

RENARRATIVISATION OF TOURING IMAGES OF AN EXOTIC LAND

When India is celebrating its 62nd anniversary of Independence from the British colonial rule, an exhibition contextualising various selective art objects representing the late eighteenth century to early nineteenth century India, can be legitimately considered as a profound metaphor for changing contours of identity formation.

With the collapse of the universal systems of metanarratives, a need for re-narrativization of Indian images – oil paintings of Indian landscapes and Mughal architecture, Portraits of Rajput rulers, drawings of Hindu architecture, Indian Botanical drawings of a particular era (Georgian age) emerges out of the bottom and slowly floats on the surface to make an urgent impact of a message upon the universal audience.

With an accentuated reversal of the decolonization process and a globalizing neo-imperialism, multiple ways of looking at the images passed on to us by the past is becoming a necessity for the purpose of redefining the present which was already codified by the earlier historiography.

If we look at the biography of art objects originated in India and collected in a museum elsewhere, one can realize that they have been relocated and revalorized over time by various communities for various reasons and thereby given room for multiple interactions and interpretations in new contexts that Indians never foreseen ever before. I realized this fact personally when I visited for the first time in 1994 as a Research scholar to various British Museums in London, Oxford and Cambridge.

With the growing British economic and political power, during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the role of British in Indian subcontinent underwent a major change. When they started realizing that India is to be structured as a suitable object for Western knowledge the native people including the kings and rulers also started restructuring their ideas of India with a new perspective designed by the colonial rulers. Ancient Indian texts were studied and translated by both British Sanskrit scholars like Sir William Jones and Indian scholars like Ram Raz by keeping the new-found western readers in mind. The past of an ancient civilization was intellectually explored and intentionally restructured according to West as a practical measure intended to bring about more efficient control and prosperity over the colonized land.

Between 1770 and 1825 itself, about 30 portrait painters with expertise in oil and 28 miniaturists have traveled from England to India in search of patronage. Many Western artists John Zoffany, William Hodges, George Chinnery, Tilly Kettle, William and Thomas Daniells, Emily Eden and others traveled to India for a livelihood as artists. Because the average British artists in England were earning

lesser than Italian artists, the British artists have decided to travel to a new found land for patronage. If you take the example of George Chinnery he came to India in order to escape from heavy commitment of debt.

British artists, apart from many amateur artists like Maria Graham, many great artists like George Chinnery , Thomas and William brothers also traveled to India to find work among a new class of wealthy patrons. George Chinnery , who was a famous portrait painter in Ireland came to India during this period in order to escape from the clutches of debt and spent major portion of his life in India.

Touring British artists used new mediums that were unknown to India and they tried western technique of academic realism with its emphasis on linear perspectives. They painted the vast landscape , the numerous historical edifices and monuments and the many communities inhabited the land . Filtered through the ‘Orientals’ lens, these works imaged India as an exotic and mysterious land in painting depicting the Ghats of Benaras, dancing girls in princely courts , colourful caste costumes , portraits of local rulers and local flora and fauna.

The Mughal and Rajput miniatures were replaced with the paintings of the British painters. Indian ruling class like Shuja-ud-Daulah of Oudh wanted to surround themselves with Western art objects to please their European overlords.

All these British scholars and artists who worked on India as a subject matter of their study , consciously or unconsciously, worked on a special project of revealing a mysterious land and it’s ancient civilization that remained so long as a hidden area for the Western world. This we can realize in the words of the great artist Turner in one of his tributes to Daniel brothers as follows:: “The East was clearly reflected as the moon in the lake”, the artist had succeeded in increasing our enjoyment by bringing scenes to our fireside, too distant to visit and too singular to be imagined.”

The British painters in India created a new visual portrayal of the topography of the subcontinent and distributed their picturesque renderings of India back home. The most exquisite early views of Chennai, the first colonial town of India were drawn by Daneil brothers. Apart from their artistic merit they serve as very good historical documents. In one of the aquatints of Danielles titled ‘South East view of FortSt.George’ brings out vividly the major drawback of Chennai not having a natural harbour.

