

When Was Modernism in Indian Art?

[T]he innovations of what is called Modernism have become the new but fixed forms of our present moment. If we have to break out of the non-historical fixity of *post*-modernism, then we must search out and counterpose an alternative tradition taken from the neglected works left in the wide margin of the century, a tradition that may address itself not to this by now exploitable because inhuman rewriting of the past but, for all our sakes, to a modern *future* in which community may be imagined again.

Raymond Williams¹

Material Conditions

Taking the cue from Raymond Williams's 'When Was Modernism?', there is need to reiterate that we in the third world continue to commit ourselves to the immanent aspect of our complex cultures. We persist in trusting the material status of meaning manifest, in Williams's words, as a 'structure of feeling'.² We commit ourselves to relating forms of art with social formations, for this kind of a grounded relay of cultural history will help the process of survival within the new imperialism that the late capitalist/postmodern world sets up.

Whatever the chances of that survival, it may be worth mentioning that modernism as it develops in postcolonial cultures has the oddest retroactive trajectories, and that these make up a parallel aesthetics. It is crucial that we do not see the modern as a form of determinism to be followed, in the manner of the stations of the cross, to a logical end. We should see our trajectories crisscrossing the western mainstream and, in their very disalignment from it, making up the ground that restructures the international. Similarly, before the west periodizes the postmodern entirely in its own terms and in that process also characterizes it, we have to introduce from the vantagepoint of the periphery the transgressions of uncategorized practice. We should

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has its justification in an unassailable metaphysics, a humanism that never fails, devolves in the postmodern context into sheer play with cultural codes. Anthropology and semiotics, the sciences favouring *difference*, seem to revert us ironically to a kind of essentialism.⁶

Through absentminded benevolence the centre is maintained, serving as it does cultural vested interests. At the same time peripheral initiatives—national, regional, local interventions, seen as culture-specific, are assiduously appropriated for the sake of that higher universal purpose.

Under the circumstances, we on the periphery should desist from using essentialist categories of an ancient civilization including perhaps those of myth and other indigenously romantic, organic-symbolic modes of thought. We should desist from thinking in conventional anthropological terms in so far as these invite communal politics based on regional, ethnic, religious and tribal formations. Uncritical curiosity about origins and the construction of pseudohistories therefrom easily lead to false consciousness though this may be proffered as third-world ideology. Renewed imperialism makes the terms of discourse deeply problematical, and at the very least this should be recognized. How can we make radical assumptions even on behalf of popular culture when it is in the very process massively reified?

Even in the overall local and international context of cultural pastiche it is possible to conceive of a counter-practice that resists political reaction based precisely on the last prerogative that societies like ours hold out as a distinction—the prerogative of still living traditions. It remains for us to resolve how we should transform these into *traditions-in-use*. And, following from that, how we name the contemporary and in which category of discourse we choose to locate it.

Notes and References

- ¹ Andre Bazin, 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', in *What Is Cinema?*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1974.
- ² Clement Greenberg, 'Marc Chagall', in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965.
- ³ Kumkum Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', in *Interrogating Modernity: Culture and Colonialism in India*, edited by Tejaswini Niranjana et al., Seagull, Calcutta, 1993, pp. 259–60.
- ⁴ Paul Willemen, 'An Avant-Garde for the Eighties', in *Framework*, No. 24, 1984, p. 64.
- ⁵ Sangari, 'The Politics of the Possible', in *Interrogating Modernity*, p. 246.
- ⁶ Rustom Bharucha, 'Peter Brook's "Mahabharata": A View from India', in *Framework*, No. 35, 1988.

reperiodize the modern in terms of our own historical experience of modernization and mark our modernisms so that we may enter the postmodern at least potentially on our own terms.

Modernization in India is a real if incomplete historical process. Dating from the British colonial enterprise, the process dovetails with the efforts of the post-independence Indian state to establish, through a large public sector and a planned economy, a balanced growth of industry. If, despite the nomination of postindustrial societies as global arbiters in the management of capital the process of industrialization is still in progress in this predominantly agricultural country, it need hardly be said that class politics is still relevant in India. The communist parties of India, the CPI and the CPI(M), support the irreversible project of modernization with a reasonable, secular nationalism. They also support through their cultural fronts the struggles of religious minorities and of women. The left fronts in India, given the growth of fundamentalist reaction, may now be the only organized movements to speak the language of modernity. To the first world this may seem paradoxical: in a postmodern world where not only cultural initiative but even the historical modern is threatened to be taken out of the hands of Marxism (or parodied with malicious quips that name Stalin as the great modernist by virtue of his rapid modernization programme), it may be worth recalling these forceful anomalies in the developmental process of the third world. Here indeed the modern continues to be placed nowhere more correctly than along visibly socialist trajectories.

Modernity is a way of relating the material and cultural worlds in a period of unprecedented change that we call the process of modernization. It is also an ontological quest with its particular forms of reflexivity, its acts of struggle. Modernity takes a precipitate historical form in the postcolonial world, while its praxis produces a cultural dynamic whereby questions of autonomy, identity and authenticity come to the fore. These are desired individually but are sought to be gained in collectivity. Even the tasks of subjectivity, so long as they are unresolved, require acts of allegorical exegesis—often via the nation. There is a chronological fix between nationhood and modernity so that both may stand in for a quest for selfhood. Ever challenged in the postcolonial world, modernity continues to provide a cutting edge; it marks necessary historical disjunctures in the larger discourse on sovereignty.

The characteristic feature of Indian modernism, as perhaps of many postcolonial modernisms, may be that it is manifestly social and historical. But western modernism in its late phase is not the least interested in this diachronicity and opposes it in the name of a *sublimity of the new*. Or, to put it another way, by a hypostasis of the new. Consider the high modernist argument as it shifts from Clement Greenberg to the postmodernist Jean-Francois Lyotard. When late modernist art is not metaphysically inclined it is, as we know, absolutely formal. Late modernism finds in the work of Greenberg a peculiar cathexis in and through sheer opticality. Lyotard in

turn prefers epiphany to materiality and process and thus leaves out historical representation, considered to be too grossly accountable within something so local and involute as national cultural identity.³

Given this obstacle race of history it is possible to argue that Indian artists have only now become fully modern—in what is characterized as the postmodern age. I mean this in the sense of being able to confront the new without flying to the defence of tradition; of being able to cope with autonomy in the form of cultural atomization by invoking *and* inverting notions of romantic affiliation. That is to say, the mythology of an indigenous 'community' and the lost continent of an 'exile'—both alibis borrowed from the grander tradition of the romantic—are allowed to shade off into the current form of identity polemics. This already mature modernism means accepting the 'dehumanization' and decentering of the image. It means being self-conscious through an art-historical reflexivity; that is, through overcoming the anxiety of influence by overcoming the problem of originality itself. It is not surprising that in a country like India with its cultural simultaneities, its contradictory modes of production, modernism should have been realized through the promptings of postmodernism. For, in economic terms, modernization declares its full import when it comes to be propelled by global capitalism.

This is not unrelated to the fact that India is now, after five decades of protective nationalism, opting for integration in the world economy via what is called liberalization—the stage and style of capitalism which the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank dictate to the developing world. It is an internationalism under duress in that its first condition is the delinking of growth from any form of nationalism. With this precipitate internationalism the Indian artist is now, for the first time, shocked out of the nationalist narrative of identity that makes certain overt demands for authenticity in the existential and indigenous sense. The very achievements of the modern Indian artist can begin to appear too conscientious: first, because they are secured by forms of realism instituted like a reverse mirror image within the modern; second, because this euphemistic modernism keeps in tow a notional ideal of a people's culture. Folk/tribal/popular art becomes a heritage that can stand in for, even usurp, the vanguard forms of the modern.

