



Essence of Maladies and Melodies of Society In Contemporary Indian Art

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In the literal sense of the word ‘the concept of society’ is a phenomenon which showcases our social beliefs, cultural and religious practices, myths and folklores, perceptions, philosophical manifestations, religious and cultural heritage, arts, music and literature carried on the wings of our conscious and subconscious sensibilities, behavioral norms, conceptual regulations, hopes, dreams and desires which have evolved through the centuries and stood testimony to our civilizational development. Even the early *homo sapiens* felt the urge to observe and record the elements found in their immediate surroundings and environments through their creative impulses and the works in the cave paintings present a luminous specimen to this fact.¹ As the family groups grew in numbers a need was felt to create certain rules and norms in order to channelize their lives. Thus the birth of society took place which further enhanced and nurtured the civilizational growth in a systematic and orderly manner. The factors which mirrored our social system and needs were felicitated through the development of language, music, dance, art, culture and religion shaping specific traditions, expressions, regulations and rewards in order to achieve the eternal bliss, peace, happiness and divine experience enriching and nurturing the significance of aesthetic awakening. One witnesses the entrance of social themes in the cave paintings of prehistoric period where the first art practitioners drew or painted fantastic pictures of animals, deities and hunting scenes which were prevalent in their surroundings.²

As the journey of civilization progressed through the tunnel of time, social concerns, desires and aspirations of mankind saw the behavioral and creative transformation wiz-a-wiz the priorities set in urban and global milieu. In the present context we have inherited a plethora of some real humanistic ideals which have awakened our innermost selves and triggered in us creative and literary impulses which have the imagination to co-relate to our collective consciousness. In the twentieth century we have witnessed a rare freshness of thought waves and ideas which directly or indirectly relate to the whole mankind. Thus a large amalgam of sensitive issues and concerns affecting our daily lives have found credence in our artistic agendas.³

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Contemporary works today have truthfully and faithfully developed a whole new vocabulary and symbolism in art impregnated by day-to-day social and political onslaught.

Themes and ideas based on isolation, mass-migration, urbanization, effects of globalization and exploitation are being attempted by a vast majority of artists so are the other themes such as feminism, political oppression, domestic violence, wars, fragmentation of society, environmental concerns, population explosion and gender bias which stare at the society. In the contemporary scenario a wonderful quote by John F. Kennedy, former president of America carries a lot of conviction when he says, "*If art is to nourish the roots of our culture, society must set the artist free to follow his vision wherever it takes him*". Though the artists during the last many decades enjoyed considerable freedom in pursuing creative journeys yet a disturbing trend is being witnessed in India where one observes rising intolerance and political confrontation which is putting obstacles for free thinkers engaged in literal and artistic fields. But a brave generation of artists who have deep conviction about their ideologies have continued to devise and develop their individualistic visual language. Society is of course the main subject in most of the artworks due to the very fact that our life is shaped by the society we live in and certainly the same is the case with contemporary art which is the mirror to the society and the trends and lifestyles followed by the citizens find voice in many vocal masterpieces. It is up to the artists to choose a muted or subtle trend to express a certain thought or to illustrate it with peppy and glamorous depiction. But by and large the glimpses of our contemporary traditions based on social, economic, political and religious interventions have found space on the contemporary canvas.⁴

An encouraging fact that has raised the national pride is the arrival of very dedicated women artists on the contemporary Indian art scene who are endowed with rare sensitivity and evolvment. Though many critics may call them feminist artists yet the wonderful work they are doing has been recognized all over the world and they deserved appreciation for portraying the concerns which are inflicting the society at large and women in particular. The seeds of this consciousness were sown by none other than the great women painter Amrita Shergil and today there is a whole new breed of bright painters, sculptors and photographers who have enriched the contemporary art scene in more than one ways. In her life, as in her work, Amrita Shergil attracted instant attention. From the moment she stepped into the crowded canvas of the Indian sub-continent in the early 1930s, she sparkled with all the exotic allure of her half Indian-half Hungarian parentage. In a society that was in the grip of the powerful currents of change, struggling to transform the old colonial-feudal order to meet the demands of the 20th century, Amrita leapt gracefully over the breach keeping intact her equilibrium. In her own

