

## Mapping the field of Indian art criticism: Post-independence

Progress Report, April 2010

### **The Background/Rationale behind the Project**

Most of my research to date has been on art institutions and museums and how they frame art practice and grapple with discourses on modernism, tradition, nation and identity. But this is a scantily documented field in the Indian context and one has to contend constantly with the lack of information and access to material. It was while researching the National Museum in 2006, for the Getty-funded *Museology and the Colony* project, that I had a personal breakthrough. I realized that by closely examining the *Journal of Indian Museums*<sup>1</sup> I would get good leads on the National Museum's role and mandate, and how this evolved over the years. This was not only in terms of the journal being a repository of information on the museum but in looking at the questions and debates current in the museum world and how these influenced institutional policies.

Looking at the post-independence cultural institutions I realized the need to change strategy and scrutinize the dialectical relationship between institutional spaces and critical discourse that was being produced via art writing. This shift towards mapping art writing in the Indian post-colonial context is, to follow from Tapati Guha-Thakurtha<sup>2</sup>, an examination of how the object field comes to be constituted in text and how this, in turn, affects exhibition and museum practices.

In 2009 while working on an essay on the National Gallery of Modern Art, I found a photograph in the 1951 issue of the bi-monthly bulletin *Art News*, published by the artist-led organization, the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS)<sup>3</sup>. The photo showed around 75 artists carrying banners, one of which faintly read 'National Gallery of Contemporary Art'. This was a last, desperate effort by AIFACS to be the central institution in charge of a national art gallery (which they had lobbied for since 1938) but the Calcutta Conference of 1949 had given the institution over to the Government of India. The National Gallery of Modern Art thus came to be established in 1954 by the state. I have elaborated on this history

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<sup>1</sup> The *Journal of Indian Museums* was published first in 1945 by the Museums Association of India (itself set up in 1944). For a compilation of articles, see Usha Agrwal's *Index to the Journal of Indian Museums*, vol. 1 – XXVIII, 1945 – 1972, Museums Association of India, New Delhi, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Thakurta Tapati Guha. *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India*, (New York, New Delhi: Columbia University Press, Permanent Black, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Photograph by A Ghosh published in *Art News*, bi-monthly art bulletin, February-March 1951, vol. V, no. 2.

in my essay on the institution<sup>4</sup> but here I simply want to focus on the contestation over the title of the institution and how the term 'contemporary' is alternately suggested by AIFACS.

An editorial in *Art News*, a monthly newsletter published by AIFACS, explains the anxiety the term modern conjured up among a section of the artists and scholars like Baroda Ukil and Sir James Cousins, among others, "There is the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which buys up as much representative collection of avant-garde art as possible. This is on the premise that what may not be intelligible today, will be highly significant to posterity. It is a gamble but America is rich enough to afford it. In India we are still trying to be contemporary, not ultra-modern...

At present because of absence of allocation of funds for a separate gallery, NGMA has to provide an uneasy home for a heterogeneous collection of twentieth century art – Bengal school, Tagore's ink drawings, Amrita Sher-Gil. There are also a number of artists who at present defy classification...

As soon as possible NGMA should have a specialist gallery of modern art, another gallery for more conservative schools like Bengal school, earlier Rajput and Moghul schools and Rajasthani art. Even Ravi Varma can have a place in such a gallery."<sup>5</sup>



*Art News* bulletin reported on this procession from Parliament Street to Talkatora Road to take formal possession of the one acre land allotted to AIFACS by Government of India. The artists carried two sign boards indicating the sites of AIFACS office and Gallery.

<sup>4</sup> Shivadas, Vidya. 'Museumising Modern Art, NGMA: The Indian Case-Study', to be published in volume tentatively titled *No Touching, No Spitting, No Praying: Museum Cultures of South Asia*, ed. Singh Kavita and Mathur Saloni, Routledge.

<sup>5</sup> Editorial, *Art News*, a monthly bulletin of arts and crafts, vol. XII, no. 7 & 8, July-August 1959.