As the national/modern moves in tandem into the late capitalist age this double bind of authenticity is virtually abandoned. The grand narrative of civilizational transformation which haunts the progressive sections of the Indian modern now appears to the younger generation of Indian artists as simply anomalous. Not so surprisingly they echo Lyotard⁴ who, in a rhetorical manner, designates realist criteria as pernicious. Even if Lyotard's moves are equally pernicious to our cultural considerations, it is possibly true that these older terminologies of representation and identity connected with the modernizing function have become seriously problematized. Moreover, by maintaining, even in rhetoric, the notion of a people's 'authentic'

culture, we may jeopardize avantgarde interventions based on surreal and other subversions. So that indeed one might ask again, *when*, if the avantgarde has been thus blocked or deferred or deviated by what one may call the national cause, was modernism in Indian art?

The Politics of Modernism

The 'when' in the title of this essay is of course polemically placed. It refers to a period of self-reckoning locked in with a commitment to collective social change. It refers to the project of figuring subjectivity as a locus of potential consciousness. The when is a site of vexed doubling within colonial/postcolonial identity and the permanent ambivalences that it launches.

The painful debate on identity, nowhere more viscerally handled than by Frantz Fanon,⁵ is a debate within the modern consciousness at the last juncture of decolonization when the question of freedom is lifted out of an existential universalism and cathected upon the subordinated yet intrepid body-presence of the 'other'. A condensed unit of humanity drawn from an overwhelming demographical explosion caused by the emergence of the colonized people, this other displaces the safe space occupied by the pristine self in western ontological discourse. The entire western project for authentic being thus comes to be differently historicized in the moment of decolonization. Identity is seen not simply as a rational individuating project within the utopian plenitude of romantic community. It also involves reclaiming the ground lost (or never found) in history, the ground where the self may yet recognize itself in the form of a collective subject.

The debate on how to politicize one's otherness seems now to be given over to a politics of negotiation. It remains to be seen how a further project shall be set up to match that moment of modernity when a reflexive and revolutionary critique of its own deformities can still be mounted. The chips are down and there has to be some way, a political not a counter-metaphysical way; there has to be an alternative project whereby this nonidentity between the self and the other, which was once a call to rewrite history, has to be given a function larger than that of differential play. Or, that play itself has to gain a praxiological motive through a cultural avantgarde.

In the postcolonial dialectic of modernity the term avantgarde is often subsumed by the term progressive, which refers more properly to the debate on realism/modernism. That is why I begin with Raymond Williams. But when realism turns rigid it is worth recalling with Fredric Jameson that the modern itself had a politicality far greater than we are taught to recognize.⁶ He notes the persistent use of the vocabulary of political revolution in the aesthetic avantgardes which complemented, perhaps even compensated for, the deep subjectivity to which modernist works were committed. That subjectivity itself prefigured a utopian sense of impending transformation where society was seen to be moving towards a greater democracy.

It is worth remembering this because there is a further case for reinforcing the fact in nonwestern societies where the modern, occurring in tandem with anti-colonial struggles, is deeply politicized and carries with it the potential for resistance. This is progressive as also polemical, so that there is a tendentious angle on modernity within our cultures whether they draw out theories of domination/subordination from the subaltern point of view (after Gramsci), or build an identity politics in a rhetorical mode (after Fanon). For Indians there is, besides, a profoundly paradoxical entry into the modern: the entire discourse against the modern (after Gandhi) gives us another utopian option to consider, one which is in its own way a negative commitment of tremendous force in the achievement of modern India.

The discrepancies in the stages of capitalist development in India remain so huge that the modern is charged with strong anomalies. Modernization, both desired and abhorred throughout the nationalist period, is continually contested even in the Nehruvian period. Indian modernity is often quite circumspect, mediated as it is to a point of handicap by negative evaluations of the very practice that it is evolving.

There is the further question as to what categories Indian modernism adopts. Is it the aristocratic/high art category or the more historicist one found in modernism's conjuncture with realism? Or does Indian modernism satisfy the condition of romantic radicalism in its bid to align with the 'liberating vanguard of popular consciousness'?⁷

The moderns anyway stage a mock confrontation between the mandarins and the luddites, a tantalizing play between the classical and the popular, which is worth our while to consider. More specifically, the modern period cherishes great artists who, as Fredric Jameson suggests, are seen to be holding over some archaic notions of aesthetic production, a handcraft aesthetic within a modernizing economy, and in the process valorizing perhaps for the last time a utopian vision of a more human mode of production.⁸ This is especially true for third-world cultures. In India primitive techniques, artisanal skills, iconographic references are much valorized; and the modern, comprising the indigenous and the avantgarde, has a two-way relay and a paradoxical politics.

There is of course a strictly leftwing intervention in the process of defining Indian modernity: A movement charged with a radical popular consciousness provides, through the 1940s—a period when the communist movement poses a real alternative in political and cultural terms—the ground for a great many innovations in theatre, cinema, literature (and to a lesser extent the plastic arts). I am referring to the Indian Peoples' Theatre Association⁹ (IPTA), which breaks away from the innate conservatism of a civilizational discourse. It breaks with the brahminical/sanskritized resources privileged as the Indian tradition and thereby gives the emerging *tradition of the modern* in India the possibility of *not* being trapped in the citadel of high art. It should however be mentioned that though 'the people' are invoked in the discourse

and practice of Indian leftwing movements in the arts through their very forms (especially in theatre) and through their participation as an alert audience, the Indian left produces its own conservatism, even an incipient Stalinism. Something like a slogan of national in form, socialist in content is built into the programme. Thus while it is modern and in the Indian context also avantgarde, the movement represents itself as realist and progressive and tilts the definitional balance of Indian modernism. This obviously prevents it from trying out more daring formal innovations.

Caught in the cold-war division between freedom and commitment during the first decade of independence, the progressive movement tends, as it proceeds, to ground aesthetic discourse. For, if in the heyday of socialism we do not designate art practice in avantgarde terms, we cannot in postmodern times so readily invent a vanguard discourse that has an appropriate historical import. We should have to use the term radical rather than avantgarde, but do we thereby scuttle the diachronic model with free signifiers; do we beg the question of modernism itself?

Indian Modernism: A Brief Account

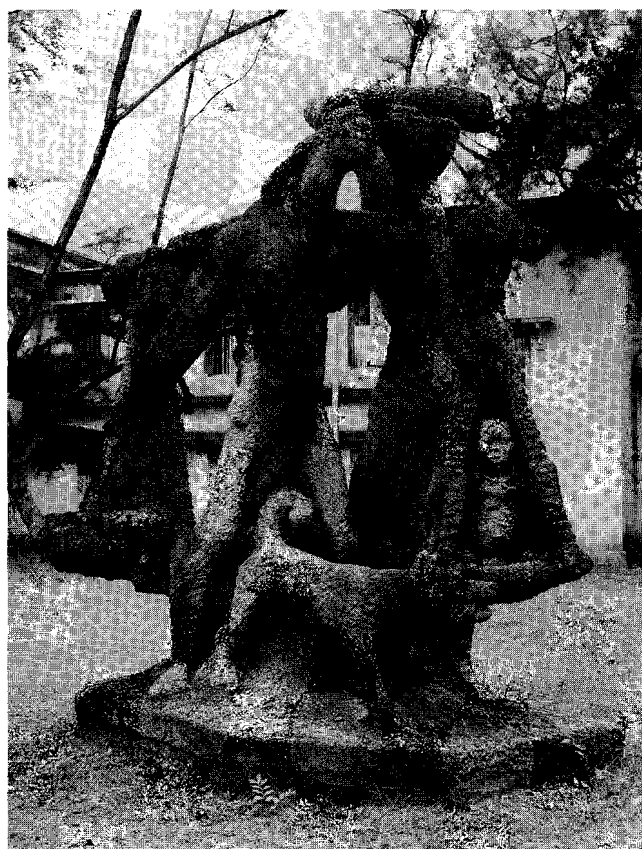
If Indian artists have often appeared to be hamstrung over the progressivist as against 'correctly' modernist definition of modernism, if they have seemed to be stuck at the crossing-over, it is not so surprising. They are living out the actual material transition. Let me recall notationally the history of the modern in Indian art.

