Alphonso Arul Doss
Sultan Ali Bhaskaran
Arnawaz Rani Nanja
Vasudev Sreenivasu
Redappa Naidu alaniap
T.K. Padmini H.V. Ra
Anila Jacob. Dhana
Premalatha Shesha
K.M. Adimoolam Go
K. C. S. Pa
D. P. Roy Chowdhari
K.V. Haridasan Raman
Achutan Kuo
R. Krishna Rao Doug
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CHAPTER 3

CHAPTER III
THE DECADE OF THE 60S: K.C.S. PANIKER AND THE MADRAS ART MOVEMENT

Introduction

A cultural agenda during the 50's and 60's was predicated on the notion of authenticity, a move to revalidate the pre-colonial artistic traditions that British imperialism had disrupted and made invisible. This validation of tradition had earlier manifested in the nationalist agenda when politics and culture had sought one another to disrupt imperialist hegemony. Again in the post independent era of the 60's the traditions had to be renegotiated as a response of internationalism of the 50s and a growing concern over the question of Indian identity. Hence the decade of 60s marks a watershed in the growth and progress of the Modern Indian art.

Initially the avowed internationalism practiced by the artists of the 50's had become problematic and gradually a consciousness had developed amongst them and the intelligentsia consequent to the consolidation of third world realities. This consciousness encouraged an artistic response to read tradition to make claims of authenticity – cultural, regional and national via the modernist notions of subjectivity as in creative freedom. Various international movements in the 60s like the anti-Vietnam practice, students' protests in Paris, the Negritude and NAM in different parts of the world simultaneously had challenged the western hegemony. And in this respect indigenism can be seen as emerging against this broader backdrop, when the question of identity assumed signal importance.

By the end of 1950s, which was a period of internationalism, modern Indian artists had appropriated a large part of varied European modern movements and the art scene was fairly active. This included the formation of two apex bodies the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Central Lalit Kala Akademi at Delhi. These government agencies served to mediate contemporary art to the larger public bringing an awareness that eventually was to lead to a greater appreciation of modern art and its collection.

A body of work had been produced; European sources had been mediated and personalized by individual painters. There were lively cross currents between Indian artists and experimentations amongst them led to creation and rejection of new idioms. "They had pushed aside confused

ideologies – nationalist, socialist and traditionalist to win their creative freedom"[1]. This 'creative freedom' references the period following independence, which was a short-lived utopia, when the question of 'Indianness' emphasizing its culture and authenticity was raised again in the 50s and 60s. The factors that precipitated it were the dominance of abstraction in the guise of American hegemony, making it difficult to distinguish between the productions of Indian artists from their Western counterparts. In order to counter this, and make visible the contradistinction, it mandated the rethinking and re-presentation of pre-modern cultural art forms derived both from vernacular and canonical high art. Modern Indian art hence by the late 50s and beginning decade of 60s was going through an identity crisis. By the 60's this crisis manifested in response to question of identity - an identity based on the Indian ethos as against internationalism. Once again tradition assumed a new meaning and the indigenous sources were mined for creative forays. The mindset of the artists seen as the very symbol of creative freedom was now on a different plane having distanced to rid them of intellectual and ideological slavery. They could make their individual choices. In exploring vernacular art forms it was considered their prerogative to understand an inheritance that offered inspiration for artistic articulations.

The Madras Group in this context has redefined and renegotiated tradition through cultural and regional mediation in ways that could be challenging and innovative [in their methods and technique to explore the medium afresh]. In their search "they incorporated the vigorously charged figurative style of the folk art, the quaint anecdotal style of miniatures and the grand epic style of classical sculpture"[2]. All this had to be realized in the easel medium, setting forth challenges in figuration, spatial dynamics and innovative techniques. The Madras group hence, within the modern cultural arena arbitrated the simple dichotomies of modernity and tradition. The identity of the group was largely based on this dichotomy, which prevailed as a consistent mark of its nomenclature when it eventually emerged as a Madras Art Movement within the national circuit. The positive interpretation of the traditional national, ethnic and regional had become a way for the artist to withdraw from the hegemony of Euro- American mannerisms to provide a template of their identity. This chapter will define and analyze the seminal role played by K.C.S. Paniker towards the definition of the Southern identity as particularized in the Madras Art Movement, eventually problematising the question leading to the emergence of the regional modern.

K.C.S. Paniker: An Influential Teacher

After the retirement of D.P. Roy Chowdhary in 1957, Paniker an intelligent, sensitive and an achievement oriented artist took over the mantle. The personal and modernist approach to art education that he introduced made significant impact within the School of Arts. Paniker, a brilliant student of Roy Chowdhary, joined the teaching faculty in 1941. As early as this he had voiced his concern for an aesthetic impulse that would go beyond nationalist hegemony. To his very close friend Sushil Mukherjee he had opined, "we in India must develop a reformed aesthetic vision, free from the severely restricted early nineteenth century concept. The aesthetic impulse or inspiration of an Indian artist has to be Indian but any narrow nationalistic idea of recreating our great cultural and artistic heritage shouldn't bog him down. That could be dangerous for an artist of the new age. We should break away"[3]. Paniker was implicating the Indian consciousness within the nationalist milieu though he wanted to evacuate pre-independence narratives and replace it with autonomy of artists vision and creative forays. From his student days, he dreamt of innovative aesthetic approaches that would astound the Indian art world. He had an experimental vision and restlessness to explore modern formulae that were familiarized through reproductions. Western values were disseminated through print media, tourism, cultural exchanges and exhibition catalogues. His teaching assignment provided the forum from where he could embolden his students to a greater modern reality.

He had already initiated this process in the School's curriculum by orienting students away from excessive empiricism and retinal sensibility that, Chowdhary had unflaggingly encouraged. Initially Chowdhary's approach had a liberating effect on the students but eventually [after thirty years] resulted in producing arcane studies devoid of any experimentation. Now Paniker gently nudged them to be different in their perceptions. As Vasudev observed, "while academic realism was insisted upon in Bombay by having the plaster casts copied through the apparatus of light and shade, here in Madras, Paniker would instigate them to distort, make it abnormal or stylized and away from realistic representation, and it is this artistic directive which made an impact on the minds of his young students"[4]. Other senior artists have reinforced this view.

For Paniker an equally important factor was the individuality of students and that successfully obtained for him a crop of talented artists among them. A.P. Santhanaraj a highly talented and a senior artist proudly mentioned, "he would take individual interest in each student if he chanced a creative spark and gently spurred him on for more such explorations"[5]. A mention in

'The Hindu' [a leading daily in the city] about the exhibition of Madras artists in Delhi in 1960 clarifies the experimental approach of Paniker, "The Madras School of Arts should be congratulated on the freedom and the experimental outlook of young artists"[6]. Art for Paniker was an intense passion and anyone who shared this interest in the field was his immediate friend. Not surprising then that such enthusiasm made him a focus of attention for a large corpus of art activity in Madras in 50's and 60's.

As the decade of the 60s dawned, in Madras, artists like Paniker, Redappa Naidu and 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 in the editorial of the Art Trend magazine, "it is depressing to note the general trend of Indian painting and sculpture today. The fact that contemporary art is mainly book inspired; and based superficially on European and American art reproductions. Foreign books are more misused than used. It is a fact that we have in this country no informed art criticism, which can serve as a corrective during these difficult times. In the circumstances, the progressive minded among our artists should essay vital expressions of life and nature with their full experience of contemporary world art"[7].

Paniker's disillusionment with contemporary scenario called forth the need for a self search going beyond modernist formulae and turn to traditional sources for redefining the regional idiom. 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 regional vocabulary in terms of folk arts and crafts, forms of accoutrements derived from performing arts like *Kathakali, Theyyam* as also the high pictorial tradition of South Indian arts.

In Bombay, the Progressive Artist Group drew its modernist ideology and aesthetic definition from Postimpressionism and German Expressionism. This was an orchestrated rebellion against modern Indian pioneers so that nothing of the past should intervene with their present[ness]. In Madras on the other hand from the late 50's to early 60's Paniker was searching to go beyond spurious internationalism for an expression that would be meaningfully Indian. His was the underlying anxiety about an identity shared by every modern, where tensions became a creative force. In their attempts to be Indian and contemporary, the Indian artists suffered from fundamental epistemological and ontological alienation caused by the colonial intervention. "In order to rise to its greatest stature of self expression in the arts, a race or a nation has to

depend, in the midst of all influences, on its fundamental ways of thinking, feeling and shaping. It is here that a search for the roots of tradition can help. It appears paradoxical however, that the Indian painter has to pass through the school of contemporary world art to be able to reinterpret his own racial or national roots of tradition"[8]. Cultural symbiosis for Indian artists has remained a lived reality when alien influences consequent to varied invasions were absorbed and assimilated within the Indian social and cultural fabric. In this respect the weighty words of Rabindranath Tagore has relevance when he claimed, 'our artists were never tirelessly reminded of the obvious fact that they were Indian in spite of all the borrowings that they indulged in[9]. Internationalism had come to stay and within that paradigm it was a struggle for this group to carve out a niche. Geeta Kapur explicates this idea. She says, "Indian artists have suffered from many handicaps. In the west, a full stream of thought - philosophic, psychological, and scientific – fed the artist where as in India; he was a lone 'modern' feeding off from distant sources. It is in this respect that cultural indigenism attempts to dig up the soil to make it fertile again"[10]. A pragmatic re-evaluation of contemporary situation within the country set them off for an indigenist search following the derision of their works as western, rootless and hybrid.

In the 50's, the Ministry of Culture, in order to promote the development of modern Indian art and expose the artists to a European artistic milieu, introduced a policy of sending senior artists to Europe, where they could have a firsthand knowledge of great modernist makers and markers. Paniker was one such beneficiary in his capacity as the principal and it was on a trip to London that he met Henry Moore and Picasso in Paris. Paniker encountered the works of Cézanne, the Cubists, Paul Klee, Kandinsky and the Expressionists especially the Blue Rider Group. The direct experience with European masters and their oeuvres had an emancipating effect on Paniker that would successfully serve the cause of the Madras Group[11].

Paniker's educative sojourns abroad precipitated the turn to indigenism. While in London, an exhibition of his paintings [1954] had provoked a remark from a critic that his frames lacked the depth of 'Indian' feeling. This led to an introspection that that was to result in approximating ideas, forms and imagery from local/regional sources. In moving towards this conceptualization wherein he could initiate a dialogue with the genre of local art forms and reinvent and reinterpret pictorial traditions he was consciously attempting to chart a trajectory that in essence would allow for a definition of his strategic position within the Art Institution. This would entail his emergence as a leading torchbearer for 'Indianess' in concurrence with his colleagues and a band of young talented students to support, reinforce and augment his ideas towards the quest for an

Indian identity subsumed within regional modern. He began holding discussion with his students and colleagues for negotiating an artistic language that would mark their identity. The presence of students within the campus armed with university degrees [S.G. Vasudev, K.V. Haridasan, K. Damodaran, Rani Nanjappa, V. Vishwanathan and others] enabled an intellectual ferment and positive artistic debates, discussions and arguments. It is this core group, which gave birth to the Madras Art Movement.

