THE MODERNIST WORLD

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

VISUAL ARTS IN SOUTH ASIA

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BEGINNINGS: COLONIAL MODERNISM

Early modernist painting in India emerged around the first decade of the twentieth century, with the first Indian art movement beginning in Calcutta, the capital of the colonial regime. The stage was set between the academic realism that prevailed in the colonial art schools set up in Calcutta, Lahore, and Madras, and the nationalist style that grew out of the cultural syncretism of different Asian cultures. Bengal took a lead role in cultural nationalism and promoting an indigenous (Swadeshi) ideology

Figure 15.1 Installation by Atul Dodiya entitled 'Between the Spider and the Lamp'.

of art, derived from a modern interpretation of Buddhist and Hindu aesthetics. Despite the Pan-Asian impetus underlying the appropriation of 'the style and conventions of Mughal miniatures and the Japanese wash technique by artists such as Abanindranath Tagore, the overall thrust of Swadeshi visual aesthetics possessed a sectarian character' (Dadi 2010: 57). While the rise of national and cultural self-definition brought with it a rejection of British academic oil painting, it at the same time fostered religious identity, which was to later fragment the subcontinent into Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan.

1947: PARTITION AND THE RISE OF THE NATIONAL MODERN

India's independence from British colonialism in 1947 led to a bloody aftermath resulting in the partitioning of the country into two independent nation states: India and Pakistan. In 1971 another partition created Bangladesh out of former East Pakistan. Today, when we look back at these tortuous moments, seldom do we find a direct reference to the trauma of partition in the art works. Perhaps, cultural amnesia of partition marked the entry of South Asian artists into the post-colonial era. In India, what was evident was the euphoria of internationalism when many artists such as F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, and Akbar Padamsee headed westwards, particularly to Paris, perceived as the epicentre of modernism.

While post-colonial India witnessed the rise of new art institutions – such as Lalit Kala Akademi, the National Gallery of Modern Art, and a major artists' collective, the Shilpi Chakra in Delhi – Pakistan lacked an institutional background. The only two institutions that emerged were the Department of Fine Arts at Punjab University and the Mayo School of Art. The latter was founded in the late nineteenth century by colonial authorities and became the National College of Art (NCA) in 1958. The situation in East Pakistan was also not too conducive, with no history of an art school. The main art institution in Dhaka was the Government Institute of Arts established in 1949 by Zainul Abedin. The aim of all these post-colonial art institutions was to offer a platform for artists to address the binary of tradition and modernity and render art meaningful in the progress of the nation.

How the concept of nation was conceived in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka was quite varied, with different valence attached to democracy and secularism. What marked Indian modernism as different from that of its neighbours across the 1950s to 1970s was its ideology of modernity as envisaged by post-colonial India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, which subsumed the religious identity of its citizen artists under an overarching category of the nation.

On the other hand, Pakistan emerged as an Islamic nation-state, which directly affected the way the artists saw their identity. Comparison between the careers of Abdur Rahman Chughtai and M.F. Hussain may be demonstrative of the ideological divide between a modern Muslim and a modern Indian artist. Despite his contact with Calcutta and the Bengal School, Chughtai emphasized his connection to Lahore and the 'Punjab School', which consisted of Muslim artists and thus stood in counterpoint to the Bengal School with its predominance of Hindu artists (Dadi 2010: 61; see also Nesom 1984). Chughtai's early works were based on Hindu mythology, but soon shifted to incorporate Islamic and Mughal aesthetics.[1]

Conversely, Hussain was the most representative artist of the Indian style of modernism. He freely interpreted Hindu epics and mythology and fashioned a modernist semi-figurative and semi-abstract idiom. Until the end of the 1980s, he enjoyed a reputation as 'the Picasso of India', but later, as Hindu fundamentalism overtook national politics, he became increasingly embroiled in controversies and legal wrangles that starkly 'exposed' his Muslim identity and forced him to lead the life of an exile.

In a sense, colonial modernity prevailed in the post-colonial subcontinent through its legacy of art institutions. Moreover, countries enlisted their artists to function as nation-builders. This may be seen as one of the factors for the different trajectory that modernism took in the subcontinent: a modernism without an avant-garde.

