VOICES AND VOID: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF CONTEMPORARY INDIAN VISUAL ART WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF N. N. RIMZON'S WORKS

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DECLARATION

I, Om Soorya, do hereby declare that the Ph.D thesis entitled **Voices And Void: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Indian Visual Art within the Context of N. N. Rimzon's Works** is a research work accomplished by me under the supervision of Dr. E. K. Govinda Varma Raja, Assistant Professor (Retd.), School of Folklore Studies, University of Calicut, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy in Folklore Studies, University of Calicut. I also declare that this has not been submitted by me previously for the award of any other degree or diploma, and it represents original work done by me.

Place: C.U. Campus

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled **"Voices And Void: A Critical Analysis of Contemporary Indian Visual Art within the Context of N. N. Rimzon's Works"** is bona fide record of research carried out by Om Soorya under my guidance and supervision, and that it has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma or any other similar title or recognition.

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Om Soorya

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Dedicated to
those whose voices are
muted by the dominant forces…

Chapter 1

Introduction

The idea of this research was sparked inadvertently when the present researcher revisited the image of an installation art called *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet* (fig.1) by N. N. Rimzon, a key figure among modern Indian artists. This specific work of art somehow suggests that the artist has developed the idea of this work from Ambedkar's ideology and philosophy. Truly amazed with the explanations given by Rimzon in interviews and other writings, a close monitoring and attempts to understand Rimzon's works were carried out. His works reflect certain socio-cultural and political concerns shared by the marginalized communities in India. After collecting and recollecting all the available images of his works of art, comparisons and cross-checkings were made to see whether there were any similar artistic interventions in contemporary Indian art.

Preliminary readings and review of literature revealed that Rimzon's approach is unique and essentially a counter-cultural practice in the history of modern Indian Art. Also, it was found that few scholars have worked on Rimzon's contributions to Indian art. In order to fill in this substantial gap in cultural knowledge, the necessity of the present research was established. The topic of this research emerged from this specific context and it turned out to be a critical analysis of contemporary Indian visual art from a subaltern perspective.

In order to situate the discussion of contemporary visual art in relation to socio-cultural and political contexts, the historical development of Indian visual from the colonial period has to be briefly discussed. One need also to critically look at what the mainstream artist, art critics and historiographers described as modern Indian art. Modern Indian art practices have evolved through different phases and various styles. From the colonial period to the postcolonial and till the contemporary scenario, the developments in art have been predominantly focusing on the themes

related to mythology, nationalism, religious harmony, unity in diversity, globalization, urbanization and so on.

Since the late 19th century, Indian art showed drastic changes in its approach, particularly a relative insensitivity to native art traditions. The European aesthetics and techniques were imposed on the traditional art and crafts of India. Gradually, the English educated elite Indian artists slowly accepted the cultural hegemony of the West. Consequently, Western academic realism and easel painting techniques were introduced to Indian art. The emergence of the Company style of Indian painting has to be viewed from this angle. The neoclassical aesthetics, which was already out of fashion in the West was transmitted to India by the colonial immigrant artists. Raja Ravi Varma's painting style, which has been much celebrated by the Indian mainstream art historiography is an outcome of the same. Varma's ability to amalgamate Indian subject matter and the European style and techniques were considered as "…the strength of his non-traditionalism and eclecticism, [and] he is widely regarded as the first modern Indian artist" (Kumar "Modern Indian", 15).

The nationalist cultural movement which flourished under the "orientalist" thoughts, promoted by the scholars like E. B. Havell (1861-1934) and Ananda Coomaraswamy (1877-1947) urged for challenging the academic realism endorsed by the colonial propagators. The Bengal School under the leadership of Abanindranath Tagore with the moral support of the "orientalist" and nationalist leaders like Rabindranath Tagore, and Gandhi tried to revive indigenous cultural traditions and aesthetics, which resulted in forming another kind of "eclecticism". This was projected as one of the major characteristics of modernism in Indian art followed by the mainstream art critics and historians. Gandhi's ideas like *grama swaraj*, orthodox religious belief and the s*wadeshi* movement had a strong influence on the artists of this specific school and it has been reflected in their works except in the works of few artists like Ramkinkar. Nandalal Bose, who is known for shaping the pedagogy of the school of Santiniketan, had been consistently following the ideology of Gandhi. Such efforts to revive the indigenous elements and incorporate them into their art practices often ended up in appropriating the cultural expressions

of the marginalized. It was almost similar to the appropriation of the African cultural expressions by the European artists in order to claim their artistic practices as "modern".

On the one hand, the Indian nationalist elite artists used indigenous cultural expressions as a tool to project "nationalism" to resist the colonial power; and on the other hand, they did not recognize the subalterns as equal citizens. Such paradoxical approaches were very prominent among Indian artists, critics and art historians during the colonial and even in the postcolonial period. In short, these artists were trying to hold the elite/brahmanic "tradition" in the name of resistance against colonialism. Since the elite artists did not possess any distinctive cultural form, which can be used as a "counter" to the Western aesthetics, their "theoretical" hegemony made them easy to appropriate the vibrant cultural forms of the marginalized without any compunction. Among those artists who practiced art in Bengal as a counter to the orientalist approach of the Bengal School during the 1940s, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Zainul Abedin and Somnath Hore were prominent. Their drawings, sculptures, and graphical prints were the real representation of the Bengal famine of 1943; and their ideological approach was based on the discursive practices of dialectical materialism and Marxism.

The Bombay Progressive Artists' Group, formed in 1947, which was also ideologically left, challenged the indigenous approach of the nationalist artists of the Bengal School and endorsed the formalistic approach of European modernism. Though the focus of the art practices in India shifted from a nationalist approach to a more individualistic approach in the postcolonial period, the majority of the artists could not come out of the influences of the "orientalist", "Indologist", and Gandhian perspectives completely. Apart from these three perspectives, Nehruvian secularism, unity and diversity were also added to their art practices. The brahmanic intelligentsia of the postcolonial phase continued to argue the necessity of holding Indian culture and "tradition". While K. G. Subramanyan was vocal about the "living tradition", J. Swaminathan stood for an "ethnographic perspective" in art practices focusing on *Adivasi* arts as a counter to European formalism. In south

India, K. C. S. Paniker initiated Western formalism through his art practices which was carried out through the usage of words, symbols, and *tantra* motifs which evoked and cherished a brahmanical past. Ultimately, one can easily observe that the elite Indian artists have been inspired by the "orientalist", "Indologist", "brahminic ethnographic", and Gandhian perspectives.

At the same time, The Narrative Group of artists challenged the "living tradition" and tried to move away from the formalistic approach by showing a common interest in figuration and narration of common life. Their idea was very much explicit in the group show *Place for People* (1981) which are considered as a "transition from modernist to postmodernist art in India" by many mainstream art historians and critics (Kabir). The Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association (1985), an artist group formed with a Marxian perspective, negated hitherto art practices of India. The Radical Group, especially challenging the Bengal school tradition, indigenous revival and the Narrative Group, offered an alternative art practice focusing on social realism. Globalization brought multiple possibilities to Indian artists by the 1990s due to the growth of information technology and through their interaction with the other parts of the art world. Since the 1990s, majority of Indian artists started dealing with various issues of the globalilised world and they also tried to create a global language through their works incorporating multiple mediums and elements instead of projecting Indianess alone. They also tried to present the local subjects and themes in a global perspective. However, the influence of the nationalist, Gandhian, Nehruvian perspectives has always remained a strong factor among the majority of modern Indian artists and such an influence was evident even in the approach of the artists who have strong affinity towards dialectical materialism. On certain distinctive characteristics of modern Indian art, Carter L. Curtis makes the following observation:

> After independence, a distinctive Indian modernism characterized by ecclecticism, incorporating Western, Asian, and distinctively Indian elements continued to develop. Throughout this stage, Indian artists increasingly experimented with the theme of reciprocity between

> their own histories and the changing societal forces in a postcolonial environment. As India moves beyond initial settling into its stature as an independent nation, the focus of artists reflecting on the use of art as a means of social change shifts from nationalism to more concrete, fragmentary issues relating to class, caste and gender. Increasingly, artists of the 1990s and beyond have employed representational strategies in painting and sculpture, as well as in performance and media arts to address such concerns. (31)

The new exposure to globalisation made at least a few artists to think independently beyond the baggage of the "orientalist", nationalist, Gandhian and Nehruivian perspectives. There is nothing wrong in artists sticking onto any ideology or following such legacies if they want to carry forward it intentionally. However, if they follow it without having a deeper understanding of it and at the same time claiming to be "modern" is really problematic. The significant question here is, whether these legacies are enough to identify modernism in Indian art or not? In order to find out answer to this, one needs to identify the presence or the absence of the characteristic of modernism in the Indian visual art.

The Indian mainstream contemporary art world has been predominantly approaching the art practices from a formalistic angle. These modern Indian artists try to categorize a work of art by identifying its stylistic origin and technical features. Such a formalistic approach of analyzing a work of art is purely Eurocentric. Therefore, Eurocentric aesthetics and art criticism, which is rooted in Kantian- Hegelian-Orientalist-Indologist perspectives is not adequate to analyze the representation of the doubly or triply marginalised subjectivities like the Dalit or the Adivasis of India. The second argument raised in the present study is that there is a conspicuous and conscious attempt from the side of elite historiographers, critics, artists, and patrons to exclude the representation of subaltern identity from the mainstream art practices in India. The term "subaltern" is not used here in the general sense it was used by a group of South Asian scholars of subaltern historians. As they looked at history from the Marxist perspective, they did not consider the

caste factor, which is unique to the socio-cultural fabric of India. Therefore, the term subaltern is used in this study refers to Dalits and Adivasis who are socially, economically and educationally ignored or under/misrepresented in the context of modern Indian art too.

While problematizing the generalized application of the term “subaltern” in the Indian scenario, Y. S. Alone, an Indian neo-Buddhist art critic, categorically states that,

> [The] Subaltern as it is understood and applied as a category in India becomes problematic, particularly when it is read against Ambedkar’s understandings of caste. Ambedkar defines caste as not only a division of labor but also of laborers. The experience of division of laborers cannot be understood by the nomenclature of “subaltern.” “Subaltern,” being a generic rubric and more class oriented, does not empower us to understand caste differences and conflicts. Caste entails graded hierarchy, whereby levels of discrimination and exclusion are different in each case. (141)

Though European modernism has imbibed and practiced modernism beyond the formalistic approach, the Indian mainstream art world could not accept it in its total spirit. The major characteristics of European modernism include rationality, withdrawal from the baggage of the tradition of past which include orthodox religious belief, logic, scientific attitude, egalitarianism, humanism, pluralism, democracy and so on. While perceiving it from the socio-political angle one can observe that it emphasizes an egalitarian idea at least among the western population. On the essence of modernity, Heidegger opined that:

> The essence of modernity can be seen in humanity's freeing itself from the bonds of the Middle Ages in that it frees itself to itself….Certainly the modern age has, as a consequence of the liberation of humanity, introduced subjectivism and individualism…What is decisive is not that humanity frees itself from previous bonds but, rather, that the essence of humanity altogether

> transforms itself in that man becomes the subject. … When, however, man becomes the primary and genuine *subiectum*, this means that he becomes that being upon which every being, in its way of being and its truth, is founded. Man becomes the referential center of beings as such. But this is only possible when there is a transformation in the understanding of beings as a whole. In what does this transformation manifest itself? What, in accordance with it, is the essence of modernity? (qtd. in Young 66-67)

Modern Art represents an evolving set of ideas among a number of painters, sculptures, photographers, performers and writers who both individually and collectively seek new approaches in making of works of art. Although Modern Art started emerging around the 1850s with the arrival of realism, its approaches and styles were defined and redefined throughout the twentieth century. Each art practitioners were determined to develop a visual language that was both original and representative of the times.

Major characteristics of Modern Art is the rejection of religious orthodoxy and the morality principle as the only means of obtaining social progress, and repudiation of the moral codes of the society imposed on people from time to time. Modern artists questioned academic art for its lack of freedom and flirted with many isms like impressionism, fauvism, expressionism, cubism, futurism, constructivism, Dadaism, surrealism, etc. for developing new types of art including collage, assemblage, kinetic art, land art, performance art etc, using new materials, expressive use of colour, and employment of new techniques through the formalistic approach.

Realism in the 1840s is widely considered as the beginning of the modern art movement due to its philosophical-aesthetic push to incorporate modern life and art together. It was from this period artists began to represent socially relevant themes in their artistic endeavors for the first time. For instance, *The Gleaners* (1857) (fig.2) by Jean-François Millet and *The Stonebreakers* (1849) (fig.3) by Gustave Courbet depict the life of common people and these artists were “rejecting the

idealized classicism of academic art and the exotic themes of Romanticism"(Finocchio). Courbet stated that "painting is an essentially *concrete* art and can only consist in the representation of real and existing things" (qtd.in Finocchio). In other words, the artists of that period began to think independently beyond the restrictions of religions or other commitments. But Clemente Greenberg, who has been a great influential figure in the art criticism of the 20th century of the West with his advocacy of formalism which he acquired and proposed through essence of Kantian subjective enlightenment philosophical system, tried to interpret modernism as "art for art's sake".

Greenberg observes that "Modernism appeared in answer to a crisis [and that] the surface aspect of that crisis was a certain confusion of standards brought on by romanticism" (44). He also adds that, "Innovation, newness have gotten themselves taken as the hallmark of Modernism, newness as something desired and pursued. And yet all the great and lasting Modernist creators were reluctant innovators at bottom, innovators only because they had to be—for the sake of quality, and for the sake of self-expression…." (44). Greenberg considered realism to be irrelevant and incompatible with avant-garde training. But his approach is inadequate to read the work of art beyond its formalistic and subjective expressions. For instance, reading Vincent Van Gogh from the formalistic approach could not address the idea of his poverty and mental illness which play a central theme in his works and which makes his art more significant today. In other words. reading Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters* (fig.4) from a formalistic perspective is problematic. Georg Lukács observation, " fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society succeed in concealing reality", cautions one against such blind application of formalism in the reading of work of art (qtd. in Beech 13). What is argued here is that the modernism, which is interpreted through the Kantian-subjective-formalist approach, has failed to understand modernism in its full sense. Even the Janson's *History of Art*, which is considered to be a very authentic art historiography of the West, also ignored the social context. In this particular juncture, the method proposed by art historians like Frederick Antal (1887-1954) and Arnold Hauser

(1892-1978) who approached art history from Marxist dialectics to understand European modernism is followed.

Arnold Hauser observes that art making is dependably an impression of socio-cultural practice. He explains through his book *The Social History of Art* (1951) that the Paleolithic craftsman drew animals on the cave wall to accomplish a sort of supernatural energy to overcome the real threat from animals effectively. Since they had no other means of survival except hunting, the manifestation of inscribing pictures of the same animals over the wall before the real hunting was an inevitable part of their day-to-day life. Subsequently, this routine of drawing animal on the cave wall became a materialisation of survival (Hauser 2). While looking back, we can consider this ritual as the first sign of art making. Arnold Hauser's observations on the definition of art and the reason for art making have been from point of view of Marxist aesthetics.

The German philosopher and cultural critic Theodore Adorno's aesthetics of emancipation also explains the fundamental role of art in society. Adorno explains that, "Art can be understood only by its laws of movement, not according to any set of invariants. It is defined by its relation to what it is not. The specifically artistic in art must be derived concretely from its other; that alone would fulfill the demands of a materialistic-dialectical aesthetics" (3).

If this is the case in the West, when it comes to the Indian art context, understanding the term modernism is more problematic. Since India is a country in which graded inequality is practiced vigorously, the process of modernism/modernity here is so complex and ambiguous that both the formalism and dialectical materialism which are inadequate to define and understand many of the modernist dimensions in Indian art. However, it cannot be denied that the approach of dialectical materialism has helped to understand the problem of subaltern from a generalistic perspective. But how many mainstream modern Indian artists and art historians have used this approach remains a vital question. Due to the baggage of the brahminical tradition many of them could neither adopt a formalistic approach completely in art practice nor could they look at the social

problem even from the angle of dialectical materialism. Eventually, the modernism in Indian art was interpreted with the reference to the formalistic approach and was strategically termed it “eclecticism” in order to suit it to the ideological agenda of the mainstream brahminical intelligentsia. On this type of regressive elements found in modern Indian art, Y.S. Alone observes that Indian painters formulated a modernity that did not create space for an interrogation of cultural caste practices. Consequently, modernity needs to be reinvestigated as a systemic tool for maintaining power relationships that operate within the caste hierarchy (145-146).

Ultimately, the formalistic approach of modern Indian artists and art historians endorsed the position “art for art sake” and consequently they could not understand the real social problem beyond the perspective of dialectical materialism. It is in this particular context that the present discussion of N. N. Rimzon’s works and philosophy is carried out to analyze Indian modern and contemporary art critically. By approaching Rimzon’s art practices based on the *Sramana* philosophy and Ambedakarist ideology an attempt is made in the present study to explain how Rimzon provides an alternative for the dilemma faced by Indian modern artists, art critics, and historiographers. This thesis intends to critically analyze the representations of the subalterns in a few modern and contemporary Indian visual art with the intention to find out and explain the reasons why these artists, critics, and historians have overlooked their voices. In order to locate the void in subaltern representation attempt is also made in the present study to problematize the historiography of modern and contemporary Indian art. In addition, a focus is given in the present study to critically analyse the pedagogy of the art education in major art schools of India and provide suggestions for making it more inclusive. The art pedagogy in India has to be put under a critical lens, as the ideological and philosophical problems involved in the art practice, critical observations, and historiography also are directly related to the art education followed in India.

The methodology I have used in this research is both quantitative and qualitative. By critically analyzing the viewpoints of the major Indian and Western artists, critics, historians, theoreticians and philosophers I also have attempted a

critical analysis of the materials related to the topic of research. I have used both primary and secondary materials which include personal interviews, original works of art by various artists, published interviews, various printed books, magazines, articles in news papers, catalogues, Journals and similar materials from websites, eBooks, digital images, YouTube videos, published and unpublished theses. Each material collected has been critically examined and relevant points to support and to contest my argument have been quoted. The references from various sources have been properly cited in the thesis following M.L.A Handbook 7th Edition.

To substantiate the arguments put forward in the thesis, works of important artists, from late Nineteenth century to the present, art critics, historians, and theoreticians both Indian and Western have been referred to. Theoretical insights from Culture Studies, Dalit Studies, Subaltern Studies, and Post Colonialism, Feminism, Western and Eastern aesthetic concepts have been drawn to analyse the research problem. Besides primary and secondary sources, the present researcher has personally interviewed N. N. Rimzon whose works form the focus of this research in order to explore the philosophy, aesthetics and ideology reflected in his works. The hypothesis is argued out based on the critical and comparative analysis of art and social historiography, aesthetics and philosophical aspects of Indian and Western thought. The works of various artists analysed in this thesis are given towards the end of the chapters.

So far, there have not been many studies on contemporary Indian visual art from the subaltern perspective. Understanding the reasons for the void in representing the voices of the subaltern, especially, Dalit, Adivasis and triply marginalized women in Indian art and the exclusion of their voices in the historiography would sensitize the scholars, readers and academics of the cultural and elitist bias inherent in Indian society and would pave the way for an inclusive historiography thereby acknowledging the polyphony of cultural expressions. As arguments are raised in the thesis for the necessity of theories and approaches that are specific and sensitive to the socio-cultural context of India and suggest the

possibility for an alternative frame of reference, the study will provide a significant contribution to the existing body of knowledge on contemporary Indian art practice.

India's Tryst with Modernity

It is obvious that ideologies and systems cannot be transferred from one society to another mechanically. The very notion of modernity keeps on changing with the articulation of the agency potential of each social group. Primarily, it is colonialism and the British Raj which facilitated the colonial modernity in India. When modernity entered India, the Indian traditional intellectual community had seen it as a threat to the Indian traditional social structure. To protect the age-old brahminical social structure, the upholders of the traditions were bent on keeping the tradition intact. The nationalist social aspirations were articulated by the elite and liberal intellectuals who happened to be *savarnas*/brahmins on behalf of the nation. They seem to be modern in their appeal and appearance but traditional in their epistemological practices. Indian leaders, writers and artists redefined modernity as reformism. They shaped Indian modernity through their literary, cultural/artistic and philosophical discourses. Therefore, the Indian edition of modernity differs from Western modernity, which seeks the transformation of social systems based on rationality, egalitarianism, humanism, and scientific temperament. In the following words, Alone describes how caste-Hindu Indian society and art negotiated with colonial modernity for reaping dividends out of it:

> While colonial modernity entered Indian conditions as a superior power, art patronage became increasingly popular and gallery space became the new arena of art activity, even as access to such space was restricted based on caste stratification. However, colonials were not challenged by the modernist agenda of "high caste" Indian society. The imperial government established art educational institutes, which sought to break the shackles of Indian society. Ironically, the biggest beneficiary of this endeavor ended up being the caste-Hindu society, which claimed that tradition was sacred and a marker of purity. (142)

The whole process of embracing modernity by the Indian intellectual community of the time raises many interesting questions. The intellectuals and leaders of social reform and Indian nationalist movements who were forced to negotiate with colonial modernity were the social élites of the 19th century. They monitored and controlled the whole process of modernization/the modernity project in India and made constant interventions to ensure that their interests are secure by not allowing the fruits of modernity to be shared by other underprivileged sections of Indian society. This resulted in halting or postponing radical social transformation in colonial India and post-independent India as well. Indian leaders and thinkers like Gandhi and Ambedkar offered new ways to look at the Indian self which essentially differs from western modernity though there were differences between these two intellectual-cum-political leaders. Though Gandhi admired aspects of western modernity—its scientific temper, its pragmatism, civil liberties—he considered it fundamentally a violent form of life (Bilimoria). His indictment of modernity was rooted in the fact that it was remorselessly materialist and he saw humanity only in its physical aspect (Shrivastava). He argued for an alternative and non-western form of modernity that embodies a different set of values and ideals which blends what he considered to be the best of both Indian traditions and modernity (Tayyibji).

Gandhi's proposed modernity was premised on inward inquiry, or a form of inquiry directed towards the self, rather than the outward–looking trajectory. But Ambedkar saw in the modernity project a possibility/potential for radical transformation of Indian society built on the caste system. The essentially discriminatory Indian caste system was/is against the very idea of equality, justice and rationality. Therefore, Ambedkar was convinced that the caste system has been one of the major impediments to the progress of Indian society and hence argued for annihilation of caste. Whereas, caste-elite Indian intellectuals and nationalist leaderships wanted to revive the Indian/Hindu tradition based on the *sanathana dharma* which denies equality and humanity to the large masses of India, Ambedkar wanted to revive the ideals of justice, equality, ethics, and democracy and *Samatha, Karuna* and *Maîthri* enshrined in India's Buddhist tradition. Expatiating this point,

the question can be raised here whether the elitist upper-class Indian political leaderships did allow modernity to transform the basic structure of Indian society?

Gopal Guru argues that the condition of Dalits during the colonial period was further problematic, because they had to agitate strategically against two opponents at the same time; they had to fight for self-respect against the higher caste Hindus as well as against the British Imperialism in India. Guru opines that,

> Mainstream nationalists of all political shades were either indifferent or completely opposed to self-respect movement. They were generally reluctant to take up the caste issue, as they, including Gandhi, wanted to avoid any fragmentary impact on the nationalist movement. The mainstream nationalist response was directed against the colonial configuration of power. The Dalit-Bahujan response was primarily directed against the local configuration of power—capitalism and Brahminism. The Dalit-Bahujan perspective, thus, offers a critique of both orientalism and apologists for colonialism. Within this framework, they argued as to how Hindutva and even mainstream nationalists can justify their fight against their inferior treatment at the hands of the orientalist while the latter themselves sought to inferiorise Dalits and shudra masses. ("Janus-faced")

In his essay titled, "Janus-faced Colonialism in India", Guru adds that colonial modernity brought a kind of realization to the Dalits about their identity and rights, which enabled them to fight for the same. However, the mainstream "reformers" did not support this movement. Guru comments on the double-threat faced by the Dalits:

> When Dalit-Bahujan leaders tried to construct a place for the Dalits within the nation, borrowing from the liberal intellectual paradigm, they were criticised as apologists of colonialism. Their plight is best explained in terms of the good old story, where a mother does not offer food to a quarantined child and father does not allow borrowing food from outside. ("Janus-faced")

Indian mainstream artists more or less followed the elitist and nationalist attitude to modernity and they tried to combine tradition and modernity in their works. And hence the emancipatory potential of modernity has hardly been reflected in their artistic endeavors. Moreover, modernity in India came as a package with colonialism which in its turn has a historical connection with capitalism. Capitalism in the colonies demonstrates all the features of distorted consciousness, racial superiority, arrogant cultural exclusiveness and an intellectual condescension over and above the political control of the marginalized whom it had subjugated. The irony is that the Indian nationalist leaders and the elitist intellectuals who posited themselves as "modern" were also culturally biased, and condescending towards the "other", the Dalits.

Thus, it is very clear that the mainstream nationalist leaders were not ready to accept modernity in its "totality"; what they really wanted was only a very peripheral modernist change in society without shaking the roots of traditional repressive social structure. The artists who were following these leaders and their nationalistic and religious views could not think beyond the frame. For them, the idea of "modernity" is an allegorical imagination rather than perceiving it as a social reality. In other words, it must be assumed that they ultimately followed a reactionary and hence an anti-modern attitude. Therefore, reading the works of art produced during this period from the perspective of "modernism" would also appear to be problematic.

The new amalgamation of traditional / indigenous forms and western techniques brought freshness in the visual sensibility of that period and soon this kind of approach became a fashion in Indian art. Shortly, a general assumption was formed among the art practitioners/appreciators about what should be the character of modernism and they tried to identify as modern which synchronised elements of Indian themes, indigenous art forms with Western technique. More importantly, one has to accept the fact both in the sphere of art and culture that India had neither an avant-garde movement nor a historical continuity. R. Siva Kumar observes that in the West the historical development of Modernism in art is fundamentally

considered as the history of the avant-garde. He also argues that such an amalgamation of the modern and avant-garde, nonetheless, will not help one to comprehend the verifiable rationale or progression of non-Western modernism such as India's (“Modern Indian”, 14).

Geeta Kapur's book titled *When was Modernism in India*? discusses the challenges and limitations of Indian modernism in the context of Indian visual art practices. According to her, in India for the moment, it looks as though there is a modernism that almost never was. The more political among Indian artists may be right after all in believing that the as yet unresolved national questions may account for an incomplete modernism that still possesses the radical power it has lost elsewhere (323). As a counter to Kapur's contention, S. Santhosh brings up a critical issue through his article “What Was Modernism (in Indian Art)?”. He raises an important point that Kapur had totally overlooked. He attempts to analyze Indian modernism from the subaltern perspective. Subsequently, he places Ramkinkar Baji as a pioneer of Indian modernism. He argues that, a trace of modernism in India is first seen in the works of Ramkinkar Baij. It is because of the way that his works have sought a radical change against the notion of mainstream modernism**.** Through this article, citing a case from the book by Partha Mitter's, *Triumph of Modernism,* Santhosh explains how the Indian art historiography has been misappropriated by the elitists (60).

If imperialism/royal patronage promoted mainstream artistic practices during the colonial period, the same job was actually taken over by capitalism in the postcolonial period. Through the hand of capitalist art dealers and network of galleries, the art practices thrived in postcolonial India. In terms of historiography of art, Indian art was often referred to as mainstream art and ignored the “other” streams despite differences between the mainstream and the marginalized stream. However, the marginalized voices have hardly been represented or archived by the mainstream practitioners in the historiography of Indian art. They were forced to overlook the representation of the marginalized because of the elite patronage and the elitist’s bias of the industry.

The two words in the title of this thesis, 'Voice' and 'Void' must be read with reference to the "graded inequality " existing in India which was vehemently criticised by Dr. Ambedkar. In a graded inequality, the lowest grade people are always voiceless. Their emotions, cultural expressions and their history are "muted" by the brahminical hegemony and the "muted" space in the historiography is represented by the term "void". The Subaltern Studies Group tried to address the issue of the silence of the subalterns from a Gramscian theoretical framework and from an universalist class perspective. They have used the term subaltern in general to refer to all those who are economically disadvantaged and did not consider one of the core elements of Indian society, the caste.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2010) tried to address the issues of the Indian subaltern women and observed that the voices of women in Indian society are muted by patriarchal domination. In the extract given below, she connects the subaltern women with colonialism:

> The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is "evidence"; rather, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (41)

To Spivak's observation on Indian women's social position an additional question is added in the present study: "Can the real subaltern artists speak?'' The discussion of "Voice and Void" is from the perspective of Dalit subaltern, especially Ambedkar's ideology. "Voice" is not used here merely to refer to sound but to the plurality of the voices of voiceless people. The term "Void" represents the vacuum in the portrayal of the marginalized voices in the art and historiography of India. To address the core issue of the erasure of the subaltern artists, an attempt is made in this research to analyse the subject matters that are portrayed in Indian art during the last one hundred and thirty years and by examining the social and cultural relevance

of the works.

The major issues/themes of the Indian artists, curators and historians from the nineteenth century to the first decade of twenty-first century predominantly were: epics, nationalism, patriotism, religious harmony, woman empowerment, globalization, ecological issues, urbanization etc. During the same period, the representations of pivotal social issues like caste injustices and gender inequalities have not been visible enough in the works of artists of this period. Despite the fact that discrimination in the name of caste and gender has been a more vital social issue of Indian society compared to other issues, the artist of this time rarely portrayed it in their works. Therefore, it is essential to enquire the reason for the absence of representation of the experiences of the voiceless in the mainstream art practices and art historiography in modernist India. When we consider the parallel historiographies of other forms of cultural expressions like literature, film, and theater, we find that these mediums had articulated the serious issue of caste discrimination faced by the marginalized. Therefore, one needs to ask the question whether this absence of representation of the marginalized in Indian art is accidental or intentional.

While comparing mainstream visual art practices of India with the other forms of cultural expressions, one can approach the subaltern experiences (Tribal/ Dalit/ women/ LGBTQ) including caste discrimination and other social inequalities from various perspectives. Though the tradition of writers dealing with Dalit lifeworld especially, caste and untouchability can be traced from the beginning of the twentieth century in the works of Premchand, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, R. K. Narayan, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Mahasweta Devi, Girish Karnard, Arundhati Roy, Vijay Tendulkar, Padmini Sen Gupta, Tara Shankar Bandopadhyay, Gopinath Mohanti, and so on. The perspective from which they looked at the phenomena of caste was either Gandhian or Marxist.

The first manifesto of Indian Progressive Writers Association established in London in 1935 under the leadership of Mulk Raj Anand, the All India Writers Association set up in Lucknow in India on April 10, 1936 under the leadership of

Munshi Premchand and the Progressive Writers Association launched in Calcutta in July 1936 emphasised that writers must deal with " the basic problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection" (Sapfonline.org).

Main themes of the literature written by the progressive writers of India are anti-colonial consciousness, the tensions between tradition and modernity, Indian struggle for independence, the glory of Indian civilization and so on. The writers tried to present the social reality of colonized Indian society and characters of their stories were the poor deprived people who had been denied equality and even basic human rights. Even as these canonical writers of social realist literature portrayed, class, gender, and other inequalities, they only rarely addressed the pernicious caste system in Indian society, believing that the discussion of the problems of caste would be anti-national and divisive.

The representation of the marginalized, especially the Dalits and tribals/Adivasis, from the perspective of Ambedkarism was an offshoot of the Dalit social cultural and political movement and its consolidation, particularly since the 1970s. The emergence of the Dalit Panthers (a political organization formed in 1972 in Maharashtra) contributed to the evolution of various Dalit political affiliations in India is a significant turning point in the development of Dalit literature. Since then there have been a number of literary works published in India which deal with the issue of caste discrimination in various regional languages: Marathi, Telugu, Kannada, Tamil. Punjabi, Oriya, Gujarathi, Malayalam, to mention a few.

The English translations of modern Marathi Dalit literature anthology entitled *Poisoned Bread* edited by Arjun Dangle, with a prefatory note by Gail Omvedt, generated a serious debate in Indian literary sphere. *No Alphabet in Sight,* edited by Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana; *The Oxford India Anthology of Malayalam Dalit writings* edited by M. Dasan et.al; and *The Oxford India Anthology of Tamil Dalit Writings* edited by Ravikumar and Azhagarasan point out the limitations of mainstream literary historiography and provide a new direction to the history of Dalit literature and discourses. Contents of these books are the finest examples for "speaking subaltern" from the literary world. The introductions of

these volumes open up a new discourse on the representation of Dalit writing in the context of Indian modernity. Dalit writers, scholars, academics and critics have been challenging the mainstream writings about Dalits as their portrayal is culturally biased and false. Dalit writers have come up with their own writings characterized by authenticity of experiences and voices of protest against the social stratification on the basis of caste. Some of the prominent Dalit writers who pioneered this are Baburao Bagul, Namdeo Dhashal, Laxman Mane, Omprakash Valmiki, Narendra Jadhav, Sharankumar Limbale, Arjun Dangle, etc.

When we come to Indian Drama and Theatre, we see a fine line between social activism and art. There have been numerous theatres that deal with the issue of untouchability and other social disparities. Vijay Tendulkar, who enriched the soil of Marathi Literature with his genius, in some of his plays and short stories has tried to represent the struggle and mental turmoil of the Dalits resisting the oppressive mechanism of the caste-based social structure. In his *Sakharam Binder* and *Kanyadaan,* there are many a vivid and vigorous account of the consequences of oppression resulting out of caste binaries. Modern Dalit theatre challenges the enduring elite status of the classical drama and creates a new vocabulary against the caste hierarchy and represented the sufferings and struggles of the untouchables. Usha Ganguli's *Rudali* is a best example for the representation of Dalit voice in theatre. The play focuses on the enormous economic disproportion that has brought the life of low caste women to an animal level in order to survive under the oppression of a rich, higher caste man.

K. A. Gunasekharan's *Thodu* (Touch) and *Bali Aadugal* (Scapegoats) in Tamil, A. Santhakumar's *Kakkakkinaavu* (Crow-dream) and *Swapnavetta* (Dreamhunt) in Malayalam portray caste discrimination prevailing in contemporary India. Mainstream Filmmakers were also aware of the disparities among the people based on caste but their portrayal of Dalit/*Adivasi* situation were are not often realistic or accurate. There are plenty of movies like *Achhut Kanya* (Untouchable Maiden, 1936) directed by Franz Osten, *Sujata* (1959) directed by Bimal Roy, *Ankur* (Seedling, 1974) directed by Shyam Benegal, and *Bawandar* (Sandstorm, 2000) by Jagmohan Mundra which portrayed caste-based discrimination in Indian

society from a pro-Dalit perspective. *Achut Kanya* was made at a time when caste discrimination was widely prevalent in India. Portraying a love story between young brahmin boy and an untouchable girl, this movie was one of the first films that spoke about the caste system and the lives of Dalits. Indeed, even today one can find similar real incidents reported in daily newspapers where the couple is tormented and forcefully separated, sometimes murdered in the name of caste, and it is known as honour killing.

Contemporary Indian regional cinema has been strongly portraying the problems of Dalits, expecially in Tamil cinema. The filmmakers like Pa. Ranjith's *Attakathi* (2012), *Madras* (2014), *Kabali* (2016) and *Kaala* (2018), Gopi Nainar's *Aramm* (2017), and Mari Selvaraj's *Pariyerum Perumal* (2018), etc. have managed to raise questions of representation of Dalits and have produced films showing Dalit ideological position.

Recently musicians like T. M. Krishna have openly exposed the brahmanical hegemony inherent in the Carnatic music tradition. He not only performs his concert for the marginalized people but also has been politically vocal about it. He says:

> To me, it became automatically a question of identity and ownership, privilege and entitlement... and how to break that cluster of privilege and make the form more egalitarian. Let me be clear. I have no problem with the upper-caste Hindu Brahminical content of Carnatic music; my issue is with hegemony of one kind of content over others. What I do have a problem with is the lack of other voices in that space. We do not have, for example, the Dalit Hindu voice in Carnatic music. (qtd. in Sharma)

Similar counter-cultural discourses are hardly seen in modern and contemporary Indian art. Before embarking on the present research, the researcher has gone through a few theses, related to the area of modern and contemporary Indian art. A brief review of the major works related to the area of study is attempted here. Urmi Kessar looks at modern Indian art from the perspective of social content in her doctoral thesis "Social Content In Modern Indian Painting Volume 2" (1982).

She traverses through various phases of Indian art pre-colonial and postcolonial including those of the 1950s and 60s and points out that many of the early modern artists could not perceive social realities through their works. Instead of addressing the root causes, they romanticized the facts. This thesis also explains how European artists influenced modern Indian artists and critically analyzes the aesthetic gap between the contemporary artist and traditional Indian art. Sanjoy Kumar Mallik's thesis entitled "Developments in the Modern Art of Bengal Since 1940s Volume 1" (2001) investigates the important ideological and sociological changes in Bengal art during 1940s and 1950s especially with the reference to the "Famine of 1943". This thesis also looks at the modernist premises of the Calcutta group and the formulation of "contextual modernism" within the localized demography of Santiniketan. "A Critical Study of Modernity in The Art of South India With Special Reference to the Madras School 1960s And 70s Volume 1 Text" (2004) by Ashrafi S. Bhagat critically analyses modernity in the fine arts developed in South India, especially in Madras School. She also analyses how the colonial and postcolonial period has impacted the art education of South India and brought a new identity to South Indian art which enabled them to have a debate on regional modernity. Seema Khan in her study "Folklore and Motifs in Jamini Roy's Paintings" (2007) explains how Roy has given a new idiom and direction to Indian art by incorporating folk tradition into his art practices. By analyzing his contribution in bridging the gap between traditional rural Bengal and colonial Calcutta she sees Roy as a pioneer of modern Indian art.

Kathleen Lynne Wyma through her thesis entitled "The Discourse and Practice of Radicalism in Contemporary Indian Art 1960-1990" (2007) explores the trajectories of this particular art movement. She observes that this movement was a counter to the existing mainstream art practices that was controlled by the intelligentsia. "Art Artist and Society: A Study in Sociology Of Art" (2008) by Poonam Gandhi Moirangthem explores the relationship between art, artist, and the society in the context of the Baroda School. This thesis addresses the fundamental problems and the conflicts in Indian art practice from a sociological perspective.

This thesis also highlights the voices of Indian women artists generally overlooked by the art world.

"Tracing the Regional Modern Emerging Art Trends in Bengal Since 1970S Volume 1" (2009) by Nandini Ghosh tries to position "modern" in the context of Bengal regional scenario. This thesis tries to make a graph of various perceptions of "modern" from the postcolonial period up to the year 2008. It also explains how the Marxist ideology played a vital role in the socio-political sphere of Bengal during the second half of the 20th century. Atreyee Gupta analyses the trajectories of modernism in Indian art in the context of Gandhian *Swedeshi* interventions/ movement in her dissertation, "The Promise of the Modern: State, Culture, and Avant-gardism in India (ca. 1930-1960)" (2011). She also explained how art is socially engaged during that time and how much it is valid in the contemporary socio-political scenario with reference to the rise of the Baroda art institution.

Ganesh Nandi discusses the contribution of Ramkinkar Baji to the modern sculptural practice of India in "Works of Ramkinkar Baij—Conventionalism Modernity and Beyond" (2012). Nandi traverses through the trajectories of Baji's sculptural explorations and analyses his works in terms of representation of subject matters and their social relevance and places him as the first modern sculptor in India.

Vikas Gupta, through his thesis "Abstraction in Modern Indian Art: A Study in the Post-Independence Indian Painting (1955-2005)" (2013), analyses the developments of abstractionism in the western and in Indian modern painting chronologically and explains how the abstraction style of Indian painting has been adapted from European abstractionism.

"Resistance in Imaging Women in the Contemporary Visual Art of India" (2013) by Abhibrata Chakrabarty tries to re-imagine the identity of women in contemporary Indian visual art. Situating the study within the framework of postcolonial theory, she archives the representation of women images within the context of five important artists' works: Bikash Bhattacharya, Arpita Singh, Ravinder Reddy, Pushpamala N. and Chandrima Bhattacharyya. The researcher

concludes with the observation that the representation of woman in the Indian visual art had been narrowed in the colonial time compared to the past.

"Framing Pre-Modern Indian Art; Art and History" (2013) by Sarada Natarajan examines how the sub-discipline of pre-modern Indian art history frames its objects discursively. She tries to problamitize the approach of the pre-modern art history writings comparing them with the postmodern approach of writing of art history. Eventually, she also enumerates the limitations of pre-modern Indian art history writings.

