People in Conservation

Biodiversity Conservation and Livelihood Security

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Opening Words

Special Issue on Art, Nature & Society

Opening Words

Humanity has dealt with questions pertaining to what qualifies as art, its impact, its raison d'être. The attempts to answer those have also invited unpacking and challenging accessibility, class, gender, caste, environmental issues and deeply inherent hegemonies.

But where the subject is art, nothing is as it seems! After all art is not merely a depiction or exact reflection of reality. It may consist of that, but that doesn't necessarily make something a work of art. A mirror, if it is any good, can produce an almost exact replica. But what it produces is not art. Here we can of course argue that behind every expression of art is an artist, and since a mirror is just a medium of reflection, what it reflects is not art, even if it be something of great beauty. How about photography? Can all photographs be considered works of art because there is an agent- the photographer who produces it? It will be a rare person who will deny that photography can also produce great art, but common sense also tells us that not all photographs qualify as works of art. So clearly art is not merely a mastery of the technique, but neither is it perhaps truly possible to create great (or even mediocre!) works of art without some understanding of the medium (& hence technique!) through which it is expressed. Beyond technique it calls for perspective, vision, intuition, genius and so many other faculties – both inborn gifts and those that are learnt - which an artist brings to bear on her artistic expression. We can already see some hackles being raised by the term "mediocre". It perhaps will offend those who see an elitist snobbery behind such usage and might claim in a very "woke" indignation that is so fashionable these days that all of us are born artists and all artistic expressions are of equal valence. However if one does not want to elide the question by recourse to wokism, one has to move in the uncomfortable terrains that go beyond the question of what is art (or what art is?) to how we interpret it and give value to it (without necessarily monetizing it as capitalistic society tends to). Here the field of aesthetics plays a great role, that helps us understand why for example a film by Satyajit Ray has to be taken as a serious work of art compared to say a potboiler film which may be asking (or answering!) some of the same questions as Ray's films ask.

Does art have any specific purpose to serve? Is it bound by a social responsibility like the betterment of society, eradication of superstition, highlighting enviornmental or livelihood concerns, highlighting of inequities w.r.t gender, caste etc? In short, does art necessarily have to represent a political ideology? Here again we find ourselves in a controversial terrain. Some believe that art should have its own autonomy while others believe that art (and hence the artist!), because they belong to society, has/have a specific social role and responsibility. Classically this has been presented as the "art for art's sake" versus "art for social change" debate. The former stressing the philosophy that art is its own measure, while the latter demanding a reformist/revolutionary commitment to social change. The new wave art cinema movement of 50s was characterized by emphasis on director's vision, creative control, improvisational storytelling, stylization and individualization. Likewise the parallel cinema film movement began in West Bengal in 50s started by Ritwick Ghatak, Satyajit Ray, Mrinal Sen etc (finding its Hindi idiom in the 70s in the NFDC produced cinema of Shyam Benegal, Govind Nihilani, Kundan Shah, Kalpana Lajmi, Saeed Mirza etc) as a movement inspired by socio-political climate of post-independence India and providing an "alternative" (Vikalp) to the fantasy world of mainstream commercial cinema. These movements brought to fore some of the aforementioned contradictions without necessarily or satisfactorily resolving them. There were directors like Bimal Roy or Guru Dutt, who don't easily fit into the either-or categories mentioned above. The same Bimal Roy who made the hard hitting and heart-rending social realism of "Do Bigha Zameen" (two strips of land) also gave us the fantasy entertainer of "Madhumati" based on rebirth (a delicious irony of which is that one of the writers of the film was the Marxist Ritwick Ghatak who allegedly wrote it to "expose" Bimal Roy's allegedly pretentious "social" concerns!:)). How does one decide the artistic or social merit of Gurudutt's trilogy – Pyaasa, Sahib Bibi aur Gulam and Kagaz ke phool where the first two reflect a hard social reality without compromising on the artistic, poetic and very iconoclastic vision of Gurudutt behind them, from the latter film which is an intensely personal artistic expression embedded in the social reality of the times? This question remains today because while many of the issues besetting our world at that time remain alive even today (thus making us doubt the efficacy of art to effect real social change), at another level, one realizes how poorer the world would have been without these artists even if actual positive change has been slow (if at all) in coming. As if this was not enough, one needs to ask what truths can art be expected to speak to power in a post-truth world?

These are questions that need to be thought out seriously and sincerely. There is no reductive one-size-fit-all answer to them. Each has to think for herself. Add to this the question of the very "necessity of art". This is a serious question for those who insist that all art has to be revolutionary. If that is the case, one may well ask if art will still remain necessary once the aim of revolutionary art – which is bringing about a radical social change, envirnomental justice etc. – has been achieved. What will the role of art be in post-revolution society?

