ABSTRACTION IN MODERN INDIAN ART: A STUDY IN THE POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIAN PAINTING (1955-2005)

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SUMMARY

During the past fifty years Indian art has undergone more profound changes, but the changes were more crucial because the Indian people were not fully prepared for them. Indian thought and expression had been suppressed for a long time under the foreign dominance but after independence it was blossomed forth in varied forms of creativity. The Indian artists makes break through from all the traditions, norms established by British and nationalist style of Bengal school to develop a creativity of their own, they had explored new techniques and new material and their feelings have been expressed freely.

Abstraction emerges in the visual art to free the painting from representational subject matter. Abstract art generally understood to mean art that does not depict object in the natural world but instead uses shapes, texture and color in non-representational way. In abstraction, imagination and invention concentrated on pictorial surface and arrangement of shapes, colors, texture and patterns are invariably used to achieve the abstract image. The objective is to conceive the sheer visual. It is this practice, which is leading the artist to experiment with in the depth of his expressions.

The contemporary art scene in India is one of the most vibrant in the world and abstraction gives more colorful expression to it. Abstraction becomes the major trend in post-independence modern Indian art. From 50’s to till this date abstract art in India passes through the various phases of development. The lure of abstraction provides a central pre-occupation to many significant artist and its impulses so strong that at the beginning of the new century it remains an option for many individual artists to carry on the quest for sheer visuality. Abstraction has been a very significant contribution in the progress of modern Indian art.

Abstraction is a very distinct form of art, which explore varied means of creating visuals. It could be instantaneous or deeply researched too. It is sheer idea to create a visual that is directed for sheer visuality. Abstraction is one of the most influential styles of the 20th century art that affected the production of art throughout the whole world. Abandoning the 19th century European idea that art should imitate nature, abstract art does not strive to create accurate representation.
Abstract patterns have also its roots in ancient history, represented through early decoration for textile and pottery. Abstraction is different from pattern making in design, since it draws a distinction between decorative art and fine art in which a painting is an object of thoughtful contemplation in its own right.

It is very difficult to allege about the origin of abstraction in art, but in the mid-nineteenth century, the origin of Impressionism plays a significant role in the development of abstraction (Specifically in the context of painting). Painting, for the first time, did not represent images that were fully recognizable. Paintings of Monet, Pissaro and Renoir are not realistically accurate; their interest in the play of color, illumination and surface effects of light shows semi-abstract tendencies. Neo-Impressionist like George Seurat constructed forms out of points of pure color, which were again not wholly representational according to the European realism. Maurice Denis stated that “a painting--before being a warhorse, a nude woman, or an anecdote…..s essentially a surface plane covered with pigments disposed in a certain manner."

In the early 20th century, visual art achieved greater freedom as artists could now research and experiment deeper into themselves and develop art that was not just imitation of the objects from the natural world. Abstract art spread up around this time in many places around the world simultaneously. Cubist like Picasso and Braque changed our perception of representation of object in the painting. Cubist introduced the idea of painting an object from more than one point of view. Different variations of abstract art were developed and were known by different names: Futurism in Italy, Rayonism, Cubo-Futurism and Supermatism in Russia, Vorticism in England, Orphism in Paris, De-Stijl in Netherlands, and Der Blaue Rieter and Bauhaus in Germany.

Abstraction reached its apex as an accepted form of creativity in the first two decades of twentieth century. Wassily Kandinsky is considered as one of the foremost leading artist to have painted complete abstract painting around 1910. He arrived at an art of internal necessity in which color and line were used as mean of representing spiritual states of mind. Another significant painter was Piet Mondrian. He moved from perceived objects to abstract design, extracting and abstracting
colored forms till they became pure design. He represents the most austere geometrical influences of this period. Later Kasimir Malevich painted his supermatist geometrical paintings between 1914-17.

