CHAPTER - 4

Abstraction in Indian Contemporary Art: An Interpretation
The term *Abstract* has been used in reference to many new art forms of 20th century modern art throughout the world. This term has been defined and applied differently in different perspectives and historical circumstances ruling the particular country. Abstract provides two different conditions - a process and a result. This way the term abstract is seen in a very wide perspective and it opens two different connotations to its definition: one which strictly adhere the final result and the other which follow the development.

Its final result is the *pure* abstraction where any adulteration of representational form or imitation of any kind which may evoke any sign of realistic world is strictly prohibited. It is totally divorced from objective or visual reality. The second condition deals a long process where abstraction evolve varying degrees from near naturalism through semiabstraction to pure abstraction.
Pure abstraction belongs to an extreme, fully developed condition while abstraction merely provides a passage to the ultimate goal which sometimes deliberately is not reached. Often abstraction is an unacknowledged process in modern Art while Abstract Art is a complete and developed art form to represent its real and pure meaning.

Though abstract art facilitates the work of Kandinsky, Miro, Monderian, Klee, Jackson Pollock and other abstract artists their work also induce a narrow speculation in terms of the differences of their nature. In the context of Indian contemporary art the work and ideology of V.S. Gaitonde, Mohan Samant, Ambadas, Suryaprak as, Jeram Pate, S.H. Raza and Narren Nath evoke the similar speculation under the infrastructural study of pure Abstract Art.

Abstraction as a processing condition provide more space to coalesce all art development bifurcated from naturalism towards modern art. To study the abstraction in Indian contemporary Art we need to follow abstraction rather as a process of varying degrees of change - from near naturalism through semiabstraction to pure abstraction. This type of infrastructure enables to comprise most of the contemporary Indian artists who received their initial inspiration from European Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism, Futurism, Expressionism, constructivism, Dadaism, Op Art etc. and from Indian cave paintings, miniature
painting, folk art, tribal art, tantra art, symbolism and spiritual Fantasy.

Often a narrow use of the term *abstract* and the domination of the figuration in Indian contemporary Art scenario have limited the understanding and applicability, therefore the association and the implication of the term applied to contemporary art could be abrasive. It does not mean that abstraction has no place in Indian art. It is because the term figurative has been so much religiously conjugated to the traditional and classical art that it often performed as a preoccupation from any broad perception and interpretation of the possibilities of abstraction in Indian traditional and classical art. The danger of misinterpretation and practice of the abstract quality of traditional art in current circumstance was warned by Coomaraswamy.

"On the other hand we have said to ourselves that in the greatest works of art there is always a quality of abstraction, and have invoked the platonic endorsement of a geometrical beauty; we have said, go to, let us also make use of abstract formulae. It was overlooked here that the abstract formulae of ancient art were its natural vehicle, and not a person. or even local invention but the common language of the world. The result of the modern interest in abstraction as such, and apart from questions of context and communicability, has been indeed to eliminate recognizability in art, but scarcely to modify its still essentially representative purpose."  

Abstraction often connived consciously or unconsciously with a
preoccupation with the ongoing conflict of traditional versus modern approach of the initial stratum to the extreme of representational versus non representational dilemma.

The initial diversion towards abstraction in the form of cubism of late 40s were criticised to be a baffled state of expression resulted merely in a puzzled attitudinizing the fashion by some sharlatanries who essentially did not follow the right track of selfscrutiny and a subtle approach.

"Without the school -taught ability to copy nature, without even the academic formula for design and colour, the counterfeit art of the modernist camp followers is about the poorest thing in the whole scale. It usually avoids cheap sentiment, but cheap aesthetics is just as futile. Its one chance of acceptance lies in the snobbism that swallows the rubbish of the so-called moderns because it took different from the bad things of the old school. One more chance of Ananias to mislead artists and public."

Walter Pach in his book Ananias, The False Artist. Quoted by Dr. A.S. Raman while criticising the abstractionists of modern Indian art - saying "... abstract art in India is the first and last phase of a naively narcissistic modernists weak experimentation which seldom goes beyond textural effects."
Contemporary Indian art, a journey

Different point of views and connotations have been drawn in effort to provide Indian contemporary art a right direction as what should be the acceptable form of art to be practiced or labeled to the contemporary Indian Art. One thing which is noticed common to all of them is to draw a new line, a new perspective, a new dimension to the contemporary art. And the pattern was some what like Kalidas has written in Malvikagnimitra -

Puranamityeva na sudhv sarvam na
chapi kavyam navamityavadyam
santah parikshyanyataraadhajante
muddhah paraprayayaneya buddhih.

("Whatever is old is not necessarily excellent ' neither is the new in arts or poetry blame worthy. The critical and accomplished mind after examining various forms chooses the right ones while the undiscerning fool follows the path laid down by others.")