Paniker in his discussions with students preeminently conveyed the idea that art was for art's sake and should be aesthetically and visually pleasing. Though echoing Greenbergian autonomy of painting, Paniker it should be emphasized was operating from within a modern culture characterized by nation state, concept of the individual and industrial and consumer capitalism. He nevertheless explored the aesthetic issues latent in the tension between critical concepts of autonomy and contingency. Though autonomy was subsumed within the formal means of the artistic practice, the contingency insisted on the embeddedness of artistic forms within cultural or ideological context. The context he obliquely hinted could be subsumed within form. He also verbalized with conviction that all Indians should derive and reanimate the neglected or dormant traditions in their paintings and explore it for a purely decorative purpose. This intent veered him towards formalism based on decorativeness as exemplified in the works of American artists Helen Frankenthaler or Kenneth Noland and legitimized by Greenberg.

Paniker here marked an interesting departure where his aesthetics of formalism deployed to recover authenticity of tradition – similar formation was used by the late 19th century and early 20th century formalists in the west in their confrontation with non-western art traditions. In an article titled 'Art and Influence', Paniker writes that "there is nothing wrong in the attitude of the present day Indian artists, so long as they react to these traditional sources as purely visual experiences to be used creatively". Implicated in this statement was the successful deployment or idea of cultural signs effectively transcribing not to read into but to be purely looked at. Within the environment of the Institution Paniker manifested his regional ideology that was actively followed not only by his colleagues who reinforced it with their artistic statements but also taken up by the students who currently were studying and by the alumnus of the institution like Redapaa Naidu. The idea that was vehemently thrashed out projected a new perspective of 'one's roots' and to derive an artistic mileage from its interpretation. All along Paniker was the chief catalyst.

Anthropomorphic Explorations and Technical Mediations

Paniker's works of the early 40's and the 50's recorded the pristine wonder at the world of light, colours and forms [**Figs. 1, 22 3, 4**] [the canals, coconut groves and paddy fields of his hometown in Kerela]. In initiating a creative dialogue through his works, Paniker's pragmatic perception manifested in these early studies when he rendered landscapes and every day realities mediated through watercolours. "These works had a freshness of touch. His drawings had a bottled excitement. He bounced around with enthusiasm, his eyes sparkled at everything he saw, the people, the landscape the common facts of the Madras street and the responses to these were earnest and direct," notes K.G. Subramanyan[12]. They were never impressionistic or nostalgically romantic in the tradition of Bengal school but rather heavily rendered especially the patterning of light and shades.

This early phase manifests a touch of abstract in his approach to delineating pictorial reality and to this end any subject or genre became a peg to tether his creativity. "His capacity to use color in all its purity through bold washes was amazing, so that though his pictures were representational the accent was on bold patterns and not on the realism of the subject treated"[13]. R. Nandakumar also reinforces this view poetically when he says that "his paintings have a characteristic feeling for the warm sunny air and chequered shadows and the foliage streaked with the gleam of the bright sun rendered in lucid and fluid washes that preclude anything impressionistic about it"[14].

Paniker remained involved in rendering his perceptions of nature in its elemental aspects till the late 40's. In the early 50's he directed his attention to the study of Indian pictorial and plastic arts. The Ajanta narratives offered an insight into the ideational plane of figural representation. This was strongly echoed in his paintings **Blessed are the Peacemakers, [Fig. 5], Life of Buddha,[Fig. 6]** and **Humanity**. Paniker in these paintings was interestingly employing western illusionist method and the aesthetics of two dimensions of Indian pictorial art. In the values of the latter he foregrounded the deployment of the protagonists like Gandhi, Buddha or Christ for emphasis and simultaneously implicated in these epic canvasses the valency of humaneness with themes of piety and compassion. In expressing the eternal human values proselytized by these great sages, Paniker was also moving towards idealistic personification of them. In the personas of Gandhi, Buddha or Christ, Paniker was expounding the post-partition cultural milieu beginning with a human blood bath and concluding with the assassination of the generator of ahimsa or non-violence – Gandhiji. In conceptualizing such a theme Paniker was relating to a particular moment

in Nation's history and valorized the abstract concepts of peace and brotherhood through such metonymies.

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 inspiring works of Jamini Roy whose influence on Paniker was seminal. Paniker's position in the late 50s was akin to the Modernists of the mid 19th and early 20th century in their confrontation with non-western arts that was given the nomenclature 'primitivism' in their determined resolve to remove trenchant naturalism that stymied their creative expressions. Paniker was in a similar predicament searching for a stylistic expression that would effectively drain all residues of illusion or spatial depth - the fundamental academicism under the colonial pedagogy and an inherent aspect of the pedantic learning at the Art Institution.

'Primitivism' within the context of modernism was an act on the part of artists and writers seeking to celebrate features of the art and cultures of peoples deemed 'primitive' and to appropriate their supposed simplicity and authenticity to the project of transforming western art. Undeniably the concept of the 'primitive' was the product of the historical experiences of the west and more specifically as an ideological construct of colonial conquest and exploitation[15]. In the Indian context, under colonial imperialism the study of Indian fine arts as initiated by Havell, Coomarasamy and others had marginalized the folk art tradition as a category that was in contradistinction to the so called 'High Art'. This enabled for Jamini Roy, the Bengal artist in 1920s a cultural and historical reading of the substratum of Indian art that largely was unexplored and untouched by the colonials and stamped with primitive and archaic values. It is the artifacts of this rural culture that Jamini Roy appropriated as his visual imagery together with its creative and versatile compositional structures to largely manifest his works when he was searching for an individual mature expression to replace the stereotypical and mannered Bengal style in early 20s [Fig. 7].

Paniker by deviating to study the imagery of Jamini Roy was attempting to analyze and read the Bengal artist's derivatives of the Santhal tribes in Bengal particularly the arts and crafts of this substratum of Indian culture. In addition Jamini Roy had closely scrutinized and studied the tradition of Patua folk paintings with their narrative elements and the Kalighat paintings that explored the simplified imagery through strategic deployment of thick black lines.

At this juncture it would be interesting to draw parallels with other non-western cultures that European modernists vigorously appropriated and explored. Their main preoccupation in moving in this direction was to free themselves from the perceptual conventions of mimetic representation – the visual and spatial ordering system that had defined pictorial production since the Renaissance and made mandatory in the construction of pictures within the Beaux Arts. The Impressionists were notably the earliest modernists to come under the spell of the Japanese woodcuts for their compositional structuring. Gaugin adopted the Tahitian culture taking on the role of an anthropologist by living among the tribes and also marrying within. He was fascinated by the forms of their artifacts as well as the imagery assimilated in his works through arbitrarated forms and colours. The Persian miniatures and their spatial decorative formulations enchanted Matisse. Paul Klee's inquiry of the Egyptian hieroglyphics proved seminal for his works in evolving cryptic diagrams that indirectly had effects on Indian artists particularly Paniker. Picasso's interrogation of the primitive culture encountered in the Ethnological museum in Paris led to fracturing reality and bringing the long tradition of mimetic Renaissance art to an end. These non-western cultures were designated as 'Primitive' by the hegemonic western intellectuals to mark them in opposition to their progressive, scientific and technological civilization. By denying them their formal, artistic, and cultural values they scripted the notion of 'primitive' as a modernist construct incapable of fitting within their framework. These fundamental ideas premised on a notion of progress led to a discourse on 'primitivism' concerning the role of temporal constructs in power relations between cultures or between alternative modes of organizing human activity within a given society.

Premised on this notion, the similarities of stylistic features developed by Jamini Roy in his highly stylized figuration, the large decorative fixed eyes, static composition, rigid undaunting outlines and the use of colours in flat planes was folk-derivative not only from the pat paintings but also from toys and terracotta's. Paniker taking his cue from this Bengal artist derived his anthropomorphic imagery [Figs. 8, 9]. It provided a thrust for evolving and advancing his personal idiom of the human form with new values added to flatness. This strategically marked his shift from mimetic to representational. This move engendered for him an artistic vision freed from the bounds of realistic bias and towards a formula that was expressionistic,[Fig. 10] which he arrived at by distortions of proportions, with large heads and strange slanting iconic eyes as exemplified in **Two Dark women [Figs.11]**, **Mother and Child [Figs. 12]**, **Toilet [Figs. 13]**.

and **Cow and Calf** [Figs. 14]. These despite their abnormal proportions had the potency to poignantly express and reflect tender human emotions of nurture and care as the title suggests.

Paniker as he progressed with the reductionism of the human form was now assured of his evolving simplified imagery. In this search, Redappa Naidu, S.G.Vasudev, A.P. Santhanaraj and K. Ramanujam accompanied Paniker in his experimentations, by turning technically innovative to explore the medium afresh. They emphasized the inherent qualities of the medium – color, flatness, scale and edge, – that became the common ground for experimentations. Paniker said, 'Indian painting has changed considerably from mid 40's. Besides technical and stylistic changes in contemporary art, there are also dictates of materials and media, which to a great extent mould art forms[16]. To further reinforce this dimension of material and technique says Josef James, a critic who upheld the innovations and experimentations by Paniker, "The vulgarization which the western technique had introduced cannot be wished away because it marked the historic process of the art of the country turning contemporary... Ideological reactions against it started with Ravi Varma's mythological paintings. It was theorized by a group of sensitive artists in Bengal that the traditional technique, if reworked and extended could picture the contemporary world without any vulgarity at all. The vulgarity argued the Bombay Progressives grew out of the crudity of the western technique...the issue was a technical one and not an ideological or straightforward professional. This insight, which appeared about mid 50s, was almost entirely a contribution of the painters in South India. A group of painters in the South [Madras Group] probed with their drawings and in a concerted move penetrated into the entrenched native habits of pictorial figuration"[17]. The dry brush technique Paniker employed with versatility resulted in the economy of brush strokes that generated a vibrant picture surface [Fig. 15]. Paniker with minimum of means achieved a maximum of expression and this underlines his mastery in handling the compositional element of line with felicity. The forms that eventually evolved in his **Garden Series** [Figs.16] [1957-62] had a breathtaking simplicity, implicating years of experience and intense thought. His forms were not only distinctly personal but also traditional, implying a regional distinctiveness.