When a group of British Orientalists came in to existence with the encouragements of Warren Hastings ,the Governor General of India from 1772 to 1785 a pardigm-shift has taken place among the British collectors of Indian objects. The conscious acquisition took place for a clear understanding of the history, religion and culture of the colonized people and their land , was quite different from the unofficial lootings of Indian objects carried out by the British troops in the later part of the

eighteenth century. To cite an example, if we take the biography of 'Tipu's Tiger', a priceless possession of Victoria & Albert Museum, it was originally taken away to England by the British forces in 1799 and presented to the East India Company Board of Directors for no other reason but to exhibit their loyalty to the Company. At a later period only

The British officers started believing that the Orientalist's knowledge will contribute to the exercise of British sovereignty in Indian colony.

Sir William Jones, a noted Sanskrit scholar and the father of British Orientalism, has founded the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784. and the Indian art objects were collected and systematically organized as a museum. The first Indian museum came into existence in Calcutta in India. As a British counterpart of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland was established in 1823.

Contextualising the art works of Indian subjects, done by both English and Indian artists exhibited here in Doha is more important here for the purpose of history than for the purpose appreciation of beauty. When we are relocating the art works in a new place in a new context our immediate question is whether the artist intended the work to be used as an exhibition piece? The drawings of Hindu architectural sections found place in the books of Ram Raz were originally meant as illustrations for his translation of the Sanskrit text of "Manasaram" –the Shilpa shashtra that spoke about the grammar of Hindu architecture. The portrait paintings of Rajput rulers were used even for the purpose of effecting matrimonial alliances between Royal houses. The portrait paintings by the famous Daniel brothers in 1790 finding place in Saraswathi Mahal Library of Thanjavur in India, established by Maharaja Sarfoji were done for the purpose of identification and use in the Dhanvantri Mahal. Here my concern is the loss of function (whether practical or symbolic) sometimes may lead to aestheticization and there by promoting the object as a thing of beauty to appreciate and tinged with an aura of antiquity but lacking any history.

During my discussion with Julia Nicholson, the Joint Head of Collections of Pitt Rivers Museum, she explained how the changing value judgments of the art critics on Indian art works have influenced the classification and presentation of the same in British museums. She quoted the case of the stone sculpture of Visnu collected and donated by William Hedges. Because it was considered not as a piece of fine art, it stayed in Pitt Rivers ethnographic collection for long time before it was returned back to Ashmolean Museum. The emergence of the post-colonial critics like Dr. Partha Mitter and others, have played a major role in bringing in a major shift in reinterpreting Indian works of art. The physical display, the lighting, label, surrounding objects and even the building in which it was housed also played a major role in creating altogether a new frame of reference for further study. I

realised this very much when Dr.D.A.Swallow taken me to show the Indian art works collected in the stores of the Victoria&Albert Museum.

Indian art objects , including the worshipable images , finding place in British museums , presented themselves before the interpreting viewers , with more creative distance and waited for subsequent revaluations and reinterpretations . I realised this more when Namen Ahuja, a Research scholar of Oxford University took me around the Indian section in Ashmoleumn museum –in spite of the fact that we both are of Indian origin – the exhibited art objects were completely relieved from the religious ritualistic context .If the icon has found place in a Hindu temple the beauty of the sculpture would not have been prioritized.. For religious and ritualistic reasons , worshipable images would have been covered with flower garlands, sandalwood paste, and sacred garments etc. Pudhumaipithan ,one of the giants of Tamil fiction wrote an exclusive short story on the pathetic situation of looking at South Indian bronzes only as icons and not as a fine-art piece for aesthetic contemplation.

Same way if the works are brought to Doha as exotic art objects brought from abroad the domestic audience in Doha may be stimulated or excited with a sense of wonder.

The works exhibited are of mixed in nature because we find the works of British travelling artists like Chinnery, Daniell brothers, William Jones along with the portraits of Rajput rulers and the drawings ofHindu architecture done by native draughtsmen that were used by Ram Raz as illustrations in his book, the botanical drawings collected by William Jones.

All these objects are traveling to foreign places like Doha leaving their own corner of home.. So by exhibiting theses objects connected with India we encourage an atmosphere for having a discourses such as “exotic”, “colonial”. By this discourse we create an “absolute pole of address” the ideological frame work in which the colonized subject may come to understand the world. Because these art objects are touring from the Asiatic society, London they are still discussed within the frame work of a colonial discourse wherin an inbuilt power of colonial supremacy is in operation. .

Once we take this subjectivity in to consideration through this exhibition Doha is becoming a contact zone where a social space is successfully created for meeting ,clashing and grappling of disparate cultures of East and West with each other , inspite of the highly asymmetrical relations of dominance and subordination as they are lived out across the globe today.