar prints and calendar art anticipating new methods of cultural dissemination, and the fact anybody could now have access to art, is tantamount to the Industrial urban ambition of modernity. Verma's major contribution and fame lies in his history paintings of ancient Indian epics and classical literary works. He meticulously learned the Victorian dialect of salon art, especially the skill of oil painting, and articulated Indian subjects, which are both conspicuously different from the western cannon and at the same time convincingly modern. The hybridity of his art was at one point criticized for being 'kitschy' and unspiritual but now seems to have come a long way to be addressed as a possible choice in the general paranoia of nationalism and modernism. The position of Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941) as the first Indian modern may be claimed on the basis that she returned to India after being groomed in the mainstream western art world in Paris. However, it was not her immediate contemporary movements in Paris that she choose, but instead brought the influence of Post-Impressionism and in a certain sense re-enacted Gauguin-Tahiti with the 'poor, downtrodden' and 'silent images of infinite submission' of India. She identified with the Post-Impressionists not only in terms of formal language but also in their passionately nonconformist lifestyle and destiny making her a fitting example of a modern rebel. Sher-Gil's position is also of

considerable importance in the feminist context of modern for leading an individual and purely professional life in the world of patriarchal chauvinism. In 1934 she returned to India after obtaining training at the famous Ecole-des-Beaux-Arts, Paris. Born to a mixed Sikh-Hungarian parentage she became a living emblem blending East and the West. There was something about her enigmatic personality and the fact she chose Gauguin's influence, one of the legendary heroes of European modern art, out of the host of mainstream styles and movements like Cubism, Expressionism and Surrealism. And her sudden death in 1941 has made her the most remembered legend of the Indian modern art history. In her brief career, however, she incorporated post-impressionism idiom with indigenous traditions like Pahari and Ajanta by which she arrived at a pictorial solution to the everyday of life of India marking a considerable difference both from the European influence and the local Bengal School.

It was the emergence of Santinekatan in 1920s that Indian art attained some kind of solemn repose and commensurability. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) being its main architect who devised the educational formula of art practice that was adherent to the laws of nature. He talked about the art manifesting human contact with the nature/environment, which European art of the time was more or less disenchanted with. It was Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) who, especially in his landscapes, realized the dreams of Tagore for bringing art closer to nature and nature closer to art. Tagore's initiative was remarkable in the sense that the school realized the inevitability of the departure from the revivalist historicist temperament of Abanindranath and the urgency of the relationship with the local and the immediate – the reflexive nexus in which art and its environment can grow into a mutually enriching relationship. In this way, particularly in the works of Benodebehari, art was rescued from the hypothetical idealized space and became as real as the

empirical experience. The extensive experimentation of Ramkiner Baij is another aspect of Indian modernism symptomatic of his cubist–expressionist contemporaries in the west and its future in the *avant garde* of Bombay progressives. The gulf between individualism and institutions is one of the important aspects of modern art in general, which finds its specific examples in the diverse stands taken up by artists like Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari, and Ramkiner Baij the ‘reigning trinity’ of Indian modern. In the midst of the demands of Santinekatan for a definite collective identity the official ‘national’ position of Nandalal is often contrasted with the more individualistic departure from the canons of institution towards future. (Ghanesh and Thakkar 2005, 98)

Rabindranath Tagore was more radical in his experimentation than Sher-Gil for paving the way towards higher aims of modernism. Tagore’s painterly intervention in the mid-twenties anticipated the surreal expressionist idiom of free associations where scratches, scribbles, erasures, and doodles transformed into fantastic melancholic primordial forms. At that time no other artist of India enjoyed the serious attention of European intellectuals as Tagore’s art works did, partly due to his legendary reputation. And partly because of his radical imagination for expressing his unconscious obsessions with a sense of awe and mystery, which was strikingly reminiscent of his European contemporaries like Paul Klee and Max Ernst. Tagore’s profoundly personal style is attributed to what came to be defined as ‘erasures’ erupted from the game of creating shapes out of crossed-out texts, which interestingly makes a dialectic link with his discursive scriptural engagement of a prolific poet. In other words, if one feigns to speculate, Tagore’s conscious and prolonged engagement with the production of text suddenly demanded explosion of images – which attained a concrete and plastic presence in the form of human and animal forms. He needed a break from the controlled formal restraint of the writer and seek

some kind of refuge in the subjective and spontaneous release offered by the act of painting. His art, however, finds a better license in the European art released in the event of Freud's discoveries of the subconscious/unconscious, which triggered experimentation in children's art and automatic drawings.

