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# The Dynamics of Living Art Matrix

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## ABSTRACT

The essay explores India's contemporary art matrix as a living cultural continuum. Drawing on sound philosophical principles of the classical, sacred and courtly traditions on the one hand, and linked to tribal-folk art/craft forms on the other, its multitude of interdisciplinary aesthetics are living expressions by living people. Some of the work in the varied genres of art matrix is created by professionally trained urban artists while other by their rural primarily family-trained counterparts. Both are innately contemporary as they draw inspiration from their roots, while opening up to their lived experiences, surroundings and evolving technologies. However, the dichotomy between the two remains a challenge. The essay makes a case for affinity and a shared platform on equal terms, space, credit and returns for the two distinct but interconnected and innately contemporary genres to eschew marginalisation and appropriation of the lesser or folk/tribal artists' from subaltern India by their more market savvy urbane colleagues.

Keywords – Contemporary art matrix, Living cultural continuum, Living expressions by living people, Folk/tribal artists, Market savvy urbane colleagues.

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## 1. Introduction

The civilizational footprints around the world and over the millennia can be seen in diverse forms of arts and cultures defying a singular thrust. Emanating from the East and West, arts span across ancient, classical, traditional and contemporary creative domains. In the Indian context, the universe can be perceived through its arts and aesthetic milieu inextricably intertwined with life. The terracotta figurines of the Indus Valley civilization dated over 5000 years ago or the monumental structures and sculptures built during the subsequent Mauryan and Gupta era or the Shiva Nataraja (lord of dance) and other iconic forms dated to Chola period, continue to be created in tweaked variations even today, be in clay, metal, stone or as paintings or in newer modes and materials. Drawing on sound philosophical principles of classical traditions of the sacred and the courtly on the one hand, and linked to the tribal and folk-art forms on the other, Indian art draws from the wellspring of the living traditions, while it evolves in an interface with the changing global scenario. Mapping the country's dynamic cultural legacy, one needs to transcend diverse ethnic, linguistic, geographical, political and cultural boundaries to get an overview of its multifarious artistic whole. The eclectic art matrix, free-flowing and heterogeneous, appears to assimilate the old and the new, with equal élan. Unique handmade creations continue to be made taking recourse to experimentation and evolving technological innovations.

## 2. Intuitive Expressions

India's living cultural continuum encompasses a multitude of interdisciplinary aesthetics in varied genres of visual and performing arts, as elaborated in 'Aadi Anant: Creative Continuum & Unsung Heroes' book listed among references. The integral connects across the two streams, be it in classical, traditional, contemporary or newer métier of art forms is best elucidated in Indian classical text Vishnudharmottara Purana (encyclopaedic text on cosmology, astronomy, genealogies, law, politics

and arts etc.) dated around 4 CE. It illustrates the significance of intertwining varied art forms through the story of King Vajra who was advised by sage Markrandeya to learn at least rudimentary knowledge of various disciplines such as dance, music and literature, before attempting to paint and make sculptures or vice versa. The analogy emphasises the need for a coalescence of the diverse creative streams. The intermingling of the classical, tribal and folk arts with performance and contemporary practices including the use of newer media, is exemplified in the art of illustrated manuscripts and painted scrolls to accompany Katha-gatha (story-telling and singing) performances. While such traditional forms are kept alive; newer forms of art, beyond the confines of 2-D paintings or myth-inspired statutes, the shifting gaze and trajectory of contemporary Indian art can be seen to make a bridge across primitive, classical, modernist and academic steaks. Besides painting and sculpting, the artists are increasingly making videos, digital art, designs and multimedia work etc. to represent the changing face and facet of the multi-genre contemporary creative scene.

Encompassing classical, tribal, decorative, colonial, and contemporary domains, Indian art brings alive the true diversity of its rich culture and artistic trajectory as elaborated in Partha Mitter's seminal book 'Indian Art'. Historically though, the dichotomy between traditional art often treated as primitive and modern or contemporary more masterly, continues to be a subject of concern for scholars and aesthetes. Interest in traditional Indian art, has remained confined more or less, as collectible antiquities, idols, utilitarian or exotic curiosities. The art colleges set up in some of the Indian cities initially by the British and since Independence by the State, have also not done much to support the cause of folk and tribal traditions. It is only through the legacy of single-minded efforts of social reformers and cultural activists like Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay (1903 -1988), and Pupul Jayakar (1915-1997) that attempts to revive the traditional arts began to be made. Subsequently it is artist- researcher Bhaskar Kulkarni, cultural anthropologist Haku Shah (1934 -2019), artist activist Jagdish Swaminathan (1928-1994) whose work brought folk and tribal arts onto the open exhibition arena alongside their modern compatriots. Among other eminent modern masters who returned to their roots, and worked with their traditional counterparts, worth mentioning are Jamini Roy (1887 - 1972) whose paintings imbibe simplicity of Kalighat style and Meera Mukherjee (1923 - 1998) who following her art training in India and Europe, revisited her Indian roots to make sculptures in Dhokra metal casting technique learning it from artisans in Bastar. Also KG Subramanyan (1924 – 2016) whose artistic vocabulary focused on reworking traditions through modernist mediations, and Gulam Mohammed Sheikh whose work entails impressions of miniature art along with new media often lined with socio-political articulations. There is also senior artist Manu Parekh, among other contemporary professionals, who found their experience of working with weavers exciting and opening up fresh creative panoramas for them.

