

INTRODUCTION



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Concerns and Values

When does modernity in Indian art commence? To what extent is it embedded within the cultural technology of colonial rule? How does Indian modernity partake of the socio-cultural crisis that colonialism ushered in? Addressing such a range of queries brings up the question of complex negotiations occurring between the pre-colonial and the colonial episteme within the emergent structures of power. This was effectively made productive through the creation of an archive built up through Orientalist approach to archaeology, education including art education, ritual texts, agrarian structure, land organization, classification and assessment, anthropological surveys and the enumeration of caste in the census, through which the British set in motion powerful transformations.

Orientalism played a critical role in the identification and production of India's tradition, devalued under conditions of colonial modernity. This tradition was constructed and re-defined by the colonizers to suit their agenda of creating power structures of knowledge for hegemonic rule. Creating pressures within the episteme, the Indian intellectual had to vacillate between pulls of tradition and attraction towards modernity. Further the modernization of social, political and economic institutions brought an awareness that both tradition and modernity has to strike a balance of happy blend within Indian conditions. Thus the British Raj that concluded in 1947 nevertheless established political independence for the Indian nation. But the impact of Westernization consequent to hegemonic pedagogy and cultural politics had created a state of perpetual tension on Indian artists between the use of academic naturalism and 'decorative Indian art' tradition. This academic naturalism/realism consequent to colonial intervention creating the new notion of the real be in high artists like Ravi Varma or the bazaar artists of the Company School, nevertheless created a crisis for the Indian artists. The homogenization of Indian art as 'decorative' was a colonial construct, which also informed the nationalist framing of Indian culture. The "decorative style" was used as an artistic weapon to establish mark of Indian-ness which acquired legitimacy opening up space within national aesthetic discourse to form resistance against European academic naturalism and establish superiority by virtue of its tradition.

The subject of this thesis encircles the study of modernity as it developed in South, particularly at Madras [now Chennai]. The art movement as it developed here particularly in the late 50s and 60s led to the establishment of the Madras Art Movement, which was initiated from the colonial period-established art institution, namely the Madras School of Arts and Crafts. Given its embeddedness in the colonial setting, at a broad level it partially necessitates studying and analyzing colonial structures of power and knowledge as potent tool. At a more specific level, it involves taking into account the impact of the colonial art education on the particularized curriculum that gave identity to this institution in the South.

Towards the study of the Madras Art Movement that defined its existence in the early decade of 60s, it becomes imperative to study the pan national milieu - before and after Independence. The post-independent scenario allows for a particularized study, which due to certain contingencies¹ led to a development in the South, centered on Madras for the growth and establishment of the Madras Art Movement. This contingency centers partially on the ideological claims of authenticity and Indian ethos; and partially on its [South's] marginalization as a feeble voice from the periphery that brings into play the binaries of center and margin. The Madras artists pushing through with their efforts, creatively reacted within the national milieu for recognition of their identity. The cultural dynamics between the center and periphery and the momentous need of its acknowledgement lends one to foreground the recently emerging debate around the regional modern².

The first decade of the twentieth century marks an important milestone towards defining India's modernity in visual arts. The Bengal Art Movement led by Abanindranath Tagore generated the contours of India's modernism by effectively integrating the canonical pictorial tradition with techniques assimilated from Chinese and Japanese sources. By 1920's International modernism had become a force to reckon with. The implications of modernism within the Indian milieu pose a complex network of questions. The difficulty lay in understanding the scope of what modernism offered to the Indian artist who appropriated it, distanced as he was from its geographical shores and philosophical roots. In this context the fundamental question raised by Geeta Kapur "How can Indians appropriate western modernism without misunderstanding it and reducing it?" is relevant. However given the close dependence of the nationalist discourse on the

colonized/orientalist one, Indian modernism cannot also be regarded as simply a derivative of western modernism. Rather it would be more productive to view Indian modernism in the plural, as strategic inflections of western modernism, also in the plural.

Raymond Williams has defined the whole concept of modern in a single powerful statement, “‘Modernism’, a highly selected version of the modern, which then offers to appropriate the whole of modernity”³. The implication of ‘Modernism’ as a ‘highly selected version of modern’ is to emphasize in visual arts its consciousness in having certain qualities that were scientific and self referential especially since 1940s. Popularized by Clement Greenberg it lays stress on self-consciousness, reflexivity and of art as an object, reflecting preoccupation with originality [in a turn away from any past references] and invention of forms. The term modernity defies meaning and is more an attitude that pervades multi-dimensions of human enterprise, which rejects the past, characterized by secularization, scientification, industrialization and democratization. Geeta Kapur in contextualising the experience of ‘Indian modernity’ has related it ideologically to the exigencies of colonial intervention, particularly to the process of modernization and the politics of recognition within the Third World paradigm. According to her “Modernity is a way of relating the material and cultural worlds in a period of unprecedented change call the process of modernization.... mostly applicable to underdeveloped/developing societies. Non-western nations... are excluded from the claims of modernism. A cultural term modernism.... was imposed on the colonized world via selective modernization. Its subtle hegemonic operations, offers a universality, while obviously imposing a Euro-centric set of cultural criteria on the rest of the world”⁴.

The colonizers had homogenized India’s vast and varied tradition into a narrative of transition from medieval to modern [medieval was feudal and modern was capitalistic and progressive] contextualizing modernity as indexical of and the primary habitus of Europe⁵. And for hundred years we have attempted to turn our gaze away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become creators of our own. Recent writings have been more sensitive to the modern as a polemical and ideological category in Indian cultural practice, placing the modern in postcolonial India against the broader canvas of the formulations of the third world identities⁶. In the third world paradigm, post-modernity itself is an anachronism, for modernization is still a very attractive and viable option, particularly as a vehicle of economic liberation. The concept of modernity in India therefore produces a framework that is multi

layered and complex. Despite gaining political independence, the cultural hegemony of the west has continued via the discourse of modernism. Although India as a new independent nation had gained a voice in international assemblies and organizations they were as Geeta Kapur notes, firmly 'excluded from modernism'

The desire to construct an aesthetic form that was modern and national and yet different from west was shown in the Bengal School of art that was a visceral reaction to the artistic corollary of British Imperialism namely Company Art in early twentieth century. Bengal played a seminal role in reshaping the continuum of a sense of self and identity that the colonizers had violently ruptured. These efforts generated an institutional space for the modern professional artist in India distinct from traditional craftsmen, adjunct to which art exhibitions and prints created a public educated in aesthetic norms. This construction of a modernized aesthetic space was juxtaposed with an ideological program that would create a distinct Indian art. This valorized attempts to construct the notion of Indianness by the Bengal School was a short-lived phenomena to develop an art that would be modern and simultaneously recognizably Indian.

