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Art and Identity: the Creation of an 'Imagined Community' in India

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Abstract
Colonial powers, indigenous traditions, and internal ethnic and religious rivalries all contribute to Indians' modern sense of identity. This paper demonstrates how the development of Indian art reflects the contributions of these factors to the creation of an "imagined community" in India. In particular, the artistic discourse in India reflects a larger tension in Indian identity and politics between becoming a part of the modern, global economy and remaining a unique, national, self-defining community.

Introduction

In post-colonial India the development of a shared national identity has been a difficult process. The colonial powers not only influenced the political and economic structure of the country, but also the arts of the country. The British Raj introduced Western styles and mediums to Indian artists and constructed a history of Indian art that emphasized the importance and superiority of Muslim art and architecture over traditional Hindu forms of expression. As India looks to create a unified national identity in the post-colonial era, these colonial constructions continue to influence the creation of Indian art, and thus, the creation of an Indian national identity. As Indian artists have reacted to colonial and western artistic styles, the importance of art as a political discourse is relevant to defining an Indian identity within a globalized and westernized world. Because "the discourse of art arises out of its own discursive practices and is therefore necessarily implicated in politics," the arts of India reflect not only stylistic innovations, but the very meaning of what it is to be Indian in the contemporary world (Kojin 1996, p.34). Namely, the interaction among various artistic influences in India reflects a larger tension in Indian identity and politics between becoming a part of the modern, global economy and remaining a unique, national, self-defining community. By examining the various artistic and political influences that have emerged both internally and externally to the state of India and that have created this artistic discourse, I will illustrate how artistic expression necessarily informs and creates an "imagined community" of national identity in India.

The Role of Art in Creating an 'Imagined Community'

Benedict Anderson theorizes that the development of print capitalism in Western Europe "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (Anderson 1991, p. 90). This new means of communication "laid the bases for national consciousness" and the development of the modern nation-state for it created an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991, pp. 94-95). In other words, the development of print communication allowed people to share ideas more easily and more quickly. These literary works and ideas served as a common reference point for groups and connected people through shared experiences. Art, like print communication, allows individuals to think about themselves and others in new and abstract ways, and plays a central role in the creation of an imagined community. Because not only the artist, but also the viewer maintains a relationship to a work of art, a single work or style of art, if held in common by a group of people, creates a common identity and a visual reference point for that created identity. Much as an attachment to a common homeland creates a shared community among a group of people, a common visual culture also creates a community among a group of people.

Art not only creates unity among individuals, but also tangibly indicates an intangible community. In Heglian philosophy, art is the

Idea as shaped forward into reality and as having advanced to immediate unity and correspondence with this reality. For the *Idea as such* is indeed the absolute truth itself, but the truth only in its not yet objectified universality, while the Idea as the *beauty of art* is the Idea with the nearer qualification of being both essentially individual reality and also an individual configuration of reality destined essentially to embody and reveal the Idea" (Hegel 1975, p.73).

In Hegel's view art realizes historical processes and ideas in tangible form. By viewing art as a tangible indicator of the larger historical process, history is interpreted through the creative process that entails an individual reaction to historical events. In this sense,

[n]ationalism in general comes into existence in the aesthetic consciousness; it is essentially grounded less upon intellectual/moral speculations than upon an emotional/corporeal community – 'imagined communities.' In most cases nationalist sentiment remains within the realm of self-consciousness" (Kojin 1996, p.34).

Because nationalism is ultimately a feeling of common identity not based entirely upon rational or intellectual reasoning (although rationality does play a role in the manipulation of nationalist sentiment), art is an aptly suited medium to describe this aesthetic consciousness of nationalism. As a result, the tangible object such as the bordered nation-state or a work of art plays a central role in establishing a national identity and produces a tangible expression of the intangible community or nationalist sentiment. In other words, artistic representation and visual culture facilitate the creation of a sense of community and are aptly suited to describe and interpret nationalist sentiment within this community.

The Hindu Diaspora in Southern California

The Hindu Temple Society of Calabasas, California demonstrates how artistic representation can be used to create an imagined community. By creating a traditional Hindu structure within the physical territory of another culture, American Indians perpetuate their homeland culture and national community in an entirely different nation-state. Even as the children of Indian immigrants grow up in American culture, the Calabasas temple educates them about their "homeland" culture. The handout from the temple states: "This temple is a prized possession of our community and is a very valued legacy to our children." The Temple serves as a visual indicator of a wider religious and artistic culture and connects American Indians to that cultural community through a tangible artistic and visual symbol of that community. That American-Indians constructed this religious and artistic symbol in order to teach their children about a homeland culture refers to a sentiment or a feeling of responsibility to teach their children an Indian heritage. In this sense, the intangible community is not hindered by geographic borders, but transcends them by using artistic representations as indicators of a wider community.

