



A STUDY ON THE ROLE OF PRINT MAKING IN THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN ART OF ODISHA

Arts

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ABSTRACT

The creative or the evolutionary process is not gradual. It sustains high jerks and at times lands in a completely different territory. We present this quotation here to act as a springboard platform to understand the nature and process of art and the role and seriousness of the 'alien' that finally mellows down in all surprisingness in a different cultural territory, and becomes a legacy. And the old legacy arrives at a saturation point at the advent of a 'new-alien'. Legacy in the field of art is not just the material inheritance; it lingers on the art linguistics, which with the passage of time turns inconsequential and irrelevant. But the irrelevance of art linguistics or its operational inadequacy does not make the parental source redundant and obsolete. This source has potency for renewal and therefore in the hands of artists, it changes pattern, function and purpose and reappears as essential and prolific.

KEYWORDS

ART, PRINT MAKING, MODERN, ODISHA

Art is an activity of change, of disorientation and shift, of violent discontinuity and mutability, of the willingness for confusion even in the service of discovering new perceptual modes. Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes observing the evolution of a new Indian art and the generation of new artists: The first generation of new 'artists' of British India aspired for the same recognition and success as their European peers. They set out to master the art of realistic and illusionist oil painting, to secure commissions for portraits, and to gain entry to the prestigious chain of 'fine arts' exhibitions, acquiring also the new technical skills of engraving and lithography, in response to the growing commercial prospects of print-making.³

When the art schools were established in Orissa, these ideas percolated into the minds of teachers and students as well as the public. The school functioned as an alternative to literary, university education, providing vocational and technical training to those among the educated middle-class "who have an aptitude for art-work and look to the School as the only way left which will lead to active employment without affecting their caste or social status."⁴ Already by the middle of the nineteenth century, the two social categories of 'artist' and 'artisan' due to the impact of western education stood sharply differentiated and graded. In Odisha it happened 50 years later. The assimilation of the native style and the western pedagogy, gave rise to a new style with close affinity to 'Company style' at Khallikote in the sixties.

The beginning of the art movement was tinged with colonial flavour; therefore it was no wonder to find a Company kind of painting style pursued in earlier Khallikote. However, the presence of stone carving, pottery⁵, cane furniture making, leather crafts, sewing and knitting in the curriculum didn't add any native culture, rather highlighted the farcical dichotomy between the 'fine' and 'applied' art teaching.

Partha Mitter rendering criticism on the role model of the art schools writes: The model was derived from Britain. In Britain the issue of funding art schools on a national scale had been brought into sharp focus as a consequence of the rapid industrialization during the nineteenth century. The whole system of art teaching was in a turmoil, with a gulf opening up between literate artists reared in academics and growing army of 'confused' traditional craftsmen thrown up by the Industrial Revolution.

In Odisha, the situation of traditional arts was not that bad compared to European scenario. In the twentieth century Odisha the handicraft practices were in decline due to economy reasons but the artistic excellence continue to prevail in some isolated pockets, as murals of considerable good quality still being painted and temples continued to be built, the best example being the Dharakote JagannÁtha temple painted in 1908.⁷ The *Bandha* textiles of superior quality were and are still woven by Orissan weavers in Sonepur, Bargarh, Sambalpur and Nuapatna.

Government of Orissa established a handicrafts training school in Bhubaneswar in the year 1962 with master craftsmen as teachers. The traditional system of transmission of hereditary skill within a parameter of *Guru - Sisyá Parampara* was thus converted into a

western model of teaching. The government further considered the modern art college teaching more advanced and introduced a structured syllabus and examination system. The anxiety was to treat the artisans at par with trained artists.

PaÓa painting in Odisha could somehow thrive from the onslaught of the western art academics while the Kalighat painting fell and drastically changed its repertoire. This was mainly for the strong religious link that the *PaÓa* painting still enjoys. The visual language of the *PaÓa* painting therefore has remained rooted in the tradition and the changes those are being affected are peripheral.

The earlier Orissan masters like Gopal Charan Kanungo, Basant Panda, Bipin Bihari Choudhury, Purna Chandra Singh, Muralidhar Tali and Bichitrananda Mohanty were the precursors of the Western academic style in Orissa. Their students and the artists of the second and third generations like Harish Chandra Singh Babu, Lakshmidhar Das, Dinanath Pathy, Chandramani Biswal, Baladev Maharatha and Ramahari Jena pursued Western academic style as a part of their learning adventure. It became a routine affair to get modern through the British academic methods as if the road to modernism in India was laid across Britain.