By 1930s the Bengal School had devalued and new impulses generated by social, political and economic changes shifted attention to a Euro-centered modernity. An effort to go beyond national aspirations and to create a new ideology that would synthesize east and west was now on the agenda in late 30s. In this respect Rabindranath Tagore's farsightedness and perception viewed logically and aesthetically through contemporary lens allowed for dismantling the codification of tradition. This notion of tradition enabled an autonomous and an intuitive interpretation through poetic allusion and metaphors. Nevertheless the vast geography of India with its diverse flora and fauna and natural topography had enabled its artists to create metaphors and series of symbols that had enhanced and enriched the artistic repertoire. These traditional inflections strategically made it a vast body that had perennially nurtured and replenished the Indian mind. Said Rabindranath Tagore, "All traditional structures of art must have sufficient degree of elasticity to allow it to respond to various impulses of life". This broad and progressive view gained ground in India after 1940s⁷

Throughout 1950s while modern experiments were worked out tentatively, a dilemma faced by many artists was a loss of their identity. The decade of 50s witnessed many Indian artists heading west for fresh pastures in creative fields believing that stylized pastoral themes and routine

rigorously over worked modernist formulae held no space in Indian modern. By working in the west, and organically integrating with their cultural milieu, the artists felt the lack could be compensated. What he failed to realize however was that as a non European he was absent from the frontline of a process that witnessed innumerable hurdles, mental tensions and anxiety in defining and charting trajectories that characterized the avant- garde in Europe. He was also not an intrinsic part of the radical milieu that defined the modern. Moreover what he now inherits is only the second hand having no significant role to play at the moment of its inception. This remained the ground reality where he is not a biological inheritor but only a surrogate of the modern on the western soil. But in no way it provided a solution for his identity crisis. It only enhanced material benefits, a diaspora status and more “Indianness” adding value to his commodification of art.

Those who searched the west for their fulfillment were a small number however. The artists in the country were nevertheless engaged in the metropolises of Bombay [Mumbai], Calcutta [Kolkata], Madras [Chennai], Delhi and Baroda in the 50's. They worked towards evolving a symbiotic relationship with his inherited culture and the modern European stylistic formulae. The decade of 50s also witnessed many Indian artists returning from their European sojourn to mould the post-independence artistic milieu. They brought back with them semi-figurative styles that was based on post-war French development in abstraction. The question relating to identity crisis was tangentially worked through re- conceptualization and reworking tradition that had become an accepted norm within the modernist paradigm [the influence of ancient and tribal cultures on European artists in the 19th and 20th century]. And this became imperative in the decade of 60s. Towards this problem, Geeta Kapur explored authenticity as a broader question of defining indigenous culture in contemporary post-colonial India.

Modern Indian art historical scholarship, argues for a modernism that involves Westernization and a return to nativist origins - a search, labeled indigenous. This search of the past was not a land to return in a simple politics of memory as Arjun Appadurai postulates, but, has become a synchronic warehouse of cultural scenarios, a kind of temporal recasting to which an appropriate recourse can be taken depending on the art to be visualized⁸. In conjunction with this construction of the past, that is, tradition as ‘politics of memory’, it combined usefully with

European modernism that was imbricated within Indian sensibility from 1920 onwards, presaging important developments in post-independence period. Trained over centuries for borrowing, conserving and assimilating, the “Indian psyche” continued in the Twentieth in its quest for identity through varied influences. Invariably for the Indians, as historical records and material evidence proves the diverse cross cultural currents had woven a pattern of timeless patchwork of traits, spatially juxtaposed with the next or/and over, a palimpsest as Nehru compared it. Congenially India does not require a static equilibrium between tradition and modernity. Conflicts give rise to growth from an openness of mind and struggle; and this has remained an imperative of the “Indian psyche”.

Search for Authenticity

The late 50s witnessed an artistic crisis across the country. The crisis I am referring to is the vexed question of authenticity and the search for identity within the post-colonial experience, whose pre-condition in art circuits was based on widely accepted internationalism. The crisis urged artists across the country to rethink and redefine their ideology, which would neither be a return to older Revivalist style, themes or content, nor blind following of internationalism. An appropriately worked out artistic strategy in resisting these was in the making, which would largely displace these and replace it with the authenticity of Indian character and sensibility.

Against this emergent trend, the beginning decade of 60s also brought urgency for self-search to move on through different tract. In this respect in the South, the Madras Group attempted intensive soul searching to become nationally visible on one hand and on the other to establish its own distinct identity as an independent regional movement. This regionalist tendency within the modern idiom became particularly pronounced in the artists of the Southern region in terms of drawing on folk and tribal arts. The contingent situation in the South during the regime of K.C.S. Paniker, who besides initiating the agenda focused on the search for rethinking and re-presenting local folk and tribal art forms, was also looking into the problematic of artists continuing their profession of painting or sculpture after graduating from the art institution. This situation could be partially explained.

The conservative public mindset that had greater predilection for dance and music rather than fine arts made it difficult for the artists with their modern styles and expressions in painting and sculpture to find acceptance. Reinforcing the partial indifference was a lack of support from the media. Though exhibitions were held within the city, a useful propaganda tool, it nevertheless

lacked support from the print media by way of appreciative or/and in depth reviews for greater awareness in leading newspapers or the vernacular press. These mediations if properly effected would have enhanced the artists' respectability and acceptance of his status within the society. The exhibitions though necessarily reviewed were staid without any critical insight, largely because the tribe called 'art critics' was unknown in Madras [Chennai] as compared to other three metropolises.

