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| The Baroda Figurative-Narrative Movement |
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| The Baroda Figurative-Narrative Movement was a loosely organised but highly influential development in the Indian art of the early 1980s. The movement was against modernist abstraction in general, and its puritanism in particular. This novel enthusiasm for narration and figurative painting claimed no regional or ideological identity; the artists affiliated with it have been from many parts of India, with varying styles of painting. Nonetheless, the appellative ‘Baroda’ and the identification as a movement or school are quite common, because of the association with the Baroda art world, whose nucleus was the Fine Arts Faculty of the M. S. University in Baroda, Gujarat. The inaugural event of the movement is considered to be the renowned Place for People exhibition (1981). The participants were Jogen Chowdhury (1939--), Bhupen Khakhar (1934-2003), Nalini Malani (1946--), Sudhir Patwardhan (1949--), Gulammohammed Sheikh (1937--), and Vivan Sundaram (1943--). The manifesto-like essay for the exhibition catalogue was written by the art historian Geeta Kapur (1943--). The movement was a highly successful venture whose most important and immediate result in an increasingly liberalising India was the creation of a visible art market. This success depended on many factors, among them the complementarity of the movement with the general ‘return of painting’ in the international art scene of the 1980s; the ‘figurative’ and ‘narrative’ turn in British painting; and, last but not least, the artists’ institutional alliance with the Royal College of Art and the British art world. |
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Instead, in Kapur’s writings, as well as many others produced by the proponents of the movement, the concepts ‘figurative’ and ‘narrative’ enjoyed separate but synergetic functions — the former to brand the new artists against the abstractionists and the latter, vaguely, to name the linguistic outcome of their aesthetic.  Whereas the term ‘figurative’ was already established in Indian art as an oppositional category against ‘abstract’ by the end of 1960s, the term ‘narrative’ was, according to Sheikh, first introduced by the British artist Timothy Hyman, who served as a Visiting Professor in Baroda between 1980 and 1982. In 1979, Hyman curated a travelling exhibition, Narrative Painting: Figurative Art of Two Generations, in Britain, to which he invited Bhupen Khahar as an honorary member, along with a group of British artists including R. B. Kitaj, Peter de Francia (both from the Royal College of Art, and the mentors of Sundaram and Kapur respectively) and Howard Hodgkin (who was, despite being an abstract painter, a close associate of the artists of Place for People — as Sundaram’s painting *People Come and Go,* displayed in the exhibition,suggests.)  Whereas the enthusiasm for figurative painting in early 1980s British art was received critically by leftist circles, the Indian figurative-narrative movement of the same period maintained a somewhat leftist, if not exactly Marxist, identity with less controversy, at least until the intervention of the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association. Part of the reason for this reason lies in the successful launching of the *Journal of Arts and Ideas* in 1982 (it ran until 1999), a leftist trimonthly, with Kapur, Sundaram, and Patwardhan as the founding members in its editorial board. The first edition of the journal carried not only an extensive review of Place for People by Ajay Sinha, but also an art-historical justification for figurative-narrative art by Kapur. Moreover, though Kapur’s catalogue essay for Place for People was devoid of any ideological partisanship other than a strong defence of figurative art, her ‘Realism and Modernism’ essay was originally a paper presented at a 1979 seminar on ‘Marxism and Aesthetics’ organised by the Kasauli Art Centre (founded by Sundaram) with the collaboration of the Indian leftist journal *Social Scientist*. Kapur’s theorisation of ‘figurative-narrative’ as a synonym for realism in art, with extensive references to the recently released English translation of the famous Realism/Modernism debate of western Marxism, placed the new aesthetic in a discourse diametrically opposite to Hyman’s subjectivism. Thus, drawing from Frederic Jameson’s afterword to the debate, Kapur argued that ‘the dialectical thrust of realism/modernism seems to point towards a figural art that is narrative and objective’. Kapur’s example of such a Realist aesthetic was the recent art of R. B. Kitaj, in which ‘ordinary people’ were portrayed in ‘the way they expose the viewer to other’s pain, to his own bad conscience, to a shared neurosis’. Kitaj himself was, as Kapur notes, an admirer of Walter Benjamin as well as literary realists like Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.  However, it is important to note that the movement did not have a coherent ideology or outlook other than a liberal-pluralist one. As Sundaram put it later, ‘because [Place for People] was not organised as a movement to support a manifesto, each of us have retracted a little bit into our own personal preoccupation and let the work follow a logic of its own.’ Only a survey of the sociocultural context of the time can tell us how the movement could be, despite its short lifespan and lack of any explicit ideology, an important event in Indian art history. Context The historical necessity to respond to the overarching institutional crisis of modernism in India was a motivating force behind the rediscovery of realism in the aesthetic of the figurative-narrative movement. Unlike in the advanced capitalist countries such as Britain, where the return of painting and disavowal of avant-gardist strategies were received as conservative trends, an anti-institutional or avant-gardist intervention in art was generally discouraged even in the leftist pockets of the Indian art world. The decline of India’s state modernisation project and the rise of religious forces in the early 1970s; the declaration of Emergency in 1975 and the years following it; and the chaos in national politics were paralleled in the Indian art world by similar instances of breakdown. Abstraction in art reached an esoteric and occult status in the so-called ‘Neo-Tantric’ movement in the early 1970s. The Emergency was publicly supported by the most celebrated artist of Indian modernism, M. F. Husain, through a series of paintings. State institutions of art such as the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Lalit Kala Academy faced much criticism for their controversial aesthetic preferences as well as nepotistic policies. In this context of what can be identified as a decline of modernism, the search for an alternative arrived at the idea of the ‘figurative-narrative.’  Not accidentally, this new interest in realism coincided with the rise of a new Indian middle class. Barring the works of Patwardhan (for its working-class realist content), most of the paintings exhibited in Place for People can be clearly seen as autobiographical narratives of the middle-class artist. Thus, Sheikh’s *Revolving Routes* (1981) shows a self-portrait of the artist at centre, indulging in personal reveries spanning from childhood to present life with friends and colleagues of the Baroda art world, including Kapur, Sundaram, Khakhar and Hyman. Sundaram exhibited *Portrait of his Father* (1980)(K. V. K Sundaram, a powerful bureaucrat and Padma Vibhushan holder), and *People Come and Go,* a representation of Khakhar’s private studio and his friends, including Hodgkin. Malani’s *Concerning a Friend* (1981) depicts a close conversation between the artist and Geeta Kapur, located in Kapur’s fashionable apartment. Khakhar’s *You Can’t Please All* (1981), a complex painting prefiguring his later declaration of gay identity, sarcastically narrates the futility of public life and the lure of private pleasures. Criticism The crux of criticism against the movement lies in the question of how to deal with the crisis of the 1970s and the concurrent decline of modernism. Was avant-gardism or realism the effective antidote to such a degenerated modernism? In fact, many avant-gardist or surrealist strategies (fragmentation through allegory, multiple perspectives) can be found in the figurative-narrative language, though it is strikingly missing the avant-garde’s critique of the institution of art. Thus, Kapur’s later thesis that ‘we had a modernism without avant-garde’ only describes the reformist nature of Indian modernism, of which the figurative-narrative movement had very much been a part.  File: Baroda1.jpg  1. 'People Come and Go' (1981) Vivan Sundaram, Oil on Canvas, 152.4cm x 123.2cm, Courtsey-Asia Art Archive (http://www.aaa.org.hk/Collection/CollectionOnline/SpecialCollectionItem/3456)  File: Baroda2.jpg  2. 'City for Sale' (1981-4) Gulammohammed Sheikh, Oil on Canvas, Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Image Courtsey-www.theotherspaces.com (http://www.theotherspaces.com/Gulam-Sheikh/1445/gallery.aspx)  It is a point of debate whether the aesthetic of the figurative-narrative artists was realist as Kapur had envisaged or postmodernist, as it was later severely criticised in the quasi-avant-gardist manifesto of the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association, written by Anita Dube in 1987. For Dube, ‘The Narrative movement, in India, […] taking character, from the British example and continuing a tradition of colonial patronage and approval; [was] the Indian version of an archaeology of historicism emerging from the post-modern’. Whereas Dube and her colleagues were right in pointing out the role of the British art world in the success of the figurative-narrative movement, their branding of the new aesthetic as ‘postmodern’ following Frederic Jameson’s essay, ‘Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism’ (1984), could not go further due to their inability to locate the crux of the existing historical problematic. This latter point is clearer in the following remark made by Dube: ‘With the use of multiple references […], pseudo historical content, […] narration, [and] a rhetorical tone, a myth is created [in the figurative-narrative paintings] which says that, that which is being portrayed is reality and the “historical”’. Yet Dube and her colleagues failed to notice that the figurative-narrative artists’ use of multiple references, fictive and actual, under the claim of being historical was intended to oppose the similar efforts made by the proto-fascist forces of the time to synthesis the cultural multiplicity of the nation into a repressive homogeneity. At the same time, critics were quite right in locating a certain ‘logic of multinational capitalism’ in the movement’s institutional success, if not straightforwardly in its aesthetic. The exhibition ‘Timeless Art’ in 1988, which was solely dedicated to the new figurative art and included all six painters of ‘Place for People’ along with several upcoming artists of the Baroda artworld, caused controversy through Sotheby’s auctioning of the exhibits (the first time for Indian art) and the protest against the sale by the Indian Radical Painters and Sculptors Association. Whereas the protest was the last collective action of the Association outside Kerala (the native place of its members except Dube), the success of the exhibition and auction consolidated the presence of the personalities associated with the figurative-narrative movement for the coming decades of Indian art. |
| Further reading:  (Dube)  (Gopinath and Fibicher)  (Hyman)  (Kapur, Realism and Modernism: A Polemic for Present-Day Art)  (Kapur, Partisan Views about the Human Figure)  (Rajadhyaksha)  (Sinha, Place for People-New Images)  (Sinha, Envisioning the Seventies and the Eighties)  (Sundaram, Language, Narrative and the Viewer: A Personal Reading of the Contemporary Indian Narrative Art)  (Sundaram, A Tradition of the Modern) |