

Sudhir Patwardhan: A Painter's X-Ray of Indian Society

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Abstract

In this research paper, a sincere effort has been made to demystify the undercurrents of the dark belly of our society, empathically painted by one of India's finest artist- 'Sudhir Patwardhan', who besides being a qualified 'Radiologist' had keen and analysing eye of a sincere artist, who laid threadbare the imbalances in our society using the theatre of common labourers and factory workers who day in and day out toil hard to sustain their miserable and pathetic lives. No other artist in the entire Contemporary Indian Art scene had dealt with such sensitivity the subject of exploitation, hunger, deprivation and pathos of these classes. He has truthfully diagnosed the ailments in our society and each work he painted speaks volume about his tender heart and soul as well as presents the glimpses of his aesthetic excellence and intricate craftsmanship.

Keywords: *Sudhir Patwardhan, Radiologist, Contemporary Indian Art, Figurative Painting, X-Ray, Bhupen Khakhar, Gieve Patel, Post-Colonial Indian Modernism.*

Introduction

We would all agree with the fact that doctors often peep into the microscopic organisms of our body- genes and cells, veins and nerves, muscles, tissues and skeletons with a trained eye and they possess an astonishing precision and skill to study, analyse and demystify a human physical malady. But there are very few doctors who are actually examining minutely the essence of human emotions, turbulences, apprehensions, aspirations and the subhuman conditions in which a large number of people live, facing perennial inhuman exploitation, poverty, scarcity and the chaos which surrounds their lives. A doctor we are referring to in this research paper is not only a trained ‘Radiologist’ who has the capacity to zero in a disease in an X-ray which is not visible to a common eye. He studies it and treats it with all possible medical technology, knowledge and expertise. One thing is sure that this artist certainly has a keen sense of observation. His eye is sharp and full of insight that is why we call artist Sudhir Patwardhan- ‘A Complicit Observer’. Besides being a doctor, he is an artist of no less merit. His journey to peep into the lives of people and decipher their emotions is uncanny and unparalleled. Sudhir Patwardhan (**Plate No.1**) is a saintly person who loves his domestic life and all his creative philosophy flows from the fountainhead of emotions and human sufferings, social and economic deprivation and the struggle in which they are involved in their day-to-day life. Infact human form is a very vocal and potent vehicle and a chariot of thoughts in the skilful hands of Patwardhan. Employing his creative sensibilities and impulses, he immerses himself into the innermost psyche of these working class masses. Figurative painting fascinates him alot and he writes: *“When I started on the road to becoming an artist, there was no doubt in my mind as to what Art was about. It was about people. This simple belief was strengthened by the unbroken tradition of figurative painting in Contemporary Indian Art. So the human figure has, inevitably been my subject from the very beginning.”* He further says, *“Throughout the fifty years or so of Contemporary Indian Painting, figuration has been a dominant mode and since the early 70s, a group of painters has given a new direction and impetus to this tradition. What is new in their work is the depiction of everyday environment in a matter-of-fact but quietly intense manner. When I first saw the work of these painters, especially of Bhupen Khakhar and Gieve Patel, I was immediately drawn to it and felt a close kinship with their aims.”* After seeing such wonderful works by the doyens of Contemporary Indian Art who practised figurative painting in their own inimitable styles his resolve was strengthened that he would never leave figurative painting which has the capacity to communicate with a large populace, be it connoisseurs of art or a common layman.

Sudhir Patwardhan secretly enjoyed the works of Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee and M.F. Husain¹ and initially he was in constant struggle within himself to adopt an

expressionist style of figurative painting or a realistic style but it was confirmed that he would not go outside figuration as painting of human figure is a commitment and a responsibility. This is the only way he thought, he would not be able to justify being a painter without being a painter of people. There was always a thought lurking in his subconscious mind that he has to do some constructive work which could change the life of poor and toiling classes. He found himself amidst these common people while often travelling on a train to reach his work place. He was employed as a 'Doctor' in the 'Radiology Department at Mahatma Gandhi Hospital and King Edward Memorial Hospital at Parel (Mumbai).² One can only understand the life of another person if his involvement is truthful and unshakable. He could have painted portraits or life size paintings of rich and famous people but his inner impulses compelled him to savour the figurative content of all forms of people around him, be they are ugly or otherwise. Peeling off the upper layers of their skin tones and tints he successfully brought out the humanistic kindness and glow of warmth in their hearts. He loved the unusual structural and anatomical forms of a variety of people who displayed a theatrical visual ambience by moving their short or long rugged limbs and muscles. Acceptance of other's anatomy is first part of understanding a person. One has to cross the boundaries of often defined Classical Beauty to enable one to interact and share the vision which other people may have about themselves. Winning their trust brings an artist one step closer to them. Once this is established there are no barriers in communication, as this artist cherished to paint the outer as well as inner essence of a person so that his artistic and creative accomplishment is justified. He observed them keenly, studied their skin tones and the mannerism in which their limbs moved and secretly enjoyed and relished their language accents and facial expressions which were many a times full of life, mirth and sometimes pensive and remorse.