Inclusion and Exclusion in an 'Imagined Community'

The creation of an imagined community through artistic representation necessarily entails exclusion of minority groups and interests as the dominant group attempts to create a homogenized identity and national unity among differing ethnic groups and cultural traditions:

The ideological work of representation is often to translate social and cultural heterogeneity into homogenous unity and to emphasize boundaries which map zones of inclusion and exclusion. Thus, certain conceptions, values and visions are prioritized in the cultural processes of representation, reproducing patterns of inequality and power (Hallam and Street 2000, p.6-7).

As a result of this process of unification and homogenization, the creation of an imagined community, intangible by its very nature, conflicts with concrete reality. Often, the dominant group ignores or passes over differences among cultures and ethnic groups inside of the larger community in order to create a sense of unity. In this process of creating a homogenized identity, the resulting community may or may not represent the actual interests or cultural practices of everyone inside that group. At times, this exclusion of certain groups may even lead the dominant group to reassert its own identity and power over other groups within that same community through prejudiced actions or policies.

As the post-colonial society in India has attempted to create a national community, the dominant ethnic group, the Hindus, has often excluded minority ethnic groups, notably Muslims, from this community. Because the British adopted certain elements of Sarasenic architecture to use in colonial architecture and because the British identified themselves overall with Muslim culture over Hindu culture, subsequent nationalist movements that have reacted against British rule have also reacted against Muslim culture (Metcalf 1984, pp.41-42). The British consciously chose to represent their empire through predominantly Muslim architecture in order to reinforce a sense of power and majesty. Because Muslims, like the British, were 'foreign' invaders who ruled India before the British, the association of the visual representation of the British Empire through Islamic architectural styles helped to reinforce British authority (Metcalf 1984, p.42). More clearly stated, "[o]f the indigenous styles the Islamic was, simply, the most suited for the representation of empire" (Metcalf 1984, p.42). As a result of the British association with Islamic rulers, Hindu nationalist artistic movements within India have often reacted against not only British aesthetic ideals, but also against Muslim art and architecture. The Hindu nationalist reactions to these two cultures have helped to develop a community among Hindus, a feeling of unity that was weak, if not wholly absent before colonial rule.

Reactions to British Influence

British colonialism acted as both an inclusive and exclusive force in the development of an imagined community of national identity in India. Indian statehood grew as an extension of British administrative control over the territory, but Indian nationalism grew as a reaction to British colonialism. Thus, a sharp contrast exists between governmental administrative structures and nationalist sentiment. Before the British colonial power created an administrative system that unified the territory of India at least structurally, "[i]dentities [of Indians] were, in contrast to the modern nation state, segmented identities. The notion of community was not absent but there were multiple communities identified by locality, language, caste, occupation and sect" (Thapar 1989, p.222). The gradual decline of this multiplicity of communities within India under the colonial administrative system demonstrates the power of Britain's influence in creating an intangible community that could rally around a common nationality. The British aided the creation of this unity not only through the establishment of administrative structures, but also by posing as a force against which the Indian peoples could rally. Without the influence of the British colonial structure and subsequent nationalist reaction to the British presence in India, the large state of India would probably not exist today.

Thus, the development of an Indian national and state identity was in part due to a reaction to an influence from outside of the nation itself. Hechter and Levi explain this interaction among cultural and political groups through the idea of reactive and interactive group formation: "[r]eactive group formation is largely a function of the group's relations with other groups in its environment, while interactive group formation is at least potentially capable of

being determined by the group itself" (1994, p.185). Indian nationhood grew not only out of the political, social and artistic movements of the people inside of its borders, but also as a response to the outside influences of colonialism and western European aesthetic ideals. The reaction to British colonialism helped to consolidate a Hindu nationalist movement, emphasizing the homogeneity of the Indian community while ostracizing and 'othering' minority groups within India such as the Muslims. Western ideals and interactions with India influenced the political development of an imagined community within India by creating a discourse between western and non-western artistic ideals.

