

**A CRITICAL STUDY OF MODERNITY IN THE ART OF SOUTH INDIA  
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MADRAS SCHOOL: 60S AND 70S**

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The Madras Art Movement was a regional phenomenon, which began forming its special characteristic from mid 40's in initiating search for authenticity in modernism rooted in its region's cultural heritage. The College of Arts and Crafts [a colonial period established art institution] became the locus for the emergence of this movement in the South in the 60s. The configuration of the art movement had been initiated under the tenure of D P Roy Chowdhary the first Indian artist principal [1930-1957] who had laid emphasis on the development of fine arts curriculum, putting forth an empirical and perceptual approach to art. These were considered sweeping innovations, since the school's curriculum had privileged craft teaching until the date of Roy Chowdhary's appointment as administrative head in 1930. With Roy Chowdhary charting a trajectory that would lead to the development and growth of potential artists was critical for the school. These ideas in the 50s needed to be extended. And K C S Paniker who was the next administrative head brought in a study of modernist expression of European masters. The pedagogy subscribed by Paniker opened up avenues, for technical, creative and expressive investigation that became the hallmark of the school contributing towards the enhancement of the art movement in Madras.

The forces gathering momentum for the development of modern art movement in South, particularly Post-Independence, could be related/ascribed to certain contingent factors prevailing within the country. This was the demand for 'authenticity' in its visual language leading to 'construction' of an Indian identity. The thrust towards this could largely be directed at hegemonic internationalism necessitating the change in adopting a posture of difference by Indian artists to reduce similarities with post painterly abstraction practiced by majority of them in late 50s. K C S Paniker who cleverly melded western modernist technical innovations with the cultural traditions of Indian arts and crafts largely met the exigencies of the moment.

Though these factors were critical in directing the efforts for the growth and development of the Madras art movement, more crucially it was the College of Arts and Crafts that became the site for its emergence in the South. For within the institution K C S Paniker gathered around him a band of talented, intelligent and committed students with whom he held debates, discussions and

lively arguments and extended the same with teacher artists like S. Dhanapal, Munuswamy, A.P. Santhanaraj among others concerning the status of modern art within the country.

The denominating title 'Madras' though specifically refers to the city of Madras, the present day Chennai, then was a gravitating center, to which primarily students from all the four Southern states, Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka converged, determining its artistic contours. This was the only government institution for providing instructions in fine arts in the region till mid 1970's. This accounted for the majority of the students from the four states gravitating here, and each of these carried his cultural sensibility that they brought to bear upon their works. These diverse conditions and factors enabled Paniker to charter a new trajectory effectively aided and supported by his position as the head of the institution, the infrastructure, and the resources of his colleagues and students.

The emergence of the art movement also problematizes the growing debate on the regional modern, consequent to an agenda, which privileged an adherence to and valorization of local culture. This art movement had a character and identity, which though consanguine in many respects to the modern Indian art, was different and distinct as far as its development was concerned.

The ambivalence of tradition and modernity, on the strength of which the movement acquires identity is problematized to open up space that will reflect regional bias. This will serve as a crucial factor in defining the Madras Art Movement. Modernism as a historical phenomenon of the Twentieth century also has valence within the Indian context though its assimilation is only emblematic. Modernity has been defined as the set of philosophical, ethical, political attitudes and factors that enabled its establishment, which in India was the process of modernization as part of social, economic, political and cultural institutions that enabled the agenda of modernism.

The ambitious art policy of the British Raj had much to do with the rapid spread of "academic art" in colonial India. In the 1850s, of the manifold channels of westernization, art schools indirectly controlled by Departments of Public Instructions emerged as uniquely powerful. James Mill, author of 'History of British India' had a definite influence in shaping the government art policies. His differentiation between 'art' which required the exercise of intellect and 'craft' which only required 'skill', along with the judgment that the traditional artists in India had no scientific knowledge of the language of art, and were therefore, unable to create illusion of nature' were the two basic determinants in shaping the curriculum of the art schools till 1890s.

following of internationalism. Against this emergent milieu, the Madras Group attempted intensive soul searching in order to become nationally visible and establish its identity as an independent regional movement. This move became opportune for the Madras Group necessitated and conditioned by the question/problem of marginalisation leading eventually towards defining the notion of regional modern in the South. The application of the appellant 'tradition' will acquire new meaning and depth within the Southern region as culture was sourced for different purpose and intent. In the South, the artistic ideology to define its practice was at tandem with Dravidian culturalism in which the visibility of its varied art forms was privileged in conjunction with modernity to realize its aims.