Internationally renowned Art Critic Ranjit Hoskote writes, "*Sudhir Patwardhan leads what many would regard as an intriguing double life. The patients who come to his Thane Clinic for a radiology analysis know him principally as a doctor, tactful in his probing and sensitive to their fears. But to the viewers who stand before his canvases- as they are shown at Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai- he is a painter who takes an unsettling, clear eyed view of life, rejecting the placebo of false hope when he identifies suffering and endurance as the twin pivots of human experience. And yet, there is no real contradiction between the two roles. For Patwardhan the 'Painter' operates with the same X-Ray vision as does Patwardhan the 'Radiologist', divining the inner events of a human life from the physique that is presented before him. He has brought out X-Ray vision to bear on the alternatively baffling and enchanting realms of social relationships for thirty years. Having begun to paint while he was a*

student at the Armed Forces Medical College, Pune.”³ He further writes that “And for 30 years, it is the human figure as the vehicle and sight of those relationships which has fascinated Patwardhan especially- the proletarian figure which is stationed at the receiving end of societies most exploitative impulses. This fascination has never led him into the banalities of social realism. Instead, he has crafted a series of stylised portraits of labourers and heroic tableaux of common people in moments of crisis. Painting in which the ordinary and the miraculous fuse in unpredictable ways- a trucker might wear the face of an Ajanta monk, and a woman who has survived a flood may have stood at the base of a crucifixion once. Patwardhan did not simply reproduce the body from the life in these works, but subtly cast it as a machine for survival. For many years, I saw myself as a spokesman of the oppressed observes the artist. But gradually, I have been wandering whether I did not somehow appropriate their voice, turn them into pretexts for expression of my own anxieties and dilemmas.”⁴

In his earlier works, the compositions are cluttered and sometimes busting at the seams. He now has mellowed down and found his direction and has started eliminating the unessentials from the composition which inhabited many characters. He conceded to an art critic that he was engaged in absorbing too much from a particular scene and putting it together without giving thought to the dramatic presentation which can enhance the aesthetic value of a work by simply eliminating chaos. He started concentrating and emphasising on subjects with very few characters at play. This was essential to bring out the essence of an emotion by engaging very few figures instead of a large crowd. Infact these lonely and sombre characters portray the combined misery of a group. This has led him to explore the face, eyes, nose, lips, wrinkles, hands, knuckles and fingers in an emphatic way. He have also used their clothes, the colour and patterns of their fabrics as visual designs to enhance the overall expressive power of a composition.

Sudhir Patwardhan was born in Pune on 13th January, 1949. During the 60s when in teens he often found himself at loss to comprehend the prevailing situations in society and was disillusioned to see that there existed an insensitive, rotten and handicapped methodology to gauge the actual progress of a society. This was the time when many paradoxes gripped the atmosphere and people were waiting for a radiant optimism. “*After Nehru’s death in 1964 India made its transition into a period of crisis; by 1970, the postcolonial political life had revealed its continuities with the oppression and paranoia of the British colonial regime. Resistance to the state broke out in the Naxalite revolt of 1967 and the Sirikakulam peasant uprising of 1968-1969, which prefigured the widespread unrest amongst students, farmers and workers that would fuel the socialist leader- Jayaprakash Narayan’s call for ‘total revolution’ in the mid-70s.*

Young people of Patwardhan's generation confronted very different political and cultural reality. Patwardhan's generation of artists, writers, intellectuals and activists-who constituted independent India's first self-conscious and dissenting youth subculture- became seized by a sense of betrayal and a loss of idealism. Internationally, the decade was held in the parentheses of revolution; it began with the uprising in Algeria and ending in the killing fields of Vietnam; between these events were bracketed the Biafra conflict in Nigeria, the student uprisings in Paris, New York, Mexico City and Calcutta, and the assassination of Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Che Guevara.”⁵- writes Ranjit Hoskote- a renowned art critic.