Indian artists have been tardy in making a direct avowal of modernism. They have moved on from the sceptical position held by Ananda Coomaraswamy and Abanindranath Tagore through the first three decades of the twentieth century to a more complex engagement that was developed in Santiniketan by Rabindranath Tagore, and taken over at different levels of complexity by Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and Benodebehari Mukherjee from the 1930s. It is precisely at this juncture that a modernist vocabulary (as against initiatives which laid down, for half a century before, propitious ground for modernization) was introduced in several brave gestures. A rural boy in Tagore's Santiniketan, Ramkinkar Baij, ventured to introduce, in a somewhat hazardous manner, a postcubist expressionism and through that means to openly valorize primitive/peasant/proletarian bodies, to give them an axial dynamic. He thereby sought to bring through the ruse and reason of indigenous subject-matter a methodological shift in constructing the image (*Illus. 1*).

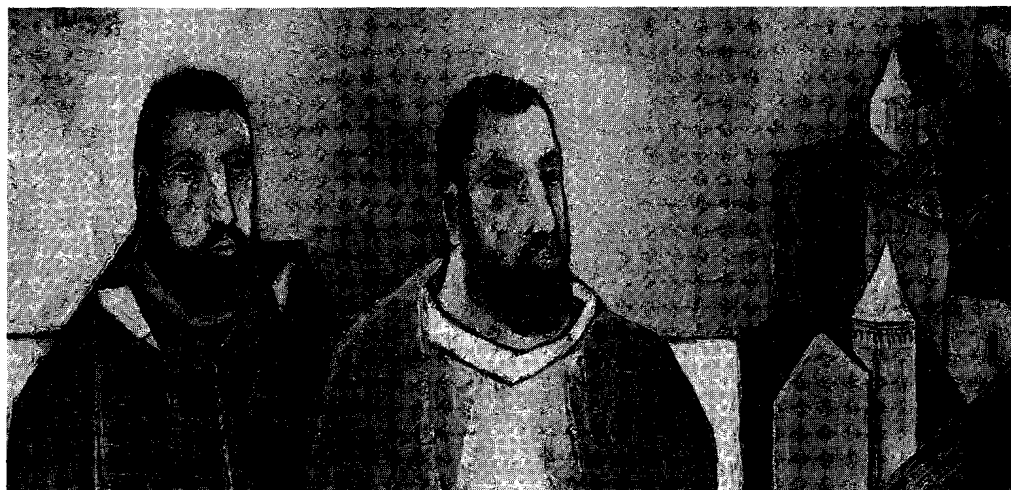
This was differently taken up by Jamini Roy in Calcutta during the 1930s. Roy 'objectified' the tradition by bringing the question of folk iconicity and urban commodification face-to-face. Exactly at the same time there was an alternative in the form of the interwar realism initiated by the part-European, Paris-trained artist, Amrita Sher-Gil (*Illus. 2*). With her intelligent masquerade as the oriental/modern/native woman, she gave to this emerging modernism a reflexive turn. She died a sudden death in Lahore in 1941, the year of death of the octogenarian savant Rabindranath

Tagore. By then Indian art had begun to pose considerable formulations on modernism.

A reckless manner of cultural symbiosis was reenacted by the Bombay-based artists Francis Newton Souza and Maqbool Fida Husain (*Illus. 3*) in the late 1940s. They belonged to near working-class backgrounds and to minority communities (Christian and Muslim). Other important artists of this six-member group, significantly called the Progressive Artists' Group, were Sayed Haider Raza and the dalit artist K.H. Ara (*Illus. 7*). Together these artists achieved, in the first decade of independence, a positively modernist stance. Several artists' groups claiming modernism came into existence during the 1940s and 50s in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Of these the



Below left: 1 Ramkinkar Baij, *Santal Family*, 1938–39. Above: 2 Amrita Sher-Gil, *South Indian Villagers Going to the Market*, 1937. Below right: 3 M.F. Husain, *Balram Street*, 1950



Above: 6 Akbar Padamsee, *Two Prophets*, 1955.
Below left: 7. K.H. Ara, from the *Black Nude*
series, 1963. Below right: 8 Tyeb Mehta,
The Blue Shawl, 1961

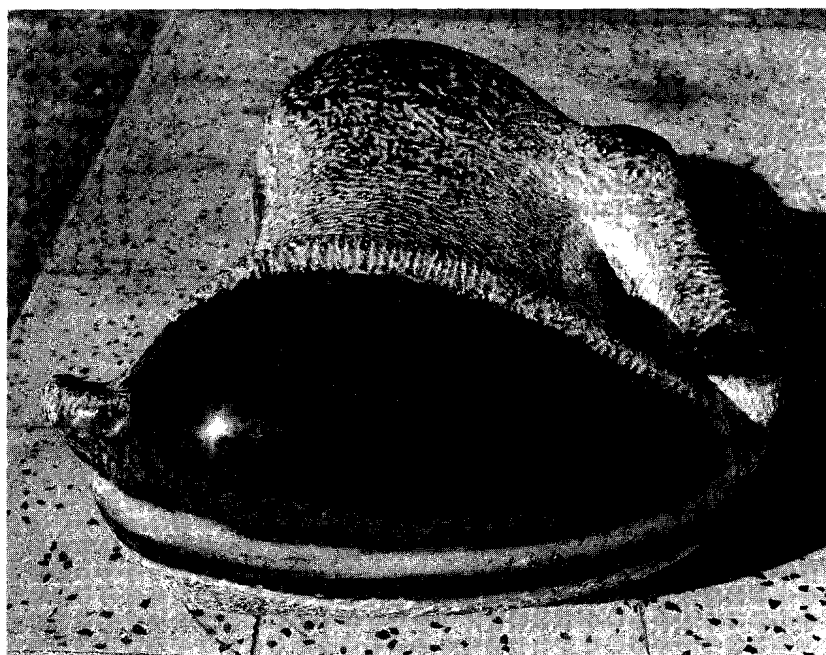
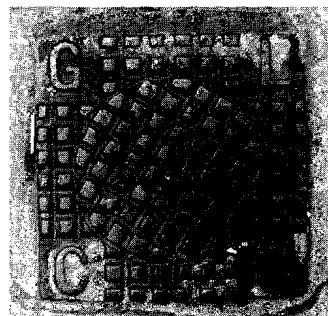
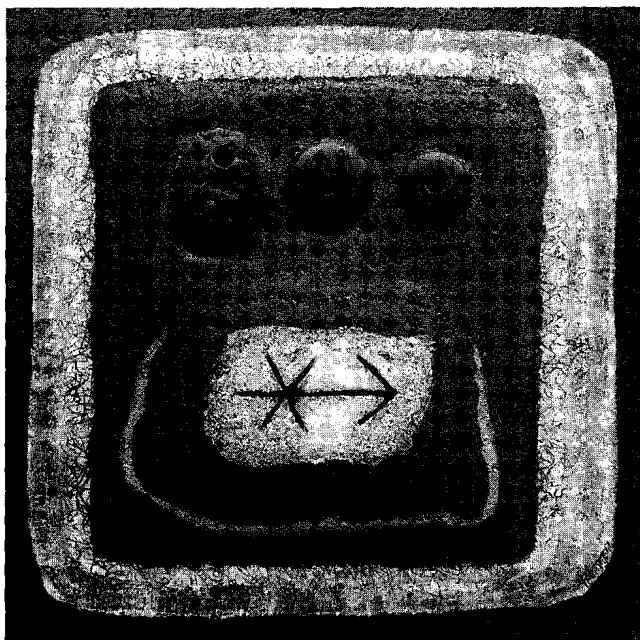