The regional characteristic and content in these, which can be described as the making of a special case of 'regional modernism' in art as distinct from the national and international modernism/s was the result of formidable young talents that gathered here. Paniker with his teacher-artists colleagues along with other ex-students formed a cohesive group, and held meaningful dialogues, discussions and debates in the late 50s and early 60s. Thus the agenda of 'regionalism' or/and 'nativism' became operational in the post-independence milieu. Nativism or indigenism in the Madras Art Movement inevitably became a product of collective and intentional experiments with modernism, which led to its definition of regional identity, helping to configure its artistic expression.

The interplay of tradition and modernity provided the framework for the Madras artists. This ambivalence/dichotomy was unavoidable implicating the process of researching classical and vernacular ethnic forms with wider significance within the paradigm of modernism. For the Madras group modernism involved simultaneously an anti modern return to nativist origins. This opens the question to 'primitivism' with regional invocations and as a site for asserting authenticity. In aligning primitivism to the nativist agenda it was primarily to valorize those Dravidian art forms belonging to the tribal and folk arts that colonizers had marginalized as 'low art'. Unlike the European use of the ideology or concept of Primitivism, in the particular instance of the Madras Art Movement the attempted establishment of relations between the episteme or the question of primitivism and nativism, allows for a site to negotiate and assert identity. In their creative appropriation they evoke those characteristics of simplicity, unsophistication, boldness, iconicity, frontality, effulgent colours and power of subjectivity.

Besides constructing tradition and appropriating modernity, the contestation of identity also focused on the binaries of center and periphery. And it is precisely this factor, which made palpable the question of identity for the southern artists located at Madras within the institutional

framework of the art college. The Southern art movement, fundamentally established on its artistic culture was to negotiate an identity not through separation from the center, but within it to mark a posture of difference. As the decades of 40s and 50s marched ahead, there appeared artists on the front lines of modern Indian art from Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta. Within this artistic circuit, there were no artists from beyond the vindhya, particularly Madras whose voices could be heard. Relatively the posture of Bombay and Delhi as the commercial hub and political epicenters respectively had their constructive roles defined.

The contribution of K C S Paniker was seminal towards the emergence of the Madras Group at the national level and shaping the configuration of the modern art movement in the South.

Paniker whose role had been instrumental in putting forth ideas about one's own culture to serve as source for reference, started his artistic journey in the 40s by recording the pristine world of light, colours, and forms mediated through watercolours. In the early 50's he directed his attention to the study of Indian pictorial and plastic arts. As he attempted a departure from mimetic aspect of his art/representations, he was searching for a mode that would associate his figurative composition to a larger spirit of design namely the picture surface only. In this effort he was informed in his experimentations by the works of Jamini Roy whose influence on Paniker was seminal. It provided a thrust for evolving and advancing his personal idiom of the human form with new values added to flatness. What Paniker essentially implicated was the strength of Indian traditional heritage that could be moderated with a renewed vigour.

Thus Paniker's breakthrough in his Words and Symbols mark the final achievement of his career. It was a method of patterning gesturing towards reductivity and two-dimensionality. And he had few followers from the rest of the country because of the north south divide. Paniker in his breakthrough series mutated and played with his basic concepts derived from vernacular repertoire [archetypal goddess images, snake forms, lingam, kolam designs etc] and mathematical configurations to armour his expressions.

Words and symbols that Paniker abstracted from material context of life namely charts, notebook scribbles, mathematical formulae, cultural objects, everyday objects and especially language, invited viewer's attention to these mundane forms, having made them as cryptic formulae that defined the structured and meticulously organized space. This inflects Paniker's avant gardism with regional specificity and its problematic identity with his crucial intervention in the 60s. His first painting that envisages the use of scripts and pictographic elements was "THE FRUIT SELLER" in 1963. Paniker's invention of this visual grammar was the *raison d'être* of his intellectuality and aesthetics. He finally achieved this decorative patterning – a move, which led

him through diverse experimentations and sourcing indigenist mines to collapse his Indian spirit with modern sensibility

Paniker in addition to providing a dynamic thrust in opening up space for experimentations and exploration in art was equally responsible for thinking about future of artists when they passed from the portals of art institution. The survival of the artists purely on their creative expression was problematic, due to prevailing apathy to modern expressions within the city of Madras. It had become contingent that they have an alternative in order to sustain themselves. Paniker who had put his faith in the art/craft process established the Artists Handicrafts Association in 1963 to enable artists to craft objects in metal, ceramics, wood, jewellery etc. as well textiles particularly batik sarees and scarves to be sold to the public. This avocation enabled artists to pursue their creative vision without having to take up mundane employment. These various exigencies led Paniker to evolve the concept of an artists' commune living and working together, with the Artists Handicrafts Association mediating as an agency in selling their handicrafts. On the Coromondal coast, six miles south of Madras 8.05 acres of land were acquired in April 1966, and Paniker's brainchild came into existence - The Chola Mandal Artists Village. With the birth of this concept of an artist village, Paniker had set himself and the group on the path of bold experimentation. Chola Mandal was a vision of Paniker where artists as a commune would live together to foster the spirit of artistic brotherhood and collective organization. The concept of an artists' commune, indigenist in its value and traditional in its perspective reinforced Paniker's visionary quality. Chola Mandal was a boon realizing the career of many young talents that otherwise would have been lost in banality of proletariat existence.

