

# HYBRIDIZING CULTURAL AND GLOBAL FACETS: AN ANALYTICAL APPROACH TOWARDS CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

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## Abstract

The evolution of Indian art has shaped its framework so far, enabling it to mark a prominent position on the global stage, which continues to unfold. The Pre-modern Indian art centered around the traditional artistic skill, aesthetic expression, religion and culture, myths, and legends, until the end of twentieth century. The focus on beauty and decorative art shifted dramatically in contemporary art scene witnessing a paradigm shift in conceptualization, mediumistic approaches, visual vocabulary, and thematic interpretations. The artists started depicting more intense issues like migration, gender politics, environment, search for cultural identity and many more, rather than continuing the traditional themes. Post- Independence artists focused on implying metaphorical symbolism to reflect the contemporary prevalent situation of the nation. They embedded their works with mythological imagery whether religious or non-religious to personify the personal dilemmas, social and political situations. Many contemporary Indian artists target global issues while displaying their national artistic identity. This research explores the instances where Indian artists have assimilated the local traditional elements and the global issues in their art. The study further undermines the factors that propelled Contemporary Indian art into an international prominence. It also puts forth the concepts depicted by the artists that bridged the gap among various geographical boundaries and helped establishing art to be a universal language.

**Keywords:** *Contemporary Indian art, globalization, Indian mythology, global issues.*

## INTRODUCTION

Indian art has established new paradigms as an artistic identity since the period in art history when it was known for its rich cultural prominence, lyrical and decorative form, embedded with the notions of philosophical content. The early Indian art reflected artist's observation of what surrounded him- the visible and the invisible, in other words, he portrayed the outer and the inner reality. He focused on the form which he borrowed from the nature, daily life or from the myth which travelled its course to successive generations through verbal traditions or in the form of documented texts based on myth and religion. The ancient and early medieval era noticed an era of idealization of forms when the Indian art scene got heavily impacted due to the development of religious cults, majorly Brahmanical and Buddhist cults. The local artist personified the material religious image to manifest the spiritual and devotional needs of the common man. The art, which was primitive earlier, gained a formal refinement and iconicity. The previous century recorded major drifts in the physical and contextual domains of Indian art. There was an intended transformation in the perception and interpretation of Indian themes and its visual vocabulary. The traditional and iconic objects of Indian art whether they be the ancient and regional themes, techniques, the indigenous styles of the local artists, or the iconographical statements developed under changing social, religious and political scenarios, were reappropriated to create an Indian identity with the aim of glorifying India's past under the constraint of developing nationalism during the early decades of twentieth century. The authenticity of Indian art which had lost its marks regained momentum with the reappropriation of the cultural themes but with a different perspective to art production and interpretation.

The indigenous art, which had almost lost its significance in the upsurge of modernist ideology of the progressives, remerged when, in reaction to the elitist oriental perception, came forth a group of artists, who created narratives to depict contemporary issues of the nation by representing regional themes, Indian characters and heroes who glorified the past. The traditional Hindu icons and idioms, mythological episodes and various folk fables were portrayed in the work to metaphorically convey the current socio-political scenarios of India, thus, developing a new visual grammar of their own. Like the modernists, who opposed artistic nationality and the uniformity persevered by the neo- Bengal style art and the cultural contexts in the so far developed Indian art, the post-modernist contemporary Indian art also expressed more interest in the local and global rather than the traditional past of the nation itself. 1970s onwards, the art scene in India went through a total makeover in case of its formal, contextual and psychological appropriation. The indigenous artistic style, forms and icons, what meant to be a 'constant' element in the Indian art history and evolution, found a reinterpretation in their meaning. The post-modernist artist, in quest for a new artistic identity, redefined the existing art notions to create new attitudes towards the traditional imagery to employ it new deeper meanings than the literal ones.