We make no claims to answering the above dilemmas. Yet we will be gratified if it encourages our readership to take art seriously – both as a medium of social change (as politics of art), as well as for its own sake.

Milind & Arnaz

News and Information

Gramani: A place filled with Art and Humanity

By Amal Dey M

"Gramani is the house we live in. The house where Simitha, Abhinu and I live is primarily a living space, as well as a cultural space."

– Shaji Oorali

Shaji Oorali is a great man of small stature with manifold attributes. In addition to being the founder of the community Gramani, he is also a unique artist. Shaji's life journey has led to his home, named Gramani, becoming a cultural hub where people can gather. Shaji's activities that combine art, education and rural life add to the nuances of the community.

Gramani means that which leads a village forward. Gramani is located in Naduvattam, a small village in the Palakkad district of Kerala. It is difficult to describe Gramani in a single sentence. In Shaji's words, Gramani is a group of people who would love to stand together. In 2006, Shaji and his wife Simitha moved to Naduvattam with their son Abhinu. "Naduvattam is a typical rural area with many shrines and vast paddy fields. It is home to the Thuthapuzha river and Rairanalloor hill, once climbed by the mad man of Naranam [a Malayalam folk character]" – Shaji added. Kerala's unique rural lushness stands out in the Palakkad district, lending to its beauty. Naduvattam is one such village. It is also a place of legends and historical remnants.

Shaji graduated with a degree in Drama from the School of Drama in Thrissur District. Many friends of his who worked in the theatre scene used to visit Shaji's house. Shaji's close companion and classmate Martin's friends from Latin America also started visiting there. Songs, dances and plays were performed there since the people who came had an artistic background. At the same time, the house became a cultural hub when Poothan Thira, the folk-art form of Palakkad, was displayed to the public. From thereon, Gramani's roots took hold in Shaji's mind.

Later, the above-mentioned events started happening there every year. During the events, the locals would gather outside the walls but no one was interested enough to go inside. Since Abhinu grew up in this environment, he became interested in drama and various arts. Although Shaji did not want to make Abhinu a part of mainstream education, he was compelled by his life circumstances and the existing education system. When Abhinu was in fourth class, he used to come home with his friends and listen to Shaji's plays and try to do short plays. Later, as this continued on, the parents began to respond positively to the changes that were taking place in the children. Hence, Gramani became a place where children have imparted knowledge through drama. "There are a lot of people standing with us. Pramod is there, and Biji Chechi is there. Pramod is a theatre artist. Biji Chechi is a sculptor. Then there is Aneesh, there is Kaakku and so on. We all realized that if we all stood together, we could achieve a lot of things," says Simita.

"The drama of life is different from that on the stage. We choose drama as a medium because we see endless possibilities in it to prepare for life." – Shaji

Children of Gramani performing the play 'Vellapokkathil' at Thrissur Sangeetha Nataka Academy (file photo)

Gramani's activities combine the three elements of art, education and rural life. Gramani began by using the art of drama as a tool for education. The play 'Pothu Kinar' [Public Well] is a good example of this. It was a play prepared by the children themselves to understand the general system that exists in society. As part of the preparation for the play, the children travelled by public transport and visited the panchayat office. The play discusses the etiquette that a citizen should follow in society and the function of traditions. Many of the props used in the play are made by the children themselves. Along with plays, various art camps are also organised at Gramani. In addition to drawing, photography, pottery and origami, children are also trained in martial arts. Children's activities are not limited to Gramani. The play 'Vellapokkathil' [In the flood] directed by Aneesh V. P. was performed by the children and they were appreciated at the 'Karshakarkku Kalaasalaam' program held at the Thrissur Sangeetha Nataka Academy to mark the 100th day of the farmers' protests. The play tells the story of a pet dog abandoned in a flood. The commemoration of Beevathu was another notable event of Gramani. The 'Beevathu Ororma' commemoration program was held to commemorate the death of Beevathu, a street dog from Naduvattam. Beevathu was considered one among the villagers. The news about the villagers gathering to pay homage to a street dog named Beevathu was featured in all the newspapers the next day. Renowned wildlife photographer N. A. Nazir was the chief guest at the memorial service. For this event as well, the children performed the play 'Vellapokkathil'. The day of commemoration was also a reminder of the relationship between humans and other living beings and animals. "It is a village house. A house where people get together with family, friends and locals. Here, the sky is the same for humans, animals, birds, trees and plants," Shaji adds.