and Ambadas responded to the informal aesthetic (of Antoni Tàpies, Lucio Fontana, Alberto Burri, for example) and this showed up in the *Group 1890* exhibition of 1963. The exhibition manifesto was written by Swaminathan and the catalogue was introduced by the then Mexican ambassador to India, Octavio Paz. The attraction of the eleven-member Group 1890 to material/ritual/occult signs reissued the modernist enterprise in the coming years. It came to be situated with peculiar aptness in a visual culture of iconic forms still extant in India. This indigenism produced a playful modernist vocabulary replete with metaphorical allusions. Nagji Patel is an example (*Illus. 12*). But the surrounding rhetoric of Indianness also grew apace in the 1970s and 80s. It acquired official support both in the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Lalit Kala Akademi with artists like G.R. Santosh gaining national status. This institutional aesthetic tended to shortcircuit some part of this enterprise, leaving a pastiche in the form of an overtly symbolic art proffered as neotantism.

One is tempted to plot a tendentious narrative of oriental transmutation during the decades 1960–80: to show how the Parisian aesthetic was surmounted by the hegemonic American notions of freedom in the matter of world culture, how this was questioned by the liberationist rhetoric of the Latin world, and how all this contributed to form a distinct (rather than derivative) entity called modern Indian art. And how it acquired a national seal. For at the level of painterly practice many



9 J. Ram Patel in his Baroda studio, painting with a shovel, 1961

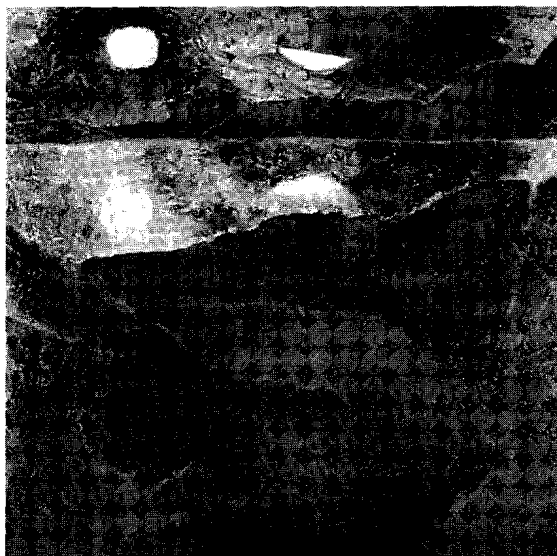


Above left: 10 Himmat Shah, *Untitled*, 1965. Above right: 11 Jyoti Bhatt, *Manhole*, 1962. Below: 12 Nagji Patel, *Animal*, 1974

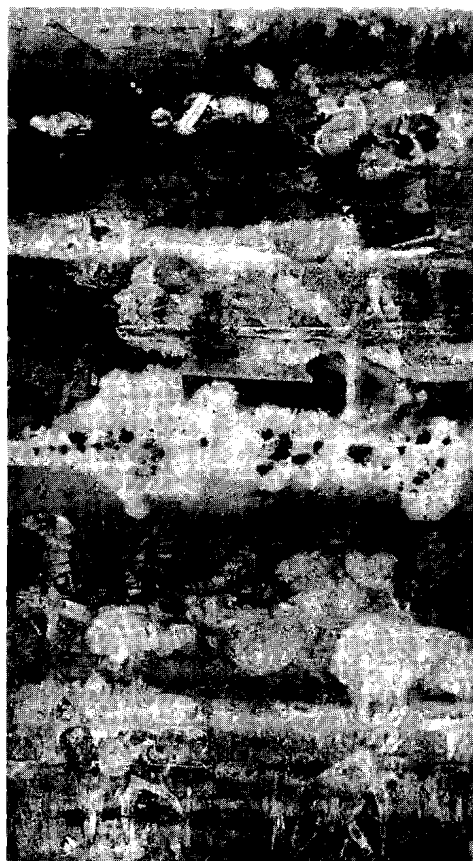
13 J. Swaminathan, *Shrine-II*, 1965

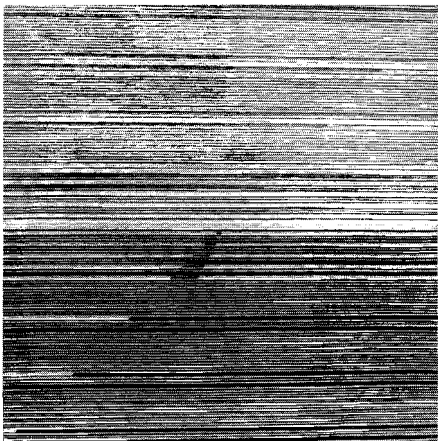
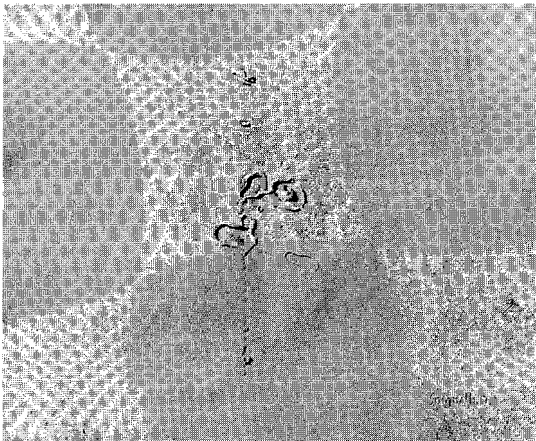
tendencies were recycled within the Indian sensibility. Exuberant forms of abstraction blazoned forth in Raza (*Illus. 19*), Ram Kumar (*Illus. 16*), Padamsee (*Illus. 14*), V.S. Gaitonde (*Illus. 15*). Abstract artists of the erstwhile Group 1890 and the so-called neotantrics held sway, especially the freer among them like Paniker (*Illus. 21*) and Biren De (*Illus. 20*), who contributed a subliminal, even ironic symbolism. At the same time, the work of artists with an informal sensibility, like Mohan Samant and Bal Chhabda, surfaced. Finally, artists with an indelible *écriture* shone out: I am referring to Somnath Hore's inscription in paper pulp of the social *wound* (*Illus. 17*) and Nasreen Mohamedi's capture of private grace in her ink and pencil grids (*Illus. 18*).