Within the Madras Art Movement it is possible to draw out two broad specific areas within which the artists visualized their creative temper. This was the 'figurative' and the 'abstract' mode. And within the Madras artistic circuit these two strands of stylistic representations though not dominantly marked are visible enough to make this distinction. The artists who made abstraction their vocabulary were L. Munuswamy, K. V. Haridasan [his tantric formulations], V. Viswanathan, K. M. Adimoolam, P. Gopinath, Achuthan Kudallur and the graphic artist Rm. Palaniappan. The abstraction that these artists practiced had a range from international to national to regional.

L. Munuswamy, a senior artist after Paniker, was a seminal art practitioner. In analyzing the crucial role played by Munuswamy it is important to contextualise him in relation to Paniker's espousal of nativism. Munuswamy in his search and exploration of modernity was equal to Paniker, and yet differed substantially from latter's preoccupation with tradition. The abstraction

that he created had an international character, particularly an affinity to Abstract Expressionism since this was emphatically manifest in his gestural brush strokes

The most programmatic and a compelling project in the 60s in search for national and cultural identity was Neo-Tantric Art a term that was coined to denote a form of abstraction developed by a small group of Indian artists, particularly Shankar Palsikar, K V Haridasan, Omi Prakash, Prafulla Mohanty, Biren De and Ghulam Rasool Santosh

For K V Haridasan moving and exploring the terrain of the *Tantric* ritualistic cult was not pedagogic but an inheritance that was not only cultivated but also a dimension of the collective subconscious V Viswanathan's conceptual *tantric* derivatives were consanguine with the abstraction practiced by the Neo-Tantric painters within the rest of the country but his creative formulations remained distinctly different This perhaps distinguishes the works of Viswanathan and Haridasan from the other practitioners of the same movement thus reinforcing their regional sensibility within the Madras Art Movement K.M Adimoolam is well known for his black and white ink drawings as well for his abstractions that mark his signature style P Gopinath's art was grounded in structured colours and planar forms derived from his experiences of life, cultural matrix and the plenitudes of nature The nativist agenda or indigenism that had informed the Madras Art Movement was implicated in the early works of Gopinath, but he moved beyond to create forms in colour, which he referenced as biomorphic. Achuthan Kudallur like Paniker, Gopinath or Viswanathan was not far in his ideology of expressing cultural values internalized in the sights and sounds of his native hometown of Kerala His mental landscape was crowded with childhood memories of his home near the river The experiences of the performance of magical rituals accompanied by the chanting of mantras and the rhythmic drumming in the fire light, the exorcism of the spirit with its quaint dance and eerie sounds, the festivals, and the *Kathakali* dances were mental images that Achuthan now recapitulates and essentialises to work as his abstract vocabulary translated as colored shapes and forms Rm Palaniappan's interest in the intangible and abstract dimension of space – to explore and make it a living element of his art makes relevant his deployment of words, symbols and numbers, a tradition deep rooted within the art institution from the regime of Paniker Palaniappan's aesthetics was a challenging interface between perception and cognition leading towards an abstraction of the art image and a conceptual presentation of psychological processes His conceptual approach explored the complex relations between perception [time], memory [space] and identity

In Indian traditional/classical culture, the human form has been reserved as a centrality in its varying formations as metaphor, sign and symbol The human figure was a dominant motif for a

large number of artists, an engagement that assisted their expressions. The senior most artists amongst the Madras Group in late 50s and early 60s were J Sultan Ali, K Sreenivasulu, M Redappa Naidu, A P Santhanaraj Anthony Doss and Alphonso Arul Doss. The impetus to explore the folk was inbuilt in modernism and in India too the artists recognized the value of this tradition in exploring their modernity. The folk derived art in its most attenuated and highly elaborate form was seen particularly in the oeuvre of Sreenivasulu who could be characterized as the 'Jamini Roy of the South'. While Redappa Naidu's derivative was more iconic in the nature of identifiable deities like 'devi' or 'ganesha' Sultan Ali's imagery was particularly inspired from the tribal arts of Bastar in Madhya Pradesh.