In the seventies, artist and ideologue J Swaminathan critiqued the exclusive category of the modern by replacing it with the term 'contemporaneity' that allowed for the simultaneous existence of folk, tribal and high art. In a curious inflection on the same term a plea is made for a more inclusive notion of art in 1959. The NGMA however aligned itself with the more 'exclusive' modernist discourse that had gained ground in the art world, as seen in many articles of the early issues of journals like *Lalit Kala Contemporary* (1961) and *Marg* (1946), which, on one hand, dismissed the relevance of the Bengal School and on the other anointed Rabindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Amrita Sher-Gil and Jamini Roy as the initiators of modern Indian art.

This rather convoluted example is to drive home the point that there were heated debates on the loaded terminologies of modern, national and contemporary among art writers, ideologues and art organizations at a certain historical juncture and how this in turn informed the establishment of NGMA.

The project was thus initiated with the task of locating critical texts within their historical contexts and looking at how they shape institutions and are in turn shaped by their mandates. I have specifically chosen the writings of W G Archer, Richard Bartholomew, J Swaminathan, Geeta Kapur and Ranjit Hoskote and, to a more minor extent, Mulk Raj Anand, Rudy Von Leyden and K G Subramanyan as distinct critical voices that emerged at different historical moments and played, and continue to play, an influential role on the modern and contemporary art scene.

### **Methodological References**

Looking at Partha Mitter's *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, Occidental Orientations* (1994) and Tapti Guha-Thakurta's *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal* (1992) have provided me with some methodological insights. Both Mitter and Guha-Thakurta look at the pre-independence art movements and writings within the larger context of colonialism and the debates around westernization, cultural nationalism and modernism taking place between 1850 and 1922 roughly. They locate art practice within the changing landscape of art education and patronage. They trace the altered status of artists, the range of art organizations and exhibition circuits and publications to provide us an overview of the altered networks within which art practices and art criticism are developing. Art criticism becomes embedded within a larger system of publications, patronage and institutions.

### **Project Update**

In the first phase of the project, which lasted from December 1, 2009 to March 10, 2010, I mainly set about collecting the texts of the above-mentioned art writers. This period of research was mainly about visiting libraries at the Lalit Kala Akademi, National Gallery of Modern Art, AIFACS, JNU and the FICA Reading Room. Given that my research is largely about art writing the library is my valuable resource.

Both W G Archer and Richard Bartholomew belong to the early years of Indian independence when

culture was being institutionalized by the state. This is also the time when art groups like Progressive Artists Groups are set up in different parts of the country. There is the establishment of the newly formed state institutions that speak of the government's desire to nationalize culture alongside the formation of an independent artist-led scene which is in critical dialogue with these institutions.

Archer's seminal text on modern art *India and Modern Art* was published in 1959. But there are also his writings in journals like *Lalit Kala Contemporary* and *Marg* as well his advisory role to the Government of India regarding modern art museums in India that can be looked into. Archer spent the years between 1931 and 1948 in India working in the British Civil Service. He identified himself with important British figures like Verrier Elwin and A O Hume who were as "Indian as many Indians themselves".<sup>6</sup> Beginning with his early work on Uraon poetry, which he translated, the initial years he spent exploring tribal and primitive Indian art, writing his first book, *The Vertical Man*, in 1947.

He then moved on to working on the more 'sophisticated' works of Indian art and researched Indian paintings forming an alliance with the editor of *Marg*, Mulk Raj Anand, and bureaucrat M S Randhawa. Among his works on Kalighat paintings and Sikh paintings, among other things, came this book on Indian modern art in 1959. Archer, in an unpublished letter to Mulk Raj Anand dated 23 January, 1959, writes, "My book *India and Modern Art* is being published in February and I am sending you a copy. I am afraid it is bound to be rather controversial and may arouse displeasure in certain quarters. I have felt it necessary to delegate Neo-Bengal Abanindranath school to a rather lowly place but I am convinced what I have done is in accordance with what most modern-minded people think. I have also included a chapter on George Keyt which may not altogether be relished by those who take a rather narrow view of Indian national culture."<sup>7</sup>