Western and Non-Western Artistic Ideals in India

A comparison of two examples of artistic representation from the colonial period demonstrates the Indian nationalist reaction to the impact of British artistic ideals and colonial aspirations. First, the painter, Raja Ravi Varma, the leading Indian academic painter of the late 19th century, began to adapt western artistic methods and mediums such as oil portraits, naturalistic landscapes, and academic nudes to paint Indian subjects (Mitter 2001, p.171). Because he learned to paint by watching European painters at court, his style generally reflects European aesthetic ideals (Mitter 2001, p.176). In his painting, *Sita Vanavasa,* he employs a western attention to naturalism (Fig. 1). However, at the same time he "adapt[s] Victorian salon art to bring to life ancient Indian epics and literary classics" (Mitter 2001, p.176). Through this mixture of European artistic styles and Indian subject matter, Varma demonstrates how British colonial rule not only influenced artistic style, but also Indian identity as a whole; namely, it extended the idea that Indian culture needed to adapt to British and western models of standardization and institution. That Varma enjoyed immense popularity during his career demonstrates an adherence to and acceptance of colonial ideals by the population as a whole. Varma's work was even regarded as nationalistic since it incorporated elements of traditional Indian subjects (Mitter 2001, p. 176). This artistic interaction between national forms and traditions and western institutional standards still forms a part of contemporary Indian identity.

While during Varma's lifetime "artistic nationalism had identified the nation with the past; from the 1920s, it began equating the nation with the soil" (Mitter 2001, p.192). During this time the rise of Pan-Asianism, originating in Japan, instigated a dialogue, sponsored by prominent Asian intellectuals, between European materialism and Asian spirituality. This reassertion of Asian identity provoked nationalist sentiment in India through the *swadeshi,* or indigenous, ideology of art: "[t]he *swadeshi* ideology of art, a reflection of militant Hindu nationalism, tended to privilege Hindu culture as the kernel of the Indian nation, thereby disinheriting other communities" (Mitter 2001, p.180). From this emphasis upon Hindu art as a prime indicator of Hindu nationalist identity, the Bengal School of Art arose. Abanindranath Tagore, a prominent painter and son of the nationalist poet, Rabindranath Tagore, created the painting, *Bharat Mata* (Fig. 2). In this painting Tagore depicts Mother India with four arms holding four symbolic objects. The use of the four arms directly associates this depiction of Mother India with Hindu deities, and, following traditional Hindu iconography, the lotus blossoms at her feet symbolize purity. Yet, the four objects Mother India holds are emblems of nationalist aspiration: food, clothing, secular knowledge, and spiritual knowledge (Mitter 2001, p.179). Thus, in this painting Tagore combines traditional Hindu symbolism with nationalist sentiment creating an artistic representation of a national community which unites all Hindus, but excludes minority groups, in a political reaction against British colonialism and western aesthetic ideals.

Globalization and Indigenous Traditions: Western Perspectives of 'Others'

This artistic interaction between western and non-western stylistic elements acts as a backdrop to understanding the development of the modern political tension between globalization and indigenous tradition that currently forms a part of Indian national identity. A discourse between western and non-western cultures emerged as Europeans became aware of other places, peoples, and cultures, and as they began to define these newly discovered peoples and cultures as essentially different from themselves. In defining these new civilizations as different, the Europeans not only reified these nations as the 'other,' but also reinforced their own sense of European identity. Stuart Hall explains that "national cultures acquire their sense of identity by contrasting themselves with other cultures. Thus, we argue, the West's sense of itself – its identity – was formed . . . through Europe's sense of difference from other worlds – how it came to represent itself in relation to these 'others'" (1996, p.188). As a result, Europe's Age of Exploration helped to define European identity as separate from non-western cultures. This process of 'othering' thus defined and determined the European attitude toward non-western cultures for centuries to come.

Because the Europeans used their own perceptions of the New World in order to define the terms of interaction between the west and the non-west, "it did not represent an encounter between equals" (Hall 1996, p.204). Not only did Europeans define non-western cultures in terms of European "cultural categories, languages, images, and ideas," but they also had specific economic and religious objectives in mind as they discovered these new lands (Hall 1996, p.204). As the Europeans created an 'other' in relation to themselves, they made sure this 'other' was represented as inferior in order to protect European interests and power. European characterizations of non-western cultures served to reinforce the perception that European cultural and political structures were inherently superior to non-western structures. These characterizations include the concepts of Orientalism and primitivism. Both represent discourses between the West and Non-West in which the West created and imposed a certain set of characteristics upon non-western cultures.

