



CREATIONS

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SOME time ago, a well-known art critic asked a well-known dancer, in my presence, why she did not include "secular" items in her repertoire. This is a shining example of "pseudo secularism". The dancer is among the greatest today — surely she has her own sources of inspiration. Why should she dance "secular" items, whatever they may be? Secular means separation of church and state and has nothing to do with the arts. What would dance be without Balasaraswathi's longing for her child-god in *Krishna nee begane baaro*, or music without the 'bhakti' in M S Subbalakshmi's voice? What would Da Vinci have painted instead of the *Last Supper* or how would Shah Jehan have envisioned a paradise on earth in his magnificent constructions? Thank God, the art critic did not live in those days.

More important, does art have a social function, should it have a social function? These are important questions demanding answers. In 1948, Radhakamal Mukerjee wrote a book called *The Social Function of Art*, which raised more questions and doubts than it gave answers to. Benjamin Rowland made the famous statement that, in India, "Art is religion". Indian art historians are still debating that statement!

Indian aesthetics does not give art the status of conceptual knowledge, or a reflection of reality. Indian art does not depict physical reality as perceived phenomena: it is more concerned with subtler planes of presentation. Unlike the Greeks, the Indian artist never attempted to create the perfect form. Indian art presents imperceptibles, wherein the artist and the viewer identify with the emotion that transports them to a more subtle (sukshma) level. Even as art fashions forms after the human image, the human figure is presented as an object of perfection, not of realism. The perfect form is one more

means of searching for the perfection within. Indian art is the expression of human and superhuman perfection.

Yet, art is a social product and a means of social control. It regulates the lives of people and societies. Myth is made and used to touch emotions. When we walk into a temple, we pass sculptures narrating tales of the deity fighting forces of evil, where good always triumphs and evil is finally destroyed. Thus the ten incarnations of Vishnu and the various murtis of Shiva are different manifestations assumed to fight evil. The mudras (hand gestures) in Buddhist images are meant to convey the teachings of the Buddha, or the turning of the Dhamma Chakra (Wheel of Law). During the Pallava period, when there was a deliberate attempt to clear the forests and promote agriculture by converting hunter-gatherers to farming, the popular deity was Somaskanda, the family trio of Shiva, Parvati and Skanda,

reflecting the "family values" that the rulers were trying to promote. Later, when agriculture had come to stay, the popular deity became Kamakshi, the Goddess holding a sugarcane. There is a strong social message in each icon and narrative scene.