Priyanka Kulshreshtha analyses the works of contemporary Indian women artists with regard to social themes in their paintings in the work, "Depiction of Social Themes in the Painting of Contemporary Indian Women Artists" (2015). She explains the various vocabulary used by the women artists to incorporate socially relevant themes. The study mainly focuses on the works of Arpita Singh, Nilima Sheikh and Arpana Caur.

"The Women Artists of Early 20th Century Bengal, their Spaces of Visibility, Contributions and the Indigenous Modernism" (2015) by Aparna Baliga Roy critically examines the reason for the exclusion of women artists in the historiography handled by the mainstream historians and tries to position the unnoticed women artists of Bengal in the mainstream historiography. She also argues that the evolving concept of women artists cannot be read through a study of autonomous existence of the art objects.

Runa Shelina Banu, in her thesis "A Critical Study of Progressive Art Movement in Bengal" (2005), analyzes the various phases of Bengal School from the 19th century to the mid-20th century. She scrutinizes the Company painting, the revival of 19th century and the Progressive Art movements of Bengal and discusses various issues related to art and aesthetics.

The dissertation "Critical Writings on Modern Indian Paintings (ca. 1900-1970 AD)" (2018) by Anantdeep Grewal is a chronological study of the major trends and approaches in art criticism; how they evolved and the major phases of

development in India. The thesis has positioned the art criticism in India from the beginning to the contemporary scenario. The thesis entitled "Modern Trends in Indian Arts with Special Reference to the Participation of Delhi Based Women Artists in Triennale Events from 1968 to 2000: An Analytical Study" (2018) by Huma Khan analyses the works of the Indian women artists belonging to the 20th and the 21st century. It also explores the subject matters, various techniques and medium that the women artists have been using in Indian art. "Globalisation and its Impact on Contemporary Indian Art" (2018) by Vrushali Dhage tries to critically examine the Indian contemporary art, important artists and their works in the context of globalization. She examines the impact of globalization with reference to the socio-cultural-economical changes, and how Indian contemporary artists adapted to them.

After a perusal of various theses related to modern and contemporary Indian art, it can be concluded that there are hardly any studies on the topic of research which is presently undertaken in this thesis. However, "Spectres of Caste: Institutionalisation of Art in Modern India" (2018) by S. Santhosh shares certain ideological and theoretical position with the present topic of this study. Santhosh looks at the historiography of Modern Indian art from the "minoritarian" perspective. In order to identify the problems persisting in the mainstream art practices he adopts the Subaltern and post structural theoretical perspectives. By deconstructing the historiography of Indian mainstream visual art practices Santhosh critically analyzes modernity in art positioned by the mainstream historians. His attempt is

> [T]o understand society and culture in terms of its systems of exclusion; its systems of invisibilisation. In other words, it is a study about the forms of epistemic violence unleashed by various modernist discourses in the name of consolidation, systematisation and integration of the cultures of the nation." ("Spectres of Caste" 3)

Santhosh also explains how the caste has been playing a crucial role in the realm of Indian "modernity" as well as in the craft sector. Though his thesis shares

certain commonality in terms of ideological and political perspective, this study is more focused on the representation of Dalit/AAdivasi life world and counter-cultural discourses in modern and contemporary art practices in India. Analyzing the historiography of the last hundred and thirty years of Indian art practices is a difficult task and the exploration is based on limited materials available. In order to explore the issue, the present researcher requires a reference point to analyse the art works of various artists and art historiography to arrive at a comparative evaluation. Hence, N. N. Rimzon has been chosen as the center point for reference in this study. Nevertheless, the structure of this research is not exclusively to evaluate Rimzon's works and his contributions.

This thesis is primarily divided into three chapters. In the First Introductory Chapter, the major arguments and objectives of the thesis are stated. A critical evaluation of Indian modernity vis-a-vis Western modernity and their impact on the socio-cultural milieu of India in the light of major political ideology and dominant aesthetics is also attempted in this chapter. The theoretical framework used for analysis in the study is also explained here. A brief critical review of the theses, dissertations and books related to Indian Modern Art is also given in the first chapter.

The Second Chapter tries to problemitize the historiography of modern and contemporary visual art and it provides a brief account of major Indian artists, art movements, and theoretical approaches and political ideologies reflected in their works during the discussion. It also provides a critical overview of the evolution of Indian art from the late 19th century to the contemporary period and this segment explores the subject matters Indian artists have been dealing with in their works throughout colonial and postcolonial phases. Company painting, Ravi Varma, Nationalistic phase, developments in Santiniketan, Progressive Art Group, Baroda School and the influence of K.G. Subramanyan in the contemporary Indian art, distinctive voices of Bupan Khakkar and the Marxist view of Vivan Sundaram, the emergence of Radical painters and sculptors associations, voice of the women artists and the subject matters of contemporary artists are critically examined from the

subaltern perspective. A critical analysis of the representation of the marginalized in the works of Indian artists and the contradictions between their ideology and practice is also critically examined.

The Third Chapter critically analyses the works of N. N. Rimzon as an instance of representation of marginalized from the Ambedkarist and indigenous perspectives. This chapter also shows how Rimzon's works point out the necessity of artists to attempt to offer a counter-cultural practice to the dominant culture. A comparative study between artists from the West and Rimzon and his contemporaries are also included. Attempts are also made to trace the influence of Sramana tradition in Rimzon works in this chapter.

The Conclusion will sum up the arguments in order to justify the hypotheses and will state the reasons for the "void" in the modern Indian contemporary art. The limitation of the application of western theories and pedagogy in Indian art education will also be pointed out along with putting forth a few suggestions to make it more inclusive.

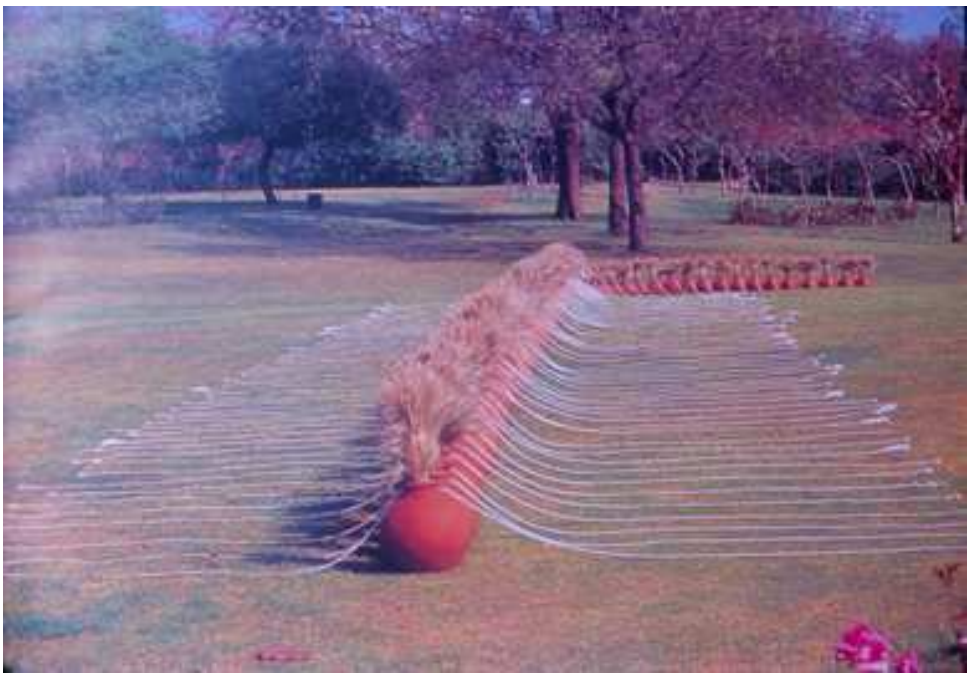


Fig.1. Rimzon,N.N. *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet* .1995. Site Specific Installation. Terracotta Pots and Straw Brooms and Ropes. Dimensions-Variable.Buddha Jayanti Park. New Delhi. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.2 Millet, Jean-François .*The Gleaners* .1857.Oil on Canvas. 83.8 x111.8 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.Web. 14 April 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Gleaners

Fig.3. Courbet, Gustave. *The Stonebreakers.* 1849. 165 x 257 cm. Oil on Canvas. Web. 14 April 2020. https://smarthistory.org/courbet-the-stonebreakers/

Fig.4. Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Potato Eaters*. 1885. 82 cm x 114 cm. Oil on Canvas, Van Gogh Museum. Amsterdam. Web. 14. April. 2020. https://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0005V1962

Chapter 2

Problematizing Historiography and Art Practices of Modern Indian Contemporary Art: An Overview

2.1 Problematizing Historiography

In order to analyse the problem of voice and void which has been posited through this research, it is necessary to have a critical analysis of Indian artists, art schools/ movements, art historians and art critics from a subaltern perspective. Most of the works of art created in the past have been appreciated along the line of interpretation of art critics as well as art historians. Until the period of Conceptual Art (1960), the artists generally kept themselves away from describing their works of art. Appreciations of art work have often been based on the reviews and critical writing of art critics published through various magazines and catalogues. Eventually, those pieces of critical writings accumulated in the form of art historiography of modern and contemporary Indian art.

Due to the absence of serious and comprehensive historiography of Indian art is difficult to compare it with the historiography of Western art. A work of art cannot be seen only as a visual form. It also has to be viewed as a cultural product. Its aesthetic as well as its socio-cultural significance has also to be taken into consideration. Art historians and critics have been approaching works of art from various perspectives: philosophical, aesthetics and political. The twentieth-century art historiography and criticism reflect this plurality in approaches. Before attempting a critical overview of the work of arts and the artists of various periods it is essential to look at the historiography. An understanding of how the various theoretical approaches and methodologies adopted in the historiography of western art have evolved will help one to discern its influence on India.

Works of art in the West since the late 19th century have been viewed from various theoretical perspective like Kantian-Hegelianism, Marxism, Structuralism,

Phenomenology, Poststructuralism and Postcolonialism. However, the approach of each historian was varied from each other. The most important thing in writing history or reading historiography is the perspective from which one is looking at it. The history written by a person who has the primary lived experience will be different from the history written by a person who has got only a secondary experience. Manda Boetzkes explains how the differences in experience influence methodologies or perspectives of the historiographers.

> The ethical quandaries surrounding issues of subjectivity and the interpretation of art often revolve around the questions of who is representing, who is represented, and who is looking; and around how these dynamics produce and reproduce visual systems of power on the basis of gender, race, and libidinal desire. (34)

The idea of "New art history" approach on historiography in the West opens up possibilities of writing art histories from various theoretical perspectives like Marxist, postcolonial, poststructural, feminist and queer theories. Johnathan Harris' book *The New Art History: A Critical Introduction* (2001) emphasizes the importance of the new approach of art history of contemporary times. He states that the Marxist art historians have always drawn on historical materialist philosophy developed by Marx himself though clearly in differing ways and to differing degrees related to specific social, political and ideological contexts (12). Eric Hobsbawm, one of the world's most renowned Marxist historians, even asserted that Marx was 'the main force in ''modernizing'' the writing of history' (qtd. in Perry 1).

Marxism has enabled historiographers to engage in a productive dialogue with new historical approaches. Subir Sinha and Rashmi Varma point out of some of the valuable contributions by Marxism on knowledge production in the following words:

> Recent re-engagement between Marxist and postcolonial theory has produced new thinking and writing on world systems…, 'Third-World' aesthetics, opening up fresh ways of thinking the relationship between capitalism, modernity and aesthetic form. This suggests that

> neither ‘Marxism’ nor ‘postcolonial theory’ are stable categories: they are evolving positions, responding both to events and processes in the world, and challenges, internal and external, to their modes of comprehending such events and processes. (Subir Sinha, 546)

But Marxist historical materialism was very much Eurocentric and to a certain extent it stagnated with its own limitations to address the various problems beyond class issues. To address the diverse problems already existed and newly emerged in the colonial and third world non-European countries demand a new theoretical perspective beyond the frame of class struggle. However, the contribution of Marxism cannot be ignored completely.

The development of postcolonial studies and poststructuralism envisaged a new methodology to address the persisting problem of the oppressed. It enabled historians to perceive historiography from the perspective of the oppressed. The institutionalization of writing history becomes more complicated and problematic. This has to be viewed from the angle of “knowledge and power”. The accumulated knowledge in the hands of certain groups has been transformed into a mode of power. Subsequently, this power has been used to maintain the social hierarchy in which they become dominant. Historiography and art criticism of Indian modern art can also be viewed from this perspective. Moreover, the amalgamation of religious and spiritual aspects also was very much visible in the approach of many Indian art historians and critics. From the colonial to contemporary, the art historiography has been constructed in a linear way. The critics and historians evaluate works of art from their own “apparatuses” of aesthetics instead of evolving a vocabulary appropriate to specific works. With their monolithic yardstick they not only define what is high or low art, but they also draw a social hierarchy among the artists.

Parul Pandya Dhar explains the origin and evolution of Indian art criticism and historiography in her book *Indian Art History; Changing Perspectives* (2011) as, “Critical introduction to the historiography of Indian art sets the stage for and contextualizes the different scholarly contributions on the circumstances, individuals, initiatives, and methods that have determined the course of Indian art

history from colonial times to the present" (2). While describing the cultural history of India between 1870 and late the 20th century in his book titled *Writing Cultural History in Colonial and Postcolonial India*, Henry Schwarz points out how Indian writings of history and other documents were dominated by European historiography, which was very prominent at that time. He traverses from the late nineteenth century to the present time and exemplifies how later Indian scholars reached a point to address their own issues and able to bring projects like Subaltern studies (5).

From the postcolonial to the present time the socio-political scenarios of India have been transforming through different phases. It is important to look at how much these changes got reflected in visual art before embarking on analyzing the representation of subalternity in them. Historiography of modern Indian art shares ambivalence between the idea of nationalism and postcolonialism and the art historians and critics have been confused with these two**.** On the one hand, the art critics and historians have been interpreting the fusion of Western style and Indian themes as modernism in Indian art; and on the other hand, they were also attempting to construct a nationalistic narrative based on the socio-political-cultural events of the time. With globalization which facilitated the foregrounding of the plurality of voices, artists moved away from the usual narrative of modernism and nationalism to concrete and fragmented ideas. Consequently, historiography of Indian art also witnessed changes in the perspective.

In her essay, "Art Criticism In India: A Brief Overview" (2000), Gayatri Sinha observes that,

> the art criticism in India is a colonial contribution and it appeared for the first time in English Journals. Otherwise, the regional and traditional writings on art and aesthetics were presented as natural commentaries at courtly art conventions and poetic meetings. However, twentieth-century onwards the English educated Indian critics began to contribute their insight over the Western and Eastern aesthetics through different mediums. With the emergence of new art

> schools at different parts of the country—Calcutta, Madras, Bombay and Lahore—by 1850s, the British had already given a new direction to the academic studies on art (n. pag.).

Most of the scholars consider Ananda Coomaraswamy as the pioneer of Indian art history. On Coomarasway's intervention in art historiography in India, Parul Pandya Dhar observes:

> He placed the text- image relationship at the centre of his relentless investigations into the roots and rationale of India's artistic past. He sourced Vedic and post- Vedic texts, Buddhist and Jaina literature, treatises on art and architecture, varied genres of Indian literary writings, as also a few epigraphic and numismatic sources to marshal evidence towards his objectives. (6)

She also quotes James S. Crouch observing that Coomaraswamy "was at the forefront of 'Nationalist' responses to 'Orientalist' constructions of Indian art history during the colonial period" (qtd. in Dhar 4-6).

The Indian art historians have been tracing the evolution of artistic style in the beginning years or writing art history. Eventually, the focus of art history turned towards ideas that are more inclusive. Understanding the historiography of Indian art is more complicated since it is having multiple phases: religious, philosophical, and aesthetic. Predominantly the art historians of pre-independent India were searching for the origin and style, influences, similarities with art practices of other nations. Though Indian art historians and art critics have been adopting new methodologies to approach art practices and art history in the postcolonial phase, they hardly used the theoretical approach of Subaltern Studies. At the same time, one can see such in other cultural expressions like literature, film, theatre, music and so on as already explained in the introduction.

When we search for the real reasons for the exclusion of the subaltern representation from the mainstream art historiography, we find the same reasons in

the mainstream/elite social history of India. On the exclusive nature of Indian nationalist historiography, Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that:

> Indian historiography was structured from the beginning as a battle ground where imperialist and nationalist versions of Indian pasts wrestled with each other in their attempts to legitimize their respective projects. It is true that the first modern histories of India were written by European colonists but, for the nationalists, they never amounted to an Indian history in any sense. (2163)

Ranajit Guha also explains how the bourgeois-nationalist and colonialist elitism have monopolized the historiography of India. He argues that both this bourgeois and colonialist approach of historiography is the by-product of the colonial period. Ranajit Guha notes:

> The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism - colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism shar[ing] the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness-nationalism which confirmed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements. In the colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies, these achievements are credited to British colonial rulers, administrators' policies, institutions, and culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings -to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities, and ideas. ("On Some", 1)

Historiography is a phenomenon that evolves from one event to another from past to present and all events are recorded in the history based on the previous record of events. The historians always take reference from the past-recorded history to construct the present history. In short, what kind of technique the colonial writers followed to construct their past and their present was taken as a reference by the postcolonial writers to build the nationalistic history and eventually it becomes a kind of linear perspective of historiography. During the transition period from colonial to postcolonial, the role of writing history shifted from the colonizer to

colonized. Predominantly, the Indian elite historians were more focusing to construct nationalist ideologies through their writing. Consequently, the internal social problems were not addressed or documented through their writings and data collection.

The elitism in modern historiography is represented not only by the elite historians but by the elite artists and viewers. The lack of critics, art curators and historians from Dalit or subaltern community and the lack of such perspectives among the dominant art fraternity are the major reasons for the exclusion of the representation of Dalit or subaltern in the modern contemporary art practices.

2.2 Early Representations of the Subaltern

When a discussion on modernism in Indian art arises, in general, there is a disagreement on the beginning of modernism in Indian art; whether it originated with the Company paintings and Kalighat paintings, or with Ravi Varma. Since the assumption on "Indian modernity" is based on the social modernity and its reflection on the cultural expressions of that particular period, the works of Varma, Company painting and Kalighat paintings have to be viewed from the perspective of Subaltern historiography. To begin with, a brief critical analysis of the content and style of Company paintings carried out.

Company style or Company painting is a term for a hybrid Indo-European style of paintings made in India by Indian artists, many of whom worked for European patrons in the British East India Company or other foreign Companies in the 18th and 19th centuries. This particular style blended traditional elements from Rajput and Mughal painting with Western treatment of perspective and rendering techniques. Most paintings were small, reflecting the Indian miniature tradition, but the natural history paintings of plants and birds were usually life-size. Many art historians and critics observe that modernism in Indian art begins with Company paintings. However, viewing the modernism in art from the perspective of "modernity" the traits of modernism in Indian art can be seen in Kalighat paintings because it was socially engaged. On Kalighat paintings Krishna Chaitanya observes that:

> The Kalighat artists who belonged to the *Patua* community of Bengal which had made pictures for the entertainment of the common people for generations and they did not have the kind of contact with the Britishers which the Company school painters had. But they created a distinctive art which differed from both the traditional Pats and Company school work and reveals some extraordinary anticipations of modern painting. (112)

Tapati Guha also says that Kalighat patuas art belongs to the streets and it was an expression of outcaste Calcutta. Kalighat patuas paintings should be celebrated as authentically Indian works that represent a specific reaction to colonial rule from an indigenous perspective. These artists thrived in a colonial urban setting all the while maintaining traditional imagery and culture, operating under the aesthetics inherited from their forbears and modified by them (18-23). The colonial rulers and Indian elites catered to the interest of the upper class and hence both of them never tried to promote the traditional *Kalighat* artists or appreciated the aesthetics of the *Kalighat patuas*. The bold and rough expressions of *Kalighat* forms did not conform to the dominant aesthetic criteria mentioned in Bharata's *Natyasasthra* or Bamaha's *Kaavyalankara*. Moreover, the subject matters of the *Kalighat* paintings were related to everyday life. Another reason for not promoting them may be that *Kalighat* painters were political and they portrayed social issues sarcastically through their works and exposed the contradictions that prevailed in the society (fig.5). Instead of choosing the *Kalighat* artist, the Company trained the male artists from the elite class and appointed them as the Company artists.

Lower classes in Calcutta, such as the *Kalighat patuas*, had very limited contact with the ruling classes. The majority of them did not receive any direct benefits from colonial rule and were not permitted into even the most inferior levels of employment. Lauren Slaughter substantiates the indigenous origin of *Kalighat* painting and explains how the true substantiates of the *Kalighat* painting tradition got diminished with the colonial interventions (251). Quoting Sumanta Banerjee, Lauren explains that the British had no role in portraying contemporary life in

Kalighat paintings as the majority of art historians claims. Instead of that they painted the subject matter according to their choices and what they thought important to them. When a significant portion of society began to reject Indian tradition, the patuas lost patronage. So, like any other business-focused person, they adapted. They turned away the Hindu deities and turned toward modern life, yet they maintained their traditional style while providing visual commentary of their new globalized world (qtd. in Lauren 253).

Jamini Roy also appropriated the Kalighat style of painting to develop his own personal style in the name of nationalism and revivalism and achieves a special place in mainstream historiography as one of the pioneers of modern Indian art. The modernism in Roy attributed by the mainstream historiography has nothing to do with the "modernity". Instead, this observation has to be taken as recognition of his ability to appropriate indigenous cultural expressions and bringing new hybridity in visual language. The traditional *Kalighat* artists tried to depict the everyday life of marginalized people and rejected ancient Sanskrit aesthetic canons. In fact, *Kalighat patuas* were one of the first representations of subaltern identity in Indian art. In short, *Kalighat* paintings are all about freedom, tradition, social responsibility, and representation of the marginalized. If we consider "Modernism" based on the "Modernity" prevailed in the approach of the artists, the Kalighat style of painting has to be considered the first example of it.

Modernity or Hybridity in Raja Ravi Varma

Developments in the theoretical field help people to look at works of art from various critical frameworks. It also helps one to socially and historically contextualize a work of art rather than describing the technicality of it. The term Modernism in the West is generally associated with ideal visions of human life and society and a belief in progress. If we consider the subject matter as a deciding factor of modernism; romanticism and realism can also be considered as first signs of Modernism in the West because it was the first time the Western artists got relieved from giving importance to religion and portrayed the lifeworld of ordinary people. If European modernism is taken as a benchmark for assessing modernism in

Indian art, could Raja Ravi Varma be considered the first Indian modern artist as the majority of the Indian art historians and critics like Partha Mitter posit (*Art And*,179,180)? In fact, he was accorded this position for his contribution in bringing hybrid language by combining western techniques and Indian themes, which brought a new visual sensibility to Indian art. Geeta Kapur observes that,

> [O]ur modernism could also be redefined via such linguistic disjunctions as occur in the course of the most literal adaptations, thereby opening up, even by default, figural devices that match the very exigencies of colonial, excolonial and cleft identities. […..] It is precisely in such matters that Ravi Varma is the indisputable father figure of modern Indian art. ("When Was", 147)

Though the subject matter of his portrayal were predominantly elite /savarna life he also portrayed marginalized subjectivities. *There Comes Papa* (*Here Comes Papa*) (fig.6) *, Reclining Nayar Lady* (fig.7), *Gipsy Women* (fig.8) *, Village Belle* (fig.9), *Woman Washing Clothes* (fig..10), *The Barber* (fig.11), *Toddy Tapper* (fig.12), and *Lady in Prison* (fig.13) are instances. Kapur, the mainstream Indian art critic and historian interprets Varma's *There Comes Papa* from the background of social customs that prevailed during the period in Kerala and described it as an expression of "nascent modernity". She elaborates:

> Socially permitted liaisons with higher-caste men give the matrilineally positioned nair women ambivalent erotic significance. As coded icons they are paradoxically thematized in Ravi Varma's oeuvre: these are his Malalabar beauties. In the genre pictures with narratives (such as the 1892 *There Comes Papa),* he develops conventions that are pictorial equivalents to social custom and local etiquette in an as yet a nascent modernity. ("When Was", 152)

However, looking from a subaltern perspective, *There Comes Papa*—with a girl child in her hand waiting for the child's father—could be seen as a representation of a Sudra (lower caste) woman of South Travancore of his times. The position of Nair women during the period need to be understood in relation to

the two marriage practices prevailed during the time; *thalikettu* kalyanam and *Sambandham*. The *Sambandham* refers to a "sexual liaison" between a Namboodiri, or a man belonging to a caste higher than Nair or a high ranked Nair, and a Nair woman. The system of Namboodiri inheritance was such that the oldest son inherited all property and only he was allowed to marry a Namboodiri woman. The younger sons on the other hand entered into an alliance with Nair women and the children born out of this relationship were raised as Nair caste.

As polyandry and hypergamy was prevalent during the time, men could have more than one *sambandham* partner at the same time. Women also might take one or more partners and bear children by them. Nor will the men have any legitimacy over the children in the relationship. Such inter-caste couple could not live together as the Nair women were not allowed to live with an upper caste husband. The husbands used to visit the wife's *tharvad* (family house) at night and leave the following morning. It is the *karnavar*, the eldest male member of the Nair joint family who takes care of the children. If we look at Varma's painting form the socio historical background of the time one can see this picture as a representation of subaltern women reflecting helplessness, anxiety and uncertainty over the future of herself and her children which is completely at the mercy of the elder male member of tharvad, the *karanavar*.

Ravi Varma's *Reclining Nayar Lady* has been interpreted as the representation of Indulekha, the titular heroine of the first modernist novel in Malayalm by Chandu Menon. Menon projected Indulekha as a symbol of modernity. She criticizes the Nair matrilocal and matrilineal system, especially, the relationship with Namboodiri Brahmins called *sambandham* argues for English education, breaking away from the age-old traditions and asserts the right to choose her husband. Hence, this could also be taken as an example of Varmas portrayal of the transformations the society underwent during the late 19th century. Varma's *Gypsy Family* (1893)—depicting a poor displaced village woman wandering with three children, cooking in an earthen pot and possessing a cloth bundle, the only property the family has—is a realistic representation of the subalterns. The *Village Belle*

(*Lady Carrying Water Pot*) also portrays the pathetic living conditions of rural women of then India, who have to carry home drinking water from faraway places. Viewed from the background of casteism practiced in 19th century India in which the untouchables were not allowed to take water even from public sources, this painting also indicates Varma's social concern. His other works like *Barber, Woman Washing Clothes, Toddy Tapper* and *Lady in Prison* can also been seen as representations of the subaltern subjectivities in Indian society.

It seems that art critics and historiographers have overlooked the subaltern representation in Varma's paintings and highlighted his technique of fusing of European style and Indian subject matters. In fact, Ravi Varma deserves to be considered as modern more for his representation of subaltern life. By overlooking the representations of subalternity in Varma's works the mainstream historiographers reveal their elitist bias. The contribution of Mangala Bayi Thampuratti (1865—1954), Varma's sister whose works also demonstrated the characteristic of modern art, is overlooked in the mainstream historiography because of their elitist and patriarchal bias.

Though both Ravi Varma and Mangala Bayi learned the initial technique of art from their uncle Raja Raja Varma, Mangala was denied the freedom to take up art as a career like her brother because she was a woman (Priya Daniel, 58). The highly orthodox and patriarchal society of that time had prevented all women from entering such creative fields. She herself explains the constrains she faced to become an artist:

> I was taught to paint mostly by my uncle [Raja Raja Varma]. I approached my brother only to clear doubts. Even that became impossible after my marriage, for as goes the custom among us, it was not thought proper for a married woman to go near her brothers. (qtd. in Das)

One of her paintings titled after Varma's *Alms Giving (*c.1900) (fig.14), though depicts the subject matter similar to Varma's *Alms Giving* (1899) (fig.15), Bayi's approach is very different from Varma. Varma portrays a bejeweled royal

woman with fair skin dropping money into the extended hands of a young subaltern boy. The distance between the boy's hand and the elite women who is giving alms is very much visible as it represents the practice of untouchablity. Depiction of the same theme by Bayi invites the viewer to have a closer look at the reality of that time through her perception on marginality. She portrays a teenage woman in white *mundu* and blouse ladling out rice gruel into the begging bowl of a bare-breasted poor old decrepit woman. In her painting, both figures are represented as women. Whereas in Varma one is female and the other is a boy. Here Bayi's painting reflects her position as a women artist. By depicting both characters in black skin tone, placing them on the same level of platform in a shabby and dull space, Bayi seems to show her empathy towards the marginalized woman.

Another interesting observation one can make is that while Varma's royal woman drops coins on to the boy's cupped hands, in Bayi's work the young woman ladles out gruel in to the begging bowl of the decrepit beggar woman. The attitude of Varma's royal woman seems to be condescending; whereas, Bayi's painting suggests sharing. In both Varma and Bayi, we can observe the representation of subaltern reality, which is one of the major traits of modern art. Art historiography places Ravi Varma as a pioneer of modern Indian painting, based on the European Indian hybrid language that he practiced, and not for his representation of marginalized in his painting. Comparing Varma with Bayi, It can be argued that Bayi is more realistic in terms of representing the everyday life of the subaltern. Her *Alms Giving* can also be taken as an attempt to deconstruct Varma's painting with the same title and subject matter. However, her painting and approach seem hardly noticed by the mainstream historians and it indicates how Indian art historians, just like social and cultural historiographers were elitist and patriarchal in their approach.

2.3 Nationalism, Indigeneity and Contextual Modernism

While analyzing the artistic endevours of the Bengal School an attempt is made to focus on the area which most of the mainstream historiographers have overlooked. The Bengal School is predominantly famous for its association with the nationalist movement, especially with the *swadeshi* movement and it was a kind of

counter to the western art practices though initiated by an English man, Ernest Benfield Havell. He tremendously encouraged Abanindranath Tagore who was known as the founder of the Bengal School of art for attempting the new method of practicing art, which was against western aesthetics. The objective of this movement was to bring "indigenous (*swadeshi*) ideology of art" rejecting the European "academic naturalism such as Ravi Varma's style**" (**Mitter, *Indian Art,* 177). Ratan Parimoo points out the stylistic influences which moulded the trajectory of Abanindranath's early works as, "[Abanindranath] Tagore tried to make an alternative non-academic style of painting with the combination of Mughal Rajput Miniatures, Japanese wash, Chinese ink painting and equally of English Pre-Raphaelite and Art Nouveau trends" (73). Debashish Banerji observes that AbanindranathTagore was strongly influenced by "Havell [who] was clearly interested in the construction of an Indian art history which essentialized a cultural Aryanism" and adds that while addressing the subject of modernity, Abanindranath sought to give expression to an ontological transcendence (36-42).

Most of the subject matters of Abanindranath's works were based on Indian mythological characters and Mughal miniature paintings. *Bharat Mata* (fig.16) can be cited as an example for the same. It was painted during the period of *swadeshi* movement and when the political tension related to the partition of Bengal was very much alive. Sister Nivedita praised the painting "[…] as an appeal in the Indian language to the Indian heart. […..] the first great masterpiece in a new style" (60). The art critics of that period were not able to see *Bharat Mata* from a different perspective. But today there are lots of studies that criticize the approach of Abanidranath. For instance, Vidya Dehejia looks at *Bharat Mata* from the perspective of the Hindu religion. In her article called "Hinduism and Hindu Art" she explains how this specific painting is connected with the Hindu religion. She says, "Deities are frequently portrayed with multiple arms, especially when they are engaged in combative acts of cosmic consequence that involve destroying powerful forces of evil" (n. pag.) Natasha Eaton also points out that Abanidranath has followed the Hindu aesthetics and developed his own visual language based on

Sadanga, an ancient Hindu text coded in *Shilpa Sastra.* She also criticizes the Bengal artists for their lack of empathy towards the marginalized (624).

Rabindranath Tagore, another prominent artist of the Bengal School, was projected as the first modern Indian painter by W. G. Archer, one of the first pre-independent art critic and scholar, considering his style which was very unique and different from European aesthetics (49). Rabindranath also commented about the dysconnectivity between Indian art and the lives of Indians. To put it in Tagore's own words, [O]ur country has no artistic atmosphere, there is no arterial link between our social life and our art—for us art is a superficial thing, neither here nor there; which is why you people can never derive your full nourishment from indigenous sources" (qtd. in Dutta 177). As an artist Tagore was an expressionistic painter who took inspiration from primitive forms. Due to the lack of academic training, Tagore's painting showed a kind of naive quality. Tagore always wanted to consider his paintings as doodles and he explains the process of his paintings which is similar to the idea of "art for art sake". In short, Tagore paintings are reflections of his philosophy, his own imagination, and his intuitive experience. He hardly attempted to see everyday life of the people around him and represent them in his paintings. Mitter observes that, "Tagore's painting originated in his game of creating shapes out of crossed-out texts. [… his] primitivism sprang from an inner psychological need" *(Indian Art*, 193-194).

Apart from his artistic endevours he is more known for establishing Santiniketan, an innovative centre for artistic activities. Unlike the conventional formal schools set up under colonial rule, Tagore wanted to create a new environment for learning which will lead to individual liberation. While the colonial education system focused on creating more skilled people to assist the colonial rule, Tagore's idea was just the opposite, that is to bring full freedom to each individual. The school was, in Rabindranath's own words, "an effort to take education into our hands…[and make it] as indigenous as possible" (qtd. in Sivakumar, "Santiniketan", 104). Tagore says that he has,

> [T]ried to save children from such vicious methods of alienating their minds which are fostered through books, through histories, geographies and lessons full of national prejudices. I have done it with the help of friends from the West. In the East there is a great deal of bitter resentment against Western races, which rankles in our hearts, and in our own homes we are brought up in feelings of hatred. I have tried to save the children from that, and these friends from the West, with their understanding, with their human sympathy and love, have done as a great service. We are building up our institution upon the ideal of the spiritual unity of all races. (798-799).

Tagore's writings show that he has approached all the social problems that prevailed in the Indian society including caste and untouchabablity from a universal perspective. He says that,

> India tolerated difference of races from the first, and that spirit of toleration has acted all through her history. Her caste system is the outcome of this spirit of toleration. For India has all along been trying experiments in evolving a social unity within which all the different peoples could be held together, yet fully enjoying the freedom of maintaining their own differences. (501)

But his observation seems to be very unrealistic because it does not address the graded inequality existing in Indian society. He equates castiesm with the racism of the West. Whenever Europeans raised the issue of caste in India, he used to defend himself with a counter-question that why the race problem in the west is not solved (492).

The intention behind initiating Santiniketan was to try out his new educational approach which aims to provide a holistic education to the urban elites' children by providing an opportunity to experience the nature and surroundings. It was not intended to uplift the marginalized or underprivileged class. Rabindranath gave more importance to culture in his educational experiment. As India being a multicultural society what he meant by "Indian culture," that he wants to emphasize

is problematic. Uma Das Gupta points out that Rabindranath insisted on the urban children's need to live and learn in a different atmosphere away from their city homes; and their education would be incomplete without knowledge of rural living (32). Rajarshi Chunder critically explains the social reality of Santiniketan of that time. She says that "Tagore's attachment to Vedic brahminism—particularly to the caste system, the supposed superiority of brahmanical celibacy and austere life—inspired him to set up the *Brahmacharyashram* at Shantiniketan and he found Santiniketan ideal for such a school" (n. pag.). She also states that by following *vedic gurukula* practice "the school became a repository of Vedic brahmanism, an ideal which was largely Tagore's own construction." She explains further that Tagore was a strong believer of Varnasrama and he emphazised the virtue of "Brahman" throughout the interaction with the students. Chunder categorically states that in the initial stage, the students enrolled in the school were all from upper castes and untouchability was practiced between Brahmin and non-brahmin students and teachers (Chunder). Santhosh also rightly observes that Santiniketan is a "suspended space from both reality and imagination". On the one hand, it was trying to capitalize the culture of the habitat by maintaining the primitive ambiance of the place and on the other, they were trying to exclude the actual presence of the *Santals*, the real subaltern community lived in the area where Santhiniketan was built. Santhosh explains further:

> The land of this University was a *Santal* habitat before it was acquired by the Tagore family in order to establish an educational institution. But the educational institution was not imagined as an institution for the *Santal* community. On the contrary, the *Santals* remained a marginal presence or absence in this imagination. The presence of *Santals* here is defined by the symbolic economy of the primitive ambience of the place, while their physical absence had constituted its materiality. ("What was", 62-63)

The satirical response of Ramkinkar also shows how people from the subaltern classes respond to elitist vision of Tagore. Kinkar stated that, "It was the

Santiniketan Brahmacharya Vidyalaya. I was astonished. I had wished to go to art school in Calcutta. What was I going to do in the Brahmacharya Vidyalaya?" (qtd. in Santhosh , "What was", 71).

Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) who belonged to the same school was considered one of the pioneers of modern Indian art and a key figure of contextual Modernism. He was known for his indigenous style which was inspired by Ajanta paintings and he tried to bring back that style in murals, folk traditions and Indian mythology. He is best known for his close association with Gandhi and *Haripura* posters (1938) (fig.17) consisting of more than 400 posters of rural life which propagated the idea of *poorna swaraj* (absolute freedom), a slogan of the Indian National Congress which was in the forefront of India's freedom struggle. Nandalal's admiration towards Gandhi was quite obvious in the linocut portraying Gandhi in Dandi March (1930) (fig.18). Gandhi's struggle against the salt-law was symbolized in a dark white lino-cut of Mahatma venturing out with his walking stick, inspiring a feeling of solid will to conquer all impediments. Unlike Rabindranath Tagore and Abanidranath, Nandalal had shown interest in depicting a worldview taking stylistic reference from Kalighat patuas. The *Haripura* posters should be considered not only as the culmination of his interest in folk paintings but also anticipating his experiments in murals. The images reflected in his work were the lives of ordinary people like hunters, musicians, bull handlers, carpenters, smiths, spinners, village women, and so on. Natasha Eaton comments that this approach has helped to reduce the gap between the subaltern and the elite nationalistic approach. "In this new configuration, art serves as a vital means of communicating to the subaltern masses" (632). However, Partha Mitter observes that Nandalal was using the subaltern representation in his works to propagate his nationalistic agenda rather than representing their real problems. Mitter stated that,

> [T]his is also the era when the nationalists came to admire the hunting and gathering communities of India for their robust innocence uncorrupted by colonial culture. […] To the Bengali elite the 'sexualized' image of the *Santal* women became inextricably

> linked with the myth of their innocent 'vitality', serving as a foil to the trope that blamed the 'loss' of the Bengali vigour on colonial domination." (29)

The term subaltern is used by the critics in a general sense. However, the category of the subaltern looked into by Indian critics does not represent the real subalterns who are oppressed by the caste discrimination. Bose's strong association with Gandhi and the Indian National Congress has influenced him so much so that his art works became a tool of propaganda to promote the political ideas of Gandhi and the Congress Party. Hence, the representations of marginalized people in his works cannot be seen as a result of his genuine concern towards the subaltern. Rather, it has to be seen as a reflection of the paternalistic attitude of elite Indian nationalists including Gandhi towards the rural oppressed people. Though Nandalal, like any other artist, has the freedom to chose his subject matter for his artistic representation his decision to follow the vision and footprints of Gandhi put himself in a problematic position because the attitude of Gandhi towards the marginalized (Dalits/Tribal) was purely based on his faith in *sanantana-dharma* or the external duties expected of a person on basis of their birth in a particular cast. It is to be noted that Gandhi's idea about *grama swaraj* or self-reliant village has been criticized by Ambedkar as it will aggravate the exploitation and the repression of Dalits at the hands of the upper caste that holds power in the villages.

Jamini Roy, another important artist of the time, was very much against the style practiced by the Bengal School. He criticized the Bengal School for not discarding the western style completely in their art practices and for not showing intensity in boycotting westernization in Indian art. Instead, he stood for a drastic stylistic change in his painting by fusing Kalighat Patua tradition to bring in the Indianess. He states "I want to discard European painting not because I wish to be "Swadeshi" or Indian" (qtd. in Chatterjee 7).