Patwardhan observed that Indian artists of his generation were primarily drawing strength and vitality from the post-colonial Indian Modernism which was based on the Schools of Paris, London and New York styles and trends. Between these styles hanged yet another style of Indian art which was based on *Tantric* style geometrical forms which provided an authentic excuse for Indianness in style and mannerism. This was in reply to the prevalent abstractionist styles which were in vogue those days drawing their much needed oxygen and pretexts from European American painters. To make these works of art look indigenous some artists started exploring and infusing in them the age old Indian mysticism and the pearls of wisdom available in the ancient texts. In such a scenario, three main art groups emerged- 'Progressives Artists Group from Bombay (now Mumbai)', 'Delhi Silpi Chakra', and the 'Calcutta Group of Artists'. They infact showed a marked resolve and promise in their work to abandon the alien concepts and perceptions of European and western art which dwelled on abstraction, industrialisation as well as academic realism. One should not fail to mention a rare exception here as the great 'Amrita Sher-Gil' truly and faithfully evaluated the best of both the Western as well as Indian Schools and came out with a vibrant figurative modern style bathed in Indian colours, tints and hues and sensibilities. Those days the connoisseurs of art, patrons and cultural czars had no desire or intent to promote something unusual such as paintings of people in the streets, slums and ghettos. There was no place for such works in their galleries for the life in streets and figures of truckers, *teashopwalas*, construction workers, labourers or urchins, only the highly romanticised and idyllic works were in demand. The works based on the theme of folk art and village life were infact not much considered of aesthetic merit. But a small group of artists emerged from Baroda School who had connections in Bombay, Delhi and Santiniketan. These painters were broadly Post-Modernists in their aesthetic choices and radical in politics. Among them were- Gieve Patel, Nalini Malani, Bhupen Khakhar, Jyoti Bhatt, Vivan Sundram, Gulammohammed Sheikh, Nilima Sheikh and Jogen Chowdhury who based their art on particular subjects of their choice without catering to the universal appeal.

Eminent Author and Art Critic- 'Kamala Kapoor' based in United States of America avers about the essence of Sudhir Patwardhan's art and justifies his place in Indian Contemporary Art, "*In any discussion of Contemporary Indian Art the significant contribution of Sudhir Patwardhan is undeniable. He belongs to the openly eclectic generation of artists born in the 40s whose socio-political commitments seem to have been best realized in their work through figuration. Their eclecticism which includes Western influences as well as their own traditional ones springs from a particularly Indian mandate which has to be understood in its art historical contexts. Patwardhan uses his sources with deliberation, quoting when the need arises from Leger and Cezanne to the Jehangiri School of Moghul Miniatures. What emerges however is a highly personal style which has focussed in different ways over the years on the working classes; their predicament has impinged deeply on his work- the deepened spaces of construction sites, suburban trains, crowded tenements and cheap cafeterias have become Patwardhan's stage upon which his bit players with walk-on parts have stayed on to become heroes. Blown up to impact maximum tension, his sentient figures have shuttled between the expressionist idiom and the realistic. 'Close enough', in the artist's words 'to be sensually full bodied and disquieting, but distanced through the act of observation and depiction.' A bit of a tight-rope act in which he goes on to say "are compounded the pleasures and problems of both extremes."*"⁶

In one of Patwardhan's most engaging and intense work titled 'Pokharan' painted in 1991 (**Plate No.2**), the compositional aspect is quiet complex as one finds many landscapes juxtaposed against each other but blended in a sublime whole new landscape. On the left hand side of the composition, there is a clutter of shacks with tinned roofs haphazardly erected shining in a strange and haunting light. There are dark freshly laid metalled roads and the foliage is still carrying the dirt and the dust of construction work. The earth is baked in sunlight and dark structures are coming up on the paleish brown earth. One finds a deep and dark tunnel which is actually the mouth of a coal mine. On the right hand side, a mist appears and settles down on pure white dazzling houses. One finds an eerie air in the atmosphere and everything seems to stand still as this looks like an abandoned ghost town where barely three human figures are standing still with their shadows falling in different directions. Uphill one finds a lonely Auto and some trees which have been left out. An important aspect emerges in this painting, one finds on the left top side of the painting, there is an elaborate Tile work done with the precision of a masterly painter. This perhaps is presenting a glimmer of hope for the gloomy landscape. The other two prominent works which one would like to mention are firstly a vertical composition titled 'Fall' (1998) (**Plate No.3**) and other one is 'Sleep' (1998). In the first painting, we see an industrial town coming up at the base of a plateau near a lake and in the foreground a new house is being

constructed with bamboo scaffolds. In this touching painting, a dark and thin construction worker is shown falling from the scaffolds with his construction tool against a background with elegantly designed tiles fixed on the surface. The pathos come alive quietly and pierces one's spirit intensely. On the edge of a verandah, a starling bird is gazing silently. One finds excellence of execution and detailing of design elements in very clever and effective way.