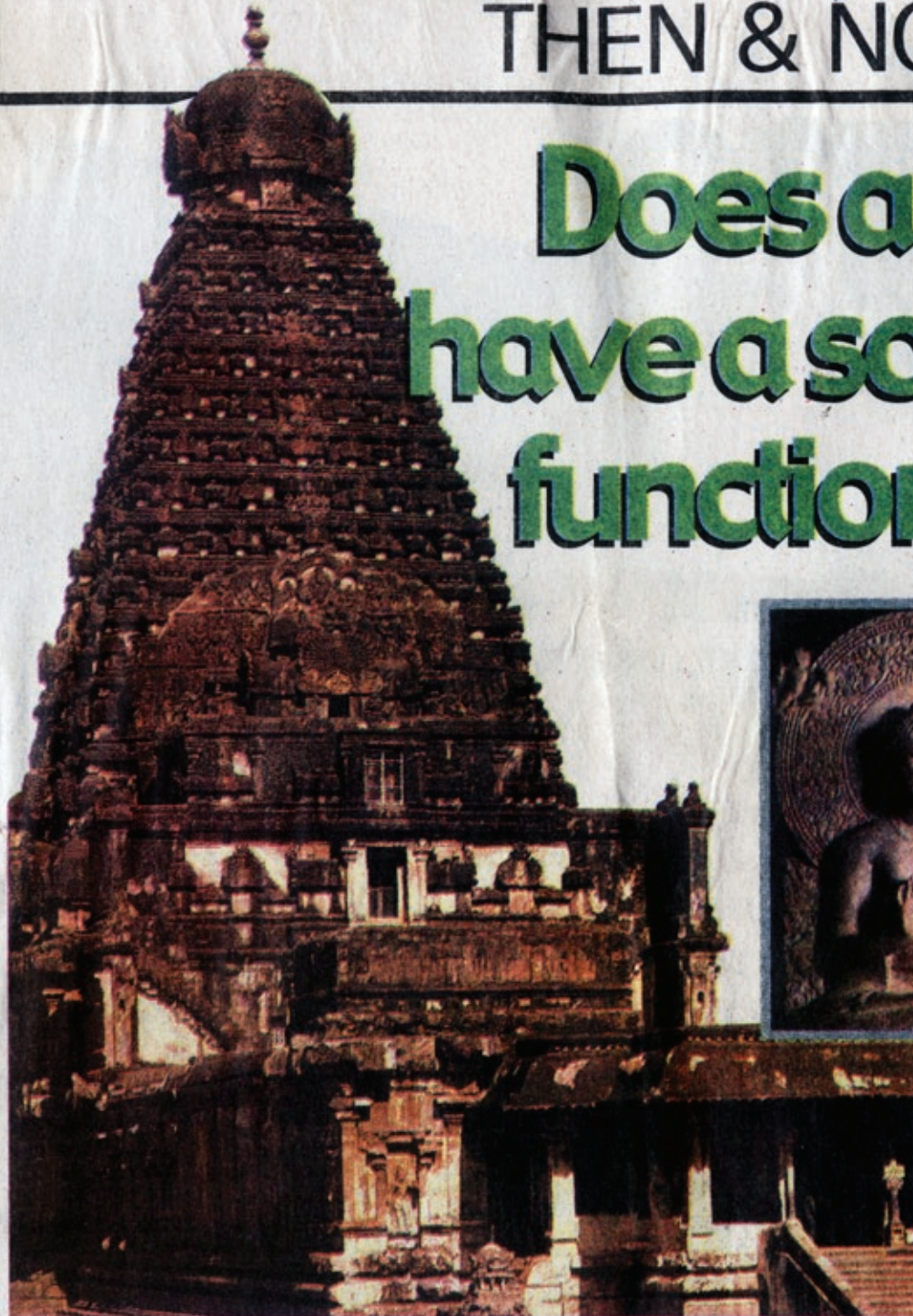
Ancient cultures represented gods and goddesses, demons and symbols that arose from the collective consciousness of the people as myths. Myth formation has been described as "a re-echo of the pre-historic and the ancient". The myths bind the individuals to each other and to the community. The myths and symbols become the raw materials and subject matter of art, creating symbols that are recognizable, which bind the artist and viewer in a common web. Symbols such as the swastika or cross were gradually imbued with magic and mysticism by the work of artists.

Art is also a symbol of power. When prehistoric man painted cave

walls with scenes of the hunt, he may have tried to internalize the event and thereby strengthen himself. The icon in a temple or the cross on the altar is imbued with magic and ritual. Prayer strengthens the worshipper emotionally, and helps him internalize the power symbolized by the object. Art also provided an opportunity for the ruler to display his power. The Ashokan pillar capitals were symbols of the ruler's imperial power. Whether it was the pyramids of the Egyptian Pharaohs or Rajaraja Chola's Brihadishvara temple at Thanjavur, each symbolized the power and achievements of the emperor. The spires of the shikharas were as tall as the king's status. When Rajaraja's son Rajendra built his own Brihadishvara temple at Gangaikondacholapuram, he made it shorter than the Thanjavur shikhara, out of respect for his father.

The art form is often dictated by the message. Where authority is paramount, architecture becomes the

Does art have a social function?