### **OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

The above titled research enquires about the amalgamated and dynamic nature of contemporary Indian art which transcends the bars of language and geographical boundaries to connect with the global contexts of some recurring issues faced by the modern human; or in some cases the artist himself. The contemporary art with the trend beginning since the post- Independence era has been perceived as pragmatic with the globally hunted themes alongside the depiction of nationally bounded ones without ignoring the indigenous art traditions of the country. It advocates how present-day Indian artist manages to convey his personal dilemmas, political suffering, and the challenges faced as an artist on the international stage; and simultaneously relates these issues in global context and hence universalizes them. The works of a few selected artists have been put forth to elaborate some convincing themes such as the agony of migration and forced displacement, diaspora, environmental issues, search for identity, gender politics, sexuality etc. Through this paper, attempts have been made to showcase the extraordinary ability of the post-modern and contemporary Indian artists, who made a careful use of traditional imagery to convey recurring issues in the form of visual idioms. It further explores the use of experimental approaches to artistic mediums, execution, new formal interpretations, inclusion of digital and other innovative methods employed in the recent Indian artworks.

### **POST-MODERN INDIAN ART: A DRIFT FROM THE TRADITIONAL APPROACHES**

The neo-Indian school of art could not hold longer to the conviction of the Indian audience as they over romanticised their cultural past to keep alive their traditional themes based on myth and religion. They intended to create an Indian identity under the influence of ongoing Indian national movement. This barely gained the interest of contemporary public. This was followed by a shift in artistic attitude just before the Independence, when the artists of Progressive Artists Group developed an art which was free from uniform thematic structures of the traditional art contexts and it no longer promoted artistic nationalism, rather it was in favour of individualism. They remodelled the form, and they broke free from the barriers of realist and ideal form. According to the colonial rulers, Indian art was perceived primitive and static. To break that image of monotony and continuity of the concept of formal beauty, the modern artist had been in a continuous quest for artistic identity. This search for identity in a modern developing art world and a close correspondence of change in the spectrum of interest, inside and outside, led to gradual emerging of new conceptual frameworks and a more vulnerable artistic attitude which was receptive to the globally prevalent art notions, new mediumistic approaches.

The post-modern artist was more inclined towards commenting on the happenings of the surrounding world rather than sinking into the mythological narratives of the ancient and medieval era. There were artworks conveying the socio-political issues relevant to the common man; besides this, some common issues such as

migration, violence, forced displacement, environmental issue, devastation, search for artistic and national identity in conditions of diaspora, etc. were also worked upon by framing them into global context. Thus, the contemporary Indian artists transcended geographical boundaries and the barriers of language while connecting to national and international issues. There is an increased sense of individualism in art sphere while carrying the cultural roots. They succeeded in portraying abstract concepts, and the reflections on contemporary world through regional themes and popular motifs of indigenous and folk and tribal art. Adoption of creative approaches, using unconventional material such as wires, cow dung, utensils, etc., changed aspects of design and structure. The artists focused more on a concept rather than perceiving a piece of art as a mere visual product. For this, contemporary artists choose various modes of representation such as conceptual art, minimal art, installation art, performance art, video installation etc. in addition to the traditional conventions of painting and sculpture.

### FACTORS INFLUENTIAL IN GLOBALIZING INDIAN ART

During the latter half of the twentieth century, the Indian art landscape witnessed a significant paradigm shift. Foundational to our society and culture, folk and rural communities have long served as conduits for the transmission of tradition and knowledge across generations. Therefore, the contemporary Indian artist created their visual vocabulary out of the traditional themes and forms instead of moving into mere abstraction trends and stood up in favour of the indigenous and cultural artistic roots. These artists reappropriated India's rich tapestry of folk culture, local art traditions, and iconic characters, aligning them with the popular culture embraced by the masses and the nation. By expanding the boundaries of established artistic practices and challenging predefined paradigms, they fostered new attitudes and forged a national artistic identity while also engaging with the global art scene. Furthermore, these artists demonstrated a keen social responsiveness, using their work to express the common man's perspective on the social and political currents of the world around them. Moreover, it was the social responsiveness of the artist to convey his thoughts as a common man about the social and political happenings of the surrounding world. The new audience who was disenchanted with the static nature of traditional Indian art, could relate to the more pressing issues in much easier way through their cultural themes and iconic imagery.

Several factors which stimulated the access of contemporary Indian art to the global stage were-

*Search for national artistic identity-* Post-Independence, 'Indian artists fell open to various eclectic influences especially as zonal barriers were breaking down on the global art scene. Artists disavowed cultural specialties and took the stand that the whole world was their heritage, and their work was their personal document, individual and unique. Such an art bereft of both factual and cultural ties with their immediate environment, except in the most superficial sense, could not satisfy them for long. They started yearning for roots in their environment' (**Subramanyan, 1978**). Since this situation persisted for some years, a number of Indian artists understood that their artistic anonymity on the global art spectrum acted as a barrier in their progress.