way using a devastating array of weapons- intelligence, wit, warmth, but most memorable of all the aura of beauty- she celebrated the arrival of the individual. She plunged into the Indian landscape drinking in the colours, with orgiastic glee. “*How can one feel the beauty of a form*” she asked, “*the intensity or the subtlety of colour, the quality of a line unless one is a sensualist of the eyes?*”⁵ Amongst the path-breaking masterpieces she created during her short life span is the silent and gloomy eyed group of rustic women immobile looking out on an empty future (Fig-1) and more such wonderful works painted in the shades of the dust and aromas of innocent Indian rural landscapes embedded with *Gurudwaras* and the priest (Fig-2). Contrary to these subtle and muted pictures she also created enigmatic and mesmerizing self-portraits (Fig-3), nudes and compositions studded with an aura of loneliness where the central figures are shown lost deep in thought and yearning for a breakthrough and an escape. These works sum up her yearning for salvation. After this period the focus shifted to accent on the personal expressions and experiences where the artist yearned to have their voice heard. In the similar fashion, many women artists followed their minds and contributed their creative energies in barring their souls which they felt were ensnared by the constraints, conflicts, traditions, latent bonds and curves perpetuated by the centuries old male dominated society. In this direction the works of Gogi Saroj Pal, ArpanaCaur, Arpita Singh, Anjolie Ela Menon, Bharti Kher, RekhaRodwittya, Anju Dodiya, NavjotAltaf, AnupamSud, NaliniMalani, Vasundhara Tiwari, RiniDhumal, ShobhaBroota, Madhvi Parekh, Shukla Samant, Nilima Sheikh, Anita Dube, Shilpa Gupta, Jaya Ganguli, JayashreeChakravarty, Rummana Hussain, Mithu Sen, KanchanChander are a few names who inherited the torch and today contemporary Indian art has a great future due to the dedicated contribution of these women artists. They have laid threadbare the undercurrents and psychological intricacies of our society in their powerful and engaging works as they were capable of creating their own language and were bold enough to portray with sincerity what was on their minds.

The male counterparts and contemporary Indian artists who were equally talented and endowed with poetic stance captured the inner and outer aspects of society in their aesthetically rich paintings, sculptures, graphic prints and photographs. One comes across an omnipresent iota of activism, a sense of liberty, escapism and a yearning for change. Though a number of them followed a variety of traditional styles and idioms yet the breakthrough was achieved when they continued to possess an unwavering commitment and zeal to open the doors and windows so that the winds of change may drive away the stagnation and make way for global humanistic trends, philosophies, insights and visions. After a long stint of turmoils, tribulations, struggles and evolvment the contemporary art scene which was always wrapped in the multi-layers of societal inhibitions and paraphernalia saw a bright streak in the dark

skies mainly due to the path-breaking efforts of painters who were part of Bombay Progressive Artists Group. The oeuvre of their work pays tribute to their struggle for creative liberation and we see whiffs of fresh air in their mesmerizing works. They had the courage and commitment to usher in a new dawn which welcomed the presence of very contemporary mindset and aesthetic wisdom. In this crusade M.F. Husain, F.N. Souza and S.H. Raza were the leading lights. Souza's depiction of tortured martyrdom conjures up a '*vision of the son of God to the extent of identifying himself with him.*' He sees human beings in a perpetual state of conflicts and suffering. His figures and faces possess a sense of strangeness and an eerie life of their own, as in his '*Seated Roman*' and the hideous faces of the '*Six Gentlemen of our Time*' (Fig-4).⁶ Husain has transformed all aspects of society in a pragmatic way in his renowned series of works- '*Ramayana*' and '*Mahabharata*' (Fig-5) in which he used visual metaphors of violence, injustice and despair. His '*Horses*' carry a spirit of a protagonist who is engaged in war against the pressures of oppression, violence, exploitation, disparity and futile blockades. Though Husain's sensibilities are rooted deep in the soil of tradition yet the magic of his brush has transformed the age-old mystical beliefs and folklore into glorious viable and accepted contemporary norms.⁷ Raza right from his early childhood enjoy the sights and sounds of his small village neighborhood he was fascinated by the ritual incantation of *jaap* where the repetition of certain syllables leads to total concentration likewise, the resonance of a single visual form leads to ever richer dimensions. He discovered that '*Bindu*' symbolizes the seed bearing the potential of all life and also a visible form containing all the essential requirements of line, tone, colour, texture and space. '*Bindu series*' emerged out of the chaotic jumble of visuals manifested in conflicting theories and interpretations prevalent in society.⁸ (Fig-6)

