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## A review on significance of progressive art movement in India

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### Abstract

Modernism in India had to bear the burden of its historic past effectively mediating through the high art of its classical civilization and through the construct of 'invented tradition' in the nationalist agenda. These two factors were closely allied within the arena of 'modernism', which was a cultural and historical period in the late 19th and early 20th century. This period was to become a dominant force in influencing the character and configuration of the emerging modern Indian art the 'modernism' fundamentally was directed towards a process that required and involved experimentations of not only techniques and materials but also privileging new concepts and ideas in artistic expressions and centrality premised on the uniqueness of the creative individual. In metropolitan cities like Bombay and Calcutta the colonial established art schools had played a constructive role in the emergence of 'artists' in the modern sense of independent creative individuals from the period of nationalist struggle. Though Bombay and Calcutta had these art institutions it did not serve as a site or locus for the emergence of the modern movement. In Bombay the Progressive Artist Group established in 1947 was a loose confederation of artists with a common agenda of reducing nationalist character in the arts and seriously looked to Europe for appropriating then- stylistic formulae particularly of Post-impressionism and Expressionism.

**Keywords:** art, progressive, movement, India etc.

### 1. Introduction

The first decade of the twentieth century marks an important milestone towards defining India's modernity in visual arts. The Bengal Art Movement led by Abanindranath Tagore generated the contours of India's modernism by effectively integrating the canonical pictorial tradition with techniques assimilated from Chinese and Japanese sources. By 1920's International modernism had become a force to reckon with. The implications of modernism within the Indian milieu pose a complex network of questions. The difficulty lay in understanding the scope of what modernism offered to the Indian artist who appropriated it, distanced as he was from its geographical shores and philosophical roots.

In this context the fundamental question raised by Geeta Kapur "How can Indians appropriate western modernism without misunderstanding it and reducing it?" is relevant. However given the close dependence of the nationalist discourse on the colonized/orientalist one, Indian modernism cannot also be regarded as simply a derivative of western modernism. Rather it would be more productive to view Indian modernism in the plural, as strategic inflections of western modernism, also in the plural.

Raymond Williams has defined the whole concept of modern in a single powerful statement, "Modernism", a highly selected version of the modern, which then offers to appropriate the whole of modernity". The implication of 'Modernism' as a 'highly selected version of modern' is to emphasize in visual arts its consciousness in having certain qualities that were scientific and self-referential especially since 1940s, Popularized by Clement Greenberg it lays stress on self-consciousness, reflexivity and of art as an object, reflecting preoccupation with originality [in a turn away from any past references] and invention of forms. The term modernity defies meaning and is more an attitude that pervades multi-dimensions of human enterprise, which rejects the past, characterized by secularization, scientification, industrialization and democratization.

Geeta Kapur in contextualizing the experience of 'Indian modernity' has related it ideologically to the exigencies of colonial intervention, particularly to the process of

modernization and the politics of recognition within the Third World paradigm. According to her "Modernity is a way of relating the material and cultural worlds in a period of unprecedented change call the process of modernization mostly applicable to underdeveloped/developing societies. Non-western nations are excluded from the claims of modernism. A cultural term modernism was imposed on the colonized world via selective modernization.

The colonizers had homogenized India's vast and varied tradition into a narrative of transition from medieval to modern [medieval was feudal and modern was capitalistic and progressive] contextualizing modernity as medieval of and the primary habitus of Europe. And for hundred years we have attempted to turn our gaze away from this chimera of universal modernity and clear up a space where we might become creators of our own.

Recent writings have been more sensitive to the modern as a polemical and ideological category in Indian cultural practice, placing the modern in postcolonial India against the broader canvas of the formulations of the third world identities. In the third world paradigm, post-modernity itself is an anachronism, for modernization is still a very attractive and viable option, particularly as a vehicle of economic liberation. The concept of modernity in India therefore produces a framework that is multi layered and complex. Despite gaining political independence, the cultural hegemony of the west has continued via the discourse of modernism. Although India as a new independent nation had gained a voice in international assemblies and organizations they were as Geeta Kapur notes, firmly 'excluded from modernism'.

Modern Indian art historical scholarship, argues for a modernism that involves Westernization and a return to nativist origins—a search, labeled indigenous. In conjunction with this construction of the past, that is, tradition as 'politics of memory', it combined usefully with European modernism that was imbricated within Indian sensibility from 1920 onwards, presaging important developments in post-independence period. Trained over centuries for borrowing, conserving and assimilating, the "Indian psyche" continued in the Twentieth in its quest for identity through varied influences.