These exigencies fructified in the artist fraternity grouping together for a common cause of artists' professional survival into a community called the Cholamandal Artists Village [1966] located on the road to historical site of Mammallapuram. An anticipatory act of this nature had far reaching consequences. The village opened up space for artists to indulge in creative crafts, since the handicrafts industry had received an impetus from Nehruvian cultural program. Within this artistic discourse handicrafts as a discursive field, received a dynamic thrust in its development. This economically driven handicrafts industry was to be the monetary nemesis of the Madras group at Cholamandal artists' village. The artistically crafted items particularly metalwork, Jewellery, enameling, batiks, ceramics among others found favourable response within the general public. In addition the sales of these products were also mediated through the Artists Handicrafts Association founded in 1963. The remuneration earned from the sale of various articles allowed the artists to concentrate on his experimentations and exploration, releasing him from the binds of a routine job, which he had to pursue either as a commercial artist or an art teacher in school – the two ready options available to him after graduation. It is the cumulative effects of these diverse factors, that the concept of artist fraternity at the Cholamandal village became popular. Within the serene village ambience interested, committed and enthusiastic artists explored and experimented creating art forms that facilitated an exposure of their cultural expression within the larger ambit of the nation

The intense experimentations that were bodied forth from within the Art Institution in Chennai beginning with Paniker and Dhanapal to Ram Gopal, Munuswamy and Santhanaraj in a mixed artistic language that was both figurative and abstract led to an emergence of a heterogeneous group. Initiating a trajectory primarily for technical experimentations with diverse media and support, these exploratory tracts logically pushed towards incorporating new artistic vocabulary from local or native sources, developing and evolving to configure into an art movement designated as the Madras Art Movement. The relevance of this group is that within the regional framework it defined its character projecting a countenance of marked specificity.

The modernism of Madras Art Movement therefore found favour with fantasy of ethnic folklore, rituals, folk arts and crafts and South Indian dynastic art without jettisoning the western model. The modernism of an Indian artist is that of a once colonized. Immanuel Kant essaying Enlightenment spoke of the founding moment of western modernity that looked to the present as the site of one's escape from the past. In direct contradistinction, Indian artists in order to establish authenticity of their art within the larger context of internationalism was precisely seeking the past to launch their identity with an "Indian" ethos. This establishes an ambivalent attitude encapsulating both tradition and modernity. Consequently the modality of Indian modernism becomes radically different from the historically evolved modes of the western. The desire for power, resistance to power, and dreams of freedom are elements of modernity that Indian artists also aspired to.

To fashion forms of Indian modernity in visual arts, it required courage to reformulate and rework modernity according to its contingent needs. Hence the argument cannot be for or against modernity, but required devising strategies for coping with it. A sense of attachment is the driving force of Indian modernity; and this attachment relates to the cultural past, which gives birth to the feeling that the present needs to be changed according to its demands. This ambivalence of modernity and tradition set a heterogeneous tract for the artists of the Madras Art Movement to a large extent [because not all the artists of the Madras Group believed/put faith in this essentialisation] where the regional identity was defined⁹.

The regionalization of this movement was premised on a structure of feelings that produced particular forms of intentional activity yielding particular sets of material effects. The move towards this regionalisation was effected due to certain contingent factors. Primarily it was the comment from a critic Ludwig Goldscheider in London in 1954 on the exhibited works of K.C.S. Paniker. The remark, that his art lacked "Indian" feel and character, initiated for Paniker the search towards rethinking and reinvestigating tradition in which "Indian" ethos would be privileged. A trajectory of this nature would lead to nascent definition of configuring the contours for 'regional modern', which was closely associated with its preoccupation for recognizing the strong presence of modern art in the South.

The Madras Group under the initiative of artist teachers like K.C.S. Paniker and S. Dhanapal attempted to reduce European affinity in arts especially based on an over exposure of American abstract art, and endless restatements of Impressionists, Post-Impressionists and Cubist principles. These factors implied an imminent search from indigenous sources that were replete with rich artistic stockpile and mediated through western techniques. Indigenisation therefore remains a product of collective and spectacular experiments with modernity and not merely a subsurface affinity of new cultural forms with existing patterns in the cultural repertoire¹⁰. Walter Benjamin echoing the sentiments of Tagore when the latter mentioned 'sufficient degree of elasticity to allow it [tradition] to respond to various impulses of life', Benjamin spells out forcefully in his definition of modernism as that which, 'wrest tradition away from conformism'. This repositioning of tradition with modernity inevitably became central to the agenda of developing contours of Indian authenticity and collective ethos within the regional framework. Authenticity I reference within the cultural grid premised on the notion of establishing exclusive Indian modern identity within the international framework in the decade of 50s and 60s.

The early decades of the 20th century as earlier mentioned was related to the process of reviving and re-establishing the canonical pictorial and plastic traditions at tandem with folk and tribal arts as a mode of resistance against staid European academicism. Paradoxically, in the post-independence milieu of the 60s, especially in South India, with artistic activity centered at Madras, the same pre-independence process assumes a new urgency after five decades. This urgency refers to the central question inherent in the cultural politics relating to the recognition of the Madras Group within the national ambit. Pushing towards it, this anxiety privileged a valorization of the Southern regional art forms.

The Madras School of Arts and Crafts

Significantly the process that led to the establishment of the Madras Art Movement was nurtured and developed within the colonial period-established institution - Madras School of Arts and Crafts. It was one of the first art institutions marking its appearance within the country in 1850. It served to be an arena for the emergence of the Madras Art Movement particularly in the decade of 60s. The only art institution in the South that provided instructions in fine arts, it became an important locus towards which students from the four Southern States of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka gravitated.

Till mid 1920s the School of Arts and Crafts remained primarily a commercial craft venture to meet the demands of the Imperialists economic needs. Beginning with D.P. Roy Chowdhary who assumed headship in 1930 becoming the first Indian principal, he was instrumental in giving an academic status to the school and an empiricist perceptual sensibility to the students. His pedagogy emphasized 'academic drawing' that is, to develop skills in rendering objects either animate or inanimate, in order to equip the students with tools that will serve as firm foundation for future creative efforts. This had far reaching implications aiding to strengthen the formal skills of the students and enabling them to utilize this pedantry in studies either realistic or otherwise. Under K.C.S. Paniker, who joined the teaching faculty in 1941 and became principal in 1957, a number of changes were envisaged. These changes were largely based on his personal experiences as a result of his travels to London and United States.