These complex developments are only signposted here to fill out the contours of the larger narrative of the modern. By 1978, when the relatively old-style modernist Harold Rosenberg was invited by India to sit on the jury of the Fourth Triennale India, the more strictly modernist style in Indian art, especially abstraction, was on the wane. Rosenberg saw what he was to describe in his generously mocking manner as a 'much of a muchness' of representation by younger artists. He was referring to artists positioned against modernist formalism: late expressionists with a social message and artists trying to tackle the problem of reification in art language and the objects/icons of late modernism who had moved into popular modes and narratives, turning objects into fiction, icons into discourse.



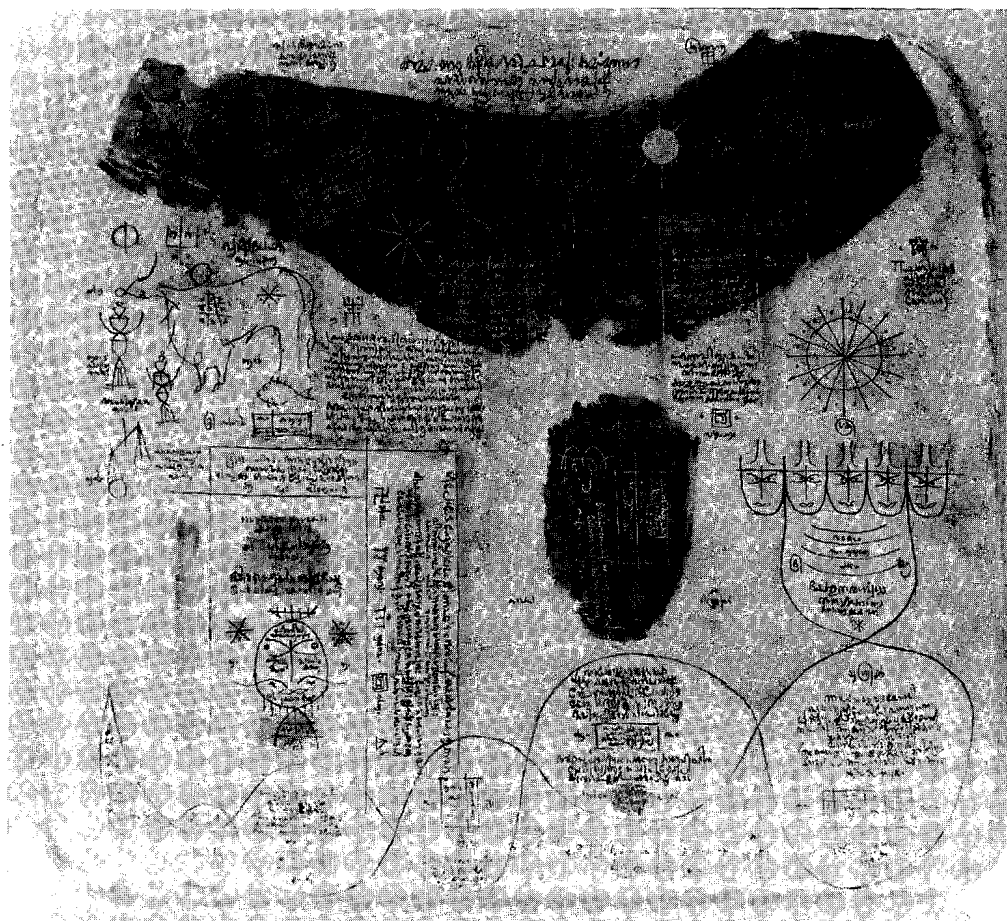
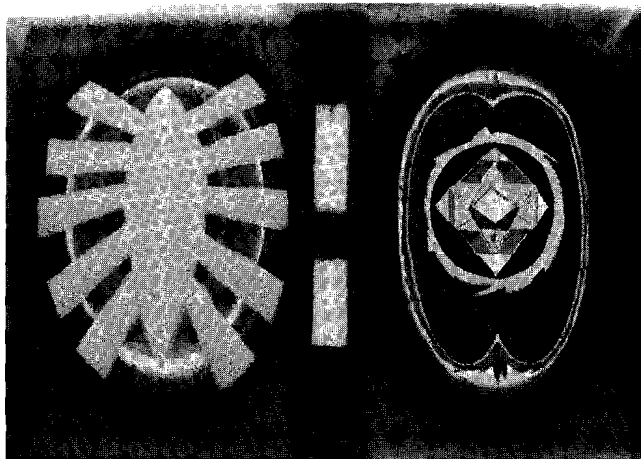
Above: 14 Akbar Padamsee, *Sun-Moon Metascape*, 1975. Below left: 15 Ram Kumar, *Flight*, 1976. Below right: 16 V.S. Gaitonde, *Untitled*, 1974





Above left: 17 Somnath Hore, from the *Wounds* series, 1977. Above right: 18 Nasreen Mohamedi, *Untitled*, ca. 1980. Below: 19 S.H. Raza, *Rajasthan*, 1983





Above: 20 Biren De, *June* 1967, 1967. Below: 21 K.C.S. Paniker, from the *Words and Symbols* series, 1965-66

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Narrative Extensions

Noting that an interest in allegory had developed across the board but especially in the third world—from Gabriel Garcia Marquez to Salman Rushdie—Fredric Jameson provides an ideological twist to the impulse:

Fabulation—or if you prefer, mythomania and outright tall tales—is no doubt a sign of social and historical impotence, of the blocking of possibilities that leaves little option but the imaginary. Yet its very invention and inventiveness endorses a creative freedom . . . agency here steps out of the historical record . . . and new multiple or alternate strings of events rattle the bars of the national tradition and the history manuals whose very constraints and necessities their parodic force indicts.¹¹

During the 1970s not only third-world writers but also filmmakers and artists moved into magical realism, courting narrative abundance for deterministically motivating desire. In India this form of quasi-historical representational practice led equally deterministically to a variety of social realisms featuring artists as varied as Krishen Khanna, A. Ramachandran, Gieve Patel and Bikash Bhattacharjee. By the end of the 1970s an affiliation was formed with what was at the time the School of London after R.B. Kitaj—anathema indeed to Paris and New York but seen by several Indian artists of this generation as an antidote to the formalist impasse of late modernist art. This move also tried to take into account the lost phases of twentieth-century art: Mexican muralism, German new objectivity, American regionalism. That is to say, all those artists left in the wide margins of the twentieth century that a too-narrow definition of modernism ignores. This was the virtual manifesto of the 1981 exhibition *Place for People*, featuring Bhupen Khakhar (*Illus. 23*), Gulammohammed Sheikh (*Illus. 24*), Jogen Chowdhury (*Illus. 26*), Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani and Sudhir Patwardhan (*Illus. 22*).

The narrative move activated the strong traditions in Indian art itself, including its revived version in the nationalist period. At this juncture K.G. Subramanyan, the wise and witty father-figure linking Santiniketan with Baroda, took up genre painting (on glass) as a form of parody of the high modern. Parodying as well the ideologies of the popular, he slipped over the cusp—beyond modernism—and made a decisive new space for Indian art. This was extended by subversive tugs in social and sexual directions in the hands of an artist like Bhupen Khakhar. A regionalism developed in Baroda and it combined with the urban realism of Bombay. A representational schema for cross-referencing the social ground was realized. A reconfiguration also took place of the realist, the naive and the putatively postmodernist forms of figuration. Indian art, even as it ideologized itself along older progressivist terms, came in line with a selfconsciously eclectic and annotated pictorial vocabulary.