Critics like Partha Mitter and Ratnabali Chatterjee have pointed out the various aspects of his Jamini Roy's artistic trajectories. Mitter observes that, "Jamini Roy tried to encompass the very expressive power of the village artisans by

enhancing the lines at the expense of colours, using black outlines painted with a brush on white paper (*The Triumph*,106). Chatterjee observes that Jamini Roy is caught between a colonial hangover and a feeling of nationalism adjoining on chauvinism; the middle-class intelligentsias were oscillating between two extremes (5). Both the critics cited above ignored the fact of cultural appropriation involved in Roy's art practice in the name of Indianess. Mitter tries to justify it by viewing it as a modernist approach of primitivism.

Roy was also actively associated with the Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) of that time. The main objective of PWA was to bring out a radical change in the society by practicing "scientific rationalism" in literature and other cultural mediums. The manifesto of PWA proclaims that, "Indian writers should combat literary trends reflecting communalism, racial antagonism and exploitation of man by man. […] We believe that the new literature of India must deal with the basic problems of hunger and poverty, social backwardness and political subjection" (sapfonline.org). The objectives of this group had been literally practiced by many prominent writers of that period who were members of this group.

The literary works of Mulk Raj, one of the founding members of this group, is the best example for the same. One of his popular novels, *Untouchable* (1935), exposes the pathetic life of manual scavengers and the hypocrisy of the Indian society who had oppressed them and treated them worse than slaves. Though Anand was a great admirer of Gandhi, he was critical of Gandhi's attitude towards caste (Anand, 128). But Roy, in spite of his close affiliation with the Progressive Group, never tried to express a proletarian ideology through his works. This reflects the contradiction between the ideological proclamations and practical works that existed among the majority of mainstream Indian artists.

Ramkinkar Baij, who himself was a subaltern, was another very important artist who belongs to the Bengal School and was very unique in his life and artistic approach. Starting in the mid-1930s, Ramkinkar created a number of sculptures, which were innovative in terms of subject matter and technique. His first mature work of importance is the *Santal Family* (1938) (fig.19). The representation of a

marginalized Santal tribal family in a larger-than-life sculpture by a subaltern artist was very new to the art scenario of that time and it remains very relevant even today. Materializing such work in ordinary and inexpensive medium like cement and Bamboo, Kinkar brought out a new approach to the Indian sculptural practice. By portraying Indian marginalized life by adopting an expressionistic style, Kinkar brought a new social realist approach to Indian art which was considered very radical at that time in Indian art. Though his works are remarkable and unique compared with any of the Bengal School of artists in terms of style and representation it is important to look at how he has not been adequately positioned in the art historiography.

2.4. Context of *Santal Family.*

R. Siva Kumar's essay "Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism" (1997) begins with a long explanation of the philosophical and political contribution of Rabindranath Tagore and the whole essay is structured in such away as to argue that the foundation of modernism in India was laid by Rabindranath Tagore and ends up with the contribution of Ramkinkar Baij. The essay gives a feel that the whole legacy of Santiniketan in terms of ideological, aesthetical and philosophical position belongs to the Tagore family and Nandalal Bose. By over emphasizing Tagore and Nandalal the art historiography have been denying the actual position that Kinkar deserves. Through this essay, Kumar was actually defending the elite artists generalising the representation of Santal life portrayed in works of subaltern artist Kinkar. He also states that other two *savarna* elite artists, Nandalal and Benode Behari, also have depicted such elements in their works. Rather than viewing it from different perspective he continued arguing that "In Nandalal not only the Santhals but human subject matter in general was seen as a part of the larger reality of nature, and the human figure was shown in close-up or represented monumentally only when man assumed a larger-than-life role as in myths or history " (Kumar, "Santiniketan"). But as already pointed out, Nandalal's approach on the social problems is very much associated with Gandhi's vision of *grama swaraj* and it cannot be compared with the approach of a true sabaltern artist

like Kinkar. Kumar says that the subaltern representation in Kinkar is "….responding to the Santhal's natural zest for life, and takes a greater interest in the human figure, its body language, and in the human drama in general." Besides that, Kumar is also trying to put Kinkar into the nationalistic folder of the Bengal School. Kumar says that, the portrayal of Gandhi a full-size sculpture by Kinkar "shows Gandhi as a man striding triumphantly through a crumbling world (fig.20). He saw Gandhi as a moving colossus, a whirlwind of action." (Kumar "Santiniketan"). However, the Dalit art historian, Y.S. Alone says Kinkar was never been an admirer of Gandhi and he was an artist with a unique worldview which he attained from his subaltern life. Alone categorically states:

> He created a number of key models as a precursor to this sculpture. Baiz's (Baij's) large rendering of Gandhi—which literally depicts Gandhi on a pedestal and with a human skull under his foot—remains the sole example from a modernist who refuses to accept Gandhi's persona as that of an extraordinary person. According to Baiz, "Gandhi became Mahatma by crushing people" (fig. 20). Baiz made this statement when Ritwik Ghatak made a documentary showing Baiz before the colossal image of Gandhi, explaining the importance of the human skull. Baiz decodes Gandhian achievements by placing the skull under the feet of a tall, towering Gandhi. The sculptor's deliberate intervention is rooted in pragmatic understandings and not in romanticizing this icon of the Indian freedom struggle. Baiz therefore harshly critiques the idea of Gandhi as a figure of "nonviolence." Baiz's image of Gandhi is conceptualized through a formalistic engagement and offers a different reading of Gandhi that challenges Brahmanical representations. (148)

After going through the arguments of a mainstream historian like Kumar and Dalit scholar Y.S.Alone, one can easily find that Alone's view is more convincing and logical.

To cite another example, Geeta Kapur's essay "When Was Modernism" devotes a large number of pages to describe K. G. Subramanyan's trajectory elaborately whereas the contribution of Kinkar was too short and limited to supplement Subramanyan's achievements. In one of his essays, "Ram Kinkar", (1978) K. G. Subramanian talks about Ram Kinkar briefly, only in two pages. Whereas he talks elaborately about other artists like Abanidranath, Rabindranath, Binod Behari and Amrita She-Gill. His attempt to discuss others elaborately and reduce Kinkar's contribution to a very few pages cannot be viewed as an accidental one. The contradiction in K. G. S' perception is explicit in his own words: "Kinkarbabu is so unique on the modern Indian art scene; both in *his person* and in his work he is like no other" (102). The uniqueness K. G. S observed in Kinkar is not the aesthetical quality of his work but the personal mannerism and Kinkar's Bohemian lifestyle. Subramanyan's condescending attitude is more evident here in overlooking the real contribution of Kinkar and the radical potential of his works.

Santhosh's criticism of observation of K. G. S and Mitter regarding Kinkar's work in art historiography is very relevant as it exposes the elite bias of mainstream art historiographers and critics. Santhosh points out how K. G. S, a student of Ramkinkar, was trying to underestimate the intellectual acumen of Kinkar by using peculiar linguistic expressions and argues that KGS's usage of words like "animal like" and "instinctive" is not to appreciate him but to overlook the intellectual quality of Kinkar (62). Mitter was trying to give the credit for Kinkar's revolutionary approach to the legacy of the fraternity of Santiniketan School. Santhosh adds that Mitter has overlooked the representation of marginalized in Kinkar's work and shows how Mitter emphazised the work of Debi Prasad Choudhury, at times spelled differently as Devi Prosad Chaudhary, comparing Choudhury's *Triumph of Labour* with Ramkinkar's *Mill Call.* In fact, in *Triumph of Labour* Choudhary tries to bring the universal problem of working class and it is not specific to any region. Whereas, Kinkar's *Santhal* in *Mill Call* was a specific representation of Indian Subaltern, with special focus on the participation of Santal women in labour force. Mitter seems to have ignored this very important factor. Santhosh rightly observes:

> The question of ethnicity, caste, gender, etc., is very central in Ramkinkar's discourse, and traces of a critical element of the local are always present in his representations. The Santals in Ramkinkar's *Mill Call* are not the primitive ideal or the 'unchanging community' of Mitter. Here, Ramkinkar looks at modernity from a subaltern's point of view. In a general sense, modernity here appears as an emancipatory discourse and a historically available option for subalterns to break away from the oppressive machinery of the traditional social system. (“What Was”, 61)

After analyzing a few examples from the art historiography one can easily understand that Kinkar was not given importance like other mainstream artists. Elite artists like Bose and K. G. S who belong to intelligentsia got prominence in the art historiography not merely because of their artistic ability but also because of their capability in articulation, social networking connectivity as well as their class/caste elitism. Unlike elite artists, subalterns would be hesitant to speak publically about their works and would hardly be capable of forcefully articulating the uniqueness of their work. But instead of practicing cultural appropriation like other artists of the Bengal School, Ramkinkar went ahead with the true calling of his own taste and eventually it culminated in a new vibrant language of art.

The artists coming from the marginalized rural background usually will not have the excitement or an exotic eye on any culture form like those who are coming from urban/elite background until and unless they have any particular intention for it. Their attitude towards art cannot be compared with the western way of practices or with elite urban Indian artists. For them present life is more important than the past or future and they usually do not think of preserving anything. Instead of preserving the art, they practiced art as part of their day-to-day life and Kinkar’s approach towards his practices also has to be viewed from this perspective. He was more interested in making art instead of propagating an ideology. Regarding his work, he said: “I do not know whether what I am doing is modern or not, but it is based on my experience.” (qtd. in Kumar , “Santiniketan”)

The major criticism raised in this thesis upon the Bengal School is its practice of cultural appropriation. The new method adopted by Abanindranath Tagore to bring Indianess in the art in order to resist colonialism has encouraged his disciples like Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy and K.G. Subramanian to follow his ideological and aesthetic position with regard to borrowing ideas from Indigenous cultures. Just as European artists who borrowed material from "pimitive art" and projected them as modern art, Indian artists also began to incorporate indigenous/tribal elements to accelerate the momentum of modernism in India. The only difference between the European and Indian elite artists perhaps is that the latter tried to use it as an instrument for their anti-colonial resistance, especially as a part of *swadeshi* movement. Their quest for "modernism" and nationalism during the early 20th century ended up in their rejoicing the freedom of borrowing cultural expressions of the indigenous people. Partha Mitter argues in one of his books, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India,* that Indian artists started to think about adding indigenous elements in their own work only after the Europeans started incorporating their imageries with primitive ideas and eastern spirituality**.** He also adds "India and Modern Art failed to consider "artistic intention" in its historical setting" ("Art and" 4).

Nandalal Bose himself once observed that, "I had once done some practice in Kalighat Pats—it was after all not a waste of time. I reaped its fruits at *Haripura* Congress. What I drew there was just a playful extension of the *Kalighat Pats*" (qtd. in Chopra 70). Jamini Roy's practice is also another instance of the cultural appropriation. He directly took the style and techniques of *Kalighat* painting and began to contempororise it by adding contemporary social life in his compositions. His works titled Mother *and Child* (1940) (fig.21), *Yashoda and Krishna* (N.d) (fig.22) are examples for the *Pats* influence. However, the mainstream criticism and historiography were conveniently ignoring the issue of cultural appropriation practiced by artists belonging to the Bengal School. For instance, Mitter even tries to justify Roy differentiating his practice from the European artists stating that the Western "primitivists" were mainly concerned with the predicament of urban existence, whereas Indian artists applied primitivism as an effective weapon against

colonial culture (Mitter, “Decentering”, 543). The artist and art scholars trained under European academia during this period failed to critique the appropriation in the field of art. In other words, we have to assume that the elite /intellectual classes of India had shown green signal for the appropriation of indigenous cultures and cultural expressions during that period.

Ideologically the Bengal school projected an anti-colonial resistance through their artistic endeavors; but technically, they were following the method practiced by European artists. This position adopted by the Bengal School seems contradictory because, on the one hand, they were trying to resist colonialism but were adopting cultural imperialist policies towards the indigenous culture**.** Most of the artists who attempted to imbibe “modernism” or “Indianess” belonged to the dominant culture and, they borrowed profusely from the cultural expressions of marginalized communities. Another contradiction is the artist belonging to the school tried to evoke nationalism by appropriating cultural expressions of tribes and other indigenous art forms. Hugh Seton-Watson observes that it is so complicated that it is not easy to decide at what point “tribal consciousness” becomes “national consciousness”. Those who use the word “tribe” of others are usually convinced that they themselves belong to a higher culture and are looking at persons of a lower culture (5).

Kinkar did not want to capitalise on his cultural root and to use it for propaganda or to attain fame. But his works were a natural reflection of his subaltern identity. While describing contextual modernism, especially with reference to the contribution of Santiniketan School, Siva Kumar argued that the artists shared “belief in the need for a renaissance” and in doing so brought such modern context in Indian art. He continues:

> Such a rethinking was necessary because on the one hand the historical context had changed and on the other it was only through a rethinking of the basic issues from time to time that art can remain in contact with reality. They also understood that such rethinking held the key to modernism and that the new developments in art concept

> and practice, we call modernism, have to be contextual or related to history and environment. (Kumar, “Santiniketan”, 1997)

The idea of “contextual modernism” seems to be problematic because Kumar approaches the trajectories of all artists generally from Tagore’s vision and it only envisaged the “imaginary” Indian society and did not mention about the real society where “graded inequalities” exists.

2.5 The Transition: Colonial to Postcolonial

The Progressive Artists Group was formed in 1947 by a group of artists like F. N. Souza, M. F. Husain, S. H. Raza, K. H. Ara, S. K. Bakre, and H.A. Gade as a counter practice to the nationalistic approach of the Bengal School and stood for the establishment of a universal formalistic language. “[R]ather than developing an indigenous modernism, they believed the right thing for the Indian artist was to assimilate the language of modern art and become a part of international modernism” (Kumar, “Modern Indian”, 18). The Progressive Group was very much influenced by the West, especially, European modern art. Picasso was a key inspiration for many artists of this group and the style of F. N. Souza is an example of this. Though Souza was the intellectual leader of this group, it is MF Hussain who became the most popular artist of this group.

> Husain emerged as the major allegorist for the nation with his ceaseless endeavor to give plastic expression to the entire gamut of co-existing myths, faiths, conflicts and personae that make up a vision of the nation. His paintings are filled with the kind of archetypal imageries woven from his lived experience of India where one can find the details of nature, rural and urban essence. (Sambrani 106-107)

Though Husain belonged to the minority within the Indian Muslim community he had hardly addressed minority issues through his work. Kapur observes that, “Hussain's artistic weaknesses are related to the fact that he failed to discover a deeper relationship with his images, and beyond them, to the subjects, the

people he painted…. He did develop an idiom, original to an extent, but not powerful enough to give expression to the Indian identity,' which he' sought to characterize throughout his imagery" (*In Quest*, n.p).

Another prominent artist of the Progressive Artists Group was A. H. Ara who has been overlooked by art historians and critics while giving importance to other members of the group. Qaroon Thapar, an independent art curator observes that Aara was a "gem in many ways". She continues that while other artists of this group moved abroad and gained a reputation, he stayed back, and tried to mentor artists who struggled both with real life and artistic imagination " (qtd. in Sharma). One of the reasons for underestimating his artistic endeavours by the mainstream historiographers may be because of Ara's caste identity. Ara comes from a Dalit family in Andrapradesh. His educational background was poor and his articulation was weak compared to the other artists of the group. Moreover, he had not approached his artwork as a commodity like others. Instead of adopting a professional approach, in selling or preserving the works he generously gave away his works to his friends and well-wishers. Ara's works did not get the importance he deserved because they did not conform to the dominant aesthetic criteria. Though the Progressive Group had rejected the nationalism projected by the Bengal School they failed to be "progressive" in understanding Indian society because they only tried to imbibe the formalism of Western art and the class consciousness of leftist ideology.

Another significant art movement in post-independent India called the "Group 1890" was initiated by twelve young painters: Jagadeesh Swaminathan, Jeram Patel, Ambadas, Rajesh Mehra, Ghulammohammad Sheikh, Jyoti Bhatt, Raghav Kaneria, Himmat Shah, Eric Bowen, Balkrishna Patel, Redappa Naidu and S.G. Nigam. These artists met in 1962, at the residence of Jyoti and Jayant Pandya at Bhavnagar, in Gujarat. Ideologically the Group 1890 opposes the hegemony of the Western culture that promotes internationalism. Swaminathan became the most popular artist from this group because of his intellectual brilliance and cultural capital. Art historians considered him as a prominent artist because of his effort in

bridging between mainstream art practices and indigenous cultural expressions. However, his actual roots goes back to "the philosophy of transcendence that of the Vedanta in its Advaitic interpretation" (Kapur, *Contemporary Indian,* 193). He argued for internationalism that questions the orienatlist attitude in art practices incorporating Marxist ideology. However, what we saw in him was a "…breaking away from the Communist Party, Swaminathan was going back …. to the combination that Gandhi represented" that is " indigenism and political anarchism." (Kapur, *Contemporary Indian,* 192). Swaminathan's view that indigenous need not always be taken as a reflection of their specific ritual but it can also be viewed just as a work of art is problematic. He focused on Indian folk tradition and tribal culture, as they are symbols of magical aspirations. He repeatedly used symbols derived from Indian mythology, like the signs of *om, swastika,* the lotus, the *lingam,* the snake, and the palm imprint (Kapur, *Contemporary Indian,* 198).

However, the relevant question here is how much was he aware of the spiritual significance of the symbols and forms of the indigenous cultures he borrowed. Kapur clearly states that Swaminathan's borrowing of indigenous symbols and motifs are part of cultural appropriation. Kapur observes:

> To rob a symbol of its hallowed place and register it on the blank canvas may or may not be a sacrilegious act. It is to a large extent futile. It is with a specific purpose and belief that a votive tablet with a relief of a snake image is placed at the roots of the *pipal* tree; or the magnificent lingam within the most holy precincts of the temple. They serve as symbols of fertility. It is only in these appropriate contexts that they perform; the numen in every icon needs its own special locale and ambience to manifest itself. One can pilfer the form but not the immanent spirit which continues to hover in its due abode, chosen by the believer with an intuition that perhaps only faith can provide. (*Contemporary Indian,* 199)

By de-contextualizing, the indigenous symbols and motives Swaminathan must have gained international recognition as an Indian artist just like Jamini Roy

who has achieved his position as Indian 'primitivist 'or modernist by appropriating indigenous cultural expressions**.** Upholding the Gandhian ideology, Swaminathan was knowingly or unknowingly endorsing the brahminical notion of culture.

The debate regarding whether modern artists should emphasize internationalism or Indian national identity was very active in the post-1940 Indian art scenario. In South India, K. C. S. Paniker initiated a new direction towards the native understating of art by forming a common platform for artists called Progressive Painters' Association in Chennai in 1944. As he believed that there can be no international art without national characteristics and western art has ceased to be a vital source for Indian avant-garde. Though he had incorporated a post-impressionistic style in the beginning of his career, by 1960 he began to search for a new language for his expressions that was rooted in the Indian tradition. Paniker's language became more abstract with words and symbols in the later period which "were not for reading but were intended to evoke a lost culture" which was known as Tantric art (Kumar "Modern Indian"19). Here the "lost culture" has to be seen within the context of lost Sanskrit texts. By creating such mystical words and symbols such as writing on palm leaves he was trying to make Indian art a continuum of brahminical caste tradition which practiced obscurantism. In addition, Ajit Mookerjees's books on Tantra art: Its philosophy & Physics (1967) also gave intellectual support to the Indian artists who practiced this tradition. N.N. Rimzon observes that Paniker's attempt to create a new language was to bring a kind of Indianess into his work which can be showcased in front of an international audience. Rimzon explains:

> Paniker had done an exhibition in London in late 1940s and those paintings were very much influenced by the post-impressionistic style of Europe. Though his European friends appreciated his skill they also shared a concern about the lack of Indianess in his painting and advised him to necessitate a style of art practice, which reflects Indianess. For Paniker that comment was an eye-opener and he began to search for a new style of art which is oriented towards India.

> Eventually, he reached to the style of painting which is known as "words and symbols" and the reference of these paintings can be traced in the traditional palm-leaf manuscript. ("Personal Interview")

Before attempting to take art from his realistic approach to an abstract level like the series *Words and Symbols* (fig.23) Paniker had portrayed commoners and marginalized people in his paintings. For instance, *Farmer's Family* (fig.24) painted in 1954 depicts the sabaltern life. However, the criticism on Paniker is that he had caught up with the aesthetics of dominant culture in his later period. By bringing the new mystical vocabulary based on words and symbols which has a similarity with the manuscript of palm leaves of the Hindu text, he was disabling the viewership of commoners knowingly or unknowingly.

2.6 School of Baroda: Paradigm Shift or Peripheral Change?

The emergence of the Baroda School or the Baroda Group envisaged a new dimension towards the pedagogy of art education in terms of theory and practice (Sheikh 55). But how they understood "modernity" is a debatable point. Though the Baroda school seems to have taken a liberal stand in terms of art practices of the students compared to Santiniketan in the initial stage, soon it also became part of the continuum of the nationalistic approach under the influence of artists like K. G. Subramanyan (K.G.S) who was appointed there as a teaching faculty. K. K. Hebbar, Ravishankar Raval, Somalal Shah, eminent Indologist Herman Goetz, Pradosh Das Gupta, N. S. Bendre, Sanko Chaudhari and V. R. Amberkar were the important figures of the Baroda Group in the initial stage.

K. G. S became the most influential person in the Baroda school as a teacher and art crtic. Since he was a student of Nandalal Bose, he had a strong affiliation with swaraj movement and Gandhian ideologies. He tried to carry forward the legacy of the Bengal School after Bose. Though Ramkinkar was also one of his teachers he had not shown much interest in the social realism that was practiced by Kinkar. Instead, he introduced a new pedagogy assimilating Gandhi's concept of *grama swaraj* which he thought was an integral part of Indian culture. Siva Kumar's observation that "Among the artists of this generation K. G. Subramanian belongs to

the few who were more consistently exercised the issue of "culture sensitivity" in modernist practice…." (Culture specificity", 15, 19) is debatable because he has not specified which culture was represented in K.G.S's works when he talks about "cultural sensitivity". K. G. S always endorsed only the Hindu culture through his work and hence for him "culture" means the Hindu culture and it is so explicit in his own words:

> In a culture where the gods have to incarnate themselves as human beings (sometimes even as animals) to come to the aid of fellow humans, they are rarely perfect; they too have their weaknesses and vulnerabilities…I do occasionally build round a well-known theme, and give it new implications. The *matsya avatar* motif, for example, generates the vision of a fish goddess. Symbolising elegance and grace or a conference of mermaids. It will be unproductive to explain each image as it will destroy the mystery of its birth. (" I am")

Further, referring to Mahabharata Subramanyan says that, "Most developed cultures have stories of this kind that unmask the contradictions inherent in human life and indicate a way of resolving them, of facing them with dignity" (Subramanyan). Hence, the present thesis puts forth the argument that even K.G.S, just like the pioneers of the Santiniketan School, was culturally prejudiced. Therefore, he was least bothered about the problem of subaltern and he never attempted to address such issues. Because he must have thought all inequalities and oppressions are "natural" and part of *dharma* and *karma*.

As pointed out previously in this study, modernism in Western art in the Indian context is problematic as it involves the question of cultural appropriation. Subramanian has conveniently borrowed from many European artists like Picasso and Matisse who were already critiqued for taking ideas from African and Eastern cultural expressions. In this context, K.G.S's borrowing ideas from indigenous cultural expressions was also not very different from the western art practitioners who ignored the issue of appropriation. This appropriation of indigenous cultural expressions was neither utilized to highlight the reality of the oppressed/

marginalized communities nor to promote their artistic expressions. On the contrary, it was purely intended to bring a new aesthetic formula in order to revive and retain the "living tradition." Notwithstanding this, the historiography of Indian modern art has given more importance to KGS' works and thoughts than to other artists of the period. For instance, Kapur has written elaborately about KGS' contribution, aesthetics and his ability to explore the traditional crafts and the medium that he worked with, but did not mention the issue of ethics in borrowing indigenous cultural elements (*When Was,* 87).

By the 1970s the Art History Department of Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda showed self-critical awareness initiated by Gulam Muhammed Shiek, Ratan Parimoo and Vishnu Kumar Bhatt. Three of them contributed their perception on art history and aesthetics based on their own understanding. Parimoo argued for a new art history curriculum that will offer a new humanistic holistic approach rather than limiting it into an archeological study. Ajay Sinha makes the following comment on the paradigm shift created by Parimoo as,

> [He] used the European strain to contest a British colonial legacy, and to create displacements of the colonial roots of discipline while also critiquing the nationalist position…he urged the art historians to see the "visual" aspect of the material artifacts as the primary imprint of mind of an artist". (152)

Art criticism by the artists like K. G. S, Gieve Patel, J. Swaminathan, Gulam Muhammed Sheik, Nilima Sheik, Mala Marwah and Bhupen Khakhar created fresh awareness among the art circle. Geeta Kapur joined this fraternity after completing her studies in art criticism and history from overseas. She along with other artists K.G.S, Gulam Muhammed Shiek and Bhupen Khakhar tried to bring a new discourse in art practices. Kapur's extensive writings appeared in the *Vrichik*, an initiative of Sheik and Bhupen and discussed the problem related to the contemporary Indian and world art. However, how much their interventions in art practices and approaches have changed and gone beyond the Gandhian and Nehruvian perspective is debatable. Were they able to perceive modernism through

the perspective of “modernity”? Apart from Gandhian and Nehruvian ideologies that were already prevalent in art practices of the Baroda Group, Kapur tried to add dialectical materialism also into that, but it remained peripheral only. Kapur’s dilemma in locating modernism in Indian art is explicit in her book *When Was Modernism? Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India* (2000). For instance, she finds modernism in Subramanian, considering his formalistic approach which he imbibed from the western “modern” primitivism and indigenous affinity. She says,

> His modernity is linked to the semiotic option and his indigenism is reinforced by precisely this choice as it gives him access to the premodern cultures of India. Where tradition is still alive to the extent that a collective system of significations can be encountered-as in peasant and tribal communities of India, art can be said to equal language. (125)

However, her observation is problematic because she is not defining what she means by “premodern culture”. Since K.G.S’s practices are moulded with the influences of Tagore, Gandhi and Coomaraswamy, his cultural consciousness also was very much rooted in the *Vedic* traditions. He always argued for the necessity of the revival of the Hindu mythology and epics which endorsed the *sanatanadharma* and he was upholding all traditional values. On the one hand, Kapur was trying to see this revival of traditional values as part of modernism; on the other hand, she was giving credits to “[t]he communist parties of India, the CPI and the CPI(M), [who] support the irreversible project of modernization with a reasonable, secular nationalism” (*When Was*, 203). While she dedicated most of the pages of her book to describe Brahmanical artists like Amrita Sher-Gil and Subramanyan, the true subaltern artist Ramkinkar was treated like a “tribal persona”(*When Was,* 203) and discussion of his contribution was limited to only a few lines. This shows her elitist bias. Though she claims to be a Marxist, her art criticism hardly goes beyond the formalistic approach. On Kapur’s refusal to engage with the caste question, Santhosh opines,

> According to the left-liberal framework espoused by Kapur the question of race or caste only appears as an ideological question …..But what needs to be stressed and clarified here is that questions of race or caste have never been merely ideological in character; they are in fact the constituent core of both the experiential and theoretical realms of nation and modernity. (“Spectres of”, 54)

2.7 Can the Queer Subaltern Speak?

Among the artists from the Baroda School, especially Bhupen Khakhar’s contributions have to be discussed because his works need to be studied from the perspective of his gay subaltern identity. In addition, his effort to bridge the gap between the “high” art and “low” art also has to be considered. Khakhar’s strong involvement with the Baroda School had begun from the early 1960s. The simplicity of his works and selection of themes related to commoners brought great admiration for his paintings in the beginning of his career. Most often, his paintings became a kind of documentary of the lower-middle-class life of the Indian society. The naive quality of his forms and metaphysical mode of rendering, innovative handling of two-dimensional space and colour made his painting very unique among his contemporaries:

> In these paintings one of the major concerns of Bhupen is with pictorial space. He moves away from a two- dimensional, diagrammatic space and towards a 'landscape space'. But this is by no means naturalistic- the landscape is schematised and ornamented. This tendency suggests two indigenous references (Kapur, “In Quest”, n.p).

Some of Bhupen’s works titled such as *Janata Watch Repairing* (1972) (fig.25), *Factory Strike* (1972) (Fig.26), *The Celebration of Guru Jayanti* (1980) (fig.27) suggest different layers and possibilities. Roobina Karode observes that over the years, Khakhar rose to become an extraordinary figure in Indian art, a true exemplar of uncompromising honesty, who disregarded purist trends and divides between “high” and “low” art (Karode). The question of what is “high” and “ low”

art has remained debatable in the context of conflicting aesthetic values.

However, the basic question is who has unilaterally decided the borderline between the high and low art. Generally classical music/ art have been considered high art and the folk/tribal/art has been regarded as low art. Classical art forms are rigid, complex and are limited to elites whereas, the low art forms are flexible and they entertain the masses. The content and forms of classic art are more refined, abstract and religious; whereas the content and forms of low art /folk art are natural and self-explanatory and reflect the subaltern life world. The American sociologist Herbert Gans theoretically juxtaposes the conflicting values systems existing in hight and low art as:

> The aesthetic standards of low culture stress substance form being totally subservient, and there is no explicit concern with abstract ideas or even with fictional forms of contemporary social problems and issues. As a result, high and upper-middle culture is almost never borrowed and adapted. Low culture also emphasizes the morality play, but it limits itself primarily to familial and individual problems and to values which apply to such problems; low culture content thus depicts how traditional working-class values win out over the temptation to give into conflicting impulses and behavior patterns. The culture's dominant values are dramatized and sensationalized more than in lower-middle culture; the emphasis is on demarcating good and evil. Low culture fiction is often melo-dramatic, and its world is divided more clearly into heroes and villains, with the former always winning out eventually over the latter. (108)

By adopting the language of Pop Art, Khakhar was trying to represent the life of “low culture” as well as trying to place him as a negotiator of gender equality. Revealing his gay identity during the 1960s and 70s was risky because homosexuality was a criminal offence under the Indian Penal Code. It is only by the late 1990s gay/lesbian identity politics were openly discussed in the Indian public sphere.

Khakhar's self-proclamation as a gay through his works was far ahead of his time. "Since 1981, Khakhar has painted images with explicit homosexual themes in his paintings" (170). Unlike the earlier works which closely carried the tone of an ethnographer, his later paintings are veiled in myth. Through paintings like *You Can't Please All* (1981) (fig.28), *Yayati* (1987) (fig.29) and *Two Men in Banaras* (1985) (fig.30) Khakhar was trying to normalize the idea of homosexuality.

Yayati is another work that vividly proclaims Khakhar's sexuality. It follows the myth of an old king who asks his son to give him his youth. Khakhar converts this story to portray an aged man who receives a new lease of life from his young angelic lover. Khakhar often took the Hindu mythological characters and placed them into the contemporary context very politically and in a sarcastic manner. He says:

> [W]hen I did the one of *Ram Embracing Hanuman* (watercolour, 1998), then I was quite serious. Because there is a certain kind of relation I feel may have existed between them–animal and man–but I have not made it very explicit or I would not have been able to exhibit it anywhere". (Khakhar)

Khakhar was very much aware of the consequences that he would have to face if he portrays such a mythical theme in a sexually explicit manner. The way he depicted such mythological theme shows that his perspective on art is very much distinct from the other artists who have been endorsing the brahmanical thoughts through their art practices. Art curator Nada Raza observes that, "he [Khakhar] started by rejecting the idea of "Nehruvian" modernism…. His choice of color, his choice of form, his source materials were very carefully considered and didn't really reflect a global or elite approach. He was basically saying: I don't care—I belong to the India of Gandhi. I am going to portray my world" (Raza). If some of his earlier works are colsely examined, one can observe his tendency to gradually lean towards homosexual imageries by rendering erotic gestures or forms in his paintings. Beth Citron explains how Khakhar takes the American artist Anti Warhol as a role model for not only as a reference for his paintings style but also to support his gay identity.

Citron observes:

> These borrowings should be taken as especially meaningful in terms of understanding Khakhar's struggle with his personal and artistic identities in several Indian public spheres. While, by this time, Warhol was openly homosexual and could manipulate certain biographical factors like humble beginnings, lack of a fine-art degree, and initial rejection in the art world, these all remained sources of insecurity and instability for Khakhar. Revealing his homosexuality would have been even more fraught in the middle -class Gujarati society in which he also lived. In that sense, these photographs speak to Khakhar's desire to be like Warhol the person, more than just Warhol the artist. (57)

Khakhar's approach towards the depiction of LGBTQ themes, critiquing the orthodox religious living traditions, was a very deliberate attempt. He had said, "….there are hardly any other painters touching these sexual subjects. I guess people only want to hide…. I also responded to a beautiful passage in Virginia Woolf where she says you can't have art that only has a male voice. She says art needs an androgynous voice" (Khakhar). From the above-cited statements one can observe how politically and tactically he was approaching the gendered subaltern issue. His courage to proclaim himself as gay through his works gave a new direction and confidence to other marginalized, especially, LGBTQ artists to represent their own sexual identity. In that sense, Khakhar's works have to be seen as one of the rare representations of gender subalternity in modern Indian art practices.

2.8 "The Discreet Charm" of the Marxist?

Vivan Sundaram was another artist from the Baraod School who explicitly showed the concern of an activist by articulating his political ideology openly. He can be taken as a true representative of a postcolonial elite artist who practices art within the framework of Marxian, Gandhian and Nehruvian ideologies. Like any other Indian elite Marxists, Vivan also claims that his artistic practices are socially committed. He believes that "Marxism is concerned with developing human

potential in every area. That is the concept of the New Man. New visual experiences are part of this development" (Sundaram). Even if we agree with what he says for an argument, it is necessary to examine whether there is any such approach in his works. He talks about the conflicts and war between countries and will raise his voice for religious harmony through Nehruvian perspective and whenever occasion demands, he accommodates Gandhian ideologies also. He also shares his empathy towards marginalized "classes" but he never addressed the problem of the real subaltern who are being dehumanized and exploited in the society in which he lives. Though Vivan claims to be a Marxist he was also not very different from other artists who uphold the nationalistic approach and living traditions. The only difference one can find in him compared to other artists is perhaps that he is more explicit in portraying socially engaged themes. Having an elite brahmanical family background, Vivan always has been trying to capitalize on such heritage. His is an example to show how an elite family legacy would play a crucial role in moulding a successful artist in him. A glance at his biography will substantiate the argument:

> Sundaram remains an influential figure…The son of India's second Chief Election Commissioner (Tamil Brahmin)…Amrita Sher-Gil, one of the most important painters of pre-Independence India, was Sundaram's aunt. His grandfather was Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, a Sikh landowner and early photographer…. Another significant member of the family is the art critic and historian Geeta Kapur, Sundaram's wife, (Kamayani Sharma).

By taking forward this elite caste and class family legacy Sundaram posits himself as a Marxist liberal artist who engages his art with social issues from the Marxist perspective. But after seeing two of his major projects *Re-take of Amrita* (1991-92)(fig.31) and *The Sher-Gil Archive* (1995) (fig.32) one may question the Marxist perspective that he claims to share through these projects. Both these projects seem to be a mere projection of the aristocratic feudal life of Amrita Sher-Gil who was his own aunt. Vivan says about this work:

> In *Re-Take of Amrita*, I put the bodies of Umrao and Amrita together in such a way that a very sensual, sexual, almost incestuous relationship between the two is proposed. The *Sher-Gil* works feature a typical bourgeois family, but the elements couldn't be more exotic: a Sardar and a Hungarian, two daughters and a life of art. They are often read as a representation of a kind of early modern cosmopolitanism, of a romance between east and west. (qtd. in K.Sharma)

And in the second work, *The Sher-Gil Archive*, Vivan tries to look at the family photos of Amrita and his father from a feminist point of view. He says "I can also understand that from a feminist perspective it might appear as if I am imposing a male gaze …. In one sense, the rearrangement also disturbs the patriarchal order. By placing Amrita next to her father, it is almost as if she were saying, 'I am your equal" (qtd.in K.Sharma).

Whatever explanation Vivan gives on both these projects, his claims are not convincing to a larger extent. If he really wanted to address the issue of patriarchy, he should have addressed the brahmanical hegemony. Since there were many vital social issues around him through which he could have portrayed the problem of patriarchy effectively, his conscious decision to choose these photographs to convey such issues is problematic. As soon as he saw the photographs as a found object, his brahmanical mindset seems to have conceived the idea to "archive" his own family history. These photographs are not just pictures but they are documentation of elite bourgeois life and colonial luxurious interiors. What this photographic display has to do with the then contemporary Indian society is a crucial question. Both of Vivan's projects mentioned above can be at the most taken only as a mere attempt to "archive" his elitist class and cultural legacy of his family. Archives are social constructs. Jacques Derrida, the deconstructionist philosopher, explains the epistemology of archive. He says, "[t]he archons are first of all the documents' guardians. They do not only ensure the physical security of what is deposited and of the substrate. They are also accorded the hermeneutic right and competence. They

have the power to interpret the archives"(2). Joan M. Schwartz and Terry Cook explain it further on the function and potential of the archives:

> [A]archivists continually reshape, reinterpret, and reinvent the archive. This represents enormous power over memory and identity, over the fundamental ways in which society seeks evidence of what its core values are and has been where it has come from, and where it is going. Archives, then, are not passive storehouses of old stuff, but active sites where social power is negotiated, contested, confirmed". (1)

This is exactly the way the cultural capitalism has been working in India too. The archived materials work as an agent of historical power and authenticity on the history; and with that knowledge and power the caste-cum-caste elites retain the cultural hegemony. In a society where graded inequalities have been in existence for centuries, the knowledge and power of the dominant discourses not only controls the subaltern people but tries to exploit them through cultural appropriation. The subaltern, especially the Dalits and Adivasi have no archive of their own. Their knowledge system was practiced and preserved predominantly through the oral tradition and this system is purely dependent on memory. These memories have a certain power because it was purely based on their experience. For them, experience, memories, knowledge and oral histories are not different entities. Rather, it is perceived in totality as a Totem. Lack of such memories and history, which evolved through the experience, in elite artists often makes them inferior in their creative pursuit. This often led them in borrowing, stealing and recreating the original subaltern artists' works. Vivan's attempt of making 409 pieces of miniature replicas in the name of "re-imagining" Ramkinkar's much-appreciated works, *Santhal Family* and *Mill Re-call* in 2015 along with other elites has to be seen as an attempt to overcome such cultural inferiority (fig.33,34). Through this project what Vivan and his elite friends wanted to do was to recall the idea of "class struggle" in Kinkar. Vivan was approaching Kinkar and his subaltern art works in the same way in which he recreated the series of photographs of his own family member Amrita Sher-Gil.

Vivan's Ramkinkar project is problematic mainly because of two reasons. Firstly, recreating the work of a subaltern artist by an artist from upper caste really falls in the category of cultural appropriation. Secondly, Kinkar's *Santhal Family* (1938) (fig.19) and *Mill Call* (1956) (fig.35) were originally installed in the premises of Santiniketan the habitat of *Santals* and due to the same reason the politics of these sculptures are very contextual. Plucking Kinkar's "politics" from the subaltern context and replacing and staging it in front of a brahmanical audience is highly problematic. Parul Mukherji raises a valid question on Vivan's displacement of Kinkar's off its organic cultural milieu; "How does this desire of a metropolitan artist like Vivan Sundaram for connection with a subaltern artist like Ramkinkar feature in a project that presents itself as a collective?" (Mukherji).

Another conceptual approach is visible in Vivan's works like *Memorial* (1993) (fig.36) , which depicts the aftermath of the communal riot which took place in Mumbai after the demolition of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. He claims that the idea of this work is based on Nehruvian secularism which he thinks is very much needed during that time. But his response to this incident does not go beyond the conventional thinking of religious harmony and he did not see the real agenda of Hindutva forces behind the demolition of the mosque in the context of the Mandal struggle. As Kancha Ilaiah observes, "The Mandal struggle was the precondition for the Dalitization that would weaken and gradually destroy brahminical Hinduism. Therefore, they quickly reorganized themselves to divert the caste struggle into communal warfare. The destruction of the Babri Masjid in December 1992 is a result of such diversionist strategies" (51). Instead of understanding the problem comprehensively, Vivan tried to read it and translate into his work from the perspective of nationalism and elite aesthetics. Through the collaborative project with an NGO called *Chintan*, Vivan came up with a video work called *12 Bed Ward* which portrays marginalized people. He says that the idea of this particular work germinated during his visit to these people as part of the research for his proposed installation called *Tracking* (2003-04). On the usage of a subaltern body in this installation, Vivan opines thus,

> Once I had the idea for the video, I got somebody from the National School of Drama to teach him [Marian, a waste picker] to dance, and in three hours this boy was moving in a balletic fashion. So in one sense, you can say I used the body of the subaltern. However, in representing him I'm trying to get at something utopian. A fine, solid body is embedded in garbage, rises and then comes back down into that cycle, but in that brief moment of ascension there is aspiration. (qtd. in K. Sharma)

Coming from elite aristocrat living experience, Vivan could only see this issue related to marginalised as an "outsider" and that was his major limitation. Moreover, his political belief based on Marxism did not allow him to think beyond the class struggle.

