

## art Art Market and Art Economics

by Navine Murshid and Sajjad Ahmed

*'Desire refuses to be signified, because it creates its own signs as it arises — or simply does not arise; signs or symbols of desire can only provoke a parody of desire that is never more than a pretence of the real thing.'*  
(Lefebvre, 1984)

Is an artist herself a discourse of society? If so, who is a great artist? And are we then talking of negative causality? Does recognition make artists(s)? then whose? Does signature function as signs of social status? Is dysfunctionality to be lived by an artist to be successful? How does invisible hand(s) regulate the demand for a certain canvass? These are but a few questions raised at the seminar organised by Gallery 21 recently. In our article, we only try to forward neutrally and without too much critical dialect, the matters discussed and disclose.

Sovon Som, one of the leading art critiques and intellectuals of India, gave an arousing performance at Gallery 21 premises on the 9th June discussing the art-market of the Sub-continent and its nexus with art-economic reality. The audience consisted of art-enthusiasts and eminent personalities of the literary and cultural field. Poet Shamsur Rahman, who presided over the ceremony, later said that the seminar opened doors to new ways of thinking. Though the elite economist, Dr Firdous Murshid, termed the analysis "excessively Marxist", the discussion was pioneering in contemporary Dhaka.

The gallery which functions as a bridge between the art-consumer and the artists, can in other words be called the art-market. Sovon Som pointed out how the artists can be exploited by the art-market: 'recognition' often being the passport, 'young artists' fall-out of having their works displayed in galleries. This is true, but "only a small part of the story". While on the other hand, it was questioned how some artists' works are



Always an impressive talker Sovon raised a number of fundamental questions relating to art market and art economics.

— Photo Zahid

'sold' before completion. Sovon Som commented that 'these artists' have attained such an aesthetically 'higher-plane through upward mobility that their freedom in the canvass needs no beholder's eyes'. It was also pointed out that commodities are no longer bought for use but function as 'signs or symbols of social status', so for instance: S M Sultan's signature vastly differs from Shameem Subrana's. Abul Momen was critical of those painters who focus on 'selling' their works rather than meditating on creativity. Thus commercial-

ity is in direct contradiction with the creative-self, or so it was portrayed. But 'great' artists, like Rabindranath Tagore, would rather reverse the causality saying: I would not bestow upon what the market 'wants', but what I feel it ought to want. Selves may be a discourse of society but it is the 'success' of the 'genius' to bring society to a higher consciousness. What we feel was absent from the seminar is: what should be the morals of an artist of today? Personally, we are inclined towards the 'super(wo)man morality' for

the artists to follow, but that is beyond the scope of the present article.

Media's role was specifically disclosed. Sovon Som compared television and its portrayal of what we ought to want as part of our lifestyle, and how we should want it. Though the link with art-economics acting through the television (creating the demand) and aesthetics was less scrutinised. It was not pointed out that in post/late-modernity governments cannot control their cultural integrity (e.g. Star TV). We think the following should have been dis-

cussed: the 'global pull' acting through satellite TV creates a schizophrenia in the late-modern artist, 'truth-experiences' being introjected by multi-perspectivism and, failure of belief in 'grand-narratives' such as Marxism and Marxism-in-the-subcontinent in relation to art. Though a commentator states that we 'need' some control over the art-market, he did not provide any justification for it, and we see so reason why the art-market should not be floated on outright capitalism!

We accept that a new form of stratifi-

cation overwhelms, not of class but lifestyle. Success is multidimensional (i.e. varies with perspectives), but the media is not: deliberate control can only be a sign of fear that would, not too infrequently, be transparent to the naked eye as impotency. Thus, the question of temporality, now or soon, will have to arise. When we talk of 'fear' culturally; we talk of death. When we come to artists, the same issue becomes of mortality and/or immortality. Thus, the 'bid for immortality', or 'durability', or that which is not meant for consumption, can very easily lead to "functionless, meaningless, purposeless, useless (as the functionality, purpose, and usefulness is admittedly the focus of ordinary mortals' interests)" depiction. As Peter Burger (1984) puts it:

If an artists today signs a stove pipe and exhibits it, that artist certainly does not denounce the art market but adapts to it...

We can put lifestyle in economics' term as an investment. Thus, an artist's life does count, in deciding who is more immortal than who!

Internationalisation was talked of but how to maintain cultural authenticity was (only raised, and) not fully discussed. The absence of 'eastern' theories of art and art-market was emphasised. Market was criticised for promoting, analogically, Humayun Ahmed rather than Showkat Osman. Yet the talk of alternatives painted three minutes of void on the bodies of those who were present. Modernism began with the death of God. All talk of post-modernism in the sub-continent seemed incoherent and artificial. Nevertheless, the seminar should be hailed. We feel, as long as art is not used as a means of corruption, all such moves for the advancement of this form of life should be encouraged. Pointing out the struggle for self-sustainability, self-authenticity in the midst of overflow of signs was the underlying success of the seminar. And that we have, not found it yet, also adds to it.