The history of abstract art can thus be seen as a process that evolved slowly and reached its culmination with emergence of abstract expressionism. This form of abstraction emerges in New York in the 1940’s and was not so much a school of art as it was a new way of thinking. The abstract expressionist broke away from the conventions of the past and began creating art that was previously not deemed as ‘acceptable’ in the art world. In America, abstract expressionism was one style that involves painters like Hans Hoffman, Arshile Gorky, Jackson Pollock, Mark Rothko, Barenett Newman, William de Kooning, Ad Reinhardt, Ellsworth Kelly and many others. Op art and Minimalism are the new idioms of abstraction in the 1970’s in Europe and America. It is at present more likely that an artist's work is seen as an individual entity rather than part of a movement. Sean Scully, John Mclanghin, Callum Innes, Ronald Davis, Larry Poons, and Yako Shiraishi are some abstract painters of today.

Early instance of abstraction in modern Indian art comes with semi-cubist style paintings by Gaganendranath Tagore. He was much aware of what was going in the western world of art. In his early period he was highly influenced from cubism. He develops a style which is very different from the notion in which other Indian artists were practiced. His later paintings entirely in black ink of the 20's are really mysterious. When Gaganendranath Tagore was experimenting with the modern European techniques, at that time most of the Indian artists were practiced in the league of nationalism. Gaganendranath Tagore’s paintings play a significant role for the further developments in the context of international trends. At the same time Rabindranath Tagore turned towards painting in his old age. He felt an urge for creation with visual medium of line and color. His early paintings of crossed out lines in his manuscripts are very close to abstraction. Incidentally he had been supportive for non-imitative art. Rabindranath Tagore was influential in bringing an exhibition of Bauhaus’s artists to India in 1922. This was for the first time Indian artist had came face-to-face with contemporary European art. It was the first time that the Indians were exposed to the pure painting and painting without the subject.
In 30's and 40's Ram Kinkar Baij’s work was influenced from European modernism. Cézanne and Cubits movement influenced him initially. He painted some abstract compositions in this period. The influence of western modern art was felt long before independence in the various art centers in India. Few scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy, Herman Gotez, Rabindra Nath Tagore, O.C. Ganguly, Niharanjan Ray and Mulk Raj Anand also played significant role to establish the new and proper interpretation of modern Indian art.

In 1947, India becomes a new democratic country. The early period after independence was very crucial for Indian citizens as they were facing crisis of identity in the social and cultural sphere. Many visible and significant changes have taken place in the Indian cultural sphere. These cultural developments have also reinforced people self-consciousness and narrow cultural identities organize on the principle of ethnicity, culture, language, religion and art. The process of cultural integration on national scale has grown but with simultaneous increase in search for cultural autonomy. Most of the artist practicing in the period ardently responded to the modernist language of expressionism.

In India, the division of the country shocks of socio-economic dislocation during the period and holocaust of communal riots that followed, a rise of new urban centers. The hectic industrialization and urbanization were coeval with the emergence of newly independent state. All this led to a growing alienation of man from family and traditional social bounds. In visual art, this situation also created a crisis in the academic aesthetics of verisimilitude. So in the context of painting, the colours became free from their naturalistic context and forms found an unprecedented release in expressionist distortion and complexity.

After independence art scene in India changed drastically. During 30’s and 40’s number of theater professional, writers and visual artist joined together under the banner of “Progressives”, taking the inspiration from progressive writers in 1947, Progressive Artist Group (PAG) was formed by Souza, Raza, Ara and others in Bombay. PAG artists had leftist ideology; they believed that the Indian artists had to assimilate the language of modern art and become a part of international art
modernism. Taking inspiration from Progressives many Indian artists began a quest for their individual styles, bringing forward innovative ideas and new techniques; because this assimilation of Western modernism presented them a way for claiming a modernist identity for themselves.

