

# TRADITION NOW

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“Only a dialogue with the past can produce originality” ---Wilson Harris

## INTRODUCTION

Tradition is the future out of the past. Tradition, among other things, is an appeal to the past. However historical traditions are not reconstructions of the past. Rather, the past is reinterpreted, fashioned anew or “invented” to meet the possibilities and demands of the future.

Within the context of this argument I would like to place a group of nine artists emerging from the geopolitical locale of Kerala with modern art pedagogy. The commonality of thread linking them is their tradition of style foregrounded in the Kerala Murals. These murals are characterized by folk elements, sophisticated line, resonant colours, decorative space and profusion of ornamental elements. A general observation about the Southern artists is that they try to retain their individuality by remaining rooted, without blindly imitating what are perceived as global trends. The reasons perhaps could be geography — their location at the extreme periphery and an innate obduracy to mark a posture of difference by interfacing with their unique tradition to establish their distinct difference in this age of globalization where monotonous uniformity is a norm. The dialectic of past and future, mediated through understandings of tradition, therefore remains of singular importance in the cultures of South a case in point would be the Madras art Movement.

## TRADITION AND MODERNITY

Tradition and Modernity are concepts/conditions that establish a tension between an old order and new adventure. They are terms that functions dialogically. As a matter of fact there is no opposition but the two modes weave together centuries of symbolic experiences into a new texture that carries within it both the old and the new. “Modernity is an economic force with social, cultural, and political correlatives; Tradition is a cultural force with social, economic, and political correlatives” [Partha Chatterji]. Great tradition as K.C.S. Paniker said “are storehouses of deathless creative energy which under contingencies can kindle itself anew, vibrate with life and inspire to reach greater heights”.

The idea of modernity rests on rupture serving to makes it the vibrant experience of uniqueness of any moment in history. It simultaneously is the intricately bonded experience of a contemporary present with its historical memory. Yet the paradox of conditions of rupture and historical memory continues to be a reality within the Indian context, which has been made dialogical by the artists.

Tradition within a broad definition imbricates unique artistic cultural heritage of a nation. Subsumed within the category of tradition was a distinct notion of indigenism or nativism. Indigenism as Geeta Kapur conceptualized it was a construct that had cultural-ideological implications of colonialism. It concerned the unique feature of one’s nation’s history and tradition, its surviving culture and its environment. A different

perception of tradition was given by three leading artists of the Swadeshi movement namely Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Rabindranath Tagore. Abanindranath in his approach to tradition was freely moving between the different positions of a textual scholar, a critic and an artist. Nandalal said, "Tradition is to the artist, what capital is to the businessman. With it he can work with less effort and more profit". And to Rabindranath it presented challenges to manoeuvre tradition and translate it in keeping with the contingencies of the contemporary moments, which would allow opportunities for reworking. In traditional arts the concept of time is timeless. That is why tradition remains timeless only to be rejuvenated at the appropriate moment with a required idiom that will make it meaningful. Indians in their imaginations are a fecund race. This is supported by the material evidence of the great epics, mahakavyas and itihās that remains our enduring tradition. Within this mythical imagination, timelessness is the most vital concept and according to the ages the epic has lent itself with versatility for interpretation. Hence in the 21<sup>st</sup> century it remains so becoming not only didactic but also dialectical with its dialogical route remaining ever so fertile.

## TRADITION IN CONTEMPORARY REALITY

In the recent past attempts have been made to provide visibility to certain pictorial traditions from certain locales within the country. Artists from the western regions of Rajasthan or Gujarat have carried their cultural baggage from the rural traditions, to synthesize their experiences into works, marked with folk and tribal arts and crafts. The influence of mural or miniature tradition from their region also inflects their form and structure of composition. A case in point is Rameswar Singh from Jaipur or Mahaveer Swamy from Bikaner who reflects the mural and miniature traditions of their locale respectively interpreted through their contemporary reality. Hence tradition as a living memory continues to be a dominant centrality and aspires to remain so. The preeminent question is why do the artists continue to make it integral to their visual language? Is it to make their works marketable in the shores across the continent or is to mark a posture of difference in the condition created by the world as a global village? I would base my argument on the latter, since it mandates that artists of this subcontinent continue to remain distinct especially in their visual expressions.

Having created this framework which makes modern Indian art significantly dissimilar, I now proceed to encounter the works of the above mentioned group of artists from Kerala with shared modern art education. These artists have intervened, in bringing alive a medieval art form of mural tradition within their contemporary reality, which has remained distinct to the region of Kerala. Their works are not replicas, though it conveys this visually; because of the similarities apparent in style and forms. If there is a commonality of thread binding the cluster of artists together then it is their distinct individuality in the interpretation of the curatorial concept of Sita. Again it is not Sita as an iconic ubiquitous woman conceptually and philosophically represented in the epic and philosophy with her aura of the archetypal woman. Hence Sita becomes an excuse to interpret the changing role of the modern woman in fluid and capricious society. She also translates as a metaphor for the mother earth, with the marauding humanity plundering her incessantly and insensitively. The conceptual paradigm involves the duality manifests in the role of a woman; empowered on

one hand and tradition bound with her role of a procreator, mother, friend and wife and as planet earth that seeks or begs for protection.