The concept of Orientalism served to reify and to categorize all eastern cultures into a homogenous identity that starkly contrasted with European ideals. The British "set out . . . systematically to order and to classify the elements of India's heritage. Its peoples, its languages, its philosophies, its styles of building, were all labeled and defined. Set apart from the West, India had become an object" (Metcalf 1984, p.62). Due to this process of categorization and reification, the British defined many characteristics of Indian art and culture in terms of comparison to western cultural standards. For example, in order to categorize India's art history, the British labeled the Gupta period of the fifth century CE as the 'classical period' of Indian art history after which the increasing presence of heavily decorated Hindu deities and temples represented a decline in artistic taste (Mitter 2001, p.2). However, because this view of Indian art history is "grounded upon the western classical ideal of simplicity as perfection, and on decoration as a sign of decadence, [it] fails to appreciate the ornamentation of Hindu temples as an essential expression of Indian taste" (Mitter 2001, p.2). In applying western standards of aesthetic beauty to non-western, and specifically to Indian art, an important aspect of Indian artistic representation is ignored. Instead of Indian arts freely representing the culture which created them, the western classification systems made them objects to be studied and classified according to western aesthetic ideals. Through this process the concept of Orientalism, which described the wide range of peoples in the eastern world as a homogenous group, came to be used prominently by Europeans in their descriptions of the East.

The concept of primitivism also reified the peoples of the East, describing them in terms of western perceptions and standards. During the Enlightenment, the idea of the innocence of the 'noble savage' and of the primitive society as the 'other' when contrasted with western rationality served to further reify the cultures and arts of eastern peoples (Mitter 2001, p.192). The term primitive not only implies an underdeveloped culture, but was also used by many art historians to describe the art of non-western societies as the "'prime forms' from which Western art [has] evolved" (O'Riley 2001, p.31). Therefore, the discourse of primitivism entails an inherent euro-centricism which ignores the development of separate aesthetic standards in non-western cultures. Partha Mitter suggests that "[i]n short, we need to see the development of ancient Indian art not in terms of a 'classical age', nor in terms of a linear development, but rather as a series of paradigm shifts bringing to prominence different aims and objectives in different periods and regions" (2001, p.2). By looking at Indian art as a product of its own culture that creates its own aesthetic ideals and not through the lens of European aesthetic ideals, a better sense of Indian identity can be formulated.

As a result of these characterizations, the discourse between western and non-western cultures has from the beginning represented a bias toward the western world because Europeans represented the Non-West as inherently inferior. As this interaction continues into the present, non-western cultures confront an immediate tension between their own indigenous cultural and political forms, which represent a certain aspect of their identity as a nation, and western cultural and political forms. Until recently, western culture and politics have always been presented to Indians as unquestionably superior to and different from their own.

Because Europeans defined Indian art in terms of their own aesthetic ideals, these definitions played a crucial role in the creation of an imagined community in India. "[T]he British, self-proclaimed masters of India's culture, could in the process shape a harmony the Indians themselves, communally divided, could not achieve" (Metcalf 1984, p.50). Although British classification systems distorted Indian history, they also created the illusion of a unified community in Indian society. This illusory unity survived even as the colonial power began to lose control over the country.

Globalization and Indigenous Traditions in Modern Indian Art

As communication and technology have become more advanced, the transfer of artistic styles across national borders has led to the creation of a modern style of art in which art forms first introduced by Western artists have begun to dominate artistic expression throughout the world. Modern styles have not only influenced artistic expression, but also modern production techniques, viewing art as a commodity in a capitalist economy where individual artists compete against one another. In post-colonial India the attempt to create a feeling of national identity by referencing traditional Indian art forms, as opposed to Western or European art forms introduced during the colonial era, has created a sense of national identity around these traditional art forms.

In 1996, the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum in New Delhi organized a workshop that brought artists from rural, agrarian-based villages together with artists from urban, industrialized cities. One of the artists, Vasundhara Tewari, an artist based in New Delhi, reflected upon her experience working with a traditional *mehndi* artist:

> Tewari was interested in working with the *mehndi* artist because she had grown up with this tradition since childhood. As she has stated, "For me it was a way of linking myself with another life, for me they represent my ancestors. There were many women in my family before me, and it was a way of relating to my past, to

my roots. It was a coming together of two paths within myself" (Milford-Lutzker 1999, p.28).

The outcome of the collaboration between these two artists is the work, *Surging Energy I*, depicting a middle class, urbanized woman doing yoga exercises against a background of traditional Indian decoration (Fig. 3). Through the juxtaposition of traditional Indian design motifs and references to a modern, urban lifestyle, this image reflects the contemporary tension between the urbanized middle classes and the rural lower classes in Indian society.