Delhi Shilpi Chakra group emerged, and started organizing exhibitions, workshops, open debates and others art events that vibrated the cultural sphere of Delhi. In 50’s several commercial art galleries came into existence, which began to exhibit and marketed the works of an increasing numbers of upcoming artists. At that crucial point Indian Government starts taking initiatives for the cultural resurrection of Indian art. In this respect Indian government established the Indian Council for Cultural Relation for cultural exchange with other countries. Under cultural agreement signed with most of countries, several artists went abroad. Selected exhibitions as well as programs of performing and literary arts of India were also sponsored and sent to various countries. Reciprocally, artists and cultural programs from abroad were regularly invited to make their presentation. National Gallery of Modern Art, National Museum and Lalit Kala Academi were established. Delhi became hub for all sorts of art activities and events.

In 1950’s artists enthusiastically turned towards the sheer joy of abstraction. Indian artists were influenced by doctrine and technique prevalent in the western art and began to accept the cultural hegemony of the west. Changes in the economic environment and socio-political advancement had its influence on the Indian artistic scene. A section of viewers and artist have been inspired by the display of colors in the place of representational human figures and its sophistication. Indian artists developed a hybrid modernism with the amalgamation of the Indian tradition with western modernism. During fifties some significant figurative artists turned towards abstraction. This general development is seen in the works of K.C.S. Panikar, Biren De, Bimal Das Gupta, Ram Kumar, Krishan Khanna, K.G. Subramaniyam, Satish Gujral, V.S. Gaitonde and many others. Some of them were teachers and also disseminated new set of values which their student or followers recognized.

Abstraction became more pronounced in the 1960s among Indian artists. These were the crucial years of Indian art, when the quest for personal and collective identity was undertaken by referencing traditional arts that are non-figurative in
character. The general tendency during this time was to rejuvenate the abstract motifs on canvas and disowning the human figure in painting. Artist were fully aware of work of art to be expressive, it need not rely on naturalistic subject-matter alone, but that color, shape, line and combine use of elements of design speaks forcefully for themselves. The artist had to struggle long and hard to understand as a new vocabulary of ideas and methods evolved. The basic ideas and methods are European but the subject, flavor and vitality of these painters are thoroughly Indian. Those who boldly adopted the abstraction included, Ram Kumar, K.C.S.Panikar, Bimal Das Gupta, S.H. Raza, Jahangir Sabawala, V.S. Gaitonde, Shanti Dave, Jeram Patel, J. Swaminathan, Ambadas, G.R. Santosh, Biren De, Surya Parkash, Nareen Nath, Parbhakar Barwe and later it went on to become a lively trend.

The fifties was a period of ferment and assimilation; the work produced during this period bear the influence of the Western modern movements. However, it is to be noted that while the impact of the West on certain phases of modern Indian art has been crucial, it has been largely catalytic rather than decisive. The sixties through the early seventies was a period of introspection. There was a reaction away from the western influence and an aspiration towards finding an Indian identity within the modern art idiom. This idea was eloquently articulated by a pan-Indian group named ‘Group 1890’. The group was reaction to the idea that the Paris school of art was central to the movement. At that time many significant artist feel a strong need for the indegenious expression in their respective approches and derivative styles. Among them J.Swaminathan, Himmat Shah, Jyoti Bhatt, Jeram Patel, Ambadas and Balkrishan Patel are really significant. Another manifestation of the need for establishing an Indian identity was the establishment of Cholamandal Artist’s village, near the Mahabalipuram in 1966. The intent of the Cholamandal artist village was to create an alternative to the artistic derivativeness from the western norms.

Indian abstract art has strong affinity with nature. Nature has always been a significant source for inspiration for artists. The pre-occupation of Indian abstract painters with nature is the essence rather than the appearance of the subject, that shows they are concerned with reality but of the different nature. A romantic language was created by artist, where nature was the excitant and aroused artistic
intuitions regardless of the realities of the material world. Many expressed through nature where nature itself had become a source of inspiration for their vivid colored images on the two dimensional surface. These painters has been towards kind of abstraction which draws on observed reality to create the variously a conscious or unconscious imagery or a kind of organic and natural technology of form.