### **3. Current Creatives**

More recently attempts have been made to assimilate the divergent streams and enrich current creative flow. Some of the platforms at railway and metro stations besides street corners in different Indian metros are examples at hand. The murals painted by Madhubani artists in Patna feature their rural landscape in an interface with city culture and its hectic lifestyle. One landmark project that set the ball rolling for bringing folk and tribal artists into the lime-light was 'Other Masters Five Contemporary Folk and Tribal Artists of India' publication dated 1998 which accompanied the exhibition curated by Dr. Jyotindra Jain. It documented the dilemma most traditional artists encounter as they attempt to come out of their shackles and enter the public domain so often restricted to their 'academically trained market savvy' modern counterparts. Also, similar projects undertaken by

designer Rajiv Sethi, credited with putting together the GVK New Museum at Mumbai T2 terminal, craft activist Laila Tyabji founder of Dastkar who has helped revive dying crafts, and handicrafts expert and writer-curator Jaya Jaitly who founded the Dastkari Haat Samiti and Dilli Haat market space for artisans. 'Crafts Atlas of India' along with other seminal books and projects that she has led on, document Indian arts and crafts. All such endeavours have helped provide shared platforms and level playing fields for the traditional and modernist artists.

With a similar thrust comes 'Vernacular in the Contemporary' exhibition curated by Annapurna Garimella. Such initiatives are helping dismantle the ruptures of the existing artificial hierarchy in traditional versus modern, old versus new, local versus global, Western versus Eastern, worldview versus peripheries, high versus low art and academically trained versus hereditary artists. As such divisions become irrelevant, the artists are beginning to opt for 'this and that' rather than 'this or that' approach in working across genres. In the current context, the professionally trained urban artists draw inspiration from the same traditions that they had at one stage opted to forget and forego, in their pursuit and validation from the West. Similarly, the rural artists are opening up to using digital tools and featuring city and global culture within their rural art-scape. This trend is illustrated by painter Kalyan Joshi from Bhilwara in Rajasthan who uses his traditional Phad style to paint a colourful picture of people as they go through the stressful period of coronavirus pandemic. Such work illustrates that all artists be they folk or modern, are aware of and sensitive to, the current happenings. All of them belong to this day and age. They are equally contemporary, none less and none more.

A mythical golden past is no longer a contested terrain in contemporary Indian art and thought. Many artists turn to history and myth for their inspiration. There are others who opt to reinvent, remix, renew traditional techniques colouring them in new ideation and materials as in the diptych painting by young Anant Mishra titled New Age Avatars incorporating the impact of science fiction films in his work. There are other creative experiments where traditional and contemporary artists work jointly on projects. For the Vistaar exhibition artist-printmaker-sculptor K Laxma Goud from Hyderabad paired with Thomas John Kovoov. Thomas worked in his bronze casting workshop in Jaipur to make a cast and turn Laxma's work into a collectible bronze. To make it a worthwhile experiment for both, working arrangements for such ventures need to be on equal terms. The space, credit and terms for both sides should be just and fair to avoid appropriation of the 'lesser' or folk/tribal artists by their more market savvy partners.

#### **4. Living Arts**

Within this premise, a study of the current scenario presents an engaging assemblage of living arts. Their intertwined dualities engage with visual- performance arts, spiritual- material, fact- fiction, old-new, art- technology, and creativity- commerce. Dislodging the closed doors across disciplines and genres, merging in and out of varied materials, modes and manifestations including the hybrid ones, today's artistic expressions may be simple or grand. What appears on the horizon is art created using varied strands, materials and techniques, often routed through a mixed matrix of art-craft or fine-popular art in visual, virtual, performance, multi-media or collaborative form. The work in the eclectic matrix of living art may be decorative, pleasurable, provocative, funny, narrative, conceptual or political. It may be in abstraction, landscape, narrative, meditative, spatial, or kitsch. It could adorn the form of paintings, murals, sculptures, installations, prints, drawings, crafts, photography, video, animation, performance, ephemeral, multimedia, public and digital art, besides collaborative, conceptual,

interactive, issue-based projects and research or group work in addition to architecture, design, artefacts, fashion, cinema and more.