These experiments of Paniker with form and space was a major struggle to uproot himself out of the trenchant western academicism and push in a different direction to assimilate the materiality of Indian artistic tradition. What Paniker essentially implicated was the strength of Indian traditional heritage that could be moderated with a renewed vigour. In its compositional and technical aspects the miniature tradition in essence could be paralleled to Modernism with its

emphasis on two-dimensionality, distortion and expression. Hence in pre-colonial Indian philosophical and artistic episteme were found dimensions of western modernism that now loops back to acquire strength in a problematic nativist agenda. Paniker was largely successful in gaining mileage out of a tradition that had been bracketed out by the colonizers, as unsophisticated reflecting a lack of scientific principles in picture construction.

Paniker and his Definition of Nativism

Paniker's problematic compositions bear traces of his developments and assimilations of varied influences in his pictorial structuring from earthy renderings of landscapes and everyday genre to distorted and stylized figuration, to an integral synthesis that was an empirical response of Ajanta, Mamallapuram and Post Impressionism. What made his pictures significant were the intellectual needs that articulated his well-defined interests organizing every element of line, tone, color and the subtle figurative element. This was a cerebration with forms enabling an expression of rare sophistication. His imaginative faculty clarified the conceptual form by reducing his concerns to a simple but powerful linearity. Reinforcing this was an equally potent and bright palette, frankly articulating its design with playful animation. These attempts mark his search to withdraw completely from virtual plasticity to an expression of rhythmic linear configuration where the quest for 'Indian' identity would become focused. As an underlying cultural vision, Paniker was sourcing tradition that leads culture to superimpose its common sense interpretation to provide content. The Madras Group's contribution to the movement in this respect, from a materialist's point of view was part of both a dominant culture [national modern aesthetic] and an indigenous society [Dravidian and linguistic nationalism that is cultural and not territorial]. The artists in making a valiant effort to 'integrate the past as an active presence in the future' [Paul de Man] employed marginalized or folk art forms and contents for individual expressions.

His western sojourn in 1954 had brought him back as a confirmed indigenist leading him towards a path to introspect on inherited tradition. His search for truth [indigenism] called upon the investigations of the paradigm of the art of modernism emphasizing skill and sophistication as relevant material factors juxtaposed with regional art vocabulary. He had reached a mystical conclusion when he argued for a work of art that need not incorporate any experiences of the real. So his frames incorporated no subject, meaning or theme. This set the parameters that largely manifested in the oeuvre of many of the artists within the group. Consequently they began to express strong preferences for formal aspects and embodied conceptual vision that largely was derived from a cultural matrix.

Culture as a spatially bound, temporally distinct entity has its integrity, essence and purity. James Clifford spells out the assumptions of culture as organic wholeness, continuity and growth with a powerful structure of feelings. Stuart Hall theorized culture as a "site of convergent interests rather than a logically or conceptually clarified idea." By understanding and contextualising it within the regional Dravidian cultural space, Paniker was heading towards a new representational regime through this move.

Paniker though had resolved his human forms to a simplified imagery; he still had to contend with the three dimensionality of the picture, which he wanted to transcend in order to align his art with mainstream modern art that emphasized the irreducibility of its painted surface. To realize this dimension of his work he turned his attention to the classical tradition of South Indian art – both pictorial and plastic - and focused upon the rhythmic pulse of its historical tradition. In searching and studying this tradition, it dawned on him that here was a supreme exemplification of the meld of skills of crafts incorporated into the spirit of art. This realization enabled a closing of the distinction, which the British had exploited. The art of the Pallavas, Cholas and Vijaynagar Empire was found to be an important point of reference in its decorative imagination and he equated it with the craftsmanship [read skill] in his own works. "It is a thin line that divides a great painter or sculptor from a great craftsman. It is often forgotten that a great artist is a great craftsman, for there can be no art without craftsmanship". Once the common grounds of craftsmanship became evident he worked towards the possibility of an art that would be 'Indian in spirit and world wide contemporary'. This vitally also implicated the notion of subjectivity formed via art/craft divide played upon by the colonizers for their economic gains within the Art Institution.

The cultural awareness and the social milieu, which grounded Paniker in the 60's, enabled support that was both intellectual and artistic from artists in Madras emerging from the institutional matrix of the School of Arts with shared art education. The modus operandi adopted was to reduce the influence of the existing derivatives of specious and stereotypical Euro-American modern art formulae, namely Impressionism, Cubism and Expressionism that were closely studied by them. In his avowed statement of an art 'Indian and contemporary' Paniker unlocked the doors of abstraction. Here I would digress to elaborate on the conceptual paradigm of abstraction as practiced in the west and understood in Indian art.

Abstraction: The Indian Dimension

Once abstraction was identified as a dominant art form in European avant –garde in the 1950s, it was paramount for Paniker to deny it an exclusive western identity. Traditional arts were reinvented and reinterpreted to establish a presence of abstraction in the heart of traditional arts. Through this spirited awareness Paniker laid the authoritarian ground with his claims of classical Indian art forms projecting abstraction understood well by the sculptors of Mamallpuram or Pattadakkal. When Paniker spoke of Indian sculpture as manifesting abstract qualities, he was referring to their nonrealistic representation where the anatomical parts were conceptually organized paying attention to order, balance and rhythmic sequence in their creations in sculpture whether in relief or in the round.

In Europe on the other hand abstraction that emerged was a rebellion against mimetic, historical, religious and mythological canons. Beginning with Manet whose reality of painting was the paint itself and this was carried forth by the Impressionists who recorded their sensory impressions by the loose handling of paint dissolving recognizable form. And from here the story is a familiar one with cubism and futurism to abstraction of Kandinsky, which to him was born out of inner spiritual needs. In Modernism the abstraction as we know today was made famous by American critic Clement Greenberg who insisted on the refinement and irreducibility of the painting namely its two dimension. Propagated and espoused in the America of the 40's and early 50's it concentrated upon purely formal artistic problems. This approach was grounded in a Kantian aesthetic theory that prioritized elements of line, color and shape rather than the representational elements involved with narrative, iconography and iconology.

Paniker's turn to abstraction was strategic. It was a compulsion that had brought him to this stage after going through the whole gamut of his human figurative experimentations especially in his **Garden Series**, [1957-62] as well as his **Mother and Child Series** where he had conceived his forms intimately with line and color. His human forms under the strong influence of Jamini Roy had become sketchy with pronounced heads displaying folk features of wide- open static eyes. Paniker in the Garden series was not only attempting distortion for subjective expression but this move engendered for him the possibility of defining the two dimensionality or the planar surface in his paintings. This was a struggle for dematerialization that eventually pushed him into an abstraction of a different category that he would celebrate as **Words and Symbols.**

Words and Symbols Series [1963 – 1976]

According to Josef James, "A group of painters in the Madras Group probed with their drawings and in a concerted move retrenched the method of delineating figural compositions with illusionist devices to mark a trajectory that would be relevant for the regional modern. Their drawing broke structure, spread itself out and patterned out the agitation. Paniker accomplished this breakthrough after a long struggle. The central idea advanced in his paintings and those of his associates was that of patterning, since the grammar of patterning had nothing to do with laws of nature or the rules of realistic representation. The pattern as the summary principle had been basic to the pictorial arts of the great non-Western cultures – the Islamic, the Chinese and the Indian...The accomplishment of the Madras Group was their success in carrying it over into the modern easel medium."[18]. Thus Paniker's breakthrough in his Words and Symbols **[Figs. 17&18]** marks the final achievement of his career through this method of patterning i.e. reductive and two-dimensional. This was to prove challanging not only for him, but also for others in the group, though it is surprising not many followed his adventurous spirit of incorporating the words and imagery. Paniker was able to push ahead in his daring ventures because he was the leading voice and an artist with a mission to define the Indian identity subsuming indirectly within it the regional identity. 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, linga, kolam designs etc.] **[Fig. 19]** and mathematical configurations to armour his expressions. Paniker stated, "I used to hear a lot about Paul Klee. Egyptian pictures and hieroglyphics influenced him considerably. It was Paul Klee who roused plenty of hopes in me. Paul Klee is closer to our art than Picasso or Braque. His lines are simple and full of life...after learning the lessons imparted by Klee, I was at a loss how to commence work on the basis of these from scratch. I did not like to copy him. I had to begin from the beginning. The past was found equally to be help as well as a hindrance in this new venture. Suddenly one day I happened to notice a page from the math's notebook of a young student. Arabic figures, Latin and other symbols of algebra and mathematics, and the linear and other formations of geometry all helped to arouse in me a new idea"[19]. Thus through contemplative and problematic artistic definitions laboriously worked out by Paniker that he succeeded in making Klee his point of reference but moving beyond to anchor his ideas in quotidian references of mathematical formulae and calligraphic scripts.

It was at this time [1963] that Paniker introduced Batik in the curriculum, [inspired by a T-shirt worn by a Malaysian tourist] a craft form derived from S.E. Asia. P.B. Surendranath, [Fig. 20] a teacher and an artist highly skilled and talented conducted the Batik course. Batik on fabric set off an experimental process for the young students for whom the fabric became a playfield to venture exciting ideas. It is in this direction that young V. Viswanathan a restless energetic youth with polemical ideas introduced the idea of script in the saree design. The inspiring Chola inscriptions on the classical Brihadesvara Temple at Thanjavur mediated Viswanathan's creative forays [Fig. 21&22]. The arbitration of script in batik design removed fixity of surface ornamentation on the fabric to create a novel appearance, simultaneously making ripples within the group of students and teachers at the School of Arts and Crafts. Paniker after this was to delve the depths of this exploration[20]. For Paniker however this was not the first hand experience of visualizing script. This idea was notional already in Indian pictorial tradition as mentioned earlier and also familiar with the cubists' experimentations of their synthetic phase. What is vital here was that it enabled him to move confidently in a direction giving him the break that he required. This was his remarkable quality - a capacity to chance and push new ideas that were thrown up and if he saw a potential he would explore it, as he did with the batik saree and its script.

Paniker with this conscious break was moving in a direction of new representational [not necessarily mimetic or naturalistic] regime, where the traditional and regional forms would become operational, in salvaging the authenticity of traditional mores from its moribund state to make it proactive. As K.G. Subramanyan stated " till the individual is alive with self awareness, the past is an immovable and uncommunicative carcass. It is only when the living fire of the creator reaches down to it that it wakes up and becomes evocative". While K.G. Subramanyan stressed the need to recall tradition that could serve as a terra firma of visualization on the other hand Clement Greenberg accompanying the exhibition 'Two Decades of American Paintings' [1967] pointed out the disadvantage of belonging to any highly evolved ones. Paniker [in 1954] relates of an incident in Paris with an American woman who told him that modern American painter being free from all traditions is better suited to paint or sculpt than any other national. Without those 'meaning-less' disciplines, she felt brilliant things could be achieved with comparative ease. America she said had a message here for the world. Paniker tried to draw her attention to the analogy of Indian street acrobat. The acrobat astounds his audience by leaping successively, head foremost, through hoops smaller and smaller in size each time. The clown who parodied every feat of the great acrobat finally 'crowned' it all by leaping without the hoop.