Some distinguish artists are discovering innovative values in abstraction by experimenting with texture. They have been creating texture with various materials like collage, wax, threads, burnt wood, zinc powder, beads metal etc. They create new forms and arrange space which creates a new universe of organic forms, texture and color which constitute a reality of its own that is unknown to the real world. These painters are V.S. Gaitonde, Ram Kumar, Shanti Dave, Jeram Patel, Balraj Khanna, Piraji Sagra, Bishambhar Khanna, Surya Prakash, K.V.Haridasan, Smriti Dixit, Surender Pal Joshi, Yogendra Tripathi, Santanu Gohain etc.

Indian folk arts have very rich ritualistic visual cultural heritage. A number of abstract artists turned towards the folk-arts for their inspirations. These artists attracted towards folk-arts because of its beauty and characteristic vitality of the basic design elements, like simplified forms and shapes, bold use of line and large color planes, among them K.C.S. Panikar was the chief exponent, who showed a continued interest in linear design. He constantly used folk symbols, signs and scripts in his paintings; another significant artist was the J.Swaminathan, who inspired from the tribal ritual wall paintings. He created his own abstract vocabulary, which was very close to tribal art forms. Later many significant artists derived inspiration from the folk arts, such as Achuthan Kudallar, Nareen Nath, Sujata Bajaj, K.V.Haridasan, Shridhar Iyer, Yogendra Tripathi, Sanju Jain, etc.

All the arts have a symbolic component. Indian art has often been characterized as being symbolic and spiritual. Heinrich Zimmer, A.K. Coomaraswamy as well as E.B.Havell spoke eloquently of the symbolic and spiritual elements underlying Indian art. This twin component of symbolism and spiritualism had become main stay of argument in defending the Indian tradition. As a response to this, the Tantric art was rediscovered and its philosophy was used as supportive philosophical premise as an extension and nationalistic religious
appropriations. Some distinguish artist went back to ancient tradition of occultism for their inspiration.

The subject of Tantra is generally considered highly esoteric and has always been shrouded in myth, mystery, superstitions and tradition. “The definition of the history of the tantric tradition is made difficult by the paucity of reliable data. It is general opinion of scholars that the cult of 'Sakti', the most important feature of the Tantra, was a very ancient tradition.” It is general opinion of scholars that the cult of 'Sakti', the most important feature of the Tantra, was a very ancient tradition. Ajit Mookerjee produced some finest examples of Yantras and Mandlas in his book entitled ‘Tantra Art’. In ancient times, tantrics used these Yantras and Mandlas for the magical and ritualistic purposes. But tantric artists used the geometric forms and symbols like, bindu, oval shape, square and circle in their paintings as a device to aid their contemplation. They adopted the cosmic imagery of the Tantra for pure plastic purposes. Because of this pre-occupation this particular trend of modern Indian art has come to be known as Neo-Tantra art. Soon the movement became popular and it found many adherents throughout the country. Most of the tantric artists worked in non-representational visual imagery.

Neo-Tantra art gives new revival to Indian abstract art. Indian artists found an indigenous theory that has its roots in ancient mythological tradition. In Late 60’s some distinguish artists in India reflects a desire to express symbolic, utopian, or metaphysical ideal inspired by tantric visual manifestation. Artist like K.C.S. Panikar, Biren De, G.R.Santosh, S.H.Raza, Om Parkash, Pufulla Mohanti, Mahirvan Mamtani, K.V.Haridasan created their own abstract style based on symbolic meaning deeply rooted in the Indian philosophy of Tantra.

In the early 70’s few distinguish painters turned towards minimalist variety of abstraction. Minimalist presented the work of art as object of elemental form with the least amount of visual components and divorced from the symbols and personal expression. Among them Nasreem Mohamedi was the most significant; her paintings based on line-grid pattern are rare of its kinds. Her work was influential for later minimalist like Shobha Baroota, Homi B. Patel etc.

In 1980s, with the inception of Bharat Bhawan in Bhopal, a new crop of
artists is beginning to make their own mark. The lure of abstraction is so strong that many talented artists turned towards the abstraction as medium of their expression. Some are infallible in their expressions of indigenous elements, while others are merging indigenous and modern expressions. It is this individual sensibility and strength that make artist’s expressions unique in creating a powerful impact—both emotionally and visually.

