

Editorial Introduction

Contemporary Art Practices in Twenty-first Century India

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Contemporary, as a terminology, means anything and everything that live-in or belong-to or occur-in the same epoch, especially the one that is prevailing. Being used in the realm of human art-practices, it refers to a specific time-frame rather than a special type of art. It was framed as a coin at the beginning of Modernism in western-world, while its definition – being anchored in the present – always had a start-date that kept on moving with time. Thus works bought by the Contemporary Art Society of London, for instance, way back in 1910 could no longer be described as so, while museums with a permanent collection such works inevitably find them aging. In addition to this, the contextual functionality of the term was also taken over time and again by various ‘-isms’ through the last six-seven decades. Multiple definitions came into the fore, since 1960s, of what constitutes Contemporary Art and today they vary widely from each other. The term however is now used specifically to limit the art of the present, produced in the late-twentieth century or the early twenty-first. To be more substantial, ‘contemporary’ now refers to art made and produced by artists living today, though commercial-galleries, art-dealers and art-magazines often restrict the coin to the works done after AD 2000 only. Thus it poses further issues with the mid or late twentieth century artists who are still productive after a long career, along with ongoing art-movements that have lasted for long – leaving us imprecise about the divide between contemporary and non-contemporary.

In approaching Contemporary Art in particular, the major difficulty faced by the western intelligentsia seems to be its diversity — diversity of material, form, content and even time periods. They took it as something devoid of any single objective or outlook, with a view that is often unclear and therefore multiple, contradictory, confusing, and open-ended. This however didn't restrict them from tracing-out a number of common themes in such works including identity-politics, human-body, gender-bias, racism, globalization, migration, technology, socio-economic issues, time and memory, institutional and political critique, so on and so forth. With various inputs from Marxism, Freudian-psychoanalysis, Postmodernism, Post-structuralism and Feminism, they sincerely devised multiple theories and tagged them with different ages of contemporary art practices.

According to these thinkers and practitioners, a Contemporary-artist works in a globally-influenced, culturally-diverse, and technologically-advancing world. They project Contemporary-art as (to be) a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts, and subjects that keeps on

challenging the boundaries prevailed in the earlier era. Such works are considered to be diverse and eclectic – and is distinguished as a whole by the very lack of an uniform organizing-principle, ideology, or -ism. To a great extent, they are taken as a conscious-dialogue that concerns larger contextual-frameworks like personal and cultural identity, family, community and nationality.

The idea of Contemporary in Indian Art was imported as a colonial hegemony that took a substantial shape in the 1940s with the advent of Calcutta Group in Kolkata and Progressive Artists' Group in Mumbai. In search of doing something new, these two groups of city-based Indian-artists became highly influenced by the west. They urged to come out of their native traditions of art-making and took western-modernism with all of its multiplicity, contradictions, similitude and confusions. However, in this process, they failed to realize that what could be fitted or suited, if at all, to the monolithic structure of the western-society might not be appropriate for a multi-lingual and multi-cultural populace like that of India. Perhaps they forgot that the diverse nature of this soil all in terms of anthropology, linguistics, habitation, outlook, art, music, literature, religion and philosophy doesn't allow any uniform notion of identity, politics and culture.

Since then, in any case, the concept of 'contemporary' in Indian art has always been limited, misused and hence misleading – keeping away the absolute majority out of context and relevance. Even today, most of its applications import various western-theories unanimously and thus remain limited or restricted to the minor-arena of *avant garde* practices that are mostly limited in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore or Kolkata, displayed in urban-galleries, promoted by mediator-traders, propagated by metropolitan media and art-magazines, practiced by individual city-dwellers, and purchased by the urban riches – either investors or collectors. On the contrary, the vastly potent and living panorama of rural-traditions that belong to a wide range of folk-tribal genre, have always been forgotten or avoided in this context and kept aside as the 'other.' Age-old legacy of *Madhubani* of Mithila or *Warli* of Maharashtra – even after being alive, and contemporaneous to the Subodh Guptas' for example – have always been left out as something that belong to the past, as outdated or as something irrelevant. Nobody ever tried to study the spirit and strength of these collective-practices in sustaining their vitality and vigor for such a long period of time. Only at times, a handful of these traditions are picked-up hastily and projected as abrupt sources or references of aesthetic-inspiration for the *avant garde*, as and when required, merely to establish the authenticity and socio-cultural-historical relevance of any 'contemporary archetype.' That is the way how the living-tradition of *Godna*, for example, becomes relevant only when it is referred as one of the source-materials for the contemporary-renderings by Arpana Caur.

Unfortunately, such a generalized notion of 'contemporary' has been deeply rooted in most of the discourses on Indian art, though the unique demography of the country itself defies such incomplete connotations. Occasional efforts however have been displayed in the recent times to showcase both the *avant garde* and the folk-tribal, urban and rural, the individual and the collective under one-roof – but the approach of such endeavors initiated by the urban-liberals has always remained as not of a true comrade but a savior. Hence the desired synthesis remained as a distant dream even in the twenty-first century, the era of global-multiple. Perhaps it was only Tapati Guha Thakurta, who placed the question unanswered to a group of *avant garde* practitioners by insisting for a fresh outlook to check and find how the living-folk and the living-tribal are to be accommodated in the contemporary space of Indian art.

The Chitrolekha Journal on Art and Design, in this special issue, aimed to embody a deep concern on this matter and succeeded to gather a fair amount of materials in the form of papers submitted

from various corners of the country. Soma Ghosh from Hyderabad has discussed on the contemporary textile art of Kalamkari. (Dr) Mousumi Kandali from Delhi has written on the new interpretation of the *Patkai Tales* and the artistic oeuvre of Debananda Ulup of Assam. Manik Gaonkar from Mumbai has emphasized on the contemporary-practices of *Citrakathi*-tradition and its relevance in the present art-market scenario. Tanvi Bambolkar from Goa has taken a different route to explain the semiotics of traditional versus modern space with special reference to the *Maand* system of Goan folk tradition. Sabuj Sarkar and Mithun Barman from Maldah of West Bengal have jointly contributed with a socio-cultural study on the tribal art and paintings of Maldah and South Dinajpur.

We know that a lot is yet to cover and a lot yet to discuss. The paradox is yet to be resolved and our perceptions are yet to be streamlined. This issue however is a beginning and a small-step in that direction – a random discourse towards the cause and need of a flexible accommodation of the ‘multiple’. Wish this effort of Chitrolekha would lead towards many such endeavors and deconstruct the cliché of Contemporary Indian Art, in parallel to the reconstruction of its meaning in a broader perspective. Perhaps that is the only way to reorganize our regular-practices and overall-understanding of Indian life and culture as a whole – in search of a proactive-harmony and productive synthesis for the future.