

Folk and Minor Art in India
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Lecture - 10 & 11

Idea of Nationalism and Modernism in Context of Folk Art-I
Idea of Nationalism and Modernism in Context of Folk Art-II

In this second half, of the second module, we will discuss, these three very important aspects, together, that is, the relevance of the art practices, in reference, to nationalism and modernism, as ideas for a nation building. To make it simplified, we need to understand, how the visionaries behaved like activists, and they perceived that, folk and minor art has a prime role to play in the cultural politics of our country, and specially in the colonial India, it became much more relevant, because that was a time, when the country men were in search of a new idiom of expression, that is of their own. So, in search of that indigenous expression, they tried to understand and realize quite a few factors, that has acted as operational factor in the colonial and of course, in the pre colonial, post colonial era. And we are going to talk about the vision and the visionaries, who realized that, modernism and nationalism has some connection, and that built up the importance of folk and minor art practice in India, to a large extent.

So, in these three lectures, we are going to understand through examples and texts, that how it has shaped up and how it got executed in that particular time, and what is the relevance of this particular activity in today's context. So, although, being instinctive and primitive by nature has never been counted as a demerit for modern art, folk art, of India, but it holds the potential to fall under a different subgroup, which is perhaps still unnamed. So, in the beginning of the lecture, when we talked about this misleading terms, folk art itself is not a very clear term, or when we say some art to be minor, then what is the major stream that remains the question. When we say is tribal art, then who are the tribes, and who are not the tribes. So, this is perhaps the question that we must hold and try to understand and answer that, through the journey that we are taking up. And for me, as instructor of the course I am trying to gather as many information as possible, and I am going to connect them, in reference to the context of the importance of nationalism and modernism.

The concept of modernism that has come via Europe, but the nationalism and modernism had the similar fiber, all over in the world. So, let us see how they were interpreted, and how we look at them. We can neither call it primitive, if we associate primitivism in western, European Avant Garde principle, of modernity. Nor can any academic sophistication in its technique that transports it to the mainstream. The Avant Garde artists in the west included revived primitivism to defy classicism. This set the appreciative parameters for modern expression, to overrule the illusion of space and confronted a new mode of idealism, conforming to the basic simplicity, similar to primitive and prehistoric culture. In colonial and post independent India, primitivism was rather associated with nationalistic spirit, by the activists, who initiated the revival of indigenous art.

During this time, the revivalist scholars realized the importance of folk art that was regional, religious, and also vernacular in nature. For a long time, the folk aesthetics have confronted doubts whether the paintings are worth of any serious discourse or not, but eventually with the endorsement of nationalism, context of folk art drew thoughtful attention as a newly found alternative aesthetics for our country. W G Archer found the tradition to be of some importance, due to its primitive connection in the light of the pioneering Avant Garde movement in the Europe, whereas, Ananda K Coomaraswamy and E B Havell, studied between the years 1909 to 1935, on Indian art practice, outside the mainstream mughal court painting, placed the regional art form on the higher pedestal.

In their opinion, on the potential of painting, to contribute in a rise of modern Indian art, under nationalistic spirit, E B Havell noticed the tradition as a turning point, to revive indigenous style of visual expression. Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and other nationalists from Bengal school, commented over the explored possibility, of including the style and aesthetic principles of folk painting in their own artworks. In recent times art historians namely Partha Mitter, Debashish Banerji, and R Siva Kumar, are amongst the writers to access the significance of these experiments, in their recent writings.

So, from here, we would like to understand, how we invited modernism, in the country's cultural history, with the help of folk and minor art that was existing for a very long time without notice. It was something that was not really taken into a serious account for a very long time, but the practice nevertheless, went on and on and on. In the writing of

Partha Mitter's, *The Triumph of Modernism, India's artists and the Avant Garde, 1922 to 1947*, Partha Mitter highlighted on some lesser known aspects of Indian art, focusing at the turbulent aimed at the British colonial era, when the dawn of modernism, offered Indian artists of early twentieth century, with a commanding device of colonial confrontation.

He particularly mentioned two artists namely, Sunayani Devi, and Jamini Roy's, their works to reiterate folk components that was discussed thoroughly in Partha Mitter's writing. The devices of colonial confrontation, that we try to understand in this particular context, was more like a codification in this direction, where Bahaus exhibition in 1922 in Kolkata, marked an entrance of European modernism in India, to potentially intervene and mingle with Indian nationalism. The decline of oriental art changing nature of imperial patronage, rise of feminist voices, and realization of primitive elements for independent artistic expression, marked the modern India.