The contemporary art scene went through a kind of revival of during the 1990s. There were a greater number of full-time practicing artists than ever before, participating artist than ever before, participating within a wider field from which they drew creative inspiration. Abstraction in India is as diverse as artists involved. Today artists are much aware of international trends and have begun to conceptualize their unique position in international contemporary art. Now artist are practicing and experimenting in abstraction with a new set of values. Some of the contemporary practitioners are Achunthan Kulddlar, Bhagwan Chavan, Vijay Shinde, Vilas Shinde, Sunil GawdeHem Raj, Anwar, V. Vishwandhan, Sachida Nagdev, Ganesh Haloi, Akhilesh, Shobha Broota, Sujata Bajaj, Mona Rai, Rajendra Dhawan, Manish Pushkale, Anjum Singh, Seema Ghurayya Smriti Dixit, Manisha Parekh, Hem Raj, Manoj Kanchangal, Yogendra Tripathi, Siraj Saxena etc.

Overall goal of proposed research work is to analyze a complex account of abstraction in post-independence Indian art. It aims at: - a) Analyzing various tendencies of abstraction in historical, political and social development of modern Indian art. b) To critically evaluate the visual and varied philosophical manifestation of abstraction in modern Indian art. c) To explore the relationship between the modern art practices and its appropriation of native tradition. d) To analyze the stylistic progression as trend as well as individual to emphasize on sheer visuality over content or narrative.

The proposed study requires considerable visual data, which shall be collected through various sources. It also involves personal interactions with various artists so as to understand their ideas and its formulations through visual codes. The secondary data includes various writings in art journals, books etc. It will be gathered through various libraries. In addition, exhibition catalogues of various
artists and galleries can be helpful in this research.

The First chapter provides an outline of the abstraction in the context of Indian modern painting. It gives a brief overview of the various trends which traced through varied phases since Indian independence.

The Second chapter provides an overview of the historical development of the idea of abstraction in Western art through its various stages, in Europe, Russia and America. It provides an insight into the history that how the idea of nonfigurative art emerge and further develop through the Analytical Cubism, Futurism, Der Balue Reiter, Orphism, Vorticism, Neo-Plasticism, Bauhaus and Abstraction-Creation in Europe, Rayonism and Supermatism in Russia and Abstract Expressionism, Op Art and Minimal Art in America.

The Third chapter divided into two sections. The first section traces the emergence of modernism in Indian art through the beginning fo Bengal school to the mid-twentieth century expressionism. It also provides an insight into the various pioneer artist of that time including Jamini Roy, Abindranath Tagore, Amrita Shergil, A.R.Chughtai and George Kyte. Modernism in Indian art is really very complex to understand. This section further explore the Indian modern painting through the development of Bengal school to the Calcutta group and then evolution of painting in the post-independence period from the 1947 to 1955. Second section addresses to the early emergence of abstraction in Indian modern painting in the post-independence era. It also gives an insight into the painting styles of Gaganendranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore, who influenced the forthcoming generation of artists to move towards non-imitative and expressionistic style of painting.

The Forth chapter presents the theoretical propositions and critical analysis of the problem that what is ‘Abstraction’ and ‘Non-objective’ in art. It also deals with the questions such as the subject matter of abstract painting, colours and aesthetic experience. Origin and sources traces the various Indian ancient occult doctrines such as philosophy of ‘Tantra’, religious heritage, functional arts such as pottery and architecture, folk traditions of visual arts such as Rangoli, Kolam, Alpana, Tatoo making, traditional rituals of our fasts and festivals, and tribal culture. This chapter
also takes the underlying theme of abstraction in the staging of modern Indian art – The oft-repeated view that Indian culture, from ancient times, had a peculiar affinity with abstract and non-representational design-pattern and visual decoration. This chapter also provides various categorization of abstraction on the basis of ‘form’ and the ‘process of making’.