A dialogue on:

Traditionalistic versus Modern

"Today it is not the story of the tradition that has lived long, but of a growing tradition, in a continuous process of evolution ... many of us are inclined to think that it has nothing to do with ancient culture, that it is not a serious affair and if encouraged will have ruinous effects .... If it grew first in France, Germany or Italy, it was only because the situations there were
more suitable for its growth."^5

S.H. Raza.

"... Emotion is not tradition; nor the awareness of historical affinities. Experience is always an invariably contemporary, and from experience we get a concept of integral, significant form... To go through the essential paces he must repeat something of the achievements of the Europeans. It is a question of necessity, not of design... the Indian expressionist can not but be conditioned (not necessarily influenced ) by the work of Van Gogh, Gauguin, by the brilliance of the impressionists... Here the Indian painter is Indian. Our Younger painters like Husain, Grade, Bendre, Samant, Pai, etc. are each differently influenced by the west. Their drawing (based on temple sculpture and the folk motifs) is Indian. Their use of flaming, and unsubdued colour, is Indian... The copyists one easily distinguishable from the experiments. And a period of transition, as today, must be experimental."^6

Richard Bartholomew

"Modern developments in Bengal and Bombay represent attempts either to recover a lost tradition, or for the development of an electric style, neither wholly Indian nor wholly European. At the present day the Indian genius is finding expression rather in the field of conduct than in art."^7

A.K. coomaraswamy

"Tradition does not mean imitation, that is, routine repetition of
familiar forms, mindless manipulation of lines and spaces.”

Dr. A.S. Raman

"Introduction of modernity in terms of ability of an artist, has no limitation whatsoever. Therefore a modern idiom could be evolved independent of Western influence."

J. Sultan Ali

Nationalistic versus Internationalistic

"Each race contributes something essential to the world's civilisation in the course of its own self-expression and self-realisation. The character built up in solving its own problems, in the experience of its own misfortunes, is itself a gift which each offers to the world. The essential contribution of India, then, is simply her Indianness; her great humiliation would be to have substituted for this own character (Svabhava) a cosmopolitan veneer, for then indeed she must come before the world empty handed."

A.K. Coomaraswamy

"An Indian can remain modern and contemporary by rejecting Western influences and asserting his Indian identity."

M. Reddappa Naidu

"An artist thinks that he has arrived by winning a national award. no he has just begun his work. Indian talents in general are a match for international talents.
But we must work hard.”  

Laxman Pai

“The fact that we had been imitating. ... to reproduce and manifest the attitudes and approach to life and nature existing in other culture. I only hope that this alienation has not taken hold of us for good; it is commonly believed that the attitudes and mannerisms we are projecting today, are of an international or global nature.”

P.N. Mago

“Van Gogh copied Japanese prints, Matisse drew from Persian Miniatures, Picasso lifted from African Carvings, Gauguin painted in the south sea Island. Even earlier Rembrandt made drawings from Mughal paintings and Beethoven read from the upanishads.”

F.N. Souza

“...Maurayan art successfully assimilated elements from western Asia and Persia; Gandhara art imbibed Greeco-Roman influence to gain distinction; and sassanian influences are conspicuous in the art of Ajanta. The Moghal school was founded on Persian tradition and the painters in its ateliers did not fight shy of European influences... the first chaos and meaningless technical experimentation, a definite Indian International in its approach but wedded to the soil, is gradually coming to the surface.”

Moti Chandra
Figurative versus Abstraction

"In figurative works, I feel that I am able to bring out different kinds of expressions and rasas, as we have in Indian aesthetic. I can not convey these significant moods in abstract style where main concern is with arrangements of non visual forms and harmony of colours."  

J. Sultan Ali.

"It was with the advent of the cubism that the final curtain fell and art became completely liberated from the tradition of representing optical images and committed to guide another aim, that of substituting abstract or symbolic forms of images...It is the sphere of abstract art, the new images seemed to be veering towards two different sensibilities-one which still retains an interest in feeling, animation and life as we sense it in nature, and the other which is quite insensitive to life or animation, but not to dynamism or automation...." 

Chintamani Kar

"I have no doubt that these painter felt that the figure game had been played out by then,... In relation to art it is a process of creative expression adducing ideal and abstract values, referring to the inherent form of the idea. It is also a mode of expression which though non-representational embodies intrinsic feeling and overtly formal values. Abstract Art, which is the product of the process of abstraction, has very concrete qualities sensuous connotations but presupposes that the art effect possesses sublimity because
it has been free from descriptive meaning."  

Richard Brtholmen

"By choosing to be ruthlessly abstract and non-representational, and by reflecting traditionally handed down tales, characters and symbols as aids to communication, modern artists have made it exceedingly difficult for contemporary spectators to respond to or penetrate their world...."  