## Art Can Empower and Educate

by Batuk Vora

IT'S a well choreographed movement that uses art to impart awareness and gain empowerment. And as the results are showing, it is nothing short of a little revolution in the western Indian state of Gujarat.

In a novel method, an ancient folk art form -- in which artistes go from village to village to spread social awareness -- has been employed in the city of Ahmedabad to get underprivileged children to school. The effort has been so successful that the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation has invited the team to perform in over 500 schools here.

It is claimed that the singular cam-

paign has helped increase the number of school-goers by an incredible 300 per cent and managed to convince 400 households of the merits of family planning.

The organisation behind this movement, aptly called 'Jagruti' (Awareness), is headed by none other than the internationally acclaimed danseuse Mallika Sarabhai.

Sarabhai is a visiting contemporary dancer at the Pan Project, London, the Battery Dance Company, New York, and the National Dance Institute, also in New York. She has led her dance troupes to prestigious festivals in Paris, Singapore, Hong Kong, Tokyo, Perth and all major festivals of India. She even per-

formed at the Miss World pageant held in Bangalore in 1997.

Jagruti is not the only project the dancer-actress-activist is involved in. Tribespeople in the western state of Gujarat have been trained in folk art to enable them to communicate more effectively with their community and help empower them.

'Pariavartan' is a project for attitude change in tribal communities in Gujarat and the central state of Madhya Pradesh. It has adopted 30 tribal villages in northern Gujarat where atrocities against women are high. The message that the tribespeople put across through their art has helped usher in

progress "at an unimaginable pace", she says.

Moving from one desk to another in her office, Mapin Publications, in Ahmedabad, Sarabhai is a picture of confidence and energy. In seeking "a relation between art and life, art and the reality outside," the dancer-actress-activist has launched several subaltern socio-cultural movements.

Sarabhai says whatever be the larger picture of national politics or economy, a tribal woman, a rickshaw-puller, a cattle breeder in a faraway village or even a teenage student in a school needed to be "empowered" in his or her own field.

"Empowerment is an attitude of

mind," Sarabhai told IANS. "Changing the women's thinking is after all changing society. A woman is the basic pillar of life all around. Empowerment of women is only one aspect of my movement on several fronts at a time," she added.

Sarabhai's own dance performances embody her conviction. She is co-director of Darpana Academy of Performing Arts which she set up with her mother Mrinalini Sarabhai who herself is a legend in Indian dance.

Says Jim Hughes, a choreographer from Australia who was chosen by Sarabhai as a 12-week resident at Darpana for a project in collaboration with Alliance Francaise: "Her perfor-

mances are full of passion, laced with superb technique, using her guile and expressive body to create a physical theatre which is poetic, powerful, right out there with her message."

Apart from her mastery in the classical Indian dance forms of Kuchipudi and Bharatnatyam, Sarabhai is also known for her acting -- and activism.

Her Darpana Academy of Performing Arts has a number of sections -- the Dance Academy, the Puppet Company, the Theatre Company, the Centre for Non-Violence Through the Arts, and Darpana for Development.

—India Abroad News Service

## essay A Victim of Imperialism

by Iftekhar Sayeed

ONLY a victim of imperialism could have written the novel 'Heart of Darkness'. Joseph Conrad was, therefore, eminently qualified. For he was born in Poland, a European victim of European imperialism. Between Russia, Prussia and Austria, Poland was carved up three times -- in 1772, 1793 and 1795. After the last partition, Poland ceased to exist as a state (until resurrected again after World War I). His father, Apollo Nalezek Korzeniowski, was a poet and a patriot. He was one of the organisers of the secret City Committee of Warsaw, which, in 1863, as the National Central Committee, led the rebellion against Russian domination. Apollo was arrested by the Russians in 1861 and exiled to Volodga in northern Russia, followed by his family. Although permitted to move to a milder climate, his mother died of tuberculosis, hastened to death by the pitiless weather which nearly killed her four-year old son on the way to his father.

The death of his wife, and the failure of the insurrection, devastated Apollo, withering his creativity. Broken in body and mind, he became a mere translator. The father's Polish renditions of Sir Walter Scott, James Fenimore Cooper, Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray provided the son's first introduction to English literature. Apollo died of tuberculosis in Cracow in 1869.

"Those who read me," wrote Conrad about himself, "know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests, notably among others, on the idea of Fidelity." And, like the Polonaise, we find a Chopinesque dedication to the fact that 'Poland is not so much a state as a state of mind' in the reiterated idea of Fidelity throughout his novels. Sometimes, it takes the shape of fidelity of man and women (Victory, 1915); now, that of loyalty to a sinking ship (Lord Jim, 1900); or the thwarted fidelity of brother and sister when pitted against the state and career (Under Western Eyes, 1911). But his most fascinating study was the inner breakdown of loyalty to civilisation itself masquerading otherwise -- imperialism.

