

Indian Contemporary Painting in the Changing Global Perspective: Defining a New Praxis

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Abstract

The paper intends to take an in depth overview of the impact of globalisation on Visual Arts in India, through an overlap of two entities. Firstly through an economic model: the changing infrastructure of the art market, and secondly, to inquire and analyse the concerns and issues of the globalised world. These concerns were outcrops of the transitions that had taken place at a socio-cultural level across the globe, and have been addressed by the artists, through their works. Therefore a detailed study and analysis of issues of the new globalised world and of the visual language formulated as a response to these which have become their tool of representation shall be dealt with.

Keywords: globalisation, Contemporary Indian Art, New Media, visual praxis.

Understanding Globalisation - Economic Phenomenon and "The World Citizen"

The economic policies of globalisation were formulated in the late 1980's and were implemented in the early 90's in India and the resultant effect was felt immediately. India then being a nascent economic market, with prospects of increasing industrial growth and immense brain/intellectual capital, proved to be a potential financial - emerging market. This led to the increase of foreign investments at a phenomenal rate in a small time span, nearly less than a decade. The opening of the economic scene was marked with new entrants both internationally and domestically. This exchange also led to a larger transference of the intellectual capital and also of the service sector. At a social level there was a drastic change: now (the rigid) locational-rootedness, which was earlier restricted to countries/ states/ regions/ cities/ sites, was slowly seeing dissolution. Dissolution - hinting that there was no longer a need for an individual to *belong to one place*, but formed multiple terrains of reference for her / him. Implying that individuals were not just working as migrants, relocating and settling, but as people having their presence in more than one country at a given time, shifting notions of identification and relation from a single nodal aspect to multiplicity of presence / existences. This created a scenario of what can be called as a close and first-hand experiential understanding of **internationalism** as opposed to a mere idea of internationalism, stuck in a conceptual realm. Further this large scale migration led to the creation of the *transnationals* - as *de-territorialised individuals*. Individuals who despite having a single national origin had their working presence in multiple countries simultaneously, creating *world citizens*. Citizens not in a conventional sense of a country or nation but that of the world, granting a strong sense of equality in status regardless of the

actual nation of birth, race, sex, etc. thereby defining an identity by stripping it off the standard norms, classifications and methods (Nelson 296-314). This can be called as an *identity-less identity*, evidently an extremely unrealistic and an unachievable goal. The term transnationals has often been used interchangeably with that of the *diaspora*; as individuals in a state of constant flux (Safran, Sahoo and Lal 1-5).

The term diaspora in earlier times was employed to describe the Jews living in exile from Palestine (Meyer). Then it suggested – a *forced* dislocation from a place of origin and relocation in a new setting. In the given globalised world that is increasingly interdependent and increasingly structured by international flows of capital, technology, information, media, transportation and most importantly with efficient and superior modes of communication – especially the advent of internet, the idea of global dispersion no longer seems to be a hurdle; therefore diaspora has taken on changes and increasingly complex significations. It has shifted from its original character of a forced exile – of historical uprooting, to that of a *voluntary migration*- for economic or political reasons; the idea that now prevails is that of a *choice* to live away from ones homeland.

Constant movement of individuals became possible as *globalisation had a primary intention of creating a single platform for individuals to participate (in any given field) without any discrimination*. But what has been observed over time, is that, in the very process of making an attempt to erase identities which could be considered as parameters for segregation, globalization led to the highlighting of the same. Therefore considering a dynamic state, globalisation at a point aims at dissolving identities and in the very process widens or creates fresh fissures. The act of homogenisation had a nearly reverse effect with that of creation and constant projection of identities with respect to territories, race, nationality, colour, etc. This has shattered the Utopian dream of a single, equal pedestal of globalisation (if ever dreamt by the First World Countries).

The failure of such a setup led to another, nearly accommodative thought of *multiculturalism*. This thought aimed not at creation or plateauing of identities but of giving due respect to individual identities. Since homogenisation meant a direct threat of imposition of a single identity, usually that of a dominant power. At the same time a more optimistic approach speaks of opening of various cultures; the term ‘multi’ creates a ground for an easy diffusion, creating a condition conducive for cultural, socio-political and intellectual ferment. The transgression of limiting factors of culture, of regional specification, of insular tendencies of restrictive holding, non-permissibility of newer participants and dispersion from the existing group, all shatter under the weight of an open space of exchange. Further this led to an increase in level of sensitisation - as now no culture would be an alien culture, any positive or negative happening in any culture has started finding respondents, beyond those purely belonging to a particular culture, but from all those who could relate to the same. Therefore multiculturalism accepts these differences as an ineffaceable construct, but moves beyond it with an assimilative tendency of accommodating differences, without

making an attempt to alter them but nearly preserve them. Evidently this has become a more sustaining and tolerant version provided by globalism.