What is perhaps lacking in a lot of American painting today is the 'hoop'[21]. Ironically what essentially was proclaimed as modernist universal when the art capital moved to the shores of America in 40s from Paris turns out to be American Nationalism. But Paniker in attempting to draw a philosophical parallel gives greater valency to tradition than the domain of mere references [modernist stylistic formulas].

With his awareness of the script in his quest towards a breakthrough, Paniker studied it [scripts] along with symbols, which he understood as highly evolved forms of intimate human usage. The use of script in his compositions brings in a possibility of a comparison with Conceptual Art that was gaining momentum in 60s in America, Europe and England. Conceptual Art in adapting strategies to elucidate experiences of the world was in direct contradiction to Greenbergian formalism with its self-reductive idea. The experience here implied Paniker's active deployment of his regional language that enabled a breakthrough with his artistic intellectualization. By bringing to bear upon his canvas the hand written script from English, Tamil and Malayalam language he imposed another dimension to precipitate in his works namely the titillating visual textures without inherent meaning as also decorative patterning [**Fig. 23**]. This however was at polarity with the conceptual aesthetics in which an interactive role of the viewer was elementary, inviting participation.

The fact is that Paniker delved into the material world around him and retrenched elements that otherwise were commonplace and gave them an artistic status. Of course this in no way compares to either Duchamp's 'found objects' nor the Pop artists gainly use of consumer products. In the deployment of these forms he became intensely aware of design component that debars illusion and sought to advance the aesthetics of planar reality that he was passionately seeking. In juxtaposing the dematerialized figure [linear in design] with the material text of the script beginning with English characters, Paniker brought about a dynamic strategic change in the art of picture making. These changes were significant as Santo Dutta comments, "after this came the sudden hush of impersonal linear geometry, reducing all the warm human elements to a cold deterministic patterns of horoscope in his Words and Symbols series"[22]. By using script in a painterly context, he provides space of distinction with the Conceptualist artists. Nonetheless he overtly embraced it as a fundamental motif to build up his canvas. And this fundamentally explains the difference with the Conceptualists. Essentially the scripts whether English or Malayalam in its entirety was abstract shape used in a variety of combinations. Paniker's use of script and paradigms of linguistic signs can also be seen as working against the individual

personalized gestural marks, say of Abstract Expressionism. Incidentally his use of script was tautological appreciated primarily for its inherent visual qualities. Simultaneously he was also stating that form is not a personalized and substantive concept, just as it is not an abstract and a mindless one.

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 innovative deployment of words was investigated as concepts in the form of language - a language Paniker vehemently reiterates not to be read but conceptually to meld with the composition. If the Conceptual artists in 60s employed words as propositions, investigations or concepts that was presented in the form of language, Panikers approach was its polarity to make it incoherent. For Paniker the activity of painted drawings on the canvas be it words, symbols or imagery was the most immediate connection of establishing regional specificity with leaning towards local bias.

Paniker when he initiated his experimentations with Words and Symbols, the first element that he axed was color. The colours were subdued like those of the yellowed pages of a manuscript creating an ambience of mystery of the magical past [Fig. 24]. He ascetically employed it and consciously marginalized it from the epicenter of his imagery that primarily comprised of words, alphabets and symbols mined from regional scripts and traditions juxtaposed with wiry human forms. With this marginalization of color, Paniker at the same time was breaking the stereotypical fixity of Indian art forms as colourful and gaudy.

It becomes imperative to analyze the formal mode in his works for a simple reason that modernity as it evolved in India was an imposed phenomenon - a process of modernization and modernism brought on second hand from Europe. If Paniker was exploring the formal language it was because he was simultaneously involved in employing the basic values of design, elemental in breaking the ground of perceptual realism in which the Madras School of Arts was ensconced; to a direction of two- dimensionality, which is our artistic heritage. Paniker had scripted this method of working when he had argued for a visual statement that would rely for its aesthetics only on the formal elements of the composition and will have no social or political bearings.

Though the idea was a-political it nonetheless was a political move to make visible the Dravidian cultural nationalism privileging its two thousand years old language, art and culture to become manifest.

It is paradoxical that our pre-colonial Indian aesthetic tradition had been essentially two-dimensional in its miniature pictorial format, which unfortunately was lost on artists who unfailingly referenced the modern idiom in the West to arrive at their flat and walled space. The frescoes at Ajanta clearly predicated naturalism based on incipient and calculated use of light and shade and other methods as stippling. But when modern Indian art took a definitive posture towards redeploying and negotiating tradition it had to do so through modern European formulae. Strangely Kandinsky's non-figurative abstractions, i.e. his images of color music were based on Indian religious thought. And in a world upside down, the Indian painters turned to the west, while European avant-gardes headed east for inspiration. And in between "the Madras group's approach was interesting as the skepticism about modern art and the questions about formal aspects and conceptual thoughts are the same as for Europeans; only Madras artists handle these questions with an Indian idiom"[23]. This could be explained by Paniker's initiation of his discourse on nativism raising skeptical questions on the appropriateness of European modern art to mediate within the contemporary Indian context. While modern in Europe defined a complete break with the past, Paniker was attempting a renegotiation with tradition and other regional cultural art forms to define its modernity. While questions of formal aspects and conceptual thoughts were prioritized, these were responded to with a native idiom that made his art worldwide contemporary and Indian in spirit. Paniker when he set out to appropriate modern European Movements within the Schools curriculum it was for students to move away from entrenched academicism – remnant of colonial pedagogy as well the empirical approach of Roy Chowdhary, with his insistence on rendering everyday realities. Paniker explored the questions of formal values in opposition to pictorial illusionism and perceptual renderings. He became skeptical about Modernism when questioned or probed about the concept of Indianness in his expressions by a critic in London. The Modernists in Europe had premised their artistic articulations in confrontation to academic pedantry and negotiated the non-western cultures to bring about a transformation. Paniker's methods and approach was similar when he worked his ideology in the 60s to renegotiate tradition and other cultural signifiers to not only give authenticity but to empower it with Indianness marked with regionalism that would precipitate the notion of problematic identity. Paniker through such a move engendered a reworking of European modernist formulae [Impressionism Cubism Expressionism, Abstraction] mediated by

an Indian sensibility through assimilation of pictorial and plastic traditional repertoire in 'High art' and folk arts including various symbols and forms for pictorial expressions.

Paniker not only played upon the abstraction of the words and scripts but also incorporated mathematical formulae, algebraic equations and diagrams of horoscopes. Said Paniker, " my works of the Words and Symbols started in 1963 using the mathematical symbols, Arabic figures and Roman scripts helping me to create an atmosphere of new picture making which I seemed very much to need. The symbols and diagrams, the tabular columns etc. have no meaning whatsoever other than their visual aspects; and images born out of association of ideas". These diagrams of horoscopes are the impersonal codification of an individuals life trajectory recorded in the constellation of the planets. Following certain rituals it is possible to evoke powers of these through contemplation and chanting of mantras. Paniker's awareness in this direction was significant for his employment was purely to provide a point of reference merely getting ordained as decorative device/tools. "The totality in Paniker's design has been suggested by the horoscope – a quasi scientific rationality – that represents in an instantaneous design of script and lines a case of human existence. Visualizing this way, Paniker interpreted time as the total design of an existence and not as the abstract chronological quantity of western science. The reformulations of the two basic concepts of scientific rationality are clear progress towards the metaphysics of a new."[24].

His first painting that envisages the use of scripts and pictographic elements was **The Fruit Seller [Fig. 25]** in 1963, [oil on board]. What is remarkable is that though he confessed to a use of mathematical abstract formulae it proved an antithesis where residual figuration remained entrenched though juxtaposed with cursive script of English characters. The figure was a haphazard delineation and very experimental indicating a tentative transition. Nevertheless a break was achieved though naive and simplistic. In an ethnographic construction of animal form and proletarian fruit seller - the touch with reality was still organic. This vital work of Paniker fragmented and loosely organized compositionally may not possess an aesthetic value in its play of elements, but these considerations were marginalized to prioritize his creative experimentations in this transitional composition.

In Paniker's painting, the imagery and words juxtapose but in an arbitrary manner heightening the sensuousness of the cursive text. This work was followed by **Premonition**, and **Ancestral Assertion [Fig. 26]**. It is important to emphasize that in wrestling with the problem of mass and

space to rid the picture surface of the tyranny of corporeality and illusionist spatiality he established the conceptual reality over the perceptual one. Further to facilitate the reading of the painting he created a network of lines, systematically organized into a formation. These methods were reflected in his above mentioned works that were not only exclusively monochromatic but also attempted a clarification of his regional signs and symbols including the cursive Malayalam script that widely inhabited the picture surface.

R. Nandakumar's cryptically remarks on this experimental phase of Paniker when he notes, "he was using scribbles and scrawls that were reminiscent of the cursive Malayalam script but made illegible, interspersed with characters of an apparent pictographic manner, organized into a design. In the initial phase the colours were muted almost monochromatic. The apparently 'symbolic' pictographs he interspersed among the scribbles were reductive, like the bull, bird, fish etc. These ungainly signatory motifs, placed within colored areas among bars of scribbling and the slanting or sweeping lines, hardly ever resolve themselves into an image field gestalt"[25].

The above-mentioned author is critical of these significations, for in his opinion there was nothing radical or progressive about Paniker's experiments and that he remained within a traditional and provincial conservative mould purely revalidating tradition and inheritances invented during the nationalist discourse. The signs and symbols that Nandakumar posits as 'ungainly signatory motifs' were essentially devoid of any semantics to function purely as decorative patterns subverting the modernist logic from within, with the consequence that the image filled gestalt itself is resisted. This explains the patterning that is dominant in his series. "The argument in favour of adapting this mode of working the picture plane was premised that the grammar of patterning has nothing to do with laws of nature and that it is the faculty of patterning and not sensing that contribute to knowing and picturing. The pattern thus became fetishised as the superior principle of non-Western art – Indian, Arabic or Chinese – with its complex geometries and calligraphies. This entire argument has been uncritically bequeathed upon succeeding generations of students of the Madras School"[26].

Though Paniker had argued for the formal character of artistic statements, subsumed within this agenda was the visibility of the native culture, thus implicating Dravidian aesthetics to become prominent. This aesthetics was partly reflected in the regional art forms, in the accoutrements of its performing arts particularly the street plays. The shape and forms of these cultural signs mark their appearance in paintings and sculpture. The patterning that Paniker arrived at was

consequent to his series of experimentations with forms derived from nature and human forms and extreme simplifications leads to a decorative formal arrangement termed 'patterning'. And if Paniker had fetishised patterning through complex geometries and calligraphies it is hardly visible among the works of his students who formed the core of the Madras Group. Resistance to Paniker's modus operandi had also become an important factor manifested through abstracts [Adimoolam or Munuswamy] or completely negating to make concepts significant [Bhaskaran and Alphonso Arul Doss, Balan Nambiar]] or reverting to academic mode of repesentation [Anthony Doss]. Thus not many artists wholeheartedly subscribed to Paniker's views as springboards of their creative aesthetics.

