

Specters of the Nation Contemporary Indian Art, the National Gallery of Modern Art and the Market

Following India's independence, the National Gallery of Modern Art was founded in order to represent the nation's modernity through the collection and exhibition of fine art. Since then, the simultaneous emergence of neoliberalism and contemporary art has reconfigured India's art world into a paradox: contemporary art is distributed widely by private galleries but moderately supported by the national institution for modern art.

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The domestic and global circulation of Indian art through art markets is largely understudied. It was not until the late 1990s, when India opened up its economy to neoliberal market forces, that Indian art started to make its presence felt in the global art market. Despite this increased prevalence of Indian art

internationally, museums in India do not cultivate collections that reflect contemporary art practices. Stepping in, private parties have taken it upon themselves to produce discourse and write the history of contemporary art. The paradoxical position of contemporary Indian art and its relation to markets can be partially grasped by examining the trajectory modern art has taken in the Indian art institution. How did an ideological prerogative towards national modernity shape an institutional environment oblivious to contemporary cultural production? Could the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi hope to become a dedicated space for contemporary art that would create a canon of taste, which in turn would help legitimize the position of artists in contemporary markets?

The recession in 2008 caused many Indian art collectors to abandon contemporary artworks in favor of

1. As art historian Arshiya Lokhandwala explained in 2011, 'Indian contemporary collectors are cautious in buying contemporary art today, and would now rather wait and undertake the "tried and tested" route, watching artist's [sic] careers before acquiring their works.' Arshiya Lokhandwala, 'Treading with caution? Art Markets in uncertain Times' in: *Take on Art*, Vol. 2, Issue 06, 2011, p. 22.

2. Kavita Singh, 'A history of now: modern and contemporary art museums in India', in: *Art India*, Volume 15 Issue 1, 2010, p. 31.

3. File No. 6-3/51-G.2A, Department of Education, National Archives of India, unpublished material.

4. File No. 6-19/G.2A, Department of Education, National Archives of India, unpublished material.

early Indian modern masters, a more secure investment both in domestic and international markets.¹ This turn towards modern masters in times of economic crisis is related to the institutional embrace of those artists whose works have been collected and preserved by state-owned museums in India such as the National Gallery of Modern Art, Delhi (NGMA) in an effort to legitimate a narrative of Indian modernity. Founded in 1954, just eight years after India's independence from British rule, the NGMA is the first contemporary art museum to be established in a postcolonial nation, predating other such museums in South Asia and Africa by several decades. Intended to represent and legitimate a narrative of Indian modern art production, NGMA was formed through the acquisition of artworks that reveal the conflicting drives of Indian Modernism haunted by an uneasy negotiation between tradition and modernity. Despite the vastness and diversity of a country like India, the museum has collected an impartial account of the dominant formative trends of modern art. From early Company paintings to the works of the three Tagores, Sher-Gil, Ramkinkar Baij and Benodebehari Mukherjee, Neo-Tantra and the Bombay Progressives, NGMA has successfully helped forge a narrative of the Indian historical modern, however troubled that narrative may be by fault-lines and discontinuities. Yet, as art historian Kavita Singh has pointed out, the institution is trapped in the mire of its own historicity, failing to acquire and display works that would expand the history of Indian Modernity beyond the 1970s (the period to which the collection extends). She rightly argues that 'it would be hard to trace developments of the 1980s onward in galleries, harder still to find more than a nod to the extraordinary energy mobilizing India's art scene from the late 1990s on to the present.'²

A closer look into the acquisition policies of the National Gallery of Modern Art makes it clear that in its formative years the museum was not only eager to procure works by the founding masters of Indian modernity, but it also actively intervened to gather works by contemporary artists to create a vocabulary resonant with the ethos of an emergent nation. Only so long, however, as those contemporary works revealed and iconized identifiable national signs. This was possible because of the active engagement of a certain group of people who, in their capacities as administrators and connoisseurs, acted as arbiters of taste for national art institutions. They were a mixed group of critics, scholars and collectors whose choices on the matters of art were instrumental in pushing the nationalist agenda of the government to create a comprehensive collection for the museum. This group made decisions regarding pricing and the selection of works, matters in which they sometimes had the final say. Among them were people like dr. V. S. Agarwala, a trained historian of art and a disciple of Ananda Coomaraswamy; Rai Krishnadasa, a consummate collector who established a fine private museum of Indian art in Benares; artists like Ramendranath Chakrabarty and Surendranath Kar who filled administrative positions; and V. V. Oak of the Bombay Art School, among others.³

A few were known to national leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru as competent authorities and collectors of art long before he came to power. Others were chosen or recommended by art societies funded by the state to evaluate the institutional conditions of Indian art after independence.⁴ Agarwala and Nihar Chowdhury were given the task of selecting the representative works of the founder and principal artist of the Bengal School, Abanindranath

5. File No. 5-21/ G.2A, Department of Education, National Archives of India, unpublished material.

6. Hermann Goetz, Letter to the Secretary to the Ministry of Education titled 'Acquisition of Exhibits for the National Art Gallery', November 8, 1953. File No. 9-11/53-H.2, Department of Education, National Archives of India, unpublished material.