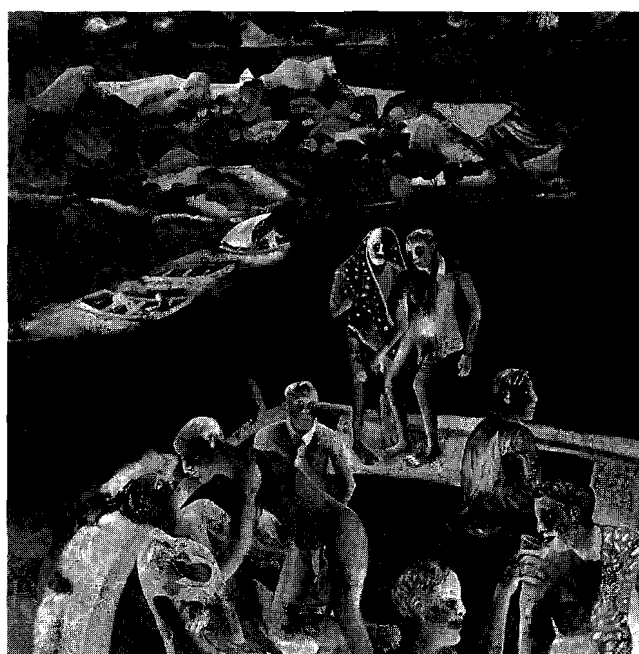
If we argue that Indian efforts at finding an identity were reinforced by a

kind of ethnographic overspill into fabulous narratives and new ideologies of narration, it can also help position the interest in pictorial narration in Indian contemporary art during the 1970s and 80s in a more provocative stance. To the traditions of K.G. Subramanyan and Bhupen Khakhar add Gulammohammed Sheikh, and we can see how these artists moved via pop art into a representational excess of signs to renegotiate several traditions at once. The intertextuality of their images, the art-historical references, the popular idiom serve as a more confident avowal of a regional and properly differentiated national aesthetic. Art language now affirms its multivalence, opening up the ideology of modernism to the possibility of alternative realities. By its transgressions what is retroactively called the postmodern impulse opens up the structure of the artwork, too-neatly placed within the high culture of modern India. The new narrators rattle the bars of national tradition and let out the parodic force suppressed within it.

During the 1980s a number of Indian artists assume the authorial confidence to handle multifarious references, to deliberately disrupt the convergent philosophy and language of Indian modernism. Prominent among them are women artists of a figurative turn. Arpita Singh (*Illus. 25*), Nalini Malani, Madhvi Parekh (*Illus. 27*) and Nilima Sheikh are active in the 1980s. Anupam Sud, Arpana Caur and Rekha Rodwittiya (*Illus. 28*) reinforce the turn. These artists introject a subjectivity that is existentially pitched but does not devolve into the currently celebrated schizophrenic freedoms. Gender interventions come to mean that the narrated self is inscribed into



Left: 22 Sudhir Patwardhan, *Ceremony*, 1984.
Right: 23 Bhupen Khakhar, *In a Boat*, 1988.
Facing page: 24 Gulammohammed Sheikh, *Story of Aziz and Aziza*, 1989

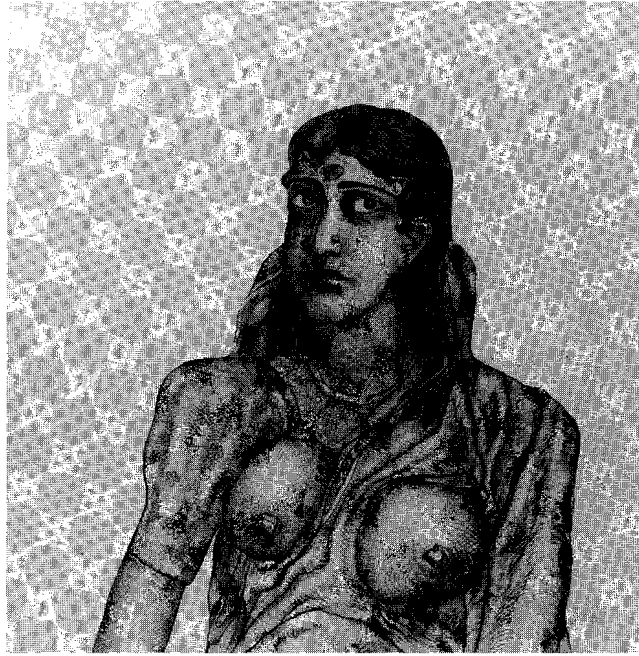


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Above left: 25 Arpita Singh, *Woman Sitting*, 1992.
 Above right: 26 Jogen Chowdhury, *Nati Binodini*,
 1975. Below: 27 Madhvi Parekh, *Durga*, 1993



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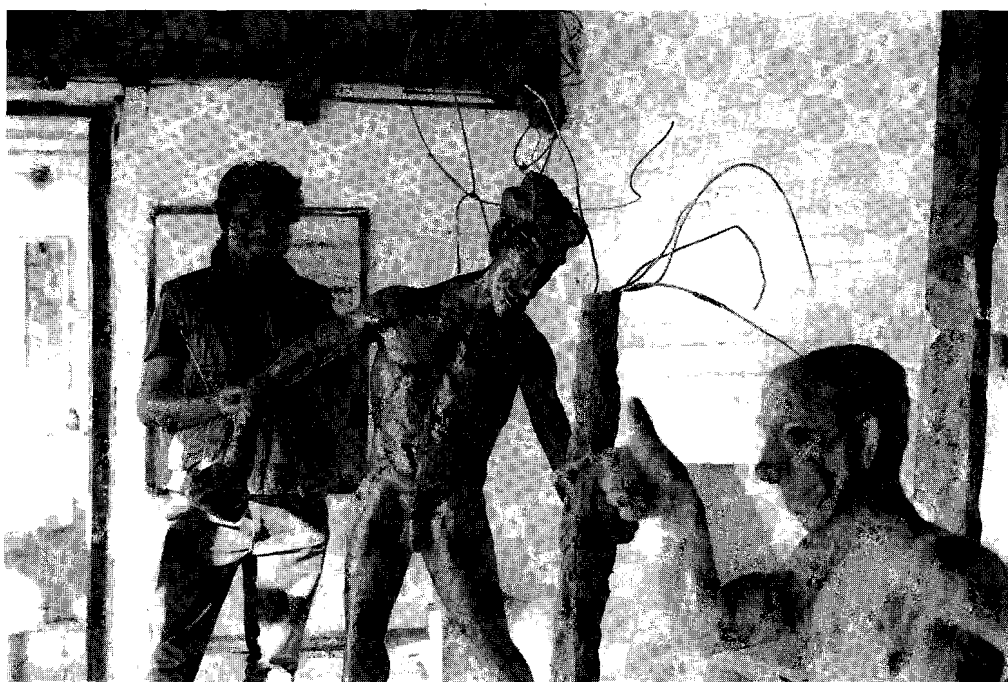


28 Rekha Rodwittiya, *A Milestone on the Journey*, 1989

the social body through allegorical means with a secret intent that exceeds its textual character. For there is always in our unresolved modernity and in our postmodern retroaction the haunting need to release a repressed consciousness, and in the case of the more politically inclined artists, to introduce a mode of intervention.