EXODUS TO THE WEST: COSMOPOLITAN MODERNISM

In India, independence from Britain in 1947 coincided with the formation of the Progressive Artists Group in Bombay by F.N. Souza, K.H. Ara, H. Raza, H.A. Gade, M.F. Hussain, and S.K. Bakre. They marked India's arrival as a nation among nations and exuded a new confidence in aligning themselves with international modernism on their own terms. Rudy van Leyden and Walter Langhammer played a crucial role in creating a public for their art and broadening their horizons, through their newspaper writings. In line with such cosmopolitanism was the art scene in Pakistan. From the mid 1950s to mid 1960s – also the time of General Mohammed Ayub Khan's military regime (1958–69) – Lahore's art circle opened to modernism. In Sri Lanka, the 1950s marked a rejection of the internationalism that had prevailed from the 1930s with the formation of the 43 Group under Lionel Wendt. In 1956, the state made Sinhala the only official language of Sri Lanka, lighting the fuse of ethnic tensions among minority groups. This situation was aggravated in 1978 when Buddhism was declared the official state religion of Sri Lanka. The subsequent rise of sub-nationalisms and eventually full civil war between the state and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil (LTTE) reflected the intensity of identity politics, which was to preoccupy generations of artists across the subcontinent.

INTERNATIONALISM VERSUS INDIGENISM, 1960s TO 1970s

If the 1950s marked a turn to internationalism in most of South Asia, it also prepared the ground for its dialectical, Indigenous Other, to gather momentum. Reliance on Euro-American abstract modernism was condemned as capitulating to Western hegemony and the past was searched for pre-modern models. K.C.S. Panikkar in South India and J. Swaminathan in North India were important champions of a non-derivative modernism. They found alternative artistic practices in traditional decorative arts, ancient Tamil and Sanskrit scripts, and tribal art. The Bharat Bhavan, a cultural institution and museum in Bhopal, resulted from Swaminathan's wish to create a dialogue between the modernists and traditional artists, and to arrive at an Indigenous modernism independent of Euro-American influence.

In 1981, around the time of the Festivals of India that carried Indian art and culture to the West, a major exhibition was conceived. Entitled *Place for People* by

Geeta Kapur, it featured Vivan Sundaram, Gulam Sheikh, Jogen Chodhury, Nalini Malani, and Bhupen Khakhar. It aimed to move debates about art beyond the binary of tradition versus modernity and abstract versus figurative art. It inaugurated a major trend of narrative painting. With its headquarters in the Baroda art school, it valorized the cosmopolitan as well as the local, finding as much affinity with Ron Kitaj's paintings as with medieval Siennese frescoes. The word 'people' in the title of the show was intended as a political category in response to the 1977 Emergency under Indira Gandhi, when democracy was suspended in the alleged interest of a greater public good. What was first imagined as a political gesture was soon institutionalized, and the Baroda Narrative School faced a serious criticism in 1987 from the Kerala radical group, including Anita Dube, Krishna Kumar, Alex Mathew, Rimzon, Prabhakaran, Jyothi Basu, among others. Largely embracing an expressionist–figurative style, they sought an alternative space for their practice, away from the commercial gallery system.

Indigenous expression took another form in Pakistan with the rise of calligraphic modernism. By the late 1950s and well into the 1970s, 'calligraphic modernism formed an increasingly influential modality in Pakistani art' (Dadi 2010: 134). This was not a unique development, as artists from North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia partook in a movement that transformed Arabic calligraphy into modern art.[2] In Pakistan, Hanif Ramay, Iqal Geoffrey, and Anwar Jalal Shemza contributed important calligraphic modernist works. Yet the country's celebrated artist, Sadequain, most effectively developed the language of calligraphic modernism during a time of increasing Islamicization in the 1970s and 1980s. His many public works, commissions, and murals helped open up art to a wider public and are credited with 'contribut[ing] to the development of translocal modernist Muslim aesthetics during the era of nationalism' (Dadi 2009: 48).

The political upsurge that led to the war between East and West Pakistan and resulted in an independent Bangladesh was not only a military action; educational institutions participated in it, too. The students and teachers of the Art Institute in Dhaka weaponized their art. For instance, Quamrul's poster *Annihilate These Demons* portrays General Yahia Khan as a demon. Art was seen as significant by the nascent state in contrast to the conservative attitude of the earlier regime, and new horizons opened up for younger artists. Under state patronage, public art projects in the form of large paintings and sculptures beautifying government buildings gathered impetus and the themes remained predictably nationalistic.

One of the most important steps forward was the establishment of a National Academy for Fine Arts, Shilpakala Academy, in 1974. Apart from sponsoring and conserving artworks in Bangladesh, the Academy initiated the Asian Art Biennale in 1981, which has now become one of the most celebrated art exhibitions in Asia. New art education centres were set up in Chittagong, Rajshahi, and Khulna. Taking the opportunities to interact with the wider world of art, they brought a much-needed diversity of practice to end the monotony of the previous decade. Abstraction remained the major style, but at the same time the strong sense of patriotism brought back the folk traditions and realism. Monirul Islam and Shahabuddin are among the most celebrated artists of the decade. Both of them are educated and based abroad; Monirul was trained in the University of Madrid and Shahabuddin in Paris. Monirul's *Time & Tide* (etching and aquatint, 1984) and Shahabuddin's *Freedom Fighter*

(2000) best demonstrate the trends of the decade, although they were done a little later. In *Freedom Fighter*, Shahabuddin demonstrates the pride and strength of the victory in the war for liberation through a dynamism of the human body. Shahid Kabir, Mansurul Karim, Mahmudul Huq, Kalidas Karmokar, and Farida Zaman were among a host of new generation artists who started their career in this decade, while the old masters including Zainul himself were also active.