Invariably for the Indians, as historical records and material evidence proves the diverse cross cultural currents had woven a pattern of time less patchwork of traits, spatially juxtaposed with the next or/and over, a palimpsest as Nehru compared it. Congenially India does not require a static equilibrium between tradition and modernity. Conflicts give rise to growth from an openness of mind and struggle; and this has remained an imperative of the "Indian psyche".

In the late 50s and early 60s throughout the country, a definitive search was made conditional to open up a different tract that would not permit constant reminders of Western modernism. At the eastern periphery of the Indian sub-continent the artists of the Calcutta group had projected their motto, which expounded, that 'art should be international and interdependent'. It also urged that art ought to be used for cultural regeneration to effect meaningful changes in their society. Similarly in Bombay the Progressive Artist Groups' modernist ideology and its aesthetic definition had its roots mainly in Impressionism, Post-Impressionism and German Expressionism.

This was because the Progressives' had rebelled against the modern Indian pioneers to clear the table of any semblance

of the nationalist past. In Delhi the artists belonging to Delhi Silpa Chakra laid claims for art to be in the service of society and should reflect social reality. Baroda, with its Faculty of Fine Arts at the M.S. University was established in 1950. In 1957 under the dynamic tutelage of N.S. Bendre a Baroda Artist Group was formed. The Group founded by J. Swaminathan and others in 1963 was a radically nationalistic forum that pronounced in its maestro'.

## 2. The progressives and modern ART

The Group of Progressive Artists was established by F.N. Souza, S.H. Raza, M.F. Husain, K.H. Ara, H.A. Gade and S. K. Bakre (the only sculptor in the group). Other members of the group included Manishi Dey, Akbar Padamsee, Ram Kumar and Tyeb Mehta.

The group sought to break with the revivalism of the art school in Bengal and encourage a worldwide involvement of the Indian avant-garde. The Group was formed a "Partition of India" and Pakistan within months from 14 August 1947, resulting in religious upheavals and the deaths of ten thousand individuals who had been removed from its new borders. The founders of the Group of Progressive Artists often refer to "the partition" as the cause of their quest for new standards in India, starting with their own new art style. Their purpose was "to paint content and technology with extreme freedom, almost anarchy except that one or two basic elemental and everlasting principles rule us, of aesthetic order, plastic coordination and color composition." European Modernism was the Group's major influence, yet it generated members in a large number of genres, from Souza's expressionism to pure abstraction by Gaitonde. The distinct Indian motives and locales that Mehta and Husain in particular appropriate.

## 3. Some progressive Indian writers

### 3.1 FN Souza

Co-founder of PAG, FN Souza (1924-2002), is the epitome of rebelliousness and insurgence. Anecdotes of his expulsion from Sir JJ School of Art, Mumbai, demonstrates an idea of his fearless personality. Although the influence of European modernism shows in his colorful paintings in the early years, the portraits and sardonic imagery take off from representative signs.



**Fig 1:** FN Souza, Untitled, 1962, Oil on canvas 27.75 x 35.75 in, private collection

### 2. SH Raza

Through the vivid transformation from indigenous to European to innately Indian, SH Raza (1922-2016) charts a route that safeguards color meticulously. Raza's entire oeuvre charms with varying color palettes, whether in his early landscapes, branching into impressionist and post-

impressionist paintings, or in the later mature phase of his Bindu paintings. Both Raza and Souza left India within a few years of the establishment of Progressive Artists Group.



**Fig 2:** SH Raza, Carcassonne, 1951, Oil on paper board 18.5 x 22 in, private collection

### 3.3 HA Gade

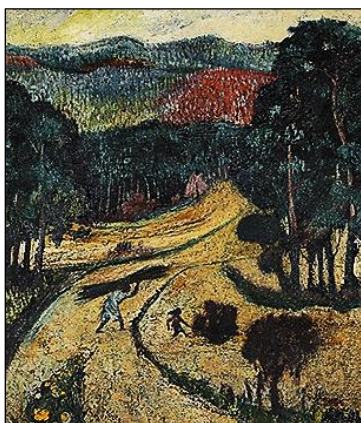
HA Gade's (1917-2001) paintings show a direct influence from impressionism and cubism. Although the below painting is absent of geometrical structure, Gade was greatly influenced by scientific theories. His attempt to break off from colonial subjugation was expressed through his ferocious and exceptionally demanding brushstrokes.