In the early 60's Paniker was introspecting and he tentatively defined his initial experimental aesthetics. Undoubtedly there was ambivalence towards his projection of figurative imagery initially but after 70s it became a dominant aspect of his compositions. In pursuing these experiments he essentialized linguistic signs, cultural symbols and mathematical formulae. With support from colleagues and enthusiastic students he was emboldened to this new trajectory. His visual endeauvors were paralleled by a symmetrical support from the art critic Josef James who provided a positive critique of his works extensively in the print media not only at the regional level but also at the national. This was instrumental as it emphasized his pioneering status within the Art Institution opening up the possibility of leading a movement within Madras in particular and South in general. Moreover his pursuance of a regional agenda was vulnerable to attacks from the revivalist critiques like Nandakumar who saw no opportunity of going through the exercise and the process since it was validated in the nationalist agenda and criticized as hybrid, revivalist and stereotyped.

It should be reiterated that while the artists within the rest of the country were creatively and actively intermingling and assimilating modernist formulae with Indian artistic heritage to synthesize their modern experiences, Paniker on the other hand systematically and progressively paved the way for a study of regional arts that he extensively researched and manifested in his works ultimately defining the regional modern and also vitalizing the immanent Southern identity. In this search visionaries and experimentalists accompanied him like Dhanapal, Munuswamy and Santhanaraj Undeniably the quasi-abstract character and appearance of his works would prove a difficult proposition for acceptance by the not so educated and conservative Tamilian milieu within which Paniker was operating from. The character and form of his composition required an active intellectual engagement on the part of the spectator for productive

interaction. The ground situation was that his works would have no market lessening the chances of acceptance. In retrospect it appears that Paniker had pushed his artistic experimentations with the single-minded stubbornness and perseverance of an artist to travel such a trajectory and it was a trying and a testing period, as he changed direction.

Words and Symbols Series: A Critique

The compositional layout of Paniker's **Words and Symbols Series [Fig.27]** does not provide for a focal point evolving as it does freely on the picture surface. Though all the cultural symbols were ubiquitous within the artist's milieu, it is by strategically selecting and transposing them on the canvas at the crucial juncture that makes Paniker's works different and innovative. Though the words, symbols and algebraic formulae were repeated it became vitally charged creating variety and intensity in his artistic articulations.

Paniker in his works attempted interplay of language and images without any priority or hierarchy between them nor manifesting any meaning. In his works the dialectical interplay of words and images were missing, as it was the fundamental working ethos/basis of the Conceptual artists marking it out to be a point of contrast. But the use of language within art is hardly new. Early fusions of the verbal and visual occur in Egyptian hieroglyphics, Chinese ideograms and Mayans glyphic writing. Illuminated manuscripts, seventeenth century emblem books, pattern poetry are among some of the diverse and curious combinations of these. The immediate and important context for discussion of contemporary 'language works' however are inflected in the modernist works of Juan Gris, Stuart Davis, Gino Severini and Carlo Carra. The very contemporary artists in the decade of 60s would be Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, the Art and Language group in England and many others in Europe and America. These Conceptual artists extensively deployed words to convey ideas and meanings. Art and Language group's insistence [Terry Atkinson, David Bainbridge, Michael Baldwin, Harold Hurrell] was on the 'form of the work', the idea in the work of art than to the object of art. That is since the Conceptual art emerged as a reaction to Minimalism's formal purism, concepts hence were more important than the physical art of making. This however is the international scenario.

Closer home on the domestic front moving away from these international phenomenons in art; the incorporation of texts and images was at the heart of all Indian pictorial traditions. The Jaina manuscripts clearly reflected this so also the Mughal miniatures. The same remains of our hoary tradition in astrology with its diagrammatic charts, juxtaposed with words and numbers.

Echoes of cubist ideology and pictorial philosophy also reverberate in Paniker's works. Undoubtedly cubist's aesthetic was well understood by Paniker and others in the Madras group. A cultural symbiosis had taken place with Indian pictorial tradition and methods and sophistication of Euro models. Doughlas Cooper suggests 'the fragments of verbal material in a cubist painting serves a double function: they operate as mimetic elements, heightening the representational aspects of the work, while at the same time foregrounding the two dimensionality of the canvas'[27]. And this indexical factor is reinforced in Paniker's painting **The River [Fig. 28]** 1975 where nature and culture, the former in its schematized role and latter in its symbols, geometric shapes and diagrams of astrology's charts co-mingle and co-exist. This ambivalent approach remains a salient feature in all his Words and Symbols series. Interestingly this composition has representations that are from terrestrial and aquatic world. An element of wit and subtle humour play upon the theme. One half of the picture is given up to nature with a demystified tree and a flowing river that is subsumed in the body of the snake form. It is the crows and a monkey that imparts a quality of interest. The crows are engaged in their varied activities while a lone monkey sits amongst them with caricatured leaves of the tree surrealistically floating with ideograms of spirals, stars and circles with illegible scrawls and scribbles of unidentifiable script. While the river comes alive with diagrammatic fishes, here it is a lone octopus that wittily leads them. The rest of the picture is a meticulous ordering of various signs and geometric forms with an interesting Arabic script provided at the margin on the left.

Paniker working through his Words and Symbols series during the decade of 60s gained confidence and the monochromatic backgrounds that conditioned his works during this period gradually came alive as he introduced colours and pictorial elements from nature in the 70's **[Fig. 29]**. This reverting back to pictorial elements strongly emphasize his antipathy to total abstraction arguing for a material base for his works that should not lose connectivity with ground reality. This implies subversion within the modernist logic, which in contradiction to this distinction sets him apart from the Western abstractionists to clarify his position within the national milieu and particularly the South.

In his Words and Symbols series the mute earth colours are activated by juxtaposition of yellow ochre with a touch of vermilion. Through the 70's his works like **Crows** is animated not only with bright colours [reds, greens, yellows and orange] but full of actions with the birds and the river of life replete with fish. It marks optimism and confidence resting assured in the knowledge that it gained nation wide attention and acceptance, reconfirming his motive for a definite

regional identity in Madras. Truly his works manifest sourcing of his regional culture translated through contemporary sensibility. This was a vital artistic factor that had to be overcome in order to identify with the international stream.

This pictorial articulation of words and images draws together an authentic quality of regional identity where crows manifest the skyline of not only Tamil Nadu's urban and rural landscapes but of south in general [Fig. 30]. Although triangles and circles without yantric connotations have a universal identity the incorporation of these shapes together with the sensuous Malayalam script [his mother tongue] undoubtedly projects it as native and regional. Well calibrated, articulated and painstakingly organized; Paniker's works have echoes of craft like decorative quality that peculiarly remains active and dictates the appearance and physiognomy of his works. It was the privileging of visual aesthetics over any other criterion that informs his works. And this characteristic is underwritten in the artistic make up of the Madras group. Perhaps an insistence on the craft that essentially emphasizes the skill was for Paniker the other side of an artistic coin.

Says Anis Farooqi, "Paniker's aim was to evolve a style deep-rooted to the soil to which he belonged. It was the result of his love for the traditional values which he had been advocating throughout his life; as he was of the opinion that if Matisse and Kirchner could be inspired by the oriental sources why an artist from the east cannot imbibe these values and transpire them to a new visual format aesthetically suited to the modern requirements, and for that reason he had exclusively chosen the basic element – the script of his region"[28]. Paniker's deployment of the cultural signs was authenticated with his creative imagery that was partly individuated and partly tied to the local vocabulary, the site of its derivation. His facility to mutate geometric and organic elements of symbols and nature characterize and imparts a strong sense of originary to it.

This opens up the question of avant- garde and its implications within the regional milieu in the 60's. A mention of the historical avant- garde to differentiate the activity in this region becomes inevitable. The term avant-garde originally was used to designate the conjunction of revolutionary sociopolitical tendencies and artistic goals. Both Renato Poggioli and Peter Burger agreed to this definition for the arts that were operational till about 1880. But Poggioli postulated that after the third quarter of the 19th century avant-garde concentrated on formal creativity, rejecting conventional habits and incorporating 'the cult of novelty and even of strange'. Burger on the other hand saw Poggioli's definition of avant-garde as too elastic. Burger felt Poggioli

allowed the avant-garde to separate itself from 'real' life and social issues. Burger preferred to understand art not as single works produced by individuals but as entities within an institutional framework that includes artists, dealers, critics, museums, collectors etc. For him aestheticism at the beginning of the 20th century gave way to a historical avant-garde that attacked art as an institution[29]. In Europe hence avant-garde ideology was two-fold. The aesthetics that resulted from this avant-gardism was to negate the mimetic representation since the latter inflected neither progress in science and technology nor in industrialization. Not only science and technology but also socio-economic changes radically affected the texture of Europe's social fabric. With industrialization, came market economy and capitalistic society and as Marx would have it an alienation of the individual.

None of these artistic-socio-politico-economic factors affected the national Indian scenario in the beginning of the 20th century absorbed as it was in the espousal of political freedom from the yoke of British Imperialism. Nevertheless its repercussions were felt on the Indian economy with the colonizers operating within the field of capitalism. But avant-garde either historical or aesthetic was hardly espoused, as the culture of India's pictorial artistic tradition had a hiatus and was obfuscated to re-emerge in the light of colonizers perspective and it's construction of it. My effort in consciously drawing parallels with the west was because India's Modern art was a satellite culture and had to make valiant attempt through eclecticism and hybridization to come into its own. Geeta Kapur postulated that, in India, avant- garde as an ideology made its intervention in the 60s. This ideology may not parallel the western modernists development as it was conditioned by the exigencies of that period. Geeta Kapur bases her arguments for the negotiation of this term within Indian modernism on the grounds that in China a group has emerged in the 90s calling themselves as Avant-gardes. This enables according to her to deploy the term within the Indian context at the point of disjuncture, arguing for its applicability in the modern Indian art scenario at the historical disjuncture, which could be either 70s or 80s or 90s.

By such an argument the applicability of avant-garde could be made for the Madras Movement in the 60s; and extending it to read for defining the problematic identity. If this argument is taken then it validates Paniker's position in the South as an avant-gardist when he consciously employed cultural signifiers and linguistic signs in a radical way, an approach that had no precedence in modern Indian art. Paniker when he reinvented the cultural symbols he destabilized the sanctity of it to make them into an intrinsic statement of his compositions. It also became a form of resistance, a counter discourse to Greenbergian Modernism to implicate an

aesthetic, functional, integral and productive role for the artist directly operating from the regional cultural matrix.