Paniker realized that a freshness of vision was severely lacking among the artists in Madras. Though he had initiated the study of European and American modern masters in order to go beyond the empirical-perceptual pedantic morass of Roy Chowdhary, in mid 50s he felt the need to axe the spurious and overworked modernist formulae and open a tract in art that would combine the local or the regional idiom with modern sensibility. The ideological framework that Paniker set out was to reduce Euro/American modernism and intermingle it with signs and symbols mined from tradition. This ideology, which privileged mining from rich cultural topography enabled the opening of space for the construction of 'nativist or/and Indigenist aesthetics in the visual arts in South. This assertion of cultural identity could be construed, as an act of political will.

Nativism is a post-colonial phenomenon since its primary construct was to battle invasion of alien sensibilities and modes of feelings and articulation, particularly when applied to the visual arts of painting and sculpture while it is post-modernist in its emphasis on cultural difference. Nativism configures to seek articulation of ties in a specific region, which could be ethnic, cultural-linguistic or artistic. This categorization encapsulates a pan Indian character, since artists like J.

Swaminathan, Meera Mukherjee among others were sourcing tribal art imagery and craft forms to have valence. This idea within the Southern context acquired power and strength when it was reworked consciously with images, forms, signs and symbols derived from its familiar terrain and integrated in its application towards creating a modern expression. A nativist ideology according to K. Satchidanandan "has a commonality of myth of ancestry, shared historical memories, one or

more differentiating elements of common culture and association with specific 'homeland'. Nativism exhibits virtues and character of cultural plurality; it is largely progressive when it approximates modern egalitarian values, objective temperament and futuristic orientations. The nativist task of deconstructing the Indian tradition must be part of a greater secular and egalitarian project of constructing unity at a higher and more realistic conceptual level, of cultural plurality within the nations boundaries and intertextuality within culture¹¹.

The concept of nativism as laid out by Satchidanandan celebrates diversities in which 'unity at a higher and more realistic conceptual level' would imply regionalism as a different creative agenda within the plurality of cultures that simultaneously would buttress and enhance the national identity. Ethnic and cultural differences within postcolonial ideological positions have become sites of articulation for construction of identity. In order to successfully mark their difference and hence the weighty implications of creating a modern expression via extension of Indian tradition within the country, the artists mined their ideas and imagery from a phenomenally rich cultural landscape of their native regions, which added newer dimensions and verity in the Madras art scene. Thus the modernity emerging from the South was distinct related directly to the native tradition, dissimilar with the West and which simultaneously cannot be dismissed as 'quaint provincialism or exotic ethnicity'. Paradoxically it was tradition, which strengthened modernity here and in turn tradition acquired authority and acceptance because it was mediated and interpreted with technique and tools that were modern.

Nevertheless Paniker realized that weaving modern stylistic idioms with the regional/nativist visual vocabulary was essential to the process of cultural symbiosis within internationalism. Nativism gained ground as a vibrant current in a march towards cultural self-respect and identity for an art world beyond the vinyas. And the School of Arts and Crafts strategically served the purpose for initiating this process or otherwise a movement of this nature would not have materialized in the city of Madras due to apathy of the public towards visual arts.

Towards Regional Definition

The personality of the Madras artists in the 60's was like a hayawadana character [part man part horse] where his physicality is Indian but his intellectual make up a received one. The colonial intervention undoubtedly brought a hiatus with Indian art tradition. Compounding this was the Imperialists interpretation of the indigenous arts in terms of its own 'superior visuality', which traced its origins in the arts of the Renaissance. This was seen to be in opposition to Indian art

tradition which was labeled as 'decorative'. During the hegemonic rule India had constructed its indigenous arts according to its national aspirations. The tensions between academic naturalism and 'decorative art' dominated artistic thought until modernism arrived to negotiate a different trajectory. This free exposure to modernism was provided by the exhibition of the Bauhaus organized at the instance of Rabindranath Tagore at Calcutta in 1922 after his visit to Germany.

In the late 50s and early 60s throughout the country, a definitive search was made conditional to open up a different tract that would not permit constant reminders of Western modernism. At the eastern periphery of the Indian sub continent the artists of the Calcutta group had projected their motto, which expounded, that 'art should be international and interdependent'. It also urged that art ought to be used for cultural regeneration to effect meaningful changes in their society. Similarly in Bombay the Progressive Artist Groups' modernist ideology and its aesthetic definition had its roots mainly in Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and German Expressionism. This was because the Progressives' had rebelled against the modern Indian pioneers to clear the table of any semblance of the nationalist past. In Delhi the artists belonging to Delhi Silpa Chakra laid claims for art to be in the service of society and should reflect social reality. Baroda, with its Faculty of Fine Arts at the M.S. University was established in 1950. In 1957 under the dynamic tutelage of N. S. Bendre a Baroda Artist Group was formed. The Group 1890 founded by J. Swaminathan and others in 1963 was a radically nationalistic forum that pronounced in its manifesto ' We reject the pastoral idealism of the Bengal School, down through the hybrid mannerism resulting from the imposition of concepts evolved by successive movements in modern European art on classical, miniature and folk styles, to the flights into abstraction in the name of cosmopolitanism¹².

When we turn our gaze to South and particularly to the Madras artists, what Paniker was attempting was on similar lines of carving a niche that would give itself an identity while simultaneously reacting creatively within national mainstream. This was partly to counteract the marginalisation of the Southern region and to recognize its presence as a voice from periphery. The partisan attitude that placed South at the periphery was due to certain factors beginning with colonial pedagogy, economic causes, political developments social structure and its geographical extremity. Added to this was a very relevant comment made by Lady Pentland wife of the governor of Madras from 1912-18. She said, "It has a special Madras clannishness, perhaps as a recompose for its isolation at an extremity."¹³. This isolation hence was from colonial regime and not a novel phenomenon of post-Independent India. In order to rouse itself from such a

predicament it was imperative to move towards self-search or an identity by charting fresh vision and creating an independent and individual space for themselves. Also Paniker played an instrumental role, since he headed the art institution. Invested with power and authority to take certain crucial decisions, he strategically inflected organizations of exhibitions to showcase the talents of the Madras Group of artists regularly at Bombay and Delhi. Paniker's proximity to the well connected office bearers of Delhi's Lalit Kala Akademy also made possible the frequent exhibitions held by the Madras artists and taking the cue Kumar Art Gallery [founded in 1955] jumped in the fray to also showcase the Southern artists' works. It was the enterprise of Paniker ably aided and supported by his colleagues that made Madras visible on the national scene. All leading artists of the Madras movement have vouched for his mediating role.