Nehruvian secularism is a major area where the majority of artists have worked in post-independent India and Vivan also incorporated those ideas when it was in high demand. The main objective of such works based on Nehruvian secularism is to bring religious harmony between various religions, especially between the Hindu and Muslim, which was frequently under after the partition of the country in 1947. However, the caste-cum-class elite artists have hardly tried to look at the tension within the dominant Hindu religious discourse and the discrimination and torture meted out to the marginalized and lower caste people by the caste Hindus.

The Baroda School has brought a new pedagogical approach in the art practice in India in terms of the exploration of material and in adopting global perspective and techniques. The School emphasized the freedom of the individual artists. The conflict between artists who stood for indigenous and international art practices can be observed throughout the activities of the School. The art exhibition, *Place for People* (1981) marked a paradigm shift in art practices in India according to the majority of mainstream art historiographers and art critics.

Sudhir Patwardhan, a self-taught artist, was also a part of the show *Place for People*. His works derive from the observation of everyday of life of the lower

middle class and marginalized people of his surroundings. Mostly his painting compositions are arranged with human figures with different actions from locations like railway stations, construction sites, tenements, over-bridges and factories. His limitation is that he perceives social issues only from the perspective of "class" struggle. The essay for this show penned by Kapur categorically argues for a human-centered art practice in Indian art rather than focusing on the "living tradition". Eventually, Kapur's vision of modernism in Indian art as universal "eclecticism" points out her limitation in understanding Indian modernity from the perspective of the subaltern.

2.9 Were They Really Radicals?

The emergence of The Radical Sculptors and Painters Association (1985-89) has to be viewed as a counter practice to the Narrative School of Baroda. This ideologically leftist oriented group was officially formed with the exhibition of *Questions and Dialogue* (1987) (fig.37). Another important event organized by this group was an art camp at Alapad in Trissur, Kerala (1989) with the objective of bringing art close to the marginalized classes. They were against the exclusiveness of art practices which were limited to the elite circle.

Taking reference of Antonio Gramsci, Anita Dube—the only female member of the group—writes in the group's manifesto the necessity of opening up a debate on activism in art which is against the hitherto narrative praxis of visual art in India. Their manifesto emphasizes the anti-caste, anti-feudal, and anti-establishment character of the group and this kind of the ideological position has not been seen in Indian art before. Though their intentions are very clear from their manifesto, it is important to analyse how much they had been able to fulfill their objectives through their art practice? Kathleen Lynne Wymain observes that:

> 'Against the Imperialist Exploitation of Art' ….Claiming the auction to be an expression of overt cultural imperialism, the Radicals charged the artists participating in the show with capitulating to the lucrative lure of capitalism and pointed to the political dangers and ideological pitfalls of blindly following the siren-like voices of

> international interest. At the heart of the Radical's protest was a concern over reducing India's cultural products to an empty commodity circulating within a market in which few Indians could participate. (11)

The Radicals argued that colonialism and late capitalism has destroyed the folk traditions of India. However, the group could not give any alternative to it. Prabhakaran, one of the members of the Radical group, explains that the group does not approach art as a commodity because according to them art practices are byproducts of cultural activities and selling these artifacts or paintings are similar to selling one's own culture which cannot be entertained. But, the Radical Group's intention was misinterpreted by the Narrative Group (qtd.in Wymain 150).

Radicals came to the art scene challenging the Narrative practices of the Baroda School, and alleging that the latter is lacking in the representation of real social problems of the marginalized in their works. The Radicals cannot claim that they are the first group of artists who gave representations to the subaltern as it has been pointed out earlier that many artists including Kinkar had done it before the Radical's attempts. Santhosh interrogates the Radicals so, "Do their incomplete subaltern project really offer us anything more than a lack, loss or failure?" and also he observes that, "the overemphasized subjective attitude constrained members of the Radical movement from problematizing their own subjectivities and various class/caste/gender affiliations'' ("Spectres of the", 185).

The representation of the marginalized people in general can be seen even in the works of artists belonging to the Narrative group who were rejected by Radicals on the ground that there were no subaltern representations in their work. The works of Sudhir Patwardhan and Bhupen Khakhar share the day-to-day life of the commoners from their immediate surroundings. In fact, Khakhar goes beyond the usual narrative of marginalization by adding the queer identity as a new area of identity politics through his work. What is not really represented in either movement is the problems of Dalits/Adivasis who are the real subalterns of India. In this context, It can be argued that even the Radicals could not go beyond the practices

and ideological position of the Narrative group put forward though the former claim to be “radical”. While discussing the vocabulary of the Radical it is also important to look at how much they had gone beyond the expressionistic language and the representation of the marginalized in Ram Kinkar’s works.

N. N. Rimzon, who is contemporary to the Radical Painters’ and Sculptors’ Association, critically views the approach of the group and makes the following observation.

> [T]he members of the Group had no idea about dialectical materialism or about Communism. Instead of that, they attempted to push forward this idea on the basis of some distant experience or secondary information that they gathered through some of their leftist friends. They never attempted to do a study or research on this particular ideology before initiating this Group. One of their main agendas was to resist art market and boycott art galleries arguing that it is against cultural practices. But in reality there were no such galleries making money out of selling art works. So it was a baseless attempt to resist art market. Their next major attempt was just create a visual language against the Narrative Group (Bhupen, Sheikh etc.). But the changes they tried to bring through their art practices ended up in making similar narrative language itself. Almost all paintings or sculptors of the members of the Group showed the impact of narrative style. Once when Jyoti Basu [the late communist Chief Minister of West Bengal] spoke against narrative painting, Bhupen asked him, “Aren't you doing the same thing?”. Even Gulam Mohammed Sheikh spoke to them angrily. He said to them that it is paradoxical that you speak against the narrative language and practice the same thing, either stick to what you say or do not claim such false things. So, what I am trying to say is that it was nothing more than absurdism. (“Personal Interview”)

2.10 Contemporary Art Practices Since 1990

By the1990's Indian artists have begun to experiment with new materials and concepts. *Voice of Changes*, edited by Gayatri Sinha, discusses the trajectories of contemporary Indian artist's works and their ideas. The criteria for selecting these artists are based on their participation in international events and important curatorial projects. The book has been structured in the form of interviews with selected artists by individual art critics/historians and their interpretations. Though this book features many artists, this study discusses only a few selected artists like Atul Dodiya, Jitish Kallat, T. V. Santhosh and Riyas Komu whose perspectives on art and their works seem to reflect contradictions. Apart from these artists, a few women artist's works have been discussed in the present study in another section.

Atul Dodiya, a prominent and the most popular Indian contemporary artist, is quite famous for his depiction of Gandhi's images and ideology through his works. The portrayal of Gandhian ideas in his work seems to be a continuation of the approach of the nationalisitc artist like Nandalal Bose. Gayatri Sinha's observation that "the postmodern trajectory of Indian art were the outcome of the initiation of the modernist approach of the artist who had approached art beyond the pre-conditioned idea of nation and independence" ("Indroduction", 8) has to be critically viewed in this context. Dodiya's works generally depict the social conditions of post-independent India. For instance, through the series of works *Man with Chakki* (1998) (fig.38) he invoke the portrait of a country, a motherland driven mad by turmoil and fragmentation. Accompanied by symbols such as a precariously located house, a shipwreck, a giant turtle, and a skull in the belly, the artist's protagonist stand within an India threatened with schism and violence (Hoskote 120). Dodiya's attempt to see the social reality through the eye of the Gandhian lens seems to be superficial; because even Gandhi understands of Indian society itself was problematic.

Jitish Kallat, another celebrated contemporary Indian artist who has been given a prominent place in the mainstream historiography of Indian art, also works with various media reflecting the ideologies/philosophies of Gandhi, Nehru and

Vivekanda. About his important work *Public Notice 2* (2007) (fig.39), an installation of Gandhi's speech delivered on the eve of Dandi March, he says that "The words coming of Nehru and Gandhi that I've referenced in *Public Notice* (2003) (fig.40) and *Public Notice 2* (2007) were spoken at historical moments of elevated urgency; evoking them today helps us *grade our* feats and follies at this current moment" (qtd. in. Merali 280). In a personal conversation with Jitish with the present researcher (2020) he admitted that he does not like to follow the entire philosophical approach of these national political/spiritual leaders, but he places them in a particular context at different times. For instance, he takes the actual speech of Gandhi to denote Gandhi's idea of non-violence in the context of Gujarat communal riots that occurred in the year 2002. Another important work, *Covering Letter*, by Jitish envelops an entire room with the image of a July 1939 message Gandhi sent to Adolf Hitler, before the start of World War II, in which Gandhi appealed for peace. By projecting Gandhi, Nehru and Vivekananda and ignoring Ambedkar, another important national Dalit political leader, Kallat seems to endorse the mainstream narrative of Indian nationalistic discourse which was largely exclusive especially with respect to the caste question. On the exclusive practices of Jitish, M. L. Johny critically observes that,

> This is what the western museums want... Jitish never attempted to monumentalise the speech of a landless migrant or even the monologue of a security guard. …going by the Indian contemporary art, we see only international issues or issues that could be identified internationally in art. Nothing provincial and regional about it; provincialism could go maximum to giving iconic status to the security guards, a new tribe that gets the sympathy of Indian middle-class artists; from Jitish Kallat to Shilpa Gupta and many more. (n.page.)

T.V. Santhosh's works intensively reflect international issues like the consequences of war, terrorism and border disputes. Santhosh briefs his inspiration and motive of his works as below:

> Well, in my case, the world of news reports is what my works deal with. Each day, we wake up to disturbing images of violence and terror. Fear about the present and angst about the future are reflected as linguistic devices in both my paintings and my sculptural installations. It is an attempt to look deep into the history of violence, its political implications of terror, and its inherent complexities of ideological as well as ethical positions. (qtd. in Merali, "Between the", 208)

War and terrorism has been a subject matter for many post-independent Indian artists. The artists who represent these ideas were empathetic towards the people who are affected by war and terrorism (fig.41). However, they hardly were able to see every day war, which happens around them between savarnas and the Dalit/Bahujans in their own country. As mentioned earlier, an artist has complete freedom to choose his idea according to his subjective preference. However, it has to be pointed out here how these artists who are concerned about international events like war and terrorism have overlooked the serious problem of increasing atrocities against Dalits and tribals by the savarnas in India.

A similar approach can be observed in Riyas Komu, another important contemporary Indian artist, who is well known for his strong political activism and for the portrayal of minority politics, particularly the Muslim identity. His major project titled *Designated March by a Petro-Angel -10* (2006), which was part of the Venice Biennale 2007, portrays the oppression of doubly marginalized Muslim women under the Islamic regime and international military. Riyas' latest series of work titled *Holy Shiver* (2018) juxtaposes the images and ideas of Gandhi and Ambedkar contradictory to his previous large-scale portrayal of Gandhi alone which was showcased in Kochi in 2015. In an interview he explains the idea of this particular show as: "I felt this was the right moment to talk about Gandhi. He stands for many arguments in the present times. I juxtapose *Swaraj* with Control, *Satya* with Perception. The background is blood red, a martyr's red. Gandhi here is a symbol of hope, of resistance, of fearlessness" (qtd. in Kalra, "I feel"). But later on

Komu's ideological position seems to have changed.

The concept note of *Holy Shiver* says that Komu cultivates his thematic preoccupation with the figure of Gandhi by placing his portraits in dialogue with that of Ambedkar, thereby framing and establishing an interaction between the two apparently disparate ideologies within the scope of a single frame (fig.42). "He places the Gandhi-Ambedkar debate as part of a larger political narrative and references the ideological paradoxes in the contemporary moment while challenging, in their photographic verisimilitude and invasive gaze, the short-lived nature of public memory (Komu). By reading this work one can presume that Komu is in a political dilemma as to whether he should focus on Gandhi or Ambedkar. In "*On International Workers' Day, Gandhi from Kochi*" (2015) he had clearly stated his admiration towards Gandhiji. "Gandhi here is a symbol of hope, of resistance, of fearlessness " (qtd. in Kalra, "I feel"). There is nothing wrong with Komu's decision in juxtaposing Ambedkar along with Gandhi, but his juxtaposing of these two national leaders in a single canvas which contradicts the statement he made earlier that "All I wanted to do was bring the real Gandhi back" (qtd. in Harikrishnan).

It is so evident that, Gandhi and Ambedkar are two personalities whose experiences and philosophies are quite different. They differ particularly in their approaches regarding ensuring equality and social justice to the depressed sections of Indian society and to prevent caste discrimination and untouchability. Whereas Gandhi suggested a solution within the Hindu religious framework, Ambedkar argued for "annihilation of caste". So portraying both Gandhi and Ambedkar on a single canvas, Komu's intention, contradicting his own earlier position, may be to please both categories of people: the savarna Hindus and Dalit Bahujans.

Today Gandhi is being criticized all over the world for his racist attitude towards the Blacks of South Africa where he lived twenty-one years of his early career. His statue that was installed on the premises of the University of Ghana was removed in 2018 due the high demand from the protesters of the Black Live Matters (Chandhoke). Several such demands are being raised by the Blacks all over the world against the double stand of Gandhi. Mary Elizabeth King comments on

Gandhi's negotiation for allowing the untouchables to enter the Mahadeva Temple at Vykom, in Kerala. She argues that Gandhi was approaching this problem with a political mind. She exposes the hidden hypocrisy of Gandhi regarding caste issue. She states, "He also wanted to reclaim the untouchables not solely for Hinduism, but for the larger project rejuvenating Hindu cultural nationalism" (121). Gandhi feared that, if he takes a stand against the wish of the upper caste Hindus that was going to create a negative impact in the anti-British protests. However, the artists who followed the nationalistic legacy of art practice were not ready to look at this problem critically or from a different angle. Instead, they blindly incorporated the ideas of Gandhi into their practices to please the nationalistic elite psyche.

The artists who were included in *Vocie of Change* have been addressing various social and personal problems and bringing new visual sensibilities through their works. However, while looking from the subaltern perspective almost all the artists discussed in this study, except, Rimzon seems to be endorsing the dominant mainstream nationalistic discourse. Rimzon's works are quite different from his contemporaries because of his clear subaltern perspective. Before embarking on the trajectories of Rimzon it is quite essential to critically examine how women artists of modern and contemporary Indian art have expressed their ideas in their art and how art historiography has recorded their contributions.

2.11 Women as Subalterns

Since the focus of this thesis is on the representation of subaltern identity in the field of modern and contemporary Indian art, it is inevitable to have an overview of the contribution of women artists to contemporary Indian art because in a patriarchal society like India women have been discriminated, exploited and tortured by the male-dominated society. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak" observes:

> Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly affected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence.' It is, rather, that, both

> as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow. (*The Post-Colonial*, 28)

Though Spivak's argument that women are treated as secondary citizens in the male-dominated society can be agreed with, Spivak's theoretical equalisation of all women regardless of their race, caste, and ethnicity is highly problematic. Hence, here the focus is on how the women artists of India have perceived and represented themselves as a subaltern and how much they were aware of the "intersectionality" of caste, class and gender. It is true that women cannot become successful easily in a male-dominated world. Articulating their specific experience is also very difficult because even the structure of the language we speak and the history we study is also patriarchal. Marissa Vigneault observes that language is patriarchal in nature, organized through an array of binary differentiations that upholds one term at the expense of the other. She argues that language is having a powerful role in making gender discrimination by citing examples from the English language. She explains that, the word "artist" always sounds a male artist until and unless a female artist tries to project herself as an artist. In the first place, the male gets the claim as an artist without any effort but in the case of women, she has to claim her artistic identity. Similarly, the first image that comes to one's mind when he/she hears the word "actor" is a male and it is hard to change it. This shows how patriarchy is deeply embedded even in language. Marissa asserts that the male artist is natural in a patriarchal society and while the female, socially written as woman, artist is made, created through and by something exterior to her (892).

How Indian female artists got "qualified" and whether they were aware of the intersections of caste and gender has to be explored further. Gayatri Sinha observes that,

> Women's participation and engagement in art became suddenly conspicuous during the decade of feminism, in the 1970s. But even as

> women rode the crest of visibility in art, their work did not echo prevailing feminist polemic. In the intervening three decades, in an ironic inversion, even as feminism in India gasps and flounders for new directions, women's art seems to acquire a sinew of intention and expression. ("Feminism and", 59)

Though the presence of women artists can be seen in Indian art from the late 19th century, mainstream historiography on Indian women artists begins only with Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941). Before coming to India Sher-Gil was influenced by the Post-Impressionist French artists like Paul Cezanne and Paul Gauguin and by then she was already a public figure in Europe (fig.43). Since Sher-Gil's treatment of subject matter and technique was very much influenced by Gaugin who moved to Tahiti isaland in French Polynesia in search of indigenous cultural expressions, the changes in her painting after returning to India from Paris cannot be seen as an accidental one.

Born to a Sikh-Hungarian elite parentage, Sher-Gil may not be aware of the experience of the poor Indians rather than being an onlooker and hence the depiction of native Indians might be the result her conscious effort to bring "Indianess" in her work. Sher-Gil got enough recognition from the art critics and enjoyed reputation not just because of the aesthetic quality of her works but because of her aristocratic family background. This is very significant because only elite, upper caste/class women were allowed to seek education and got the opportunity to engage in cultural activities during her time. Her stardom as a women painter has influenced many women artists in later periods to choose art as their profession. Kapur observes that "Sher-Gil articulated a woman's prerogative to deal with a sexually immanent self equally through her persona as through her art. This is her unique role, to bring to bear what I call the feminization of modern Indian art" (*When Was*, 7).

Kapur's observation that the "feminization of modern Indian art" happened with the advent of Shergil has to be contested because she ignored the presence of a very important Indian woman artist of late 19th century, Mangal Bayi Thampuratti and her works. It shows that even women art historians and critics like Kapur also

could not see beyond the patriarchal discourse. The fact is that the artistic trajectories and contributions of Ravi Varma's sister Mangal Bayi was completely silenced by the fame of Varma and his contributions were glorified by the mainstream Indian art historiography.

It is true that the later generations of women artists have been drawing inspiration from Sher-Gil's charismatic projection as a women artist just like Frida Kahlo of Mexico, Sher-Gil's contemporary artist. Gayatri Sinha observes that,

> The accumulation of women's practices as a narrative has had to reflect on the fissures across India's polity, which shift with each decade....It has taken women artists several decades of interrogating the premises of the state to question the imaging of India as the divine feminine, or the motherland, and instead view the unquiet processes of nationhood…. in the late 1980s and 1990s, women's practices compel us to believe that just as nations on the periphery are now accepted as representing other modernisms…" ("Women Artists", 63, 55)

In India, late 20th century witnessed many successful female artists some of whom shared spaces equal or above male artists. For instance, Navajot Altaf has created her own language, absorbing energy from traditional crafts like Bastar art which is capable of negotiating with the patriarchal dominance. Though Altaf approached art practice based on her understanding of Marxist ideology, she questioned the absence of gender analysis in Marxist theory and moved more towards feminist discourse (In the sculptures) (fig.44). As a continuation, she initiated a collaborative project with the tribal artists. Adajania observes that in the course of a collaboration that began in the late 1990s, Altaf has championed their practice. Together, they have built the Dialogue Centre in Kondagaon, Bastar between 2003-2005, where they conducted their respective studio practices and hosted discussions on the political economy of art, on the marginalization of gender, and other pressing political and ecological urgencies of the day ("Dialogues on").

The sculptures of Altaf and craft persons from Bastar appear so similar that one of the visitors told Altaf that “they are copying your work” after seeing Shkila Bhagel’s works in a group exhibition at Sakshi gallery in Mumbai in 2003 (fig.45). Altaf replied, “but my own work takes from the Adivasi, Mayan and African sources” (qtd. in. Adajania, “Dialogues on”). In fact, the resemblance is a result of Altaf’s borrowing from the Bastar Adivasi cultural expressions. The similarity in forms is only peripheral because the philosophies reflected in their works are quite different. Coming from an elite and academically sound background, Altaf’s position was that of a Marxist feminist which she expresses through her works. In order to do so, she mainly focused on the female body as an experience in her sculptural practice to confront the patriarchal society. Gaytri Sinha observes that the issue of women is an extension of Altaf’s work as a political activist and from the urban context of middle-class Mumbai to tribal Bastar. She uses an archetypal feminine, to posit concerns of womanhood and self-expression (“Feminism and”, 63).

Whereas, a craft person from Bastar like Shantibai portrays men, women and “mundane” activities in the village in her sculpture and drawing to depict the harmony and holistic approach of tribal lifeworld. Shantibai’s sculptures and carvings on totem pole depict men and women equally unlike Altaf. This signifies that there is relatively less gender discrimination in tribal communities compared to non-tribal communities (fig.46). In Bai’s case, it was her late husband Raituram, a master craftsman, who encouraged her to be an artist and trained her in the beginning.

Though both these artists are subaltern as women, the experiences of tribal women are quite different from the elite women artists because of the intersection of caste and gender oppression the former face. Therefore, generalizing the mainstream feminism with Dalit/tribal feminism is problematic. However, the elite historians interpret Bai’s works from a mainstream feminist point of view. For instance, art historian like Nancy Adajania explains that Bai’s sculptures express a deep empathy

for women and children and she sculpted the trauma of a woman raped by the police in Bastar by depicting her as a sacrificial goat (“In the sculptures”).

In fact, the content of Bai’s sculptures cannot be viewed through the lens of mainstream feminism. Instead, it should be viewed from the perspective of intersectionality focusing on the discrimination based on gender as well as caste. In reality, Bai’s works voice out against the ongoing institutionalized exploitation and atrocities against Dalit/Adivasi community of that particular area. But mainstream feminism fails to acknowledge and address the triple oppression experienced by tribal/Dalit women in their everyday life. Elite historians’ attempt to bring Dalit/Adivasi women under the umbrella of mainstream feminism with their notion of universal sisterhood and generalize the problem of women seems to valorize their collaboration with Dalit/Adivasi artist community. By doing so, they think that they can escape addressing the larger question of identity politics and the difference between Dalit/Adivasi and savarna women and the caste bias of art historians and critics.

Gopal Guru describes the necessity of giving a separate space for Dalit woman for talking within the context of feminism: “It is further underlined that social location determines the perception of reality and therefore representation of Dalit women's issues by non-Dalit women was less valid and less authentic” (“Dalit women”, 2549). Another point to be noted in women art practices in India is the contradiction between their practices and their political stand. They conveniently use ideas and imageries from mythology and epics, which usually endorse dominant religious values and at the same time talk about the necessity of fighting patriarchy. If we look at the origins of patriarchy, we find it is in the religion itself. For instance, *Manu Smriti*, a sacred text of the Hindus emphasise the necessity of casteism and lays down rules and regulations to maintain patriarchy. The burning of *Manu Smriti* by Ambedkar was nothing but a symbolic act to destroy the “madness of Manu”, which valorizes the casteism and patriarchy. Artists who follow Sanskrit/Hindu aesthetics knowingly unknowingly endorse the patriarchy embedded in the braminic discourse.

For instance, Bharti Kher, one of the most expensive and prominent women artists of contemporary India, frequently uses *bindi* (fig.47), a cosmetic spot mark worn by many married Indian women on the forehead, as a material as well as a concept in her work which symbolize the third eye, a mystical concept in Hinduism. Kher says that "In India, when we go to people's bathrooms, we will see *bindis* on the mirror, because women take them off and stick them there at the end of the day, and that *bindi* is the witness of the day and life of this person. It has been everywhere, has heard everything." (qtd.in Wolff). Here Kher tries to conceive the idea of *bindi* as symbol of women's oppression of everyday life. But taking the *bindi* as a metaphor for representation of oppressed women in general is problematic because wearing a *bindi* is a religious practice of the Hindu women only. The real subaltern women belonging to Dalit/Adivasi communities who are outside the fourfold division of the Hindus, the *panchamas,* do not attach this symbolic significance Kher speaks of. Sowjanya also argues that "a *bindi* on the forehead is a marker of the Hindu woman. Constructing the Hindu woman figure as the Indian/native woman figure leads to the exclusion of other women. Similarly, many feminists have neither rejected *bindi* nor the religious/caste position that comes from the patriarchal family structures….But mainstream feminists too have not yet rejected certain privileges of their own social position in the intersecting caste and patriarchal structures. For example, many feminists have not rejected their surnames, family/caste names, husband names, caste/religious status." Portraying the Hindu goddess as a symbol of empowering women has been a mainstream practice endorsed by the Braminical discourse and it is currently projected by the right-wing Hindutva. "It is unfortunate that no women writer, not even feminists, have deconstructed the socio-political influences of these Goddesses on women—particularly on brahminical women" (Sowjanya).

Though, there are problems in the trajectories of women artists in terms of clarity and their political understanding of the intersectionality of class, caste and gender, a few women artists have explored new ideas beyond their gender identity. For instance, Rummana Hussain (1952–1999) can be viewed as a strong voice as a women artist in Indian art and her practices reflect a complex mixture of art and

activism. Her installation *Home/Nation* (fig.48) shows her transition from painting to conceptual art and then to installation art. In this specific installation the dome/breast, images of organ mutilation and destruction are developed/juxtaposed simultaneously. Though the mainstream historiography limited Hussain's artistic identity within the frame of feminism, her works seem to break the constructed image and the stereotypical definitions of the critics. Her works reflect experiences of the Muslim minority in India and a strong opposition against the Right-wing Hindutwa politics for which she had to go through a hard time including a self-imposed exile.

Anita Dube is another important female Indian artist who got recognized first for her association with the *Radical Painters and Sculptors Association* for addressing the issue of the marginalized. After the dispersal of the *Group* she started experimenting with different kinds of materials and mediums which include photographs, drawings and installations. Her important works like *Silence/Blood Wedding* (1997) (fig.49), made out of human bones covered in red velvet, share the female experience as silent oppressed. Dube's another important work *Kissa-e-Noor Mohammed /Garam Hawa* (2004), a video production in which she acts as a young Muslim male and portrays as if he/she is sharing a personal experience to her close friend. By portraying the dual identities through this work, Dube was contesting the conventional gender norm of the dominant discourse. Jyoti Dhar points out that "This is particularly significant given the film's fraught context, coming in the aftermath of the 2002 communal riots in Gujarat and amid the temporarily successful campaign in the 2000s to amend the law (Section 377) to decriminalize homosexual activity in India" (86). Despite being a Marxist feminist throughout her career, Dube demonstrated her concern for the triply marginalized subjectivities as a curator of Kochi Biennale in 2018. In this Biennale she brought artists from various gender, caste, sexual identities for the first time in India. Dube explains, "I am looking at practices in the margins, from the obvious political margins, Dalit artists, queer artists, to even contemporary women artists, whose works I admire but haven't perhaps been in the limelight as much." (qtd. in Kalra, "We need").

Thus, one can find that the historiography of Indian contemporary art has recorded the contribution of a number of women artists like Nilima Sheikh, Meera Mukherjee, Rekha Rodwittiya, Nalini Malani, Arpita Singh, Anju Dodiya, Shilpa Gupta and Mithu Sen were equal or even above some of their male contemporary artists. Considering women as a subaltern, one can argue that there are representations of women artists in contemporary art historiography. However, the mainstream historiography of contemporary Indian art is conspicuous by the absence of the real subalterns like Dalit and tribal women. This is true also of mainstream historiography and even of mainstream feminist historiography. Shailaja Paik's observation is highly relevant here. She argues:

> Historically speaking, like mainstream historiography, much of the mainstream feminist historiography has neglected the presence of 'caste communities' to focus on gender categories. Moreover, much scholarship on 'Women in India' has also focused on upper-caste and, most significantly, Brahman women and their caste difficulties in terms of sati, enforcement of widowhood, widow remarriage and child marriage. In the process, however, these scholars have re-signified Brahman women's problems as those of the Hindus and therefore Indians. By fixing Brahman women and Brahmani practices as 'Indian', some scholars have subsumed the powerful collusion of (upper) caste, class and patriarchy into `Indian identity' itself. Most significantly, such an intellectual strategy seems to be predicated on the scholars' reliance on the historical construction of 'liberal feminism' as de-classed, de-caste, or even de-sexed, and on its at times potent amalgamation with the upper-caste logic of a Hindu nation, which significantly occluded Dalit women as historical agents and rights-bearing citizens of the state. Only over the past two decades have feminists critically analyzed caste patriarchy and the power and privilege enjoyed by select castes and classes both historically and contemporaneously. (14)

How art historians, art critics and artists have been approaching the idea of subalternity at various stages of their career have been discussed in the previous pages. Though the representation of subalterns can be seen at the various stages of the history of art from the Kalighat painting to contemporary art practices, only a few contemporary Indian artists have attempted to depict the crucial problem like caste in Indian society. The major ideologies that influenced the majority of the twentieth-century Indian artists are Gandhism, Nehruvism, and Marxism. However, Ambdekarism, the only ideology capable of addressing the basic problems of the real subaltern people of India, has rarely been explored by Indian art historians, art critics, and artists.

Fig.5. *A Woman Strikes a Man With a Broom* ,1875, Kalighat Painting. Web.18 May 2020. https://theculturetrip.com/asia/india/articles/a-brief-history-of-kalighat-paintings-in-kolkata-india/

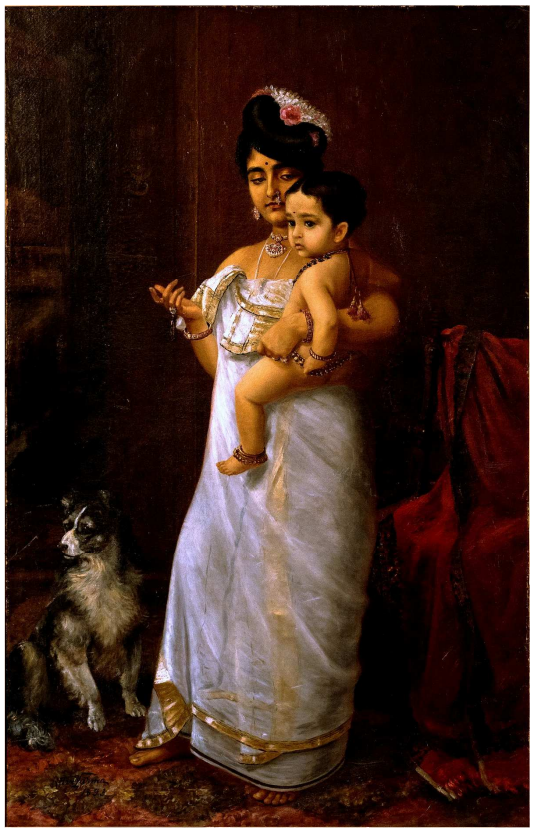


Fig.6. Varma, Raja Ravi. *There Comes Papa (Here Comes Papa).* 1893.Oil on Canvas. Private Collection, Web. 24 May 2020 https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/there-comes-papa-raja-ravi-varma/_AFv7N8y_RbNbg?hl=en

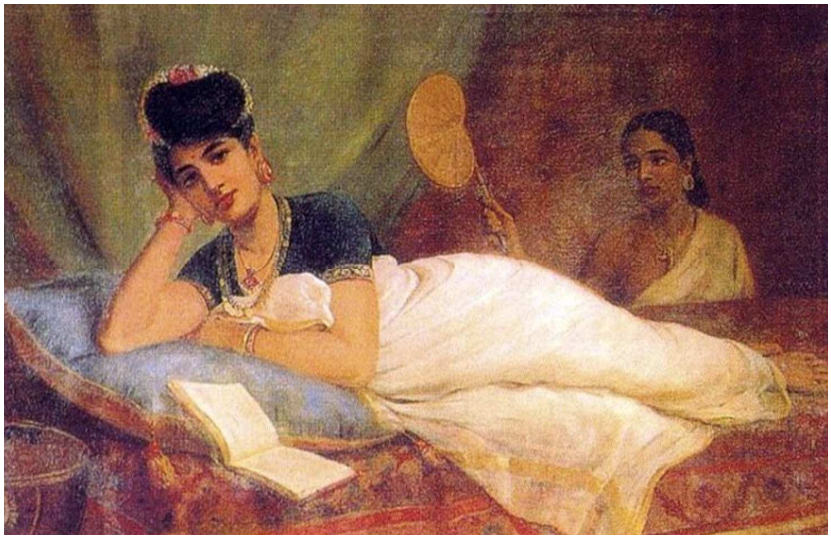


Fig.7. Varma, Raja Ravi. Reclining Nayar Lady.1902. Oil on Canvas.73.6 X 104.4 cm. Private Collection.Web. 28 May 2020. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja_Ravi_Varma,_Reclining_Woman.jpg#cite_note-1

Fig.8. Varma, Raja Ravi. *The Gypsies of South India.*1893.Oil on Canvas,76x120 cm. Sree Chitra Art Gallery, Thiruvananthapuram.Web. 23 May 2020. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-gypsies-of-south-india-poverty-raja-ravi-varma/6AGyEJE4hCuCMw?hl=en

Fig.9. Varma, Raja Ravi. *Village Belle*. N.d. , Oil on Canvas. 42x24.7 cm . Private Collection. Web. 22 May 2020. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/village-belle-raja-ravi-varma/PAGAyqoFCqsZcQ?hl=en

Fig.10 Varma, Raja Ravi. *Woman Washing Clothes*, Ink on Paper, Drawing, DAG Private Limited. 1890. Web 20 May 2020. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/woman-washing-clothes-raja-ravi-varma/jAEOxeUQ58eO2g?hl=en

Fig.11. Varma, Raja Ravi. *A Barber*, Sketch ,Watercolour and Graphite on paper, DAG Private Limited. N.d. Web. 22 May 2020 https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/a-barber-raja-ravi-varma/1gFvQlxu5myZzQ?hl=en

Fig.12. Varma, Raja Ravi. *The Toddy Tapper*.N.d., Water Colour and Graphite on Paper. 24 x 34 cms. DAG- New Delhi. Web. 22 May 2020. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/the-toddy-tapper-raja-ravi-varma/0wHjmaGluL091Q?hl=en

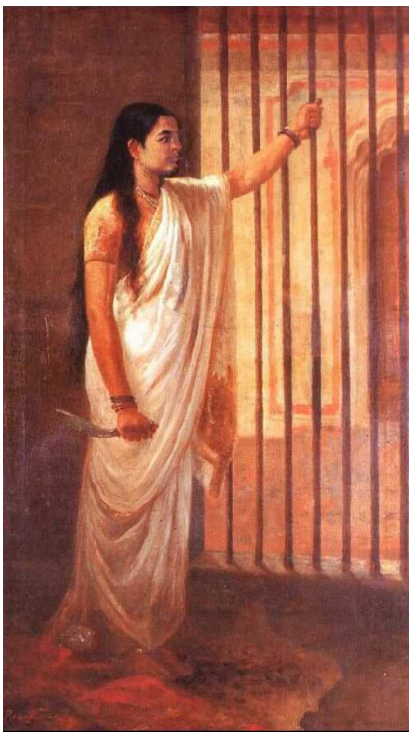


Fig.13. Varma, Raja Ravi. *Lady in Prison* , Oil on Canvas. Sree Chitra Art Gallery. Thiruvananthapuram.Web. 23 May 2020. http://www.museumsyndicate.com/item.php?item=25497

Fig.14. Thampuratti, Mangala Bayi, *Lady Giving Alms*. N.d, Oil on Canvas, Web. 23 May 2020. https://www.theheritagelab.in/mangala-bayi-artist/

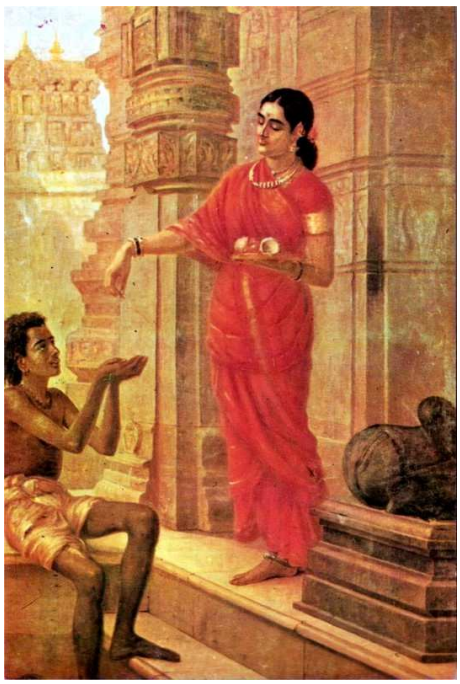


Fig.15. Varma, Raja Ravi, *Lady Giving Alms*, 1899, Oil on Canvas. Web. 21 May 2020 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ravi_Varma-Lady_Giving_Alms_at_the_Temple.jpg

Fig.16 Tagore, Abanindranath. *Bharat Mata*.1905.Water Colour on Paper, Web. 18 May 2020. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bharat_Mata_(painting)

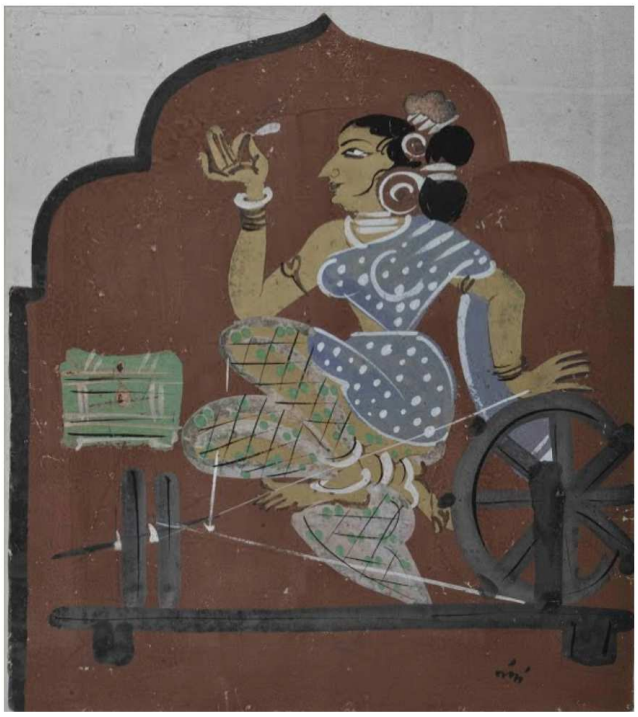


Fig.17. Bose, Nandalal. *Cotton Spinning*, 1937. Haripura Posters, 57.2X63.7 cm. Tempera on Paper.Web. 21 May 2020. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/_/tQHhRM6OsoJhIA

Fig.18. Bose, Nandalal. *Dandi* March. 1930. Linocut print on Paper. 35x22.3cm. Web.28 May 2020. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/201528/mahatma-gandhi-bapuji-on-the-dandi-march

Fig.19. Baij, Ramkinker. *Santal Family*, 1938. Cement, Laterite Mortar, Dimensions variable. Santiniketan.Web.21 May 2020. https://www.frieze.com/article/santhal-family

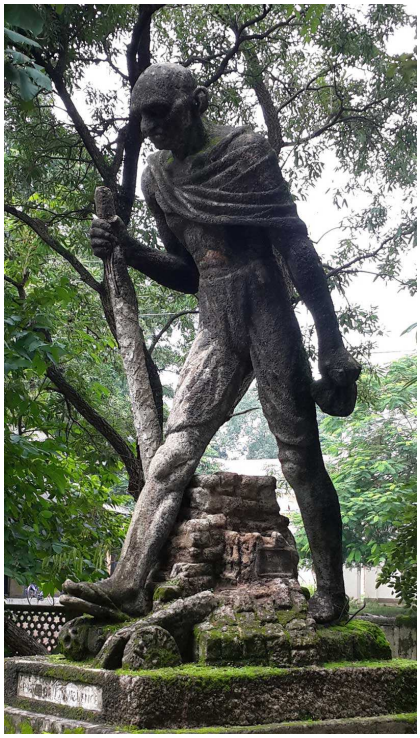


Fig.20. Baij, Ramkinker. *Gandhi*, 1953–55, Cement. Dimensions variable. Santiniketan. Web.21 May 2020. https://muse.jhu.edu/article/666055/pdf

