

The Patkai Tales: An interpenetration of the folk/ tribal/ avant-garde

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Abstract

In the history of modernism, inventing a modern art that is exclusive and one which privileges the speaking subjects of the metropolis has been the normative trend. Here in this exclusive list that includes folk, tribal, popular, other minorities, little tradition and subaltern groups, another category can be added which is a terrain of the under-privileged locations with regard to geo-political domination and economic emancipation welding no hegemonic power in cultural dynamics. However, within such locations too some artists such as Debananda Ulup are seen engaged in symbolic mediation of their existential predicament tethered to the experience of modernity and its associated polemics, the post-colonial-peripheral-tribal which can be seen as an interpenetrative realm of the folk, 'tribal' and the avant-garde.

Keywords: Modernity, Modern Indian Art, Folk, Tribal, Myth.

I

Construction of the Modern Indian Art and the periphery of the Nation's Imagination

Any deliberation on the contemporary/ contemporary art in India inevitably leads to a critical probing about the 'modern' since the contemporary art practices are historical consequences of a cultural departure from the traditional artistic discourse ushering a unique phenomenon called 'Modern Indian art' at the advent of 20th century. The term 'Modern', though highly equivocal, commonly refers to a cluster of international movements and trends in the arts and literature pertaining to a specific periodization within the given historical context. Beyond this rudimentary labelling, however, there is little agreement about the meaning and scope of the term and hence, it jeopardizes any claim for a homogenous wholeness or status as a monolithic entity. Rather the semantic structure of modern can be described as a fuzzy set of meaning horizons determinable functionally and contextually clustered in dynamic hierarchies by degrees of salience. The tendency of upholding a logically intentional definition of modern with an official checklist of necessary and sufficient conditions for all modernist trends to articulate an organic model proves to be too positivistic on the one hand. On the other hand, the logically, extensional definition concerned with the periodization-oriented approach that attempts to define modern simply by enumeration or descriptions of various conventionally associated issues tends to be too relativistic. Both these models make no

room to embrace certain categories, since these categories cannot be appropriated within the organic wholeness of the monolithic structure of the modernist model. These side-lined categories or systems tether onto the edge of the margins. Looking into the context of mainstream national modern with regard to Modern Indian art, the logically intentional definition of a monolithic modern based on this organic model seems to be working so far. The national modern of Indian art maps the ways in which the choice of historicizing the art of twentieth century has been operating. It is about framing of history, categories, inclusions and exclusions. It is obviously a troubled terrain. Any discussion of the ways in which objects, representation and practices are historicised would necessarily entail a consideration of the ideational and institutional frames within which these objects, representation and practices are produced, understood and disseminated.

The American art critic Lucy R. Lippard (1990) in her book *Mixed Blessing* outlines a pattern of cultural domination in the United States by a homogenized Euro-American society and the consequent marginalizing of mixed race group comprising African, Native American, Latin American and Asian natives. Lippard states:

The Contemporary art world, a somewhat rebellious satellite of the dominant culture, is better equipped to swallow cross-cultural influence than to savour them... Ethnocentrism in arts is balanced on a notion of Quality that “transcends boundaries”- and is identifiable by those in power. According to this lofty view, racism has nothing to do with art, qualities will prevail, so called minorities just haven’t got it yet. (p.57)

Hence, the institutionalized version of cultural modern that emerged in Europe and America around the middle of the twentieth century is based on the critical standard of a notion of Quality that transcends boundaries and is identifiable only by those in power. I take this clue from Lippard’s observation about the international mainstream modern juxtaposed against other modernisms at the margins, to apply it to the modernist canonization of Indian national modern, where if any marginalised category or system does not map into the mainstream, the reason provided is this very notion of “just haven’t got it yet. Consequently, in such ‘production’ of modern or contemporary art, the (living) folk, (living) tribal and popular cultures often get side-lined. In this history of modernity, inventing a modern art that is exclusive and one which privileges the speaking subjects of the metropolis becomes the norm. Here in this exclusive list that includes folk, tribal, popular, other minorities, little tradition and subaltern groups, I would like to add another category of the lesser zones situated in the side-lined terrain of remote geographic space, a terrain of dis-privileged positions with regard to geo-political domination or economic emancipation and wielding apparently no power in cultural dynamics. Such a geo-political space would be “North-East” among others in the cultural landscape of India in general and ‘Modern/contemporary Indian Art in particular. It substrates on the complex binary division between the centre/mainstream and periphery/sub-stream where North-East has been historically occupying that position teetering in the periphery of the nation’s imagination.