A symbol of imperial might: Tanjavur's Brihadishvara Temple (left); Preaching Buddha from Sarnath (top)

dominant art form, subordinating the others. When knowledge and intellect hold sway, the brittle edges are sharpened and sensitive modelling creates rounded, decorative and soft sculptural modelling. The sculpture is a message. Painting is generally the result of strong passions and a lyricism that pervades the life and times of certain societies.

Each culture or social system nourishes a distinct art form. When the society is passive and static, the art and architecture are severe. A good example is the architecture of the Public Works Departments (PWD) buildings of the post-Independence period in India. Globalization and the opening of the economy have made architecture, art and decoration so much more exciting.

Art is also based on economic structure. The nature of the economy and the forms of distribution of surplus wealth and leisure define the form and emotional content of the arts. Temple building, an economic, religious and artistic activity in medieval south India, was replaced by individual works of artists in the colonial period; today, big buyers collect works of art as an investment, apart from adorning their walls. Art also depends on the region for its subjects, materials and technique. Early Indian farmers worshipped the Earth goddess, who was represented as a large-limbed symbol of fertility, while the searing Iranian desert juxtaposed the endless tranquility of the sands with the rich colours of stylized gardens.

The more perfect the symbolism of the artistic form, the more beautiful it becomes. The Gupta Buddha, the dancing Nataraja and the stately Shiva Lingas are all-powerful representations of a superior intellectual process. But, even as the religious message becomes stronger, so does the artistic creation. The distinction between religion and art lies in the abstraction of values and the formalization of religious appeal, which form the basis for emotional appeal.

If art has been "a hand-maiden of religion", it has also developed unaided by religion. Chinese sculpture and Moghul painting are two good examples, although the imperial style is ever present. Post-Renaissance art in Europe broke away from religious themes to create landscapes, portraits and still life. Every age throws up new problems and challenges, and new materials for the artist. But, as art is produced by the interaction between the individual and society, the artist's social and cultural relationships govern the choice of subject and the art form. If primitive art was closely associated with the rites of fertility and survival, and the art of the ancient world served a religion that expressed universal values, aspirations and moods, later European

art compensated for inhibitions and urges suppressed earlier. Much later — and as late as the twentieth century in India — art became an individual quest, developing its own rules and standards and searching moods and emotions within for inspiration. In the 19th and 20th centuries, the artist began to refashion and reinterpret social values and moral codes, leading a protest against social repression. But style, symbol, motif and content remained the products of social developments, and served the purpose of social expression and communication.

Art has been described as an "autobiography of society", expressing the ideals and sentiments of the national culture of the times and age. The power of art lies in the presentation of the universal and symbolic. Art has created archetypes and symbols that have bound society and individuals. Whether the work of an individual or the collective creation of a guild of artisans, art has given the world the noblest and most beautiful ideals and symbols. By bringing unity and order on the ideal plane, art binds society. It cannot be "religious", "secular" or "ethical", for it combines all the truths of religion, metaphysics and morality to bring about equilibrium between the individual and his society.

So, to return to our question, art does have a social function, but it is one that develops unselfconsciously, one that responds to a social need. If it is imposed, as the communists did in the USSR, it becomes a symbol to hate. Let us not forget that the first symbols to fall as the Soviet Union was dismantled were the enormous sculptures of Lenin, now lying in junkyards. Art should not be required to have a social function, for enforced attempts will never succeed. We cannot demand "religious" or "secular" themes — that is the artist's prerogative. If the end product is something society can identify with, it is automatically feted, appreciated and takes an important place in society. If the community cannot identify with the work of art, it is discarded. When Raja Ravi Varma broke with tradition to paint in the newly introduced European genre of portraiture and realism, he chose themes and symbols out of the epics and puranas. Every viewer looking at his works identified with the symbols that were already a part of social consciousness. The new style merely enhanced the picture. And that is why Raja Ravi Varma became immortal, whereas many of his contemporaries were soon forgotten. There is a message here that artists and art critics may like to remember.

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