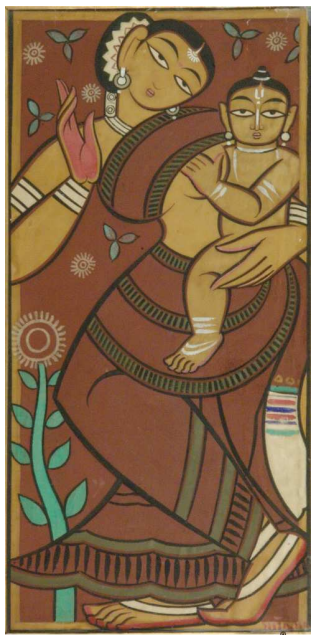


Fig.21. Roy,Jamini. *Mother and Child*. N.d. Tempera on Canvas, 36 X 73.5 cm. N.G.M.A. Web. 23 May 2020. http://www.ngmaindia.gov.in/virtual-tour-of-modern-art-1.asp

Fig.22. Roy, Jamini. *Yashoda and Krishna*. N.d. Tempera on Cloth. N.G.M.A, Web. 15 May 2020. http://www.ngmaindia.gov.in/virtual-tour-of-modern-art-1.asp

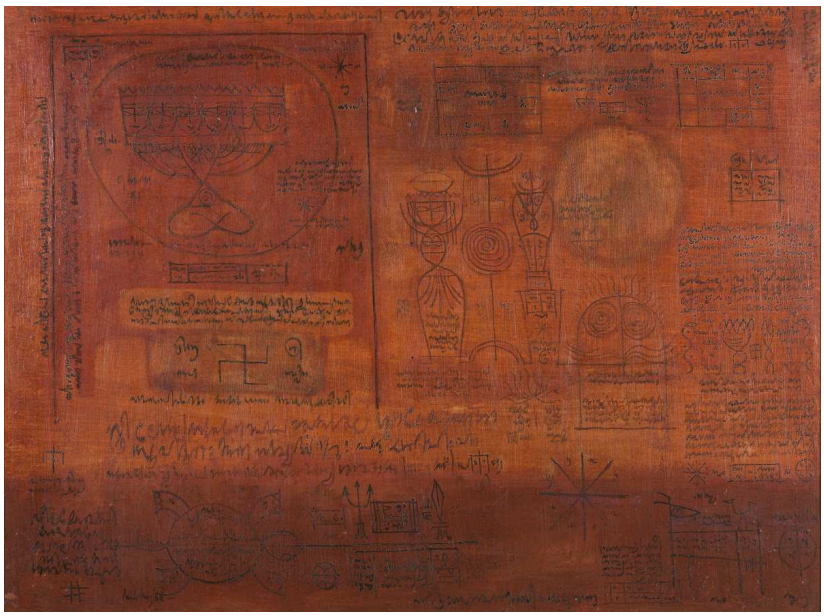


Fig 23. Paniker,K.C.S., *Words and Symbols*.1966. 80.8 x 110.9 cms.Web. 12 April 2020. https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/words-and-symbols-k-c-s-paniker/VQEhj9cri-vO_w

Fig.24. Paniker, K.C.S., *Farmer's Family* 1954, Web. 28 March 202 https://www.sahapedia.org/kcs-paniker-selected-works#lg=1&slide=32

Fig.25. Khakhar, Bhupen. *Janata Watch Repairing*, 1972, Oil on Canvas. 36.8 x 36.8 inches, Web. 26 April 2020 http://www.chemouldprescottroad.com/artists-works/bhupen-home/bhupen-khakhar-aw2289.html

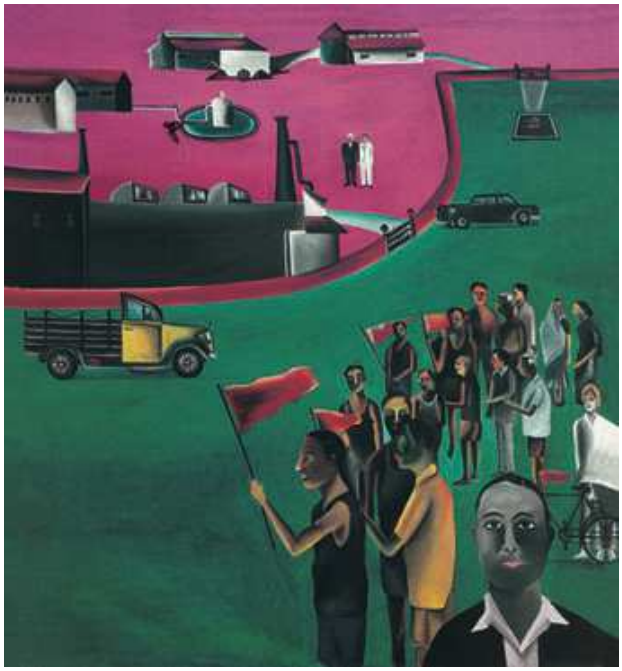


Fig.26. Khakhar ,Bhupen. *Voice of Freedom – Strike.*1972. Oil on Canvas 36.4 x 36.4 in. Web. 23 April 2020. http://www.chemouldprescottroad.com/artists-works/bhupen-home/bhupen-khakhar-aw2291.html

Fig.27. Khakhar, Bhupen. *The celebration of Guru Jayanti*.1980. Oil on canvas, 68 x 99 in. Web.23.May 2020. http://www.chemouldprescottroad.com/artists-works/bhupen-home/bhupen-khakhar-aw2300.html

Fig.28. Khakhar, Bhupen. *You Can't Please* All. 1981. Oil on Canvas. 66.8 x 66.8 in. Web. 23 May 2020. http://www.chemouldprescottroad.com/artists-works/bhupen-home/bhupen-khakhar-aw2301.html

Fig.29. Khakhar, Bhupen. *Yayati*.1987. Oil on Canvas. Web. 28 May 2020. http://www.chemouldprescottroad.com/artists-works/bhupen-home/bhupen-khakhar-aw2310.html

Fig.30. Khakhar, Bhupen. *Two Men in Banaras*. 1985. Oil on Canvas. Web. 24 May 2020. http://www.chemouldprescottroad.com/artists-works/bhupen-home/bhupen-khakhar-aw2302.html

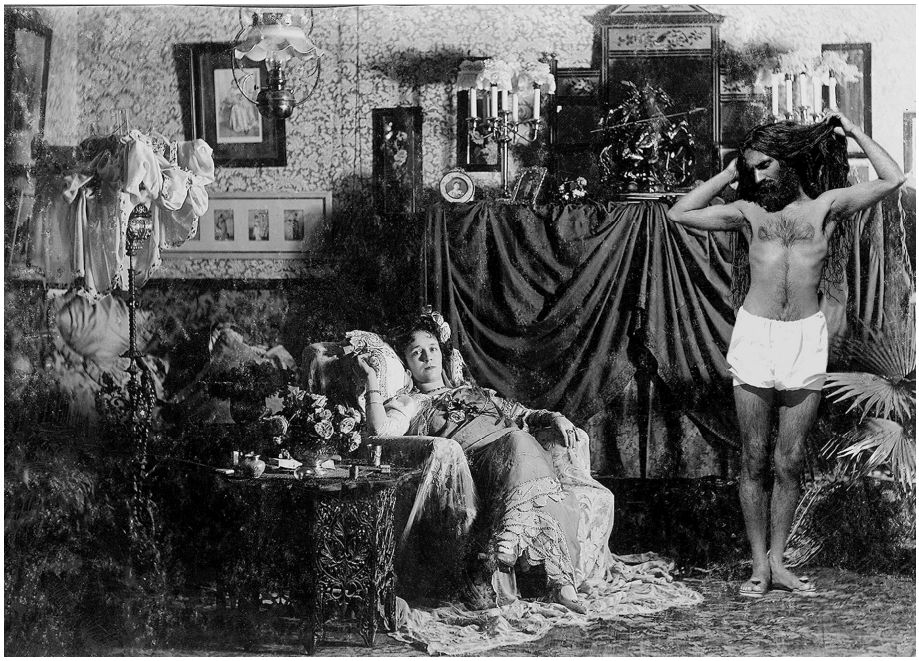


Fig.31. Sundaram, Vivan. “12–13. Preening”, (Marie Antoinette, Lahore, 1912; Umrao Singh, 1904.) *Re-take of Amrita.*1991-92. 15 x 21 in.200. Web. 24 May 2020. https://crowcollection.org/exhibition/re-take-amrita/

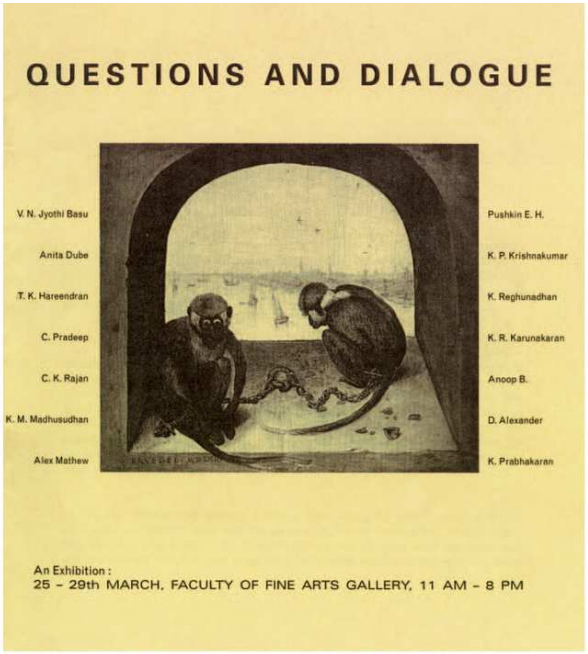
Fig.32. Sundaram, Vivan. “Box Five: Family Album” *The Sher-Gil Archive.* 1995, Dimension-Variable. *Asia Art Archive.*Web. 10 May 2020. https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/geeta-kapur-and-vivan-sundaram-archive-the-sher-gil-archive-1995/archive/geeta-kapur-and-vivan-sundaram-archive-the-sher-gil-archive-1995/object/box-five-family-album

Fig.33. Sundaram, Vivan, *409 Ram Kinkers*, 2015, Terracotta installation. Web. 28 May 2020. http://vivansundaram.com/works/409-ramkinkars-2015/

Fig.34. Sundaram,Vivan. "Mill Re-call", *409 Ramkinkers*. 2015. Moveable stage prop, motor car parts. Web. 28 May 2020. https://guftugu.in/2016/05/28/vivan-sundaram/

Fig.35. Baij, Ramkinker. *Mill Call*, 1956. Iron armature, concrete, laterite pebbles, and gravel. Santiniketan. Web. 12 April 2020. https://aaa.org.hk/en/collections/search/archive/jyoti-bhatt-archive-mill-call-by-ramkinker-baij/object/mill-call-96

Fig.36. Sundaram, Vivan. *Mausoleum* (From the series Memorial).1993. Steel, glass, neon light, white inlaid marble, plaster cast. Tate Collection, Web. 12 May 2020 https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-vivan-sundaram/



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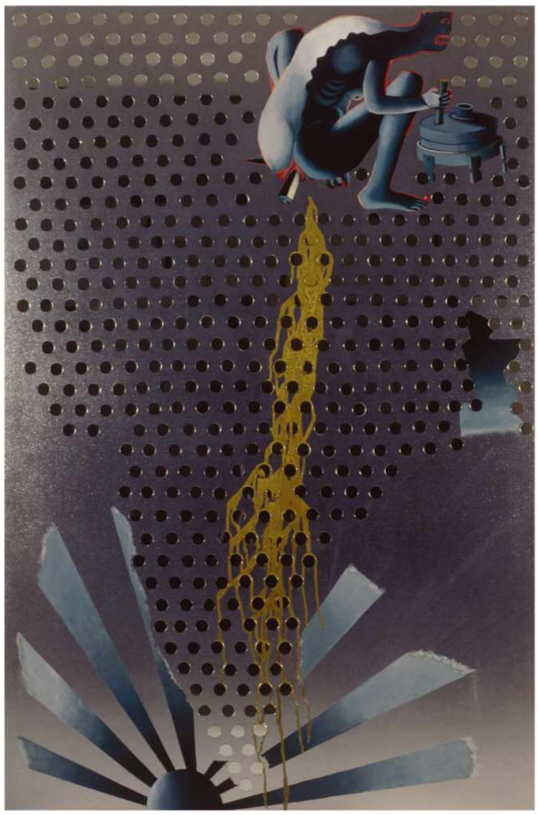

Fig.38. Dodiya, Atul. *Man With Chakki*, 1998. Enamel Paint, Mirrors On Laminate, 72 X 48 in. Web. 26 May 2020. https://www.vadehraart.com/recent-works-atul-dodiya

Fig.39. Kallat, Jitish. *Public Notice 2*. 2007. Installation. Resin. Web. 12 Aug. 2020. https://jitishkallat.com/works/public-notice-2/

Fig.40. Kallat, Jitish. *Public Notice*.2003.Installation. Burnt adhesive on acrylic mirror, wood, stainless steel. Web. 21 Aug.2020. https://jitishkallat.com/works/public-notice/

Fig.41. Santhosh,T.V. *Another Story from the City Square*, 2011, Oil on Canvas, 48 x 96 in. Web. 24. March. 2020. http://www.guildindia.com/tvsantosh/index.htm

Fig.42. Komu, Riyas, "Dhamma Swaraj", *Holy Shiver*. 2018. Oil on Canvas. 72x162. In. Web. 26 March 2020. https://www.vadehraart.com/holy-shiver-riyas-komu

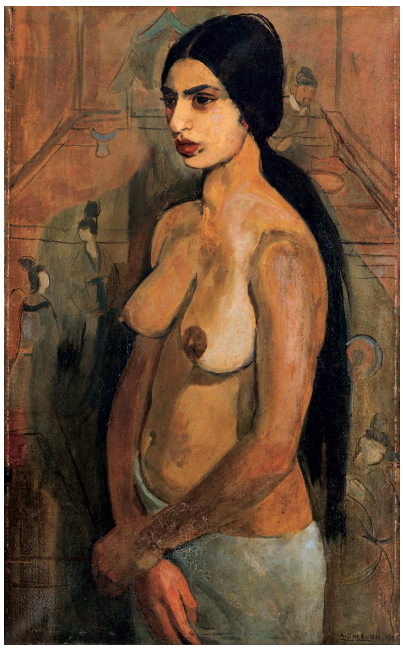

Fig.43. Sher-Gil, Amrita. *Self Portrait as Tahitian* 1934. Oil on Canvas, 90 × 56 cm. Private Collection.Web. 20 March 2020. https://www.documenta14.de/en/artists/21989/amrita-sher-gil

Fig.44. Altaf, Navjot. *Modes of parallel Practice: Ways of World-Making*, 1999.Installation view. indigo powder on wood, PVC pipes,and a video film Journey on TV monitors. Fukuoka Asian Art Museum. Web. 24 May 2020. http://www.navjotaltaf.com/modes-of-parallel.php

Fig.45. Baghel, Shakila. *Self as an Artist*. 2001. Bell-Metal. Sakshi Gallery Mumbai. Image Source: Sunday Magazine. The Hindu 16 Feb. 2003. Print.

Fig.46. Santabai. *My Life, My Story*. 1998. Wood. 60x12x12 In. Sculpture. Web. 27 May 2020. http://www.dialoguebastar.com/the-thirteenth-place.html

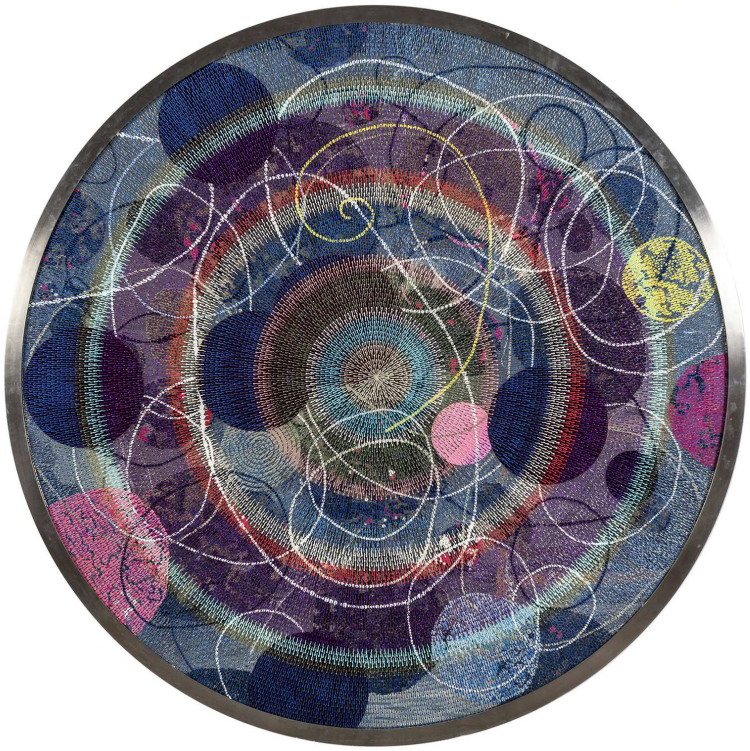

Fig.47. Kher, Bharti. *Bindis on Mirror.* 2019. Algorithm (series). Diameter: 192cm. Web. 28 March 2020. https://bhartikher.com/#/new-gallery-43/

Fig.48. Hussain, Rumana, *Home/Nation.* 1996. Installation view. Chemould Gallery. Mumbai. Web. 11 March 2020. http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/90/RummanaHussain

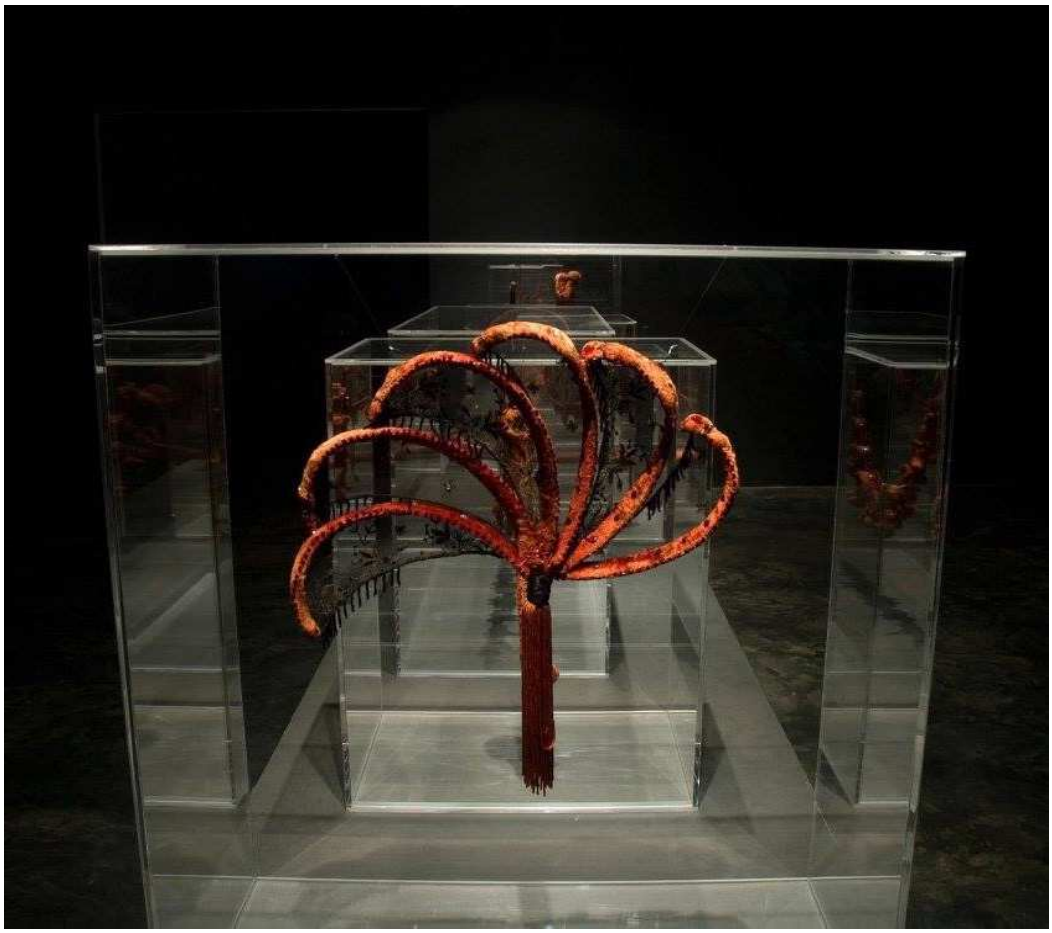

Fig.49. Dube, Anita. *Blood Wedding*.1997. Human bones covered in red velvet with beading and lace. Dimensions variable. Devi Art Foundation. New Delhi. Web. 26 May 2020. https://twitter.com/deviartfoundati/status/732095262345314304?lang=en

Chapter 3

Still "Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet"

In the introduction of this thesis, it has been briefed that this particular research has begun from the site-specific work of Rimzon, *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet* (1995). In the first chapter, attempts have been made to examine critically the major contributions and ideological positions of post-independent Indian artists and their works, various art movements from the late nineteenth century to the present and how the historiography of Indian art has been archiving those artists and their works. This overview was inevitable to identify the problem that has been existing in the field of art practice and the historiography of Indian modern and contemporary art. As a result of that overview, it can be observed that the works of Rimzon is very relevant in terms of the representation of the subaltern "voice". Therefore, it is necessary to examine how Rimzon has explored a new methodology in his artistic endeavours and brought a new dimension in the representation of subaltern in contemporary Indian art practice.

Already discussions have been done on the representation of the subaltern in the works of a few other artists and their approaches before taking up Rimzon for study. Rimzon's approach is quite different from other artists because of his theoretical perspective, ideology and cultural politics. In addition to that, he also put forward an alternative perspective to address the problems of the subaltern. In order to explore that, a traversal is made through the Indian contemporary art historiography, art criticism, and catalogue essays of Rimzon's exhibitions, secondary interviews, and personal interviews with him. In this chapter, an attempt is made to closely observe and analyze his works in relation to Rimzon's personal experience, the evolution of his artistic career, and transformations of style.

Rimzon was born in Kakkoor village in 1957 in Kerala, the southern state of India which has been nationally known for its high rate of literacy and left

progressive ideology. In an interview published in the Malayalam weekly *Mathrubhumi* in 2018, he recalls the transformation of his life from his childhood to a well-known artist (Interview by Sujith Kumar). Rimzon started to demonstrate his artistic skill even from early childhood. However, he had not given any importance to it because he could not find anything special about it since the habit of drawing was found in other children of his age group also. He took art seriously after joining the College of Fine arts, Trivandrum in 1975. He gained a basic understanding of the art through the new academic environment in the college. He remembers that back-issues of *Studio International Magazine* from the 1950s until 1973, donated by the British Council, India, was the only source for understanding the contemporary western art practices of that time. With those limited resources, Rimzon acquired a fair enough understanding about international art practices of that time.

The internal political emergency declared by Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India (1975), had a huge impact on Rimzon, like his contemporaries and it brought a new political awareness of resistance in him. As Victoria Lynn points out, "It became important for Rimzon and his contemporaries to develop a radical, socially committed attitude that was independent from western modernism and mainstream Indian politics" (88).

Afterwards, Rimzon got admission to the Sculpture Department, Faculty of Fine Arts, and Baroda University in 1982 to pursue Masters Degree. But, due to financial difficulties, he had to discontinue his studies, and later in July 1984 got admitted to the Kanoria Centre for Arts in Ahmadabad on a stipend. He left the centre in October 1984 and participated in a camp for young sculptors at Kasauli. Then again he resumed his postgraduate studies at the Fine Arts faculty of the University of Baroda. The Baroda School gave him a new direction and inspiration in terms of developing a new vocabulary. During the time the Narrative Group enjoyed a prominent position and was controlling the contemporary art of India. They contested the perspective of "living tradition" and proposed "depictions of everyday life….thereby moving away from the formalist closures…" (Kabir) and culminated with an acclaimed group exhibition entitled "*Place for People* (1981)

which is generally known as the exhibition which signaled the transition from modernist to postmodernist art in India" (Kabir).

The Radical Painter's and Sculptor's Association (1986-89) primarily led by a few artists from Kerala challenged the ideological position of the Narrative Group, the "living tradition" and other peripheral art practices like Neo-Tantric art endorsed by the Madras School and tried to be "radical" by adopting a social activist position incorporating the problems of the marginalized. Though many of the members of the *Radical Group* were Rimzon's friends and contemporaries, Rimzon did not affiliate with this group due to his ideological differences. The Radicals questioned the commoditization of art and they resisted all kinds of selling of art works alleging that it is a bourgeoisie idea. Since Rimzon has been trying to pull on his life with the little money he gets from selling his works he could not digest the utopian idea of the Radicals. He believed without money art cannot be practiced or preserved. He has already explained the reason for not associating with this group in his interview with the present researcher.

Rimzon completed his Master of Art degree from Royal College of Art in London in 1989 and after returning from England he lived in New Delhi for the next six years. He says, "Going to London on an Inlaks Foundation scholarship was a lucky break for me. There I was exposed to a totally different model of learning and art practice. Since it took me away from the commotion of the Indian art scene, I was also able to rethink." (qtd. in Khasnis). During this period the mainstream art scenario of India was mostly dominated by practices of painting than sculpture. The scope for sculptors during that time was limited due to the marketability of sculptures. It was in this particular context that Rimzon began to experiment with new materials and ideas which he acquired through his European exploration. His large-scale sculptural/installations gave a new direction to the Indian art scene.

By the beginning the 1990s, a new shift was visible in the art scene of India and the importance of three-dimensional works also got equal recognition with painting. The new tendencies appeared in the field of sculptural practices especially, in the works of Rimzon and a few of his contemporaries like Vivan Sundaram and

Nalini Malani. What distinguishes Rimzon from his contemporaries is that he has got more clarity than others in terms of philosophical understanding, theoretical approach and their application in his art practice. Though Vivan and Rimzon had begun to practice Installation Art which has been part of the Conceptual Art, the trajectories of both were quite different. Vivan's practice and his ideological position was rooted in Marxism and he seems to be caught up in his elitist perception. But Rimzon went beyond the Marxist perspective and identified himself with Dravidian/Sramana cultural traditions and the Ambekarist ideology. Rimzon believes that coming from a marginalized background is advantageous because those people can have a better worldview because they will be exposed to a variety of experiences, which includes poverty, discrimination, and other kinds of atrocities, which elite artists may not experience or even imagine. On these Rimzon says:

> I have travelled in train lower class as well as upper class, in flight some time sin Economy class some other times Business class. I have stayed in very luxurious hotel. At the same time, I also had even stayed in a place like slum. I had done my study in London and travelled to many places in Europe and America. I have an experience of talking with different kinds of people and I gathered various information and knowledge from different levels/strata of people. What I am trying to say is that I have been exposed to extreme experiences of both up and down. And from that whole experience I have tried to make my art. ("Personal Interview")

The research objective of comparing the social background of Rimzon and Vivan is to show how the family legacy and location of an artist plays a crucial role in their identity as an artist. Vivan seems to have gained much prominence in the historiography of Indian art not merely because of his contribution to Indian art but for his ability in capitalizing his family legacy and his articulation skill.

How family heritage and its glory influences an artist's chances of success and fame can be seen in the way artists like Vivan are recorded in history. The intention here is not to underestimate the contribution of Vivan. But it is quite

essential to expose how the elite historians and art critics have been projecting the elite background of certain artists and ignoring the artists who come from the marginalized background. This practice has been continuing since the late 19th century in the historiography of modern Indian art and it has already been explained how caste and class capital worked in the case of artists like Ravi Varma, Abanidranth, Rabindranath, Nandalal, Jamini Roy, K.G.S in getting a highly acclaimed position in the art historiography. But an artist like Ramkinkar who comes from a subaltern background has hardly anything to claim about the legacy of his family and hence he did not get a prominent place in the art historiography. Every artist who comes from the subaltern background has been experiencing the same.

Like, any other person who grew up in a rural background, Rimzon also nourished his interest in fine art appreciating calendar pictures, film posters, and Ravi Varma paintings, etc. Born in a place known for its affiliation with the leftist ideology, Rimzon admits that he was influenced by those ideas and at the same time he also points out that this kind of affiliation never stopped him from growing beyond the set up of narrow-minded political parties and their ideologies. Rimzon perceives the idea as tool for understanding the problem of the society and he considers it as a part of his leftist cultural consciousness.

Rimzon tried to place his large-scale format of sculpture at the juncture when the art scenario of India was dominated by painting. Indian art scenario did not appreciate the new language introduced by him to the Indian art very easily. Soon the idea of conflating multiple objects together to share a concept became a new trend in Indian art practices. Rimzon has been already exposed to the style of minimalism within the framework of western phenomenology. However, Rimzon's minimalism cannot be read within the Western context. Instead of that, it has to be understood from the perspective of Eastern traditional thoughts from which minimalism originates. Though he was initially exposed to the idea of minimalism through his western exploration, later he understood that the root of it's in the Sramana traditions. Victoria Lynn explains that the figurative expressionism of his

works brings a kind of post-minimalist aesthetics where the circle, sphere, cube and square, filled with life force, which co-exist in a magnetic field of energy. He uses metaphysical imageries in a subtle way to represent the reality of his surroundings (88).

The basic challenge that Rimzon faced in the initial period of his career was finding a new language of art that is adequate to address the social, cultural and political realities of his time. In a personal interview with R. Nandakumar, Rimzon explains the trajectories of his practice and he places himself as a contemporary conceptual artist. Rimzon was closely observing the changes in modern and contemporary art practices of the West. Apart from the theoretical approach, Rimzon explores his idea through different kinds of materials, which has been unfamiliar to Indian art practices until that time. His association with the Royal College of Art, London, from where he had completed his Masters in sculpture, helped him to understand and perceive new ideas in terms of material and concepts. By experimenting with the materials like wooden crates, blocks or pieces of wood and painted fiber glasses Rimzon was negating the traditional and conventional materials used for sculpture. He does not deny his admiration for the work of European artists/sculptors like Anish Kapoor, Tony Cragg, and Bill Woodrow. In fact, some of his works remind one of the works of a few European artists like Alberto Giacometti, Antony Gormley and Joseph Beuys. A comparative study of these three artists with Rimzon has been made later in this chapter under the subsection of Phenomenology Perception.

The Departure

The earlier works of Rimzon which had been a part of the exhibition *Seven Young Sculptors* (1985) curated by Vivan and essayed by Anita Dube share his stylistic evolution. The strong expressionistic affinity, which is found in the majority of artists of this show clearly indicate the influence of the subaltern artist Ramkinkar. Dube says:

> Ramkinkar Baij becomes a source of inspiration; and it is towards this that we direct our search for a language and its hidden potentials,

> to carry over our experience and give meaning to our commitment. The example and lesson of Ramkinkar is precious, for he embodies in his life and art values that we cherish: a search towards a maximization of expression and communication; great passion and great vitality; an infectious love for life and its celebration in a sensuous and dynamic art. (n. pag.)

Few of the artists participated in this particular group show, *Seven Young Sculptors*, really understood the ideological position that Kinkar attributed through his work and carried it forward further except Rimzon who shows a very clear perspective on what he wants to take from Baij and pursue it in the future. Rimzon's work titled *Three Sculptures on a Shelf (*1985) (fig.50) clearly indicates such perception. This work portrays the bust of a woman and two men hung like trophies over a shelf. The very expressive gaze and uncultivated gesture of the three portraits resemble a subaltern gesture which can only be portrayed by an artist who has such lived experiences. The feral expression on the three faces seems to challenge the elite aesthetics. Dube observes that the relations between the three portraits are mysterious, but "their class origin is evident, and as displayed trophies they are disquieting evidence of oppression" (n. pag.). Rimzon's inclination towards making such feral expression in his sculptures was part of his exercise to come out from the conventional way of narration followed by other artists. Colours in Rimzon's sculpture has been a part of psychic projection similar to the traditional ritualistic smearing of turmeric or vermilion on the primitive idols. The idea of painting a three-dimensional object in his works is not intended to have a decorative purpose but to bring a ritualistic experience. Narrating a story through a visual or a sculpture was the need of artists to propagate religious values in earlier period. The shift from a traditional perspective to modern art demands a more secular approach in art practices to address the social reality around them. Eventually, these kinds of practices become a kind of "visual information" and added to the social history, according to Rimzon ("In Conversation").

The basic challenge during his initial career was to bring out a new language focusing on human aspects other than the stylistic practice promoted by various schools like the Bengal, the Madras and the Progressive. Rimzon began to negotiate with this situation and tried to overcome it by incorporating new materials and objects into his work. Rather than creating a narration through the form, he found interest in finding meaning in certain objects and materials. Thus he explores the possibility of "Phenomenology" in his sculptural practice by using the method of seeing the world through certain objects and by understanding how different objects act and react upon one another.

In fact, *The Departure* (1985) (fig.51) that had been part of the same group exhibition which shows Rimzon brings out the idea of phenomenology in his work. This particular work depicts various objects related to the common life arranged on the floor rather than the conventional ways of displaying a monolithic sculpture on a pedestal. These objects can evoke various emotions and ideas related to the life of the marginalized. The association between the made object and found objects are very evident here and this new way of conflating of object/sculptural pieces was very new to Indian art practice. This style of work can be considered as the beginning of "conceptual art" in India, which has been already in practice in the West even in the 1960s. By adopting this style, somehow Rimzon could find a solution to the problem that he had been stuck up with; that is to deviate from the narrative style. His basic challenges were not only to find a new language but also to bring out a more humanistic approach to art practice.

Though his earlier works like *Sculptures on Shelf* and *The Departure* show strong affinity towards the expressionistic style like his contemporaries; later he takes a conscious effort to avoid such influences. Instead, he found a new language and method to represent his concept, which is more oriented towards the East and its spirituality. To attain this stability of language in his work he traverses simultaneously through Indian myths, folklore, and history and his intervention towards this medium did not remain just as the language of form but it opened up a new debate on the possibility of conceptual art in contemporary Indian art. Rimzon

says that the ultimate aim of an artwork is not to seek aesthetic pleasure but it has to share some social experience (Interview by Sujith Kumar).

Till the artistic intervention of Rimzon, the Indian art scene was unfamiliar to the application of ideas such as semiotics and deconstruction that were already in practice in the West. Apart from the usual modeling of sculptural language, Rimzon also could incorporate these new ideas in his work by accomplishing the new theoretical possibilities. The use of found objects in his works has to be read within this context. On Rimzon's juxtaposition of found objects with other materials and spaces, Marta Jakimowicz makes the following comment in the archive called *Critical Collective*:

> Rimzon relied on the found object of chance and on them so treated realistic or expressively exaggerated figure as a starting point taken from the immediate surroundings. Its placement in the vicinity and juxtaposition to other objects-forms yielded unexpected associations and revelatory insights into broader paradigms of existence.

Void and Voice or Self within.

The best example for Rimzon's innovativeness in using materials is the work called *From the Ghats of Yamuna* (1990) (fig.52). By keeping two terracotta pots mouth to mouth, Rimzon tried to create a new possibility—a third space—knowing the fact that even that space will be nothing but just a feeling of hollowness. The actual negative space contained inside the two pieces of sealed pot creates a kind of curiosity in the viewers. In other words, he creates a "void" space to fill another "void" space. This "void" space can be seen in his entire body of work. Here, the pot is not just a pot but it has to be seen from the perspective of semiotics. Jakimovicz further observes that:

> In a rather similar manner, he appropriates, interprets, and transposes material from art history. Among his main motifs, there is the earthen pot—the womb of fertility, nourishment, and plenty belonging to the mother goddess, to the waters and to the woman. When paired, it may

> allude also to fertile masculinity. It is the vessel of the body, the world, the self, and the spirit but also the container of feudal cruelty to the untouchable (*Critical Collective*).

By bringing different contradictory images and forms together, he creates new meanings from the same objects. For instance, the meaning of the pot has been changed while changing the function and the positions. In an interview with Victoria Lynn, Rimzon elaborates his metaphysical perceptive drawn from Martin Heidegger. Rimzon says, “A stone lying in the street won’t mean anything. But when you put it up to the sky then it can reveal the Earth, or the silence of the Earth...when the sky meets the Earth, it represents a dual moment. I am fascinated with that poetry” (qtd. in Lynn 87).

Rimzon’s consciousness has been moulded with the “archetypal” imageries and events of the past. He traverses through the evolution of mankind from prehistoric time to the present time. His approach towards modeling the figures cannot be read within the framework of traditional practice. On the contrary, it gives more disillusion and detachment from the subject and destructs the narratives. In short, it becomes just a found object like any other ready-made artifacts. Rimzon’s deep understanding of the Indian figurative traditional Buddhist and Jainist sculptures had played a vital role in moulding the philosophy of his sculptural language. This spiritual affinity distinguishes him from other figurative Indian sculptors and makes his work unique. He perceives the quality of the Buddhist and Jain sculptures and particularly notices the use of inner and outer space and the radiance of the inner energy and tranquility reflected on their face and body.

Rimzon’s works show the clear influence of Sramana cultures. He believes that by modeling a sculpture he can elevate his ideas to a visual and visionary level. He adapts and recreates the content and form of the Sramana sculptural tradition as a means to suggest the Sramana philosophy as a solution to the suffering of humanity. Humanism has been a primary concern of his practice. However, through the existentialistic thoughts he also tries to negotiate with the cultural socio-political situation of his time. He explains how a small hole can bring a difference in the

perception on an object. A hole on the object indicates the hollowness of the object and it creates a sense of emptiness (fig.53). By connecting the universe with the small hole on the object he gives a life to his art works and also gives a possibility that is more metaphysical. An ordinary object like an earthen pot, if completely sealed will give more tension and anticipation. But, Rimzon release this tension by putting a small hole on the surface of the sealed object. This is a play between space and material. The emptiness or the void space in his work can also be related to Taoist philosophy. One of the texts, *Tao Te Ching,* explains how the void space becomes an essential part of that particular object.

> Thirty spokes are joined together in a wheel, but it is the center hole
> that allows the wheel to function.
> We mold clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside
> that makes the vessel useful.
> We fashion wood for a house, but it is the emptiness inside
> that makes it livable.
> We work with the substantial, but the emptiness is what we use.
> (Tset 24)

As the above quote shows, it is the "void" or emptiness in Rimzon's works that gives life to his sculptures. The surface of the pot which is made of mud is usually known as positive space**.** The positive space of the material is nothing but a convenient space or intermediary space, which enables to hold the emptiness. Without that shape, it is impossible for one to hold an empty space. Emptiness is everywhere and it is not useful in life until and unless certain shapes do not define it. In short, only by perceiving the difference between being and non-being we will come to know the value of human existence. The totality of Rimzon's work can be read from the same philosophical perspective.

Rimzon believes that Buddhism has an important place in tackling the present-day conflicts of humanity. His ideological and philosophical approach towards Buddhism is not merely to use it as an aesthetic tool but it has been

suggested as path to solve the problems of the marginalized people and this idea is very clear from his own words:

> Buddhism is a very unique religion in the world and its glory lies in giving solution to eradicate human suffering. Buddha studied the reasons for grief in order to eliminate it and found the most scientific remedy for it. Buddha found that it is the five senses of human beings that give them all experience and so he advised people to acquire the ability to control those senses through various methods and to seek solution from the self within. At the same time, other religions are trying to solve this problem based on the idea of God. Other religions approach God as a problem solver. In fact, it was his anti-Hindu attitude that made him in search for Buddhism possible. The fact is that caste discrimination is the backbone of Hinduism. Hinduism generally tells people that some are reborn as lower castes as a result of their past sins. Because of such caste hierarchy and segregation, I realized that a man would not be treated as a human being or given the respect and pride that he deserves as long as such practice exists. ("Personal Interview")

Rimzon sees Buddhism as an alternative practice to counter the dominant Hindu culture. He firmly believes that only Buddhist philosophy, which is based on liberty, equality, fraternity and freedom, can overcome issues like untouchability and other similar intolerance (qtd. in Nandakumar). In their totality, Rimzon's art works are a kind of commentary on the prevailing socio-cultural-political fragmentation of India. By choosing the mediums like terracotta and forms like the pot Rimzon constitutes a language of representation of the tradition of the marginalized. In other words, the story of this material is rooted in the ancient civilization. The imageries in his works resemble artifacts of the Harappan and Mohenjo-Daro of the ancient Indus valley culture. On this connectivity with the remote, Rimozn says that,

> "Many of my works seem to be similar to those of Indian cultural figures such as Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. In other words, I see my

> artwork as a continuum of such practices. It is a non-Brahminical ideology but at the same time, it is very much associated with Dravidian culture. In fact, our South Indian culture is intertwined with such non-Aryan or non-Brahminical Mohenjo-Daro Harappan culture" ("Personal Interview").