II

The art of Debananda Ulup: Mythic re-appropriation and political allegory

It is in this context and backdrop that I would like to discuss an artist from Assam who represents an ethnic 'tribal' community called the Singphoe which is a very small community hailing from the upper region of Assam on the bordering area of Arunachal Pradesh and Myanmar. As Dibya Jyoti Borah (2017) observes:

The Singphoes similar Jingphoes, Chingpaws, Tneinbaw, Kakhieng, Kachin and Ye Jen are the inhabitants of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, Kachin Land, Chan State and Wa State of Myanmar, Yunnan Province of China and a few villages of Chinassgmai in Thailand, Tibet and Laos. At present in Assam, they are mostly concentrated in Margherita sub division of Tinsukia district and in Arunachal Pradesh at Changlong and Lohit district... Singphoes were the most powerful and influential tribes of Patkai frontiers for several generations whom Afghan troops of British Army attributed as "Pathans of Burma" out of respect. Leaving deep traces in history of Assam, Singphoes have had a historic role in pioneering tea cultivation in Assam during the British reign (Borah, 2017).

Now the artist in reference in the forgoing is neither a typical practitioner of a particular living –folk or living-tribal art tradition nor is he solely engaged in artistic endeavours within a rural set up. But he is a self-taught artist in whose creative praxis one can see an interpenetration and intermingling of folk/tribal/avant-garde as well as rural-urban dynamics thereby representing the complex existential predicament of a contemporary selfhood . Most importantly his works are constant and consistent engagement within the socio/politico/cultural contexts of the 'locale' gaining a profound constituency for the people of his ethnic origin. His close connectivity to his geopolitical space and his political reflexivity has been a pointer to the relevance of contemporary art practices in society today where the respective art is not merely a high modernist aesthetic engagement but a form of practice for cultural documentation and archiving of the cultural memory of his community. His lingual and stylistic expression could be modernist at times but it is tinged by a deep folkloric perception and imagination. Myth, folk tales, oral poetry, religious beliefs, traditional ideas and local images are manifested in great opulence and abundance in the sense of epic theatricality in the vast spectrum of folk cultural resources in the region of Assam where more than one hundred and three ethnic groups inhabit. In such situations, juxtaposition of real and unreal or fantasy is a part of the lived traditions. The artistic oeuvre of this artist, namely Debananda Ulup is a typical rendering of imbibed Singpho tribal myths, ideas and local images where traditional myth are recreated as modern myths thereby adding a new dimension to the artistic expression. Appropriation/ Re-appropriation of myth to suggest and generate newer meanings by trans versing them to allegorical historical statements is a characteristic feature of his art works. For Raymond Williams (1985):

Myth has been held to be a truer (deeper) version of reality than (secular) history or realistic description or scientific explanation. This view ranges from simple irrationalism to super naturalism, to more sophisticated account, in which myth are held to be fundamental expression of certain properties of human organization. These expressions are timeless or fundamental to particular periods of culture. (p.212)

As observed by Williams, assimilation of the mythic function to the creative function of art and literature has become involved with difficult modern senses of imagination, creation and fiction and has been used to illustrate and analyse human nature. According to Roland Barthes (1972), myth is a type of speech conveyed by discourse. “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message” (Barthes, 1972, p.107). Hence with advancement of time and changes in the historical contexts, myths generated new meanings or new myths and these newly generated myths are indicative of newer values pertaining to the society.