'Heart of Darkness' begins with no sense of having begun, but ended, in some way. We find Marlowe and a few nautical friends in a meditative mood at the mouth of the Thames. The imagery itself suggests a finish, rather than a start, as the sun sinks over the river. "Only the gloom to the west, brooding over the upper reaches, became more sombre every minute, as if angered by the approach of the sun."

The sense of history reveals itself artistically as profound rest, as memory, not imagination, as wisdom after the event, not the event itself. "The owl of Minerva takes its flight as the light of day is falling." We find Hegel's observa-

tion literally rendered.

The anger of the west to the approach of the sun is quickly reinforced by Marlowe's remark, "And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth." One can almost hear the Roman legions tramping up and down England, building roads, those ancient railways. "I was thinking of very old times. When the Romans first came here, nineteen hundred years ago -- the other day..."

Having blended Art and History -- imagery and memory -- Marlowe indulges briefly in Philosophy. He contrasts the plundering Romans with the evangelic European. "They grabbed what they could for the sake of what was to be got.... The conquest of the earth, ... is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much. What redeems it is the idea only...."

And the idea was (as it continues to be today) to wean "those ignorant millions from their horrid ways", as his aunt tells him after securing him a job at the 'Company'. When Marlowe hints that the company is run for profit, she retorts, "The labourer is worthy of his hire."

For, just as Christianity had emerged as the conscience of Rome, so Europe would like to present its credentials as the conscience of the world. And this is to be achieved with the simple trick of pointing to their 'horrid ways', and saying "This is what you are, but that is what you ought to be." If you accept this sacerdotal manner of looking at your-

self -- or your culture -- you'll soon come to loathe yourself, especially if you've also been robbed in the process. The new imperialism is different from the old; it is conscientious, not pure. Its aim is not just orderly depredation, but orderly depredation disguised as a benediction for the deprived.

Notice the concatenation of events as far as the Belgian Congo is concerned. Dr Livingstone embraced the natives whole-heartedly; but, for them, it was a fatal embrace. Hard on his heels followed Henry Stanley, the first time as journalist, the second time as the agent of Leopold II of Belgium -- love had paved the way for curiosity, the quest for information had given way to the quest for ivory, to greed. The usual sequence of Empire in other parts of the world had been reversed in the case of the Congo -- the trader, raider and priest came there in reverse order. And last of all, everywhere, and in all ages, comes the artist.

For Kurtz had gone out a Livingstone and ended up compounded with Stanley. "Hadn't I been told in all the tones of jealousy and admiration that he had collected, bartered, swindled or stolen more ivory than all the other agents together?" And this of a man who had been entrusted by the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs to make a report! Aply, his mother was half-English, father half-French. "All Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz."

All Europe contributed to the unmaking of Kurtz, also. A young man, driven by 'comparative poverty' into realising his powers of speech and persuasion, knowing his own talent for enriching others, and the necessity for couching greed in noble terms -- he'd gone into the heart of darkness to discover himself. And what he had found was 'The horror! The horror!'

What had horrified Kurtz was his own apotheosis. On the one hand, Europe acknowledged him to be a universal genius. On the other, the natives "adored him", to the extent that the chiefs crawled up to him, and let him hang human heads on wooden posts around his hut!

The Russian who finds him -- and worships him -- is on an average between the two continents. The Russian sailor is a Conradesque stroke of genius. Through him, we see Kurtz, the man-god in uncomfortable equipoise.

It is odd that Conrad should make a Russian the archangel to Kurtz, so to speak, for Conrad hated Russia. After all, Conrad's father had been persecuted by the Russians, like many Poles. His only novel about Russia, 'Under Western Eyes', had become, in his opinion, a little too objective due to a scrupulous attempt to keep his feelings under control. Bertrand Russel had remarked, rather narrowly, that Conrad's only philosophy in life was a 'passionate hatred of Russia'. But in 'Darkness', a Russian, for that same reason, was the ideal being to objectify Kurtz. From Marlow, who had

never known Kurtz at all, to the men at the station, who had known him briefly, we finally reach the Russian sailor, who had known him the longest and deepest, in Africa. Of course, it is no coincidence that, like Marlow, he too is a sailor, to make the transition easier for the reader; indeed, there soon develops an almost fraternal relationship between them. In fact, the sailor is Conrad, the objective Pole, transformed into a Russian awed by the awesome power and appeal of imperialism. Such is the attempt of the artistic temperament to come to terms with its own demons. The other person, living, who had known Kurtz was his intended, and hardly knew him at all. His mother had died recently, nursed by his intended.

The sailor's admiration for Kurtz soon transmits itself to Marlow, though for a different reason. The most you can hope from it (life) is some knowledge of yourself...." says Marlow, and, consequently, some knowledge of life. And what's more, Kurtz was also able to put that knowledge into words. "The horror! The horror!"

And the knowledge of life that he gleams is the darkness of pure subjectivity. In the attempt to approximate Christ, who represents the consciousness of all men, Kurtz attempts to be god himself. That the natives thought him such was natural, with his arsenal of advanced weapons. His return to paganism was the return to Zeus of the thunderbolt. It is this darkness of pure subjectivity that is the heart of darkness. ■