Visual Arts: Defining a new Praxis

With the advent of globalism, drastic and continuous changes in the social scenario led / forced artists to be more reflexive. Either as participants of the global, multicultural or transnational culture or as mere observers, various artists made attempts to read and at times even provide a critique of the freshly-globalised world. Not taking a stance of an isolated entity but that of a responsive participant. These artists have addressed multiple issues, to name a few - of multiple identities, of disparities and invisible hierarchies, the segregation of the newly formed bipolar world: local versus the global, and further divisions of the local, humanitarian views of societies inflicted with terror, and also of technological progress. Evidently there seems to be no one particular facet of globalisation that has been dealt with by artists but an array of issues; these have been further interpreted and re-looked at by artists considering either an extremely personalised stand or a generalised humanitarian understanding of the same.

Moving ahead from the conceptual realm to that of the practice, one sees a quantum difference. Exhibiting outdoor in open-air galleries is no new thing but using specific spaces for specific works, making works with high level of temporality, providing a multi-sensorial experience, simulation of events or of a space, has become possible due to a creative osmosis of ideas and techniques. Drawing from the technologically superior west, various artists started employing not just practices related to visual arts but techniques related to hardcore scientific technology. This in a way has created a rift between the artists working in the traditional mediums and which are now wrongly labelled as *fossilised tools*.

There has been an inclusion of various mediums - computer programming, animation, internet interaction, films and videos, performances, just to name a few. Creating a strict differentiation between the new-media artists and the *others*; the new-media hinting at a very / most contemporary and progressive tendency and the others as the conventional / sedated / outdated. This view certainly seems flawed as much as the diametrically opposite - that of extreme disbelief and rejection of new media as a borrowed language, or a language aping the west. Globalism as explained earlier permits, rather supports, the erasure of demarcations and borders, making an allowance for creation of new paths of approach. Given this one can say that there is a need to understand and define these newer modes of expressions which allow a high level of possibility of assimilation from various sources and even endpoints. In order to accommodate the new media works, galleries too moved away from the strict white-cube setup to construct rather design mouldable spaces which can be altered according to the works of different artist not just in terms of size but in terms of providing flexibility of the medium employed by the artists. This mouldability has become a dominant characteristic of the current exhibiting spaces, such that older and conventional galleries too have redesigned their

spaces on understanding the needs rather necessities of such spaces for works made in newer media (Dhage, Diaspora, Transnationalism and the Art Market).

At this juncture there seems to be an urgent need to ask a few questions which are frequently asked and assumed to be true. To mention some - concentrating on art practices, we need to look at how new media came up supplanted with thoughts like 'painting is dead', giving it an obsolete status. Further do we consider New Media as a medium legitimised by the west and therefore granting it a superior status in the mainstream practices? Given the same, is the hegemonic west and the recipient east an unnecessary dialectics, of opposing social forces? Further, focusing on the medium, one needs to ask as to, - what we consider as New Media today is absolutely outdated and obsolete, considering artists working in Zero Gravity Art and Military Art. Then what is "New" about New Media. The need is to see if there are any ways through which one can mend these fissures.

This situation suggests that the need is to define a new praxis, which shall provide a cohesive and not a separatist solution. This attitude can be exemplified through the works of few artists who have mindfully analysed globalism as an experiential phenomenon and have expressed them through their paintings and some have also extended the limits of painting by borrowing tools from new mediums. Therefore these works become like convergence points of the bipolar approaches and at the same time retain honest affiliations to the concept and the medium respectively. These issues shall be dealt with while analysing the works of artists (painters) who have been segregated in two distinct categories based on the conceptual similarities namely, - SudhirPatwardhan, JitishKallat, Subodh Gupta, PrajaktaPalav, who given the globalised world address the issues of locals as lived experiences; and the other artists - T.. V. Santhosh, BaijuParthan and RanbirKaleka who look at non contextualised, generalised situations and outcomes of the globalised world. These artists even have held to their original practice of paintings and have transgressed boundaries of expression when required.