Sibnarayan Roy

Experimental versus Indigenous

"Caught up in this speed, even the artist is confused. His ambition stirred, he turns his studio into a production unit, manipulating his medium and constantly inventing, the reward being recognition, ultimate fame and comfort. His work suffers from the lack of self-expression and depth. Lacks poetry and philosophy as there is no time to reflect or contemplate. For his art is not way of living but is made for the gallery."  

Krishna Reddy

"It is for the first time in human history that the artist has to struggle hard to express his feelings and discover his own kind of expression.... The handling of the pigment or drawing of the line itself can be satisfying art form."  

K.S. Kulkarni

"the contradictions of the existing attitudes both in the visual and
plastic arts, are quite apparent in the works and aspirations of many artists. The work of post-Independence period, particularly of the 60s, 70s and 80s reflect the times, the weight of civilization that bears down on the artist's images, giving rise to an underlying scene of confusion and turmoil. There is as much borrowing from Cubism, Expressionism and Abstractionism as suits the individual expressive need and purpose of the artist. There are wide scale visual and ideological explorations in their work that one characteristic of the contemporary art movement in Europe.”

P.N. Mago

“"The most successful of the modern paintings based on indigenous sources are Tantric ... this label however, is controversial, because the artists who use their formulae are not practicing tantrics in original sense of this word nor do they use the pictures as devices to aid their contemplation. They are tantric in-so-far-as the ancient yantras, mandalas or other diagrams have served as origin....”

Jaya Appasamy

“" K.C. S. Panikar's ... words and symbols will have to be, therefore, regarded as an echo of the cryptic content of the astrological chart or a page from a mystery - ridden mathematical note book... J. Swaminathan ... owes to the upanishadic thoughts... Biren De's creations are the visions of the effulgent light, flame and fire of the Upanishads. Dharaj Bhagat owes very much to the
idea of genesis, and to twin life principles of Sive-Saktim, ... Haridasan is... inspired by the Purusha - Prakriti theme, and the doctrine of Bija (the seed), and Yantra (tantric diagrammatic symbol).... Santosh stands quite apart, ... his work is a most graphic and impeccable realization of the tantric ideal of non-asceticism. He depicts the union of Siva and Sakti in an exoteric manner, regarding sex as the supreme symbol of the sense.”

S.A. Krishnan

Individual Conceptualism

"Today when to a great extent elaborate conceptional work has taken the place of creativity, one talks of the disappearance, yes, even the death of the artist. Conceptual art, Happenings and fluxes make new demands on the viewers...”

Ursula Bickelmann

"...I do try to do something different each time, and I try to build up a kind of a pictorial vocabulary of my own so that I can use it time and again.”

Tyeb Mehta

"... Painting has been a sort of confrontation from the time...”

Gulam Mohammed Sheikh

"...My paintings help me to find hope in my self and in my life...”

Profulla Mohanti
"... When I paint I just try to assemble certain objects. For me the human figure is like an object and I arrange it on the support of the thing..., most of my paintings are very esoteric in their concept and technique,..."  

F.N. Souza

"My present work is the result of two parallel inquiries. Firstly, it aimed at pure plastic order, form order. Secondly, it concerns the theme of nature. Both have converged into a single point and became inseparable. The point, the bindu, symbolizes the seed bearing the potential of all life, in a sense..."  

S.H.Raza

The contemporary art of India has been interpreted and redefined many times and in many ways to cosset the critical and creative impulses of Indian critics and artists of the time. The need to interpret it in the context of abstraction is approached here.

Abstraction though deeply rooted in Indian art and rituals could not acquire a centre stage as an art form till late because the atmosphere was not favourable for it here in India. Abstraction in Indian art developed during the 1940s through an opposition to the prevailing condition of Academic art, Indian traditional art and to a certain extent to the figurative art.

The term figurative often wrongly, as traditional art is figurative,
had been associated with traditional and classical art of India, is an essential art form to the art practitioner and has been a pivotal till now.

"... till the end of the first two decades after independence, Indian art shows a marked affinity for human figure." 32

"human shape is always there in Indian art, it was never abandoned, it was the medium of expression par excellence" 33

This attitude was first confronted by some of the progressive artists of the time who initiated towards abstraction to draw a new idiom to Indian contemporary art. In the free air of freedom the modern approach to catch up with the world art was quite expected but an attitude to restore the traditional heritage also came as patriotism, where abstraction of any kind was perceived as foreign and degenerating factor if intermingled with traditional art of India. On the other hand this abstraction was modulating its final shape drawing the inspiration from all the idioms of spiritualism,, folk art, tantra art, symbolism miniature painting in France Germany and Russia.

The term pure abstraction can not be tagged to any emerging movement or period of time ever since 1940s except in some individual cases. Though Bombay Progressive Group, Calcutta Group, Group 1890, and cholamandal Artists Group exude in the direction of new ethos but its paradigms were not solely constructed on pure abstract idiom.