Postmodern Pros and Cons

The adventures of the aesthetic make up one of the great narratives of modernity; from the time of its autonomy through art for art's sake to its status as a necessary negative category, a critique of the world as it is. It is this last moment (figured brilliantly in the writings of Theodor Adorno) that is hard to relinquish: the notion of the aesthetic as subversive, a critical interest in an otherwise instrumental world. Now, however, we have to consider that this aesthetic space too is eclipsed—or rather that its criticality is largely illusory (and so instrumental). In such an event, the strategy of an Adorno, of 'negative commitment' might have to be revised or rejected, and a new strategy of interference (associated with Gramsci) devised.¹²



Apropos forms of interference, The Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association (1987–89) most nearly attempted such an avantgarde function within the Indian context. It was constituted by young Kerala artists like Alex Mathew, and the charismatic K.P. Krishnakumar who committed suicide in 1989 (*Illus. 29, 30*). Its members were affiliated for the most part to ultraleft groups in a provenance of India frequently governed and consistently influenced by the communist movement. Their mode of intervention and how they pitch themselves into the practice and discourse of radicalism make an exemplary story terminally situated in the project of modernism.

It is often argued that the antiaesthetic in the modern–postmodern conjuncture suits the third world very



Above: 29 K.P. Krishnakumar with unfinished sculptures, 1986.
Below: 30 K.P. Krishnakumar. *The Boatman*, 1987

well. This is the position of the third cinema protagonists, the crisis in modernism itself being attributed to revolt by cultures outside the west. We also know for a fact that black ideologues and feminists have found the possibility of conceptualizing a far greater degree of freedom through an understanding of postmodernism, through an understanding of the operations of power in relation to which their own art activity is inevitably positioned. It is precisely the task of the politically inclined artist to make this conjunctural moment more profoundly ironic; to once again question the existential status, the indexical ramifications of signs in the politics of our times. This has to do, as Hal Foster points out,

with a critical deconstruction of tradition, not an instrumental pastiche of pop or pseudo-historical forms, with a critique of origins, not a return to them. In short it [postmodernism] seeks to question rather than exploit cultural codes, to explore rather than conceal social and political affiliations.¹³

At this point it becomes more than a polemical strategy to say that with the advent of the postmodern there is a release of new productivity in India and that it provides a relief from Indian modernism developing according to its so-called inner logic. It is worth noting, therefore, that this entire discourse might mean something quite precise within a continuum of Indian art: strongly imagist and almost always covertly symbolic, Indian art may have already come into crisis through the too-easily assimilated modernist principle of metaphoricity. Since the pop divide took in surrealism and dada—specifically their critique of representation and reification—the image has been persistently questioned (by the forms of theatricality in minimal art for example, and by the ‘idea’ in conceptual art) in the west. Not so in India. It is worth asking if our own fixation with the past as image, with the heavy claims for cultural condensation, does not require a sorting out of the over-signified image.

The postmodern aesthetic now plays with the image of images, the simulacrum—it plays through parody and pastiche. With the market entering Indian art practice on an institutional plane the factor of commodification is firmly on hand. In fact Indian artists may be nearer than they know or acknowledge to postmodernist kitsch through ‘instrumental pastiche’ and exploitation of ‘cultural codes’. In India, now, one may find a mock-surreal confrontation between the protagonists of the real as against those of the simulacra over the live body of the modern—a confrontation to claim the very sublime that Lyotard attributes to the postmodern avantgarde.¹⁴ All avantgardes have to take account of the market now; all art practice has to reckon with forces that sully the sublime. Which is why, in place of Lyotard’s illusory account of transcendence, the term ‘interference’ may be more correct.

For myself I hope to find affinities for Indian art beyond the simulacra and towards a historically positioned aesthetic. There is a strong glimpse of this possibility: if postmodern art, preferring the spatial over the temporal dimension, produces

a flattened version of time and narrative, a cut-out image of the contemporary without its historical referent, there is already in Indian art an appreciation of these problems. There is an attempt at a radically different ordering of the part to the whole so that the different ordering of the relationship between metaphor and metonymy is worked out as a form of 'cognitive mapping'.¹⁵ A utopian vision is sought to be worked out by structures other than the overworked ground of mytho-poetic symbolisms favoured in indigenist versions of modern art. The immense imaginary, always seductive to the Indian psyche, is now consciously transfigured by a handful of Indian artists into open structures, paradoxical signs.

The cue for a complex handling of the postmodern may come, more than anywhere else, from cinema. The cinema of Kumar Shahani, for example, uses the fictive device of epic narration not only to keep a hold on history, on the dimension of time and memory which the postmodern age is determined to displace; it also poses the question of aesthetics and reification within the narrative itself. The conditions of hypostasis are staged precisely to resist the unadmitted stasis of the commodified image. Thus the image that Shahani so sumptuously nurtures as a cinematic privilege, or rather as cinema's privileging of the imagist realm that constitutes the unconscious itself, this image is made profoundly ironic in its very beauty in films such as *Tarang* (1984) and *Kasba* (1990).

Ground Realities

At this juncture I would like to *reverse the argument*. Having gone through the logic of art history in an optimistic mode—anticipating further complexities within what I called the modern-postmodern conjuncture—it is worth asking if all questions of aesthetics might not be mocked out of discussion at the level of ground realities and in the current play on lifestyles as differential culture. The postmodern has as many cosmopolitan conceits as the modern ever had and requires over and above that a command of technology and media and of international market transactions far exceeding the modern. We do not, in the third world, have command of the mechanisms that may be used to undo the terms of this reified culture which offers so many seductions. We do not even have the backing of the historical avant-garde that Europe conceived as its dialectical method for battling reification and other vagaries of capitalist culture.

The political discourse of the postmodern promises to undo the totalizing vision of the historical universe and with that the institutionalizing of the modern. But it subsumes nevertheless the politics of actual difference based on class, race, gender into a metadiscourse of the one world order rivalling, despite its protestations to the contrary, any global hegemony sought or established by the modern. This postmodernism supersedes the kinds of cultural praxis historically possible in different parts of the world to such an extent that one might say that *our* cultures in the third

world do not at the moment stand a chance. Thus the cultural manifestations of the postmodern may be something of a false gloss on the hard facts of the political economy to which these are related.

All this is further contextualized by the fact that India has now been pulled into the logic of multinational capitalism, a fact only lately declared and now openly celebrated. The Indian government now puts out posters showing a great elephant breaking free of his chains. It is not clear whether the elephant is the people, the nation, the state, or the big bourgeoisie, but perhaps that is the whole point. There is this deliberately conflated representation of an Indian identity hitherto signified entirely, even defensively, in nationalist terms, terms that are now seen as fetters.

The Government of India has accepted 'solutions' for its economic crises in full accord with the IMF/World Bank prescriptions for 'stabilizing' the less developed countries, when in fact the experience of a majority of the countries that have accepted 'structural adjustment' packages has been disastrous.

What metropolitan capital demands via the IMF and the World Bank . . . [is] an 'open-door policy', namely that it be treated on a par with domestic capital itself, which inevitably entails encroaching upon the latter's extant economic territory. The transition demanded and enforced is not one from Nehruvian state intervention to an alternative regime of state intervention in favour of domestic monopoly capital, as in the case of the metropolitan economies, but to a regime of state intervention in favour of monopoly capital in general, both domestic as well as foreign, in which the foreign element inevitably constitutes the dominant component.

