



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

A Resonance of Himmat Shah's Works in Contemporary Indian Art

Arjun Kumar Singh

Research Scholar

Lovely Professional University, Punjab

Abstract

The first half of 20th century in the modern Indian art scene is crucial and significant. The artists who were following the Bengal School lacked the stamina and energy required for contemporary art scenario. Himmat Shah was one such talented young artist who participated in the Group 1890 subtly and skillfully infused different classical and folk ideals with distinctive forms. The sensible diffusion of the 'Great' and the 'Little' in Himmat Shah's works ultimately opened up to an aesthetically novel personal individual approach. Shah handled the sculptural vocabulary with geometrical abstraction and like his modernist European contemporaries he had infused his works in a monumental scale.

Keywords: modernist; deconstruction; geometrical abstraction; personal tradition

The 18th and 19th century witnessed the emergence of Indian art under the domain of the British academic art which was in a large way a counter reaction, paving way for the Bengal School of Art. The aim and aspiration of the Bengal School of Art movement was to counter the prevalent western trends and ideologies as also to glorify the rich tradition and heritage of Indian art. The movement was initiated by E B Havel and Abanindranath Tagore and its other important profounder were Swami Vivekananda, Sister Nivediata, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Percy Brown.



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

Rabindranath Tagore, the pioneer of modern Indian art witnessed the making of Neo-Indian (Bengal) Art from very close vicinity. He almost unequivocally sponsored and later criticized this erroneous quest of Havell and Abanindranath, an art practice that was removed from people's lives and experiences. In order to revive lost identity, Abanindranath following Havell's example, chose to lend primacy to aristocratic life passed off as tradition, within which there were little room for people and their experiences. Art historian Mamta Chaturvedi (2010) sites:

This initial spurt was followed by the pioneering work of Rabindranath Tagore who incorporated experimentation in such a way as to elevate the Indian nationalist art movement to a world vision level altogether. Tagore, a born innovator and an iconoclast, believed that an artist should not only be aware of tradition and try to assimilate its nuances in his unconscious self but also practice his art freely to unearth new forms and meanings. Tagore differed again from the mundane mass of art practitioners of his day in that he was very much against the nomenclature and labeling system which was prevalent at his time. Tagore's inspiration led to newer horizons being touched and in 1940's the Calcutta Group and the Progressive Artists of Bombay Group deconstructed the style of the Bengal School and created an original style by assimilating ideals of the contemporary art movements of West with that of the peripheral Indian folk art.¹

It was rather a difficult task to reject the shadows of stalwarts of Bengal School like Abanindranath Tagore, Gaganendranath Tagore, Nandlal Bose and Asit K Haldar replacing an individual style using one's own specific tradition and belief. Some noteworthy organizations of that period are: Young Turks (1937), Calcutta Group (1940), Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay (1948), Delhi Shipli Chakra (1949), Bombay Group (1957) and 'Group 1890' in 1962. The avant-grade art movement of these groups helped other Indian artists to dream in their own way and establish their own groups across the country.



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

In independent India a center of art and culture, Lalit Kala Akademi was established on 5th of August 1954 by the Govt of India in New Delhi. This central government body though gave a breathing space to the artists across the country, somehow this did not succeed to establish a new movement in the field of art and culture. By 1950s many artists migrated from India to settle down abroad. Artists like F N Souza, Raza, Gaitonde, Natwar Bhavsar and Krishna Reddy were the prominent ones. The prominent ones who returned to India were Ram Kumar, Satish Gujral, Pradosh Das Gupta, Paritosh Sen, K K Hebbar, Nirode Majumdar and Akbar Padamsee.

Regionalism and regional identity has become the key factor of post-independent Indian art. In this scenario, the Group 1890 was established by J Swaminathan incorporated the uniqueness and unfathomable zeal in post independence Indian art. Members like Jeram Patel, Raghav Kaneria, Himmat Shah, Rajesh Mehra, Ambadas, Gulam Mohammad Sheikh, Jyoti Bhatt and others exhibited their mettle in their art works. Art critic Bordewekar, Sandhya(2011) writes:

The Group had no regional affiliations, although it became associated with Baroda, probably because a few of its members later made it their home. Most significantly, it didn't advocate any set principles related to art-making. This differentiated the Group from many other art movements that focused on a particular style or ideology. The manifesto voiced the Group's unequivocal rejection of the prevalent art practices of Indian artists. It also revealed the Group's approach to the creative process. The manifesto declared, "To us, the creative act is an experience in itself, appropriated by us and therefore bearing no relation to the work of art, which creates its own field of experience, as the experience of copulation is not the same as that of the offspring." In their view, therefore, a work of art stood alone, isolated from any explanatory props that the artist wanted to offer. This idea was the keynote of the manifesto; the rest of their arguments served to bolster this primary theme.²



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

Group 1890 had its first exhibition at Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi in 1963 which unfortunately turned into the last exhibition of the group. But the exhibition had a promissory note laying in it. It projected some talented young artists who after that got popularity and have been dominating the Indian art tradition since then. Himmat Shah was one of the talented young artists of that group who disproportionately infused different classical and folk medium with several forms. The sensible diffusion of the Great and the Little traditions in Himmat Shah's work ultimately opens the way for an aesthetically novel, personal tradition of the artist himself.