Paniker forging ahead with his Words and Symbols series set a trajectory that individualized his style. A call for indigenism and going to one's 'roots' as S. Nandagopal vehemently reinforced it was not a prerogative of the Madras milieu alone, it was a clarion call also at the national level. And this is where the compulsions of the regional identity were foregrounded in Paniker's works. In the rest of the country artists were mobilizing traditional and regional mines of tribal and folk imagery, decorative play of lines on floor and wall decorations to suit their individual purpose. And what set them apart was their regional sourcing. J. Swaminathan, G.R. Santhosh, Nirodh Mazumdar, Raza, Husain, Ganesh Pyne, P.T. Reddy, Paidi Raju to mention the most prominent were on the same path. The movement of Neo-Tantricism with philosophical affiliations and artistic implications as put forth by Ajit Mookerjee in his book on Tantra Art [1967] was to have international repercussions at this time in the late 60's. This movement I shall critique in relation to the works of K.V. Haridasan, a pioneer in the South. Paniker in his works thus scripted the regional identity by reworking idioms peculiar to the south, and thus establishing its identity. This idea was to find extension with other major artists who were his colleagues as well as his students.

Paniker and Neo-Tantricism

In the critical appraisal of Paniker's works art writers and not too well informed journalists from their imperial position at the capital have baptized him as a Neo-Tantric. An umbrella of Neo-Tantric does not define his artistic position within that movement, which came up in late 60s. Paniker professed, "I had little to do with Tantric art, though I am visually aware of its forms. My pictures are just contemporary expressions'" This sums up his total vision. Savita Apte in her article Ancient forms, Modern Frames,[30] postulates that Paniker "synthesized yantric horoscopes, occult yantras and yantras evoking deities". No visual statements of Paniker in his Words and Symbols Series reinforce this argument. To clarify his stance on the usage of Tantric pictorial elements Paniker wrote to the editor of Lalit Kala Contemporary vehemently stating that, "I am neither a tantric painter nor a symbolist. My symbols are no symbols – they mean nothing. They help me design a picture and perhaps, by association of ideas help me project an image .... Complex yet precise, elaborate yet concise or at sometimes even decorative, devotional and mystic .... They are not at all pertinent to painting on the conscious plane"[31]. Paniker clarifies his notion and application of reinvented ritualistic art forms, since he has attached no philosophical

argument in the appropriation of these *tantric* signs and symbols as G.R. Santosh or Biren De' clearly have explicated through their works. It remained purely an exercise in creating a visual appeal in his works enabling an enrichment of his artistic repertoire. This approach also provided a mark of distinction from the practice of other modern *tantric* artists within the country. It is this aversion to content, meaning and symbolism that separates Paniker from the Conceptualists use of words and images.

Yantras, as understood in its religious connotation were magical diagrams exuding power when accompanied by the ritual chanting of *mantras.* There are no diagrammatic references of these yantric *mandalas* in Paniker's works as it manifestly operated in G.R. Santosh's, K.V. Haridasan or Biren De's oeuvres. His triangles, squares, rectangles and circles have universal validity and read as geometry with their numinous space organizations. Paniker played with geometry but stayed away from any association as mentioned, aware of its enjoyment of form which was essential for his picture making. His use of triangles indicated his engagement and preoccupations in creating permutations with that shape generating a remarkable multiplicity of designs. The space with its color organization has strong echoes of horizontal Saivite marks made on the lingam [Fig. 31] or they are reminiscent of bindus. Vasudev has given another slant to this color organization when he noted, "Paniker's works have a strong resemblance to color field painters like Rothko or Barnett Newman. Remove the layer of scripts and diagrammatic sketches, the color organizations and their juxtaposition will reflect one of these painters"[32]. [Fig. 32]

The Words and Symbols Series are an abstraction of the cultural slice, the milieu in which he was grounded. His semiotic was integral to the modernist agenda, in which subjectivity was privileged to authenticate cultural signs for a specific purpose, in this instance of Indian identity and regional emphasis [Figs. 33, 34 & 35]. Paniker's invention of this visual grammar was the raison d' etre of his intellectuality and aesthetics, the idiom in which he continued to work till his death in 1977. The salient marks of his creations were the spatial color organizations, methodical arrangement of tabular columns, the inter twining sensuous script that was irrepressively a signature of his brush and the imagery from the terrestrial and the aquatic world with monkeys, dogs, birds, trees, river, fish and the snake weaving interesting patterns on the surface of his canvases. Patterned kolam designs enhanced the linearity of his compositions. Paniker's vocabulary of reductive forms, was distributed in a hyper pictorial space, one that accentuates the two- dimensionality of the picture plane and diminishes the three dimensional illusion. Here was

a root vocabulary derived from Cézanne and Cubism juxtaposed with the structural space formulations of Indian miniatures. Paniker 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's Words and Symbols series though reflecting a conceptual paradigm does not lose their unique aura, remaining essentially as painted canvases. His persona remains in focus with an awareness of the context in which the work was seen that is the Dravidian cultural milieu. Like Barthe argued in 'The Death of the Author' that we read language rather than author. And Paniker's words and symbols demand exactly this kind of engagement.

Paniker it should be noted, as he transited from one stage of experimental phase to the other he did so only after thoroughly mastering the various complexities that, inevitably led to his Words and Symbols series where he seemed to have done the same. This was because he had set his gaze/mind to a release from any mannered styles. What Paniker also set in motion was a set of experimentation with varied techniques, which the artists of the Madras Group explored. That is how the character of the group gets essentialized as decorative and craft oriented that placed premium on the valency of regionalism within a larger framework of the national. Paniker's devotion to cultural regeneration, his critique of art practice, the romanticization of esoteric and primal experiences as in astrology, support the construction of Southern identity through signs of its regional cultural heritage. In the narrative of the Madras Art Movement the role of Paniker was crucial. He engined the whole group and attained the results he had visualized. Each member was not only highly skilled but also creative that helped forge the group's identity. The road traveled by Paniker was an arduous and a prickly one but one that engendered for him a national and an international status.

Paniker was not only responsible for encouraging, motivating, inspiring and mobilizing artists and students towards newer horizons that resulted in the establishment of the Madras Art Movement, but also conceived of the possibility for establishing an artists' center where the students could pursue their experimental vision after they had left the portals of the Art Institution. In this direction Paniker was instrumental in realizing his vision of establishing an artists' commune where the talents and skills would be nurtured once removed from the problematic economic exigencies. By mobilizing the resources towards these concerted efforts he successfully translated it to establish the artists' village at Injambakkam in Chennai. Cholamandal Artists village has become integral to Madras Art Movement.

A Nascent Beginning - An Idea Takes Shape: The Artists Village

The Madras artists in general were practicing an art, in which the world of Dravidian cultural politics and popular art forms were becoming relevant for the understanding of contemporary cultural practice in painting and sculpture particularly. I reiterate this viewpoint as it marks an interesting departure with Bombay, Delhi and Calcutta, which defined their ideological contours in a manner very different from the Madras Group as discussed earlier. It remains peculiarly characteristic of the Madras group to have worked in this direction.

After his breakthrough in 1963, the ingenuity of his experimentations and the mobility of his ideas soon caught up. The core group that essentially were the graduates with other artists now found direction and confidence to move ahead. In their endeavours towards creative formulae, the craft articles that were produced in the workshop of the school aided them. Paniker had melded art and craft curriculum negating any distinction between the two modes of artistic productions, having professed that there is a thin dividing line between art and craft. This created a subtext within the group – one that was to dismiss the whole group as craft specialists with only skill and no capacity for creative or original thinking according to R. Nandakumar, a severe critic of the Madras movement and on the other it became the raison d' etre for their survival within the capitalistic society.

The period of early 60's was a trying one for the Madras artists. Patronage was few and far between. A lack of contemporary art awareness was a glaring lacuna in Madras. This has been explained by the conservative and orthodox mindset and a terrain that is a stronghold of tradition where dance and music find great favour than visual arts of painting and sculpture – a field that remained elusive and enigmatic beyond comprehension. Unlike Bombay, where the European war émigré Walter Langheimer with support of 'The Times of India' had advanced the cause of the Progressive Artist Group or in Delhi where Dr. Charles Fabri with the support of the 'Statesman' peddled the ideas of Delhi Shilpa Chakra, in Madras a conservative daily like 'The Hindu' could offer no meaningful support while 'The Mail' was British owned and had no interest in the creative arts, patronizing only the decorative crafts. Within such a milieu it was difficult for the creative artists with all their exciting adventures in modern art to find an appreciative patron. It posed a serious threat as a profession for many a heady youths because of its non- economic viability. Many who graduated were absorbed as art teachers in schools, designers in Weavers Service center, or as finishing artist in commercial art establishment. K. M.

Adimoolam joined the Weavers Service Center but had the audacity to give it up and concentrate only on his paintings. Redappa Naidu joined the same establishment and retired from there. However these were the two notable artists who could commandeer their artistic calling and still be at the job. In this dismal scenario what was required was a proactive solution and Paniker stepped in to solve the problem to a large extent. Talent he realized was not found wanting and skill was the value that the artists were generously endowed with.

As discussed earlier Paniker had introduced batik in the curriculum and in this endeavour was supported by the creative skills of the artist P.B. Surendranath who successfully assimilated the technique to be eventually taught to the students. It was not only batik creatively realized and explored on sarees, scarves and dress material, but also the same creative and experimental agenda was applied for the production of other crafts like the leather articles, wooden and metal artifacts, ceramic ware, and Jewellery **[Figs. 36, 37 & 38]**. From small beginnings at the School's premises Paniker had to expand his activities outside the institutional premises as demand arose, with local consumers appreciating the artifacts that had the strength of original vision marking a space for these craft articles from the mass produced ones available in the market.

Soon various government bodies showed interest and this commercial venture became a success. Victoria Technical Institute or V.T.I. had been a major player in the sale of paintings to foreigners who visited it and the same government organization became a major conduit for the sale of various craft articles, which the school produced in the early 60's. This government institution has made and unmade artists. C. Joseph a product of the Art school and a student of Paniker in the late 40's could not go beyond essentialized seascapes and landscapes for it was a saleable commodity within the market forces.

These various factors initiated Paniker to start the Artists Handicrafts Association. "In 1963 a gathering of artists decided that traditionally arts and crafts have always been clearly related and hence in their free time artists would take up any craft that would have a steady market. Thus began the Artists Handicrafts Association, which provided facilities for part time work in crafts like batik and leatherwork and also marketed the product. The Tamil Nadu state Akademi provided the studio to the association and their first exhibition brought a profit of Rs. 20,000/-[33]. The association made its sales through Handicrafts Board, State Art Emporiums and V.T.I. that also helped process their foreign orders.

