

From One Crisis to the Next

The Fate of Political Art in India

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The 1990s will be remembered in India as the decade of liberalization, when Indian society and economy were opened to the world after fifty years of political non-alignment and economic protectionism. For Indian art, this was a period of self-criticism and reassessment, during which many artists, especially the younger and more globally aware among them, realized that their peculiar inheritance of nationalist sentiment and Modernist aspiration had limited their practice in fundamental ways. As images and information poured across the now-opened borders from the global metropolitan centres, the biennales and triennales and from other post-colonial societies, Indian artists, critics and curators began to subject their work to closer scrutiny in the light of these parallel histories and alternative lines of development.

At the same time, these artists had to deal with the threat of *Hindutva* – the militant Hindu-majoritarian movement – which had consolidated itself in reaction to the perceived cultural and political challenge of globalization, in parallel with its long-term aim of securing India as a Hindu nation rather than a multi-religious formation. The political upsurge of *Hindutva* manifested itself through demands for censorship, the violation of artistic freedom by right-wing activists, and a general claim by the Right to monopolistic privileges of articulation in the public sphere.

Indian artists gradually realized that the history of their practice had not prepared them to confront such provocations. The first generation of post-colonial Indian artists, active between the late 1940s and early 1990s, had espoused a Modernist aesthetic, and worked within a gallery system that they perceived as the space of recognition. Who could have guessed – in that first optimistic phase – that the gallery system, which liberated Indian artists from the constraints of individual patronage, would eventually compromise their freedom to interact with the wider public sphere? Especially in the last decade, as the demands of the political have become pressingly urgent, it has become clear that the artists of the white cube and the black box are inadequate to the task of formulating positions that engage the public sphere.

As such, quietism, rather than activism, has been the leitmotif of Indian art; and the activism that some artists in India have displayed relies on outmoded strategies of protest, weak in the face of the ideological and technological challenge of a Hindu Right that is at home in the world of global communication and urban warfare. The greatest challenge for

Indian artists today is to counter the Hindu Right's claim over the symbolic reality of India, a claim that runs counter to the Nehruvian national imaginary, which was based on secular and broadly progressive ideals. At the material level, the *Hindutva* mobilization is sustained through a pervasive network of grassroots political organizations, schools, and volunteer 'self-help' groups, as well as through the dissemination of pamphlets, broadsheets, television serials, cheap audio- and video-cassettes, and now, the internet – in the form of Hindu nationalist websites, chat groups, and mailing lists. As against this, activist-artists have neither inspirational symbols with which to engage the popular imagination, nor updated technology to vehiculate their secular ideas, nor indeed the organizational abilities to mobilize people into audiences and support bases.

Artists across disciplines – whether in painting, theatre, music or dance, and with different political backgrounds – have found themselves in an embattled situation where freedom of expression is threatened by censorship and violence. They have worked with one another, and in collaboration with activists and NGOs, to resist these repressive forces. For instance, SAHMAT (Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust), an organization of artists, activists and intellectuals that was formed after the murder of the Communist theatre activist Safdar Hashmi in 1989, has emerged as a significant voice against *Hindutva* communalism. It has set up encounters with different kinds of publics by holding outdoor exhibitions, poetry readings, seminars, dance and music programmes, etc. Unfortunately, their programme has tended to be event-based; it has also constantly been phrased in the form of reaction to right-wing outrages, which limits its usefulness as it does not conduce to long-term dialogue, mass outreach and an autonomously evolving project of defining a secular imaginary. SAHMAT has attempted to grapple with several problems: it tries to sensitize artists to political reality and political activists to art; and also to sensitize artists, activists and the general public to the misuse of the sacred by politicized religion. But in its desire to achieve a tactical solidarity (which is a laudable aim), it opts for a reductionist approach, glossing over problems of interpretation and translation between the sacred and the secular.

More recently the artists' initiative, Open Circle (founded in 2000), has replicated the tried-and-tested strategies of confrontation and resistance employed by Left, environmentalist and feminist groups. While Open Circle has served as a forum for the enthusiasm of young artists, adding its energy to the cause of ecological refugees among others, this group of artists must realize that new situations demand new strategies; and that its methods must politicize the aesthetic and aestheticize the political in the same act of transformation. One without the other would be a vain gesture.

Indian artists seem to have reduced their imaginative ability to deal with political situations to a simple reactive attitude, critical but devoid of affirmative content. This is, moreover, a cellular imagination confined to individuals and small groups who are not able to make effective interventions in larger public life. A pertinent question arises: Are artists engaged in showing fashionable solidarity with politically correct causes, or are they seeking genuine ways of connecting with the larger public?

What explains this disjunction between the aesthetic and the political? Why has the pursuit for an artistic style led to a muted response to their ambient life-world on the part of many Indian artists?