Artist Debananda Ulup grasps this function of myth and hence weaves a series of visual representations like *The Yellow Bird* (2002, See Image 1), *Nac/ Bagh -manuh* (1991, See Image 2), *Patkai* (2005, See Images 4 and 5) and others, by imbibing this mythic function into his creative realm.

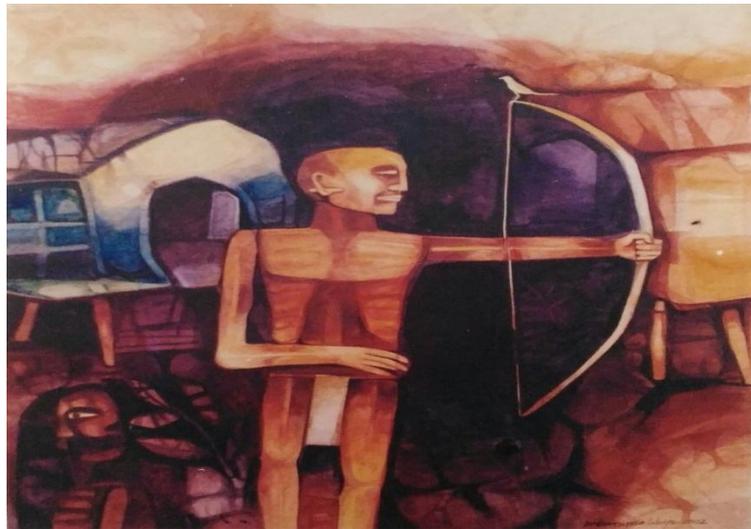


Figure 1: *The Yellow Bird* (2002) by D. Ulup. Gauhati Artist Guild Gallery.



Figure 2 : *The Nac or Bagh Manuh* (1991) by D. Ulup. Gauhati Artist Guild Gallery.

With an acute sense of Political reflexivity, he thereby has been trying to mediate the modernist aporias experienced by an ancient “tribal’ culture in transition. The myth of ‘The Yellow Bird’ which eats up all the hard earned crops of the farmer gets depicted as the metaphor of the exploiter, robbing the resources of the tribal commoners. So powerful is the bird that it intrudes and nests right on top of the bow, the weapon of self-defence thereby rendering the oppressed ‘other’ totally helpless. Interplay of multiple meanings and a subversive/deconstructive strategy characterize his renderings. Bird, the traditional signifier of hope, dreams, desires and aspirations, transforms into a yellow metaphor of the parasite nesting on the oppressed “other” in the artist’s vision. The skeletal figure standing in the defensive posture, arching his bow is a recurrent image. Here the body becomes a text, a politicized site for allegorizing the state of tribal society and its world threatened by the aporias of an uneven modernity/ aggressive modernization besides being bitten by the tension of losing one’s authenticity, traditional values and ideals. The lament gets intensified in the poetic depiction of the imagery of the moon being swallowed by the monstrous dragon- a Singpho tribal myth about beauty as serenity of peace and prosperity and devilish ugliness as turmoil and devastation.

To talk about the aesthetics and politics in the art of Ulup, the embedded context of an existential predicament tethered to the experience of modernity and its associated polemics (the post-colonial-peripheral-tribal) has to be considered. Springing from the queer form of a split modernity set against an enlarged theatre of economic and political contradictions, it is the experience strangled by the opposing pull of tradition and modernity that triggered off the quest for identity amidst an acute sense of survival angst

and the shock of displacement. To delve deeper into the politically reflexive tales of the self-taught artist, the context of modernist aporias experienced by a ‘primitive’ tribal culture in transition has to be deeply understood in its totality and complexity.

