

ART AND THE ARTIST, REVIVAL OF INDIAN FOLK ART SPIRIT IN MODERN INDIAN ART

Sunil Dutt Gautam

Asstt.Prof., Jawahar Lal Nehru Govt. College, Fine Arts Shimla (H.P.)

Abstract:

In any culture, art function is to communicate its ethics, value, tradition and moral beliefs. Indian art was thus, born out of religious beliefs, myth, oral tradition and sacred scripture. For a very long span of time Indian artists were executing art that had reflection of its cultural spirit, art produced was under the consciousness of race. My paper opens with discussion, how alien nation called 'British empire' implanted its western thoughts, academic style of art on Indian art and artist as a part of civilizing process. Under these forceful circumstances, art of our nation was almost on the edge of decline. Indian artist was forced to work in a new idiom, which was not based on understanding, aimed at individual creativity, but completely on imitation. At this juncture the concern of our artist was to create an art that has character of Indianness, Indian elements. Thus, it became necessarily important for artists to recourse towards Indian heritage, its culture, its people and folk art communities, which reflect the true identity of our nation and set us apart from rest of nations. In history of Modern Indian art, first initiative to think deeply and revive Indian art is credited to Bengal School of artist that began under the guidance of Abanindranath Tagore.

Key Words : Indian Modernism, Folk Art Revival, Folk Spirit, Jamini Roy, Nandalal Bose, Meera Mukherjee

Reference to this paper should be made as follows:

Sunil Dutt Gautam,
“ART AND THE ARTIST,
REVIVAL OF INDIAN
FOLK ART SPIRIT IN
MODERN INDIAN ART”,
Artistic Narration 2017,
Vol. VIII, No.2, pp.19- 25
[http://anubooks.com/
?page_id=485](http://anubooks.com/?page_id=485)

Pran Nath Mago defining Modern in Art puts “The element of the modern is a character of consciousness. It is a particular state of tension or concentration which accompanies human will and effort when it grapples with the changed aspect of form, when it battles and strains to grasp the new. It is that which gives a passionate and vigorous direction to the human activity of a period. The operation of this character of consciousness is like the undying force of the universe itself which surged forth at every fresh creation of civilization. The course of its working has been well envisaged by the conception of Lila—the form that is eternally integrating and disintegrating. Tadve Buh Bhavan Pranojane Nadhyap Nibrattam (Its shape and character are determined by time and place. Modernism is thus a changed and more advanced phased of progress with new development in life and society. The precedence of ‘modern style’, especially in Indian art, entered with the establishment and rule of British Empire in India, who introduced Indian soil with their ‘western academic realistic style’ of art, as a part of civilizing process. Colonizers eye to modernize Indian art, by introducing ‘western style of art’ was a political agenda to hegemonize rural and urban Indian art societies, acculturate them to academic art style, which Britishers exalted for its ideal aesthetic taste, Value, realistic rendering of object guided by principles of geometry, scientific studies etc. To impart their knowledge Britishers introduced art schools, art exhibitions, the process of mechanical reproduction and other modern institutions in India which transformed artists status and outlook; as well as art patronage. Modernism in Indian art, commanded a new change in traditional Indian art and challenged artists to express a pictorial language completely established on strict style of ‘object and subject centered’, ‘anatomy study’, ‘experimentation with new method and material’. Their training sessions included emphasizing upon study of perspective, light and shade, Sfumato and Chiaroscuro technique of drawing. A changed world of art began to be known as ‘modern phase of Indian art’. Indian art from Pre- Independent era (1900-1947), Post Independent (1947-1985) and Contemporary Indian art(1985 to present) showed a diverse range of artistic response to reality. Artist belonging to these phases were responding to every challenge posed by the changing spirit of modernity. Artist assertion became, at different times, nationalist or modernist, socially responsive or intensely subjective, fiercely indigenize or defiantly international, or self consciously traditionalist or fashionably post- modernist. Modernism was a progressing movement, at each stage of its changing nature; artist was necessitating adopting his style from new changes. By 1920, during a further paradigm shift, modernism posed for Indian art a challenge to prove its competence with global art, to prove its aesthetic value and identity worldwide. At this juncture the Indian modernist artist such as Abanindranath Tagore, Sunayani Devi, Jamini Roy, Nandlal Bose, Benodbihari Mukhopadhyaya, and Ramkinkar Baij idolized folk art of rural India as ‘authentic’ voice of nation, true site of Indian art. A revivalist moment was started, by Bengal artist, which also