**Fig 3:** HA Gade, Trees, Water colour on paper 13.5 x 19.75 in, private collection

### 3.4 KH Ara

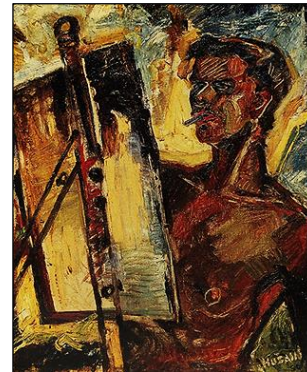
KH Ara (1914-1985) bestowed benevolence in his engagement with his students and the younger generation by helping with funds. Living in a poverty until the end, Ara's simplicity is reflected in his landscapes. They also display themes of socio-economic conditions. His preoccupation with colors marks his concerned and compassionate personality.



**Fig 4:** KH Ara, Untitled, Oil on canvas 23.25 x 18.25 in private collection

### 3.5 MF Hussain

MF Hussain (1915-2011) was one of the foremost Indian modern painters who eventually gained worldwide recognition. Hussain was a self-taught artist, unlike the league of the academic progressive artists group. Having painted film posters, his involvement with PAG drove his artistic sensibilities and his aesthetics of expression.



**Fig 5:** MF Houssain, Portrait of Souza, 1950, Oil on canvas 34.25 x 28.75 in, private collection

### 3.6 Sadanand Bakre

Sadanand Bakre (1920-2007) was the only sculptor in the Progressive Artists Group. Dynamic personality as well as a sheer sense of experimentation denoted his lifelong oeuvre. His paintings and sculptures later trod the realm of abstraction while innovating idioms and styles.



**Fig 6:** Sadanand Bakre, Untitled (Still Life), 1964, Oil on masonite 20 x 24 in, private collection

## 4. Emergence of progressive artist group in India

The history of India is linked to the colonial British rule, which lasted over three centuries. During this period, artistic innovation has taken its own route, even if it is not completely free of traditional restrictions. That changed radically when a new generation of artists joined to join the Progressive Artists Group in 1947, following the announcing of India's declaration of independence.

The progressive revolution: Modern Art for a New India is now displayed in the Asia Society Museum of NYC and is designed in a larger social, cultural and religious context to study and depict the group's ideological positions as well as their work.

Included in the exhibition are works by artists like K. Ara, S.K. Bakre, H.A. Gade, M. F. Husain and S. H. Raza, F. Souza from the 1940s to the 1990s and later by members of the movement, such as V. S. Gaitonde, Krishen Khanna, Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Mohan Samant and others. This is a publications exhibition.

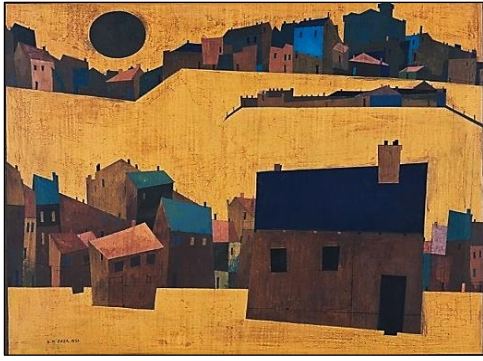


Fig 7: S.H. Raza: Haut de Cagnes (1951)

### 5. The formation of the Bombay progressive artists group

F. N. Souza, S. H. Raza, M. F. Husain, K. H. Ara, H. A. Gade and S. K. Bakre established the Progressive Artists' Group (the lone sculptor in the group). Their main aim was to stop Benjamin's reinvigorating nationalism, but instead adopted one of their approaches – the art of old forms of pre-colonial art. The establishment occurred a few months before India and Pakistan were actually divided. As the first Prime Minister in India, Jawaharlal Nehru, supported secularism, Pakistan adopted a Muslim identity. The group embraced European Modernism and its members worked in a variety of styles; they began producing highly innovative and aesthetically courageous works, which defied the canons of content and technology, combining the personal and political, historical and abstract concepts and the heritage of Indian esthetic. They adhere to the laws of aestheticity, colour, composition and plasticity.



Fig 8: M.F Hussain: Peasant Couple (1950)

### 6. Conclusion

This study reveals that interdisciplinarity is a distinguishing feature of modern art practice, and it is a must for those artists who will determine the creative practice's future. Interdisciplinary art techniques have become a tool for both the artist and the viewer in addressing social, political, and related themes by blurring the boundaries between different disciplines. Though the ever-increasing diverse practices in art have given rise to new concerns and obstacles in the presentation and preservation of artwork. Presenters frequently lack the necessary technical resources to showcase new work incorporating new digital technology. Nonetheless, galleries and museums are expanding their ability to portray these multidisciplinary artworks, but at this

point, contemporary Indian art must be evaluated in the context of interdisciplinarity and pluralism, as well as against continuities and discontinuities with traditions. The delineation on the prevalent multidisciplinary art activities could thus promote a methodical, defined, and beneficial development.

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