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| Modernism without an Avant Garde in India |
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| Any critical history of modern Indian Art must take into account the key difference between Indian and Euro American modernism: the distinct absence of an avant garde in Indian modernism. No Hegelian dialectics or Kantian autonomy impelled Indian modernism along the same historical lines plotted in Western art historiography, nor was there a distinct classical tradition to be disregarded and to start anew from.  India’s distinct origins of modernity stem from the fact that it was under colonial modernity that modernism first made its appearance in India. If the beginnings of modernism in India are traced to the late 19th century, Raja Ravi Varma can be considered as India’s first Salon artist, who acquired a mastery over the medium of oil painting and the genre of portraiture. Any neat dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonised becomes blurred when considering the close nexus between the two. It was the western orientalists and their investment in disciplines such as Indology, for instance, whose arduous discovery of the past fed the Indian nationalist imagination and its desire to return to the pre-colonial past. |
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It was the western orientalists and their investment in disciplines such as Indology, for instance, whose arduous discovery of the past fed the Indian nationalist imagination and its desire to return to the pre-colonial past.  This different starting has much to do with the fact that it was under colonial modernity that modernism makes its appearance. If we push the history of modernism in India to the late 19th century, Raja Ravi Varma was India’s first Salon artist who acquired a mastery over the medium of oil painting and the genre of portraiture. Any neat dichotomy between the coloniser and the colonised becomes blurred if we bear in mind the close nexus between the two. It was the western orientalists and their investment in disciplines such as Indology whose arduous discovery of the past fed the nationalist imagination and its desire to return to the pre-colonial past.  When considering *avant garde* not as an experimental form of art production, but instead as driven by ideological imperatives such as its rejection of bourgeois taste, morality, and institutions of art, *avant garde* becomes incongruous within the cultural terrain of India and its colonial modernity. *Avant garde* primarily gains its identity through an adversary, and the adversary in this context is ambivalent — the figure of the coloniser was both the purveyor of modernity and, from the nationalist perspective, a coercive force to be resisted. The coloniser as an intimate enemy added a paradox to the story of modern art in India. Yet, modernism even in India could not have come into being without an adversary and the desire to overthrow authority. The figure of the adversary would change over time from being the coloniser to a cultural insider whose authority had to be overthrown. On the eve of Independence, the target of the Progressive artists’ diatribe was the Bengal school and the allegedly effeminate and affected style of painting that it came to stand for. By this time, the first generation of Indian artists after Independence sought allegiance with European modernists and their rebellion was cast against the colonial art school that was now perceived as a bastion of old fashioned and reactionary art practice. Still, the Goan artist, F N Souza’s rejection of the J J College of Art in the early 1950s was too individualist for it to fall under the historical *avant garde* which, as Peter Burger defines it, has to be an institutional critique. Art institutions that came to be set up after Independence continued to have a tenuous presence in India when scientific and economic development of a nation received priority over art and culture. Even if the vision of a secular and modern India as imagined by India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru encompassed art and culture, and it was the state and its newly established art institutions that was enlisting the services of the artists to build a strong nation. In the sense in which the past was construed as a liberating or oppressive force and the role of institutions imagined as hindering or facilitating modernism, the trajectory that modern art took in post independence India was quite different from the one taken by the Euro American modernism.  In the colonial era, the figure of the adversary was recognisable despite the deep ambivalence associated with it; the very same figure of the colonizer who was at once the bearer of modernity but could also be cast as the source of repression, had a fundamental bearing on the way the past-present relationship came to be understood and also on the very nature of modernism that gets configured. When E B Havel took over as the Principal of the Government College of Art in Calcutta, his decision to replace the art collection that consisted primarily of Neoclassical European art by the Mughal and Pahari miniatures in 1904 met with resistance from some of the local students. Prior to 1947, it was easy to locate this adversary in the colonial regime and allied figures of authority and institutional sites.  The attainment of political sovereignty heralded a new way of imagining the present, free of colonial authority. But the loss of this adversarial figure of the coloniser also left a lacuna in the cultural imaginary only to be filled in by the emerging nation state. Promising art patronage, the benign national state took artists under its fold and assumed their allegiance to nation building. It was a period of intense institutionalisation of art that saw the making of the national museum in New Delhi and the gradual inception of the state Fine Arts institutions or the Lalit Kala Academies in Delhi and other states.  The first modern art group that forms during this period is known as the Bombay Progressives, who set a new agenda by forming an artist collective that comprised members from diverse social backgrounds. Perhaps herein lies the paradox of the internationalism of the Bombay Progressives that attended the coming into being of the Indian nation state. Far from the early nationalist flight into tradition or the past to forge a new modern language, the young Bombay artists wished to experience their contemporaneity in the city that was itself a strange amalgamation of rural and urban regions and peopled by diverse communities. As young artists from a young nation, they were filled with the desire to relocate themselves away from India and seek a studio in the western metropolis. Such a move was a sign of confidence of a young nation keen to take on the west as an equal under the sign of universalism. That Paris became the inevitable choice for relocation fell in line with the occidental orientations of the group - Paris was the universal haven not only for young modernists like F N Souza, Akbar Padamsee and S H Raza, from an emerging nation but also for fellow artists from other parts of the European and non European worlds.  New artist collectivities formed in the 1950s in Delhi and Calcutta amidst euphoria at the rebirth of India as an independent nation and the trauma of Partition. If Delhi witnessed the rise of the artists’ collective, the Silpi chakra with members from across the border aspiring to new beginnings, Calcutta was full of the energy of the Calcutta Group and Bombay grew to be a major art centre. Paris cast a spell over young artists from India who set up their studios in what was seen as the centre of the art world. If they attracted the attention of western art critics, as for example, when John Berger wrote a review of Souza’s Paris exhibition in 1955, it was taken by these artists as a sign of arrival, and they willfully ignored these critics’ ambivalence towards them and the western critics’ difficulty in relinquishing the category of ‘exotic’ artists. Rather than confronting the ‘coloured’ vision of the Western critics, which may have been construed as an adversial position, crucial for an *avant garde* resistance, it was seen more as an acknowledgement of their practice by those who were closest to the Western metropolitan centres of art.  The term *avant garde* came under scrutiny with the rise of postcolonial studies when the very politics of representation began to be problematised via the questions of class, race, gender and sexuality. |
| Further reading:  (Kapur)  (Kaviraj)  (Nandy)  (Panikkar, Parul and Achar)  (Gayatri) |