popularly came to be known as Bengal school of art. Among the early elite members of revivalist movement Nandlal Bose holds prime importance; he rejected everything that was western in style. Revivalist group was formed for the reason; Nandlal before coming to Shantiniketan, in 1905 joined the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta, at the time when Abanindranath Tagore was Vice – Principal of the College and E.B. Havell as Principal. During his teaching years in Calcutta, he witnessed a huge shift in Indian traditional art. The Government College of Art and Craft, was designed to instruct students in western art style. Nandlal puts “The object of the institution was to give the native youth of India an idea of men and thing in Europe both present and past, not that they might learn to produce feeble imitation of European art, but rather they might study European method of imitation and apply them to the representation of natural scenery, architecture monuments, ethical varieties, and national costumes, in their own country”. Artist like Nandlal realized the art of Indian will soon decline, its tradition and values. Nandlal was a man of creative personality, conscious of his plans, he knew Abanindranath Tagore was only person in the contemporary art arena who could inculcate a proper impetus into a young aspirants. Each passing day Nandlal saw his Guru corroborate a new language of art for which he imbibed a deep seriousness and sense of responsibility. Abanindranath never constrain him to learn or follow any particular technique. In respect of personal development of his student Abanindranath allowed absolute freedom. But through continuous analysis of the problem they confronted in modern changing spaces of urban community such as instability in life styles, cultures and art, infused in his students the awareness to generate a new creative initiative. They were aware modernism in India was not a result of natural growth, modernism in India was not a normal course of development in history of India. India has not generated any new social force, no technological revolution, in such conditions superior power domination was inevitable. Indian productive organizations of various crafts remained stagnant, societies of skilled traditional artisans, artist and craft men declined. The Colonial rulers introduced English education in India, art academies appealed to middle class section of urban population. The new administrative and commercial set – up opened up new segment and gave opportunity for making their fortune. This segment comprising both affluent and middle group income, the *bhadralok* class, tasted western culture forgetting traditional heritage. The conflict between traditional and western culture tormented the upper strata of our society. The consciousness of a changed Indian reality led to the quest for a self identity of nation. Nandlal was called to Shantiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore, to extend their art and identity concern with practical output. In Shantiniketan he taught his pupils same ideology as he has learned from his guru. A work of art is true when it reflects the style assimilated from its traditional heritage art. Artist rejected western styles because Indian art heritage already had diverse styles of patterns to choose from, freely rendered abstract and simplified

Sunil Dutt Gautam

forms from miniature painting, folk art of rural and tribal community as well classical style art excellently composed according to Indian text on painting and sculpture from Ajanta, Chola and Pallavas. With such diverse style present in Indian art, why should artist copy Western Abstract artist or copy Renaissance or Greek sculptures for Indian Subjects. The vital appearance of Indian sculptures and Painting are no less than Greek sculptures or Maillol figures, our figural art too had a curved and muscular build that one inhabits by rigorous Yoga practice. Nandlal or Jamini Roy never found anything new in modern art. Art and culture is growth, modernist were not making art for few years, but for hundreds of years. This is possible when art is made by combining essential character of its race that reflects folk consciousness of its culture, ideals of traditional past. Nandlal was against copying western style, in his class at Kala- Bhavana he denounced western techniques, and distortion never appealed him because he believed in idealization of human figure. He strictly followed and taught his students do and don'ts laid by Indian text for Fine arts. He firmly believed that modernity in essence does not mean to break away from tradition but to go deep and deep into the traditional values. The aim of our artists to develop their modern art composition based on themes, subject and styles taken from folk art or high art in Modern art phase to remind our young generation, about our traditional, ethical and religious spirit, an emotion of our folk communities which were losing its value, with the implantation of western culture in urban societies. The other aim of artist was to revive the art of tribal communities, folk and popular, who were abandoning their traditional art practices either to fulfill the demands of new art as was the case with Kalighata painters, who were losing their art originality while serving urban population in Calcutta city or due to lack of importance given to their art. The effect of such change soon began to be reflected through art, through visual emotional expression of their continent. At this point of time E.B. Havell, an ardent Indophile and Sister Nivedita devoted themselves in learning and propagating Heritage of Indian art. The art of our nation which was presented as inferior in subject and rendering, E.B.Havell says "Twenty four years ago I was sent to India to instruct Indians in art, and having instructed them as well myself, to the best of my abilities, I return amazed at the insularity of Anglo-Saxon mentality which has taken a century to discover that we have more to learn from India than India has to learn from Europe". These were some of the reasons that turned artist of modern contemporary phase towards village, to create new idiom of modern spirit permeated with folk art. A curious spectator when look at these work of art, engages his mind to know why the inspiration from folk art, what inspired artist at rural spaces, instead of inculcating new vision and trend in their art, why they were moving towards old. We all have to agree 'progression is a necessary choice to develop, but one should not forget the tradition which has given us our identity'. The meaning of folk art in contemporary art, can be well understood by understanding, the