As mentioned above the artists addressing the local concerns have interpreted the term "local" to suit their intentions of interventions / inquiries considering its ever-transient aspect. To SudhirPatwardhan and PrajaktaPalav, the landscape of the city provides an arena for change. Patwardhan provides a multi-sopic view of the now Megapolis of Mumbai. To Patwardhan the impact of globalisation can be witnessed / gauged through the alterations the city has undergone. Increasing boundaries, sudden rise in infrastructural activities - building flyovers, express ways, sea-links all stand as emblems of change / progress. The erasure of the much famed mill-land, replaced by glass walled malls or corporate buildings all marked the absolute obliteration of the earlier identity. Now according to Patwardhan, the city becomes a canvas for erasures and newer creations, acquiring an archival status with fluid boundaries. Further, the increasing influx of people in the land of opportunities saw swelling of slums and satellite suburbs, drawing a stark difference between the "town-ies" (elite residents of South Mumbai) versus the "suburbans", of plush residential buildings

/ skyscrapers versus the shanties / slums / *kholis*. This disparity highlights the superficiality of the idealised image of the Megapolis(Kapur and Rajadhyaksha). Commenting on the notion of identity, singular identity as an aim of globalisation, Patwardhan speaks of a lack of cohesiveness even within a country, through his series of the 1990's, of works based on regional types, *Keralite*, *South Indian*, *Bhayya*, etc. PrajaktaPalav's point of interventions too is the cityscape. She deals with binaries of the suburban and the town not as opposing polarities but as hierarchic distinctions; such that the non-plush spaces of the city are considered as blemishes. Taking photographic reference Palav aims at not just creating a photorealistic image but draws a sardonic tone / comment. Sparkling swimming pool (Hockneyish) with crystal clear water gets bordered by leaking sewage pipes, or a cabinet from a middle-class room when reversed becomes a shanty. In a series of works titled, *Kachra*, Palav paints the dumping grounds with utmost precision, but draws an irony of placing this *kachra* as an exhibit in a gallery. According to her one might choose to overlook these "out of place" and repulsive spaces over the posh spaces of the cities, but this shall not erase their presence.



Fig 1SudhirPatwardhan, *Flyover 2*, 2005.

Image Source:sudhirpatwardhan.tripod.com

JitishKallat opts to take a personal interpretation of the city by highlighting notions of identity, lived presence of marginalised factions of the society in a moralistic manner. Urchins selling books, flowers, cheap toys, begging at signals are a ubiquitous; a trivialised presence, but Kallat makes an attempt to portray them as "grand symbols of survivors" in a city. With this he transforms them from images of repulsion to a heroic status. Unlike Kallat who focuses on the metropolises Subodh Gupta looks at the notion of regionalisation within a country, and the varying notion of identity as one crosses local borders and then global ones. For Gupta the term local does not stand for a singular distinction but that of multiple relative locals; such that the term according to him does not help in encompassing one singular identity but a constantly and conveniently

alterable loose definition. Works titled *Bihari*, *SaatSamundarPaar*, hint at the insider / outsider status. Whereas in the case of migrants, he looks at the diaspora, and a constant sense of movements across countries, the notion of local according to Gupta now takes a wider scope of parameters. Through his works he looks, not just at the visuals of packed luggage; but the manner of packing according to Gupta becoming a symbol of one's regional roots, along with ones habits and even objects of utility act as pointers of individual identities; and the places of global transit "airports" become terrains where ones identity gets crystallised, a major juncture of identity definition.



Fig 2: JitishKallat, *Eruda*, 2006.

