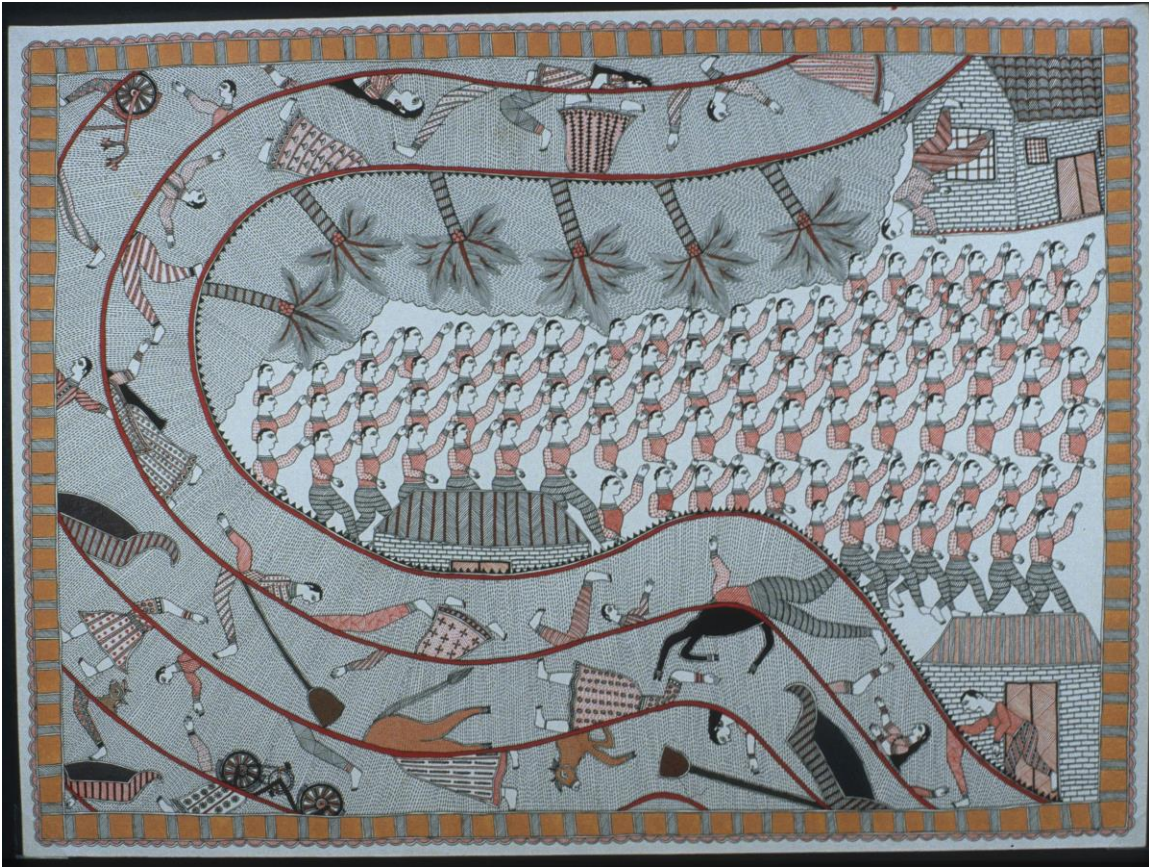


Folk in Contemporary Indian Art



Folk art is a personal as well as a cultural statement, largely identified with rural life. Anyone in the community is entitled to and able to create. It is an art form that is based on tradition and close observations of Indian life, without reference to Western Art. Within an extraordinary mix of the ancient with the modern, folk artists record everyday events of family and community life. Using colour and lyrical elements they express through a visual language that employs simplified form, ignoring perspective and proportion.

I met David Szanton, an anthropologist based in Berkeley, California, at a seminar where he showed us some brilliant work done by *Mithila* artists. He is co-founder of the Ethnic Arts Foundation, which hosted an exhibition of *Mithila* painting at the India Habitat Centre. Madhavi Parekh had just exhibited recent works at the Vadhera Art Gallery and the 'folk' link between these two exhibitions intrigued me. Szanton was cautious about giving images for publication, emphatic in his view that these works were not to be seen as folk art, but contemporary Indian paintings

Much has been written about the work of the artist Madhavi Parekh, citing her art as being vital to the reconciling of the expressions of rural India with that of modern, urban

India. Her proximity to village life; being a first generation migrant to urbanization, she naturally draws upon the images, events, sounds and scapes etched in her memory. Untrained in the formal mode of Art education she uses a kind of naïve, 'folk' narrative to tell her stories.

Modern, urban India, divested of the romance of an ethnic identity is keen to reclaim its heritage by iterating the importance of an infusion of folk elements in the Contemporary Art vocabulary; but for the rural artists, whose idiom is folk, not merely in memory, but a living discipline they naturally work within, categorizing their work as 'folk' is seen as derogatory. It is this dichotomy that intrigues and poses questions about the positioning of our folk heritage vis-à-vis contemporary painting. David is not erroneous in his apprehension, because we do not regard the work of these rural artists in the same way; we do that of the modern-urbanized painter or sculptor.