The Birth of the Cholamandal Artists Village

Having generated the monetary funds, Paniker wanted a residential work-center for the artists that will not be far away from the city; and it should function on a co-operative basis. On the Corommondal coast, six miles south of Madras 8.05 acres of land were acquired in April 1966, [an acre was Rs. 4000/-] and Paniker's brainchild came into existence — **The Cholamandal Artist Village [Fig. 39]**. This name, given by Paniker, was to reinforce his ideology of being Indian in spirit by a conscious link with the past heritage, as well a mark of continuity of tradition. With the birth of this concept of an artist village, Paniker had set himself and the group on the path of bold experimentation. However, historically, Van Gogh had forged the idea of an art community living together with Gaugin and eventually to rope in other Impressionist artist as well. But it never materialized, as every student of art is familiar, because of their strong dominating personas and eventually their split. "In this village the artists were free and bound, timeless and traditional, individual and universal as intellectually and artistically they waged the struggle between the east and the west, Asian forms and European freedom in igniting the spark of modern and Indian in this fertile paradox called 'Cholamandal artists' village' said Els Van Der Pas a Dutch curator who visited the artists village in 1989. The artists' village in many respects became an arena for the encounter of eastern and western traditions, for the ideology of Paniker and the group was premised on this synthesis without having to lose the resources of its tradition. Tradition had valence and gravity because it underlined the authenticity that was central not only to Indian identity, but for this particular group within the nation.

Paniker's founding of the village was in opposition and defiance of western individualism and contemporary Indian obsession with modernist idioms. He challenged this mind set with lofty aims in search for an indigenous domain to anchor his artistic vision. Since folklore was alive in Tamil Nadu and traditional crafts continued to be part of the teaching curriculum at the school, it was easier to bring the symbolic iconic and ornamental forms into the service of craft production. Maybe also as a corrective to the neglect of traditional Indian craft during the years of British Colonial rule [discussed earlier].

The idea of the village was formally established in February 1964, [becoming operational on 13th April, 1966]. It is sheer coincidence that it developed from an eight-acre of land situated barely thirty kilometers from Mammallapuram where anonymous master craftsmen of the Pallava period had once sculpted to immortality. The land was allotted to forty -seven members. The editorial of

the Art Trend Bulletin; a magazine brought out by Progressive Painters Association in 1961, founded and headed by Paniker; expressed its intent and purpose, "life in India today seems to provoke her artists to begin to think more pertinently of their aesthetic requirements and to evolve in their own minds a clear picture of what they are looking for in the art of their time. Modern Indian art is an almost sterile version of a European way of art expression. It still lacks vital Indian inspiration." The ideologue Paniker manifested his vision in the regional idiom and his students and colleagues supported his endeavours. Says Vasudev, the Secretary of the Artists' Handicrafts Association, "Cholamandal is perhaps the first of its kind anywhere in the world, a vision of fulfillment, a place where the artists meet the society as an integral part of it"[34]. He also, forcefully reiterated "there is no ideology or art style to which an artist must conform. The two basic freedoms so vital to an artist – freedom of expression and freedom from the shackles of earning a livelihood – are provided here. This leaves the artist free to create as he wishes." In this respect Cholamandal became a unique symbol of cooperative enterprise and community living.

The Artists' village was not only the locus of painterly and plastic creative activities, but also a place where the allied arts of dance, drama, theatre, music, poetry readings and active discussions on art were patent/part on its agenda. Its ambience was a catalyst for the varied activities in a distant part of the city. Aditi De gives a cultural insight, " an outdoor theatre-in-the-round saw the colony widen its horizons to embrace other arts under the ozone-tossed stellar skies. The performing space named Bharathi after the Tamil poet, has hosted a galaxy of visitors – Balasaraswathi and Yamini Krishnamurthy doing Bharathanatyam. A. K. Ramanujam reading his poetry and Girish Karnad his plays. M.D. Ramanathan with his classic voice and T.R. Mahalingam with his magic flute... Inevitably, inter-arts exchanges thrived. B.V. Kamath and Girish Karnad talked art, theatre and film threadbare with friends in the hamlet"[35].

The village space served international visitors who came from many climes to breathe afresh left behind a slice of their memorable sojourn. A Dutch artist built a potters wheel and a New Zealand artist thoughtfully put together a badly needed kiln for the village. American printmakers especially Paul Lingren introduced a whole range of new techniques in that art and in an admirable display of community feeling, the West German Government donated the cost of a two- apartment guesthouse to the village. The symbiosis occurred between a domestic and an international fraternity that soon brought Cholamandal Artists Village on the International map.

Acceptance and recognition came from diverse quarters like the Venice Biennale, the Paris Biennale, the Sao Paolo Biennale and the Commonwealth Art Festival in London.

K.G. Subramanyan who was initially invited by Paniker to join the Madras School of Arts and Crafts eulogizes on this concept of his when he wrote,' he persuaded young artists to call off their dependence on commercial galleries and live in a kind of commune, living and working together, sharing their success and failures, practicing art in a larger spectrum is a remarkable achievement; not only is the concept elevating in the realities of our art situation it is a pragmatic one too...its spirit and perspective is a living monument to his vision'. This sounds significant today, but at the time it was visualized Paniker said, 'I'm not concerned about the future, I am doing something for the present'.

The village thus served its purpose. As A.S. Raman described it, 'a village of the artist, for the artist by the artist'. This categorization implicated a relevant clause in the charter drawn up by the members that property bought should only be sold to another artist and not to an outsider who is a non-artist. This clause produced conflicts, tensions, anxiety and misunderstanding that forced many members to give up their land and seek residence elsewhere within the city. Among these were K.M. Adimoolam, Anthony Doss, S. Dhanapal, R.B. Bhaskaran, C. Dakshinamoorthy and many others and the fall out of this was that many artists also returned to their native states[36] or left for Delhi as Haridasan did. In addition to this legal clause that originally was the bone of contention, there were also ideological and intellectual clashes that led to bitterness. Says K.M. Adimoolam one of the earliest to leave the village "we had differences, but looking back with the wisdom of years one feels that it could have been the hot headedness of youth that forced me to leave." R.B. Bhasakaran was more forthright, "when the concept of the Cholamandal Village was mooted, I was among the first five to settle down. But very soon I realized that villages for artists could only work for the retired. Creative people at their peak cannot live together. For art to flourish, imagination should be allowed to float free without any barriers. Art should not be imprisoned within a community and so I left the village in 1969"[37]. For Bhaskaran there were legal tangles with Paniker. This fundamentally was the registration of the land/property in the name of the artist who had bought it. Paniker was opposed to this idea and prevented the land to be registered[38]. Fundamental to this candidness was the opposition to the hegemony of Paniker who benevolently but adamantly was pushing many young creative artists to follow his ideology of sourcing only tradition as their visual metaphors. Hence bitterness against the patriarch manifested itself in this form of rebellion. A.P.Santhanaraj though an admirer of his guru made a

passing remark to Paniker that nothing grows under the banyan tree, to which Paniker gave a quick repartee "but you enjoy its cool shade and the breeze"[39]

In the article 'The Once and the Future Place' Geeta Doctor postulates, that Cholamandal, the artists' village by the sea, has always existed on two levels: the romantic and the real. The pragmatic idea on which it was founded contributed also to giving the village its mythic status. Today, the burden of the community's legendry identity threatens to overpower the creativity of the individual artists within. The dualism which is at the heart of the Cholamandal enterprise –

the need for a community as opposed to the demands of the individual, the tendency to conform to fixed rules versus the desire to break them and start afresh, the conflict between art and craft – are all part of the foundation of the Artist's village. They provide the dynamics of the place, so that it is both dormant at times, and creatively active at others. Cholamandal lives no matter what its critics have to say and continues to sink new roots[40].

Cholamandal Artists Village: A Critique

Cholamandal was a vision of Paniker where artists as a commune would live together to foster the spirit of artistic brotherhood and collective organization. Exchanges of creative ideas between the artists would be mutual and there would be inexplicable harmony as they worked on their creative projects. Paniker it should be noted not only visualized the pragmatic aspect of providing the working space for the artists, but also was gifted with an intuition to recognize potential latent talent that he liberated with his nurturing and encouraging attitude. Nearly all the artists have testified to this extraordinary ability of his in identifying talent and persuasively advising them to join the School of Arts and Crafts and explore their artistic capabilities. K. Ramanujam, Balan Nambiar, A.P. Santhanaraj, Anthony Doss, R. Krishna Rao to name a few were the beneficiaries of this natural gift of Paniker. Gopinath for one admits if it were not for Paniker he would have probably enrolled as a designer in an advertising firm. "The fact is that Paniker made artists out of people who would have chosen other professions. We had to be grateful for that." The concept of an artists' commune, indigenist in its value and traditional in its perspective reinforced Paniker's visionary quality. Cholamandal was envisaged as a place instrumental in offering a creative alternative to many young talents that otherwise would have been lost in banality of proletariat existence. It provided an anchor for their economic survival in the sale of handcrafted articles through the Artists' Handicrafts Association and afforded a utopian existence for the imaginative spirit to float free in their artistic productions. The whole notion creates an aura of

romantic ambience under the cover of the azure sky, with the staccato rhythm of breakers on the distant shore; and in the midst of it the multi-dimensional cultural activities proved to be productive for the intellectualized artistic mill.

Paniker in conceptualizing the artists' village also conceived plans for future art education. In his words, "Art institutions in general have failed to fit the artist to life. Cholamandal will begin taking in fresh art students from the year 1971. The student will choose his own master and will work under his supervision for a period of two years. He is free to choose another master if he so desires for another three years, the total period of training being five years. During this period he will apply himself to two congenial crafts in addition to his main subject of study, namely painting or sculpture"[41]. This vision however never saw the light of the day in the midst of various tensions that had begun disrupting the utopian existence.

Paniker in his construal of the pragmatic vision viable for economic exigencies was collapsing the identity of a traditional notion of an anonymous craftsman with the creative individual. An approach of this type has a historical echo of the Bauhaus [established in the mid 20s of the twentieth century] whose model was the anonymous community of artists and craftsmen of medieval building guilds. The Bauhaus in order to eliminate the hierarchic organization of the traditional academy in Germany had transformed classes into workshops with considerations of mass productions in order to weave and integrate industrial technology and design in the academic curriculum. Paniker organizing his curriculum as the institutional head had dissolved the boundaries between crafts and arts, making out the artists to be masters of form i.e. proficient in both arts and crafts but not for mass production.