Image Source: http://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/jitish_kallat_eruda_a.htm

Moving from an individual level concerning either lived experiences or of those related to personal identities, another aspect of globalisation is that of larger impact of a global sensibility. Globalism while providing a justification and critique of the new scenario has to an extent (although extremely low) been able to create a sense of universality, which has been successful to create a sense of cohesion above geographical demarcations. T. V. Santhosh explores the nature of various happenings / events especially terror. Drawing his source from mediaticimages, Santhosh uses the effect of partially developed negative, creating uncertainty. The media according to the artist is the only source which common people rely to get information; it then becomes the first face of the facts. Santhosh by altering these images (negatives) raises a question – can we identify the terrorist from these images? Is the face of terror different in different land? Does a blast evoke different reactions in different countries? Moving beyond the repulsive aspect of terror Santhosh says, that while viewing images of people ravaged in wars or deeply wounded, our instantaneous reaction would be that

of repulsion; but a painting of it might not evoke a similar reaction or hit on the same sensory note. The effect is mitigated by a huge margin. To take it further, one might be drawn towards such images in order to explore the detailing of it. Thereby Santhosh moves from a contextual depiction of events to a generalised (de-contextualised) level (Dhage, *The Visible and Beyond*). BaijuParthan on the other hand, looks at the notion of technological progress and of an economy in which every product is consumable. Constructing archetypal imagery, a universal visual language, Parthan employs irony as critique and tool for deconstructing notions. *Engineered Fruit* depicts the fabrication of perfection for consumption. He believes that the globalised market economy has and shall, in the future too, lead to a voracious consumption of culture, nearly exhausting the products of consumption. Parthan draws from various sources - mediatic images, iconic images, personalities, places / spaces. He takes parts of the programmed codes of morphed graphic images, and paints it on the canvas to form a part of the works. Not creating blanket statements or highlighting the regional elements, Parthan takes a stand of an artist participating in a world by creating works which are evocative than being merely receptive.



Fig 3 T. V. Santhosh, *Untitled*, 2012.

Image Source: http://www.artsome.co/TV_Santhosh



Fig 4Subodh Gupta, *SaatSamundar Par*, 2003.

Image Source: www.artnet.com/artists/subodh-gupta/saat-samundar-paar

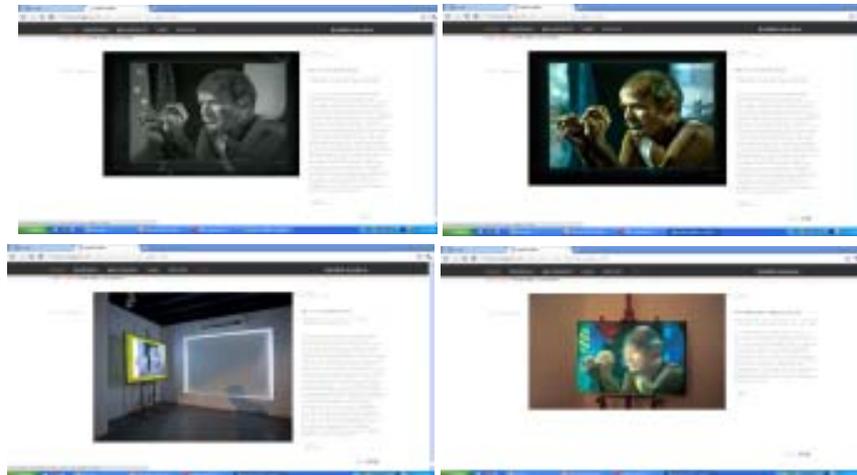


Fig 5 Ranbir Kaleka, *Man Threading a Needle*, 1998-1999 (thumbnails of the video projection).

Image Source: http://www.rkaleka.com/video_works_man_threading_gallery.html

Even as we consider artists / painters who have addressed / interpreted globalism in their own terms these artists have opted to do works in new media whenever necessary as a separate / independent entities. The works of Ranbir Kaleka differ in this context. Kaleka's works begin through a painter's lens and slowly mutate into video works and oscillate designedly between these nodes constantly / continuously. *Man Threading a Needle*, one of his early works depicts his working process elaborately. According to Kaleka, his imagination is primarily painterly, he plays with light (in the videos) just as the way he would on a canvas. The *Man Threading a Needle* begins as a video but carries a strong sense of painted image contrary to a shot / recorded video. A projection of the image gives an effect of a painting but a closer and prolonged look gives a sense of movement. Kaleka tries to explore the notions of temporality, sensory involvements as a part of viewing. It can be said with certitude that Kaleka's works become a ground of merger of the (constructed) two polarities - painting and new media. Giving a justification against such polarisation and proving that given the global scenario the need is not that of defining, finding, highlighting the rift between modes of expressions but of defining a new praxis which shall lead to the expansion of the earlier modes through the assimilation and absorption of the newer ones.

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