So, it no longer followed the western way of looking at things. When we say western, we generalize it, but by saying western, we mean the European culture, that dates back to sixteenth century renaissance, where the scientific perspective and the illusion of depth, that was created in a ground, was considered to be the highest level of beauty. They set up a parameter. In fact, into the Indian mind, to go by that and that was known to be the ideal condition for them. That was also some kind of idealism that is related to realism. So, the nationalistic notions came much later in European modern art, but with that, we should not also ignore, a new possibility of the aesthetic quality, that was provided by the primitive expressions or the prehistoric art. In our country it was surviving in the form of folk and minor art.

With that, the book of Partha Mitter, it unveils another very important component that unveils inventing the Indian peasant to access the primitive reception in modern art, as a partial dissolution and ostentation. It was not only the western intake for Indian art, but Stella Kramrisch introduced the modernity of style, in urban folk painting of Kali Ghat Pata, and Katha embroidered images of rural Bengal to European Avant Garde. Stella Kramrisch was the one who used to come and collect the almost unrealized tradition of embroidery that was done on the Katha surface and she was the great collector of that. Many of her collections are still preserved in Gurusaday museum Kolkata, and if you look at them, you feel that how that particular tradition has also evolved, but it was very,

very significant and great realization, from the part of this visionary activist Stella Kramrisch, that she established the fact of the realization of the importance of the indigenous culture, and where we should place them, how we must realize them, and get benefitted by it.

So, recognizing the aesthetic perspective, of all those things, were also very crucial for that particular moment. Until about 50 years ago, the researchers involved in the study of regional folklore, and anthropology, did not count on the potential of self expression, and aesthetic value of folk paintings. The paintings were made in the pilgrimage, and sold to temple visitors as souvenirs; they were valued for the rituals that they were associated with. So, it had a social purpose of course, but it was never realized as a artistic expression, that this can also be potentially, a very meaningful and effective expression of ones thought, emotions, as an artist.

So, it was in the beginning of twentieth century that handful of scholars started recognizing the aesthetic perspective, of the regional artist's artistry, and threw light on them, through their writings and speeches. So, in 1916, it was Ananda Coomaraswamy, who made visit to the western India, north western India in particular, to see the practice of Pahari miniature of Rajasthan, and the northern region to realize how indigenous they are in their practice, and before that or almost in the same time, it was a confusion for many, that miniature painting is only confined to the mughal court.

Mughal miniature was popular to some extent, and people also developed some bit of an appreciation for that particular tradition, and they had been collectors for mughal miniatures at that time, but nobody realized the importance of Pahari miniatures namely, the miniature practices that was there in Bundi, Kota, and all those regions, also partially the Kangra valley miniature, in Himachal Pradesh, that also had the significant impact in the Indian culture. The only thing is, there had variation in style, but that was very difficult to realize, unless somebody brought it into the open daylight, and he was one who collected and wrote about those traditions, in a great detail, and through whom, we got another exposure to a great tradition, that was already there surviving for a very long time.

It came with a much larger realization, that it is not only the Persian influence, that gave birth the miniature tradition in our country, but there had been parallel traditions, which

was going on, and it got amalgamated, and it got eclectic characteristic, with the culmination of the great tradition of mughal miniature painting. So, that added more dimension to the mughal miniature painting as well. It was Coomaraswamy, to rehabilitate all forms of Indian art, regardless of academic or non academic style, to the European audiences. His writing enabled the viewers to grasp the aesthetics of rural and vernacular term, of artistic expression.

In nineteen hundred, when it was a time when the contemporary art scenario of Europe, was experiencing a dynamic shift with the idea of modernism. Painters from Germany and France showed significant zing, to vitalize and reshuffle the existing norms of political expression, through the pictorial term, every now and then. They dared to rebuke the classical norms, of image making to engage themselves into the new experiments, with the new aesthetics that was connected to primitivism, and that took birth to a new aesthetic of modernism, which is much more simplified, and devoid of many traditional rules. For a very long time, the cultural enthusiasm of folk art was confined to Bengal in India.

The exponents of Bengali region, could sense the mode of European modern art that has corresponded to a liberated style that encouraged distortion, arbitrary qualities, symbolism and real space, to achieve a rudimentary simplicity, similar to folk art in our country. In Europe, the changes were caused by the newly beholden ventures of African art, and also the tradition of Japanese Ukiyoe trends, that they traded from Japan at that time. And that was all about the print making of the wood cut prints of Japan, the artworks of Sharaku, Hokusai, that came in through that trade route, and they also got exposure to the two dimensional quality of Persian carpet, through the trade route. And through those aesthetic qualities the flat color, the overlapping images, it is a different perspective that was very, very far eastern, where the diagonal lines never got recession, and it never converged into a particular vanishing point, unlike the renaissance compositions, rather they had a very different perspective that is known as far eastern perspective, where all the diagonal lines were parallel to each other, and that made the back side, the background of the painting, in the same scale with the foreground, to make it more revealing, and it just gives a very different type of perspective.