#### **Resurgence of an Indian looking abstract art during the 70s**

The upcoming of an art style identified by the term 'neo-Brahmanical art' introduced the audience with an art equipped with cultic icons or symbology commenting on the contemporary events. This marked the beginning of a modern trend, where the Indian artists made an intentional attempt to hybridize their cultural imagery with the globally related themes. 'Revivals and reassessments of faiths, beliefs and doctrines also take place under similar critical social situations. Indian social and human reality of the fifties and the sixties deified socio-economic and political solutions and called for some kind of religious remedy. A situation of a hopeless social situation where artists decided to seek exile in a world of religion and built that image of a parallel world in visual constructs' (**James, 1989**). Besides the inclusion of Saiva and Shakta Tantra visuals, there were many others who were inspired by other kind of visuals associated with Brahmanical religion which could not be called tantric. And some were inspired from the ancient Indian philosophy.

Moreover, to break the image of 'imitative' given by the western artists, critics, philosophers, our Indian artists consciously embraced their Hindu heritage. This led to the emergence of an abstract art with distinctly Indian characteristics, drawing on the familiar objects and symbols employed in Hindu rituals.

*Globalization and economic liberalization, leading to flexibility and exposure-* Indian art scene undergone a transformative phase with the spread of globalization and economic liberalization during 1990s. Besides other commercial fields, these factors diminished the geographical barriers for the artists also. They got an easy access to the global art scene because of augmented communication across the globe. There was an increased interest in adoption of new mediumistic approaches towards art execution such as installation, film, video technologies and digitally manipulating works that could record the actual physical world. Contemporary Indian artist got an exposure to the innovatively evolving artworld across the national confinements. The involvement of Indian artists in the global art market stirred them to extend their conceptual ideology to include visual commentaries on certain international issues rather than interpreting them in only national or personal contexts.

This further led the post-modern and contemporary artists to embrace freedom of their expressions through innovative artworks. This democratization of art enabled them to express their cultural patterns in the form of visual idioms to convey the contemporarily prevalent universal issues.

Moreover, 'the Indian artworks exhibited in international exhibitions and events permit the foreign curators to exhibit them in their own contexts, thus bringing in a trans-cultural criterion, which made an indirect impact on the concepts and language of younger artists' (Rafi, 2022).

#### **Traces of cultural and global elements in contemporary Indian artworks**

Post-modern period in Indian art puts forth artists who returned to narrative approaches with new interpretations and artistic ideologies. Several artists considered international issues in their art frame through newly developed art language. 'Some of them choose to tell stories through personal means- investigations of the psyche through the stream of consciousness, portrayal of dreams, exploration of family lineage, episodic self-portraiture. Others choose to make visual the moment in which they exist via observations of daily rituals, political extremities, and the general ironies of existence' (Seid, 2007). The cultural myths and traditions act as vehicle in picturizing such narratives. The Indian art no more serves the orientalist theory, instead, it responds to politics and aims to impact social justice. They work on global themes presented through Indian narratives or traditional motifs and icons.

Common themes of the globalized world find place in the Contemporary Indian artworks such as migration, conflict, memory etc. They employ new unconventional material and the way they present their work also differs from the earlier art traditions. Reena Saini Kallat, one of the leading contemporary woman artists, expresses collective concern regarding partition and forced migration. Her artistic endeavours encompass drawing, photography, sculpture, and videos, focusing predominantly on the fluidity of borders and the paradox of attempting to delineate boundaries in a world where nature knows no limits.

In her recent works, Reena's focus on political borders, the anguish of involuntary migration, and divisive national narratives is evident. Through her art, she portrays the unity of nature, emphasizing the interconnectedness of rivers, birds, and trees, and underscores the artificiality of all divisions created by humans. Drawing from sources like mythology and history, she merges them with depictions of everyday individuals, offering incisive social and political critique through her artwork. In one of her more recent works, Reena revisits the Constitution. Titled *Verso-Recto-Recto-Verso* (2017–2019), the installation comprises textual scrolls of the Constitutions of eight countries. The preambles of these politically partitioned countries' Constitutions are revealed as white dots on a blue and black cloth through the process of tie and dye by artisans from Bhuj. The foundational words common to both preambles are in Braille, about which Reena says, "We seem to have lost sight of our common shared values, with our failure to recognise our interdependence." She speaks of the limitations of language at being able to express deep notions of loss.