The first generation of post-colonial Indian artists – including major figures like F N Souza, M F Husain and S H Raza – showed no interest in the temporary but provocative, perishable but site-and-audience specific, mutable but memorable artwork that was process-oriented rather than market-terminated. These artists also suffered from the romantic legacy of the artist-as-genius: in the early post-independence period, they embraced this self-image because they urgently needed to abdicate the social roles of the artist as portraitist, society painter or national mouthpiece. Most importantly, these Indian Modernists wished to escape the lingering image of the artist as folk artisan. They asserted their autonomy by aspiring to a universal internationalist style (which was not, in fact, internationalist, but West-centric).

In hindsight, we realize that certain key themes and impulses of Indian culture were not expressible in the languages of Modernism that became available to Indian artists from the Western metropolitan centres during this period. The logic of these Modernisms – whether that of the School of Paris, Abstract Expressionism or Soviet-period abstraction – was essentially transcendentalist and universalist. Having adopted Modernist conventions, Indian artists were not able to express aspects of their experiential reality and expressive culture, such as the figure set playfully between the icon and body, the performative and the decorative, the heightened body-consciousness experiences of time as duration and time as trance, and the sensorium of the everyday. Significantly, since the Modernist aesthetic privileged the individuality of the artistic self, it precluded the formation of communicative relationships between the studio artist and other cultural agents of the public sphere. Therefore (with the exception of the Santiniketan school, which evolved a local modernism precisely from such crossovers between classical and folk, metropolitan and tribal culture, in the 1920s and 1930s), synaesthetic and participatory experiences like the festival had no place in the aesthetic of Indian Modernism.

These exclusions were not redressed until the 1990s, not even by the post-modernist practitioners who emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s (see Ranjit Hoskote, “In the Public Eye”, *Art India*, Vol. 5, No. 4, 2000). The Indian post-modernists emphasised the form of the little narratives, as against the universal iconographies of Modernism, using personal and political realities as material, and engaging with elements of popular culture. Even though artists of this generation displayed close interaction with local subjects so that the content of painting became more dynamic, their artistic form still remained largely stagnant. With significant exceptions such as K G Subramanyan, they made little play with unusual materials and display methods outside gallery spaces.

To borrow a formulation of art historian Ranjit Hoskote, Indian artists in the 1960s and 1970s still produced ‘well-behaved’ artworks. Also, since they were fighting for a place in the gallery system, they could not rebel against the very art institutions that stifled creativity. It was only in the 1980s that the Radical Group, a set of painters and sculptors, brought sculpture down from the pedestal and began to explore the possibilities of environments and installations. This marks the beginning of the move, in contemporary Indian art, from the isolated individual self to the artistic self expressed through notions of community, sharing and collaboration.

Before I pass on, a clarification. In both of the broad generations of Indian artists that

I have discussed above, there were individuals who sought to negotiate between the aesthetic conception of an avant-garde and the political one (the fact that both phenomena are described as 'progressive' does not mean that they are identical). It was through practice that artists such as F N Souza, Ram Kumar, J Swaminathan and Navjot (among others) – all of whom were associated with Communist formations of various shades in different locales – realized that there was, in fact, an irreconcilable contradiction between the two.

The aesthetic avant-garde demands the individuated, isolated self, adversarial to society, that is committed to the autonomous logic of art practice. The political avant-garde in its Marxist nuance demands the opposite: a self that is socially engaged and instrumentally astute, directing people and resources tactically, making strategic dispositions across the terrain of the social. Obligated to choose, each of the above artists opted for the aesthetic avant-garde; in retrospect, this appears to have saved them from Communist dogma, and even empowered some of them to seek resolutions to the apparent contradiction between the aesthetic and the political in extremely productive explorations. I think particularly of Swaminathan's and Navjot's various intellectual and emotional investments in rural and tribal society and art-making.

Thinking further on these lines it may be noted that over-reliance on an orthodox Communist epistemology led even socially sensitive artists, during the 1960s and 70s, to ignore the urgent categories of gender, caste, ethnicity and sub-national identity: these were seen as dangers which could dilute the revolutionary agenda of urban proletarian solidarity, with class as its primary mode, and the objective, however dream-like, of seizing State power.

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During the 1990s, there developed a variety of forms of performance-based video art and video installations (Rummana Hussain, Sonia Khurana and Subodh Gupta); inter-media installations comprising web and painting interfaces; painting and video interfaces; and composites of text, video, photographs and sound pieces (Nalini Malani, Ranbir Kaleka, Baiju Parthan, Shilpa Gupta, Raqs Media Collective, among others). These forms retrieved many of those aspects of expressive and performative culture that had remained excluded from contemporary Indian art. These new genres allowed for a greater play of subjectivity: they generated an interplay between the illusionism of painting and the immediacy of performance; they problematized the iconic, set avatars and morphs in motion, and generally had the effect of politicizing the private and attempting to create solidarities and environments conducive to redefining the role of art in society.