A keen observer of society contemporary artist Jogen Choudhary captures wounded and tortured men and women with bleeding open wounds and scars in his emotionally charged drawings who is the master of capturing the mute emotions in powerfully entangled figures and lines in eye-catching compositions with a stress on textural richness. The paintings on India's partition done by Satish Gujral are dynamic, powerful and moving truly depicting the pangs of leaving their hearths and homes.⁹ The two moving paintings series which inspire a strange melancholy in one's mind are paintings done in impasto style by Krishan Khanna who seeks to capture the ordinary and the cliché daily life subjects and mundane happenings through the paintings titled '*The Black Truck series*' and '*The Bandwalas series*' (Fig-7). Tyeb Mehta with his magical brush has skillfully simplified the constant struggle of man and the beast- the good and the evil. A subject that for centuries had been dealt with by writers, playwrights and folklorists but the end result of this monumental work is a striking

contemporary composition done in flat colours and delicate lines. Through his bright and colourful paintings, ManjitBawa has sent the message of peaceful co-existence in the painting 'The Goat and the Tiger' in soft and tender exposition. Artist A. Ramachandran's series of paintings such as 'Indian Resurrection', 'Encounter', 'The Chase', 'Christian Themes', 'Machine', 'Kali Puja', 'Nuclear Raginis' (Fig-8) and 'The End of Yadavas', are a portrayal of the social ambience of the time, in highly grotesque images in apocalyptic visions.¹⁰ Yet another painter who has lucidly projected his social concerns through his magnificent paintings is Ghulam Sheikh. In his painting titled 'Meghdoot' the artist has captured the presence of deep dark clouds hovering over mountains bringing the much needed rain and calm to the red hot earth and there is a sense of joy and coziness in the homes where people are huddled together and witnessing this phenomena. Figures flying like angels give a sense of elation and joy and tiny houses are silently watching the clouds. (Fig-9)

Close on the heels the work of a very sensitive artist BhupenKhakhar has immortalized the maladies and melodies of our neighborhoods choosing cliché and mundane objects and subjects in well-executed compositions which offer a lyrical stance to the beholder due to the vividness of soft hues and tones. An image easily outlasts the object it represents. How the artist conceived the image is what baffles us. The curious mix that Sakti Burman has been able to achieve, of the cultural heritage of India and European Art in his long artistic career, is what sets him apart. A careful concoction of surreal atmosphere mixed with hints of social commentary disguised in invented pictorial metaphor became his forte all these years.¹¹ Lamenting the mindless urbanization suffocating the cities by creating urban jungles is a social concern for artist Sudhir Patwardhan which showcases the hustle-bustle and jumbled up structures where it is difficult to breathe yet the life goes on.¹²Paramjit Singh has painted the echoes of silence in his earlier 'Stone series' (Fig- 10) and is deeply fascinated by the presence of a pulsating life force in the common place strands of grass and silently meditating trees and shrubs underlining the essence of sublimity in latent forces. Three stalwart artists from Bengal- Ganesh Pyne, Paritosh Sen and Bikash Bhattacharya who had their hands on the pulse of a common man and felt the emotional vagaries, stresses and strains of society around them had been successful in restructuring warps and wefts of sentiments and emotions in their own inimitable styles lacing them with fair amounts of mythical mysticism and surrealism.