Alongside they used the normal usual perspective also, by overlapping vertical location, and many other devices, that are working a general rule, for all these kind of prints. So,

through those images, which were also having a very strong impact, some of the painters in Europe, they realized that, there is a possibility to get a better aesthetics at least as an alternative that can come through Persia, from the decorative and flat color combinations of the Persian carpets, as well as the Ukiyo e prints from Japan.

The educated and visionary art lovers and art collectors of Bengal could identify the unique virtue of Indian folk paintings in non academic category. They threw light on the archaic, yet bold expression, which is fresh, spontaneous, confident, it is also very simple, and made out of the simplicity of means, and the very distinctive style of folk art. That is also various, it has tremendous variety and impact. Art critic Ajit Ghose, and artist Mukul De in 1920s were amongst the pioneers, who began to collect, to collect and preserve the living folk art works of their time. In 1930s Gurusaday Dutta, an Indian civil service official travelled the remote villages of Bengal, and made a large collection of folk art of the great significance. Slowly more centers of folk paintings were located all over the country.

I will quote very comprehensive, and clear writing from Jagdish Mittal Jagdish, Mittal writes, the term folk painting here, encompasses pictures, made in Indian villages, by both men and women, for ornamentation of their abodes, portrayal of their gods, and for their various rituals, and by local professional painters, or artisans, for use of the local people. The term also includes pictures, made in the bazaars, by hereditary painters, to cater to the needs of the urban population, and those made at centers of pilgrimage, by traditional professional painter families. All these paintings were produced in varieties of styles, and themes, history, sociology, and geography, infused the painting of each region with local flavor. To some extent, their style and quality depended on the materials available, in the place in which they were executed. These very factors help us to identify them, region-wise and yet, through all the apparent diversity, there runs an underlying unity, which makes them Indian.

Gurusaday Dutta's contribution to the folk art of Bengal is counted as superior to all. He took interest in folk art, to strengthen the social culture at large, as the colonial administrator of British India. During his tenure as the district magistrate of Birbhum, in Bengal, he initiated the first exhibition of Patua art in 1932, which is very significant, by collecting numerous scroll paintings and songs associated to them. The collected papers

in torn condition, are now preserved in Gurusaday Dutta museum, in covered cases with restricted access, they reveal useful literature on folk arts, and crafts of Bengal.

Gurusaday Dutta divided human activities into three departments, respectively, reason, imagination, and emotion; to realize that a distinctive characteristic of a particular is not conditioned to any race or nation. According to him, the cultural contacts between the races and the nation, although alarming, must not be restricted to enable enrichment, in the existing cultural wealth. Gurusaday Dutta writes, the importance of folk art is realized as a fountain for renewal of national inspiration, and for the resuscitation of national culture. For the folk art of a nation, is the sincerest and most spontaneous collective expression, of its essential philosophy of and outlook on life, and of the distinctive moral, and spiritual ideas of the race. Of its simple joys and sorrows, as well as of its highest aims and aspirations, expressed through an art language, specially suited to its race, genius, and embodying the imagery turn of expression, tonality, and rhythm, peculiar to it, and evolved through countless centuries, by operation of the physical environment, and spiritual and cultural values. This is from his writing, the importance of folk art and its relation to national culture, page four, source Gurusaday Dutta museum Kolkata.

According to another scholar, another very significant scholar of our time, K G Subramanyan; K G Subramanyan in his book living tradition raised a very crucial point, on cultural inheritance, that neither should be counted as indisputable, nor as obsolete. It is rather the question of originality that is also not free from preconceived notions, and antecedents. He says that, if we hypothetically take a person as the most original one, and the purely original one, in the context, the person still may carry certain things in his gene that will make him less original. So, there is nothing called purely original, and nobody can be completely original. And that is another problem, when we think of an idea like nationalism, where we feel that, we are showing something which is something completely of our own, it belongs to a nation devoid of all kind of possible influences from any other places, it is very difficult to perceive or formulate that kind of an idea, at the first place.

So, he said, that the traditional practice, and contemporary content is based on how the artist as a creator combines his personal contribution, to a tradition, in sync, with the former precedents, to maintain the life that is irresistible. According to him it is a circuit,

it is almost like a creative circuit that makes the creative individual to contribute to its growth, and receive a contribution, in to his own personal growth as well. In his view, the rationale of creativity, in traditional art forms, is operated by collective identities, but validity lies on their agreement, to the needs and values of time. The collectiveness comprises of factors like, ethnicity, regional identity, of nationalistic obligations, that led people once, to identify the characteristic features of indigenous art traditions of India. It was unfair for the ruling governance of colonial India, to undermine the unbroken tradition of existing regional art and craft, which contributed and continued unbreakably for years.