context under which folk art originated. In simplified explanation, for modern artists these traditional societies were the centre of true spirit of Indian art. To express emotions by means of “art” and visual utterance of some kind is a most primitive trait of human being. The study of folk art and community making it, presents before us the truthful picture of the actual condition and development of tribal community. Folk art as visual utterance are therefore undoubtedly the pieces of human emotion, expressed by “group” or emotions shared by larger number of persons rather than the emotion expressed by single individual. The individual as creative artist has not yet arisen. Therefore, archeologist also considers folk art as first true art in effect, real folk art- art of the folk-and inasmuch as they arose among a particular tribe or race-group. Folk art if compared to high art, also express its intellectual development of particular group. Folk societies as a group of “genius intellectual” has developed and blossomed forth within the last two centuries, and when their art is used in contemporary context it is awaking of long traditional expression of our identity. Artist as highest incarnation of ‘genius’ among people is leader whose work bring light of humanity, if his works are to contain quality of greatness or enduring significance, he must not separate himself entirely from the people. The individual even tho’ he be a genius has his roots, both physical and spiritual, in the soil of the Folk. His work may be ever so individual, original and interesting, but unless it also has in it some of the spirit of the folk from which he himself came, it is insignificant and destined to a short and shadowy existence. No artist can attain to greatness who loses all connection with his people. It is the spirit of “people” that furnishes him with the very fundamental of his greatness. Artist, taking a particular character such as simplified line, dull or bright colour, outlining figure/object in thick black colour, artist as composer consider folk painting as a painting quintessence from which he ultimately develop a beautiful significant work. The well developed understanding in artist is not simply in imitating the folk style, but to complete the composition presented in an intensified, enlarged and extended manner the spirit of the original folk art. Using folk elements in modern art composition was not a method of copying a style, but we should excite our admiration, for how well the true spirit of folk art is revived, has been transmuted, with addition of its own rich individuality, into the domain of high art. In my opinion, art which is composed from folk inspiration has more value, more significance. Art of such kind does not lack character of community, tradition, value. Such art pieces have beauty of its nation, sincerity of expression and beauty. Modern art inspired by folk characteristics, when looked at fills ones sense with the very soul of humanity, with the spirit of folk community who has collected the spirit of their art since ages, their originality has retained their deep traditional character in changing urban context. what I argue after seeing a painting by Jamini Roy or Nandlal or sculpture by Meera Mukherjee that on our part it will