"Oorali life inspires us immensely. Personally, I gain strength and courage from the Oorali experience. Because the foundation of Oorali is the relationship between the people who stand by it." – Shaji

Oorali is a popular music band in Kerala. Shaji writes songs for Oorali. There are several factors that set Oorali apart from other bands. It is a mixture of music, drama, poetry, art and song that differentiates the songs of Oorali and fills people with a certain feeling. The band derives its name from the character 'Oorali' who talks about contemporary issues in the folk art form of Padayani. The songs of Oorali have the same characteristics. In all the songs, Oorali puts forward a political theme. At the same time, Oorali takes part in the protests for humans and the rest of nature. Shaji plays a big role here as these songs of struggle and protest fill the minds of the people. "Art can be part of the protest. Struggle can be turned into a festival as long as Oorali is part of the struggle. Oorali has nothing to do when the police jeep is smashed and set on fire. What Oorali can do is tell people to refrain from that," asserts Shaji.

Read more here: https://vikalpsangam.org/article/gramani-a-place-filled-with-art-and-humanity/

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ESSENTIAL DELHI: Everything turns to something - Nothing is ever wasted

By Fearless Collective

At the intersection of two arterial roads in New Delhi, not so far from Parliament house and India Gate, stands a quiet monument. One that emerges from the embrace of a giant (silk cotton) tree. Here two women face each other, one looking at the city rising between them (from their open palms) and one looking towards us. Her gaze strong and soft. They belong to a community of women who collect, sort and recycle the waste we create. Old books, plastic water bottles, torn letters, peels of fruit (nothing is ever wasted- everything has the potential to turn into something).

On the night of March 24th 2020, life as we knew it in India came to a complete and total standstill. An unknown virus pushed us away from touch and into isolation. Fear swept over everything.

In this strange half-light time, as hours turned to days that turned to weeks, many of us were able to shift our work and sources of sustenance online. We stayed connected. We ordered in, food and sanitized groceries. In this time, plastic came to mean protection. But what happened to it once it was discarded?

India has one of the world's largest informal waste management sectors. In Delhi there is an informal workforce of thousands of women who leave their homes before the sun is up to collect, segregate and recycle the waste we (often thoughtlessly) dispose of. Waste that would otherwise go straight into landfills, rivers and oceans. Before the rest of the city is awake, they walk through the streets carrying a big bag on their back (often as big as them when

it's full) picking up discarded things that can be recycled.

During the first 2 months of the country-wide lockdown, their livelihood was taken away from them – they were left in the dark with little state support and no way to earn a living because they couldn't leave their homes. They lived on the savings they had. As the months passed, they chose to step out, risking threats and harassment from the police to collect the little they found. This without any protective gear at a time when the rest of the country was still locking itself in.

We began to ask ourselves at Fearless – How will we emerge from this? Can we emerge in to a safer, more inclusive and more loving world?

At the same time, people in positions of power were debating what and who should be considered 'essential.' This drew us at Fearless to start thinking about how we treat land, life, and labour in a social context where 'essential' workers are treated as 'disposable' lives, and disposable plastics permeate nearly every part of our landscape.

One of the biggest lessons the pandemic was teaching us was just how closely interconnected we all are. Very often in our environmental and social justice movements, we become so focused on one struggle that we don't see the interconnectedness of our issues (and our movements). Here we started to see- the intersections between Disposable Plastics, Disposable Lives, Disposable Incomes | Consumption and Waste Management | Caste and Class | Dignity and Labour | Access to Public Space | Self Representation | Narrative and Power – exposing a framework within which some lives are considered disposable and labour is not valued equally.

We partnered with Chintan, an organisation in Delhi who do research, advocacy and outreach work with the informal sector workers in the city, helping mobilize and offering support and protection to those unrecognized by the system. Chintan have been working on the ground for over a decade with a community of Dalit and Muslim women who informally work in waste segregation.

The women from Vivekananda camp live close together, with their families, in a settlement made by their hands out of things they've collected and recycled. The camp sits nestled in the centre of Lutyens Delhi, surrounded by embassies and consulates. Here, under the dense shade of low trees, there is a whole world unto itself where old, discarded and forgotten things are given new life. The most careful consideration is given to the value of materials, their potential to be turned into something new (and useful) and this in turn becoming a livelihood and form of sustenance. The women walk kilometers every day, setting out before its light, walking for hours and then carrying back full, heavy bags. They do this every day that they can so that their children don't have to, and can go to school instead. Meet some of the women of Vivekananda camp:

"The camp is my only home now."

Dulali Khatoon moved to Delhi from her village in West Bengal, in search of work with her two children, without her husband.

She is tall, has a strong loud voice and is constantly making those around her burst into laughter.

She is essential.

Meenu Begum moved to the city over 20 years ago from her village Hathkola in West Bengal. Meenu, along with her family were one of the first few who set up the camp in Chanakyapuri. In the time since she's seen it grow and thrive, she told us.

While we were painting together (despite her age) Meenu was always the first to break into dance and climb ladders, while the younger women hesitated.

She wants for her labour to be recognised with respect.

She is essential.