Verso-Recto-Recto-Verso (2017 – 2019) by Reena Saini Kallat



Light leaks, winds meet where the waters spill deceit 2008-2010,  
 Source- <https://reenakallat.com/light-leaks-2008-2010/>

The artist reappropriates the violence of borders through ‘*Light Leaks, winds meet where the waters spill deceit*’ by recreating the shape of the Wagah-Attari border pass between Pakistan and India. An artist has symbolically bridged the vast distance between the Indian and Pakistani gates at Wagah by merging them into a single doorway. Adorned with crimson wish-fulfilling threads, regularly tied by the devout at Hindu and Islamic shrines on both sides, the gates carry the weight of shared hopes and desires. These threads, reminiscent of intertwined roots, evoke the shared history of people now divided by political boundaries. While representing unbreakable bonds and aspirations for peace, the gap between the gates conceals a potential for violence. A white light emanating from a fly zapper alludes to the peril faced by those attempting clandestine border crossings.



Sword Swallows series, 2004, Reena Saini Kallat. Source- <https://reenakallat.com/sword-swallowers-2004/>

The beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century draws her passion for depiction of anonymous portraiture of global multitude in her works. These nameless faces which later began to count for the dead and the missing redirect the audience’s eye towards the traumatic turmoil of post-colonial Indian history. She relates these Indian faces with those suffered during partition, as it was accompanied by pogroms, forced migrations, mass rape and the irrevocable dispersal of families and communities. ‘Reena’s first attempt at creating memorials for the ordinary citizens began with her series ‘**Sword-Swallowers**’ (2004). Painted portraits with unfolding screens of visual inscription were installed in the form of archetypal memorial columns or steles. The stele narrates the deeds of the heroes of the ancient world to gods and humans. But the people we meet in Reena’s contemporary memorial columns are not legendary heroes but day-to-day survivors’ (Adajania, 2005). ‘Sword swallows’ serve as a symbol of the extraordinary challenges ordinary individuals face in confronting the diverse array of demons that threaten their survival in contemporary society. Her demons are largely drawn from the representation of asuras in the Kangra miniatures. Their traditional role in mythology is suggested to wreck the sacred practices like *yagna*, whereas, in Reena’s vertical narrative panels, they act more like caricatures. In the above (left) panel, the demon impedes the Muslim man from concentrating on his prayer, while the energetic lyrics of his prayer tend to toss the demon

off from his tongue. Intricately decorated swords recur in each panel which plays to scythe the negativities of the society perceived as demons. The skin of the man is seen in sharp contrast with his traditional white Muslim cap and his tongue reveals the same colour as that of all humans. The same linearly depicted *asuras* transcend the boundaries of each cell as they skate on a variety of traditional swords. These vertically arranged painted panels depicting a comic narration surmounted with a common man's head enforces the concern that every person is equipped with the traumatic and violent history of his nation. The swords in the lower panels of every painting suggest that the violence is embedded in the core of every being; the universal face represented by the placing of any random unknown face on the topmost panel.

Another leading face whose work surfaces political reality encloded in Indian myth and culture is, Nalini Malini. Though born in Pakistan, Nalini Malini lives and works in Mumbai. She is recognized internationally for her multimedia video installations. Throughout various media platforms, Malini is renowned for infusing her work with political themes drawn from a wide array of sources, including ancient Greek and Hindu mythology, as well as European literature and drama. With a focus on uncovering universal truths pertaining to the human experience, Malini, who is both an artist and an activist, finds inspiration in the narratives of the marginalized and the voices of the subaltern. In the series, *Stories Retold*, she reworks the tales of five legendary Indian female protagonists, Sita, Yashodhara, Radha, Mohini and Putana, to demonstrate the depth of the problems she faced. She portrays the point of view of these five characters and advocates the existence of gender bias in the contemporary world by instancing major tragic symbols of such bias in Indian and European mythologies. She has used the mythical heroines as 'the images of conflicts and violence within human psyche, both feminine and masculine' (Kayse, 2015). In the painting, *Putana* from the series- *Stories Retold*, the narratives centres around Putana, the demoness whom Kansa sent to kill Krishna by suckling him with poisoned milk. According to the myth, *Krishna* rather literally sucks the life out of her. Unlike celebrating the heroic act of *Krishna*, Nalini, through her work, presents 'Putana's point of view, acknowledging that she was a pawn in a plan that backfired. Large with life and interestingly depicted in the shape of a map of India herself, *Putana* howls with the recognition that her vitality is being drained out of her by an adult- sized child- perhaps the artist's response to the Hindu Right's commandeering of India's spiritual heritage' (Seid, 2007).