This interaction between traditional and modern styles of art and the imagined community that they create, establishes a basis for modern Indian identity. On one hand, the traditional Indian mediums and aesthetic ideals of representation are essential in describing a specifically Indian identity. On the other hand, the modern reality of globalization and the western idea of capitalism become important aspects of the modern Indian national identity. As India attempts to create a national community based upon the values of a civic nation, the influence of Western ideas of nationhood is central. This tension between a specifically Indian national identity and global modernism has created an artistic discourse in modern Indian culture concerning the national identity of Indians in a globalized world. Just as Indian art demonstrates both western and non-western stylistic influences, so also the political leaders of India attempt to create a modern Indian state that is founded upon western political ideas of democracy and capitalism, but that still maintains a specifically Indian cultural identity.

Artistic interaction demonstrates how a nation can begin to create an unified community through its own accord. A UNESCO document from 1980 states the following:

> It has become increasingly clear that the efforts of intellectual and cultural dependence are as serious as those of political subjection or economic dependence. There can be no genuine, effective independence without the communication resources needed to safeguard it. The argument has been made that a nation whose mass media are under foreign domination cannot claim to be a nation (Brennan 1990, p.60).

As non-western countries such as India attempt to define themselves both culturally and politically in the post-colonial and modern eras, indigenous artistic representation helps to create a unique national identity. As India attempts to create a unified political state, it will need to address the tension between western and non-western influences, but it will need to discover its own means of dealing with this tension. Just as Indian art has melded these two influences, so also the larger political state will need to meld these two influences.

Although Anderson bases his concept of the imagined community upon the development of the printed text in western Europe, his model of development becomes less plausible when applied to developing nations such as India with low literacy rates: "[i]t is, however, now increasingly realised that this model is of limited efficacy in explaining the development of nationalism in the Third World, where not simply the printed text but also the visual image provided a central site for the definition of the nation and the national community" (Chakravarty and Gooptu 2000, p.93). By examining the development of an artistic discourse in the definition of the intangible national community of India, the particularity of the Indian peoples is taken into account producing a truer image of India as a nation.

Because art and visual culture in general indicate a collective identity and create an imagined community, the reactions of Indian artists to the introduction of Western aesthetic ideals during the colonial period and into the present create an artistic discourse which mirrors the overall political situation of the country. The nature and evolution of the artistic contact

between national and foreign influences in India mirror the efforts of the administrative state in establishing a sense of nationalism among the individual citizens of the country. By examining the interaction between foreign and indigenous artistic expressions in India and how these interactions created the definition of what is indigenous to India, the current relationship between western and non-western identities can be re-examined in light of India's efforts to create a common national identity.

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Figure 1: *Sita Vanavasa,* Raja Ravi Varma c. 1890's
accessed at:
http://www.cherianbros.com/images/thumbnails/ravivarma/
sita_vanavasa.jpg

Figure 2: *Bharat Mata,* Abaindranath Tagore c.1905
accessed at:
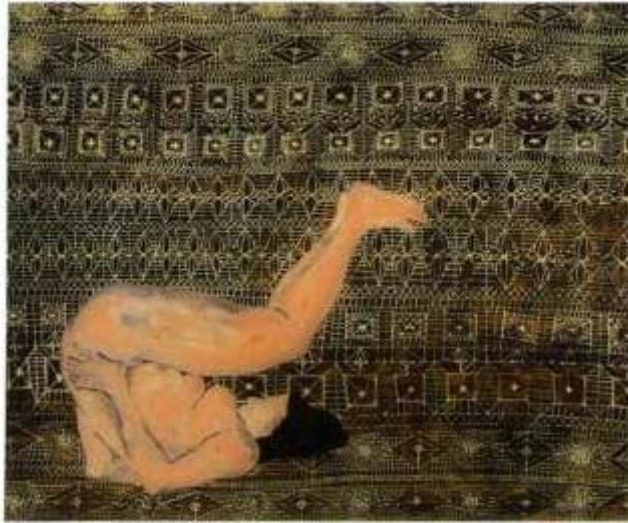http://www.atributetohinduism.com/images/Bharat_Mata2.jpg

Figure 3: *Surging Energy I,* Vasundhara Tewari and an unidentified *mehndi* artisan 1996
accessed from Milford-Lutzker, et. al.