Subject Under Study

The interest in the study and analysis of the Madras Art Movement is foregrounded in its lackluster representation within the episteme of modern Indian art discourse. The academic pursuit of this particular field of study is to transcend pejorative references as 'provincial' in its conscious effort to appropriate indigenous traditions to effect and help establish its modernity with regional accent as an accepted norm within the plurality of Indian culture. The south is best seen as an imaginary locale where the boundaries were more culturally and socially produced than naturally ordained. The south has managed to negotiate its isolation into a plea for a special status, an otherness that is both its strength and its weakness¹⁴.

Since the South Indian scenario is too vast to do full justice, I have restricted my study to the two crucial decades of the 60s and 70s in the city of Madras the present Chennai. The attempt will be directed towards a study of body of works by artists responsible for pioneering a vision for initiating a search towards recognizing their presence and collective identity from this region. These factors precipitated a process that lionized the native traditions appropriated for a new language of representation. [To see modern art as a language, a conventional system of pictorial signs where these signs in turn transpose a gamut of meaning upon the material world including the art object.]

However I do not intend a teleological study, but will attempt to focus and analyze the causal factors that gave rise to and the establishment of the Madras Art Movement. The narrative of modernism will be spelled out within the conceptual framework of indigenism that eventually

defined and shaped the regional modern marking 'Nativism' as its prime agenda. In addition it also brought into play the binaries of center/periphery, where the power equations were unequal placing the Southern region at the periphery. The binary marginalized the Madras Art Movement as 'provincial' for largely practicing an indigenous formula and maintaining this protracted position. Though Madras became proactive mobilizing a regional idiom its sustenance over a long period scripted its unpopularity, since it was regionally tethered. After nationalist discourse that spelt Indianness and later reviled as revivalists by critics, a similar methodology seemed to have become operational in Chennai. But in this particular instance it was to reduce the affinity of over worked modernist formulae, since these were entrenched with sterile prescriptions, and no creative force could propel it further. Such exigencies called attention to initiate agendas that progressively would condition different approaches to art making. The solution for these were found by naturally accepting tradition as made visible in folk art forms and historical dynastic art through reworking and reinterpreting with fresh perspectives within the context of modernity. And my focus is towards an analysis of this study. Tradition will be analyzed as a flowing stream that threw up fresh ideas and energy that the artist could now freely arbitrate.

At this juncture I would like to draw attention that no concerted effort has been made to a detailed study of the Madras Art Movement and no art historian has evinced interest in this direction. A large unorganized corpus on this region is documented through the medium of the Journal Lalit Kala Contemporary, monographs and glossy catalogues. The written articles lack the structured insight into art criticism that makes it authoritative to view and understand it in its proper perspective.

Review of Literature

Enough ink has been spilt writing about the modern art in India especially in centers of Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta and recently Baroda. No effort has been made to a structured academic pursuit that would detail history of its growth and development in Madras. A review of literature explicitly points to this lacuna.

A number of books have been penned by various self acclaimed art historians, but none of these elite writers elicited interest to throw light on the exigencies that created the Madras Art Movement. Individual artists have been covered in the journals of Lalit Kala Contemporary, but

they do not offer an academic discourse with its discursive field of indigenism. If articles appear they have been generalized and offers no intellectual insight for the art history scholar. Jaya Appasamy, S.A Krishnan, A S. Raman, Anjali Sircar, Richard Bartholomew, Josef James are a few noted art journalists and writers who have endeavored to go beyond the superficiality to account for the Southern movement.

In the context of scholarly writing and approach to modern art as a cultural study that today is an analytical paradigm, I must confess to my knowledge there are few academicians who have made studied contribution in this direction. A few authorities that come to mind are Geeta Kapur, Tapati Guha Thakurta, Partha Mitter, Dr. Ratan Parimoo, R. Nanda Kumar and Shivaji Panikkar.

In attempting to make a subject review I pointedly wish to analyze a few books that have been recently published beginning with Neville Tuli. **The Flamed Mosaic: Indian Contemporary Painting, 1996.** This volume covers hundred years of Modern and contemporary Indian Painting. An ambitious venture nevertheless for a non-art person, the structure of the book is innovatively laid out with thought provoking headings and sub titles. It however invites attention for its approach towards contemporary painting that is substantially covered, but on the contrary an enterprise of this type can allow only generalizations and provides no scope for in depth analysis. Hence the Madras Art Movement is briefly touched upon in passing. It is excellent in its reproductions, visual documentation and general layout remaining charming but as a survey text that serves no purpose of erudite application. The book is well padded by interviews and comments of the artists sans any productive criticism.

Another recent publication to mark India's Golden Jubilee year is **Contemporary Indian Art: Post Independence 1997** edited by Arun Vadhera et al. It covers a large territory comprehensively. The chapter on South Indian art is an exercise that is very limited. This chapter namely, South Indian Art: Stylized Indianness to raw immediacy by Martha Jakimowicz Karle attempts coverage of the South Indian scenario in a generalized manner. No efforts have been made to afford an insight of the cultural milieu and especially the South Indian mindset that virtually dictated the character of the group. It is penned in a language that is an exercise in verbal acrobatics and sentences running to paragraphs. The author does not concede to the use of proper art terminology to project scholarly intervention¹⁵. A mention of "Cholamandal style like

that of Viswanathan” is a presumptuous statement because there was neither Cholamandal School nor style that hall marked the Madras Art Movement. Art criticism particularly in the context of Madras art Movement is grossly lacking.

In the nature of a catalogue **Contemporary Indian Art: Glennbarra Art Museum Collection 1993**, is not an erudite publication though it has articles written by various art critics Josef James pens the article on South Indian art. An economics professor, Josef James [died 1998] evinced keen interest in art, an enthusiasm, which crystallized in the documentation of the developments of Madras Art Movement. He has detailed and analyzed the development leading to K.C.S. Paniker’s Words and Symbols Series. Josef James in his study of the Madras artists also highlighted the use of line as an essential visual tool, which has remained at the heart of discussion of Madras art Movement. Undoubtedly a family friend to Paniker and hence had breathed modern art in consonance with the artist living as he did at Cholamandal artists village. Josef James efforts cannot be denied. He has contributed tremendously in terms of two volumes on the South Indian Modern sculptors namely the Madras Metaphor and Algebra of Figuration that throw light on the various sculptors of the Madras Art Movement. But once again he was no art historian so his methodology and approach is not profoundly academic. He has also written extensively on various artists. His approach remained formalistic and appears dated today. He also took refuge in language acrobatics that was disappointing unable in sustaining the interest of the reader inclined in cultural theory. Today object centered approach to art criticism is too limiting and it is crucial to bring into focus modes of cultural practice within which, ‘a work of art’ is embedded. My interest in cultural theory is to redress this fixity on the art object and artist as a solitary maker.