Jharna is a firebrand. She is one of the community leaders at Vivekananda Camp and tells us that she is completely unafraid to speak her mind.

Often, when there are cases to be registered with the police, complaints or demands to me made with the local authorities – Jharna sees that things are followed through. She motivates the women from the camp to claim what is rightfully theirs.

"If I accept defeat then I remain a victim – so I refuse to."

She is essential.

On the day of our workshop we found a quiet corner at the camp and enclosed it with pieces of clear plastic sheet and cloth, making a safe space for ourselves. We covered the ground with a thick carpet of white rajnigandha flowers and made a throne of a chair adorned with leaves and things we found. The gentle sound of clinking glass bottles danced softly around us as they were being segregated in someone's home close by. We sat together, in a circle and began to speak about a part of our body that we considered most essential. The feet that we stand on, the ears that allow us to listen to what people have to say, to the sound of our children's laughter. Our hearts, that guide our thoughts that guide us. Our hands that do work and bring food to the table. Our kidneys that keep our whole system clean and throw out all that is no longer needed. Our bodies, like our cities, would collapse if one of these organs stopped working.

After this we began to speak about all the things unwanted that exist in our current social ecosystems – caste discrimination, the oppression of women, child marriage, corrupt governments, bickering husbands, this waste we crushed into pieces of paper and threw out.

In turn (in the centre of our circle) each woman sat on our self made throne, washed her feet and garlanded herself as she spoke about why she is essential – to herself, to her family, to this city and to our world. As she finished we chanted around her together "you are essential". By the time we had gone around the whole circle, every woman was garlanded, covered in white jasmine flowers, and she had named and affirmed just how essential she is.

As we stepped out onto the streets to begin making our mural together, the women picked up paintbrushes for the first time in their lives. They were occupying these streets in Delhi as spaces of pleasure and joy for the first time. Spaces that had always been associated as those of labour were transformed into ones of leisure at the site of the mural. We held our brushes and climbed ladders, at first hesitatingly and then with bold abandon. Played music loud. Laughed. Shared stories of home. Stepped into each other's worlds. And painted one we'd like to live in together.

A few days before we arrived in Delhi, news broke out across the country of a brutal gang rape of a young Dalit girl in Hathras, UP. This news shook many of us to our core. We watched in horror as her family, her home and her story became battlefield for opposing political agendas and media houses. How would she be remembered?

When we hear stories about those who have been pushed to the margins, they are most often stories of brutality and loss. Not enough is said, heard and shared about their lives outside of this. Stories of celebration, joy and life. This is what we chose at the Fearless Feast as we finished painting. This was held at the site of the completed mural. Tables, chairs, linen and flowers were laid out. The women arrived, dressed in their finest, along with their children and we sat together to share a meal. Residents from the neighbourhood and those who lived in the building we'd painted joined us. It was the first time we were having a gathering like this since the world had gone quiet. With the music and setting winter sun it felt like some light returning. A group of dalit and Muslim women dancing in celebration, the beauty we'd created together, our laughter on the street – were acts of our resilience.

Two women face each other, one looking at the city rising between them (from their open palms) and one looking towards us. Her gaze strong and soft. They belong to a community of women who collect, sort and recycle the waste we create. Old books, plastic water bottles, torn letters, peels of fruit (nothing is ever wasted- everything has the potential to turn to something).

The image of the women in the mural occupies one of Delhi's most visible main roads. It affirms: Our lives matter, My life matters

Read the full article here: https://fearlesscollective.org/project/essential-delhi/

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Perspectives

Beauty & Fashion: Confronting Commodification, Advancing Alternative

By Alessandra Monaco

The motivation for writing this series

About seventeen years ago I entered the world of fashion, more by chance than with any serious intent. In fact, I had been a student of the humanities with a keen interest in philosophy rather than any passion for style in attire or accoutrement. It was a whole new world to discover and make sense of as I stepped into a place made of super expensive garments and accessories of unimaginable shapes, made from refined fabrics and precious skins. It was as if I had jumped into a rabbit hole – a parallel, unintelligible universe requiring new lenses to decode it. The happenings there were remarkably distant from my ordinary life, making it difficult for me to fathom people's fascination and desire to possess all that expensive stuff. But, soon, in the company of the unconventional folks inhabiting that wonderland, I began exploring the eccentric needs of consumers and their bizarre ways of dressing. Slowly, I started getting an insight into, and, dare I say, appreciating, not only its peculiar hedonistic aesthetic, but also the artistic value, the fine craftsmanship and the devotion of all those hands and minds working meticulously on a piece of cloth or leather.