Since the 14th century, the women of *Mithila* in Bihar have painted Gods, Goddesses and symbolic icons on the walls of their homes to create auspicious spaces for ritual activities. In 1966 a severe drought gave new direction to these women who transferred their paintings onto paper, selling them to create an alternate source of income. A new art form evolved and flourished. The recent exhibition reflected the impact of contemporary experience on an ancient ritual art, in the evolution of an indigenous aesthetic tradition.

Madhavi Parekh too paints Gods and goddesses. Religion, religious stories and bhajans formed an integral part of her growing up. She draws a world with child-like imagery that attracts, but precludes you from its inner recesses. The overtly simple forms disguise a complex, multi-layered inner world. Madhavi draws upon folk traditions and memories of rural life, but the transition that she has made from this, to living and working in urban India, is complex. She uses simplified forms and traditional religious iconography. However, Madhavi does not augment this with a perceptive discovery of the *Kali* and *Durga* that she encountered, through her rather unusual vantage point, in viewing and recording impressions of modern, urban living. The viewer is thus excluded from the insights of her experiences.

By contrast, the *Mithila* artists directly address the issues or events that form impetus for their expression. '*The attack on the World Trade Towers* has been drawn by Leela Devi, from Rasidpur, a village many miles from Madhubani and "quite without electricity". The artist did not see television footage of the event but heard about it. In this painting, she draws upon her memory of sky scrapers from a visit to Japan and aptly visualizes the event, adding her own insightful perception, of the engulfing rage; depicted as fire that has permeated the entire environment and the aeroplanes, before they crashed; bringing attention to this as being the cause of such a tragedy. It is this simple, perceptive profundity that augments the simplified form and even justifies it.

In another work, *The 2004 Tsunami* by Amrita Das, a student at the Mithila Art Institute (Ethnic Arts Foundation), the same simple, heartfelt expression prevails. Large waves engulf the land, sweeping away humans as well as animal and plant life in their deluge. Some people are running inland; some are half drowned, evoking a sense of distress that

we all experienced in December 2004. These artists do not speak from an individual but collective standpoint. They communicate successfully, through empathy and insight.

These two works essentially address international tragedies but other paintings like the *Abortion Clinic* and *Ardhnarisvara* or *Women in Rain* speak of issues more directly connected with their own lives with the same honesty of exploration and expression. Some of the villages that they live in barely have electricity and lack much else that we take for granted in city life. The idea of less being more is evident in their attitude towards life that presents tragedies of such gargantuan proportion with lyrical lines while Parekh's work is dark and foreboding by comparison.

Dastkar has been working with rural women artisans whose work is not just original but powerful statements made by thinking women who are not necessarily literate. They use traditional embroidery skills to make wall hangings that provide extraordinary insights into the present-day transition occurring in their world.

Women in Transition by Shanta (36years), Gauribai (26 years) and Parvati (22 years); illustrates the change from notions of 'woman', free and untrammelled to the costumed *Lambani*, typecast and fettered by her ornamentation. For the *Lambani* women (Bellary District, North Karnataka), costume is a strong statement of their community and culture and also perceived by them today, as a cage in which individuality is lost. This textile panel is divided into two, where one half shows a naked *Lambani* with flowing hair, highlighting the power points of her body with mirrors and embroidery; the use of deep reds further emphasizing strength and vitality. In the other half she is placed on a black ground, fully costumed, weighted down by the veils, necklaces, anklets and multi tiers of fabric. The use of fabric further consolidates the comment, for in not changing their medium, but using the comfort of its familiarity, conveys a message another would have voiced inadequately.

The essential difference between these women and Parekh is that they have not been physically or emotionally displaced from their traditional environs and culture, nor overtly exposed to the culture of modern painting such as Madhavi was. Born and brought up in the village of Sanjaya in Gujarat, she married the painter Manu Parekh and has since then, resided in cities, for the last fifty years. She is well travelled, has been inspired by works of Paul Klee and other Western painters; imbibing the nuances of the world of a contemporary, urban painter, as being part of it as a spouse and also a protagonist in this herself.

Parekh has a comprehension of this world; beyond her childhood, rural environment, similar to that of the other artists, which they lack; living and working in relative isolation from the competitive glare of the 'global village'. Their brilliance seems eclipsed by the recognition Parekh has been given for an innovative stance afforded by her environment. This, a fundamental reality of evaluating creativity in terms of visibility and therefore recognition and appreciation does not necessarily accord an appropriate value.

What appeals in the folk-naïve-form of narrative is the lyrical simplicity with which ideas and feelings are conveyed. Simplicity comes from clarifying emotion, which is perhaps difficult in our frenetic world more attuned to intellectualizing as opposed to feeling. The *Mithila* painters or the women of *Sandur* may not have acquired this urban finesse, which is precisely what appeals, for we have seemingly out-manoeuvred ourselves with too much of it and lost the art of feeling – the pulse of being human.

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