Consciously or subconsciously, Rimzon's works suggest the necessity of retrieving the Sramana tradition instead of the "living tradition" which the nationalist artists have been projecting. The inspiration Rimzon got from the movement Arte Povera cannot be ignored while discussing his use of materials. One of the important aspects of Arte Povera was that it used everyday material, referred to as "poor" in terms of quality and value. The use of material like soil, food, water and found objects which was used by the artists belonging to the Arte Povera challenged the notion of the superiority of industrial sensibilities of American Minimalism. The use of unconventional materials and approaches often brought a contrast to the existing mainstream aesthetics of that time. The objects they collected from various sources sometimes shared a personal memory and social history. In short, it was a reaction to the hype of the industrialized sensibilities of Minimalism and similar sophisticated practices. This also can be read as a byproduct of the post-II World War period of Italy. If the artists of Europe were negotiating with the post-war trauma and industrialization by adopting Arte Povera, Rimzon was initiating a practice to counter the dominant Indian aesthetics drawing inspiration from a Western movement in art**.** His use of unconventional materials, figurations and use of found objects and arrangement of objects are testimonies for his close affiliation with his thought. By juxtaposing objects gathered from various sources along with hand-crafted objects Rimzon practiced the fundamental idea of the Arte Povera and tried to bring a new meaning in his works. In this case, Rimzon's approach seems to be more universally oriented rather than the nationalist approach of the so-called modern Indian artists and Rimzon has shown no hesitation in admitting that he uses a universally acceptable language in his works. He already knew that people who attempted deliberately to bring "Indianess" into their works were seeing their own country through the "orientalist" perspective. Rimzon has been consciously

distancing himself from such practices and criticizes those artists who attempt to bring Indianess very artificially. He says that there is no need for bringing "Indianess" forcefully into a work of art and if somebody is doing it, they are doing for the sake of making their works appealing to the "orientalist" eye. He says that even K. C. S. Paniker also turned towards the Neo-Tantric Art after he received advice from his European friends that he has to incorporate Indian elements to maintain his cultural identity as an Indian ("Personal Interview).

Phenomenology of Perception and Sramana Thoughts

The influence of artists like Joseph Beuys, Alberto Giacometti and Antony Gormely in Rimzon's approach to art cannot be ignored while reading his trajectories. Beuys was undoubtedly the most significant and political artist of the post-II World War and post-reunification Germany and his practices were closely inter-woven with the fascist past of Germany. Claudia Mesch observes that,

> Beuys's traumatic "experiences" led to his major efforts to expand art, freeing artists after him to work in a thoroughly interdisciplinary way, and to embrace anthropological conclusions about art and culture. Beuys has understood the force of creativity as the most important and universal human characteristic. (P15)

By using unconventional materials and forms, Beuys was attempting to bring the collective memory of his personal experience and the trauma that he had gone through in order to stimulate similar feelings in the viewers who had undergone similar experiences in the past. In addition to approaching art as a ritualistic activity, he was also actively negotiating with the current political scenario of that time. Another important aspect is that he hardly shared his experience of the Second World War publicly. Mesch reads his repressed mind and observed that his years in the war generally determined his consistent commitment to spiritual, scientific, and political notions of peaceful change and positive transformation through art and performance (14). Beuys speaks about the role and significance of Shaman who appears frequently in his works:

> I take this form of ancient behavior as the idea of transformation through concrete processes of life, nature and history. My intention is obviously not to return to such earlier cultures but to stress the idea of transformation and substance. That is precisely what the shaman does in order to bring about change and development: his nature is therapeutic … while shamanism marks a point in the past, it also indicates a possibility for historical development … So when I appear as a kind of shamanistic figure, or allude to it, I do it to stress my belief in other priorities and the need to come up with a completely different plan for working with substances. (qtd. in Tisdall 23)

Beuys draws inspiration from his autobiographical experience which he tried to see through Shamanism. Rimzon also consciously or subconsciously draws inspirations from his personal experiences. His vocabulary has been developing through the imageries of Harappan, Mohenjo-Daro and Dravidian Shamanistic thought. Various gestures and expressions incorporated in his works remind one of the ritualistic and performative natures of various elements of Dravidian and Buddhist rituals. The materials and forms that Rimzon uses in his works have historical significance in them.

Similar to Beuys, Rimzon's works actively negotiate with the political discourse of the country. If the war and related issues were a natural force of Buey's trajectories, Rimzon's artistic endeavors contest the dominant Brahmanic culture as well as the fascist agenda of certain political parties. Rimzon says,

> I see my artwork as a continuum of such practice. It is a non-Brahminical ideology but at the same time, it is very much associated with Dravidian culture. In fact, our South Indian culture is intertwined with such non-Aryan or non-Brahminical Mohenjo-Daro Harappan culture. However, such an approach is not part of my conscious decision, but, as I mentioned earlier, it comes from my subconscious mind. ("Personal Interview")

Rimzon strongly believes that creativity is the most imperative and universal human trait. He envisaged a new artistic experience by connecting his ancient root of shamanism and contemporized it to negotiate with the current socio-political situation. In his use of unconventional materials and display of especially found objects, readymade and installations Rimzon extended the medium of sculpture not only metaphorically but also politically**.** His keen observation of the practices of Joseph Beuys inspired him to explore more ideas related to his socio-cultural experiences and to incorporate the Ambedkarist ideology. In his own words: "So naturally, I explored other kinds of references—political, social, as for example, the ideas of Ambedkar—so that the works could be expanded to refer to these matters. I believe, unlike the commonplace ideas about political art, these works could be pushed to a different level." (qtd. in Nandakumar)

The tension between the space and the form is one of the major characteristics of Rimzon's works. It can be read as the tension between the self and the society or between the form and the space. Similar characteristics can be found in many European sculptures especially in Alberto Giacometti, the Swiss sculptor. Giacometti explains the reason why his sculptures are elongated and lean. He talks about the negative space in sculpture and due to the pressure of this negative space the physical form of space is shrunk and eventually it is elongated. In an interview with James Lord Giacometti says,

> What I am doing is negative work... You have to do something by undoing it. Everything is disappearing once more. You have to dare to give the final brush stroke that makes everything disappear... What's essential is to work without any preconception whatever, without knowing in advance what the picture is going to look like. (qtd. in Lord 45)

The idea of negative and positive has always been there in visual art practices. Giacometti's work suggests the unity between the body and the space that surrounds it and portrays a relationship between the body and space that negotiates the alternative existence of life and death. This approach can be seen in Giacometti's

oil painting *Annette* (1961) (fig.54) and his bronze sculpture *Woman of Venice VIII* (1956) (fig.55). He brings attention to the external, physical body as opposed to the "inner being" of the form. The very static poses of his sculpture are never engaging in activities but are posed facing the beholder. The influence of Giacometti on Rimzon is very much visible from the very initial stages of the latter's trajectories of art praxis. Rimzon's works entitled *Three Sculptures on a Shelf* (1985*), The Departure* (1985) and the *Man in The Chalk Circle (*1985) share certain characteristics of Giacometti's works. The crude and primordial gaze and the very rough texture of Rimzon's works remind one the similar treatment of Giacometti. Regarding the dealing of space, Giacometti was working with the negative space through the technique of subtractive act whereas Rimzon was more focusing on the inner world. Giacometti's artistic endeavors developed through the environment of the post-Second World War period and his works seem to share his personal response to the war. Rimzon's works progress as a response to the dominant culture in India that he has been experiencing throughout his life. However, it has to be noted that both of their intentions were to bring out the social reality through their personal experiences.

British sculptor Antony Gormley is another contemporary artist who can be compared with Rimzon. What makes these two artists comparable is the use of space and the similarity between their forms. The inner space in the casted body in Gormley's sculpture is not something meant for conceptual reading nor does it refer to a specific cultural context. Rather, it is treated as a universal form. The body-cases- like forms are quite different from other similar forms made through the same technique, which gives a curiosity to the viewer to know the identity of the person inside. The immobility and contemplating appearance of the form in Goormely also can be seen in Rimzon's work.

The inner space in Rimzon's work is not very different from Gormely's works. In the series of works like *Three Ways: Mould, Hole and Passage (*1981) (fig.56) and *Land, Sea and Air II* (1982) (fig.57) Goormely used the inner space as a metaphysical experience. At one time he perceives the body as a temple of being and

other times as a kind of prison. The idea of inner space in Gormely's works has a deeper connection with Eastern philosophy and Buddhist sculptures. John Hutchinson points out that Gormely had admitted his admiration towards such thoughts (34). Therefore the similarity between Rimzon and Gormely in terms of the notion of space and the figuration in their works cannot be seen as an accidental one. Contrary to that, it has to be read with reference to the similarity in their thought. Whereas Gormely uses this figuration and the space to bring a metaphysical experience to the viewer from the orientalist perspective, Rimzon proposes Sramana philosophy to counter the dominant cultural discourse drawing creative energy from his own cultural roots. Another important aspect which connects both these artists is their association with the "phenomenology" of Maurice Merleau-Ponty which was a major influence on the art practices since the 1970s. Ponty sought to establish the real and the imaginary as two different but corresponding realms: separate on the level of ordinary being but corresponding on the level of fundamental being and that kind of correspondence applies even to the human body.

Jhon Hutchinson notes that "Gormely, like Merleau-Ponty, is much drawn to the idea of the correspondence between the visible and invisible…. In other words, to Gormely the body is the articulation of meaning; it is that in which sense is given and out of which senses emerge" (42). Ponty says that "Man is a historical idea and not a natural species. In other words, there is in human existence no unconditioned possession, and yet no fortuitous attribute" (198). Ponty also briefs that,

> Every external perception is immediately synonymous with a certain perception of my body, just as every perception of my body is made explicit in the language of external perception…. We have relearned to feel our body; we have found underneath the objective and detached knowledge of the body that other knowledge which we have of it in virtue of it is always being with us and of the fact that we are our body. In the same way we shall need to reawaken our experience of the world as it appears to us in so far as we are in the world through our body, and in so far as we perceive the world with our

> body. But by thus remaking contact with the body and with the world, we shall also rediscover our self, since, perceiving as we do with our body, the body is a natural self and, as it were, the subject of perception. (239)

Basically it is the "phenomenology of perception" that connects Rimzon with other European artists like Giacometti, Joseph Beuys and Antony Gormely. Though the mainstream Indian art critics/historians try to read Rimzon's works with the reference of western phenomenological studies, it can be observed that his relation with the phenomenology is more oriented with the eastern thoughts especially with the Buddhist intellectual traditions. Another important factor one can observe here is that, if those three European artists mentioned used their phenomenological understanding to construct a post-war narrative of trauma, Rimzon uses it to bring in an alternative thought or a counter-cultural practice to the dominant Bhrahminical discourses. It may not be an instant solution to the problem of the subaltern. But in a broader perspective, it provides a permanent solution for all the inequalities by offering an egalitarian concept where all kinds' binaries are merged. And that is the political relevance and cultural significance of Rimzon's works.

The idea of inner space in Rimzon's work is very much rooted in his experience and in his approach. To comprehend the tension that accumulated in his work, one must understand the socio-cultural backdrop in which he lived and which moulded his early life. Despite the fact that Rimzon does not fully agree with the idea of identity politics, his works cannot be placed without relating them to his social-cultural background. How Rimzon seeks to mark the space in his creations has to be seen closely. Almost all his sculptures have a focal point and a radius that surrounds it. The installation titled *The Tool* (1993) (fig.58) shows a Jain/Buddha figure standing by holding folded hands together towards the sky in a meditating pose surrounded by assembled tools of everyday life on the floor. The representation of tools used in this work can be interpreted in different ways. Generally, a tool is meant for making the work of a labourer or craft person easier. It also can be a weapon to defend protect or attack. The tools displayed here, are those used by the

marginalized people. They use it in the agriculture field or in other construction sites. In this specific circumstance, it is more significant to look at what Rimzon has not explained about this work as the objects and forms have to be read with the reference to the "phenomenology of perception".

In his solo exhibition Seven *Oceans and the Unnumbered Stars* (2007) held in New York, Rimzon shows more affinity towards Martin Heidegger's enquiry into "ontology" through "phenomenology". Heidegger says "the phenomenological concept of phenomenon, as self-showing, means the being of beings—its meaning, modifications, and derivatives. This self-showing is nothing arbitrary, nor is it something like an appearing" (31).

In this study Rimzon's works are read from the perspective of "phenomenology of experience" rather than "transcendental" or mere "metaphysical approach. It is true that phenomenological studies have opened up a new possibility for people who work on "experience" because one's experience generally has an ability to hold much richer "content" than providing a mere sensation. The artifacts, objects, events, tools, the flow of time, the self, and the other experienced in one's "life-world" are truly a part of one's "experience". These experiences are reflected through perception, thought, imagination, memory, emotions, aspirations, personified actions, social norms, customs, rituals, language and so on. Conventional phenomenology sees the world through subjective consciousness. On the connectivity between one's experience and thought David Woodruff Smith observes that:

> Recent philosophy of mind, however, has focused especially on the neutral substrata of experience, on how conscious experience and mental representation or intentionality are grounded in brain activity.… The cautious thing to say is that phenomenology leads in some ways into at least some background conditions of our experience…. It is that lived character of experience that allows a first-person perspective on the object of study, namely, experience,

> and that perspective is characteristic of the methodology of phenomenology. (n. pag.)

In this context, it is observed that Rimzon's affinity towards phenomenology is more oriented towards his lived "experiences". Experiences accumulated in the form of memory in human brain are very much connected with the past-lived "time". One can be in the present only after a long practice and without the past there will not be present or future. So, the memory of the past is very much connected with one's past lived experience. People tend to remember the pain and sorrows than their happy moments. Here Rimzon's phenomenological approach has to be seen from the Buddhist perception of the body and mind and its phenomenology.

For Buddhists, understanding the body becomes a crucial step in the larger enterprise of understanding how worlds are constructed and how human beings remain trapped within them. Buddhist representations of the wheel of life similarly use a house with six open windows to represent the body and its six senses. As these pictorial representations of the cycle of death and rebirth indicate, the body and the senses are the basis from which contact with the world arises. Immobilizing the body in the act of meditation and stemming the flow of sensory stimulation leads to a meditative experience divested of all disruptive mental content. While the windows and the doors of the senses remain shuttered, they shut out contact with the world and block the disruptive emotion of desire that feeds upon this contact. (Lang 25)

Karen Christine Lang further explains that the Buddhist understanding of the body with the reference of *Mādhyamika* philosophy as,

> [The] nature of the body is constituted with "impurity" and "the natural impurity of the body that emerges from the womb is so great that even an ocean of water could not cleanse it. Moreover, impurities characteristic of the body leak out of its nine openings in the form of tears, ear wax, snot, saliva, sweat, excrement, and urine. In the end,

> the corpse's impurity becomes an object of meditation for those who observe the progress of its decomposition. (27)

Lang also points out in the context of this philosophy that only through the mediation of "mindfullness" one can cleanse the body and mind, but, in Brahminical way of practice, they are only trying to cleanse their body through rituals and offerings and it is imperfect. Since one's body itself is impure by nature it is a paradoxical thinking that the Brahmins' body will be contaminated by the "touch" of the lower caste people. Buddhism was logically critiquing the Brahminical practices of untouchability and they were treating body as a material of objectivity. Impermanence is one of the essential doctrines of Buddhism. The doctrine asserts that all of conditioned existence, without exception, is "transient, evanescent, and inconstant. Sundar Sarukkai observes that Buddhist view of the body is very important in the context of practices of untouchabilty. He says that, "One reason is that the Buddhists rejected a brahminical outlook towards individuals, society and god. The other reason is that following Ambedkar, Buddhism has become the preferred religion for many Dalits" ("Phenomenology of " 42). Rimzon incorporates his phenomenological "experience" into his art practice by adopting the Buddhist concepts. His approach on this idea has got nothing to do with the "theological" understanding of the European artists as pointed earlier. Rather, Rimzon's approach traverses back to his "memory" and "experience" and revert back to the context of the current social reality of his surroundings.

In his solo show entitled *Seven Oceans and the Unnumbered Stars* (2007) Rimzon perceives the human body as a container; a receptacle of violence and of generative possibilities; a simultaneous holder of secrets and emptiness. For instance, Rimzon's *Sealed Fountain* (2007) (fig.59), a large installation work, shows a sealed "space" which is formed by placing two large *urulis*, large traditional bronze vessels, face to face and a primordial female form with her erected and pointed hair placed horizontally underneath the sealed vessels as if the weight of the sealed "space" is borne by that female form. His *Mother at the Shrine* (2007) (fig.60), another work from the same display, shows a full-grown pregnant belly

merging to the imageries of nature while going to the edges. His sense of articulating space is nothing but an emptiness that he gathered from the Buddhist concept of body and space. Even the minimalism that he brings through his work cannot be read in the context of Minimalism (1960) of Western art, the most influential art movement. The artist belonging to this movement wanted to create art that refers only to itself, permitting the spectator a pure visual response. Marc Botha observes that "Minimalism is best understood as an existential modality or a way of existing in the world" (1). The minimalistic approach of Rimzon has to be read with reference to Buddhism which shows the world the necessity of eliminating unwanted desires from human mind and life in order to realise mindfulness.

It is very important to note how Rimzon's works have evolved vis-a-vis his philosophy. However, it is also equally important to know about the biographical details of the artist to have an understanding of the roots of his creative endeavors. But the problem here is that he has not mentioned his family anywhere like other artists from aristocrat families. As pointed out already, the elite artists who have been controlling the Indian art scenario were taking advantage of their location and family legacy. But in the case of artists like Ramkinkar or Rimzon, one hardly sees them claiming something out of their family background. The reason for such artists not disclosing their family background may be that they do not have anything particular to reveal to win the appreciation from the patrons or viewers.

Another reason for the artists coming from lower strata of society for not revealing their painful living experiences may be due to their inferiority complex. In order to veil this reality, they often weave out a larger narrative around them. Nevertheless, by going deeply to their biography one can identify the causes and the logics of the language of expressions that these artists have created. Similarly, Rimzon could not have expressed the bitter experience of the marginalized subjectivities like him through his work explicitly. Instead, he was trying to portray these issues in a broader perspective because he knew that he had to challenge the whole establishment including the patronage of the art world. By doing so the person could be alienated or cornered by the mainstream culture. He says:

> Though we have an alternative thought, it is also a fact that we don't have an alternative system yet. System in the sense, that we don't have a parallel political power, economy, technology, media and infrastructure etc. All these are still under the monopoly of Brahmanical culture. So fighting with them directly is just like fighting waves with a sword. In addition you will be bracketed into a certain category and will soon lose your public space for showing your art. So we can only approach this matter with a tactical mind. ("Personal Interview")

Sometimes, what the artists explain about their works may not be very important, compared to what she/he has not explained. In that case, the art historians/critics have to connect the gap between what is said and not said by the artist in order to reveal the truth behind the work of art. An artist generally reveals the process of his/her artistic endeavors. That information will be there in front of everyone already and there is nothing for art historians to add. The only scope for art critics and historians is to go beyond the work of art and find out what the artist has not explained. They should also be able to look at the artistic endeavors critically and analytically to enable the viewers to travel to the socio-cultural and historical backdrop of the work of art. Art critics also have to be capable of analyzing the visual, imaginative and philosophical perception of an artist into a simple and common language to enable the viewer for better appreciation of a particular work of art. However, the general approach of art criticism in India seems to be very peripheral of the work of art or just limited by rhetorical expressions and clichés. Eventually what the artists have not revealed about him/her self remains in a kind of "void" space.

Artists who come from the marginalized communities with little articulation skill will have to depend on the art critic's explanations. But artist coming from the elite background will be good in articulation and there will not be such "void' space in their narration. If we gather all this "void" space from social history, we can see that those are the muted voices of the subalterns. And this "void" space can only be

filled by the right intervention of the art historians and critics who have a pro-subaltern perspective.

Rimzon never has claimed that he is a subaltern or Dalit artist. But, it is also one of the researcher's academic obligations to find out the "void" space in Rimzon that other historians and critics have overlooked. In this scenario, one of Rimzon's statements given below regarding his philosophical perspective has to be examined closely:

> I feel as though I have lived my life in exile – exile from my family, from society and from mainstream culture. I feel rootless, nomadic, like a gypsy. And this is reinforced by what I see and read around me. All information is fragmented. I seem to be on an odyssey – I move from one class to another; there is no fixed point, no continuity." ("The Artist", 21)

The deeper meanings of each word used in this statement especially words like ' exile', "mainstream culture", "rootless", "fragmentation", "class", etc. have to be closely examined. One can clearly observe that these words are directly connected to the problem of "identity". Rimzon asserts that he has not been part of the "identity politics". However, the counter-argument is that why should someone consciously claim to be part of any political ideology? In other words, is it necessary for artists to proclaim themselves that they are part of a particular established or emerging ideology to voice their opinion about something? It may not be necessary for an artist to have a particular established "ideology" to follow through his/her practices.

If the artist follows a certain established "ideology," his/her artistic trajectories might end up in propaganda. "Ideology" of an artist has to have a "history" and it cannot be an "ideology without history". Most often it can be observed that the ideology that the majority follows is the ideology without history. The ideology has to be developed from a specific context based on the problem the society or an individual wanted to address. The reason for the failure of ideology such as Marxism in the Indian context has to be read in this context. As an ideology

it failed to address "graded inequality" based on caste which is unique to India. Ambedkar strongly criticized Marxism because it denies individual freedom and is based on violence and dictatorship. Ambedkar argued that the Buddhist principles of *Samata, Karuna* and *Maitri* are ideal for the well being of humanity rather than the principles of Communism.

Having come from an exploited and oppressed caste—one treated as 'untouchable'—Ambedkar naturally should have been a communist if he was convinced that it could end caste discrimination. He also has made a very critical observation about Indian communism that the Communist Party of India was under the control of Brahmin leadership. Ambedkar was convinced that if communism succeeded, the exploited and oppressed caste would continue to suffer more under Brahminic dictatorship. Rimzon shares Ambedkar's ideology and this cannot be understood without studying his entire works. However, Rimzon believes that it's risky for an artist to proclaim openly his politically perspective. He says,

> For me, I do not want to confront this issue directly. I do not think anything can be achieved through a direct confrontation but I think some kind of negotiation is needed more here. Actually, I keep doing such works which are non-Brahmanical as part of a counter culture continuum. I may not be giving a direct explanation to anybody if they ask what I am really doing. But over a period the concept of my works will be accumulated as a body of works and I firmly believe that such body of works would unravel the reality of truth. Eventually, a situation will arise in which such realities will inevitably be accepted by the society. ("Personal Interview")

An artist coming from a marginalized background faces more challenges and tensions than an artist belonging to higher caste or elitist background. So, an artist from lower caste has to address mainly three problems**.** Firstly he/she will have to fight against the dominant cultural discourses which discriminate them based on their lower caste status. Secondly, since he/she lacks a proper mentor or a promoter to support their career they have to be their own promoter and mentor. Thirdly, and

perhaps the biggest challenge is how to maintain and present their own philosophical and ideological perceptions in a universally accepted language to compete with the mainstream dominant culture. In order to materialize this they also needed financial support.

In short, compared to the artists from an elite class/upper caste background an artist who comes from the marginalized communities has to face multiple challenges to succeed in their career. The lack of articulation skill is another major challenge faced by them as was evident in the case of Ramkinkar. Artists coming from subaltern background see art as part of life and they may not see anything particular to articulate about their works. They hardly have access to proper systemic or formal education and hence may not be able to communicate in the English language, which has been a major medium of communication in the art world. Evaluating the artistic endevours of an artist coming from a marginalized background without considering all these factors will be inappropriate and incomplete. The artist as well as the individual in Rimzon has to be considered as an object of historical enquiry. Without this object of inquiry, the problem that is raised in this thesis cannot be specifically located. A historical object is a fixed point from where the past and present of art historiography can be compared. Sundar Sarukkai's explanation on the historical object is relevant here:

> A historical object is open for evaluation and testing, it is open to disagreements between two people, but in order to have that argument, we have to do something to that historical object. The default mode, which is what happens with the idea of a scientific method, is to make the past in the mould of a visual object. We have to consider this possibility that the historical method spatializes the historical objects. Unless you have these kinds of stable objects in front of you, available for your modes of enquiry through which you can derive knowledge, it is not possible to construct what you would call a discipline in the "scientific" sense. ("Representing the")

Here, Rimzon's creative endevour has to considered as a "stable object" which will enable one to make an enquiry into his works and to arrive at a reasonable conclusion. The evolution of modern Indian art can be located through different periods and it can be categorized mainly in two phases: the colonial and postcolonial; or pre-independent and post-independent Indian art. One can observe that from the early 20th century to the contemporary period, the major ideologies which influenced Indian writers and artists were the ideologies of Gandhi and the Nehru. The artists who followed the Gandhian ideology always tried to portray him with uncritical admiration. The Gandhian idea of swadeshi, or self-reliance, was one of the prominent themes that attracted the elite artists and they began to look back to their own roots and culture with a nostalgic mind.

However, as mentioned earlier, though equally important—if not more than Gandhi and Nehru—Amebdkar's ideology was hardly present in the mainstream Indian art. The artists who have been incorporating Gandh's images in their works and trying to represent his philosophy have never been critical of his religious and political views. Instead of doing that, they always endorsed nationalistic and elite consciousness to enhance the appreciation of their works. The mainstream artists never tried to critique Gandhi's views on caste discrimination in India. The contradiction, in Gandhi's perspective on the caste issue, was one of the prime reasons for Ambedkar's criticism of Gandhi. Whereas, other cultural mediums like film, literature and theatre have been critiquing Gandhi for taking a double stand on the issue of caste in India, the visual artists hardly attempted to look at him with a critical mind. While the Nehruvian ideas are talked about, the first thing that is evoked is his idea of "unity in diversity." Nehru put forward the idea of Hinduism in a broader perspective beyond the idea of religion and he focused more on the tolerance of all classes and races. Socialism and secularism were the two basic concepts he put forward throughout his period. In short, abolition of the caste system was not there in the agenda of either the Indian National Congress party or its national leaders. According to Dr Ambedkar, political changes could not succeed unless it was preceded by a socio-religious revolution. But the Congress never worked for social changes aimed at annihilating caste. Ambedkar argued that

"…only when the Hindu Society becomes a casteless society that it can hope to have strength enough to defend itself. Without such internal strength, Swaraj for Hindus may turn out to be only a step towards slavery" (80).

By representing Gandhi and Nehru and not representing Ambedkar the majority of mainstream artists in India seems to be endorsing the "nationalistic" ideology of the elite Hindus. By raising the concepts of *Samatha*, *Karuna* and *Maithri* from the Buddhist tradition and ideas like liberty, equality and fraternity from the French Revolution, Ambedkar has proved himself that he is much beyond other Indian national leaders in terms of projecting the idea of "modernity" in India where all kinds of inequalities and discriminations exist primarily as the base of caste hierarchy. Ambedkar wrote openly and straight, "The effect of caste on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has made public opinion impossible"(56). He courageously declared that, "Religion must mainly be a matter of principles only. It cannot be a matter of rules. The moment it degenerates into rules it ceases to be Religion, as it kills responsibility which is the essence of a truly religious act…I have, therefore, no hesitation in saying that such a religion must be destroyed and I say, there is nothing irreligious in working for the destruction of such a religion" (75,76). A society cannot be called modern if it does not practice humanism, equality and social justice. In this case, how can one consider modern those national leaders who were hardcore believers and advocates of the Hindu religious code, which endorses all kinds of inequality and discrimination in terms of caste and gender?

It is at this particular juncture that the works of Rimzon emerge as a central point of this research. By incorporating Ambdekar, Rimzon opens up a larger narrative idiom to contest the current establishment of art practice which is based on the elite aesthetics. Rather than confronting the mainstream art practices Rimzon tries to negotiate with the dominant cultural psyche because he was aware of the consequences that he has to face if he really challenges the mainstream art world by directly opening up a war on them stating all his arguments. Eventually, he was

opening up a new and an alternative possibility for visual art practices in Indtia by incorporating Ambedkar's ideology.

Of course, Rimzon is not the first artist incorporating Ambedkar's ideology in a work of art. Most often artists who want to represent Ambedkar's ideology may incorporate the images of Ambdekar or illustrate a picture or make sculptures portraying the suffering of the marginalized people. Quite often, it becomes an emotional outburst and may not be going beyond the subjective/emotional frame. It will have an ability to bring the emotional part of the subject matter. However, it may not be able to suggest an alternative thinking or a solution to the problem. A work of art need not be a solution provider always. But if some artists are able to a suggest solution rather than keep on representing that problem, that has to be considered as a significant quality. Here lies the importance of Rimzon's approach towards art practice. Hardly any emotional outburst in Rimzon's works can be found, nor do they share any kind of similar stories or narratives. Instead of that, the forms and materials used in his work provide a conceptual explanation of the subject matter. Rimzon is the first artist who tried to incorporate Ambedkar's ideas theoretically as an alternative to the dominant discourses in Indian art. This may not be the result of a conscious decision by the artist. But after reading all his works, it can be found out that Rimzon's thoughts are converging on the idea of Ambedkar directly or indirectly.

Quite often, Indian art historians and critics tend to omit these kinds of observations and will not attempt to look from those angles until and unless the art galleries or the museums get benefit out of such observations. The other problem with modern Indian art criticism is that it attempts to analyse Indian art from the perspective of western aesthetics which is inadequate to comprehend the social and cultural problems exist in India. At this specific context, it is imperative to necessitate an aesthetics and critical approach to analyze indigenous and contemporary Indian art. Rimzon has been bringing up the same suggestion throughout most of his conversation with the present researcher. Rimzon's approach is very similar to the idea of Ambedkar, who had adopted the indigenous philosophy

of Buddhism to frame his political emancipatory agenda to counter the caste Hindu discourse. Rimzon explains how his exposure to Ambedkar's thought made him a socially engaged artist. He says that he was not exposed to Ambedkar's philosophy in his school or college days**.** What he only knew about Ambedkar was that he was the chairman of drafting committee of the Constitution of India and was a Dalit leader. Later, Rimzon witnessed the anti-reservation struggle against the Mandal Commission Report in 1990 and had personally discussed and debated with people around him on this issue at that time. Rimzon says that people look to the reservation policy with contempt even today.

The caste Hindus were clamouring for "merit" and it was in this context that he went and searched for more information on Ambedkar and his ideas on reservation. He realized that the narrative constructed by the mainstream historiographers in the name of nationalism was false. He also realized the hypocrisy of Gandhi when he happened to read about the reality behind Poona Pact of 1932. He also understood how Gandhi and other nationalist leaders like Madan Mohan Malavya pressurised Ambedkar to withdraw his support to the Communal Award proclaimed by British Government with provisions to provide reservation for separate electorates for India's vast population of "depressed classes" or "untouchables", who are called scheduled castes (SCs) today. After the long negotiation with a hesitant mind Ambedkar was forced to sign the Poona Pact which provides a reservation for "untouchables" within the Hindu society. However, Rimzon sees it as a cunning move from Gandhi to favour the caste Hindus. This information about Ambedkar made him to read his writings further. Rimzon wonders, though we had such an intellectual person in India, why the historians or historiography of mainstream culture have not acknowledged his great contribution towards the Indian society. Not only they overlooked his contributions but they also completely ignored his presence.

Rimzon observes that the dominant culture has not accepted Ambedkar as a national leader until today; on the contrary, it sees him only as a Dalit leader. The dominant psyche of India is still revolving around Gandhi and his ideas and Rimzon

wants to create a space for a critical dialogue with the dominant culture through his work. Rimzon's explanation shows how seriously he studied Ambedkar and adapted his idea into his works.

Although not a part of any identity politics, Rimzon did try to uncover the possibilities of identity politics through his works in a larger perspective. Rimzon convinces poeple that life and art are not two separate entities but are two sides of the same coin. In this context, his work *Man in the Chalk Circle* (1985) (fig.61) needs to be looked at from a different perspective than what the critics had previously commented on it. From the beginning of his career Rimzon has been consciously taking efforts to do conceptually oriented works. The lack of emotional aspect in the surrealistic art practices in the contemporary scene made him understand the necessity of bringing up a certain level of emotional aspects in his work. This must, of course, be taken as an approach beyond the intellectual practices of his contemporaries. It is in this particular context that *Man in the Chalk Circle* was created. The sculpture represents a male figure sitting quite naked with his genitals completely touching the Earth with a "primitive" gaze. Besides that there is a line around the sculpture with chalk powder. Rimzon explained the challenges that he has to face, to the present researcher, while making this sculpture as follows:

> Let me explain you first how this work transcended from a narrative language and came to be a language of conceptual art. The limitation of the narrative language is it may not go to the deeper level of appreciation of a work or it may not address the root of the problem. Instead, it will remain as a very peripheral thing. Sometimes the narrative language works as propaganda. So the biggest challenge in front of me was how to overcome the narrative idea and to bring a third dimension to the work of art. So I in the first stage, I made this human form with this expression and it was a narrative in the first place which can be closely read as the subaltern representation. But in the second stage I treated it as a found object or a just an object and tried to break the narrative limitation and brought a third

> dimension by drawing a white circle around it. What was being done here is actually remoulding the initial form. In such transformation, the accompanying memories and experiences are recreated. Eventually, the art work attains an unexpected level of meaning. The fact is that I do not anticipate such a meaning in the first place. Through this process, a new reality actually emerges. That is what I finally see as a work of art. Any material can be transformed to its totality through certain process and can be converted into a work of art as liberation of energy of that particular material. I understand that art should be approached in that way. I 'm not trying to say this as a theory. When we approach art this way, the process becomes completely independent and, as you said earlier, achieves a dimension of creation that allows the viewer to relate to his or her own personal experience. Then what I actually tried to convey through this work becomes very irrelevant. Rather, appreciation of art remains as an independent experience. ("Personal Interview")

Taking aesthetic clues from this explanation, it is the responsibility of the viewer or critics to interpret the work according to the context of the work. A work of art need not be viewed from the Barthian notion of the "Death of the Author" (Roland Barthes 1967); but there are certain points to agree with Barthes in this context. Though a work of art is the creation of an artist, the experience of appreciation is based on the personal experience of the viewer. That is why a viewer often cries while watching an emotional scene because he/she tries to relate it with his or her own similar experiences. The spectators of a work of art always feel elevated while viewing a work of art if it relates to their experiences. If the art critics or historians have not come across the experience the artist shared through his work they may interpret it with their own limited experience which may be unrelated to the work of art. Eventually, the writings would be similar to the description of Vincent Vanghogh's *Old Shoes with Laces* by philosophers like Jacques Derrida, Martin Hedger, and Mikhail Bakhtin. The approach of art historians and critics to Rimzon's highly important work, *Man in the Chalk Circle*, was similar.

To understand this sculpture, it is necessary to unveil the language and structure of the work. By carefully observing his works one can understand, that the language and the concept he applies throughout his career has not changed much in terms of the material and the form. This shows that he has been consistent and focused on what he wants to convey through his work even before he derived a particular style. In other words, the "content" of his artistic endeavors was already within him and that he was searching for the right "form" or format or idiom to express the content. His ability to transform his ideas into a powerful medium might have been the result of his lived experience. It is so clearly understood that the marginalized male figure sitting on the floor is a representation of certain human expression and it demands multilayer of reading. It is certain that the dark-skinned and over-exaggerated expression on the face of the man definitely does not represent the elite upper caste individual. It is evidently the gesture of a person from the marginalized or Dalit community. The aesthetics of the portrait do not conform to the traditional, classical, brahminical norms. The nakedness of the figure suggests the rawness of the subaltern and the facial expressions reflect a sort of defiance.

By seating the man's genital organ on the floor Rimzon creates and permanently maintains a surreal feeling in this sculpture. Powdered chalk is used to mark the boundary lines of the playing /area/field or court. Therefore the circular line around the figure made with the chalk powder can be a signifier of power and control. This can also connote the "Lakshmana rekha", or the borderline drawn by Lakshmana, from the *Ramayana* limiting the freedom of movement of a woman if looked at from a feminist perspective. This kind of certain "marking" can be found even in the contemporary social life of India.

For instance, Dalits are not even allowed to enter public spaces in many parts of India and their freedom of movement is controlled with markings or physical structure by the dominant culture. And if somebody from the subaltern group tries to cross the line they are brutally tortured or even killed in many parts of the country even today. Quite often these "markings" are invisible and it so evident in the everyday life of the subaltern. Atrocities against Dalits and Adivasis are increasing

day by day in India and the majority of media are reporting only a minuscule percentage of such incidents. Often it is reported only when there is a political gain over it or to divert the attention from important social issues.

Rimzon's work, *Man in the Chalk Circle,* showing the contrast between the white and dark colour can be a signifier of the caste difference and conflict between the dominant majority and the subaltern minority. The circular forms in his works have been an integral feature of his works and it attributes layers of meaning to his sculpture. Though he says that he uses the white circle in this particular sculpture to bring a metaphysical dimension to his work, it also emphatically depicts the alienation and helplessness of the particular man who is trapped and stagnated within the dominant cultural discourse. Though the subaltern expression of this work may not be deliberate it opens up another possibility to read the work. As he himself admits "…in the first stage I made this human figure with this expression and it was a narrative in the first place which can be closely read as a subaltern representation…. that allows the viewer to relate to his or her own personal experience " ("Personal Interview").

Circular forms have been part of indigenous cultures of the world including the folk cultures of India. A circle is a basic form of nature. And it contains all the regular and irregular shapes just like the Earth which consists of various shapes. A circle is an absolute concept. In indigenous-tribal community it is also a symbol of equity where no one has an elevated position at a certain area of the circle. Many tribal rituals are performed in the circular format. For instance, the Warli tribal dance of Maharashtra is performed in the circular format. Buddhist Stupas and Pagodas are in circular form. Most importantly, the circular forms that Rimzon repeatedly used in his works have to be read in relation to the Mandala which represents the universe in Buddhist tradition.

According to Buddhist scriptures Mandalas transmit positive energies to the environment and to the people who see them and it is believed to affect "purification" and "healing". Rimzon might have incorporated this circular structure consciously into his work. However, the purpose of placing Mandala has more

relevance in the contemporary social context. A “healing” is required for a being who is wounded with something or experiencing sorrow; and “purification” is required for those who have been maligned with hatred, evil and inhuman “actions”. Therefore, it can be argued that the man sitting inside the Mandala is seeking “healing” for his wounded past due to the discrimination he faced in the society. The society needs purification to free itself from hatred and inhuman actions. Though the borderlines are created by the dominant culture around the subaltern in Indian society, Rimzon takes up this problem into a metaphysical level and try to negotiate it with the socio-political reality.

Rimzon’s conscious effort to make a conceptual language of art takes him to the root of his life that is very indigenous in terms of form and idea. Here the white line brings two different meanings. Firstly it provides a metaphysical meaning as per Rimzon’s version of explanation and the second one can be the idea of a marginalized or a Dalit who is trapped in the savarna/ elite circle of Indian society. Though, this interpretation seems to be very direct and lacks rhetoric, the possibility for this kind of reading cannot be ignored. Sometimes the rhetorical meaning will not serve the purpose or may not be adequate to reveal the truth. However, the mainstream art historians may not be interested in looking at the work from the subaltern perspective because it is impossible for them to have such reading since they lack such “experiences”.

Inner Voice

The “inner voice” has been another significant forte in Rimzon’s works. What does the inner voice stand for? Is it a personal voice? A monologue? or Is it a voice without sound? These questions provide various possibilities for imagination and extension. After observing the artistic trajectories of Rimzon, one would find that the inner voice in his works is not just a voice but a voice of tensions. It is a voice which never gets sounded but it is just like the silence ready to explode at any time. When the figures of Jain or Buddha are seen, they not only remind one of corporeal bodies Jain or Budha but take them back to the history of thousands of years. The forms of Budha or Jaina are not just the symbols of the path they have

shown to the world to solve the sufferings, but also of their scarifices for removing the inequality to ensure the wellbeing of humanity. By sourcing intellectual energy from such forms and recreating the forms similar to that, Rimzon reminds the people the necessity of retrieving such noble ideals of the past in the contemporary world.