The most striking contemporary works of art in Indian art scene are charged with powerful social comment by artist Atul Dodiya who is fascinated by the simple things spread all around us in the streets and bazaars yet he seeks deeper meanings and projects the injustices and horrible inequalities. The 'Paintings on Shutters' is a fantastic example of his deep concern and a heart that bleeds for others (Fig-11). Poverty, perennial neglect, isolation,

exploitation, mass-migration, the biting social maladies of industrialisation and urbanization find place of priority in the engaging and thought-provoking works of Subodh Gupta and other young artists.

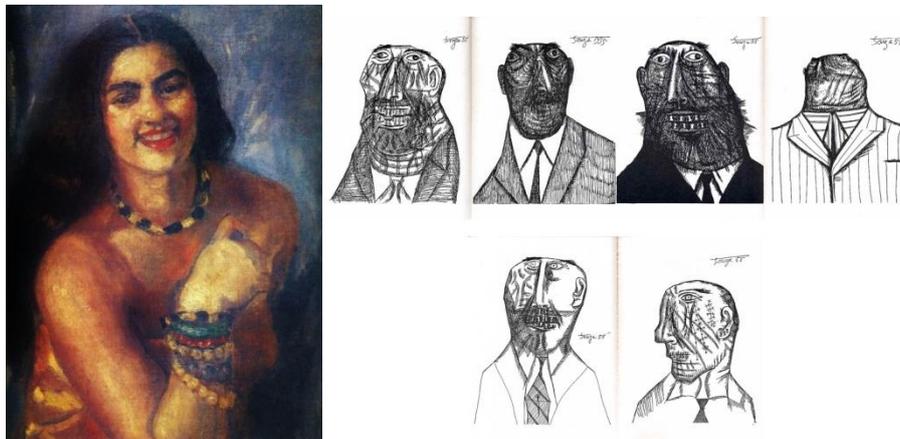
The study of these artists underlines the fact that Indian contemporary art has wholeheartedly tackled the prevailing emotional, psychological, socio-political and religious concerns and presented them in wonderfully evocative versions with both lyrical as well as sarcastical manner. The visual comments and essence of the social aspects is under their lens and their efforts to reach the core of the subjects makes them crusaders in their own right as they have successfully highlighted though in comical or lighter vein some serious agendas of the society.

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Three Girls by Amrita Shergil (Fig-1) Ancient Story Teller by Amrita Shergil (Fig-2)



Self-portrait by Amrita Shergil (Fig-3) Six Gentlemen of our Time by F.N. Souza (Fig-4)



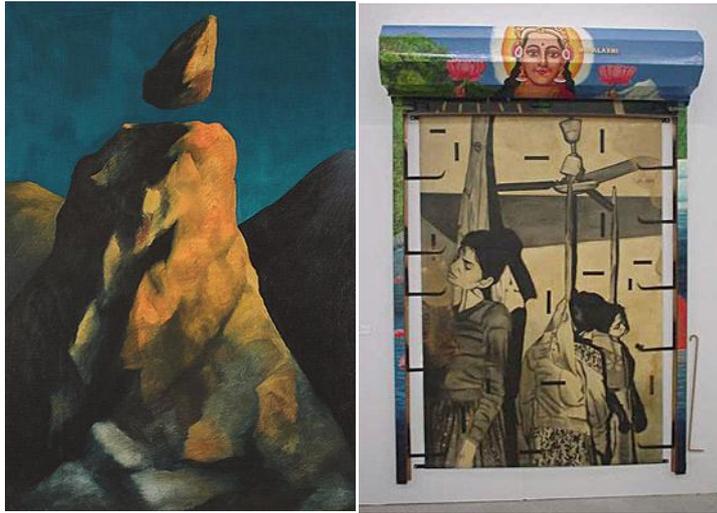
Mahabharata by M.F. Husain (Fig-5)



Bindu Series by S.H. Raza (Fig-6)TheBandwalas Series by Krishan Khanna (Fig-7)



Nuclear Raginis by A. Ramachandran (Fig-8)Meghdoot by Ghulam Sheikh (Fig-9)



Stone Series by Paramjit Singh (Fig-10) Paintings on Shutters by Atul Dodiya (Fig-11)