Evidently, a vast array of stylistic, chronological, ideological, materialistic and technological diversity is manifest in the depth and diversity of current Indian creativity across the varied forms and genres of living arts. In myriad styles, shades and shapes, artists present a panoramic view of the society and the surrounding atmospherics of the world. With sweeping winds of change, art is in a constant flux. The artists engage with on and off-site happenings from an experiential perspective. They explore socio-economic-political scenarios and document historical and cultural legacies. They navigate the past, study the present and dare to explore what lies ahead. The themes they engage with range from the sedate to violent, politics to erotic, mystical to sexual, funny to hard hitting. Their issue-based work may raise concerns around gender discrimination, violence, sexuality, regional identity, politics, marginalisation, and environment. An artist may create art for art's sake or for a purpose. Each one of them brings something distinct to the platform. It may be an intimate encounter to a dramatic social outpouring, folklore of the past or a lived experience of the present. All work appears afresh in today's context and in new age variations.

## 5. Technological Traits

A synergy of technology with art, can be used effectively in providing an interface between traditions and modernity, classical and popular, personal and collective and the sacred and profane. It can help dissolve the dichotomy between the city-bred, often trained professionals, and the home-grown indigenous artists as both groups draw from traditions and traits. While the metro-based ones increasingly work in multimedia, digital and video art, those from mufassil India are attempting to take their impressions of the urban landscape into their renderings. Both creative streams run in parallel. Both involve comparable commitment and input of ideas, skills, materials, and handwork. There may however be some difference in their aesthetics, purpose, execution, scale and approach. What the urban artist creates is more often for the museum or gallery set-up for exhibitions, enjoyment and sales; whereas the pastoral artist's work is intended primarily for utility, decor and reverence besides earning a living. The gap in the price tag of the two forms can be huge with the avant-garde city-based group getting a much better appreciation, valuation and space for their work.

Given the ready availability of a wide expanse of digital tools and technologies a great deal of border crossing and experimentation in different forms and styles of visual arts is happening. Architects are seen to work in design as in the 'Temple Honda Puja' video work by architect Vineet Kacker. Visual artists experiment with performing arts as does N. Pushpamala and Radha Gomati to raise issues around gender discrimination. Atul Bhalla's work centred around water issues combines photography with site specific installation. The seated Buddha made with old discarded and junked scissors welded together by fashion designer Rajesh Pratap makes an interesting archival documentation of his creative track while it also speaks for reuse and conservation. There are other designers and sociologists who dare enter the creative domain with a bold play of experimentation and innovation.

In a juxtaposition of metaphors and cross connections, art enriched with technological intervention, opens up the scope and scale for varied interpretation. As against fixed patterns or homogenization, the symphony of contemporary Indian art straddles across domains, ready to play around freely, and in varied combinations to create art that speaks and sparks. Also, no longer confined to the privileged few from elite classes in metros hubs, many of today's artists hail from small semi urban mofussil societies

and cities of India to make it big in the art world. To name a few one could list Ravi Chunchula from Rayadurg in Andhra, Bharat Dodiya from rural Saurashtra and Sonal Varshneya from Agra and Lucknow, besides several others from the marginalised, women, self-taught and traditionally trained artists, among them.

## 6. Dynamic Moves

The dynamics that triggered the pace of development in Indian art include the invention of printing press in the 15th century, photography in the early 20th century, the moving picture, computer software and the internet in the later part of the last century, and the subsequent developments through the 21st century in the form of image and film making. Such path breaking developments have provided an open and accessible framework for digital intervention in visual arts, communication, entertainment and documentation. The emergence of multiple contemporaries and different schools of art and thought seem to run in parallel, as a simultaneously divergent and assimilative collective. Beginning with the Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore's efforts, who took lead in connecting Indian art with the East and the West, the Progressive Artists group emerged on the scene pushing for an interface with the west and the world. In contrast the Bengal School and the Cholamandal and Delhi Shilpi groups of artists attempted to rediscover their roots to find space for modern Indian art for its own merit on a global scale. The post-independence period has seen a revival of abstraction followed by new figuration in 1980s and then the application of digital media in art 1990s onwards. This has been facilitated further with the opening up of economies, new modes of communication, ease of travel, penetration of new technologies, media and democratisation of the world. Artists have been quick to absorb the changes and evolving technologies, thereby extending their playing fields further in the 21st century.