Rimzon's work titled *Inner Voice* (1992) (fig.62) is the finest example for the same. It is a large size monolithic Jain like figure displayed with its back against the wall surrounded by a semicircle made of forty cast iron swords pointing out the sharp edge towards the central figure. The works titled *Inner Voice* tries to reconstruct and place the meaning of the actual forms into a contemporary context. Geeta Kapur observes that, "Rimzon's work is considered retake on phenomenological encounter…" (*When Was*, 395). Kapur's observation does not go beyond the explanation the artist gives and it is stagnated with it is peripheral meaning. The distance between the centre figure and the curve brought by the arrangement of the swords creates another "void" space here. Swords are rusted but sharp enough to make a wound and the wounds are created by the rusted sword could be more dangerous.

By creating the tension between the Jain like figure at the centre and the arrangements of weapons, Rimzon was trying to share his helplessness and was anticipating the violent situation of the socio-political scenario of that time. We have to see that it is the same year in which the Babari Masjid was demolished by the Hindutva forces as a result of which the country had to go through a very hard time of political turmoil and communal riots. By placing a figure like Tirthankara in an "abandoning-the-body-posture", Rimzon suggests the need to resist the Hindutva forces and to restore peace and communal harmony. The central figure which is vertical and static, feet somewhat at a distance, the hands hanging in a relaxed mode, gives a feel of frozen time.

Another work entitled *The Tool* by Rimzon also bear resemblance to the Jain or Buddha figure, in a praying gesture pointing both folded hands together towards the sky. The form refers to the Indian sculptural tradition. Both these works imply the concept of Mandala as well. As already pointed out, the use of Mandala has to be

taken as a representation of Buddhist thought. In both these works the figures installed in the middle of the Mandala seem to seek protection from the violence unleashed by the dominant culture and pray for "healing" the wounds. The very archaic appearance and the texture of the body give an ancient look. The static posture suggests the Sramana concept of Ahimsa. Rimzon upholds Sramana philosophy of peace to counter the violence unleashed by the Hindu religion.

The Hindu religious scriptures and epics justify war for protecting the *sanathanadharma.* Rimzon's upholding of non-violence through his work is quite different from the representation of the same theme of his contemporaries. For instance artist like Vivan Sundaram also has done many works to address the same issue of demolition of the Babri Masjid. Vivan tried to look at this problem from the "Nehruvian ideal of secularism". He drew inspiration from a single photograph in a newspaper of a man who was killed during the riots, which erupted as a result of the demolition of the Babri Mosque (Kamayani Sharma). Here, Vivan was portraying the consequence of communal riot and was trying to engage the viewer with the fear of death. He seems to undertake a "campaign" to make the public aware of the need of communal harmony to project Nehruvian secularism in an illustrative mode. He was not going to the depth of the problem as if he seems to have not understood the core issue behind the demolition of Babri Mosque.

Kancha Ilaiah has rightly pointed out the real agenda behind the demolition of Babri Mosque. He says that the demolition of the mosque was not against the Muslim community and the anti-Mandal protest was actually an anti-Dalit protest (51). Ilaiah's observation leads one to understand the actual truth behind the demolition of the mosque. Rimzon's response to this incident, which he represented through his work, shows that he was completely aware of the religious and political motives behind the demolition of Babri-Masjid. In a personal interview with the present researcher, he has revealed that he had closely monitored the anti-reservation struggle by the caste Hindus. As a result of his deep understanding of the problem, he approached it in a broader perspective and tried to address the core issue in the

society rather than illustrating this problem just like Vivan has attempted. However, in historiography no such observation is found.

Rather than addressing the real issue the elite historiographers still revolve around the nationalistic, Gandhian, Nehruvian idealism which are more acceptable to them. They think that the elite audience could be easily convinced with such explanations. For instance, Kapur reads Vivan's *Memorial* as a symbol of "national mourning"; whereas, she sees Rimzon's *The Tool* as a "recuperative symbol for self-sufficiency" (351). The critics can easily grasp what Vivan has attributed through his "illustrative" language. Critics were not able to go beyond the peripheral appearance of Rimzon's work and hence failed to understand the social, cultural and political undertones of the work. Rimzon was not narrating any particular story through his works, rather his images, forms and materials are intertwined to produce the intended meaning. In order to comprehend the real meaning of his work, the entire body of his works has to be examined. Rimzon says "a work of art is a truth in itself and it exists in the society with its own dynamism. So actually, the critics' role is to find out the truth within the work of art" ("Personal Interview").

To a certain extent, Rimzon's artistic discourse is a combination of intellectualism and spirituality. The language he chooses to express his ideology is quite appropriate to the context. Whenever he feels like intervening in social issues directly through his work he does not hesitate to do it without compromising on his philosophical approach. For example, his sculpture *Speaking Stone* (1998) (fig.63) portrays a crouching nude figure holding its head and shielding eyes with both hands. Sharp natural granite stones are arranged around the figure and the photographs depicting massacres, demolitions, and other acts of communal violence that have been part of India's more recent history are placed under the stone. This installation of weeping man with the stones and photographs of the communal riots reported in various media is a vital expression of the depression and anxiety over the socio-political atmosphere of the time. This artwork shows how narrow-minded religious difference can cause deep wounds in the human psyche. Rimzon's works

prove that genuine intervention in social issues is possible through works of art without compromising on aesthetics.

The Blood Rain (2019-20) (fig.64), for example, portrays two sealed vessels positioned mouth to mouth vertically just likes in his earlier works. Multiple red strings are seen falling down from the bottom of the pot to the Earth like a blood rain. Pictures of martyrs who died in the political violence of Kerala are interwoven to the blood rain. It may also be noted that the majority of the people who are killed in political violence belong to the marginalized communities irrespective of their political ideology. Rimzon seems to raise the question of why the majority of the people killed in political violence are from the marginalised community (Ullekh 9-10). Through the painting *Death of an Author* (2016) (fig.65), Rimzon directly questions the fascist approach of the Hindutwa forces. This particular painting is made with reference to the Tamil writer Perumal Murugan who was forced to stop his writing career in 2015 due to threat and attacks from the caste Hindus demanding him to withdraw all his writings especially his novel *One Part Woman* (2010). The caste Hindus alleged that Murugan has defamed certain religious beliefs of the Hindus through this novel. The intervention of authorities to negotiate between the author and the opponents demanded Murugan to give an unconditional apology and withdraw all the books that he has written. But, instead of accepting their demand Murugan declared that he would not write anymore and that "Perumal Murugan the writer is dead" (qtd. in Kolappan). Rimzon's painting on the Perumal Murugan issue shows a cross-legged man emptying an earthen pot filled with red liquid over his head. Here the "Death of Author" is not used in the Barthian sense. Rather, it shows how an author is silenced, if not killed by the caste Hindu fascists in a country where freedom of expression is guaranteed in the constitution. Rimzon also is aware that if he directly criticizes the caste Hindu attitude he may also have to face the same experience of Perumal Murugan.

Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet

The installation *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet* (1995) is to be regarded as the greatest among his work. That is why this thesis mainly focuses on

analysing it. Such powerful artwork is rarely seen in modern Indian art history. The value and strength of this work is enhanced not only by its aesthetic quality but also for it is social and cultural relevance**.** The greatest significance of this piece of art is that it was done based on Ambedkar's ideas and by incorporating his biographical narratives. It was done during the period when Gandhian ideas, Nehruvian ideals and the Right-wing and extremist Hindu ideologies were predominant**.** The work displayed in an outdoor landscape which consists of a hundred and eight earthen pots arranged in a line and straw brooms protruding from each vessel. Each object used in this work has a semiotic meaning rather than a narrative meaning. Rimzon explains how he got the idea of Ambedkar and accomplished it in this particular work of Art. He read about the caste discrimination experienced by Ambedkar as a Mahar an untouchable community in Maharashtra from his writings. They were only allowed to enter the city with a pot around their neck and a broom around their waist. The savarnas believed that the earth would be polluted if the saliva or spit of the Dalits is dropped down. The upper castes used to force them to sweep clean the path trodden by them with the broom tied to their waist. Ambedkar sees such customs as symbols of untouchability and slavery. Rimzon explains the influence of Ambedkar on him:

> This experience of untouchability, and humiliation narrated in Ambedkar's writings has deeply stuck in my mind. How it can be transformed to a work of art was the next challenge in front of me. Because it is a historic narrative piece and transforming it without any modification is going to be, another narrative idea and I never want to do that. Therefore, I tried breaking the narrative using the right material with meaning enclosed within. That is what you see the final outcome. Each object of this work is carrying a semiotic meaning rather than a narrative interpretation. ("Personal Interview")

By bringing such inhuman practices existed in Indian society to focus through his work, Rimzon aims to open up a discussion on the current social situation of India. Rather than just reminding one of the evil practices of the past,

Rimzon's work is an eye-opener to the current social condition of the country. This work remarkably challenges the hitherto language and the content of the sculptural and artistic practices of contemporary Indian art. Rimzon reveals that he approached the installation of *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet* not with the idea of Dalit consciousness but one can read that the work was a result of a subconscious mind. Only by understanding how the subconscious mind works, we can fully understand how Rimzon arrived at this creation.

This particular installation shares the painful and subdued experience of the lower caste people of pre-independent India. The idea behind this work was generated from the reading of Ambedkar's writings in which he came to know about a ritual performed by the savarnas to purify the surroundings polluted by the touch of the lower caste. "According to Vedic cosmology, 108 is the basis of creation, represents the universe and all our existence. In Hinduism… the number 108 units represent the distance between our body and the God within us" (Pandit). The significance of the number 108 in Rimzon's work not only suggests the 108 pots used for the ritual but also stands for the distance that the Dalits have to maintain from the presence of the upper castes.

Gopal Guru comments on the pot analogy in the following words:

> [T]he analogy of the pot is suggestive of the social evil that was expressed through an earthen pot tied around the neck of untouchables during Peshwa rule in nineteenth –Century Maharashtra. The untouchable were forced by Brahminical state to tie this pot around their neck so that they could spit in the pot and thus save the space around them from getting ritually polluted. Other upper castes, were free to spit anywhere but not the Dalits. ("Egalitarianism and", 11)

Rimzon has elaborated on the influence of Ambedkar's ideology in his works and his clear understanding of Ambedkar's position on the caste question in the present researcher's interview with him. The art historians and critics have overlooked the ideology underlying the works of Rimzon. The majority of them

approached his works with a preconceived notion. Consequently, his works were treated and interpreted from a conventional aesthetic framework and the critics could never come out from the influence of dominant aesthetics.

The social problems behind the work *Far Away from Hundred and Eight Feet* based on Ambedkar's writing is very much rooted in Rimzon's lived experience in Kerala. Kerala was so notorious for the prevalence of inhuman caste practices that provoked Swami Vivekanda on his visit to Kerala to describe the place as a lunatic asylum. Rimzon was trying to see this problem from a theoretical perspective. Though he had personal experience of caste discrimination he did not attempt to portray the same into his work subjectively. He found a new way to approach the problem quite objectively that was precisely scientific in nature and finally he succeeded in contextualizing it. Broadly speaking, the philosophy reflected in his oeuvre carries the experience of suppression. On the one hand, he was attempting to overcome the trauma of the oppressed past of his own personal experience; and on the other hand, he was trying to negotiate with the social reality. Eventually, he engaged with the idea of cultural and identity politics in his works. The past represented in Rimzon's works is similar to the thought reflected in Stuart Hall who said thus,

> The past continues to speak to us, but it no longer addresses us as a simple, factual 'past', since our relation to it, like the child's relation to the mother, is always-already 'after the break'. It is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, the unstable points of identification or suture, which are made, within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but a positioning . (226)

What differentiates Rimzon from other artists who dealt with the same subject matter of subalternity is that he tried to see the problem in a broader perspective. The close examination of his works would reveal his philosophy and conceptual approach. He has been following Ambedkarism and Buddhism throughout his practice to address different socio-cultural issues pertaining to the

society in which he lives. In this context it is very important to look at how other art historians have responded to Rimzon's works. In her note on the work *Far away from One Hundred and Eight Feet* Geeta Kapur explains that this particular work is referring to Dalit discrimination and the punishing rituals of a caste society. At that juncture, a cultural exile from within the surviving/ stagnating communitarian structures is seen to be almost inevitable. The profane is structurally present in the sacred, and Rimzon's obsession with essence implies the anxiety that itself is a productive possibility of the soul —its private precondition of praxis ("Dismantled Norms", 78). Instead of contextualizing his work, Kapur is trying to take away the social, cultural and political significance of his works and attribute him a halo of mythical and archetypal persona. This is the one of strategies the mainstream art historians and critics often use to avoid the contradiction between their role and their personal lived experiences. Another observation from the same critic attempts a postmodern reading of his works. By using adjectives like "sublimity" and "transcend" she tries to read his works from the perspective of Kantian aesthetics.

> The symbolic in the form of icons of otherness require, as the sculptor N. N. Rimzon shows, a ground for resistance. Starting with the material/archaic classicism of ancient civilisations, Rimzon alludes to the "sublimity" of the new through formal coding even as he attempts by a lean iconography to "transcend" the reification, which is too often the defining attribute of international postmodern art. ("A Stake". 162)

Rimzon often reminds one of the necessities to have a new perspective to appreciate Indian modern art. Indian historiographers and critics have been analyzing the so-called "modern" and contemporary art practices in India, from a Eurocentric perspective. Modern art in the west, which celebrated a humanistic approach, have been often appreciated through the Kantian "sublimity". Approaching "modern art" from the perspective of Kantian aesthetic is problematic because European modernism thrived by borrowing many cultural expressions of African people whom Kant hardly considered civilized. Kant's "race theory" was

discussed by Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze in his article "The Color of Reason: The Idea of 'Race' in Kant's Anthropology". Eze critically examines how categorically Kant considered white people as superior and black people as inferior. Kant explains various superficial theories in order to position the supremacy of white people. Kant explains: "Humanity exists in its greatest perfection in the white race…. The Negroes are lower and the lowest are a part of the American peoples" (qtd. in Eze 118). Eze concludes his article stating that broadly speaking, Kant's philosophical anthropology reveals itself as the guardian of Europe's self-image of itself as superior and the rest of the world as barbaric. In this context, it has to be critiqued that the approach of the critics and historiographers who tried to appreciate "primitivism" with Kantian "sublimity" is problematic because on the one hand the whites were appropriating the cultural expressions of the blacks and on the other hand they were denying blacks dignity of a human being.

Similarly the western scholars who followed the Hegelian notion of race not only practice racism in their life but also apply it in their cultural practices. To take another notorious example, Hegel says,

> [Africa] is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit….What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature, and which had to be presented here only as on the threshold of the World's History. (99)

Hegel, like Kant, had never considered Africa as part of great civilization. According to Hegel the religion and art took root in the Orient — Persia, China, Egypt and India. Hegel suggested that India, like China, is a phenomenon which is antique as well as modern by saying,

> It has always been the land of imaginative aspiration and appears to us still as a fairy region, an enchanted world. In contrast with the Chinese state, which presents only the most prosaic understanding, India is the region of phantasy and sensibility. (156).

Hegel's Eurocentric philosophical tradition has widely influenced the Indian scholars of the 19th century. Neera Chandhoke observes that "Hegel's views on India are of some significance because philosophy departments established in Indian Universities in the 19th century were heavily influenced by Hegelian and Kantian intellectual traditions. It is those students who were trained in this disciplines and department that became the leaders of the Indian freedom struggle. She adds "the racist attitude of Gandhi against the Africans might be an influence of Eurocentric Kantian and Hegelian thought."

Rimzon Vs. the "Orientalists"

The mainstream art historians and critics with the Orientalist approach are not able see the real problems of the Dalit subaltern in India. In other words, those historians and critics were busy with producing material to cater to the aspirations of the European world. Hegel also suggests how a historiographer should perform with accuracy. He says:

> Historiographers bind together the fleeting elements of story, and treasure them up for immortality in the Temple of Mnemosyne. Legends, Ballad- stories, Traditions, must be excluded from such "original" history. These are but dim and hazy forms of historical apprehension, and therefore belong to nations whose intelligence is but half-awakened. Here, on the contrary, we have to do with people fully conscious of what they were and what they were about. (2)

The elite historiographers of India as well as other "orientalist" writers who wrote about India have been literally following this advice of Hegel. Hegel's use of the word "original history" is really problematic. The systems of knowledge of Dravidian culture which are preserved and passed from generation to generation through various forms of oral traditions (folklore, ballad, art and crafts, rituals and so on.) were ignored by the orientalist historiographers. Their understanding of India was through reading Sanskrit texts and the people around the world knew about India often only through these elite texts.

The indigenous Sramana oral traditions are ignored by the elite historiographers and critics**.** The Subaltern could not document their own history in written form because they were denied the right to education for centuries**.** But they continued to inscribe those histories through their various cultural expressions, especially, orality. If the historiographers do not consider such materials for constructing a social history of a society, that history remains incomplete. The subaltern historians have already pointed out this. Indian intelligentsia, which is already maligned by their caste Hindu mindset, has become more biased with Kantian-Hegelian influence. Rimzon elaborates on this problem:

> I would like to say few things regarding Indian historiography and the influence of the Indologists on it. Indologists like Max Muller had a significant role in making an intellectual and theoretical framework on India. They were the people who reinvented many Sanskrit texts and other practices in India. They were also fascinated by those kinds of texts like the *Vedas* and *Upanishads* and envisaged further studies which changed the perception on India. Until that moment they thought that India is a place for nothing but a place of primitives and crude culture. After assimilating the texts, they went further and emphasized that the culture which was practiced in India based on the texts is nothing but an extension of the Aryan culture of Europe. Later they translated those texts and ideas into English and other European languages and the intelligentsia of India was very much influenced by this kind of assimilations. The so-called Indian intellectuals trained in English education were seeing India through the text translated by the European Indologists and it actually became a part of "Orientalism". Therefore, "Orientalism" became a kind of foundation for the Indian intelligentsia and it really brings lots of confusion over the representations. The orientalists/ intelligentsia of Indian society who has seen India through the eye of Indologist who has translated the original Sanskrit texts into English projected an unreal version of India. Because Sanskrit was not a language which

> was commonly used to codify or represent the experiences of the real India. The real India was beyond what was described in the Sanskrit text. It existed through various regional languages and through diverse cultural expressions. Actually, Sanskrit texts were also enriched by the experiences of Subaltern life world. Unfortunately the indoligist could not attempt to find the link between the Sankrit and the Subaltern life. The knowledge has been always actually produced by the lower classes of farmers and the folklore associated with their social life. There was a sharing of knowledge between the Sanskrit texts and the subaltern life. But the Indologist /orientalist claims that the entire cultural development of this country is the contribution of Sanskrit Text and it is really problematic. Because, their claims are historically inaccurate and the people who followed the orientalist intelligentsia may have been making the same mistakes of the former. (“Personal Interview")

Therefore, seeing the historiography of art from a fresh perspective is a difficult task. The history of the subaltern is not written. For them, their memory was the history. They shared their memories of bad and good experiences with the generations. They never felt a need for writing their own history. Why do we need history to be written? As Rimzon observes that the writing of history is a western idea. Memory is an abstract concept and there is no uniformity among the people in regards the memories that they carry. The dominant culture found that there is an authenticity in a written memory. They started to archive memories and even collected the collective memories and knowledge of the subaltern. The dominant culture became more powerful through this collective history that they acquired through this archive, whereas the subaltern people became more vulnerable and are subjected to exploitation and dehumanization.

When rewriting the history of oppression and slavery, it is necessary to revisit the history that mainstream historians narrate with a critical mind. In this context, what is silent in Rimzon’s work is more important than what is voiced in his

work. This silence is not an abrupt phenomenon, but it refers to the inaction of a people who have gone through centuries of oppression and the term "void" refers to this kind of silence. Michel-Rolph Trouillot in *Silencing the Past* explains how the past ideas are working in an individual. He argues that an individual can only remember the revelation, not the event itself. He continues that both its popular and scholarly version assumes the independent existence of a fixed past and posit memory as the retrieval of that content. He adds that the past does not exist independently from the present (15).

In this context, Indian art historians and critics have to admit as a sort of self-criticism that they have not gone deeper enough into the artist's background. They hardly go beyond the aesthetical periphery of the work of art the artist produces. The general practice of art criticism in India is that the art critics before writing for artist's catalogue or an article try to listen to what he /she talks about the work. Then they go through the works of the same artist and try to articulate the works from the theoretical premises and the historical evolution of artistic practices of the West. The first thing they do is to categorize the artist into particular "isms" according to the style of the work. For instance, they decide whether the works fall into the category of modernism or postmodernism. By doing so the critics are able to incorporate the theoretical or stylistic interpretation of the artist's work and eventually it turns to be a mere technical writing rather than finding out the real motives of the artist in practicing certain/particular styles and projecting his/her philosophy. Even in the case of Rimzon Indian art critics constantly try to read him from the aesthetical and philosophical framework of the West.

Rimzon has been emphasizing the need for a new framework beyond the western aesthetics that will enable one to understand and address the problem of modern Indian society and it's art practices ("Personal Interview"). By incorporating Ambedkar's ideas in his work Rimzon demonstrates his commitment to uphold Dalit ideology, albeit subconsciously. In one of his interviews, Rimzon asserts that Ambedkar's politics can bring some positive things and it can be an alternative for the Hindu right-wing politics (Rimzon.33). Such observations make it

clear that Rimzon has been deliberately approaching art from a Dalit subaltern perspective.

By introducing Ambedkar's ideas in his art Rimzon was trying to bring subaltern issues into the field of visual art. The downtrodden communities, minorities and the Dalits of India have been subjected to oppression by the Hindutva forces. One can easily figure out that the *Smruthis* and *Sruthis*, especially, *Manusmriti* which provide justifications for the discrimination based on caste and gender are responsible for the intolerance and brutality meted out to the ex-untouchables. Indian artists who were practicing art by not critiquing the religious fundamentalism of caste Hindus which denies equality to all human beings cannot be considered "modern" at all and therefore the art they make also cannot be considered as modern art or progressive. By bringing Ambedkarism as a tool of counter-cultural practice Rimzon declares himself as a real "modernist" as well as a "humanist". Raymond Williams, wrote in his very last book *Resources for Hope* as, "To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing" (118). In that sense, Rimzon can be considered as a true "radical" artist.

Cultural and Philosophical Backdrop.

Rimzon does not bring the Sramana philosophies into his art works randomly. European artists might also have been inspired by these philosophies as a result of their constant search for the eastern systems of knowledge. Whereas Rimzon has a solid reason for connecting his works to such philosophies, because his own socio-cultural backdrop is very much rooted is the same philosophies and imageries. Kerala, his home state had been one of the main centers of Jainism and Buddhism until the consolidation of the immigrant Namboodiris and Hindu religion. Jainism came to Kerala in the third century BC and by the beginning of the Christian era, it was well established in Kerala. It started to decline during the 8th century AD with the revival of Brahminical movements, especially Saivism and Vishnavism; and by the 16th century Jainism almost got eliminated from Kerala. Today only one percent of the population follows Jainism in Kerala. Many Jain shrines like Koodalmanikyam in Thrissur were converted into Hindu temples and the deities

were also metamorphized. Similarly, the presence of Buddhism in Kerala was very evident. Various studies related to the establishment of Buddhism in Kerala point out that it had a stronghold on the society until the Hindu revivalism led by Sree Sankara. Regarding the evolution of Buddhist practices in Kerala, P.C. Alexander observes that "The Brahmanic revival had brought about the steady decline of Buddhism every-where in India. In Kerala too Buddhism had been practically replaced by the neo-brahmanism which was becoming increasingly popular" (104). He also adds that by AD 15th century it got declined completely and many important Buddhist shrines and centers were destroyed or replaced with Hindu deities. "When Buddhism declined in Kerala Buddha images were either destroyed or removed from the temples and thrown outside or kept in obscure places within the temple precincts. In some cases these images have been transformed, renamed and made part of Hindu pantheon of Gods and Goddesses (Alexander 75).

Though Jainism and Buddhism declined with the consolidation of brahminic forces the Sramana cultural and ritualistic practices are still very much alive in the region. Sasta worship is a popular religious practice still followed by many devotees and the Sabarimala pilgrimage is the best example for the same. Scholars argue that even the repeated chanting of "Saranam" by the Sabarimala pilgrims resembles the thrisaranams *Buddham, Dhammam,* and *Sangham* of the Buddhists. Actually, Sasta was a typical Dravidian deity and Buddhism has played a vital role in developing Sasta cult in Kerala (Alexander 122).

So it is observed that the use of Sramana imageries and philosophy in the art trajectories of Rimzon was a conscious move from his side in order to mount a resistance to the Hindutva socio-cultural political discourse. The entire body of his works gives an idea that he tries to resist the Hindu extremism and opens up the necessity of retrieving Dravidian and Sramana cultural traditions. By doing so Rimzon is attempting to retrieve and reconstruct the indigenous culture of the past, which was destroyed by the immigrant Brahmins. To enhance this idea Rimzon takes the reference of archetypal studies of Carl Jung. According to Jung, each person is considered to be a particle in the chain of humankind (6).

The memory, consciousness, subconscious are all inked with this chain. He explains how a form of an object is recollected by its function and eventually it creates an archetypal meaning. The meaning of these archetypal images is passing from one generation to another. The very psychological oppression, which has been carried out by the dominant cultural discourses, might have created a long silence in his psyche. Those silenced experiences need not necessarily be a first-person experience. Rather, it can be from the collective memory or the genetic past. Most of the time this kind of "silence" becomes a witness to the history but remains muted again for an appropriate time.

> Silences are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing. Something is always left out while something else is recorded. There is no perfect closure of any event; however one chooses to define the boundaries of that event. Thus, whatever becomes fact does so with its own inborn absences, specific to its production. In other words, the very mechanisms that make any historical recording possible also ensure that historical facts are not created equal. They reflect differential control of the means of historical production at the very first engraving that transforms an event into a fact. (Trouillot 49)

In his book *Why I am not a Hindu*? Kancha Ilaiah illustrates the reasons why the people are legally bound to be part of the Hindu religion, though their socio-cultural and ritual practices are totally different (1). His study which demonstrates how caste division and untouchability have worked in modern Indian society is significant. It has to be noted that Rimzon is trying to articulate the same perspective through his Art. At the same time, he does not want to be known only as a Dalit artist. Rimzon says that the application of these kinds of terms in art practices will paralyze the artist's imaginations. The worldview of the subaltern peoples, who are so close to the soil and nature, is to reflect a new humanism which integrates man, other living beings, and nature. Consider, for example, how folk artists, Dalit/ Adivasi and other marginalized people continue their traditional art. Their rituals

prayers and vows are not merely for the benefit of any particular sect. Rather, they are aimed to achieve the well-being of the entire humanity and to sustain the natural environment. Rimzon always believed in the totality of art**.** He says:

> For me, I do not want to confront this issue directly. I do not think anything can be achieved through a direct confrontation but I think some kind of negotiation is needed more here. Actually, I keep doing such works which are non-Brahminical as part of a counter-culture continuum. I may not be giving a direct explanation to anybody if they ask what I am really doing. But over a period the concept of my works will be accumulated as a body of works and firmly I believe such body of works would unravel the reality of truth. Eventually, a situation will arise in which such realities will inevitably be accepted by the society. ("Personal Interview")

Rimzon explains how he brings synergy to his work. He talks about how he uses many references to materialise his ideas as:

> I use many references, including Jungian archetypes, as well as drawing on religious philosophies. The core of my understanding of Buddhism and Jainism, and my fascination with the Dravidian Devi cult, is that seeing is an act of remembering. My language is built in this context. I use primordial and archetypal images and forms to come to terms with the insecure and exploitative world we live in. ("Personal Interview")

Rimzon also anticipates the tension that is created with the modern way of living. He says that in contemporary society everything is materialistic. Indeed, even nature is viewed as a utilitarian object.

The idea of the boundary has been a major symbol in Rimzon's work. His installation *Dancer with Four Arms* (2016) (fig.66) which is made out of stone, fiberglass, marble dust, and aluminum has a faceless male figure standing behind a stone fence and which has an iron sword tucked in. The semicircular shape, Rimzon

says, refers to the stupa, a place for meditation and it is similar to a Mandala as pointed out already. The fence symbolizes the boundary which divides people physically in the name of caste and religion. Rimzon says, "Walls are always used as a metaphor for separation" (qtd. in Kalra, "Portrait of"). On watching this works, one is reminded of the real incident of such caste walls erected in Tamil Nadu by the caste Hindus. By inserting an iron sword inside the stone wall Rimzon reminds one that there is an act of "violence" hidden in it. The wall has been used to segregate the people, especially the voiceless people.

By incorporating images of Buddhism, Jainism, and Dravidian cult, Rimzon is trying to counter the bhrahminic discourse and its hegemony. His work is also replete with images of nature worship predominant in Sramana and Dravidian culture. By linking these two ideas Rimzon is trying to bring in a new iconography, an alternative world view and aesthetics to counter Eurocenticism and Brahminism.

Animism/Shamanism/ Totemism /Folklore in Rimzon's Works

One can also find a mixture of Shamanism, Animism and Totemism in Rimzon's works which is also a prominent aspect of Dravidian culture. A shaman is a person considered to possess spiritual and healing power and the ability to transform him/herself and have access to or influence the world of human beings. The compositions of the cosmos reflected in Rimzon's works are very similar to the shamanic notion of the cosmos. The cosmos is believed to have three levels: the Sky, the Earth, and the Underworld; and the shaman can traverse from one to another. Through his performative way of arrangement of human forms and objects, he brings a ritualistic power to his work, which provides a "healing" effect to the spectator who is having "similar experiences." Rimzon says, "Much of my work might appear to be figurative but there is an underlying "representation", whether I deal with spiritual, political or social concerns. I want them to have an ability to heal" (qtd. in Kalra, "Portrait of"). The people who did not have such painful experiences may not be able to read the deeper meaning of his works. That is one of the reasons why the elite historiographers and critics fail to read the subaltern representation in his work. They always expect an illustrative/narrative explanation

of the work to understand the story behind it and they want to create an empathetic approach towards that through their writing without touching the core issue of the problem.

Rimzon's recent work, *The Round Ocean and the Living Death* (2019–20) (fig.67) is a good example of Shamanism. It portrays a female fertile figure seated cross-legged in the centre of a Mandala. To create the negative space of the structure, he made a hollow space on a square wooden panel. Both eyes of the seven breasted female form with the elongated body are covered with red colour and the same red can be seen on the right palm rested on her thigh in a meditative posture. Though there is blood on the outstretched palm and in the eyes the female figure seems to be unmoved. This very primordial female figure can also be seen as a representation of a mother goddess or a tribal deity who has been subjected to violence and torture by the brahminical patriarchy. Traces of Animism also can be seen in the treatment of forms in many of Rimzon's works. Stewart Guthrie observes that the "most widespread" concept of animism is that it was the "attribution of spirits to natural phenomena such as stones and trees" (106).

In the installation titled *The Fence* (2000) (fig.68), Rimzon integrated a natural tree into his work. This work can be read from the perspective of Dravidian/Indigenous culture. Instead of the usual human forms in sculpture he arranges readymade axes in a circle around the actual tree posing their edges towards the tree. Just like his *Man in the Chalk Circle,* in *Inner Voice* he places the tree as a centre figure of the work.

The title of the work *The Fence* usually symbolizes protection. Since his bodies of works are strongly connected with the idea of animism, which is rooted in the Dravidian culture and Indus valley civilizations**,** the tree symbolizes the worship**.** Here the *The Fence*, which was made of axes, can symbolize protection or destruction. But the beauty of this idea is that the tree grows and blossoms vertically toward the sky not bothered by the external threat. Nor can the fence prevent the tree from its natural growth. He might have been thinking that a fence can only block the social mobility of a person but cannot stop his/her natural growth. It seems,

Rimzon was trying to overcome the limitation of himself as a subaltern and was optimistic in his thinking. The meaning of the fence can also be read from another perspective also. In agricultural field, a fence is often constructed to protect the crops. But Rimzon's work portrays a fence with axes which are usually used to cut or chop the wood creates a surrealistic effect. This could be suggestive of the contemporary socio-political reality of the subalterns. Because, the political parties which are supposed to be the saviours of the subaltern people, actually exploit them under the pretext of protecting them. "The fence itself is eating the crop" is a very popular proverb in Malayalam folklore and the idea of this work can also be read from this perspective too. Rimzon's other works like *House of Heavens* (1995) (fig.69), *When Earth Becomes Red* (1996) (fig.70), and *Mother at the Forest* (2009) (fig.71) also share his affinity towards nature and the cosmos.

In the work entitled *Forest at Night* (2007) (fig.72), Rimzon depicts a nude female figure with her hair jutting towards the sky and standing on top of two large kumba-shaped vessels placed on their mouths together**.** The vessels can symbolize fertility as well as a womb. Here the female figure has been posited as if she is the mediator of the cosmic world and the fertile Earth. The red circular line on the vessel around the figure could stand for the patriarchal control restricting the women. Rimzon says that "It is a closed vessel, a reflection of the inner mind, and also an abstract symbol of the womb and femininity" **(**qtd. in Kalra "Portrait of"**)**. Similarly, the *Mother at The Forest* (2009) shows the full-grown womb of a pregnant woman from where the elements of nature, like trees and other plants carrying fruits emerge. Here, the womb is treated as an "archetypal" image for the continuum of human evolution. Rimzon's *Bull in Day Dreams* (2008) (fig.73) is another beautiful example of the images related to farming and nature. The bull here does not have its head and the tree is fallen down and the pot did not have water to drink. The image of the bull resembles the artifacts of the Indus Valley and therefore becomes part of the continuum of civilization. Rimzon admits "Most of my works have a connection to nature, farming, fertility and festivities. There are references to the mother goddess also" (qtd. in Jayaraman). Another important aspect of Rimzon's

work is that he has given more “power” to the female forms highlighting fertility and supernatural quality.

His *Devotee* (2015) (fig.74) a male figure seated cross-legged with folded hands on a circular platform, or Mandala, seems to be a kind of magical verge, as if it would levitate at any moment. Rimzon says “The imagery [in his works] is not very difficult to understand, it is all related to things we see around us. The symbolism comes from our collective memory” (qtd. in Kalra “Portrait of”). Rimzon’s solo exhibition shows entitled *I Thank You Once Again* (2016) (fig.75), comprising the works from 1995 to 2016 explicitly shows his affinity towards the *Indus Valley* civilization and its relics. This strong affinity towards this visual culture cannot be seen as a deliberate attempt from his side. Rather it should be seen as a reinterpretation of his collective memories. The images of works in the particular show very much resembles the relics of Indus Valley artifacts. By recreating archetypal memories he tries to draw a leaner line from Indus Valley animistic tradition to the Dravidian cultural practices which share a lot of similarities. The press release of the show states that:

> It is a tableau of icons inspired by offerings of readymade images collected by the artist over years from local shrines, temples and churches in and around villages in India. These tokens transcend the boundaries of caste and religion, as they are presented by farmers and other working class in any place of worship. For them any site, whether it be a temple, shrine or a church is where they can go to communicate with God irrespective of their own faith. They do not see any barriers or differences in places of worship. They come clutching these small thin silver metal tokens to plead for respite and solace or express gratitude. (Rimzon, “I Thank”)

Totemism is another characteristic of Rimzon’s works. “Totemism is a complex of varied ideas and ways of behaviour based on a worldview drawn from nature. There are ideological, mystical, emotional, reverential, and genealogical relationships of social groups or specific persons with animals or natural objects, the

so-called totems" (Haekel). Rimzon's *Tree Shrine* (2012) (fig.76), depicting the trees with roots intertwined near the shrine, symbolizes the interconnection between living and non-living objects. *Big Maa* (2016) (fig.77) is a large-scale sculpture by Rimzon in the form of an erected and puffed-up totem pole that is formed by two large spherical vessels placed—one is up and the other down—face to face, and the middle part completely packed with small shapes of pots. Root of this work can be traced back to one of his earlier works like *From the Ghats of Yamuna* (1990) in which he positions the mouths of two pots together and sealed, and *Big Maa* where the space between this two mouths of the pots has been extended and the gap filled with a number of small pot shapes which suggest fertility.

His *Devotees on the Roof* (2008) (fig.78), made out of bronze and wood portrays the devotees as standing and seated on a long wooden *utharam* or a wooden wall plate, which is used as the base of roofing in traditional architecture in Kerala. The different gestures and poses of the devotees seem to suggest various gestures of the marginalized people. They also look like the ancestors whose spirit is believed to inhabit the homes of the marginalised.

Serpent Kavu (2008) (fig.79) is another example for Rimzon's affinity with the animism and folklore. A "sarppa kavu" is a sacred snake grove which is rich in biodiversity and is seen in traditional villages of south India, especially in Kerala. People used to worship snakes here. The root of these kinds of "animistic" practices can be traced back to Harappan civilization. Almost every *kavu* has a water body nearby in the form of a pond and these groves play an important role in stabilizing the eco system by balancing the greenery, preserving water and maintaining the soil fertility. There is a rich tradition of folklore related to the sacred groves or *sarppa kavu* in Kerala.

Folklore is yet another prominent source of Rimzon's works. Most of his works are related to the myths and stories of the land. Rimzon derives inspiration and ideas from contemporary social and cultural surroundings and traverses back to connect them with a historical, folk or mythological past. Rimzon also uses the

technique of deconstruction in most of his works. On the deconstructionist element in his art he says that,

> In most of my works, the possibility of deconstruction is very apparent, but I have not approached it on a very theoretical level. There is great potential for deconstruction to be used in art. For example, by dismantling an idol placed in the temple premises and replacing it in the contemporary socio-cultural space brings a new meaning and political dimension to that idol/ object. When such a method is adopted, reality is not determined on the basis of its original state of being or its state of re-embodiment and the reality of that particular work has to be perceived on the basis of a third space which is constructed by that process. The third space is made possible by such a deconstruction process. That is the significance of deconstruction in my work. ("Personal Interview")

The idea of fertility and motherhood is very much present in the folk tradition of Kerala, as in other many folklore traditions. Major tropes in many of the folk traditions of Kerala are mother goddess and fertility images. For instance, Theyyam, the most popular ritual and folk performance of North Kerala is predominantly dominated by female deities like Bhagavathi, Kali or Kurathi. These mother deities are incarnations of fertility and they are meant to be the protectors of the devotees of that particular locality. The Shamanistic spirit possession in the rituals rooted in the Indus Valley Civilisation can also be identified in these kinds of ritualistic performances.

Almost all of Rimzon's works are usually packed with Dravidian spirituality. The preponderance of images and forms related to the worship of nature, fertility and ancestors and the use of natural forms and shapes like egg or architectural forms and shapes resembling ancient caves and mud houses cannot be considered accidental in his works of art. Rather, they seem to have originated from his subconscious mind. The earthy forms of his works in a way attempt to create a metaphysical space in order to balance it with a natural force outside. In short, by

recapturing the imageries of Dravidian cultural practices, Rimzon is able to initiate an alternative and counter-cultural discourse to the Brahminical supremacy. Ultimately, Rimzon's idea is not to bring Dravidian culture or Ambedkarism or Buddhism back but to highlight the humanism and egalitarianism inherent in these discourses. He like Buddha and Ambedkar envisages a society in which everyone can live with freedom, equality and dignity. In that sense, Rimzon can be considered as a "true" and a "rare" modernist in contemporary Indian art practices.

After going through the trajectories of Rimzon one can comprehend that he has been practicing art with consistency as far as the "content", "form" and the "language" are concerned. As explained earlier, his works are a "continuum" of ancient civilizations like the Indus Valley and are very much interlinked with the Dravidian culture. By incorporating the Dravidian, indigenous, folk and Buddhist elements in his works he projects himself as a great critique of brahminical hegemonic discourse. From the very early stage of his creative career he has been showing a strong affinity towards the "marginalized" experience**.** However, his approach to these problems is objective and theoretical. Ambedkarism is the right tool that he has chosen for his counter-cultural discourse.

Though the representation of the subaltern can be seen even from Kalighat to contemporary period, most often, those "representations" were limited by the subjective expressions of the artists. It is true that they have tried to represent the reality through their works. But in the case of Rimzon he not only represents the socio-cultural problem experienced by the subaltern but also showss how to approach this problem theoretically and also suggests solutions to solve them. It was not an easy journey for him to reach his present position. He had to sacrifice many things. Rimzon could have gained more international recognition, opportunities and money like other popular Indian and western artists of his time if he had chosen the path of mainstream artistic practices which endorse the dominant aesthetics. However, Rimzon chooses to follow the "middle path" by balancing art and life and using his art in order to bring out a better world where all human beings can enjoy freedom, equality with dignity.