While I lived through many adventures in the fashion industry, the feeling of something being amiss accompanied me through all those exciting times. The new world that I had entered pushed the urgency to appear "beautiful" as a requisite for affirming individuality, a social constraint forcing people to put all their efforts on the form, and depriving them of the time and calm to reflect on the substance. The essence of being human and even the life's purpose, were put aside. It didn't matter what individuals thought of or felt, the important thing for being appreciated was to always conform to the latest fashion trend. Not surprisingly, every now and then, the hookah smoking Caterpillar would accost me, and ask me, "whoooo are you?", forcing me to question myself.

"To have or to be?"

My mind wandered towards "To have or to be?" in which Eric Fromm explored how humans could live by focusing on "being", taking care of their inner development, relationships, creativity, or "having", concerning themselves with the accumulation of material possessions, social status, power. He explained how a consumerist society drives individuals towards the pursuit of pleasure through forms of voracious accumulation and consumption of things, leading to a feeling of inadequacy, alienation and dissatisfaction in the constant quest for something that is never enough. The antidote, Fromm suggested, is self-awareness and authenticity. But how does one resist consumer culture and also aspire to greater self-awareness when the prevailing social winds are headed frantically in another direction? How does one aspire to be authentic when the pressure to conform to ever changing trends is so crushing and paralyzing?

Wisdom from the east also gave credence to my fledgling skepticism. The Buddha preached "non-attachment", articulating that happiness does not lie in the possession of impermanent material goods but in the gratitude for what we have now. He advocated for detachment, a way to be free from suffering and reaching a sense of inner peace not dependent on external circumstances. I also recalled the Hindu concept of sannyasa (i.e. renunciation), where selflessness is a path to spiritual growth and

liberation. That notion also has an echo in Saint Frances of Assisi's decision to give up all his possessions in his pursuit of divine truth.

For millennia, people have strived and, also struggled, to find a way to cultivate and grow their inner being, and also aim for something "higher" in life. But, the contemporary societal aspirations undermine that noble intent by putting value on exterior appearance as the necessary condition for social appreciation. How did we get to this point? I was faced with numerous questions while working in the fashion industry, but life didn't afford me enough time to find their answers then. So, I set them all aside, but, not surprisingly, those questions were still waiting for me when I emerged from the industry. Some time has passed since then, and after introducing the necessary changes in my personal and professional life I've begun delving into my doubts about the vision of the fashion industry and its hold on people's imagination. The world of fashion is still in my radar and dear to my heart, but now I have the chance to take my time and try to answer some of those open questions. The purpose of this series, therefore, is to focus on beauty, and investigate a possible path that leads from "the urgency to APPEAR beautiful" to the alternative aspiration, the "need to BE beautiful". The first part will investigate the meaning and the role of "beauty" through history; identify the moment/s when it has been corrupted, and, importantly, the role the fashion industry has played in making that happen.

Beauty and nature

Throughout the human evolution, certain physical traits were seen as "beautiful" because they could signal good genes and health. Associated with better chances of survival and reproduction, these traits were therefore favored within society. This was a shared characteristic in nature: the elaborate plumage of male peacocks signals their "superior" genetic quality to potential mates, and mate selection is key to the perpetuation of a species. Mate selection could involve varied strategies: some individuals could prioritize physical attraction and aesthetic, while others focused on factors like resources, social status, or personality traits. In all these cases, these characteristics are largely communicated through physical appearance, emphasizing some specific aspects of the body or embellishing and adorning it. In this sense, beauty is constituted by a complex interplay of genetics, biology, culture, and individual preferences that contribute to defining attractiveness, and it could be considered a tool for procreation and the survival and continuity of the species, whether it is animals or humans. Needless to say, beauty standards have evolved over time, influenced by cultural, social, and environmental factors. Different cultures have had varying ideals of beauty, often reflecting the values and priorities of their societies, though what is considered attractive today may differ significantly from its conception in the past.

The historical understanding of beauty

Starting from the classical world to the Romantic period, "beauty", to a large extent, has always been considered a combination of the beautiful and the good, in accordance with the values of different ages. In the classical world, "beauty" signified the concepts of harmony, symmetry, proportion, virtue, all underlined by a sense of limits. The concept of beauty as we understand it today, with exclusive reference to specific physical characteristics, did not really exist. Instead, the ancient Greeks used the term καλὸς κἀγαθός ("kalos kagathos", i.e. beautiful and good), which went beyond physical appearance and emphasized the importance of harmony between outward appearance and inner qualities such as virtue, nobility of character, intelligence, and morality.

The beauty regimen of the nobility was a distant dream for those living the reality of oppression in the Middle Ages.

Clothing by that time didn't have a specific aesthetic value; rather it was functional, and allowed to easily identify the sex and function of a member of the community. Culturally, the naked body was not expected to be hidden, rather it was to be appreciated. Shapes and colors were usually linked to social and ritual habits. The term "fashion" didn't exist in the Greek vocabulary, but one can observe a change in customs and collective taste appearing to correspond to the transformation of the political and economic characteristics of the era.

