BETWEEN MOTIVES AND MOTIFS

Indian art issued forth from a deep need to establish an ideal aesthetic. Market forces have hewn off the two, but a vanguard still explores the frontiers.

BY STUTI AGARWAL

THE story of art is a story of its being harnessed to various ideals—the religious, moral and 'classical' ideals that the Renaissance and post-Renaissance painters strove for, or an ideal bucolic arcadia so dear to the Romantic landscape artists, or even the mimetic perfection that was the proclaimed telos of the Impressionists. A need to engage the masses with the gathering forces of nationalism occurred in modern times. Two famous works—both embodying a national ideal—spring to mind: Eugene Delacroix's *Liberty Leading People* (1830) and Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata* (1905). Created at pivotal moments in the history of France and India, one is a clarion call to revolution; the other a serene image of benevolent motherhood. Both are unalloyedly 'idealistic'.

Then there is the art of protest—cautionary records of humankind's egregiousness, of the displacement of ideals. The anti-clerical ghouls and idiot monarchs of Francisco Goya condemn the social and moral rot in Spain, his 'disasters of war' series are a systematic impeachment of militarism, and *A Military Execution in 1808* is the first great anti-war picture. Over a hundred years later, his countryman Pablo Picasso was to express much the same in *Guernica* (1937)—the howling, cowering, contorted mass of sufferers a lasting testament to the brutal destruction of the Basque town during the Spanish Civil War. In India, Chittoprosad Bhattacharya's paintings of of the Bengal famine—often done for journals of the Communist Party of India, often in spare pencil, brush and ink—are a horrific record of death, decay and indignity.

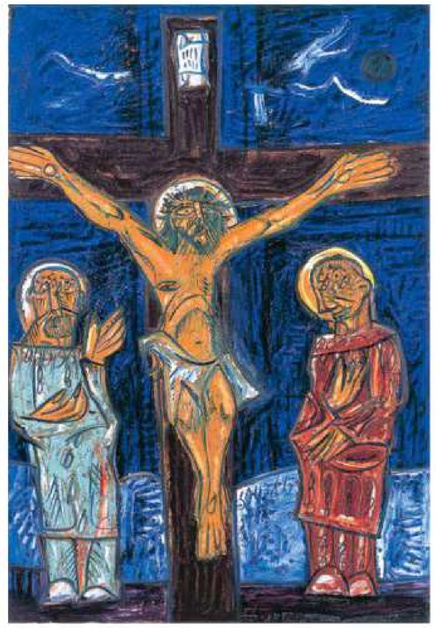
The first decades of the 20th century saw the Bengal school in intense cogitation over the direction of Indian art—how to evolve an Indian idiom that broke from the representational reality of Western academic painting, yet was eclectic and open. They did so with a refined 'revivalism'—going back to Mughal miniatures and Ajanta frescoes (and thematically to Indian mythology), but also to Japanese wash techniques. The Bombay school sought to forge its own indigeneity too.

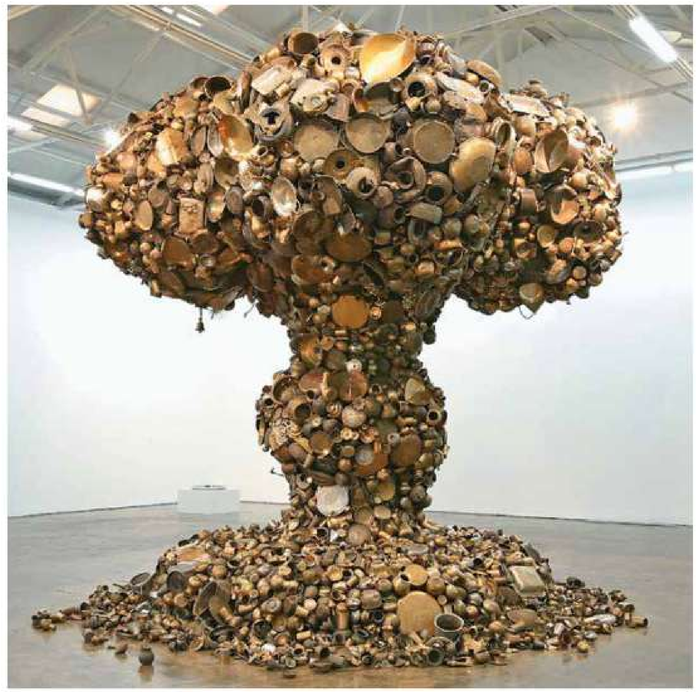
Indian artists, inevitably, responded to the freedom struggle. Jamini Roy forsook his individualistic style and, as a radical critic of colonialism, embraced the utopia of his 'pata'-inspired 'primitive' style. Nandalal Bose's frescoes in Santiniketan were a meld of traditions—from Rajasthan, Tibet and Bengal to that of China and Japan. These were cast in a nationalist mould in the posters and murals Nandalal did for the 1938 Congress session in Haripura, Gujarat. They depict common folk, artisans, musicians, farmers in scenes from village life—the Gandhian's tribute to the Mahatma's vision of an ideal, traditional village life containing the real soul of India.