Unfortunately, when conventionally trained fine artists experiment with new media, they carry their old attitudes with them and are not able to interface well with the new-media domain. These fine-arts-trained artists still tend to see the world as readymade subject matter. Committed to a strict avant-gardism, they would take on technology as a new mode of salvation/redemption from the two-dimensional frame, or other prior formal and institutional constraints. But the mere renewal of the artist's career does not automatically mean a situationally lively response: all it means is that you have a new dogma to play with, a new approaching boundary of exhausted novelty to fear.¹

Instead of expecting conventionally trained visual artists to reinvent themselves, we

need to extend the frame of art, and include in our critical purview new agents and new sites of art-making. We need to look at new media works in hybrid and inter-media art practices. Otherwise, as art critics, we would acquiesce in the self-serving career moves of conventional visual artists who take up new-media instruments to participate in the making of generic 'international' art. It helps that many of them have, also, belatedly discovered the political. (In this context, I have to say that few of the younger, conventionally trained Indian artists have undergone genuine politicization experiences, as through Left or anarchist affiliations, or involvement with street theatre or alternative pedagogy. For at least some younger artists, engagement with the political and collaboration with activists is more a strategy dictated by the expediencies of global art funding than the outcome of real conviction.)

I would like to add that those who are also belatedly discovering net art should remember that it will not automatically deliver a new democratic practice; long-etched differences at the level of caste, class, gender and ethnicities will not disappear with a click of the mouse. That is why it is crucial to generate new online and offline communities of users, viewers and players. Net art will find its artists and audiences not among the traditional community of academy-trained fine artists and art-gallery viewers, but among computer nerds, animators, architects, designers, cultural theorists and political activists.

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Already, in the manner in which the shift to new media practices is being valorized in India, we can see nascency turning into dogma: the new as something to be played with and feared, an engine of redemption, a promise of the charmed status of 'future art', an escape from the curse of being passé. As a remedy to this descent into dogma, we must acknowledge the very specific historical, artistic and technological locality in which new media art practices have been manifested in India during the last decade. Necessarily, I would argue, the history of new media art in any local context is dependent on the technological advances and the politics of communication as they prevail in that locale.²

This is why I choose to describe this phenomenon, in a situation such as the Indian, as that of new-context media. Let us recall that the new media began as tactical and situational practices. However, through the inevitable codification and institutionalization enacted by the global art world, these forms have now been subsumed within a certain predictability so that new media is seen as a universal tool kit. Indian experiments in this field need to be explained as local improvisations, not simply custom-made variants of the universal.

Viewing these practices under the rubric of new-context media alerts us to the weak moments when artists take up new media production for the sake of production. In such instances, technology becomes a mere vehiculation of the artist's intent rather than an articulation of its expressive potential. It runs the risk of becoming an art reduced to its medium and suspended in a vacuum (in a curious reworking of the Greenbergian obsession with opticality, the basic mediumistic possibility, the so-to-speak core competency of painting in the 'high modernist' period of the 1950s and 1960s).

Although the rhetoric is one of moving away from the gallery-based commodity, the same gallery reflexes of the past tend to be reiterated. The emphasis on the latest tech-

niques can lead us away from art-making as a cultural act with political resonances. Artists often complain about a lack of infrastructure, but that is only a part of the problem; the real problem is that the old habits of privileging the production of an artwork, rather than making an audience, continue. In such a model, the artist-as-genius is more important than the phenomenon of art – with all its interactive, inter-textual and collegial dimensions – so the context gets killed even before it can be addressed. Our art world has a strong ‘insider syndrome’ – very quickly, because the institutional controls remain in the hands of the old establishment, it commodifies even alternative approaches to conventional art history, and domesticates them within entrenched patterns of organization, curatorship, exhibition and response.

And lastly, individual artists have tried to push the form, but there is no realization of a critical sociality of art. The question that is never asked is: what is the ontological status of this artwork? Who is it for, what is its immediate environment? What we require most urgently is a paradigm shift in our understanding of the sociology of the new-context media. Let us not remain asleep and awaken only when the next political crisis presents itself.

Some of these ideas were first presented in a paper, “Against the Languages of Withholding: *Ulat Bhasha* as the Art of the Future”, that I read at Documenta 11, Kassel, 2002.

NOTES

1. See Nancy Adajania, “Anchored Illusions, Floating Realities: Two Mediatic Claims to the Public Sphere”, lecture text (Neuer Berliner Kunstverein, September 2003, Berlin). Publication forthcoming.
2. New media practice in India does not have a local tradition going back to the early 1960s, as is the case with such art in the industrially developed nations – where, of course, advanced communications technologies were powered by the needs of the military, espionage and surveillance concerns of the Cold War military-industrial complex. In India, however, as is well known, there has been a consistent technological lag through the Cold War period: the belated arrival of advanced technologies ensured that video art in India was a phenomenon of the 1990s.

In the virtual reality context of the late 1990s, we witness a double-edged situation. Even as the technoscape was dominated by big information technology corporations, their monopoly was challenged by the new heroes of the info-tech world: hackers, copyright-defying pirates, exponents of data flows, the brains that have used such phenomena as Linux, Napster and so forth to advantage. The mercurial nature of the technoscape and its social matrix influenced artists who chose to work with new media to ideally replace the gallery object with the project and the market with the community. This marked a turn in contemporary Indian art, so far limited to the acceptable context of the gallery, with the formal artwork privileged as commodity.