One of the most exciting moments for modern art movement in India is the December 1922 exhibition in Calcutta. With the help of Tagore, an International art exhibition was organized where the works of some of the very important Bauhaus artists like Paul Klee, Kandinsky, Johannes Itten and others was put on display. It must have been an overwhelming experience for the Indian artists to get to see the original works of western modern art. However, this event added more to the rising crisis between the disconcerting dichotomy between global and the local. On the one hand the rising national resistance movement was gearing up and on the other hand Indian art was getting more ambitious in realizing global modernism. These seemingly conflicting aspirations, the global modernity and national identity, remained the most inevitable preoccupation of the twentieth century Indian art.

The individualistic stance attributed to Rabindranath Tagore and Amrita Sher-Gil was further discovered in the primitivism of Jamini Roy (1887-1972). Roy's development came a long way to find a distinctively individual aesthetic. He had to brush shoulders with various styles ranging from academic naturalism, Impressionism, and Chinese wash painting until he rescued himself from the enchanting of European idioms of art and found his *raison d'être* in the Bengali folk painters. Taking a break from the mainstream influences Roy absorbed and imbibed the unique characteristics of Kalighat painting. The astonishing simplicity and deftness of Roy's work was initially motivated by the art of Kalighat in its result of the special handling of the pictorial form, the sense of volume evoked by the use of shade and light or the skillful linear treatment of form. Later out of his *swadeshi* impulse he

abandoned foreign art materials, like oil painting, and turned to indigenous earth colors and organic pigments. And due to the rising anxiety and the ambition to identify with the national/modern he renounced Kalighat painting for being liberal, urban and colonial and turned to village scroll painting instead. His long journey of art with consistent discontent is suggestive of the modernist aspirations for individuality and distinctiveness. It shows that his interest in folk art had a bigger reason and deeper implications than merely stylistic. As Sanjoy Mallik writes about Roy's position in relation to his efforts to work in the manner of craft guild of folk artists and yet reflect his work is quite distant.

Although his [Jamini Roy's] pictorial style does remind us of the folk conventions, his urban self proclaimed itself over and above it, in the way in which he remodeled and restructured his sources. The vivacity of his references often turned into disciplined and highly refined schema that stands at a remote extreme from its source. (Sinha 2003, 81-82)

1940s is marked with the significant upsurge in the radical experimentation in Indian modern art. With the exemplary and extraordinary individualism of Sher-Gil, Rabindranath and Jamini Roy as progenitors, Indian modernism geared up in full swing to move along the global forces of art. The Calcutta Group was formed in 1943 in the midst of the catastrophic trauma of Famine and pestilence. The main members of the group were Prodosh Das Gupta, Gopal Ghosh, Nirodh Majumdar, Rathin Moitra, Prankrishna Pal, and Paritosh Sen. The Group's ideological stand emphasized an ambitious yearning to seek their formal and stylistic solutions in the western art. Instead of looking backwards for indigenous sources they sought inspiration from European artists like Van Gogh, Matisse, Picasso, Braque and Brancusi. The Group's anthropocentric stand abandoned the old gods and goddesses of epic classical literature and replaced it with the 'supreme man' as the protagonist of their aesthetic expression.

As for as the Calcutta Group's general approach towards the west is concerned, they were not unlike other Indian modernists for aiming at a modern aesthetic, but their art could not negotiate beyond formal and stylistic concerns. Nirodh Majumdar was the first artist to receive a scholarship by the French government to visit Paris in 1946 and Paritosh Sen is the only Indian artist to have met Picasso. (Pande) 1940s/50s is also significant for locating the earliest events of modern art activities in Kashmir. Such was the influence of these Groups that even a place like Kashmir, so remotely far from the Indian metropolis, its force could be felt, which inspired local artists to join the movement. The possible justification for their claim lies in the very ideology of the 'progressives, for their uninhibited advocacy of European examples of modern art 'an opening up to a heritage unrestricted by national/geographic limits.' (Mallik 2003, 83)

However, it was in the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group that the forces of 40s found its most articulate expression. The Group emerged in the form of a most dynamic artistic force launching a resistance and break from the neo-romantic rural position of the Bengal School and the anaesthetic art taught at the colleges. By 1950s Bombay became the centre of Indian modern art engaging enlightened critics and ambitious patrons. F.N. Souza (1924-2002), the most articulate and the founder member of the group was accompanied by M.F. Husain, S.H. Raza, K.H. Ara, S.K. Bakre, and H.A. Gade. Their rigorous determination to realize the kind of art that was 'entirely Indian but also modern' was backed by the association of the radical novelist Mulk Raj Anand, the influential Chemould Gallery owner Kekoo Gandhi; the three refugees from the Nazi: the Expressionist painter Walter Langhammer, who joined as art director to *Times of India* in 1938, became their mentor; Emmanuel Schlesinger, who set up a pharmaceutical concern in Bombay, became their main collector; and Rudy von Leyden, who joined *Times of India* as