In subsequent historical eras we continue to see a link between external beauty, and, both, the values that represent the spirit of the time as well as the functional role of social classification. During the Middle-Ages clothing, and consequently ideals of beauty, were fundamental to identifying the social status and the economic stature of people. A "pale" appearance, for instance, was supposed to stress modesty and grace in a patrician woman. While the classical concept of being "beautiful" i.e. the body, and being "good", i.e. the soul, could also be discerned in the medieval society, it existed essentially at a symbolic level. In practice, it sowed the seeds of discrimination and marginalization of the poorest classes who could not, in fact, afford the required beauty routine to aspire to be "beautiful".

A strong bond between natural perfection and moral values was also present in the Renaissance period, but with a strong Christian characterization. After having gone through a period of austerity in the medieval times, the

Renaissance aesthetics imagined a "woman-angel" defined by ethereal beauty, grace, and purity, emphasizing once again the harmonious balance between physical beauty and spiritual values, reflecting the humanist ideals of the era. The Baroque period was characterized by excess, artifice and wonder. Art and architecture of that time are rich in sinuous lines that point towards a space beyond, towards infinity. Composure and grace give way to emotionality and drama, introducing subjectivity in judgment. Similarly, dresses not only become a means to indicate social status, they also become an expression of excessive luxury. Continuing to build on emotional expression, the Romantic period reflected the tender sensibilities of that time. Contrasting the sublime with the beautiful in art and other creative expressions, the human soul is animated by a mixture of pleasure and terror. Embraced by the grandeur of nature, an observer finds herself/himself entering a supra-natural dimension with an intrinsic ethical value. Female beauty is based on two main models: the romantic muse with her diaphanous beauty and the rich bourgeois, portraying masculinity and health. But, then, change came knocking on the door.

Marxist critique of Fashion

Feeding on an artificially created novelty, where "all that is, the production and consumption model of Capitalism continually invents new needs and desires, and fashion perfectly embodies that artifice. Marx dismissed it as "the murderous, meaningless caprices of fashion", highlighting pathetic scenarios that, unfortunately, still hold true in the fashion industry: factory systems based on exploitation, the frantic pace of production, continual and deliberate lowering of quality and durability, quick disposal of garments, contraposition between "Lumpen proletariat" (i.e. the proletariat dressed in rags) and the elite, and the natural need for clothing as a contrast to fashion as an ugly symbol of class stratification. Fashion, however, played a positive, quasi-revolutionary role in India's journey towards independence. Gandhi started a peaceful but resolute movement to boycott the use of imported European textile products and materials that forced poverty on to the people, uprooting the village based textile production and trade. Conscious of the destructive role played by the modern textile industry, he started the Swadeshi Movement and decided to go back to the use of the traditional loom to weave hand spun khadi, adopting the Indian dhoti as his attire. That piece of cloth, produced with locally self-grown cotton, became first a symbol of self-sufficiency and economic independence, and then a flag for freedom for all Indians. "There is no beauty in the finest cloth if it makes hunger and unhappiness", stated the Mahatma. Paradoxically, and unfortunately, today dhoti is often considered a symbol of corruption following the appropriation of khadi by the Indian political class, exploiting the strength of the symbol but moving exactly in the opposite direction.

Read the full article here: https://radicalecologicaldemocracy.org/beauty-fashion-confronting-commodification-advancing-alternatives-part-1/

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MAIN ISS DHARTI KI CHAYA HOON

By Fearless Collective

Nearly three centuries ago, in a small village in Rajasthan called Khejarli, Amrita Devi Bishnoi wrapped her arms around the trunk of a Khejri tree to protect it in her embrace.

Sir sante rok rahe, toh bhi sasto jaan
If a single tree can be saved at the cost of a human head, it is worth it.

And with that, along with 368 others, she offered her life for the Khejri. This tender act forged roots for tree-hugging movements around the world: Chipko, to embrace. Encircling their trunks, pressing our hearts to theirs, our life for theirs. Returning to Rajasthan, we sit in the shade of a 400-year old Khejri in the Thar Desert, to speak with the people who continue to protect this land by encircling it to mark it as sacred.

Village folk in the Thar draw rings around the periphery of forests in the desert, Orans, with kesar (saffron) and doodh (milk) to mark them as sacred. This ties them to the Oran in unspoken promise: no one hacks a single branch from the native trees, or tills a square inch of Oran land. The Orans reciprocate. They replenish by providing abundant water, pasture, sustenance and shelter. These Orans are a spring of abundance in the desert, passed down generations as parampara, legacy.