At the moment I have collected articles and publications on *Kalighat painting*, *Paintings of the Sikhs* and his work of Indian miniatures and am looking at how he constructs historical knowledge in these various fields. It is also interesting to note that Archer's history becomes a key point against which later museologists like L P Sihare (director of NGMA, 1971- 84) and art historians like Partha Mitter militate against and define his perspective as a biased, western approach. His version of Indian art is seen as "the conventional approach where a genealogy of influences is drawn up to see the ledger of European sources used by colonial artists."<sup>8</sup>

As for the writings of Bartholomew I have mainly collected the articles that he published in newspapers between 1955 and 1974. The articles are an interesting mix of reviews of exhibitions, his passionate advocacy of the modernists and a critique of institutions specifically the Lalit Kala Akademi – from its

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<sup>6</sup> Archer, W G. *India and Modern Art*, (London: Ruskin House, London, 1959).

<sup>7</sup> Archer, W G. 'Unpublished letter to M S Randhawa', January 23, 1959, in file 'Letters of M S Randhawa with Mulk Raj Anand August 1959 to April 1969', Chandigarh State Museum, 301.16 R 19C.

<sup>8</sup> Mitter, Partha. *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, Occidental Orientations, 1850 – 1922* (Great Britain: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

National Exhibition of Art of 1958 all the way until 1974 where he talks of the Reformation of the Lalit Kala Akademi. He finally takes on the role of the Secretary of the institution between 1977 and 1985.

I am interested in locating Bartholomew within the earlier art critics writing in newspapers, like Charles Fabri, Rudy von Leyden, among others, given the long history of art journalism in the Indian context. While this period falls out of the purview of the project it is still interesting to locate Bartholomew's writing within this long history which began as early as the late nineteenth century with reviews appearing in the *Times of India*. There is also what seems to be something of resistance to this figure of the art critic that Mulk Raj Anand touches upon in a public lecture on the Aesthetics of Contemporary India in 1956: "We do not have any genuine art critics in India. It would be better if reporters writing on art in newspapers limited themselves to factual statements on events without expressing their half-baked opinions which were likely to mislead people and artists. They do a great deal of harm. There can be one category of useful people in the art world i.e art historians, those who study art from different periods of India and are able to put it in the proper perspective for the general public."<sup>9</sup>

One very useful source of information has been the papers of the Lalit Kala Akademi seminars that took place regularly from the 1950s onwards. These seminars touch upon a wide number of issues – ranging from art education (1956), architecture (1959), modern painting and sculpture – old myths and new myths (1968), exhibition policy of Lalit Kala Akademi (1976) and art movements like 'Expressionism and its Impact on Modern Indian art' (1976)<sup>10</sup>. There were also regular artists' conferences and much of these discussions provide the editorial content for the journal *Lalit Kala Contemporary*. The other sources that I have been referring to are the newspaper clippings found in the National Gallery of Modern Art library. They are a remarkable resource for articles as well as provide a meticulous overview of the art scene since 1957.

So the first phase really has been about beginning material collection on the key writers. In the coming months I will be locating these writers within a constellation of other writers around them and also determining the historical context in which they were writing, looking at the institutions they were in discussion with as well as analyzing the forums in which they wrote.

From July onwards I will also begin my visits to various art institutions and libraries in other parts of India, to source relevant materials as well conduct interviews with a range of artists, scholars and institutional heads on their own writing career as well their understanding on the discipline of art criticism. November and December will be set aside for writing up the project.

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<sup>9</sup> A report on Mulk Raj Anand's public lecture 'Aesthetic of Contemporary India', 6 November 1956, in *Art News Bulletin* Volume IX No 10, October 1956.

<sup>10</sup> All conference proceedings can be found at the Lalit Kala Akademi Archive.