1990s: THE GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY

If the 1980s witnessed the beginning of doubt around the modern nation across South Asia, the 1990s dealt a stronger blow to cultural nationalism, its ethos of secularism, and state art institutions. With the opening up of the Indian economy to the forces of global capitalism and the uncertainty that attended it, anxiety permeated the middle class. This anxiety crystallized in fears of invasion by foreign cultural influences and paved the way for an upsurge in religious fundamentalism supported by right-wing political parties. A major disjunction with the past occurred with the rise of economic liberalization and identity politics. Together they exposed the myths of modernity as articulated by Mahatma Gandhi, the fragility of secularism, and the exclusion of caste from cultural practices.

Major shifts in the social landscape of the country that witnessed the rise of communal politics followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992, and the advent of information technology impinged upon the political consciousness of the artists at a deep level. For them, the traditional genres and media of painting and sculpture could no longer adequately represent contemporary reality. What was really desired was an art form that would turn on different aesthetics and that implicated artists within the realm of representation. Installation art fulfilled this cultural need with its aesthetics of immersion that allowed a multi-sensorial engagement and a hybrid interplay between texts and images. This art form also opened the space of conceptual art to South Asian artists. In Delhi and Mumbai, Vivan Sundaram and Nalini Malani emerged as pioneers of installation art around the themes of trauma of the Hindu Muslim riots.

After the Mandal Commission report that was to radically change the electoral democracy and public institutions in India, caste, which was a repressed category under Nehruvian modernity, entered the public sphere and shook the foundations of political sovereignty premised upon secularism. When artists like Savi Savarkar brought identity politics within his practice of figurative painting, he politicized figuration.

From the 1990s in Sri Lanka, social status and geographic location no longer held sway in the way the male-dominated and Colombo-centric elite of the previous decades had. Instead, a more pluralistic and critically engaged practice emerged in response to the militarization of the country and its consumerist culture. Art works were characterized by their critiques of the State, the machinery of war, and the emotional torment of the individual living within a divided society. Autobiographical approaches linked to experiences of torture, alienation, and displacement appeared alongside direct responses to the war. Born out of a conflict-ridden society, these themes gave rise to explorations of identity based on gender, sexuality, caste, and ethnicity. Artists also used ideas related to archiving and ethnography to reflect on

the politics of memory. Pop images from the growing urban environment also impacted art practices both visually and conceptually. The period represents an attempt by artists to rework modernism, either intuitively or cerebrally, using formalist experiments and socialist critique. The art scene, while assimilating and responding to these changes, was also exposed to global art trends, especially through the strengthening of regional ties and affinities. Locally, Colombo-based organizations like the German Cultural Institute, Alliance Francaise, British Council, and George Keyt Foundation were the major supporters of contemporary art in the 1990s. Art networks established through international exhibitions held at Fukuoka Asian Art Gallery (Japan) and the Queensland Gallery (Australia), as well as artists' residencies and workshops organized through South Asian networks such as Khoj (India), Vasal (Pakistan), Brito Art Trust (Bangladesh), and Sutra (Nepal), along with the groundbreaking Colombo/Jaffna Anum Puram exhibition held at Jaffna Public Library in 2004 all helped to introduce criticality, new platforms, and modes of operation, along with questions about the role of art, and hence the artist, within society. Put more explicitly, they marked an attempt by artists to remake/unmake the idea of the nation (see Qadri 2009).

In 1992, Jagath Weerasinghe held a solo exhibition of paintings titled 'Anxiety' that focused for the first time on the plight of the individual within a divided, war-ridden society. In 1994 Sharmini Pereira, an independent curator, curated New Approaches in Contemporary Sri Lankan Art. This path-breaking exhibition recalled the group shows of the 43 Group but differed from them, in that it marked out new lines of affiliation between an entirely new grouping of artists, such as Jagath Weerasinghe, Chandraguptha Thenuwara, Tissa de Alwis, Kingsley Gunatilike, Tilak Samarawickrema, Laki Senanayake, and Druvinka Madevela, many of whom had not been seen before. It also introduced the role of a curator and the presentation of an art exhibition as a non-commercial event. In a similar spirit of provocation, the end of the decade saw the formation of a new artists' collective, the No Order Group in 1999. This collective of radical voices included Weerasinghe and Chandraguptha Thenuwara among its members, as well as key artists such as Anoli Perera, Kingsley Gunatileka, Muhanned Cader, and G.R. Constantine. The aim of the group was to question the category of fine art and introduce modes of art making that were concept-based.