Despite being the heart of the desert, Jaisalmer is home to more than 100 Orans which belong to the commons, and have been protected by the commons for nearly 700 years. As desert communities become increasingly vulnerable to the climate crisis, we spoke to women from Samwata village on the edge of Degrai Oran, one of the largest in the region, to understand how the land shelters them from luu, heat waves, and akal, famine.

They form part of Oran Bachao, a group of people across caste, creed and religion, who have come together to protect the Orans. Orans are still seen through the eyes of the colonizer: classified in India's official revenue records as 'wastelands'. And naming them as such makes it easier to dispossess locals for the creation of solar and wind farms, destroying delicate ecosystems that make the land naturally resilient to the changing climate. Degrai was one such case. There are many more.

Along with the I Love Foundation, Jaisalmer Fort Palace Museum, and the women of Samwata village, we created a beautiful monument to transform the narrative of the Thar, and directly amplify the communities' demands for their homes and their land to be seen as abundant, and sacred.

The age of a khejri is determined by the depth of the hollow in her trunk, the lives she has lived and all that she has seen. Today, she sees the land under her roots be razed to build solar plants. 50,000 cattle, 5,000 camels, and 6,000 people across 12 villages and 36 communities risk losing access to what has sustained them for seven centuries. Under her shelter, we sit and learn the significance of this land from these women. Each woman circles the Khejri, drawing a ring with a matka of milk, in a parikrama.

We hear stories of Degrai Mata, the goddess in whose name the Oran is protected. Chunnaris are offered to her as gifts, to thank her for protecting them. The ladies of Samwata all wore colorful ghunghats, veils that cover their face as a mark of ownership. Through the course of our workshop, they slowly opened up, sharing stories and songs of the land with us. They told

us how the Oran has changed in their lifetime, how the arrival of 'companies' has meant they cannot rest there or walk freely anymore. We asked how they would like to be seen in the mural. Slowly, they assembled, backs rested against the khejri, face up to the sun, ghunghat lifted.

We gathered these stories and dreams together in the form a mural painted on the 800-year-old walls of the Sonar Killa, the Golden Fort of Jaisalmer which once sat at an important crossroads on the Silk Road. Every morning, its towering sandstone walls rise from the distant dunes, and set into them as night falls. Its largest building, the granary named Annapurna Bhandar after the Goddess of Abundance, becomes our mural's home.

We shoot colour through the pulsing veins of our mural by crushing elements found in the desert: cinnabar becomes red, indigo blue, peori and sindoor for red and orange, all bound together by our gum Arabic. Soil from the fields we sat in became the brown of the land. When they joined us to paint, the ladies of Samwata showed us how to create mandana, as taught to them by their mothers, and their grandmothers before them. Here everyone has access to beauty – palaces may be adorned with mirrors and gold but village homes painted with earth, lime, white clay and dung are no less beautiful. Mandana paintings not only cool down houses in the pulsing heat of the desert but are also ritual practice to protect home and hearth. Following their lead, we used the backs of our palms to apply a base coat of gobar, cow dung on to the wall.

Read the full article here: https://fearlesscollective.org/project/main-iss-dharti-ki-chaya-hoon/

Case Studies

5 South Asian Classical Dancers Who Resist Patriarchal Norms Through Their Dance Performances

By Faga Jaypal Rambhai

Dance is not only an art form; it is a tool for storytelling, resistance, and change. Dance has its own political economy.

Throughout the history of South Asia, classical dance has always been connected with tradition and culture. But it remains accessible to a few elites. In contemporary times, in many parts of South Asia, dance is used by performers as a means of social change. Dancers, through their dance, challenge the norms and advocate for a radical change.

Classical forms of dances like the Bharatanatyam, Kathak, Odissi, and Kathakali have always been connected with complex traditions, which often reinforce inequalities. Although contemporary dancers use these dance forms as a critique of social inequalities. With the creation of new performances and with the theme of female agency, sexual freedom, and gender fluidity, they advocated for radical change and more inclusive environments toward women and gender and sexual minorities. Through their storytelling, they resist societal norms—by using the narratives of mythological women, questioning the hegemony of male-centric narratives in dance, or advocating for LGBTQ+ rights. Their performances posit two types of discourses, one as artistic expression and another as a radical intervention in the public discourses on gender justice and inclusivity.

This article discusses the legacy and work of 5 classical dancers across South Asia who use their performance as an act of resistance against patriarchal norms and empowerment for the marginalised.

1. **Dr. Mallika Sarabhai**
   Mallika Sarabhai is a Kuchipudi and Bharatanatyam dancer, actress, and social activist. She started her journey as a dancer at a young age; her mother, Mrinalini Sarabhai, was also a famous Bharatanatyam dancer, and Mrinalini was an inspiration for her, who later started to manage Darpan Arts Academy of performance arts. The incident at the Babri Masjid in 1992 was a major factor in Sarabhai's dedication to social and political activism. In response, she started a Centre for Non-Violence at DAAA, based on Gandhian ideals to deal with the issues of violence against minorities and promote non-violent principles through their performances.