There are artists who have mastered the art of designing and creating work using digital tools and technology including AI (Artificial Intelligence), VR (virtual reality) and AR (augmented reality), NFT (Non-fungible token), 3D printing, emerging newer technologies and social media to extend the playing fields for contemporary art while also rediscovering their roots. India's National Institute of Design (NID) trained designer-artist Kapil Sharma takes to digital printing technique to refresh his inherited roots in Pichwai art and present it in a new garb. The creative expressions that use mass media technologies, computer graphics, animation, and other digital and internet based electronic and telecommunication tools in one or another form, also blur the existing divides amidst the arts, humanities, sciences, design, architecture and more. Readily accessible for conception, creativity, production, communication, presentation and dissemination of the arts, digital platforms open up new voices, visions and vistas for creativity.

Much of the multidimensional framework entails interdisciplinary formulations, in virtual or mixed media. Artists also experiment working with sound and light besides film and design. Some of the work is process oriented and performance based. Other artists focus on site-specific and technology driven multimedia as in artist Charuvi Agrawal's repertoire. Her assemblage involving a large scale installation with creative inputs from painters, image makers, animators, sound recorders, filmmakers and editors, with recitation by Amitabh Bachchan for work titled Hanuman Chalisa, which was on public display at an upmarket mall in Delhi, stands testimony to technologically enriched artwork.

The use of technology also helps bridge the gap between fine art and product design or high art and kitsch as in the work of artists-designers Jiten Thukral and Sumir Tagra amongst others. For large scale projects, where art demands work in enormous scale, the artists setup factory-like studios with assistants

in trail. An example in hand is much of Subodh Gupta's enormous sized installation made up of hundreds of traditional steel utensils including buckets and lotas (metal containers normally for liquids) meant for functional use in homes, that are made to his design in his own studio, for significant platforms. The large tree installation made largely with steel buckets on display in the outdoor space at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Delhi, is an example at hand.

A contrast of sorts is offered in work by artist Mahaveer Swami. As featured here he extends the notion of finely painted miniature art, in his composition inspired by mythology while making a dig at the society's current preoccupation with mobile phones featuring a sadhu holding a Kamandal (water pot also used to collect donations) in one hand and a mobile phone in the other.

Modernism and traditions need to be reevaluated as they oscillate between contemporary vacillation and the treasure trove of ancestral knowledge. Miniature format and objects of rituals and domestic use are recast in mural- scale narratives lined with mythical, ceremonial and political dimension. Manjunath Kamath's huge mural installation of Vishwaroopa made up of 1008 small works on paper illustrates this school. There is also a larger than life sized 'Metamorphic Mantra' sculpture by Paresh Maity using 4005 brass bells which recalls the ritual of ringing bells that his mother followed every morning. There are artists who re-discover and work with indigenous materials and objects while others employ new techniques and media to make art in fibreglass and digital devices. Works like Ravinder G. Reddy's colourful terracotta and fibreglass deity heads, juxtapose high art of the temples with kitsch of the streets. Sudarshan Shetty's unified large-scale sculptural assemblages that function as giant fairytale toys, often involve working with technicians, craftspeople and assistants as understudies.

## 7. Conclusion

The multitude of expressions and aesthetics, mirror the country's living art dynamics. The creative practices and trends are dynamic, constantly undergoing change. Within this rapidly transforming scenario, the age-old artistic traditions run in a continuum. In contemporary context, the assemblage of living arts entails enormous ethnic, linguistic, geographical, political and cultural diversity along with a selective assimilation of the newer influences of media and technological innovations. The artists adapt and absorb the new, enriching the subcontinent's culture in the process. The dynamics of the living arts reflects a montage of diverse oeuvres equally rooted and adept at assimilating the changing currents and gaining a rapidly growing market value, both nationally and internationally. The multiple ways in which contemporary art is being created, consumed and shared, need to be nurtured with participation of all stakeholders be these artists, gallerists, museums, connoisseurs, public-private enterprises, scholars, academicians, and general public.

Indian art stands marked for its technical finesse and high aesthetic merit. It represents one of the rare phenomena, where exquisite artworks akin to the antique masterpieces held in prestigious museums around the world, are being re-created even today. A case at hand is Niranjana Jonnalagadda from Sri Kalahasti whose Kalamkari compositions painted in organic palette take forward his father and grandfather's masterly work, like the ones held at the Victoria & Albert museum in London and Govt. Museum in Chennai. As in this case, several distinct pieces continue to be made by living artists who keep the traditions alive. Many of them use the same materials and techniques that the earlier generation of principal artisans, who in most likelihood were their distant forefathers, had applied to create the master pieces, in the first-place aeons ago!

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