Here my objective to introduce Shah's artistry to expose the formulistic art practice in Indian contemporary art as well as the significant and crucial time period of 1960's to 1980's. His body of work introduces the methodologies of contemporary trends of modernity, materiality, individuality, existential ideas and the questions of nationalism. Through the works of Himmat Shah my initiative is to introduce the dominance of *West* and the dilemma of the *East*.

Himmat Shah comes from a Jain family that had moved from Kathiawar to Ahmadabad. His grandfather was a Nagar Seth in the village of Lothal, the site of the major archeological excavation. In fact the site virtually overlapped with their lands. The family traded in grain and cotton; they also had land, cattle, and horses. By the time Himmat grew up the family prosperity had declined, his father who practiced Ayurvedic medicine along with his dwindled trade could not hold down Himmat's adolescent rebellion against domestic feuds. Himmat was in and out of school – once he ran away from home and hang out in an *ashram* in Girnar – but he had a spell of enlightened education in Ahmadabad, where his drawing and scribbling got noticed. He moved to Bombay to do a diploma in art teaching at J. J. School of Art and finally made his way to the fine arts Faculty of Baroda where he spent six years (1955 – 61). In Baroda, his ideas and working style made him a star among the rest of his contemporaries. He went to live in Delhi then to Paris in



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

1966 on a scholarship and returned in October 1967 via London. In London Himmat visited museums and galleries and saw a huge amount of works by the European masters and conformed his admiration for Picasso, Miro, Henry Moore, Brancusi and Giacometti in his output.

On his return to India he took two years to work on a major relief-mural in brick and cement in a Modernist building of his architect friend, Hasmukh Patel: the Saint Xavier's school in Ahmadabad. For one of the three walls (18' x 20') he prepared about 40 moulds to cast a cement relief. Devising his own methods of work, he also positioned himself in the contemporary sculpture field on the cusp of late modernist formalism. Art critic Gayatri Sinha (2007) writes:

For over four decades now, Himmat has demonstrated his leading preoccupations, primarily in drawing and sculpture. If one stands back to take a telescopic view of his sculpture, it will probably fall in the area of enigma domestically and sheer whim. Himmat turns conventional scale into a mockery and allows for sheer play to dominant his vision, wherein architectural structures are dwarfed and heads enlarged to an enigmatic monumentality. Shah's work doesn't appear to judge the human condition. Instead, it appears to present its existential state, through terms that defy simple definition.³

By studying Shah, it is understood that he lived and worked in a most serious and crucial moments of social and political life of India. The political ambitions of the then ruling party jeopardized the freedom of speech which created havoc in the social circle. The quake in the so called socialist economy did not support people getting jobs and did not help them find their own means of living. The political turmoil was in its high - like emergency, death of Indira Gandhi and the day-light killings of Sikhs in Delhi and so on. But it is obvious that this *turmoil* did not affect many of our artists who were working in Delhi. The artists never come up with their voice against the atrocities of the day. Shah being one of them, seems that he never had any political and social concerns to express. Robina Karode (1998) expands Shah's mindset and says:



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

He continues to live in the same state of uncertainty that has marked his life's journey up until now but there is a method to his seeming 'madness' he deliberately goes into complete isolation confined within his studio for days without the acquaintance of a mind other than his own. Floating in timelessness, his little fragile world can easily be disrupted by an outsider's intrusion. Living within this subjective mood, he did drive to mould his vision into his work. ⁴

Himmat Shah's journey as an artist, his path of creation led the existential and outsider mindset of practicing art in India. The reason behind that after the independence, India could not enable to develop its own socio-political system. It also failed to develop a contemporary cultural structure. Because of this we could see a development which was governed by the subconscious mind; it was the situation of enigma. In Shah's words:

I believe that the artist is an enigma, a person whose work is only successful if it is the product of total "samadhi", complete concentration. The artist is a Brahma unto himself. And like Brahma, his purpose is to search for new and yet newer forms of creation.⁵

The art of Himmat Shah does not proceed from any given notion of space and time. Here is a kind of excavation of an archaeologist, here is a feeling of celestial movement, here is a grappling against inhuman constraints. A strive for life and human dignity. A yearning for freedom, here is the courage of a diver and his findings - a constant creative search.⁶ Art critic Geeta Kapoor writes:

As much as Himmat works with the metaphorical, he introduces, through the process of his work, fragments of civilization, the trace of the human hand, cycles of possession and dispossession of objects meant for use and pleasure. It is therefore worth transiting from the metaphorical to metonymy and the aesthetic of the displaced part.⁷