We thus have a switch: of the state acting as a bulwark against metropolitan capital . . . getting transformed into a defender of its interests against the domestic working masses.¹⁶

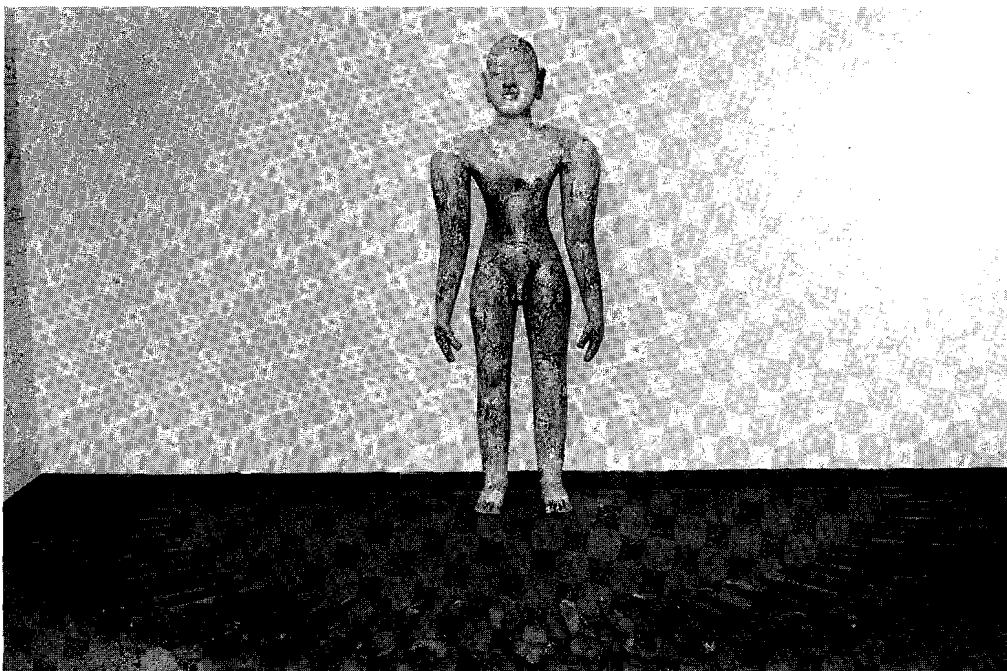
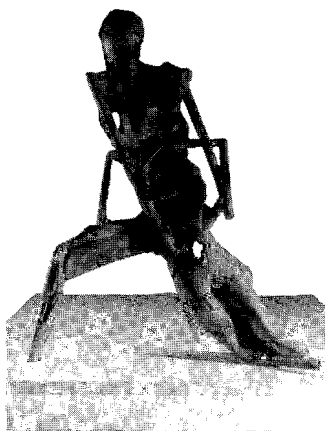
What we are doing under the tutelage of the IMF and the World Bank involves not only anti-poor, proconsumption policies but also the virtual surrender of national sovereignty—operable only on the basis of a welfare state. It predicates surrender on all fronts including the basic right inscribed in every anti-imperialist and nationalist agenda: the right to make our own economic laws. The specific pressure by the USA (via GATT and Intellectual Property Rights legislation) commoditizes all knowledge. Discussion of the cultural logic of late capitalism thus has to be contextualized so that the new imperialisms are kept fully in sight. For whether or not nationalism as such can any longer be upheld, the new globalism has to be seen for what it does. It seeks the disintegration not only of socialism but also of postcolonial national formations.

Ironically, even contemporary radicals will say that what is happening to the Indian nation is what ought to happen to national formations in good time: they

must break up to give long-needed space to new social movements, to subaltern groups and their struggles. The entire discourse from the liberal democratic to the radical is now, especially after the defeat of socialism, arraigned against large collectives, against the national, against the nation-state. It is as if the nation-state presents an even greater danger than imperialism as such. This, however, is far from the historically experienced truth of colonial/postcolonial nations. Especially as the neoimperialism of the west is happy to let reactionary nationalisms thrive—on the basis of fundamentalism, violence, territorial fracture.

Even as all categorization is now ranged on the level of majority and minority communities, all discourse proceeds thereon—as a politics of communitarian difference. Within the first world plurality is nothing more than liberal tolerance and neoethnicity is another face of antisocialism. It needs to be said that painfully wrought nations in the third world cannot be subsumed in that discourse. We are beginning to be taught the lesson that religion and its call for differ-

Above: 31 Somnath Hore, *Comrades*, 1984.
Below: 32 N.N. Rimzon, *The Inner Voice*, 1992



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ence, even in a democratic country like India, can quickly bring us to the brink of fascism—precisely perhaps if we capitulate on the national. Whatever else it may have failed to achieve, the national is still constitutionally (and experientially) predicated on modern, secular values and produces, therefore, a democratic polity.

Metaphoric Recall

Not so long ago socialism, its history interwoven with that of bourgeois culture and therefore with modernity, transmitted strength and hope from its different registers of radical opposition. Without the socialist narrative and without national allegories, what is it that will sustain a symbolic order of collectivities in our imagination? And how shall we oppose the collectivities forged in the name of the holy by the religious bigots of the day? Nationalism along with socialism may for the moment be a lost cause, but as for the more dangerous forms of totalization—racism, religious fundamentalism—these grow apace and will not be contained by postmodernism's preferred metaphors of schizophrenia, the unassimilable feature of nihilist freedom. The terror of religious revivalism is very real. However, when the east is demonized it should be placed face-to-face with the rise of reactionary conservatism, indeed of neo-fascism in the west and the terror that it spells. With the politics of emergent ethnicities, with the noncontextual appropriation of traditions and the obscurantism of religious militancy, we are increasingly held to ransom by a fundamentalist or racial consciousness.

In an age of political retrenchment it may be useful to place nostalgia for socialism to the fore and designate it as properly symbolic. There is good reason to recall that the modernist project was engaged in an affirmative act of desacralization; it was engaged in a decoding and a secularization of works of the past and the present (*Illus.* 31, 32). This is of the greatest importance in evaluating today the significance of that modernism.¹⁷

In India for the moment it looks as though there is a modernism that almost never was. The more political among Indian artists may be right after all in believing that the as yet unresolved national questions may account for an incomplete modernism that still possesses the radical power it has lost elsewhere. Positioned as an intrepid form of the human, signified in an order of verticality, thus John Berger introduced Picasso into the arena of the modern: as a vertical man.¹⁸ Despite this male imagining of the modern it may be useful to place, like an archimedean point, a stake on an anthropomorphic truth of the modern revolution. For the Indian artist this stake is beyond irony, and beyond also the proclaimed death of the subject. Mapping the chronological scale of realism/modernism/postmodernism on to the lived history of our own deeply ambivalent passage through this century, it may be useful to situate modernity itself like an elegiac metaphor in the 'new world order'.

Notes and References

- ¹ *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London, 1989, p. 35.
- ² See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Verso, New York, 1977, pp. 133–34.
- ³ See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1965; and Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1986.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ The following discussion takes off from Homi Bhabha, 'Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition', in *Remaking History*, edited by Barbara Kruger and Phil Mariani, Bay Press, Seattle, 1989.
- ⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 311.
- ⁷ Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, p. 35.
- ⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 307.
- ⁹ Collated information on the IPTA is available in *Marxist Cultural Movement: Chronicles and Documents*, compiled and edited by Sudhi Pradhan, published by Mrs Pradhan and distributed by Pustak Bipani, Calcutta, 1985.
- ¹⁰ Williams, *Politics of Modernism*, p. 34.
- ¹¹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 369.
- ¹² *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, Bay Press, Port Townsend, WA, 1983, p. xvi.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. xxi.
- ¹⁴ Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, p. 77.
- ¹⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 417–18.
- ¹⁶ Prabhat Patnaik, 'A Note on the Political Economy of the "Retreat of the State"', in *Whatever Happened to Imperialism and other essays*, Tulika, New Delhi, 1995, p. 206.
- ¹⁷ See Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity—An Incomplete Project', in *The Anti-Aesthetic*, edited by Hal Foster.
- ¹⁸ John Berger, *Success and Failure of Picasso*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1965.