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| **Cholamandal Artists’ Village** |
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| The Cholamandal Artists’ Village is the residential-cum-cultural centre situated in Injambakkam at Chennai, Tamilnadu, South India. Established by the artist K.C.S. Paniker [1911-1975] along with a group of his fellow artists in April 1966, it resides on 8.4 acres of land. The main aim in establishing this centre was to offer artists the opportunity of practice professionally after graduation. This major concern led Paniker to think about establishing studio facilities or a commune where artists would have workspace and opportunities for interaction and creative experimentation, while simultaneously generating a parallel income by creating artistic crafts that would be sold through the Artists Handicrafts Association, which he founded in 1963. Among the first group of artists who moved into the village in May 1966 were K. Jayapal Panniker, V. Viswanathan, K.R. Harie, K.M. Adimoolam, C. Dakshinamoorthy, K. Ramanujam A.C. Mamman. They lived and worked in trying and hazardous conditions. Others who settled there later included S.G. Vasudev, Paramasivam, P.S. Nandhan, K.V. Haridasan, and C. Douglas. Cholamandal also saw two women artists purchasing land with an avowed idea of marking their presence within a male dominant community. They were Anila Jacob and Arnawaz Driver. Today a museum has been established on the site, named after its founder. The K.C.S. Paniker Museum of Madras Movement contains many works of those seminal artists who contributed to the Madras Art Movement. Commercial galleries, Indigo and Labernum, offer space for exhibitions. |
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It was founded with the aim of providing studio space for young graduating artists to practice the profession of painting and other related arts. Paniker bought 8.4 acres of land through the sale of crafts objects created by the students and faculty of the Government College of Arts and Crafts. These objects were sold through various government agencies such as the Handicrafts Board, the State Art Emporium and the Victoria Technical Institute, with the latter also processing their foreign orders.  The period of the early 1960s was a trying one for the Madras artists. Patronage was rare and artistic emphasis lay with performing arts, namely dance and music. Unlike Bombay and Delhi where the European war émigrés peddled the cause of modernism in local newspapers, in Madras, a conservative daily like ‘The Hindu’ could not offer meaningful support; ‘The Mail’ patronised the decorative crafts. Within such a milieu it was difficult for visual artists to survive on their artistic practice and supplementary income needed to be found. Many who graduated from the art institution were absorbed as art teachers into schools, became designers in the Weavers Service Centre, or finishing artists in commercial art establishments.  The land was allotted to forty-seven members. On the Corommondal coast, six miles south of Madras, Paniker’s brainchild, The Cholamandal Artist Village,came into existence. The name reinforced Paniker’s ideology of being Indian in spirit by a conscious link with past heritage and hence a continuity of tradition. The name Cholamandal provided connectivity to the historical dynasty of Cholas that ruled along the Eastern coast, as well as the artistic tradition of the Pallavas situated a few miles from the artists’ village at Mamallapuram.  With the birth of the concept of an artists’ village, Paniker opened opportunities for artists to continue with their creative projects. Els Van Der Pas, a Dutch curator who visited the village in 1989, observed: ‘In this village the artists were free and bound, timeless and traditional, individual and universal as intellectually and artistically they waged the struggle between the east and the west, Asian forms and European freedom in igniting the spark of modern and Indian in this fertile paradox called ‘Cholamandal artists’ village’.’  Fig: Cholamandal  The K.C.S Paniker Museum of the Madras Art Movement with open air sculpture under the banyan tree  Paniker the ideologue had manifested his vision and his students and colleagues provided support in his endeavours. S.G. Vasudev, a seminal artist of the Madras art Movement and the then Secretary of the Artists’ Handicrafts Association said, ‘Cholamandal is perhaps the first of its kind anywhere in the world, a vision of fulfillment, a place where the artists meet society as an integral part of it.’ He also forcefully reiterated that ‘there is no ideology or art style to which an artist must conform. The two basic freedoms so vital to an artist – freedom of expression and freedom from the shackles of earning a livelihood – are provided here. This left the artist free to create as he wished.’ In this respect Cholamandal became a unique symbol of cooperative enterprise and community, living and operating without government support.  The Artists’ village was not only the locus of painterly and sculptural creative activities, but also a place where the allied arts of dance, drama, theatre, music, poetry readings and active discussions on art were also vigorously practiced. The village served international visitors who came from different parts of the world and left behind a slice of their memorable sojourn: A Dutch artist built a potters’ wheel and a New Zealand artist thoughtfully put together a badly-needed kiln; American printmakers, especially Paul Lingren, introduced a range of new techniques and the West German Government, in an admirable display of community feeling, donated the cost of a two-apartment guesthouse to the village. The symbiosis occurred between a domestic and an international fraternity that soon brought Cholamandal Artists’ Village onto the international map. Acceptance and recognition came from diverse quarters when artists from the village were invited to participate in the Venice Biennale, the Paris Biennale, the Sao Paolo Biennale and the Commonwealth Art Festival in London. Cholamandal was a place instrumental in offering a creative alternative to many young talents that otherwise would have been lost in the banality of proletarian existence. Cholamandal Today Cholamandal has progressively marched with the times and has also developed into an important tourist site. It regularly organises exhibitions, publicising the artistic character of the village via books, websites, tourist brochures, calendars and postcards. Since tourism has come to shape the twentieth century, the village has changed from artists’ habitat and work centre to a tourist destination that combines art and commerce. The art shop provides sales of paintings, sculptures and crafts, particularly metal work, produced by the artists promoting a hybrid form of tourism popular with the educated middle classes.  Fig: Art shop  Art shop below the K.C.S. Paniker Museum  In February 2009, a Contemporary Cultural Centre comprising 10,000 sq. ft., including the K.C.S. Paniker Museum of Madras Movement, was built to to represent the artists of the Madras art Movement. Two commercial art galleries, Indigo and Labernum, were also inaugurated. The Village has taken on different hues and textures. As the first generation of artists tasted success and national fame, their children now follow in their footsteps. Their artistic practices reflect global trends and have moved beyond traditional inspiration into the Post Madras Art milieu. |
| Further reading:  (Bhagat)  (De)  (Josef)  (Suni) |