Himmat Shah was born in Lothal in 1933. Lothal is a village where we could see the deep connection to Indus Valley Civilization. He spent his childhood there and grown up listening to the stories and myths of an ancient city underneath. "Though I was belonged to a rich family in the village, I spent most of my time with local craftsmen. Sometimes I used to play with clay and



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

sometimes work with carpenters. As such, I was not interested in education but enjoyed moving around and seeing the landscape related to Indus Valley sites with village children. In my village, we had several ponds but one of them had a well. In the summer when the pond got dried, we used to bathe in the well. Spending maximum time with the children I had experienced and seen unusual things which now inspires me now and again when at work.” Gayatri Sinha (2007) writes:

In his contraction of head, ancient presences are suggested, like atavistic shadows. More accurately, Himmat arrives at what Nilima Sheikh describes as “the projective voluptuousness of the image.” Here, as the artist perceives it, the head, the phallus and the pillar all the same; the sculpture gains its vitality not in its definition, but in the process of arriving at a form. These works appear to re-echo the passage of civilizations, recalling early migrations between Africa and India to ancient sea ports like Lothal perhaps.⁸

The world of modern art learns from every aspect of life. It relates its profound connection to primitive art; it also narrates its roots with scientific inventions of 20th century. Shah followed that nuances in his work like the western masters. He identifies himself with the tribal community of Gujarat by adding his childhood experiences with them. The tribal elements reflected in most of his works as symbols and forms. One of the contemporary Indian masters Krishn Khanna (2007) writes on Shah in his exhibition catalogue:

Vision is a small word used indiscriminately now days. At its lowest it is some form of egocentricism. At its broadest it is the percolation of the whole culture through the artist who acts as a receptacle. There is a powerful affinity between the tribal icons which have held communities together in our country for centuries. You grow up amongst them and these powerful images have persisted in your memory and now appear in the guise of your sculpture. They are not fragile and emit an aura to keep evil at bay. This is not idle art take because even in an age of reason there is a deep seated notion that there are forces beyond our comprehension and control which need to be placated. These images are therefore not to be seen as objects as a grace of drawing room but as votive offerings occupying sacred space.⁹

Over the time, Himmat’s work has grown to include diverse aspects of materiality. He draws on a complex body of personal experience and demonstrates an exceptional ability to see possibilities



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

in unusual forms, and is immensely ironic in his own representations of the world that he sees. He has received rave reviews for his rendering of the inputs he gathers from the complex and multi-layered visual field that human beings are surrounded by. Himmat's leading experiments are not restricted to scale; they also permeate his understanding of historical time and space. If Himmat engages the remnants of the past with the palpable present, he also encourages and coaxes out other narratives from the detritus of the earth surface. His works structured the rare courage to fight with commodity world and in attendance presents the reverberation of human existence. He narrates ultimately the recall of '*the lost world*'.

The time period of Shah as an artist is stretched since 1953 to till date. It is been long but he is an active practitioner of modernism in art. Though his journey started from a village he had exposed himself to the global scenario as an artist. This transformation consolidates the different ideas of his journey - fragments of the civilization, the trace of the human hand, cycles of possession and dispossession of objects meant for use and pleasure. It is therefore worth translating from the metaphorical to metonymy and the aesthetic of the displaced part. In his work we can also assess the metaphor of transformation of village into urban and then metro. Himmat has ability to transform the low material into high aesthetics work of art.

Notes

1. Chaturvedi Mamta. 'Samkaleen Bhartiya kala'. Jaipur: Rajasthan Hindi Granth Akademy, 2010.
Pg. 76-81. Print
2. Bordewekar, Sandhya. "Twelve Men and a Short-lived Idea." Art India.16. 3 (2011): 32.
Print
3. Sinha, Gayatri. 'An Unreasoned Act Of Being: Sculptures by Himmat Shah'.
New Delhi: Mapin Publication, 2007. Print.
4. Karode, Robina. "I Live with Himself": The studio life of Himmat Shah." The Art
News Magazine of India, 3. 4 (1998): 66. Print
5. Singh, Shanta Serbjeet 1988. Himmat Shah- A profile. Art heritage catalogue. Print



The Achievers Journal

Volume 2, Issue 4

ISSN (ONLINE): 2395-0897 / ISSN (PRINT): 2454-2296 October-December, 2016

6. Shukla, Prayag. "The Sculptor as Poet". Art Heritage Catalogue, 1089-90. Print
7. Kapoor, Geeta. "The Bohemian as Hermit." Art India 5. 2 (2000): 60, 62. Print
8. Sinha, Gayatri. 'An Unreasoned Act Of Being: Sculptures by Himmat Shah'

New Delhi: Mapin Publication, 2007. Print.

9. Khanna, Krishen (2007) 'An Unreasoned Act of Being' Edi. By Sinha, New Delhi: Gayatri.Mapin Publication, 2007. Print.