Western academic style flourished in Orissa till the death of Muralidhar Tali in 1997. Tali remained a staunch practitioner of portraiture. The shadow of the academic style loomed large over Orissa till the end of the 20th century. But the symptoms of change were noticeable already in 1990.

In Odisha, western academic style has its local version. It slantly got mixed up with popular calendrical degenerated style as reflected in the paintings of Baladev Maharatha and Manas Ranjan Jena. Lakshmidhar Das maintained its purity to a great extent and then it slowly got into expressionistic mood. The western academic style was at its best in the early works of Bipin Bihari Choudhury, Upendra Maharathi, Basant Panda and Bipra Charan Mohanty. Chandramani Biswal developed a western academic style in his earlier portrait and still life studies, but his later works slipped into a mixed style of expressionism.

There seems a definite route chart that signalled the change in artistic perception and practice. Cubism came to India at the end of the 19th century and to Orissa in 1960s. Though Gopal Charan Kanungo was following the Abanindranath Tagore's cubic oriented paintings but it was Ajit Keshary Ray's oil painting *The Flight* that made a mark with simultaneous appearance of cubism in the work of Dinanath Pathy, *The Harvesting Songs*. Both these works were awarded, one in the 1st annual exhibition of the Odisha Lalit Kala Akademi and the other in the All India exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts, Calcutta.

The contemporary pictorial language, which emerged from the imitations of the British academics, later was challenged by the *SwadeÓ* revivalistic art. A nationalistic concern and context arose to return to the roots. The Bengal revivalists had shown the way by falling back upon the art heritage and churning out the essentials to incorporate them in the new pictorial language. This language

formation owes its debts to Santiniketan teachers who taught at Khallikote like Rabinarayana Nayak, Binod Bihari Routray, and Durga Prasad Das as well as to the dynamic synthesis of Sarat Chandra Debo. Actually the revivalistic art trends in Santiniketan and Bengal incorporated all the Asian pictorial essentials like the silk base, misty environs and emphasis on line. This was built up as an eastern pictorial vocabulary to challenge the new western imposition.

Odisha is unfortunate, not having a personality like E. B. Havel who as the superintendent of Calcutta School of Art, strongly protested against sending promising students to Europe for further training in art academics. He had realized the artistic potentials of traditional art, therefore wanted students to be sent to traditional art centres in India instead.⁸ Havel could visualize that an art language to be authentic, even authentically modern has to be rooted in one's tradition.

In the contemporary pictorial language of Odisha there is less of Odishan flavour. No serious attempt has been earlier made to exploit traditional Odishan material to formulate a regional style at par with the development of modern Oriya literature. The mediaeval Odia literature that has been closely juxtaposed with paintings and drawings on the pages of palm leaves become completely separated with the ushering of modern literature and use of printing machines to print books. The use of wooden and zinc blocks made the endeavour of illustration costly. However it used to influence the art practices in pre-independent Odisha.

It is a general observation that modernism in Odisha could not come off the bindings of traditionalist. The modern pictorial language in Odisha has several elements. It emerged as a Western academic style and then switched over to cubic experiments to become modern. The Bengal revivalism, East-West synthesis, assimilation of Eastern nuances both Indian and Pan-Asian, and finally revalidating the Odishan tradition within the ambit of international contemporary are the streams operating in the psyche of the Odia artists. Talking in terms of a local language styles or a group of styles, we put these symptomatic surges as characters of a growing language seeking for an identity. With this as our premise we try to analyse the works of a few outstanding artists with clear, discernible properties.

Artists on the other hand realised the importance of revalidation rather than synthesis and incorporation. In the context of globalising pressures, revalidation or reinvention have become a search in both the direction or aimed at linking the local and the global. The artist here is an intellectual in pursuit of a creative dialect in the mother tongue language syndrome. His thinking mind is at its best in expanding the self beyond the boundaries. His dialect still is local but its interpretative language power makes it valid in a global multilingualism. Post-ninety Odisha was an Odisha of great possibilities and aspirations. The art scene came to be divided along the lines of the legacy and the young generation. This young generation vehemently criticized the legacy artists as outdated and stagnant holding to establishments, even if they were their earlier teachers and mentors. Art in nineties in India was coming off the easels, studios are being transformed into art performing arenas and art as an equally intellectual avocation were gaining ground. In the international scene far-reaching changes were happening. The international Triennials and Biennials, symposia, workshops and spectacles are becoming fashion in the art world. Fashionable terms like 'conceptual art', 'multiculturalism' and 'postmodernism' started gaining significance. Critics were vociferous about the failure of the modern art movements and talking of the end of the art world at the closure of a millennium. Everyone was looking for a new beginning.

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