In his symbolic mediation of the immediate terrain of such experience, the artist is deeply engaged in translating visual images as metaphor of the values cherished by this indigenous culture. Understandable in the cultural context, he derives the metaphors from the collective subconscious and creates the parole by absorbing the elements from the traditional tribal myth-folklores-beliefs thereby transforming them into modern myths. Myth is appropriated to generate newer meanings by transforming them to allegorical historical statements. The mythical “Bagh-Manuh” - Tiger-Man projected against an overwhelming cityscape epitomize the aggressive nihilism. Thick terror and despair perfuse the air. Soaring “Dream” tend to fall into the deep dark chasm of non-fulfilment. Even *The Brother in the Same Boat* (2002, See Image 3), which bears a resonance with the song by Paul Robson, has been depicted with a figure having a hidden third hand with a stabbing knife, evoking the distrust and terror of the contemporary time.



Figure 3 : *The brother in the same boat* (2002) by D. Ulup. Gauhati Artist Guild Gallery.

His ‘Patkai’ series (See figures 4 and 5) is yet another poignant rendering of his identitarian concern. Patkai is the mountain range at the border of Assam and Myanmar in whose foothill this ethnic tribal group of the Singpho inhabit. In Ulup’s artistic narration, Patkai becomes the metaphorical representation of the tribe. At times if the Patkai is depicted with scars all over the body. It emerges dark in colour to also signify the rigorous coal mining by the miners from the rich industrial world often coming from northern belt of India with long standing environmental implications and saga of exploitation. At other time it is seen in distorted deformations of the body.



Figure 4 : *Patkai* (2005) by D. Ulup. Gauhati Artist Guild Gallery.

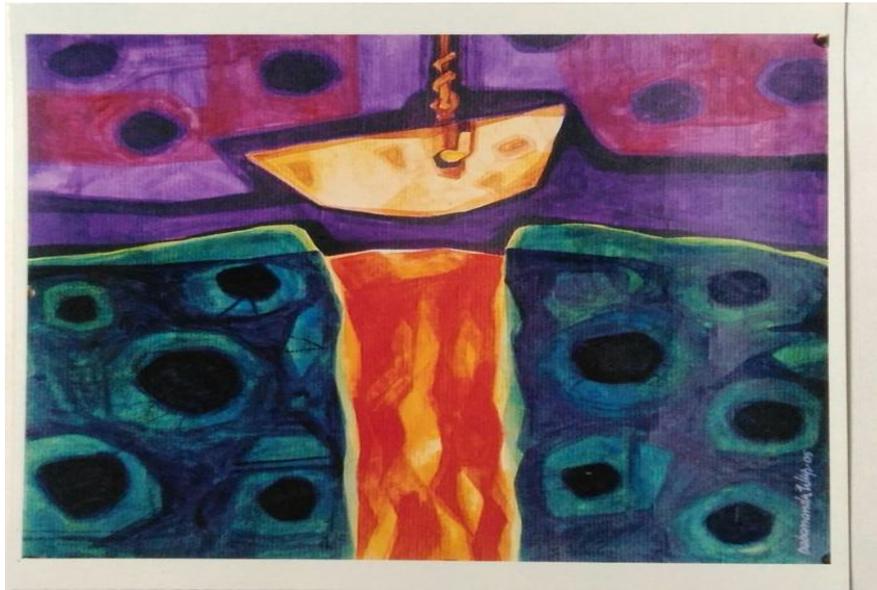


Figure 5: *Patkai* (2005) by D. Ulup.. Gauhati Artist Guild Gallery.

Ulup also engages in subversive narration of the mythical or mythological characters. Herein his depiction of *Ganesha* (1990, see Image 6) is worth mentioning. Ganesha in this painting is seen as the central protagonist of the text. His iconic and monumental representation is subverted from the traditional representations. In traditional representations Ganesha, the Hindu deity is usually seen with a *motichoor* laddu in his one hand and *Abhay Mudra* in the other hand. His head is adorned with a golden ornate crown and body wrapped in expensive fine clothing. However, Ulup in an insightful subversion depicts Ganesha in tribal look with his own folkloric imagination. His Ganesha is seen in an attire similar to his traditional indigenous costume where the head is adorned by colourful feathers with one hand holding a ripe banana and the other hand holding a bow and arrows.