The Fifth chapter provides the historical account of the development of abstraction in the post-Independence Indian art. There are issues concerning this subject which affecting the contemporary field and those matters are related to various developmental aspects of various post-independence art movements. Subsequently, two questions are addressed: What developmental role has the international language of abstraction played in these regional areas. And how has a legacy of regional abstractionist discourse matured into a new language, informing contemporary Indian art practices? This chapter is subdivided into five sections. The first section provides detailed analysis of abstraction within the context of Madras art movement, which came to culmination with the inception of Cholamandal artist village. Under the leadership of K.C.S. Panikar many significant artists choose abstraction and contributed to the development of Madras art movement. Artists such as K.C.S. Panikar, K.V. Haridasan, L. Munuswamy, K.Jayapal Panikar, K.M. Adimoolam, Akkhitam Narayanan, Velu Viswanadhan and K.Damodaran are presented there. Second section evaluates the varied trajectories of abstraction in Baroda school of art. Since its inception, Baroda had played a significant role in the development of modern art movement in India. This section discusses the role of N.S. Bendre as an artist and teacher. Then the establishment of Baroda group of artists and early initiators of abstraction such as Shanti Dave, Triloke Kaul and G.R. Santosh are discussed here. It also provides the historical account of the establishment of a pan-Indian art collective named ‘Group 1890’ and its contribution to Baroda. Artists such as Jeram Patel, Himmat Shah, Nasreen Mahamedi, Manisha Parekh, Gargi Raina, Smriti Dixit, Ganesh Gohain and Santana Gohain are discussed. Third section provides the detailed study of Neo-Tantra art of 1970s and the development of abstract painting in the contemporary Indian art. Artists such as Biren De, G.R. Santosh, Mahirwam Mamtani, Sohan Qadri, K.C.S. Panikar, J. Swaminathan, K.V. Haridasan, S.H. Raza and Prafulla Mohanti are discussed. Forth section evaluates the historical accounts of development of abstract painting in the Madhya Pradesh. In 1982, after the inception of Bharat Bhawan Bhopal, a movement had developed, which is known as a Bhopal School of abstraction. Many
significant artists had contributed to this movement such as Akhilesh, Yusuf, Anwar, Sanju Jain, Seema Ghurayya, Manish Pushkale, Mohan Malviya, Siraj Saxena, Anil Gayakwad, Pravez Ahmed, Manoj Kanchangal are discussed. Fifth section provides the development of abstract painting in the Bengal. Bengal art scene was dominated by the figurative-narrative styles since the early twentieth century, but in spite of that some artists choose abstraction as mode of their expression. Artists such as Ganesh Haloi, Baandhan Das, Ratin Mitra, Amitava Dhar, Sunil De, Samit Dey, Arindam Chatterjee are discussed in this section.

The Sixth chapter presents an insight into some of the major Indian artists, who had gave a significant contribution in the development of abstraction in Indian painting such as S.H.Raza, K.C.S.Pancar, Ram Kumar, V.S.Gaitonde, J.Swaminathan, Om Prakash Sharma, Prabhakar Kolte and Sujata Bajaj. The study provides an in-depth analysis of their concepts, source of inspiration and strategies of being as an abstract painter. It is important that all these artists had their own ideas and strategies to make their own individual expression. This contextual analysis also helpsto understand the idea of abstraction in modern Indian painting.

The Seventh and concluding chapter summarizes the argument that was presented throughout the chapters and re-iterates the location of modern Indian art within the dialectics of abstraction.

Art can never be static, there are always changes or transformations rather evolution in any form of art. There is always an urge in an artist to explore the unexplored, to see the unseen, to feel the unfelt, to rise beyond the boundaries of what is apparent and corporeal. This bold departure from the time-bound realities is seen in abstract art, art that defies all the established norms and parameters, breaks all the boundaries of time, space, perception, reason and presumption. Where motivational urges do not rely on the visible world, they are stirred by the resonances of an introverted vision. The vision might seem uncanny to a viewer, but to the artist, it is the expression of his intimate and personal experiences indefinable in terms of any representational or recognizable shapes and forms.