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Globalization and the Erosion of an Essential Indian Sculptural Identity in the Medium of Stone

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Abstract

The rise of new mediums and processes in modern art has been closely intertwined with the forces of globalization, producing significant shifts in the hierarchy of artistic materials and practices. This paper examines the adverse impact of globalization on traditional sculptural media in India, with particular focus on stone, a medium of deep historical and cultural significance to the subcontinent. While leading Indian stone sculptors of the early 1980s succeeded in bringing the medium into prominence within contemporary Indian art and onto the global platform, this momentum was not sustained. The paper argues that globalization has resulted in the transmutation of Indian contemporary art, effectively marginalizing stone as a medium of expression. This is attributed to the growing preference for newer, more accessible materials aligned with globalized aesthetics, compounded by the failure of institutional support mechanisms, particularly private galleries, to champion stone sculpture. The paper contends that the sidelining of stone represents a deeper erosion of an essential Indian artistic identity, calling for renewed institutional engagement and critical discourse around its contemporary relevance.

Keywords: Globalization, Contemporary, Stone Sculptures, New Mediums, Organic.

Indian sculptures exemplify artistic sentiments and have been affected by socio-political factors over a long period, with religion being the most prominent of them all. Within the rich and intricately woven tapestry of Indian Art, the spirit of stone sculptures stands out most. One finds ample evidence that suggests the stone sculptures of India have been subjected to diverse thematic approaches and forms during their evolution and were affected by regional influences across India. The conceptual sculptural form, identified and conceived during the archaic stages of Indian sculpture, can be seen acting as an armature over which the entire panorama of Indian sculpture developed. Stone, in this sense, is not merely a material but a connective tissue of Indian artistic identity, binding the spiritual, the cultural, and the political across millennia.

However, it is critical to examine how stone became an important Indian sculptural medium. The survival of tools made out of stone over a prolonged period led to the realization of stone as a medium that could withstand time. In later centuries, stone became an extensively used

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medium[1]. Although stone sculpture from the Indus cities is rare, the figures that survive appear to have been intended as images for worship, including seated men, composite animals, and, in rare instances from Harappa, a standing nude male and a dancing figure[2]. Stone sculptures such as the Priest-King are relatively rare and possibly represent only a small fraction of stone objects that might have been produced by the Indus Valley Civilization, made of steatite, an easy-to-carve stone used extensively by Indus Valley inhabitants, attesting to an early but already sophisticated engagement with stone as a deliberate artistic medium[3]. The arrival of nomadic Aryan tribes and their phased settlement in North India marked a distinct turning point in the socio-political history of India. Disjuncture caused as an outcome was immense. Where the Vedic civilization excelled in coining the living words, encapsulated in the Vedas and Upanishads, there are virtually no remains of sculptural expression exemplifying this epoch. Yet it would be fair to accept that new elemental gods formulated during this period and their rudimentary imagery transcended from being small figurines to colossal and monumental stone sculptures, which were to appear later.

The monumental pillars and capitals carved in sandstone with a fine polished finish from Lauriya Nandagarh and Sarnath are befitting specimens. The representation of animals such as the lion and bull incorporated into these pillars and the Chowri-bearer from Didarganj, popularly known as the Didarganj Yakshi, may be the composite and adaptive variation of similar motifs found at Persepolis[4]. With evidence found through various epigraphic sources, a category of artisans known as Antevasi, who were mobile and moved from place to place[5]. This theory is further substantiated by the political affinity that the Mauryans shared with West Hellenistic states and the Achaemenids. Due to lack of evidence[6], it cannot be conclusively accepted that artisans worked under a guild or atelier. On the contrary, the magnitude of sculptural outcome in the medium of stone and the various processes of stone carving, ranging from the quarrying of stones, dressing of stones, transportation, and finishing on-site, suggest a strict and efficient organizational structure.