A Cholamandal Artist Village Association publication, **Indian Art Since the Early 40s: A Search for Identity 1974** is generalized representation of modern Indian art. It throws considerable light on the means and methods whence the artists arrived at an artistic formula that established their position within the pan Indian milieu. The book offers visuals of the artists belonging to the Madras Group which otherwise is not available in books on Modern Indian Art particularly the crucial period of 60s and 70s.

The Progressive Painters Association in Madras attempted a major documentation on the activities of the Madras Group of artists in the journal **Art Trends** a quarterly Bulletin edited by K.C.S. Paniker initially and later by Josef James and K.V. Haridasan. This venture was initiated in January 1961 and progressively details a majority of artists who were active in the decade of 60s and 70s all over the country. It also featured modern European masters of early Twentieth century, articles on art in general that debated crucial issues of abstraction, Pop art and others. It included reviews of major exhibitions held in Delhi and Bombay as well of books published on art.

The government funded and administered institution Lalit Kala Akademi established in 1954 and headed by leading internationally acclaimed artists was largely responsible for the publication of the Journal **Lalit Kala Contemporary** as well **Monographs** on individual artists. From its inception it has extensively scripted the modern in India. Though its efforts lay primarily in the direction of documenting and promoting contemporary art than on the formulation and dialogue on contingent artistic issues. The most prominent contributors to this journal have been Herman Goetz, Asok Mitra, Bishnu Dey, Jaya Appasamy, Anjali Sircar, Josef James, S.A. Krishnan, Richard Bartholomew, Keshav Malik and Santo Dutta, Ratan Parimoo to mention the most prominent. The contribution made by this journal towards a concerted study of modern Indian art is phenomenal and its pedagogical implications cannot be denied. As an exclusive art journal it is woefully lacking in the task of attempting scholarly criticism and study and many articles are in the nature of journalistic reviews. A formal analysis in Greenbergian tradition was generally the norm. This nevertheless was the nature of art writing from 60s to 80s since critical practice was in its nascent stage. The journal has provided meaningful collection of essays on diverse aspects of modern Indian art.

This lacuna could be explained partially, because the authors were not art historians with a firm foundation in study of history of art nor were they cultural theorists of the caliber of Geeta Kapur to name the most prominent. Though Geeta Kapur's projection of the model of modernism allows for intellectualization in varied cultural fields, it is more concerned in configuring the national modern which does not admit adequate consideration of the regional modern. Kapur seeks to situate the modern in contemporary cultural practice. She sets up an ideological vantage point to view modernism along its multiple tracks in India and the Third World. These are

elicited from nationalist ethos, inscribed within the politics of modernism in India and the Third world. In theorizing these dimensions she has put forth the notion of 'constructed tradition' and 'indigenism' to establish Indian authenticity and ethnicity within international framework and Third World paradigm. She negotiates Indian modernity through these ideological apparatuses and hence has enriched the broader canvas of national mainstream. But her considerations at the micro-level i.e. regionally inspired and resourced art has attracted little attention within her episteme.

Shivaji K. Pannikar gestures towards the study of 'regional modern' by emphasizing the need to mark regional development as a specific category with self-motivated, energetic and vigorous agenda encapsulating its polemics and struggles. These factors should be recognized as integral to the making of national modern or otherwise it prevents from viewing modern Indian in all its plurality. This approach/openness according to him from art historical perspective would enrich modern Indian art study.

The active recognition of and affinity towards the use of regional art forms within the artistic practice that had inscribed and scripted the character of modern movement in South was also recognized and acknowledged by two art critics from Chennai, namely A S. Raman and K. Indran in the two articles published in the Nunkalai magazine in March 1998. They have with insight pointed towards inherent embeddedness of the local factor in the artistic derivatives deployed by majority of artists that helps to situate Madras Art Movement within its southern ambit. The essay by Raman is titled 'Regional Accent in Modern Art'¹⁶ and Indran is titled 'Aesthetics of Ambivalence'¹⁷. Says Raman, "the best that has happened to Indian art in recent times, is the shift in focus from the international [*impressionist, post-impressionist, cubist, expressionist stylistic formulae*] to the regional. Those in the Southern states have emphatically demonstrated the possibilities of a refreshingly new art deriving basically from regional sources. Regionalism has a relevance only in the larger context of national identity" [*Italics mine*]. According to Indran, "if art is to ever play a role in the construction of shared cultural experience of India, it should not shy away from re-examining the rhetoric of multicultural and redefining aesthetics with a generous recognition of regional identities". Their forthright argument calls for contextualizing the study of the Madras group within a multiculture that characterizes Indian nation. Both these critics have strongly underscored and recognized inherent co-existence of plural cultures when gesturing towards regional contribution in art that established the contours of

South Indian modern expression with regional fiber and ethos. And by mediating through the valorized Dravidian and dynastic art forms as native to the region they have marked not only a posture of difference with the rest of artists within the country but persuasively attracts attention to recognize contribution of the modern art from the Southern periphery. This becomes indexical of enriching the national ethos.

It is not only art historians and critics who have shown concern and interest in responding and acknowledging the regional contribution shaping and enriching modern Indian art but also historians have demonstrated a similar predilection towards the study of regional history. Noted historian Romila Thapar responding to a questionnaire by Parvathi Menon¹⁸ has also stressed on 'indigenism'. According to her, "indigenism in terms of its application to history attempts to invent a tradition and retain it as something essentially different from other cultures and societies and to build an ideology on such a tradition". This ideology already inscribes the thesis of Geeta Kapur sharing in the commonality of creating a different aesthetics to mark Indian authenticity. Thapar has clearly indicated in this interview that it is largely true that South Indian history has been neglected from the time of colonial regime. With the carving out of the linguistic states in the 50s the identity of each state was strengthened. This created the impetus for writing regional history by the growing middle class in the states searching for its identity in the past of the region. The positive result of this was an intensive search for local sources on the past. A search of this nature precipitated in archaeological excavations, surveys of local monuments, inscriptions and texts pertaining to the region.