Other than E B Havell and Ananda Coomaraswamy, there was Okakura Kakuzo, to pledge pan Asian Indigenism. Sister Nivedita, George Birdwood, who tried to look at the tradition to boost nationalism. On the contrary, in twentieth century Europe, artists like Pablo Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Paul Klee, they welcomed modern expression in light of world's traditional culture. They drew great impetus for the likeminded artists, and art lovers of India. Ravindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, and Nandalal Bose realized the need of an exposure, to folk art, from the language, to broaden the sensibilities of modern art practitioners. Nandalal Bose worked with the Patuas of Bengal, and his Haripura posters are the apt examples of the success. We are going to discuss it shortly, by seeing the images. Right now, let us concentrate on the concept and realize their importance, and slowly we will also see the examples and try to understand it once again, afresh.

Gurusaday Dutta indicated two folded process, with example from European nationalist ideologies, one is, to hold into their folk art, to rejuvenate patriotic feelings, and the other is to, reinvestigate primitive spirit, to reintroduce simplicity. With the realization, he ventured to save the folk art of Bengal, with utter promptness that resulted in inspiring many. To Gurusaday Dutta's opinion, unlike the cultivated arts, of the sophisticated stages of society, in all countries, often, marred by the complicated formality, and artificiality, an excessive elegance, and an over refinement of mannerism, broadening on efficiency, the folk art of every nation has primitive purity, directness, vitality, and robustness, which serve as a perennial fountain, for the rejuvenation and strengthening of national life and art form, art, from age to age.

This is based on the lecture delivered at the post graduate department in arts university of Calcutta, on 17th April 1932, and published in Prabuddha Bharata, October 1932. Gurusaday Dutta, strongly stated, let every child born of Bengali parents, be placed from the earliest years in possession of all those things, which are the distinctive products of the Bengali race, and he will, to echo the words of Cecil sharp, thereby know and understand his country and countrymen, far better than he does as at present, at knowing and understanding them, he will love them the more, realize that he is united to them by subtle bond of blood and kinship, and become in the highest sense of the word, a better citizen and a true patriot. This is written by Gurusaday Dutta, folk art and craft of Bengal, the collective papers folk art and its relation to national culture, page ten, source Gurusaday Dutta museum, Kolkata.

It is clear from the statement that was made by Gurusaday Dutta, that there had been the immediacy to inject the nationalistic spirit, in to the common mind in that time. So, we will try to realize or re-realize that particular statement, and the sense that was evocative of the mind building of the newborns, and those who are influenced by the nationalistic ideologies, as a intrinsic part of their upbringing, how they interpreted it at that time, and we will try to realize it, in reference to a more recent quote from K G Subramanyan, which he wrote in 1987 in the context of cultural inheritance, a similar spirit with more hardheaded term.

Each human being inherits, when he is born into a society, of any sophistication, a large inheritance of culture that feeds, nourishes, and gives direction to his growth. And to him, the society assumes a parental status. To his reaction, to it is, filial, in a sort; it is torn between a feeling of affection and gratitude, on one side, and of resentment and rebellion, on the other. Fundamentally, however, a tradition is based on a complex of situational factors, of what we may call a work circuit, the motivation and rationale of the activity, its conceptual and technological components, its emotional undercurrents. From these emerges its formal characteristics, when these factors hold constant, one can safely expect continuity in these characteristics, and when they change, expect a corresponding change.

It is evident therefore, from the fact that revival of folk art principle, aided the nationalistic movement in our country, during the pre-independence era, and even long after the independence, when nationalism lost its immediate significance. Folk art did not

lose its relevance that marks the core of creation. Folk art practice implies the fundamental questions of inheriting the, eventually contributing to the tradition, steering its growth further. Folk paintings being deeply rooted to life and living, crosses the initial paradigm of spiritual foundation, to respond to the real happenings, and thereby constantly shuffles, its creative modality, pertaining morality, adjusting to the values of contemporary society, with traditional value system. It faces the challenge of constantly balancing between modern sensibility, promptly responses to the current happenings, and the responsibility as inheritance of an age old ethical foundation.

So, to conclude the topic of classification and connections, and the traditional roots, this is more like a literature survey that we have had, for the past few lectures, as the second module, of our discussion. It is more like reading, understanding the different sayings of different people; we will try to conclude this particular discussion, by realizing the relevance of art practice. So, let us jot down the points that we have discussed so far, in a connected manner.