Until the early 1990s, art in Pakistan was primarily concerned with formalist and abstract issues in a late modernist sense. However, during the 1990s, the art scene experienced considerable change. While tradition, cultural encounters throughout history and modern Western confrontation have been greatly responsible for shaping Pakistan's art scene over the years, technological and media transformation is a new phenomenon that arose during the last decade of the twentieth century. The distribution of global TV material directly into people's homes and villages influenced ideas about the outside world as well as the local situation (Mirza 2010: 19). This engagement and investigation with popular urban and visual culture influenced a large number of artists, resulting in the production of influential bodies of work. Huma Mulji (born 1970) and Naiza Khan's (born 1968) addressed the many conflicting urban changes.

Until the 1990s, the NCA was Pakistan's foremost art institution, but another notable art school, the Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture (IVSAA), came

up in Karachi. These two institutions were influential in shaping a new generation of artists that questioned established canons and began to develop new strategies that would either be concerned with an ongoing interrogation of tradition or with the visuality of the everyday.

The careers of the third generation of artists from Pakistan began during a time of deep transformation – a change that appeared on the political level and was reflected in society. After the gloomy years of Zia ul Haq's dictatorship, a decade of provisional democracy brought hope and opportunity (1988–99). Despite the short-lived hope for a time of stability (the country's political system proved unstable and the spread of the Taliban caused yet another threat), the 1990s opened up new possibilities for artists thanks to a wider public recognition of art within Pakistan.

In this context, the divide between India and Pakistan became a renewed point of interest for a number of artists of mainly the younger generation on both sides of the border. Bani Abidi (born 1971), who divides her time between Pakistan, India, and Berlin, has engaged ironically with the problematic situation of India and Pakistan and the complexities of personal identities within South Asia. In a complex series of photo and video narratives surrounding the myth of the Arab general Mohammad Bin Qasim, who is said to have brought Islam to South Asia, Abidi interrogates the construction of nationalist myths through constructed histories that serve as a mode of official representation, thus reminding the viewer that any reconstruction and revival of the past is full of pitfalls.

Karachi's pop-art movement was not confined to Karachi, as it also reached Lahore. Rashid Rana (born 1968) took inspiration from advertisements and Punjabi cinema posters, and incorporated mass-produced products. Imran Qureshi (born 1972), Aisha Khalid (born 1972), Nusra Latif Qureshi (born 1973), and Muhamad Zeeshan (born 1980), to name a few, have achieved wide recognition.

Since the 1990s in Bangladesh, engagement with public space and local visual culture began to flourish. Ruhul Amin Kajol introduced street art using a large, public space and sharing the effort collectively with a group of young artists; Dhali Al-Mamoon came up with conceptual art in the 1980s, Saidul Haque Juise popularized the masks, Mahbubur Rahman and Ashok Karmokar experimented with installation art, and Shafiqul Kabir Chandan brought back Rashid Choudhury's memories with his tapestries in the 1990s. The emergence of a contingent of women artists is another important aspect of the period. Nazlee Laila Mansur, Dilara Begum Jolly, Rokeya Sultana, Niloofar Chaman, Atia Islam Anne, Taiyeba Begum Lipi, and Kanakchampa Chakma are among them. Among others, A.B. Alvi, Ranjit Das, Mohammad Younus, G.S. Kabir, Nisar Hossain, Abdus Shakur Shah, and Shishir Bhattacharjee dominated this era with a number of younger generation artists thriving in excellence. Although he is more famous for his witty cartoons, Shishir's series of paintings in mixed media, *Come and See the Game* (1996), demonstrates the latest trends of experimentation in medium, form, and execution that is going on in Bangladeshi art.

Today, artists in Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh practice in an increasingly globalizing world with more possibility of a trans-regional dialogue among them. The ease of travel, flow of capital, internet communication, and institutional collaborations – and now the burgeoning art fairs – allow for conversation among these sites of modernity not necessarily mediated by the West. Under these conditions, they evoke the past and different experiences generated by a shared

colonial history, and respond to challenges of the present that range from uneven modernization to ethnic violence and religious fundamentalism. Despite the many odds stacked against them – fragile democracy, ecological crisis, and fraught public sphere – artists continue to experiment and intervene within the larger space of the global contemporary and their more local art worlds.

NOTES

1. See also Kapur and Naqvi.
2. For a comparative study of calligraphic modernism, see Dadi (2009) 41–51. See also Wijdan, chapters 15 and 16.

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