be a lack of understanding art work, if we criticize these artist simply for reworking on past style that is something not a naïve composition, or a good idea, or they were simply creating a more refined balanced arrangement or harmonization of already arranged picture as a sort of “makeshift” in art or artist lacking inventive ability. Art of contemporary artist like Nandlal is not exact imitation of folk style, to bring aesthetic character, he draw elements of vitality and strength from other sources. His art has echoes of different periods of Indian art. Abstraction and simplification borrowed from miniature art, elongated soft figures inspired by Pallavas, Cholas sculptural art.. We can safely put now, artist aim was not to produce an imitation of folk art, but by means of their knowledge, bring out the essentiality of race, and bond us near to roots of our spiritual folk communities. These were the reason our artist has delineated their works in huge range of themes ranging from religion belief, cults to folk life. In themes related to folk life one sees scene depicting social life and daily chore activities. For Nandlal, Jamini Roy, Ramkinkar Baij visionary and depiction of village mundane life scene became folk elements. For them these compositions were images of community that is untouched by mechanical age. Artist aim was to produce work of simplistic character that can be identified with his nation, give it a character of particular age, its traditions and value. Art should be understood in this highest sense of context and culture. The art represented, is style of its nation, it has combined in it, its ethical truth that makes it distinct to the art of other nations. Artist of modern era were not only restricted to stylistic depiction but their concern was more far stretched in creating Indian art Image through material culture of their nation also. Artist explored different tribal communities, their traditional histories of material, and changes in material or decline of particular material usage. According to Dorson, “Material culture responds to technique, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across the generations and subject to the same forces of conservation tradition and individual variation verbal act. Folk artist had always been true to nature, their art utilize material that has not been synthesized by artificial methods. Material culture history study enabled artists to enrich their composition in a material that has already acquired a noble place of antiquity, in high art of folk races. Jamini Roy, who hailed from Bankura district of West Bengal, was very much inspired by Bankura terracotta art tradition. His faithfulness towards his culture remained faithful in his works. In his most of the paintings he transformed the basic characteristics of brown colour terracotta clay with more permanent colour and dark black outline. Similarly other artist like Ramkinkar Baij was inspired by Santhal artists, living in village adjacent to Shantiniketan who used to apply rough texture of sand, straw and clay to decorate their hut outer walls. Ramkinkar converted their similar rough texture technique in concrete and cement. Meera Mukherjee was very much inspired by the Dokra metal casting technique. Artist employed traditional material to remind critics,

that India has abundant of rich and diverse material and method. Metal casting is not something that colonizer will teach us. Our culture since ages has been working in various materials known to western artists. Our nation metal casting technique can be different, using local method of doing mould and pouring metal to create image, but still it was practiced since ages by our folks. Adopting a particular material from folk art in executing modern art was artist's gesture of respect to show their harmonization with opposite culture. Artist through responding to different community art, material culture were teaching society to appreciating our cultural heritage. Jules Prown, an art historian at Yale University, wrote in 1982: "Objects made or modified by humans reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the belief of individual who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the belief of the larger society to which they belonged. Studying art through material culture of particular region tribal/village community on the other hand was providing us insight into the development of these societies in relation to urban spaces. Thus, the Folk art is it of Bengal to which Jamini Roy or Nandlal was looking for inspiration or be it of Bastar region tribe that inspired Meera Mukherjee, has already crossed the state of barbarism and is in conformity with its advancement. Modernist artist thus taking clues for their work from different community tribe also present before us comparative differences in character of these different ethnic groups. Art and culture are centric vision of society, they focus on traditional discipline. To depict traditional discipline was aim of the artist, subject of modernist and hence the reasons to turn towards Indian folk art villages as site of Indian multicultural society, aesthetic art ritual that defines and is identity to our nation's art.

References

- ¹ Pran Nath Mago, *the Contemporary or Modern in Art (2000)*, p-7
- ² Brown Jules: *Minds in matter; an introduction to material culture theory & method*, 1982.
- ³ R.M Dorson: *Introduction of folklore and folk life*, p-1

Further Reading

1. 100 years of Modern Indian Art, an Essay by L.P. Sihare.
2. Contemporary Art In India, A Perspective by Pran Nath Mago.
3. The Calcutta Group- Its Aims and Achievements, an essay by Pradosh Das Gupta, Lalit Kala Contemporary-31, Lalit Kala Akademi.
4. Meera Mukherjee; Metal craftsman of India, Anthropological Survey of India 1978.
5. Meera Mukherjee; Folk metal Craft of Eastern India, 1981.