In the painting titled 'Sleep' (**Plate No.4**), an old man is shown engaged in quilting a cotton mattress with elaborate stitches and in the dark background a human figure sleeps wrapped in a sheet of cloth intricately embroidered in artistic patterns. On left and right side of the painting, one finds painted crochet work margins so delicately and labouriously painted in white colour. This has amply highlighted the painting skills Patwardhan wielded, establishing him as a master of intricate design and realism. In his works related to the early period, he has painted amazing yet expressive paintings of labourers with strong hands and limbs, square chests and strong flat feet. These paintings amplify the daily struggle for survival aching out their arduous professions. Paintings drenched in the blood, sweat and tears of these gloomy construction or factory workers though done in simplistic style they are tall and monumental in aesthetic sense. (**Plate No.5**) In yet another gripping painting titled 'Irani Restaurant' (1977), a *Parsi* person is resting his left arm on a marble round table while sitting on a dark and heavily carved chair. In the background which is in the shadows, one finds a number of customers sitting and gossiping sipping their *Irani Chai*. The floor is covered with black and white tiles and the restaurant owner is vacantly looking into the space and resting for a while. (**Plate No.6**) Patwardhan has infused his works with deep sensibilities and captured the moments in astonishingly incredible way using all his crafts very sensibly and cleverly.

Summary

Sudhir Patwardhan- a quiet looking artist is in fact a very deep person who harbours in his mind and heart the emotional travails and dilemmas one associates with much exploited working classes. He can be called a 'God of Small Things'. He has dedicated his entire artistic career to highlight the stark realities of our society filled with little hope and large shadows of gloom and darkness.

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Plate No. 1



Plate No. 2



Plate No. 3

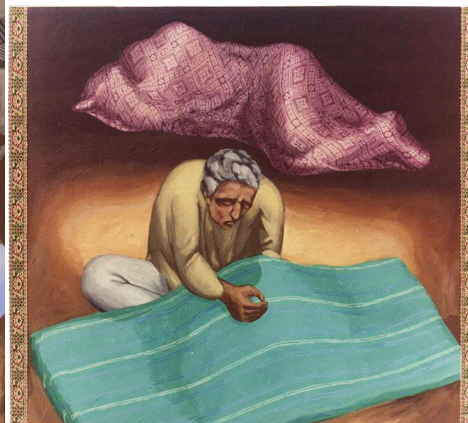


Plate No. 4

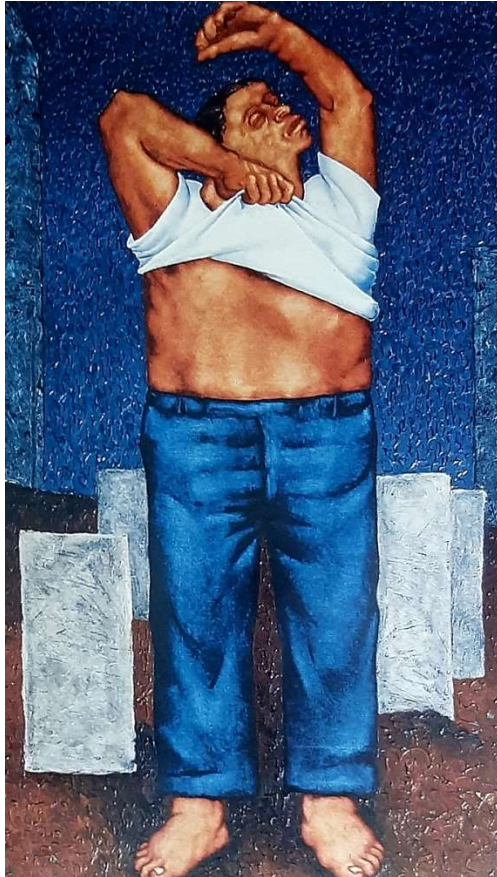


Plate No. 5



Plate No. 6