Figure 6: *Ganesha* (1990) by D. Ulup. Gauhati Artist Guild Gallery.

Deconstructing the stereotype of the conventional iconography, Ulup's Ganesha springs up as the representative of a subaltern identity. His Ganesha also represents the down trodden poverty stricken economic state of the people by holding a banana, a signifier of natural food taken by the forest people of this tribe instead of a *motichoor* laddu made of expensive ghee, sugar, besan, dry fruits or such other ingredients which are affordable only by the affluent class of the higher strata of the society or upper caste people who represent the mainstream Indian Brahmanical culture. Ganesha is indeed a note worthy subversion by the artist which is reminiscent of some of such subversive work by Indian masters like Bhupen Khakhar and Amit Ambala. Khakhar's 'Hanuman' or Ambala's "You carry the burden, I will play the flute" are such work where subaltern identity is represented in a highly evocative manner with sharp mockery and layered political connotations thereby transforming the signs of the text into some meta signs. If Khakhar's Hanuman is burning in fire from his own his tail representing the monkey army, the often exploited subject of the nation state collapsing under the burden of service to the nation (the figure of a Saurashtriyian farmer is a double pointer), the Krishna in Ambala's text is the representative of the elite class playing flute apathetic to the over burdened conditions of the lower class captured through the image of a bending red figure with a huge sack on his shoulder.

III

Interpenetration of Folk/Tribal/Avant-garde

As already mentioned in the foregoing Sub-national positioning against a monolithic national Identity or interventional resistance against stereotyping of a definite geopolitical space like North East India in the mainstream cultural imagination accounts for a definite antagonistic tendency in the politics of identity in a broader and larger sphere.

However, it is interesting to note that this same tendency give rise to multiple voices of identity assertion and acute socio-political reflexivity by multiple ethnic groups. The emergence of multiple voices of identity assertion by different indigenous ethnic ‘tribal’ groups to preserve, promote and expand their unique racial/cultural attributes has become a very significant development in the postcolonial period especially in the decade of eighties and the subsequent decades in the north eastern region. The spread of education and modern employment, growing socio-political-cultural awareness among the ethnic groups and the emergence of an educated middle class triggered off such developments along with some associated socio-economic and politico-historical problems like immigration and the fear psychosis associated with it due to the angst for loss of land ownership. The issue of immigrants from bordering nations has given rise to such renewed interest in identity assertion owing to a deep sense of losing one’s identity and survival angst. The cultural or artistic expressions which have reflected upon this aspect by symbolically mediating the embedded circumstances often cater to certain strategies and approaches. A predominant strategy among these is the renewed interest in one’s past, history, tradition, and myths which are the basic constituents of one’s cultural composition or cultural markers. Here appropriation and re-appropriation of these cultural markers becomes a distinct interventional strategy. In the artistic endeavours of Debananda Ulup bright, passionate, connotative colours enhance the narrative to heighten the temperamental reflections around such interventional strategy for identity -assertion . The syntax of expression and the lingual treatment at times seem to grow on the Ganesha Pyne like depiction or Manjit Bawasque kind of figurative tradition, enthused with his ingrained vocabulary. But rather than the lingual/mediumistic experimentation it is the discursive engagement of the ideological with which the artist seems to be more preoccupied. In a cultural condition where monolithic ‘grand’ narrative of a mainstream national modern in the contemporary art still seems to predominate, the poignant little narratives of the artists such as Debananda Ulup can act as a take off point for transgression and intervention. It also perhaps inscribes an interface or a unique interpenetrative realm where the folk and ‘tribal’ cohabit with the avant-garde quite effortlessly and evocatively.

Acknowledgement : I thank the artist Debananda Ulup for providing all the visuals.

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