   Throughout her career, Sarabhai's major concern was how to show societal issues through her performances, but she came up with various works that address issues; her works, like "Shakti: The Power of Women," delve into women's empowerment, while "Sita's Daughters" examines the plight of women in contemporary South Asian Society. These productions have been performed, both nationally and internationally, showing her dedication to using art as a tool for change.
   Her activism was not limited to the stage only, but it goes beyond it. She started her journey into politics to further her advocacy. In 2009, she contested the Gandhinagar Lok Sabha seat as an independent candidate, resisting the Bharatiya Janata Party's Prime Ministerial candidate, L.K. Advani, and his

narrow communal politics. Although she lost, her attempts to engage with politics showed her willingness to advocate and practice secular politics.

2. **Sheema Kermani**
   Sheema Kermani is a contemporary Pakistani classical dancer, actor, teacher, and women's rights activist, known for her significant contributions to both fields of the arts and social movements. She founded an organisation called Tehrik-e-Niswan, where she advocated for the rights of women and the marginalised using dance as a tool.

   Her work goes beyond dance and performance studies; she is also a writer and has written several articles on culture and feminism. Her resistance through dancing during the era of Zia-ul-Haq, when activities like dancing were considered un-Islamic, shows her courage and commitment to personal freedom. Her acts, like wearing a saree in a highly patriarchal-conservative society during the Zia regime, were both personal and political.

   Over the years, Kermani has received numerous national and international awards in recognition of her work. She also attacked Israeli colonialism and supported Palestinian freedom. Her advocacy for better relations with India is also well known. She was also one of the founding members of Aurat March in Pakistan, which advocates intersectional feminism through marches and performances in various cities across Pakistan. Through her work, Sheema Kermani continues to inspire a new generation of activists and artists dedicated to social justice.

3. **Rani Khanum**
   Rani Khanam is a Kathak dancer known for her profound connection between dance and Sufism. She was also a disciple of the famous Kathak guru Pandit Birju Maharaj. From his guidance and her Sufi learnings came a unique style that assimilated traditional Kathak with Sufi mysticism. As one of the few Muslim women in India performing classical dance forms, she has challenged the patriarchal norms and created a space where dance has become a tool for social change, religious harmony, and spirituality.

   Her performances with Sufi mysticism and traditional Kathak also incorporate themes addressing issues faced by women and religious minorities. Her work goes beyond being an artist; she is a teacher and social activist. She started an academy called AAMAD in Delhi, where she guides aspiring dancers, including visually impaired and marginalised students. She believes dance is a tool for empowerment and advocacy of radical change in society.

4. **Mansiya VP**
   Mansiya V.P. is a Bharatanatyam dancer and an activist who challenged religious and cultural barriers in the field of classical dance in India. Born and raised in a Muslim family in Kerala, she often faced rejection and discrimination for practicing Bharatanatyam, a dance form traditionally linked to Hindu temples. Her plight shows the fight for artistic freedom in a society where religion becomes barriers and dictates opportunities.

   Facing discrimination by various temple authorities, Mansiya turned her dance into a form of protest. She is a vocal critic of rigid

boundaries forced by religious and cultural traditions, advocating for a more inclusive space in classical dance. Her activism shows the plight of artists who do not conform to societal hierarchies. Her activism goes beyond dance. She questions the connection of art and religion, challenging institutions that exclude individuals based on differences. By continuing to perform, she reclaims the space of classical dance as a universal expression beyond religious barriers.

5. **Arthy Ahmed**
   Arthy Ahmed is a prominent Bharatanatyam dancer and activist from Bangladesh.

   She completed both her BA and MA in Bharatanatyam from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, India, and then a Diploma in Teacher's Training in Dance Education (Major Dance Psychology) from Madras University, Chennai, India. She uses her performances of Bharatanatyam to challenge societal norms and religious fundamentalism. Arthy's work is not just about preserving the culture, but it also redefines the art as activism against conservative norms. She uses Bharatanatyam to deal with issues like sexism, misogyny, and extinction of cultural heritage, creating a space for dialogue and empowerment.

   By assimilating tradition and modernity, Arthy effectively shows how art can be a tool for social change, constructing a more inclusive society and questioning patriarchal norms. As an instructor at Dhaka Flow, she guides young dancers and encourages them to preserve their cultural heritage. Her work demonstrates the importance of cultural preservation while demanding progressive values, making her an important figure among activists and artists in Bangladesh.

   Source:
   https://feminisminindia.com/2025/02/04/5-south-asian-classical-dancers-who-resist-patriarchal-norms-through-their-dance-performances/

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