The stage, finally, was set for the first generation of postcolonial artists who had their creativity dipped in a deep sense of national idealism and yet were primarily inspired by Western modernism. The Progressive Artists Group in Bombay was founded in 1947 by F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain, K.H. Ara and H.A. Gade. Their commitment to their credo—a concern for 'significant form'—to the utter disregard of the

THIS INDIA
Far left, an ink-work by Chittoprosad depicts the victims of the Bengal famine; *Three Dynasties* from M.F. Husain's *Indian Civilisation* series

SPOT FIXING Left, A 'Bindu' painting by S.H. Raza; above, Atul Dodiya's *Mahalakshmi*

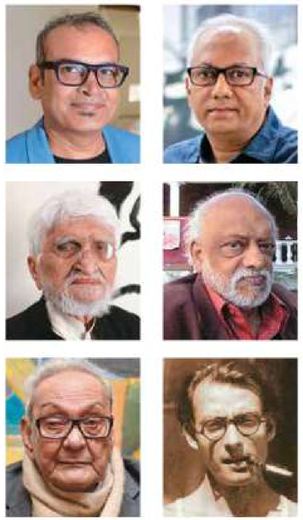




CROSS TO BEAR Above, *Crucifixion* by F.N. Souza; right, Subodh Gupta's *Line of Control*

'market' is legendary. So are their process-driven, provocative canvases. They were pure artists and lived as such—when Krishen Khanna left his comfortable bank job and chose to work full-time as an artist, his friends, Husain and Raza, held a celebratory dinner in Paris. Acclaim came after a long, hard apprenticeshp before the easel. "The struggle of the older generation has been immense. The art market only opened up in the last 15-20 years. Their fight to make a living through art instilled in them a connect to art as an extension of themselves," says art critic and curator Uma Nair.

Souza's journey from his widely acclaimed (and equally berated) nudes, to his own critique of Christianity, the Church, or the corruption of the upper class, stood firm on the belief that anything destructive in society must be confronted. He once said, "I use the aesthetic rather than bullets or knives as a form of protest against stuffed shirts and hypocrites." Raza's early abstracts are often a reworking of his own memories as the son of a forest ranger in MP's Narsinghpur district. Husain's last works, *The Indian Civilisation* series, eight monumental triptychs, were a summation of how he saw India. V.S. Gaitonde talked of art as waiting. "The most important aspect of painting is waiting, waiting, waiting, between one work and the next," he once said.



MODERN MASTERS Clockwise from top left, Subodh Gupta, Atul Dodiya, F.N. Souza, Chittoprosad Bhattacharya, S.H. Raza and M.F. Husain

This primal need to create meaningful art has attenuated under the grasping blade of commercialism, say old-timers. The numbers are certainly impressive: Artery Indian Auction Report 2017 showed a turnover of Rs 609.03 crore from global sales of Indian art in 2016. Art as investment, and artists' enrichment through auctions and commissions was only inevitable. "Earlier, masters never compromised. Today, the work of the younger generation has become market-driven and repetitive," says Yashodhara Dalmia, art historian and curator. "There has been a qualitative degeneration," she adds. Senior art critic Kishore Singh agrees. "Artists do tend to be market-led. To sacrifice to be an artist is an old concept, and the artist in the garage idea is long gone...," he says.

But many demur with this line if the art is relevant. "If artists can make money, why not," says art collector Abhishek Poddar. A change from the late '70s when, as Atul Dodiya remembers, everyone believed art could not provide sustenance and required one to have an alternate career. In a letter to Raza dated September 29, 1952, painter and sculptor Sadanand Bakre wrote, "I get very little time to do my work. I still have to do a full-time job, which is an unhealthy sign for my work. But it is bread and butter." But today, says senior artist A. Ramachandran, "The opening up of the market has led to parents wanting to make artists of their kids, because even art school graduates could sell a pleasing landscape for as much as Rs 2 lakh."

Dodiya is glad that he finds books and materials more affordable these days, but agrees the market can circumscribe the kinds of art deemed desirable. Yet, is the ideal artist, creating relevant art—a response to the political or historical context or a pure personal aesthetic—but in sync with the market, an impossibility? "Sure, there are definitely artists who are making attempts to do more than just sell art," says Dalmia. Still, the hand of the 'market' can be more insidious than the mere, bald fact of there being commerce. It can seep into a whole epoch, thinning out the aesthetic fibre, valorising the trite, the spectacular—the artist may labour earnestly to create what he or she deems to be a relevant, topical 'message' and yet be under its sway.

Subodh Gupta has his own signature lexicon. Not for him pretty landscapes or New Age spiritual derivations that appeal to the parvenu 'buying' culture. Known for his use of steel utensils as a symbol of the common man, his installation, *Line of Control*, is a mushroom-shaped cloud made with shiny utensils—a dire message to nuclear neighbours India and Pakistan. In 2001, for his shutter series, Dodiya painted *Mahalakshmi*—a common, Ravi Varma-esque calendar art goddess, yet, behind the shutter, it depicts the tragedy of three dowry suicides. Then there was his *Gandhi* series in response to communal violence after the Babri Masjid demolition. Bharti Kher's signature 'bindis' signify the third eye—celebrating an object of ritual and questioning perceptions about the common object Then there are others like Jitish Kallat, Nalini Malani and Jagannath Panda with their own visual languages.

But the overall field has so much that is pure dross. "The number of artists has gone up drastically in the last decade, and so has the number of 'factories' producing art," says Poddar.

> A thriving art market flush with funds has adversely affected many artists' need to create meaningful art. The number of artists has shot up, and so have art 'factories'.

Artists' inner lives have changed too. "I've had long conversations with the masters about art, technique, society and life," reminisces Dalmia. Today, she is saddened by how self-centred artists are. "It's all about them, their next show, their current work. Art is now a confined space." The value system has leached out, agrees Ramachandran.

A spirit of conscious awareness—a positive self-importance, if you like—about the artist's responsibility is a casualty among contemporary artists. Yet, it's only the real art and artist that survive. Only because parts of India are romancing affluence, there's no call to give up on the regenerative power of art. A light will break through.