In the past, the Indian subcontinent has withstood many waves of globalization in the form of human migration and incursions. Many foreign ideologies and practices were assimilated and passed on as indigenous. As a result, the achievement of socio-political stability and the religious and cultural clarity is reflected in the adoption of stone as a prepared medium of sculptural activity and its further honing. Crucially, what distinguishes these earlier waves of globalization from the present one is that they ultimately enriched and deepened Indian artistic identity rather than displacing it. Stone remained the primary vessel through which India's evolving spiritual and cultural consciousness was expressed, adapted, and transmitted. Till the 12th century in North India and for slightly more time in Southern India, sculpture enjoyed generous support and patronage[7]. With the spread of Islam in India, the glorious and age-old activity of sculpture-making in stone, which was essentially a subsidiary of temple architecture, came to a total halt. Post this era, one can see that the carvings in stone became limited to non-figurative adornments and decorations as part of broader architectural practice. The common grounds that sculpture and architecture shared slowly got lost. This led to sculptures becoming alienated from the general masses[8]. However, the medium of stone withstood change and at least continued as an important architectural material. Significantly, even through this dark age,

the identity of stone as an Indian material endured, even though suppressed, but never fully severed from the cultural consciousness.

The advent of the British in India marks an important and more destructive shift in the socio-political history of our country. India officially became part of the crown after the revolt of 1857. The present-day economic aspects of globalization find their roots in the imperialist and colonialist agenda of the British. The British saw India as a huge market as well as a rich source of raw material. It was of utmost importance for them to decimate every product that signified indigenousness and indigeneity. Our art form, especially the rich tradition of stone sculptures and stone carving, which was already at the cusp of losing its essence, was no exception. In 1867, nineteen schools of industrial arts and art schools were established, with the prominent ones in the cities of Madras, Calcutta, Bombay, and later in 1878 at Lahore[9]. As documented in the Art Deco Mumbai research archive, a significant transformation occurred in these schools after the arrival of John Lockwood Kipling and John Griffiths in 1865, it was due to their efforts that the use of relief sculpture in the decoration of public buildings gained popularity[10]. Yet, this was a narrowing of sculptural purpose that subordinated the medium to colonial architectural ambition rather than indigenous expression. These schools were not established to propagate and revive the rich legacy of Indian arts, handicrafts, and traditional skills. Rather, these schools were to become a critical source of skilled artisans, deployed in the adornment of British buildings being erected across metropolitan India.

The methodical prevalence of this European academic model was a political tool adopted by the British to further impede the numbed and directionless Indians. Many Indian art students and artists of this period were systematically detached from their glorious past and roots. They struggled to reinvent their identity in a more natural and organic progression. This detachment was not merely aesthetic, but a rupture in cultural memory, severing practicing artists from the very medium through which Indian artistic identity had historically been constituted. Sankho Chaudhuri was one of the first artists to move Indian sculpture into its Modernist and Abstract phase, as a counterpoint to the prevalent style of European Naturalism, an effort to reclaim sculptural autonomy from decades of colonial imposition[11].

Out of the earliest attempts at reclamation, one cannot ignore the ambitious project of executing relief panels carved in the façade of the New India Assurance Building in Bombay, undertaken by N.G. Pansare[12]. As a highlight of Mumbai's Art Deco heritage, the building's sculptural program is an example of an aesthetic that combined contemporary corporate imagery with references to India's independence movement, with its large relief panels depicting agricultural and industrial labor interpreted as visual expressions of self-reliance and modernity. This sculptural endeavor is particularly significant as Pansare chose the local Malad stone, contrary to the more preferred medium of white marble, which signified an overt British legacy. The sculpted reliefs by Narayan Ganesh Pansare depict the working class that powered the two pillars of Indian industry at the time, the industrial and agrarian sectors[13]. The figures carved in a local material, embodying a local identity, at a pivotal moment of national becoming. In many ways, this provides us with the first instance of a truly global impact on Indian stone sculptures in the modern era, one where the global was absorbed without erasing the local.

Since then, the rise and development of various contemporary expressions in visual arts such as installation art, time-based art, performance art, video art, and digital art have been tenaciously documented and researched in the West. The majority of research attributes the rise of such mediums to ripe and relevant socio-political conditions in the West. It was also observed that art created under such circumstances became a means of social and political activism. Thus, the use of non-traditional materials, which are easy, quick, flexible, direct, and effective in communicating precise meaning, has gained immense currency. Yet at the same time, one finds examples where traditional material has also been used to propagate socio-political ideology. Martin Puryear is one such African American artist who has predominantly used wood in its various forms, bringing the archaic origins of wood and his unique African identity together. Puryear's example is instructive precisely because it demonstrates that the abandonment of traditional materials is not inevitable — it is a choice, shaped by the degree to which institutions, markets, and cultural discourse choose to sustain and valorize a medium as a living bearer of identity.