The Indian art historiography and criticism which has evolved through the Kantian, and Hegelian perception is inadequate to understand Rimzon's contribution. Reading his works from the perspective of European modernism also becomes problematic. The worldview of Kant and Hegel was limited to the European world. The history and aesthetics that they projected through their writings influenced the European scholars and resulted in their developing an "orientalist" perspective. Because Indian art scholars followed the same perspective they could hardly see the Indian reality. For the Western world, India was presented as an exotic place projecting the *puranaithihasa*, or ancient stories and epics. As Ranajit Guha comments,

> So the Orientalist translation dovetailed neatly with an ancient collocation to produce a large body of writings that sought to recast Hindu mythology as history…. Educated in the colonial schools, they [middle-class Indians] had learned to accept history as an entirely modern and Western kind of knowledge about the past historicized by writing. (*History at*, 53)

Hegel's notion of world history denied large parts of the world any agency in human history. Moreover, Hegel admired India only for its religious and spiritual qualities, beyond that he had not attempted to understand the social reality of India. Subsequently, the art historians and critics who are largely trained under European schools became incapable of understanding the social reality around them as well as the reality reflected in the works produced by the artists, especially from the marginalized sections. Romila Thapar makes the following comment on how the European vision touted the Indian scholars to understand India through the western lens:

> European preconceptions imprinted on the readings gradually came to influence the way in which Indians themselves viewed their own culture. This reordering of Indian culture facilitated the direction given even to the self-perceptions of Indians." She continues that "there was an attempt to formulate Indian culture as uniform, such

> formulations being derived from texts that were given priority. The so-called 'discovery' of India was largely through selected literature in Sanskrit. (4)

Rimzon not only identified this problem of Eurocentrism and but has also articulated his resistance through his works. According to him, “the counter culture” is an alternative practice to reclaim the indigenous “shramana” cultural traditions of the past which have been hijacked by the dominant caste Hindus. His attempt to foreground Dravidian thought and culture consciously or subconsciously throughout his body of works has to be viewed as the continuation of the indigenous cultural tradition.

In order to bring back that tradition to the contemporary world, three things have to be practiced. Firstly, one needs to identify the real “force” which tries to reinstall the supremacy of the dominant discourse into contemporary society. Secondly, one has to contest them with an alternative theoretical framework. And thirdly, one need to create imageries and forms which reflect the spirit and worldview of the Indigenous/Dravidian and Sramana epistemology. Rimzon’s trajectories offer an excellent example as to how to incorporate human culture and its evolution in the works of art. Being an optimist, Rimzon believes that there are a layer of seeds of Sramana thoughts beneath the surface of Indian cultural soil, which is ready to sprout out any time from the rich Indigenous culture. He aspires that his artistic creation will serve as a fertilizer for the growth of that submerged culture.

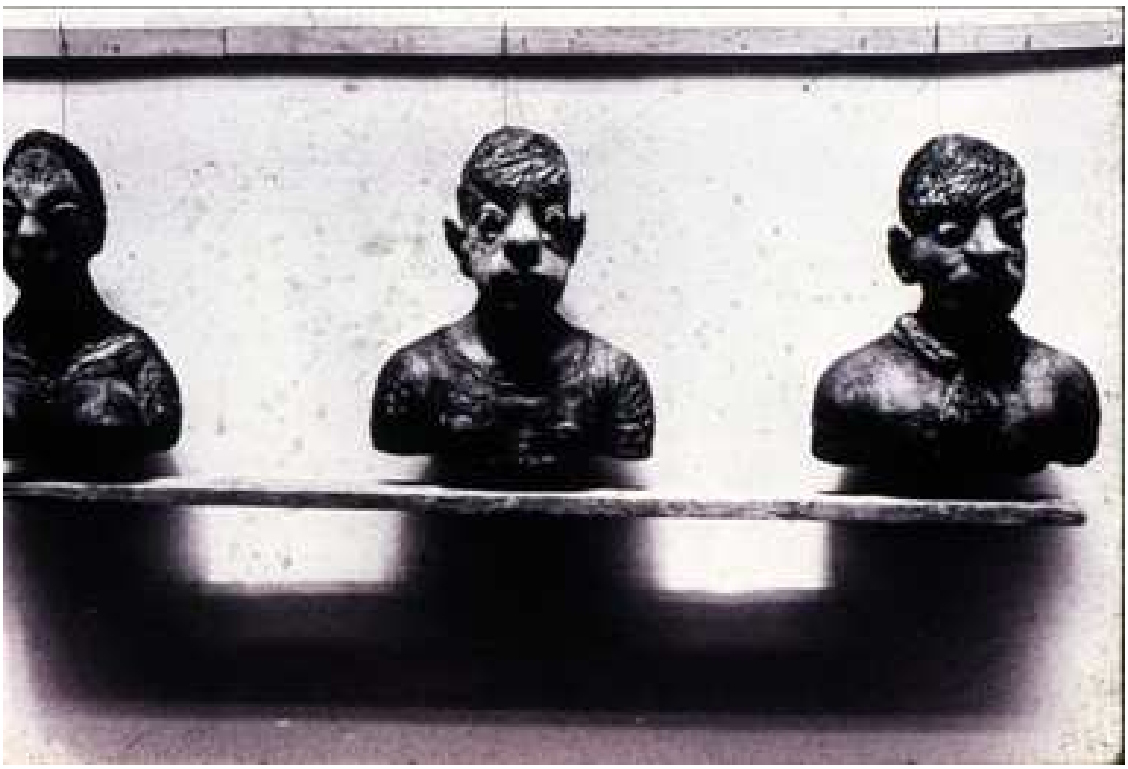

Fig.50. Rimzon, N.N *Three Sculptures on a Shelf* .1984. Painted Plaster. 300x80x38cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.51. Rimzon, N.N. *The Departure*. 1984. Painted Plaster. 300x38 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

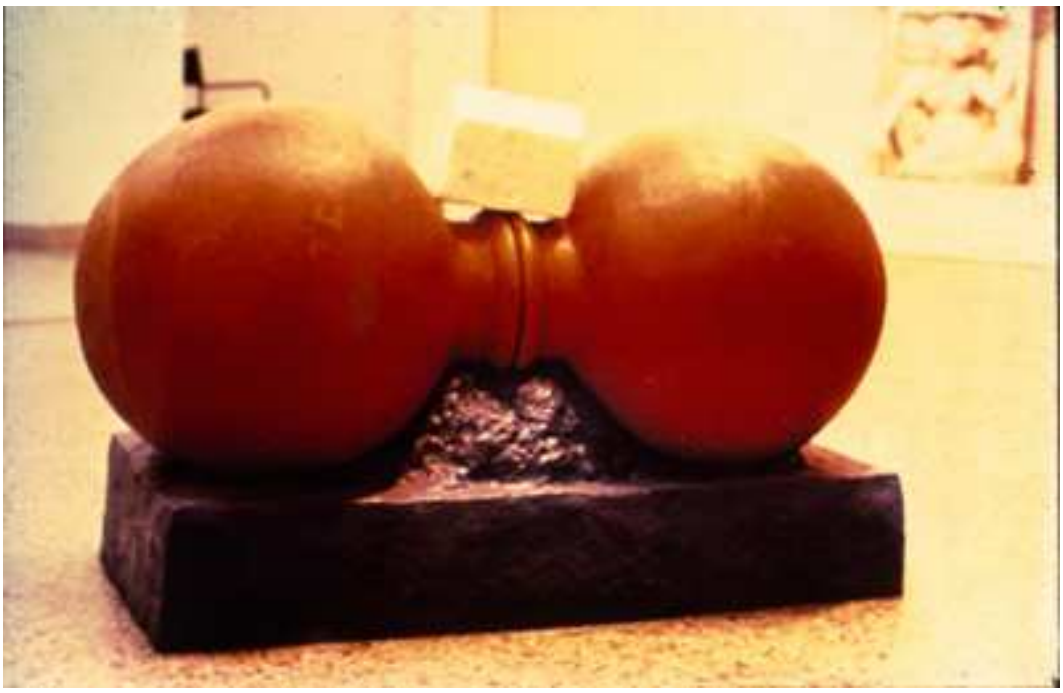

Fig.52. Rimzon, N.N. *From the Ghats of Yamuna.*1990.Teracotta Pots, Marble and Fiber Glass. 120x70x80 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.53. Rimzon, N.N. *From the Ghats of Yamuna.*1990.Teracotta Pots, Marble and Fiber Glass. 120x70x80 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.54. Giacometti, Alberto. *Annette.* 1961. Oil on canvas.116.2 × 89.5 cm. Jacques and Natasha Gelman Collection. Web. 28 April 2020. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/489982

Fig.55. Giacometti, Alberto. *Woman of Venice VIII*.1956. Bronze.47, 87 x 5,70 x 12,99. Private collection.Web. 28 April.2020. https://www.fondation-giacometti.fr/en/database/172057/woman-of-venice-viii

Fig.56. Gormley, Antony. *Three Ways: Mould, Hole and Passage.*1981. Lead and plaster. Dimensions-Variable. Tate Collection. Web. 28 March 2020. https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gormley-three-ways-mould-hole-and-passage-t07015

Fig.57. Gormley, Antony. *Land, Sea and Air II* .1982. Lead, Fibreglass, Land. Dimensions-Variable. Web. 28 March 2020. https://www.antonygormley.com/sculpture/chronology-item-view/id/2279

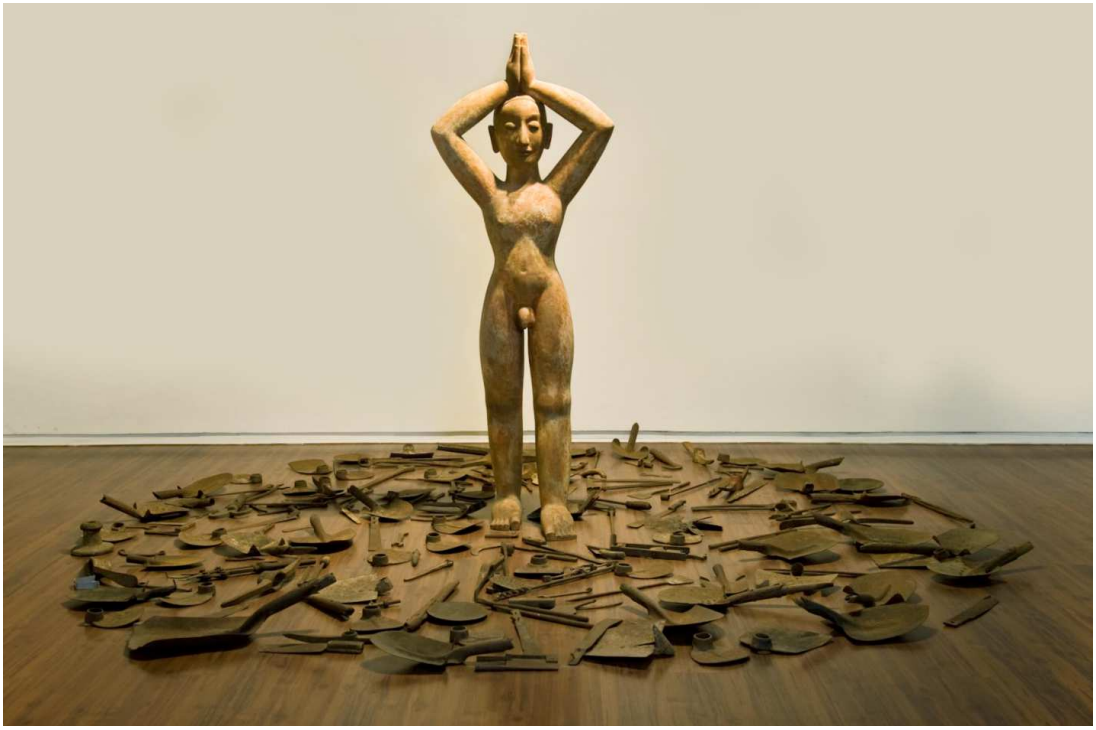

Fig.58. Rimzon, N.N. *The Tool*. 1993. Fiber Glass and Used Iron Tools. Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.59. Rimzon, N.N. *Sealed Fountain.* 2007. Fiber Glass and Bronze. 210x150x150 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.60. Rimzon, N.N. *Mother at the Shrine.* 2007. Acrylic on Fiber Glass. 165x30cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.61. Rimzon, N.N. *The Man in the Chalk Circle*.1984.Fiber Glass and Chalk Powder. Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

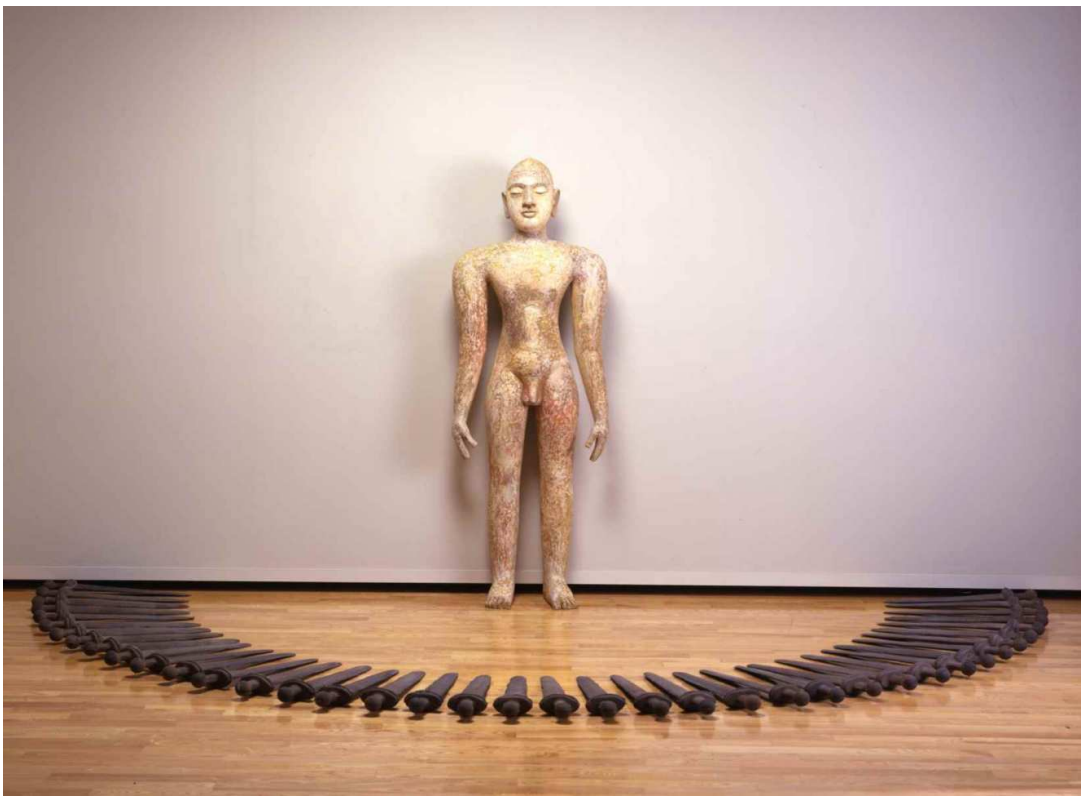

Fig.62. Rimzon, N.N. *Inner Voice*. 1992. Cast Iron and Fiber Glass. 270x450x210 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.63. Rimzon, N.N. *Speaking Stone*. 1998. Fiber Glass and Stones.Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.64. Rimzon, N.N. *Blood Rain*, Fiberglass, 2019-20. Laminated Photographs and Cotton Rope. 315x69x74 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

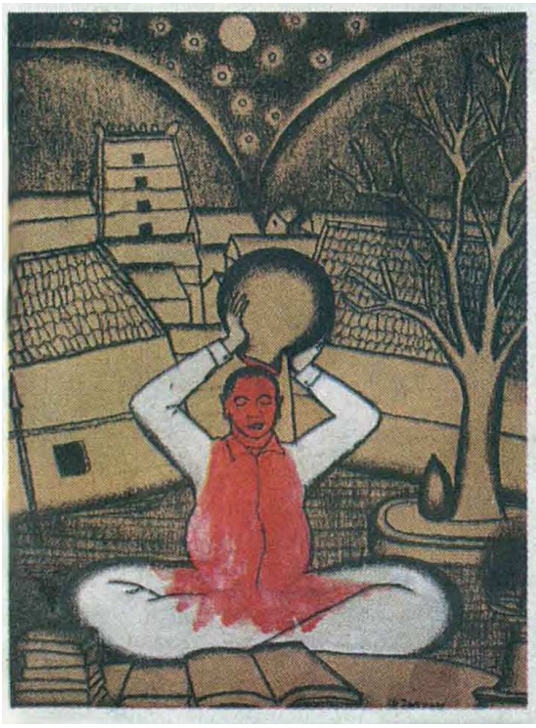

Fig.65. Rimzon, N.N. *Death of an Author*. 2016. Charcoal on Paper. Image courtesy: Artist.

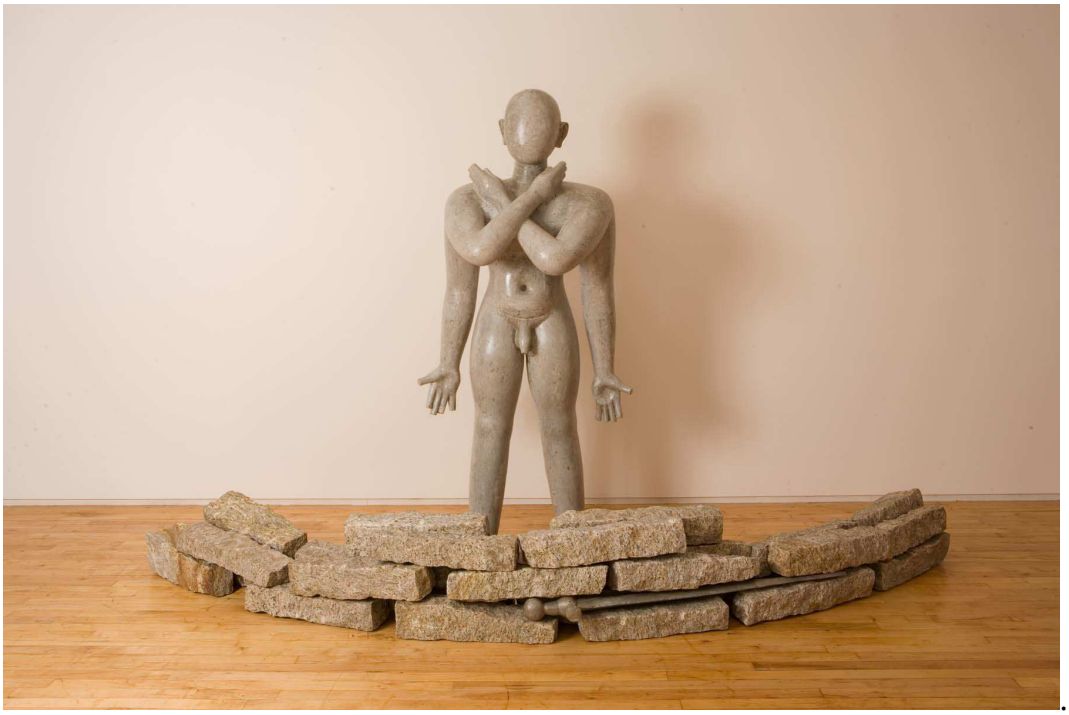

Fig.66. Rimzon, N.N. *Dancer with Four Arms*, 2016, Stone, Fiberglass, Marble Dust and Aluminum, 300x200x160cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.67. Rimzon, N.N. *The Round Ocean and the Living Death*, 2019-20. Fiberglass, Granite Dust and Plywood. 106x304x304 cm (overall, in 5 parts). Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.68. Rimzon, N.N. *The Fence.* 2000. Site Specific Installation. College of Fine Arts. Trivandrum. Iron Axe and Wood. Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.69. Rimzon, N.N. *House of Heavens* 1995, Resin, Fibreglass, Aluminium and Marble Dust. 150 x 220 x 90cm, Queensland Art Gallery Foundation Collection. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.70. Rimzon, N.N. *When Earth Becomes Red*, 1996. Wax on Polystyrene, Red Pigment, 210 x 390 x 150cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.71. Rimzon, N.N. *Mother at the Forest.* 2009. Acrylic on Fiberglass & Marble Dust. 165 x 165 x 30 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.72. Rimzon, N.N. *Forest at Night*, Fiberglass. Resin & Granite Dust. Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

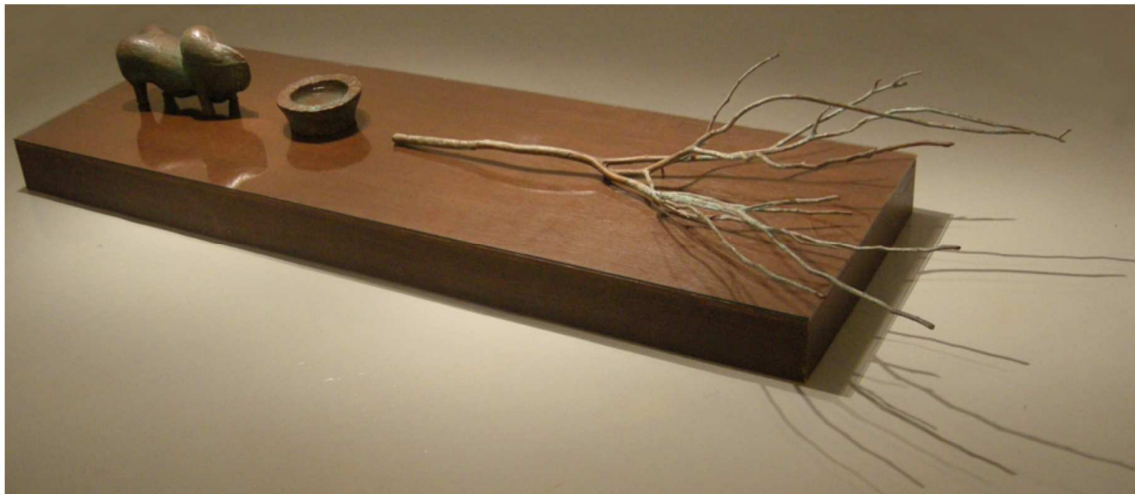

Fig.73. Rimzon, N.N. *Bull in Day Dreams* .2008. Bronze. Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.74. Rimzon, N.N. *Devotee*. 2015. Bronze and mild Steel, Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.75. Rimzon, N.N. *I Thank You Once Again.* 1995-2016. Cast Bronze. Dimensions-Variable. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.76. Rimzon, N.N. *Tree Shrine.* 2012. Acrylic on Canavas.101x75cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Fig.77. Rimzon, N.N. *Big Maa*, 2015. Fiberglass, Resin and Granite Dust | 241x 124 cm. Web.14 Aug. 2020. https://talwargallery.com/rimzon-theroundocean-exhib23/

Fig.78. Rimzon, N.N. *Devotee on the Roof* .2008.Bronze and Wood. 53 x 508 x 25 cm. Web.22 May 2020. http://www.guildindia.com/SHOWS/N.N.Rimzon/works.htm

Fig.79. Rimzon, N.N. *Serpent Kavu*. 2008.Bronze. 27.94 x 29.21x 6.35 cm. Image courtesy: Artist.

Conclusion

This dissertation argues that the representation of the Subalterns, especially the doubly oppressed Dalit/Adivasis and triple oppressed women in modern and contemporary visual art in India has been rare. Even the very few token representations have been from the perspective of Subaltern Studies Group and Marxism, which ignored caste as a definitive category that is unique to Indian society. In the introductory chapter, the major arguments of this thesis has been stated, along with the research objectives and methodological details. A critical evaluation of Indian modernity vis-a-vis Western modernity and their impact on the socio-cultural milieu of India in the light of major political ideology and dominant aesthetics is also attempted in the first chapter. The theoretical framework used for analysis is also explained. A brief critical review of the theses related to Indian Modern Art is also provided.

Various critics and historians have tried to read modernism in Indian art from different perspective and they have termed it as “alternative modernism”, “contextual modernism” and “eclecticism”. However, the very point of defining modernism in Indian art context looks incomplete because these critics and historians have attempted to define modernism in Indian art only superficially without considering the actual social-cultural reality of Indian society. They failed in raising the question about the modernity in India before defining modernism in art practices. In other words, they have not realized the necessity of addressing the issue of “modernity” in order to define modernism. “Modernists” are supposed to confront traditional norms and to stand for humanistic values and that is what the meaning of modernity of the West is. Modernism cannot be a false perception without placing it in a social context and one cannot measure the progress of modernism merely in terms of formalistic approach. If someone tries to make modern art without addressing the problem of raised modernity such effort will merely fall into the

category of the formalistic approach. When we look at “modernism” within the context of “modernity”, it is hard to find such approaches in the Indian visual art. It is in this context that it is argued that the art produced in a society cannot be called modern until and unless the society has undergone the process of modernity. The present study looks at Indian modernity from the perspective of Ambedkar’s egalitarian philosophy.

To analyse the theoretical problem which has been inherent in the art practices of India, N. N. Rimzon has been taken as a point of reference here. The initial challenge in addressing this problem was to approach the historiography from a very neutral perspective. As the history of ancient and modern Indian art is taught in Indian art pedagogy in a linear perspective, it becomes difficult to look at the history of Indian art from a fresh perspective.

The second chapter focuses on the representation of “voice” and “void” in Indian visual art from the perspective of the subaltern. In order to substantiate the arguments, a traversal through the historiography and art practices of the Indian modern and contemporary art has been attempted to. The mainstream historiography of Indian art and the religious and cultural bias of artists, art critics and patrons have been problematized while analyzing their interventions during the last one hundred and thirty years. A critical analysis was made to illustrate how the elite artists like Ravi Varma was projected as a pioneer of Indian modern art by elite art critics and historiographers considering his visual language, which was in fact just a fusion of western technique and the Indian subject matters. However, it is also argued that if at all Varma was to be considered as a modernist it should be based on his drawings which represented the marginalized Indians.

The overrated Bengal school, which practiced art projecting the nationalistic ideology and demonstrated the spirit of struggle for freedom from the colonial power never were concerned about “humanism” or “equality”. And this collaboration between the nationalistic movement and the art practices became a mere projection of the “orientalist” aesthetics and the Hindu elite intelligentsia.

Abanidranath's portrayal of Bharatmata as Hindu goddess evidently shows how the dominant religious belief was internalized by the "modern" Indian artists. A brief critical analysis has been attempted to show the role of Rabindranath Tagore, his initiation, i.e. the school of Santiniketan which was founded in the land inhabited by the Santals tribals. It is found out in this study that historiographers place the subaltern artist Ramkinkar Baij generically along with other elite artists who were great followers of Gandhi's orthodox religious belief problematic. Because, instead of projecting Kinkar as a true modernist, the historians were tactfully placing him in the larger frame of "contextual modernism". If they project Kinkar as a true modernist, they knew that they will not be able to sustain themselves in the elite circle because eventually they will also be forced to question all the aesthetic notion of the nationalistic art practices which endorsed Gandhian ideology. Kinkar was very much aware of the social reality around him and the contradiction in Gandhi's approach to religion and politics. His full-size sculpture of Gandhi stamping on a skull shows how Gandhi has emerged as a national leader by crushing the subaltern aspirations.

Various movements in Indian art which came after the Bengal School, like the Progressive Art Group, the Baroda Group, the Narrative Group, the Group 1890 and the Madras School could not go beyond the nationalistic and orientalists perspective is another theoretical arguments of this thesis. But Bengal Famine artists of the 1940s who practiced social realistic art were an exception. Whereas Gandhi's ideas were very much influential among the pre-independent Indian artists, the Nehruvian secularism and unity and diversity were the major themes among the post-independent Indian artists.

By late 1970s Indian artists who were exposed to the Western art institutions and cultural environment began to incorporate new ideas into their works. Though there were artists who had leftist ideological affiliation even before the independence, they were not incorporating those ideas into their works. Artist like Vivan Sundaram by the early 1980s had begun to show his affinity towards the Marxian ideas publicly. According to the mainstream art historians *Place for People*

(1981) a group show of six elite artists showcasing their middleclass lived experience was considered to be a path breaking exhibition which differentiated modernism and postmodernism in Indian art. The attempt of the mainstream art historians to place this exhibition as a "turning point" of the Indian art seems to be a false claim. In fact, they were trying to represent the life and experience of the middle class into their works. Their claim is contested by pointing out that even in the 1930s Ramkinkar had portrayed the real "lived experience" of the subaltern through his works. One can consider the 1981 show as revolutionary only because of the presence of Bupen Khakhar, who by then had proclaimed his gay identity and sarcastically exposed the homophobic prejudice of the orthodox Indian society.

Another theoretical argument raised in this dissertation is that The Radical Painters and Sculptors Association emerged in the mid-1980s questioning the hegemony of the *"living traditions"* of Subramanian and the Narrative Group proclaiming to bring a radical change through art practice were also failures due the lack of clarity in their perspectives. However, the leftist writers articulated it as revolutionary approach in Indian art by over romanticizing it. But in reality the intention of the group could not be fulfilled.

It is a categorical fact that majority of contemporary Indian artists still follow either nationalistic approach, Nehruvian secularism or dialectical materialism as an ideological reference for their work and tactfully ignores Ambedkar's views which is more relevant to address the discourses on modernity in Indian social context. Towards the end of this chapter, a critical analysis of the representation of women artists from the perspective of "intersectionality" is made. Another argument raised in this study is that majority of modern Indian women artists who have been successful in the field belong to the dominant culture and they also were knowingly or unknowingly endorsing patriarchy inherent in the dominant religious discourse.

It has also been pointed out that the major reasons for the apparent lack of representation of subalterns in Indian art is due to the elitist cultural bias and the uncritical endorsement of nationalism and dominant aesthetics. In order to free them

from the cultural, ideological and aesthetic prejudices, mainstream artists, art critics and historiographers need to be self critical. Since Indian society is unique because of the graded inequality and the practices of untouchablity, artists, art critics, art historians and patrons must understand the country's social structure primarily based on graded inequality.

One of the main reasons for the cultural prejudice and following western and Indian dominant aesthetics uncritically is the pedagogy which has been followed in the art schools of India. The existing pedagogy in the prominent art schools in India is a continuum of colonial education policy. In order to develop a self-critical approach among the Indian elite art fraternity it is inevitable to have a radical transformation in the art pedagogy, which would offer a new perspective beyond the colonial and nationalist preconceptions. The method of teaching and learning art in India is still following the western oriented curriculum introduced by colonial rulers. Just like any other discipline in India, majority of prominent art schools in India like Sir J J School of art, Faculty of Fine Arts Baroda, Delhi College of Art, Culcutta Art and Craft School, Kala Bhavana at Visva-Bharati University at Santiniketan, and College of Fine Arts Trivandrum, the Madras Art School have been following the same pedagogy. The Art educational institutions are set up to train the native artisans in European model and with the intention of using them for documenting the everyday activities of the East India Company and their operations.

In order to understand the educational system of the colonial period one has to understand the need of the colonizer. In other words, the pedagogy of art study in India implemented by the British had no other intention than improving the skill of the native artists to the level of the European craftsmen and to produce the Indian arts and crafts with the precision of the western skill. Ami Kantawala also observes that "…art education within these schools would encourage the skills necessary to produce objects that fit with British taste. Goods would be produced that used Indian techniques taught by British officials and based on British aesthetic preference" (212).

The Indian art scholars also developed their analyzing skill from this pedagogy and it more often worked against the interest of the colonized. The art critics and historians belonging to the colonized countries were trained to see the art and craft from the colonial perspective and what appeal to the Western eye became the primary concern of their writing. Eventually the artists and the historians became less interested in representing their own subject positions and their surroundings and thus became a victim of cultural imperialism. The colonizer always used drawing as central method in educational system and the conceptual art and nature depictions were sidelined. They saw drawing as the right method to maintain discipline among the students. Ultimately, the art school of the colonial period served the economic interest of the colonial masters and the dominant culture as they treated learners in art schools as labourers. The same pedagogy has been continuing in most of the art institutions in India even after the independence. The only difference from the colonial to postcolonial phase is that in the post independent period, the students got a little more freedom and flexibility in terms of expressing their creativity. However, the colonial mindset has not been changed yet. Indian artists most often work with an eye on the possibility of exhibiting them in European museums and galleries. Hence, the genuine socio-cultural problems of India are hardly reflected in their works. The Indian art critics and the historians, who have been trained in European aesthetics also developed a colonial mindset and still have their own limitation in analyzing the works of Indian artists.

In addition to the colonial pedagogy, the incorporation of brahminical aesthetics rooted in the Hindu religious texts in the name of nationalism and Indian tradition in the art education made the artists, art critics, historians, and patrons to stay away from the crucial social reality of caste and gender discrimination. Ananda Coomaraswami, one of the pioneers of the Indian art criticism and aesthetics had been deeply rooted in brahminical aesthetics. Apart from Coomaraswami, art historians of that period including E. B. Havell, Sister Nivedita, and Abanindranath Tagore also were very much influenced by the brahminical narratives and the percepective of Indoligists. Coomaraswami’s idea of art was deeply rooted with the

idea of Sanathanadharma. He says that "Upanishad and other idealistic Indian philosophy running like a golden yarn through all the Indian schools of thoughts, so there is a unity that underlies all the amazing diversity of Indian art. This unifying principle is also idealism here, which is essential, because the synthesis of Indian thought is one, not many" (17). According to Havell, "Indian art is essentially idealistic, mystic, symbolic, and transcendental" (qtd.in Natarajan 108). Havell explains his view on Indian art and history based on his awareness of the Vedic texts and he believed that these texts are the creative force behind the articulation of the artistic expressions. The foundation of Indian art history and criticism build upon the perspective of both these scholars were purely based on the brahminical tradition which they acquired from the Indologists. The art historians and critics of India who followed the legacy of Coomaraswamy and Havell tried to follow their styles and eventually they also became incapable of developing an alternative aesthetic to address the social problems of India.

The third chapter has focused on N.N, Rimzon's praxis of art and argues that he deserved to be considered the best example of true and radical modern /post modern Indian artist. His works are analyzed in detail to highlight the themes, styles and the philosophy underlying in them. Explanations with examples on how Rimzon's art works are different from the other International or Western artists and Indian artists in terms of ideology, style and philosophy are given. It is also pointed out that how Rimzon projects an alternative aesthetic through his works and theoretically addresses the problems in Indian art which has been identified in the second chapter. Unlike any other Indian artist, Rimzon's works are unique in that he not only offers a counter cultural resistance to the dominant discourse but also mounts an alternative aesthetics and ideology based on Ambedkarism and the Sramana philosophy. The mainstream modern Indian artists more or less followed the nationalistic and the Gandhian ideology. Rimzon was critical about them because he thought the nationalistic artists were following the perspective of the Indologists and Gandhi was following the Hindu religious orthodox belief. He was convinced that the Gandhian idea of Ram Rajya based on Sanathanadharma is anti-

modern and anti humanist. Whereas the majority of the mainstream artists ignored Ambedkar, the real modernist, and his ideology based on the egalitarian principles and philosophy of Buddha, Rimzon realized the significance of the Ambedkarism especially during the ant-Mandal struggles of the 1990s. This period witnessed a resurrection of Ambedakar as a defender of the all-oppressed people and got reflected in the socio-cultural politics of India of the times.

However, the mainstream visual art practices in India which have been patronized by the elite/brahminical forces remained silent about the important social issues. Though, even before the resurrection of Ambedkar, scholars had addressed the problem of the marginalized in other cultural mediums in general from a Gramcian/Marxian perspective, they did not address the representation of the subaltern in mainstream art practices. Even though there were few attempts from the self-proclaimed Dalit artists in this direction, they were silenced by the brahminical cultural forces who either ignored or silenced their contributions. It is in this particular social context that Rimzon has been placed as a point of reference in the present research. Rimzon not only presented Ambedkar's ideas through his works but also have drawn energy from Buddhism which was the real source of influence on Ambedkar and his egalitarianism.

It has to be pointed out that Rimzon’s approach is not merely an image-making or emotional outburst, but a result of his deep understanding of the evolution of society from the early Indian civilizations to the contemporary cultures and that he was trying to establish a link with the ancient Sramana tradition. It has also been demonstrated in this study how Rimzon’s practice brings a new theoretical framework in Indian art practices to counter the elite/brahminical hegemony. Hence, his attempt has to be considered as a significant counter cultural practice in Indian visual art. To resist the cultural hegemony he has not attempted to jump out of the system, rather he has been practicing art within the limitation of the dominant discourse and was trying to project a cultural resistance.

As mentioned earlier, the representation of voice and void can be found in the works of Rimzon as a form as well as content. The voice is formed through the articulation of the counter culture and the void is the space in the physical form vacuum, which is found in his works as a representation of the muted voices of the subaltern people. Though the theoretical framework is similar to Ambedkar, Rimzon goes a little further and tries to gather all anti brahmanical materials—Dravidian, Sramana and folk traditional elements—together to bring counter cultural practices in visual art. Ambedkarism was not only practiced by Rimzon, but it has been practiced by many other artists too. However, most of them approached it in a lyrical or poetical way. To resist the cultural hegemony what the subaltern lack and what they needed is a theoretical perception rather approaching it poetically. On the need of conceptual backup in cultural resistance, Gopal Guru suggests that, "Poetry helps the Dalit in making connections through metaphors, but not through concepts. It is theory that is supposed to do that. It makes connections through concepts and also helps in illuminating the meaning that is embedded in complex reality" ("Egalitarianism and", 23). In short, Rimzon's trajectories opens up a new theoretical debate which provides possibilities for the Indian art practitioners and academicians to look at the art practices and historiography with a new perspective through which they will be able to produce art which represent the socio-cultural reality India.

After going through the history of Indian modern and contemporary art a conclusion can be reached out that the representation of subaltern especially, the intersection of caste and gender has never been a serious subject matter for the majority of the Indian visual artists. The major reasons for the exclusion of this vital social problem from the visual art practices are identified through this research. They are: the influence of Kantian-Hegelian philosophy and aesthetics; adherence to nationalist, Gandhian and Nehruvian ideology; application of culturally incompatible Marxist class category and aesthetics; and caste elitism among the mainstream artists, critics, historiographers, patrons and viewers. The pedagogy of

the art institutions founded by the British was also not adequate to make the learners aware of the social issues unique to Indian society.

The European and Brahminic aesthetics taught as a part of curriculum projected European and Indian traditional art as high and Indian Tribal and folk art as low and "primitive". The lack of art critics, curators and historians from the subaltern community or lack of a subaltern perspective among mainstream Indian art critics and historians are also reasons for the exclusion of the representation of the Dalit or Subaltern perspective in the modern Indian contemporary practices. Rimzon's observation is relevant here:

> Another important point is that the art critics and historians who wrote about Kinkar most often come from the Brahmanical background. Therefore, there will be a spontaneous tendency to avoid the subaltern artists like Kinkar. In order to include him the writers from the elite/bhraminical background have to take a conscious effort and most often, it won't happen ("Personal Interview").

The elite Hindu upper caste patrons are running majority of the mainstream private galleries in India. Majority of art historians and the curators of the exhibitions belong to the same category. Artists belonging to lower castes hardly reveal their identity due to the insecurity or the fear of humiliation that they may face in future in different ways including exclusion of their participation from the various art projects.

Comparing the works of subaltern artists' with the works of artists from the dominant culture with the same aesthetic "yardstick" also is problematic. The role of museums and other art institutions is to conserve and decode the history of humankind in general and not cater to the dominant cultural norms. However, generally such institutions India fail to represent the marginalized and hence they need to be sensitized about the diversity, plurality and polyphony of Indian culture. It is in this context that Rimzon's works which propose an alternative approach become relevant. Rimzon says,

> I think ‘politics’ is actually the process of creating such [alternative] space. So beyond a subaltern perspective I treat my practice as a tool for moulding a counter culture or alternative system….I do not think there is any potential for Brahminical art in the current or future scenario but I am confident of the possibilities for counter-cultural discourses (“Personal Interview”).

He finds that equality and the idea of justice and humanism implicit in Buddhism, was completely discarded by the dominant discourses. By incorporating the Dravidian, Indigenous and Sramana perspective into his work Rimzon challenges the elitism of the Indian contemporary art practices and opens up a new possibility for posterity to voice out their marginalized identity. Future studies on the practices of modern Indian artists belonging to the marginalized groups will throw fresh insights into the Indian art fraternities’ tryst with modernity.

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