Through this process Paniker was inscribing flexibility as integral to creative will in the persona of the artists; who in the traditional sense was first a craftsman; implying development of skill through investigations of all types of materials with an eye to their practical and aesthetic usefulness especially in designing. By indirectly valorizing the traditional crafts to meet the exigencies of the artists for their economic survival, Paniker was further reinforcing and strengthening his ideology that tradition with its rich layering of diverse signs and forms will invigorate contemporary needs. One such tradition, which he was fully conscious about was manifest in its craft form that directly also stemmed from the institution which the colonizers had exploited for their commercial enterprise. The infrastructure within the institution in terms of

workshops for various crafts as pottery, metal ware, textiles, ceramics, jewellery, woodwork aided Paniker in his venture. It is from the institution that these craft objects were crafted and put for sale to the public. This explains the crafts works produced by the artists and the proceeds of the sales that eventually led to the establishment of Cholamandal artists village. This conceptualization was necessitated to strengthen and reinforce the future prospects of the artist, which otherwise would be lost in the banalities of economic struggle for survival. And towards this the village and its apex body the Artists' Handicrafts Association connoted the age-old guild system operational in India where the artifacts were produced and offered for consumption. This was a habitat that was artist-centric and not mass centric thus marking a posture of difference with the Bauhaus.

The artists' village by the sea – a swan song of Paniker - has witnessed the highs and lows of contemporary living. Many artists commend Paniker's initiative in this direction while others condemned it as highly communal and suffocating. It still remains a home to its diaspora like Viswanathan and Paramasivam who religiously visit the place as they have built their homes here. The unique aspect of its foundation was that its survival rested on the concerted artists' community effort without any aid from government bodies. Paniker vehemently postulated this to an editorial in the leading daily, The Hindu, in late 60s. But Bhaskaran in opposition to this invalidates the tall claims of Paniker and forcefully reiterates that the only piece of land bought by the Association was the present Art Gallery [Fig. 40] that continues to operate and function. According to Bhaskaran, "The land for the Village was bought in three parts from a Muslim. The first part bought by Paniker was registered in the name of Ramabai his wife; the second part was bought by Janakiram and the rest five acres by the Association. This Association comprised artist members to whom the land was sold. The artists who purchased this land had their loans serviced from Industrial Sector. Major artists within the Madras Art Movement like Munuswamy, Santhanaraj, Adimoolam, Dhanapal, C. Dakshinamoorthy, Anthony Doss, Bhaskaran, Janakiram and many others had purchased the land. Paniker who was in control of the entire set up disallowed the land to be registered in the artists name. Paniker's lack of faith in the artists that there may not be maintenance and eventually it may fall in disrepair or the land would be sold to a total outsider with no respect for art. Paniker's ideology of community living was to have the inmates of the village-remaining fluid with new entrants taking up residence when the older or the original members decide to leave. On the other hand the entire group of artist who had purchased the land, expressed desire to build permanent homes with working studios Since the artists' did

not comply with this idea of his [Paniker] they were asked to leave. This was a manipulative act to bring in artists whom he desired"[42].

That it continues to breathe art today is a testimony to the success of its visionary founder with due apologies to the politicking that was played out in a power tussel. It nevertheless has the distinction of being one of the few artists' colonies in the world to survive successfully. Nevertheless it should be mentioned that rural artists' colonies were a remarkable and international significant phenomenon of artistic practice in the late 19th and early 20th century. The majority of rural artists' colonies were to be found in France, Germany and the Netherlands, but there were also sizeable communities in Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia. These colonies were held together by loose bonds of friendship rather than by institutionalized formal structures[43]. Today the notable thriving communes include the American settlement McDowell in New Hampshire, Worpsewede in Germany and Ein-Hod in Israel. This spirited enterprise, closer home find its echo in Calcutta in what is known as the Arts Acre where the artists' fraternity have studios there and work. A similar concept could be identified in the Garhi Studio in Delhi founded in 1976 the existence of which was contingent on the artists' lack of workspace within the city. The government chipped in to allocate space for the artists according to their seniority, and with a minimum of rental they could work where they have the facilities of graphic workshop, painters' studio, and sculptors' workspace.

Cholamandal also saw two women artists purchasing land with an avowed idea of marking their presence within a male dominant community. They were Anila Jacob [sculptor, who sold her land to a chain store and now lives in Kerela] and Arnawaz Driver who later married Vasudev. Commuting everyday to the colony to work in the studio of Anila, said Arnawaz, "I am looking forward to my own little piece of Cholamandal. At first I was suspect, since being a mere female, I was expected to abandon art for marriage. But now that I've proved my serious interest in art, I have at last been accepted"[44]. This move of the women artists daring to live among patriarchal dominated community marks a progressive attitude that enabled the realization of their artistic careers. Anila Jacob took to the difficult medium of sculpture that requires physical labor in its execution but nevertheless made her mark on the Madras art scene. Arnawaz was equally bold and dynamic forcefully employing the regional vocabulary in terms of varied art forms derived particularly from Kolam and the diverse iconic representations of the local deities to mark her trace and identity along with other stalwarts. After her marriage to Vasudev she was able to

maintain her individuality and originality especially in working in different techniques and media like metal work and glazed tiles.

Paniker: His Manifold Dimensions

K. G. Subramanyan effectively has extolled the critical role played by him for the Madras artists. He said, "Paniker's role in the art world of Madras was a decisive one. He was the first person who contributed much to bring the South Indian artist out of his crisis of self-confidence. He helped them, organized them, and fought their cause on national forums to the chagrin of many. But his role in the Indian art world is even more illustrious; he led a generation of young artists to look into themselves and their surroundings. He made them think about art in a larger perspective"[45].

Paniker's administrative skills combined with his passionate zeal were responsible for the founding of many associations. The first association was the South Indian Society of Painters and Sculptors, 1943, an elitist organization founded by D.P. Roy Chowdhary and Dr. Ayappan Director of the Madras Museum of which Paniker was a member. This was an agency, responsible for the holding of exhibitions mainly in Bombay and Delhi for the representation of Southern artists. Its endeavours included art journalism that today serves in generating useful information about artists who are not active or dead. Progressive painters association founded in 1944 was responsible for publishing the art journal known as Art Trends [1961] a 'quarterly bulletin on contemporary art, mainly Indian'. This association was formed to take care of collection, exhibition and sale of their output of painting and sculpture. In 1963 was founded the Artists' Handicrafts Association, which made the sale of various handcrafted artifacts, retaining ten percent of the profit with the rest handed over to the artist. These various associations served their purpose in the collection of funds from private or governmental agencies and served as conduit for its distribution. This was an intelligent and shrewd move that moderated monetary benefits for the economic survival of the artists and aided in materializing their shows on the western coast and at the capital.

Cholamandal created an aura of intellectual exploration within the 'illusory' cohesive artist community, bound as they were by local culture, through a shared vision [contemporainity], higher purpose [individual creations], ideology [definition of identity] and an aesthetic goal. Paniker remained a moving force but during his regime discontents were expressed and as explained earlier many artists moved out. His death initiated fragmentation and differences of

vision eventually – a process that had already set in earlier. Nevertheless it continued to grow and nurture the artistic community attracting not only the local students of the College of Arts and Crafts, students from Trivandrum Arts College but also foreign visitors who came on short artistic sojourn. Today the place is alive and continues to grow from strength to strength as a very novel phenomenon, but the artist have become insulated, from the activities of the charged world. The art lovers come seeking them in the ambit of their studios and the worthy artifact eventually finds its rightful owner[46].

Cholamandal Artist Village as it developed and established itself also brought in environmental awareness within its community. When the land was bought it was only sand with the frontage of the nearby shoreline of Bay of Bengal. But as the artists settled, trees and coconut palms were planted enhancing not only the aesthetics of the village but also nurtured the environment with its productive greenery. The house of the artists originally were built of natural materials that is with thatched roofs though of course was necessitated by the economic factor that dictated it. The artists as they gained their foothold on the art market and attained recognition were able to indulge in constructing their homes according to their artistic taste. The homes of few artists blended with its surroundings creating a rural ambience [Fig. 41] with sloping tiled roof and exposed brick or stone walls as in the houses of V. Viswanathan, Paramasivam, Douglas and Vasudev.

Cholamandal Today

Cholamandal today has progressively marched with the times and has also developed into an important tourist site with the construction of the East Coast Road linking Chennai to Pondicherry. It also has on the anvil the proposal to establish a permanent museum, [by replacing the present art gallery] and a commercial gallery that would include a restaurant within its precincts. Over more than three decades it has been regularly organizing exhibitions, publicizing the artistic character of the village via books, websites, tourist brochures calendars and post cards. Since tourism has come to shape the twentieth century in more profound and far reaching ways, the artists village has changed from being a site primarily as a habitat and work center for future and prodigious artists to tourist destinations that combines art and commerce. Commerce as the art gallery provides sales of art works and crafts particularly metal work produced by the artists who live in the village. Thus they provide a hybrid form of heritage tourism particularly popular with the educated middle classes.

The young artists from Kerala or Karnataka or from Chennai take up residence at the village through the generous agency of V. Viswanathan one among many artists who rents out his studio to these young aspirants. Cholamandal recently sold the prime part of its land to the chain of food store, enhancing the prospects of tourism as well the development of local habitat that is fast turning residential. Hence from the isolation of urban activities, today Cholamandal is situated to exploit the world of tourism and its related commerce without losing its artistic hold that nevertheless has been the foundation of it.

Though materially [sales of art works] and physically [its recent expansion plans] the artist village shows great promise the main vision of its founder Paniker has either become obsolete or drowned in march towards commercial gains or an over emphasis on 'consumer-as-king' philosophy. The artists remain insulated from outside world though they claim that they show regularly at either Bangalore or Bombay. But the creative penchant, a commitment to push their art forward, to explore and experiment with newer media and technologies is totally lacking or smothered in complacency. The stereotypical stylistic formulae developed in the 60s and 70s in response to the needs remain unaltered with slight modulations. The core founder group of the village, continue to work and rework their art in this mannerist mode. It is not surprising that Geeta Doctor who had eulogized the artists village as "sinking its roots deeper" in her earlier article, 'The once and the future place', implying a process of growth; scathingly described the artists' village as 'Cholamandal ghetto'[47] in her recent article 'Islands in the Sun' gesturing towards the tight mindset of the elders of the village in relation to the young blood who finds acceptance of artists' within the fraternity of the village on their terms or they remain marginalized to find their own place under the sun.

End Notes on the Chapter

[1] Geeta Kapur, Vrishchik, [Baroda: 1972, Oct. Nov. No. 12].

[2] Josef James, 'Modern Indian Painting' in Indian Art Since Early 40s: A Search for Identity, [Madras: The Artists' Handicrafts Association of Cholamandal Artists Village, 1974].

[3] Sushil Mukherjee, Devi Prosad and his disciples at Madras School of Art - V, Indian and World Arts and Crafts, August 1985

[4] in conversation with the artist at his residence in Chennai on 7th April 2001.

[5] in conversation with the artist at his residence in Chennai, March 2001.

[6] Madras Artists in Delhi, The Hindu, Nov. 20. 1960.

[7] Artrends, Editorial. April 1962

[8] Artrends, Editorial, Oct. 1964

[9] Quoted by Amitabh Sengupta in a seminar paper 'The Indian Seed in Indian Art Today', Department of Fine Arts, Stella Maris College, Chennai, 1993.

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