The historical perspective also buttresses the partisan attitude, clearly establishing that the Southern region, which had suffered neglect and apathy in political, economic, historical and cultural terms from colonial period finds its identifiable place within pluralistic Indian traditions during post-Independence.

The gesture towards regional modern in my study of Madras art Movement is to establish the dialectics of the regional within the national. That is, a dynamic relationship exist between the regional and national since the artists though reacting to native/local inspired impulses from the south were simultaneously subscribing to the enrichment of national mainstream. It is also to underline the inscribed marginalization within the binary of center/ periphery, [capital/south] a

phenomenon from colonial rule; and its vibrant emergence within national framework with the valorization of native and regional art traditions. This scripted a regional cultural identity with the ambivalence of tradition and modernity becoming integral to the process of its development as a movement. This dynamic relationship has primarily and constructively woven the regional within the national.

The focus of this thesis is on the study of the Madras Art Movement particularly in the decades of 60s and 70s with extension to mid 80s regarding certain artists. Chapter I, *Cultural Politics and Hegemonic Pedagogy*, is a historical analysis of the Madras School of Arts and Crafts. Since the art movement was institutionally localized or based, a study of its cultural politics and hegemonic pedagogy becomes necessary because it projected a curriculum that eventually led to Madras's alienation and marginalization within the country. This prime factor in conjunction with the exigencies of establishing Indian identity and authenticity within international mainstream led to the formation of the Madras art Movement centered at the Art Institution. Because its character reflected regional bias it also led to the emergence and definition of the regional modern within this space. Since the art school is sufficiently historicized it allows for a detailed study of its curricula, the seminal role played by its English administrators and the type of students who

joined the institution. The chapter attempts to analyze the influential and decisive roles played by its two principals namely D.P. Roy Chowdhary and K.C.S. Paniker. Under the first artist principal D.P. Roy Chowdhary [1930-1957] who created the structure for fine arts curriculum, the thrust in fine art education was established. This shift marked a focus towards pointed efforts in enhancing creative and aesthetic interest and a radical departure away from craft making approach. D.P. Roy Chowdhary provided the framework and K.C.S. Paniker set the momentum for innovative pedagogy and mobilized the energies of colleagues and students to establish the modern art movement that was later seen to have a strong regional bias.

The post-independence phase marked a time of creative introspection for exploring the vitality of the indigenous epistemological traditions. Many involved and dedicated artists' felt that validity of their art could have valency, if "Indian ethos" combined with useful experiences of western modern art. This opened the question of researching Indian tradition, to define an Indian sensibility in their creative and imaginative schema. Chapter II *Negotiating the Self: In Quest of*

Identity, Defining the Regional Modern investigates the three problematic dimensions inflecting the Madras art movement

- a. The definition of 'regional modern' within 'national modern'.
- b. The binaries of center/periphery inscribed in the power play at Delhi in which the representation from the South [periphery] was minimal.
- c. The subsumed ambivalence of tradition and modernity in its art practice.

The agenda of 'regionalism' or/and 'nativism' in the South became operational in the post-independence milieu. In a sense nativism in visual arts was an attempt to battle the invasion of alien sensibilities and articulating modes of feeling in keeping with "authentic tradition", a concept, which in itself was a construct. This called into question the problem of melding modernity with indigenism. The former was tackled technically and stylistically with pragmatic appropriation of modern European formulae together with the notion of creative freedom in the manipulation and exploration of contemporary techniques and materials. Indigenous identity focused on the centrality of defining the regional Dravidian culture with its folk and tribal art forms and crafts articulated in a language either abstract or figurative. An endeavour of this nature allows for a healthy commingling of tradition and modernity engendering a set of ideologies within culture, which are constitutive of that culture. This is to imply the superiority of Dravidian culture by the valorization of its varied traditional art forms. And this explains the resurgence and maximum visibility of folk art and inspiration derived from South Indian dynastic historical heritages.

Within Orientalist discourse, which inscribes superior relation of knowledge and power in a colonial context; in South India in the last decades of the nineteenth century, it produced a cultural hegemony contributing to the establishment of a distinctive Tamil culture through underpinning of Dravidian heritage and thus challenging the cultural hegemony of the Brahmins. This was the first valorization of a Dravidian race and in the art of 60s it echoed similar resonance, translated as valorization of its folk and tribal art forms privileged over any other influences. This 'Orientalist formulation' enables a problematisation of the essentialist underpinnings of the nativist claim, that is, what is taken to be 'authentic' is already invented. The embeddedness of Orientalist discourse thus engendered the definition and establishment of the regional modern.

K.C.S. Paniker who set the momentum for inquiry into traditional repertoire as a tangential endeavour with modernism postulated his ideology of an art that would be Indian and world wide

contemporary. This manifested trope to modernism was underwritten in the quest for identity and authenticity. The conceptual framework for this ideology was evident in nativism that emphasized the aesthetics of local traditions particularly its arts and craft forms allowing for prioritization by the artists in its deployment. The aesthetics of indigenism derived its power and values from this inherent move to regional art forms and languages. In the visual arts especially painting and sculpture the framework was provided towards mobilizing regional art forms, scripts as decorative space fillers, puppets and toys, floor decorations, icons and classical sculptural forms with its abstract rhythmic line allowing for creative intra-cultural interaction. The pattern of heterogeneity that emerged within the regional paradigm was a collective endeavor.

Chapter III, K.C.S. Paniker: New direction in the 60s, attempts to project his pioneering role of evolving a nativist/regional agenda that contributed to his innovative and personalized artistic trajectory. As the decade of 60s dawned, in Madras, artists like Paniker, Redappa Naidu, and K.V. Haridasan had become self-conscious about evolving an artistic and stylistic expression that would not be derivative of the western modern art. Paniker verbalized this urgent need when he realized the morass to which modern Indian art had sunk. His disillusionment with contemporary scenario called forth the need for a self-search going beyond modernist empiricism and a turn towards traditional regional sources for defining the Indian ethos. While rest of the country was forging ahead with Euro- American modernism adapted to suit individual needs and creativity, the Madras group consciously attempted a translation of regional vocabulary of folk arts and crafts, forms of accoutrements derived from performing arts like Kathakali, Theyyam as also the canonical pictorial tradition of South Indian arts. Paniker in appropriating the regional art forms set the trajectory for the younger artists and his colleagues to emulate and be inspired by. He evolved his quasi pictographic style with signs and symbols in his seminal 'Words and Symbol' series. Paniker largely was responsible for initiating a move towards the direction of regional modern and dissolved the boundaries that had created the epic north-south divide to voice his national ideological concerns.