Arguably modernity in India has never been a fixed paradigm. That is, it is relational, since tradition is always found in some measure in the other, with notions of tradition, modernity and contemporaneity becoming by default mutually inclusive of our times. The relevance of the stylistic features of the traditional mural character in the works of these artists imbibed through pedagogy from their Guru Mammyiyur Krishnan Kutty Nair, posits the contemporary reality mediated with acrylics and mixed media. Further their interpretation of the concept of Sita Bhoomiputri is through the contemporary lens of their perceptions and experiences, largely desecralized, with the story having been evacuated of its sacred connections. Sacred nevertheless is problematic within modernity and hence through this gesture their works approach postmodernity.

The influence of tradition and culture nevertheless is not unique only to this group of artists. The murals in the palaces and in temples equally have served as a source of inspiration for many artists in this region. It provided a point of reference and a source of departure for their individual idiom as A. Ramachandran whose works serves as illustrious example. While the artists may have sourced out certain compositional features of these traditional murals to be imbricated in their works, this group of nine artists have literally brought the murals from the walls on to their canvases marking a departure in the very medium and technique.

"Sita", as an exhibition by these leading artists, have rejuvenated the Kerala Mural tradition. The murals now take on a garb of a neo- mural style, surrealistic as well as naturalistic. This constellation of artists has strived to achieve not simply a sense of beauty but also of intelligence. This is an intelligence, which is self contained like a glow worm internalizing the light to emit it out, in other words, one which is not borrowed, but created from within, maintaining the freshness of vitality and vigour in conception. With the sacred completely evacuated, the works open the space for versatility in its interpretation, striking simultaneously a posture of postmodernity, since they have excavated a tradition not necessarily from the debris of modernity but from the colonial amnesia, to a status of renewal not through mimicry rather through a difference in perspective.

The tradition of Kerala murals is a historical materiality speaking the language of plurality, of dialogue, of difference. And by this gesture, the artists works transcend modernity and tradition to become contemporary. The question confronting the artists and spectatorship is; do their artistic statements remain within the paranthesis of mere art historical tradition? Even if it is so, looping back into tradition at this critical juncture of the globalized phenomenon; within which the geographical, political and cultural space, is vast and osmotic, mandating that we remain significantly different by imbricating our traditional and cultural heritage that is uniquely ours, since inherent multivalence partially also characterizes our reality.

Thus, an encounter with these series of works, foregrounds tradition within the contemporary cultural milieu, which opens up critical and aesthetic dialogue, to provide a

perspective of its magical realm in relation to its forms and colours. Thus the charm of enduring tradition remains ever so vital that these works mandates classification under the umbrella of postmodernity more than modernity.

An interesting dimension which the curatorial note offers is one of Sita - a protagonist desired by the curator to be interpreted and represented by the male artists. The curatorial note reads as follows, "The story of her life is universal and contemporary in relevance; she is every woman. Here is the story of an ancient goddess conveyed through the ancient style of the Kerala Mural tradition. Sita loved unconditionally, forgave readily and was the epitome of patience. Sita inherited these qualities from her mother Bhoomidevi or Mother Earth. When she could no longer bear the cruelty of her fate she asked her mother to take her back into her bosom. "

There are many layers to the canonical motif of Sita represented by the concept note. She is the archetypal all embracing personification of woman as mother, wife, daughter, sister, lover, friend, as well the shakti with her virtues of utmost patience, tolerance and sacrifice. The artists reengage with her by the convergence of the trope of tradition as woman meeting India [bhoomimata] as a woman in the age of globalization. And following Judith Butler, where the feminine is understood less as a biological category and more as a performative identity transcending her biological reference, with the glance directed towards the mother earth whose daughter bhoomiputri she is. Created here is the metaphor of the earth as Sita, with the metonymy of environmental protection in the form of the earth spirit to be sanctified and not mauled.

It is nevertheless interesting to note that while globalization has created cultural delocalization, loss of identity and uniqueness; the present exhibition, is making a concerted effort to mark visibility of traditional art form, that is, the rejuvenation of Kerala murals, a regional affiliation, located within the national paradigm. The multivalent reality subverts or subsumes cultural identity particularly of a region, mandating tense construction, essentially structured upon ambivalent moments namely of tradition and modernity. A new, dynamic concept of cosmopolitanism arises as an attitude that surrenders neither to the logic of a blind globalization, nor accepts a simple particularity, but has the capacity to think both across borders and about borders.

One of the distinguishing marks of our present time is complexity - - complexity in terms of living, and thinking. That art, thought and life are invariably interlinked and human life is implicated in human thinking and art is a point that cannot be over emphasized. The resurgence of Kerala mural tradition nevertheless marks an emotional moment for India's contemporaneity, since this tradition had almost become obsolete in the process of modernizing India's education system. Consequently, many traditional training schools were shut down and skilled practitioners became scarce, especially in the sacred arts.

The collective endeavor of these artists, it should be pointed out is not extraordinary, as works based on Kerala mural tradition has been executed by other artists that has enabled in expanding the rich opulence of this cultural heritage. In a similar vein carrying it forward with equal zeal and passionate dedication are these artists with the curator mediating the role of an activist on one hand and that of the facilitator of the continuity of tradition on the other.

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