A simple vision and naive expressions characterized Sreenivasulu's works. Sreenivasulu's vision was translated through cultural grids namely the Lepakshi experience, the Thanjavur and Sigiriya frescoes, the primitive vocabulary in Jain miniatures and the immediate precedent of the works of Jamini Roy. The structured formulations of his compositions that were his highly personalized statements had a quality of insistent movement and were not static or rigid as it was with Jamini Roy. M Redappa Naidu's art was born out of restlessness with his inquiry based on tradition and its productive adaptation and reinterpretation within the modern paradigm. His place within the Madras Art Movement is influential to the same degree as Paniker's was with his contribution of the Words and Symbol series. After visually, materially, optically researching the extrinsic dimensions of life he was exploring sites that would add a dimension to modern Indian art. And crucially this was his encounter with the icons intimately associated with religious practices and worships leading to his Deity series [1963-1970]. Moving forth he also mediated through myths and epics making possible the translation of his concepts concerning politics of vision of the Indian culture.

Santhanaraj like Munuswamy and other artist teachers within the institution delved into creative technical explorations, with zest, enthusiasm and passion for art. His compositions have pastoral themes in which the figure of the woman plays a central role. Largely the compositions have single figures and very rarely did he evolve paintings that had groups. His rendering and delineation of them particularly in his drawings exhibit primeval characteristics bordering on expressionist distortions. In paintings, the forms are essentially reductive and attenuated, projecting a modern vision and experiences but with affinity to regional folk arts in particular its stridency, boldness and an iconic frontality.

Anthony Doss emerges from within the Madras Art Movement to inscribe a different narrative. That is he is an artist who was actively engaged with nativist agenda in consonance with his

colleagues and students. In addition, he was equally exposed to the modernist European styles, but gradually he moved away from all these activities to mark his return to a style that could be described as 'Neo-Academic Realism'. K. Ramanujam's pictorial vision was a translation of his fantasy and oneiric dreams that was radically different in its visual language from the others within the group. He saw reality and the dreams, consciousness and unconsciousness as indissolubly linked. His reality was romantically manifested in the surreal world populated with hybrid and the bizarre creatures.

Alphonso negotiated his creativity through abstract values of religious emotions namely love, sacrifice etc. His expressions in art were primarily realized through his figures though he clarified that he was neither realistic nor abstract. Though a regional bias characterizes his works, Alphonso resisted the proselytization by Paniker to formulate expressions based only on traditional art forms. Alphonso argued that culture is part of our inherited and inherent mental make up and occasioned no valorization of their forms to make them visible.

R. B. Bhaskaran, one of the core members of the group of students with Paniker as the head of the institution, exhibited aggressiveness in his ideas about what constitutes art. Bhaskaran opposed the indigenist agenda set forth by his teacher Paniker and began formulating concepts derived from social matrix concerning evolution, marriage etc. that would permit independence from traditionally derived art forms. He was also one of the founding members of the Chola Mandal Artist Village but soon parted ways because his creative restlessness would not permit any categorization in artistic conceptualization as 'nativist' or 'regional'.

S. G. Vasudev, another core group member who debated the status of modern art in India, concentrated his cerebration on art confined not to large borrowings or reinventing the vernacular vocabulary as it was with the majority of the artists within the Madras Group. His close association with theater in the persona of Girish Karnad and with literature through the Kannada poet A. K. Ramanujan and D. R. Bendre effectively amalgamated the influences and inspiration from these varied sources to rework them as visual expressions. The 'indigenising' dimension of his art was largely conditioned and drawn from literary sources.

Of the younger artists along with Rm. Palaniappan, Douglas and Muralidharan, however, represent polar opposites with their ideologies and working methods. Both undoubtedly are figurative painters, for while Douglas is expressionist with his painted statements and anthropocentric, Muralidharan in the tradition of the Madras Art Movement is a mythical contemporary artist with his imagery grounded in folk art forms and ideas derived from mythical tales. Douglas in his



works creates anti heroic imagery trapped in a world that has altered dramatically and reduced life to an unendurable incoherence, which becomes his basic concern

The women artists though marginalised within the Madras Art Movement have also played a definitive role. Nevertheless what emerges as relevant in this context is that in a conservative and male dominated patriarchal set up these women artists were able to mark important signposts created by their individuation through intense struggle. The most prominent who were able to establish themselves with their individual styles are Arnawaz Vasudev nee Driver, [1945-1988] T K Padmini, [1943-1982] Rani Pooviah nee Nanjappa Premalatha Seshadri and Anila Thomas nee Jacob, [1941 -] the first four were painters and the last mentioned is a sculptor. They were truly progressive and determined to make a mark for themselves in this arena particularly in the late 60s and early 70s. It becomes mandatory to mention them to underline the male dominated art scene that constituted art practice. Whether their visibility within the discourse of the Madras Art Movement marks it as feminist intervention in the 70s or subsumed within the Indian modernism is a point of contention, which exceeds the scope of this thesis.