Within the Madras Art Movement it is possible to draw out two broad modes, which served as artistic mediations in the decades of 60s and 70s. This was 'figurative' and the 'abstract' modes. And within the Madras artistic circuit these two strands of stylistic representations though not dominantly marked are visible enough to make this distinction. This is to say that for certain artists the preferred mode was figurative but bordering on the abstract. It remained visibly

figurative as Santhanaraj's or Vasudev's works demonstrate with strong implications of crossing over to abstraction. Therefore it disallows definite or marked distinctions to be made within the Madras Group. Nevertheless it allows for categorization within it for study in the direction of abstraction, as certain artists preferred this language for their creative statements. It could be also broadly understood that this preference rather than being private could be public institutioned or art market oriented. This dimension of the Madras Group has been analyzed in depth with seminal contribution from those artists who were at the forefront of the movement in Chapter IV: The Trajectory of Abstraction within the Madras Art Movement, 60s and 70s. It attempts to delineate the trajectory that abstraction had evolved its distinct language marking a posture of difference from International modernism.

The Human form as a Dominant Trope: Art in the 60s and 70s, Chapter V analyzes figuration or the active employment of human form as a favoured mediating mode among the artists of the Madras Group. The human body is the very basis of individual consciousness in art serving to communicate expressions. Art historical discourse has focused upon the development of the human imagery and its figuration or representation in art. It has shown that every culture has had different and varied methods of employing human form – as opposing as the occident to the orient. In Indian episteme the canonical arts served up the human form idealistically based upon nature and the espousal of its versatility to serve as metaphor, sign and symbol. It has always remained in a state of flux becoming a ubiquitous phenomenon in visual art from sacred to profane to narration in epics and myths. The term figurative has been employed to significantly reveal the use of the human form/and or its use as metaphor, sign and symbol to become the vehicle for the artists' schema in conveying his expressions.

The subject of study in this thesis is limited to analysis and study of those artists who have been successful in conceptualizing their radical and dynamic creative visions on the canvas and have made notable contribution to the development and establishment of the modern art movement in the South.

I also wish to point out that though there were women artists who were also part of the core group within the artistic circuit a brief study has been made of them. It becomes mandatory to highlight their achievements within a predominant male centered group. In fact that very little

documentation on women artists is available points to the male centeredness of the movement itself. But the scope of this thesis disallows for a detailed examination of their concepts and ideologies. I would be doing gross injustice by not mentioning them because of their valuable contribution towards the development of the Madras Art Movement. Hence a brief analysis is included in my work. Nevertheless they form material for research that would involve a separate, dedicated efforts and energies to highlight and analyze their contribution.

NOTES ON THE CHAPTER

¹ The contingencies that I refer to deals with the situation within the art institution. Paniker realized the need to construct a 'nativist aesthetic', consequent to his own experiences of showing abroad as well as the contingent needs that were felt within the country in late 50s. The projected role of internationalism had become the accepted norm for establishing credentials of countries on the periphery, thus enabling Paniker to harness the local folk and tribal art forms as well historical dynastic art to be put into the service of creating a modern expression, which while keeping within the framework of modernism would simultaneously establish a modern Indian aesthetic and provide regional visibility as a force to reckon with.

² The question of defining regional modernity in art was first raised by Shivaji Panikkar in his presentation "*Representation as Language. A Case in the Direction of Defining Regional Modern – The Madras Experience*", at the national workshop on "Politics of Representation: Visual and Verbal" at the Department of Art History and Aesthetics, M.S. University, Baroda, October 2000. His argument of the 'regional modern' was made stressing on the need for an art historical perspective of the regional study of the South Indian Modern Art within its milieu to be characteristic of that domain and simultaneously distinct from the "national modern".

³ Katy Deepwell, (ed.) *Women Artists and Modernism*, [Manchester University Press, 1998] 18

⁴ Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, [New Delhi, Tulika, 2000] 276.

⁵ Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History Who speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?' an article in the *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory* [ed.] Padmini Mongia, [New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999] 227

⁶ Tapati Guha Thakurta, "Visualizing the Nation", *Journal of Arts and Ideas* No. 27-28, [New Delhi, March 1995]. 7

⁷ Geeta Kapur, *When Was Modernism: Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, [New Delhi, Tulika, 2000] 268-269

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, [University of Minnesota Press, 1998] 30.

⁹ From my study of the madras group of artists, it has emerged that their comfort levels in creation were conditioned by what was familiar to them. Consequently it was tradition that nurtured their vision and provided them with a vocabulary which when melded with western modern stylistic approaches created at the regional level a new artistic language.

¹⁰ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, [University of Minnesota Press, 1998] 90

¹¹ Makarand Paranjape,[ed] Nativism Essays in Criticism, [New Delhi, Sahitya Academy, 1998], 18-27

¹² Group 1890 Manifesto, Lalit Kala Contemporary No. 40, [New Delhi, 1995] 84.

¹³ Irschick, F Eugene, Politics and Social Conflict in South India, 1916-1929, [publisher not given, 1969] 4

¹⁴ Geeta Doctor, "The once and the Future Place", The Art News Magazine of India Vol. VI issue II

¹⁵ The editing shows lapse of errors especially the name of Sushil Kumar Mukherjee that is morphed into Sunil - a gross overlook since the identity of the artist is at stake

¹⁶ A S Raman, "Regional Accent in Modern Art, Nunkalai Magazine, [Chennai, March 1998] 27

¹⁷ K Indran, "Aesthetics of Ambivalence", Nunkalai Magazine, [Chennai, March 1998] 35

¹⁸ Parvathi Menon, "A Paradigm Shift", Frontline magazine [Chennai, Vol. 14, No 16, August 9th-22nd, 1997]