art critic.” (Mitter 2001, 206) As is the fate of any such collective art movement, the group did not sustain for a long time. The most of ambitious leading artists left for Europe to confront and engage with the groundbreaking innovations happening in the mainstream western modernism. Souza left for London and Raza to Paris, however, Husain stayed back. Souza as notoriously called the ‘angry young man of Indian art’ demonstrated a true nonconformist by debunking his Catholic upbringing to shock the complacency of the clergy, the rich, and the powerful. (Dalmia and Hashmie 2007, 105) His cynic and gnawing temperament injected some kind of wild anarchism in his rugged use of paint and brutal gesture of lines. Souza shares with Picasso the ruthlessness and intimidating robustness, which was as much a matter of fascination as it was a shock to the artists and art connoisseurs. By his deft method of handling pigments, Souza’s ability lies in his dauntless ability to transform his compulsive erotic-religious feelings in the convulsive discipline of expressionist language, which earned him an international acclaim by 1950s. (Tuli 1997, 204) S. H. Raza’s initial interest in expressionist landscapes evolved into a geometric abstraction which eventually culminated into the target-like metaphorical icon of Bindu - (the dot or the epicenter). Unlike Souza, Raza was not really interested in the human figure. Even his landscapes and cityscapes retain a cold distance from the identifiable representation of a figure, rather his art showed more tendencies towards abstraction. By 1970s in France, Raza’s struggle to reconcile the eastern mind with the western dialect brought him close to the esoteric philosophy and abstract symbols of the Neo-Tantric tradition. Raza imbibed European grammar of formalism and sought to express the spiritual-mystic dimensions of Hindu philosophy.

M. F. Husain the most popular modern artist of India has constantly been the subject and the center of media attention incomparable to any other living artist of India. His charismatic and multidimensional personality brought him a

long standing fame, which however, is supplemented with the bites of controversy in the recent years. Husain was not privileged enough like his contemporaries to think of settling abroad. His story has quite a romantic tinge: Born to a poor family and starting off by painting Bollywood hoardings for living and eventually attaining the position of an undisputed leader in modern Indian art. His phenomenal body of work and tireless experimentation has kept him significantly alive in the minds of critics, connoisseurs, patrons and art lovers. Engaging with as diverse resources as the flamboyance of Basholi, spontaneity and lyricism of Islamic calligraphy, the naivety and innocence of folk art, pop images of Bollywood, and classical Indian sculpture – bridging the gulf between rural and urban, popular and elite, east and west. (Tuli 1997, 206) His incommensurable output and the range of concerns have left the art scholars bedazzled, as Alkazi would confirm: ‘They have barely been able to categorize one phase of his when he has stormed his way into another.’ Husain’s position as a national/modern is far more articulate than most of the other artists aspiring the same. As Chaitanya Sambrani writes:

Working within the agenda for the development of a secular, socialist, non-aligned economy, Husain emerges as the major allegorist for the nation with his ceaseless endeavor to give plastic expression to the entire gamut of co-existing myths, faiths, conflicts and personae that make up a vision of the nation. His *Zameen* (1955)...the 14-foot-long canvas teems with images culled as though from a primeval memory of the archetypal Indian village, presenting a panorama of persons, animals, objects and activities that stand in as metonyms of national essence. (Sambrani 2003, 106-107)

The similar impulses of 40s/50s are seen in the Delhi Silpi Chakra. The artists associated were B. C. Sanyal, Kanwal Krishna, Dhanraj Bhagat, K. S. Kulkarni, D. N. Mago and others. The group came into existence after the catastrophic Partition where many artists who migrated from Pakistan

chose to form an art circle in Delhi where they could exchange ideas and express their experiences with the new reality. Apart from the concerns of colossal human tragedy of the Partition they too addressed the then contemporary issues of Indian modern art. Their main distinctiveness lied in incorporating the skill of handicraft traditions of Lahore. At that moment Delhi was far behind for providing some infrastructure for the promotion of art. This brings the eventful alliance between Silpi Chakra and Dhoomimal, India's first private art gallery, which has earned a great reputation for promoting some of the very important modern artist of India during their earliest struggle. It is the legacy of Silpi Chakra that today Delhi claims to be one of the most important centers of contemporary Indian art. Artists like Satish Gujral, Ramkumar, K.G. Subramanyam, Bimal Dasgupta, Shanti Dave and Ambadas were beginners when under the patronage of Delhi Silpi Chakra they embarked on their respective journey of art. (Cf. Indian Contemporary Art)

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