

India

Sanjukta Sunderason, *Partisan Aesthetics: Modern Art and India's Long Decolonization*

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“Realism was born in the streets of Calcutta,” says the author in a lapidary phrase that captures the social predicament of art in a colonized nation. The Calcutta famine, birthed in the crucible of war, nationalism, and left-wing politics, created an orientation toward the depiction of the everyday abjection of the subaltern. The 1940s were a crucial period in creating a new sensibility arising from the urgent need to rethink earlier engagements with idealism and primitivism in modern Indian art. The peasant, tribal, and the subaltern, in general, could no longer be an object of reflection alone; the new situation necessitated the rise of a partisan aesthetics. Art had to have a social character, a commitment to particular historical subjects and themes, and artists themselves had to be the partisans—the irregulars—in the war against the retreat of art into the studios and a vapid humanism. The art of the famine generated an archive of modernity that provided a different genealogy to the very idea of a modernist aesthetics. As Sanjukta Sunderason points out, we have to engage with a narrative space shared by visual art, the left, war, and decolonization. The book navigates deftly the constantly moving terrain between the cultural left and the Left parties’ reconciling of theory with the exigencies of the historical conjuncture.

There is a genealogy that could be constructed from the Bengal School of the early twentieth century to the individual humanism that characterized the period after independence. In this trajectory, the left aesthetics of artists like Somnath Hore, Chittoprasad, and Zainul Abedin can appear to be a conjunctural blip occasioned by the horror of war and famine. How exactly are we to read this archive of work that dealt with questions of destitution and abjection, putting the frail human at the center of aesthetic consideration? This “conjunctural terrain” (9) in which we witness the “becoming political of the artistic” (9) needs a narration not located only in the standard narrative of colonialism and nationalism. Sunderason is insistent on the transnational space of aesthetic imagination and draws out the imbrications of the work of these artists that exceeds the demands of a Stalinist socialist realism. Social reality was depicted through expressionistic forms and “grotesque realism,” such as in the work of George Grosz and Kathe Kollwitz. The conjuncture of the famine led to a reaching out to forms from transnational contexts, creating a very particular form of vernacular modernity. Sunderason manages the disruption of Indian modernism’s rhetoric about itself with great dexterity by recovering for us the partisan aesthetics of the war period.

If we consider the trajectories of the left-wing cultural movement between 1936 and the decade after India’s independence, we need to begin with what Sunderason calls “the passive participation of art in political mobilization” (31). It is the war and famine that moves the artists to an active authorship. However, even as Chittoprasad and Hore transition to gut-wrenching depictions of distress, the Calcutta group set up in 1943 showed a “vacillating affiliation” to social and socialist art, the latter more ideological in intent. Sunderason’s argument is convincing that the Calcutta Group represents the “missing link” (169) that allows us to explain the deradicalization that happens under the aegis of Nehruvian modernity. There are several aesthetic temporalities in the period, and the “partisan aesthetics” ranges across a spectrum of commitment. After 1947, the artist engaged gives way to the idea of individual humanism and the citizen subject. It is less destitution and more the proleptic idea of modernity and development that takes over. A statement issued by the Calcutta Group in 1950 with the newly formed Progressive Artists Group in Bombay is revealing of this transition. “Art will, as long as it remains, be esoteric. It can be utilitarian, didactic, socialist and religious, but then it is mercenary, pedagogic, political and devotional but never pure intrinsic art” (163). National freedom also called for a freedom from the exigency of showcasing the devastation of subaltern life. A new era, presumably, had dawned when “pure art” could come back. Chittoprasad, the heroic artist, could now express a sense of distance from the “picture as the saddle horse of history,” and Hore could move from the urgency of the present to metaphor. The cover of the book captures this transition. Hore’s *Wounds* (c. 1977) are abstract indentations on paper pulp, no longer the bodies of the suffering human.

In charting this transition, which sits alongside the histories of modernism in Indian art, Sunderason does the exceptional work of producing “granular histories of artistic modernity in India” (36). Decolonization itself emerges as an analytical field in which the privileged narrative of the national-modern is set aside. This book is an original and profound intervention in the understanding of modernity, art, and politics in South Asia.

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