Stories Retold- Putana I, 2002, Source- <https://collection.qagoma.qld.gov.au/stories/3644>

Atul Dodiya, a Mumbai based artist, executes art based on the subjects drawn from historical events, Hindu epics, old European maps of India, etc. He incorporates found and readymade objects from urban life into his paintings, thus extending the context of two-dimensional painted surface. His works employ popular religious iconography as well as cinema culture. His installation series- *Devoured Darkness I* derive its name from a line in one of the poems of Allama Prabhu, a south- Indian poet, which runs as *Light devoured darkness. I was alone inside. Shedding the visible dark, I was your target, O Lord of Caves.*

The communal riots in Gujarat in 2002 deeply stirred the artist's conscious. His installation *Devoured Darkness series* displays gallows attached with a poem painted with watercolours and collaged images. On the other side of each gallows' pole, a mirror has been installed which allows the viewer to be as reflective as the poet in contemplating the impermanency of his life. Here, the gallows represent man's inhumanity for the fellow men. Through this personal experience, he comments on the global issues of violence, and forced migration and poverty faced by the unsettled people after such crisis.



Devoured Darkness Series- What is the darkness on the eyes, 2006



Devoured Darkness Series – What is the darkness on the eyes, 2006.

Source- <https://www.vadehraart.com/privateviews/4d9627ea427fc088323775/10718-atul-dodiya-devoured-darkness-series-what-s-the-darkness-on-2006/>

Apart from the above discussed artists and artworks, there are other Indian artists who draw their subjects from Indian arena and manifest them as commentaries over the political and social happenings and personal dilemmas of the artists in a global context. Girjesh Kumar Singh, focuses on the use of different media such as cement, bricks, mortar and seeks to address his concern for identity, migration and displacement. Shilpa Gupta's digital, sculptural and installation works prefer themes of interconnectedness, terrorism, human rights and gender politics. The works, there is *No Border Here* (2005-06), *I Live under your Sky too* (2013) affirm the irrelevance of territorial claims and borders for the nature. Her works also expound the issues of terrorism and socio-political instability that has stimulated a mental turmoil all over the globe. Subodh Gupta promotes the use of indigenous cultural material such as steel utensils, cow dung and creates narratives highlighting the relationship of oneself with food and family and delves furthermore into migration and displacement issues.

## CONCLUSION

The present study explores the journey of Indian art from local to global in the recent decades. The confrontation with the international art trends under the influence of globalization stimulated the establishment of 'Individuality' in Post-modern contemporary Indian artists. The stereotype image of Indian art which was perceived to be static and repetitive of traditional and cultural motifs, no more exists in the contemporary scenario. The Indian artists confined to the traditional mediums and techniques have expanded their media approaches to creative modes such as digital media, sound, installation, video, photography and performances.

The use of readymade and found raw objects find unique position in the works of artists as Subodh Gupta, Bharti Kher, Reena Saini Kallat and many more. The inclusion of indigenous techniques, materials, subjects while indicating towards the globally shared challenges suffered by the common man, has hiked the strength of audience for contemporary Indian art all over the world. The traditional and religious imagery placed in the contemporary Indian works confirms a reappropriation of their conceptual meaning. Every individual character, motif, colour, having their origin in the Indian culture functions as separate visual metaphors. These when co-created within the modern narrative, reflect symbolic meanings along with their literal ones. The present Indian art thus syncretizes the cultural reflections of Indian art with the contemporary global pressing issues such as migration, loss of artistic and national identity within an art sphere. The Indian artists have victoriously managed to create a balance between the 'cultural' and the 'international'; between the 'traditional' and the 'modern'. The famous artists such as Nalini Malini, Reena Saini Kallat, Bharti Kher, Atul Dodiya, and many more such artists have gained recognition globally while carrying with them the traditional tribal and folk-art inspiration, religious and cultural history and at the simultaneously possessing an empathy for the universal mankind by expanding their personal and local issues to the global context.

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