To understand this phenomenon, I would like to exemplify the United States of America, where the power center of contemporary art shifted from Europe during our modern times. In addition to being a British colony, the United States of America has traditionally welcomed settlers from all over Europe. United in its diversity, the new nation that emerged after the American Civil War chose to break away from its European roots and legacy in an attempt to reinvent itself. The second important event in world history that reinforced this sentiment was the Second World War. Many brilliant minds of the era, including artists, moved to the United States of America to be part of the new world order, in the wake of which the United States of America became the center of world art.

When India attained freedom after a prolonged British occupation, a sudden surge to reclaim a long-forgotten identity through various art forms, such as sculpture, became central. The institutional foundations of this reclamation were significant. As the Critical Collective's documentation of the modern movement in Indian sculpture records, the Baroda stamp in direct stone carving was spearheaded by Sankho Chaudhuri, who introduced the attitude of going back to fundamentals as had been shown by Brancusi, Gabo, and Moore, evolving a new definition of sculpture premised on loyalty to material, three-dimensional palpability, and the activating of space through the juxtaposition of solids and voids[14]. This became the intellectual and pedagogical bedrock upon which a generation of stone sculptors was formed. His pupils, Nagji Patel, Ramesh Pateria, Balbir Katt, and Vidya Ratan Khajuria, continued to grapple with stone, their concept chiefly concerned with the block quality and the sensitivity towards the ponderousness and texture of stone. By the early eighties, outstanding results were revealed. Balbir Singh Katt was credited for monumental sculptures, while Nagji Patel, who explored a relatively intimate scale, is proof that Indian artistic identity could be both rooted and globally relevant without sacrificing the medium through which that identity had historically spoken.

The dawn of the internet, coupled with the opening up of the Indian economy, saw the first wave of present-day globalization hitting our shores. Beginning with the liberalization of India's economy in the 1990s, there was a surge in economic and cultural engagement between India and the world, with globalization producing lasting effects on art production and the art

market through the partial westernization of contemporary Indian art practices. While India gained economically from globalization, its ill effects were felt on aspects that are uniquely Indian. In this context, one of the major outcomes of globalization has been to nearly legitimize the concept of investment and profit-making within the art world, a process that critics have described as a steamrolling effect that will eventually erase local culture[15]. The medium of stone, by its very nature, is slow, laborious, site-specific, and deeply tied to the Indian landscape and its traditions, and is antithetical to the logic of this globalized art market. To abandon stone, therefore, is not merely a shift in material preference. It is a concession of cultural distinctiveness, a quiet surrender of one of the most powerful markers of Indian artistic identity[16].

Among all these issues, the support provided to the practice in the medium of stone by government and non-government institutions is bleak and casual. As documented in research on contemporary Indian sculpture, despite the dynamic growth of Indian contemporary sculpture, the field faces a major challenge in the lack of institutional support and funding, with many artists struggling to find adequate resources for large-scale installations, leading them to rely on private galleries and corporate sponsorships. Critically, installation and performance artists continue to be funded largely through grants from organizations that specifically support the broad needs of contemporary art, such as the India Foundation for the Arts, the Foundation for Indian Contemporary Art, and the Goethe Institut, while artists working in non-traditional media have moved to the global stage where they have received significant cultural and financial support from Western institutions[17].

Such tendencies are increasingly marginalizing the medium of stone. The lack of infrastructure and patronage today has become a major concern. One can observe a steady decline in the use of stone as a sculptural medium, both by practicing sculptors and budding students of sculpture. As a result, showcasing sculptures in stone at the state and national levels has been substantially minimized. The time-consuming process of stone carving, the diminishing indoor and outdoor spaces for display, and the cost challenges have further added to the woes of stone sculptors.

In our present times, expression in the medium of stone is facing many problems within the rapidly changing Indian art climate. We are poised at a juncture where it is vital to evaluate the medium of stone, sculptors engaged with it, and its present course within the contemporary Indian art context. What is at stake is not the fate of a single material but the continuity of an artistic identity that has survived foreign invasions, colonial erasure, and centuries of neglect. As scholars of globalization and Indian culture have argued, India must navigate the challenges of globalization while preserving its rich cultural heritage, requiring a conscious effort to promote cultural diversity and support local traditions, with policymakers, cultural institutions, and civil society organizations working together to create a cultural environment that embraces global influences while safeguarding India's unique cultural identity.

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