7. *Ibid.*

8. Singh, *op. cit.* (note 2), p. 32.

Tagore, for NGMA.⁵ Their contacts with artists and collectors, some of whom were scions of aristocratic families, dealers, and scholars, both in India and abroad, helped them form a network which was useful in understanding and engaging with art.

These connoisseurs would survey the conditions of the domestic art market and keep abreast of trends in international art markets, assigned as they were with the task of collecting and fixing prices of art works at the national level. Bound by governmental policies, administrative constraints, and infrastructural limitations, and motivated by a sense of urgency and reliance on their own judgments and predilections, they were put in a trying situation in the creation of a national museum of art in the years after independence. Although they often worked as members of Art Purchase Committees, and had to keep art expenditures well within the annual budget provisions of the Education Department, their purview on matters related to art and its valuation went beyond art acquisitions, and had a wide-ranging effect on the very status of Indian art as an exchangeable market commodity.

Hermann Goetz, the first director of NGMA stated in a letter to the Secretary of the Ministry of Education that the formation of a good collection for the institution required that collectors actively 'hunt' for works of art in art markets that were in a nascent stage in this newly formed nation.⁶ He further noted that artists primarily preferred to sell their works on the open market rather than to state-funded national galleries that had more limited budgets.⁷ The state, with its highly regulated protectionist fiscal policies, was wary of art markets, dealers, and collectors and tried to press laws that would not only strictly regulate the movement of works of art (primarily antiquities), but also track the movement of art objects by cataloguing and inspecting private collections,

many of which were owned by large estates or wealthy collectors. Some of these collections were in danger of being liquidated as a result of financial difficulties faced by the collectors after the partition of India. As a nation which was lacking not only in resources but also in matters of policy and jurisdiction over these objects, the government tried to contain the movement of artworks within the country. Objects, once released into international art markets, were very difficult to recover for lack of funds and inadequate diplomatic maneuvering on part of the government, which was tied by more pressing concerns at home. The uneasiness of nationalized institutions with the forces of the market continued in the decades that followed, even when nationalized art institutions were solidly in place. With the emergence of global capital and neoliberal reforms from the 1990s onwards, it became even more difficult to craft an acquisition policy that would dissolve the predominance of the historical Modern to further the agenda of the institution.

While nationalist narratives may not yet be fully demolished, in the contemporary post-reform context of India there are enthusiasts for whom the market has the potential to take over for the state as patron and conservator of the arts. Kavita Singh argues that in contemporary India 'the art market itself has begun to take on some of the museum's role; the market that is producing the discourse, through web-resources, auction catalogues and books; it is the market that is rewriting our art history by conducting research and bringing old and new artists to new prominence; it is the market that is building the archive of modern and contemporary art.'⁸ Singh contends that the market helps produce knowledge about artworks but also helps to create a value for them that reaches beyond self-interest. No doubt what Singh is trying to argue about the

market has more than a morsel of truth to it. Of late, the private galleries in India have made public a lot of information and materials about hitherto neglected figures of Indian art. Naturally, however, this is not a selfless act. Many of the galleries, funded by corporate money, try to create an informed context that in turn provides their business with some semblance of legitimacy and prestige. If galleries are to produce histories, this appropriation will be guided by their own self-interest. Since much of the history and knowledge-production regarding artworks is done by scholars attached to private institutions and galleries that are all too happy to be a part of the emergent finance-capital, it will be interesting to see how the tropes and ideological baggage of the nation-state will be inflected and produced by these corporate-funded histories. There is every possibility that the nation will prevail as an assemblage of free-floating reproducible signs, since the changing nature of capital has learned to speak the language of the local and the national in an invented lingo of its own.

With one foot in incomplete neoliberal reforms and the other stuck in an outmoded mandate of the hyphenated 'national-modern', it is difficult to think of India's nationalized art institutions as able to sustain a confident engagement with works of contemporary art. Despite talks of a decline in acquisitions in many state owned institutions across South Asia, this moment should not be seen as the withdrawal of the state as patron and the rise of the market in its stead, but as an opportunity for the state to participate in the formation of the global contemporary and to respond to the critiques of art institutions. The gradual loosening up of the institutional focus on Western art, and the rise of alternative art spaces with centers spread across Asian cities, cannot be seen as a final withering away of the nation, but as a juncture for reorienting the prerogatives of the national. National art institutions still have a relevant challenge in creating spaces that reach

contemporary artists and the public by engaging with works that are based on a decoupling of nation and modernity. These would be reflexive institutional spaces in terms of curatorial policies. However, institutions like NGMA feel the inertia of a modernity gone awry. In such a context modernism and tradition will continue to haunt the art market with questionable authenticity.

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