While abstract art in Europe took a gradual progress from
Academic Art to French Realism to pre-Raphaelites and from there to impressionism and modern Art towards various abstract Art movements, in India we reach directly from Academic Art to various types of abstraction. Contemporary Indian Art confronted Abstract Art as a tree full of fruits to pick and enjoy the taste. Among various modern European art forms as Cubism, Surrealism, Expressionism, Op art - Abstract art also provided a patina to the contemporary Indian Art.

Classification of Abstraction

Abstraction in contemporary Indian painting is a complex thing because it inherits paradigms from both Western and Indian traditions. Both these traditions represent very different trajectories in general.

Abstraction which empirically to anchor the profusion of new possibilities suggested by the changing ethos, developed particularly around 1940 in India.

On the basis of certain speculation contemporary Indian Art of the past fifty years may be classified as;

1. Abstraction adopted from modern European Art.


3. Abstraction as an individual commentary.

4. Combination Abstraction.

The first classification which was received from modern
European Art specifically from France, Germany and Holland provided, a paradigm to the contemporary Indian artists. A consolidated inspirational source was also drawn directly from Cezanne. Gauguin, Van Gogh, Seurat and Picasso to Kandinsky, John Miro and Paul Klee. Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism and Abstract Art was adopted freely in some parts of the country specially Bombay and Madras. This type of abstraction maybe described as intellectual, perceptive, expressionistic, Illusionistic and geometric.

This type of abstraction which came first as a reaction to the realistic approach may be identified as non realistic, which is only limitation. In this type of abstract approach artist takes the subject from realistic world, sometimes unrecognizable. He could emphasize a particular aspect by exaggerating it, as Goya did. He could use the colour that we expect to see, or he could use a completely unexpected colour that meant something to him personally, as Van Gogh did. He could make scientific experiments in colour, as Seurat did. He could take parts of a landscape or still life as seen by the moving eye, and rearrange them in one composition, as Cezanne did, or break up the subject and put it together again in a different way, as the Cubists did. He could present the subject distorted by his own feelings, as the Expressionists did or almost drop the recognizable subjects, as Kandinsky did when he filled spaces with color and suggestions of objects to express feelings and sensations.
In the second classification the principle inspiration is based on the Indian traditional art culture and the theory and interpretation drawn from spiritualism, symbolism and mysticism embedded in Indian soil. This type of abstraction may be expressive, decorative, symbolic, mystic, illusionistic, geometric and flat.

This type of abstraction is a counter reaction against European influence which was initiated, before independence, through Bengal school of art by Abanindranat Tagore, Nandlal Bose, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher Gil among other artists of the country who were fighting for the revival of Indian Traditional art. Abanindranat Tagore returned to Ajanta painting and miniature Paintings, Jamini Roy took inspiration from folk Art and Nandlal Bose got busy in experimenting all the medium and style.

Among post independence artists B.C. Sanyal, Biren De, K.C.S. Panikar, G. R. Santosh, J. Sultan Ali, Manjit Bawa, Bhupen Khakhar, G.M. Sheikh drew their inspiration directly from Indian traditional art or their indigenous surrounding with the profusion of abstraction to a certain degree.

The third classification facilitates the pure abstraction concept where painting does not represent any theme or subject but becomes self explanatory of its fundamentals and principals as texture, line color, balance, rhythm etc. speaks itself. Exploration of unknown and self is
another pivotal. This type of abstraction may be drawn from both European and Indian traditional art. Perspective value and spiritual are the base of pure abstraction.

This type of abstraction is scientific, constructive, experimental, spiritual, symbolic, and self explanatory, Rabindranath Tagore who is known as the Father of Modern Indian Art, first profused abstraction in its purest degree drawing his initial inspiration from klee and provided a patina to the younger generation artist. Many among them fused their concepts with pure abstraction.


The form of abstraction adopted in Indian contemporary Art is generally noticed as multifaced which does not represent only one kind of abstraction but most of the time is intermingling with more than one kind of abstraction. It provides a paradigms, of both European and Indian inheritance. It produces a different result that consolidates a unique identity for contemporary art of India. This type of abstraction maybe classified as combination abstraction.
The term Decorative and Illusionistic which is considered to be alien for abstract is welcomed in this type of abstraction. As in decoration no intellectual and aesthetical values are detected, and illusion represent the plastic reality both are considered a drive away from abstract. In India where abstraction mostly is adopted not as an end but as a process of development such idioms are easily adjusted with other combinations of European and Indian style of abstraction, to represent a unique result.

Rabindranath Tagore, Jogen Chowdhury, Ranbir kaleka, Laxman pai, Reddeppa Naidu, K. Ramanujan, M.F. Husain, Anjali Ela menon, J. Sultan Ali represent, such type of abstraction in their various phases.
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