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identity

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Altered Egos

Girish Shahane explores the insight into identity provided by current art practice, and discusses its ideological foundations.



Anju Dodiya. *Entering the Ring*. Water colour. 22" x 30". 1998.

For her first solo show at Gallery Chemould in 1991, Anju Dodiya wrote a catalogue essay which began with the lines, "My Nayika dislikes intrusions. Yet she craves for something, surrounded by modern, urban Indian furniture. Her anxieties warm the damp, white rooms she inhabits." The use of the word 'Nayika', or heroine, indicated that Dodiya saw her self-portraits as theatrical rather than autobiographical. Biography can, of course, be presented as theatre. The dramatisation of personal trauma is at the heart of the work of Frida Kahlo, one of the central points of reference for Dodiya's paintings. But Dodiya's words may have signalled a desire to minimise the biographical content of her watercolours by employing distancing mechanisms.

If this was indeed what the artist wanted, she achieved it more fully in her second solo show five years later. A crucial innovation in this show was her decision to use two self-portraits within a single frame. The interaction between these two protagonists made any transparently autobiographical reading redundant. The identity of her figures was now more obviously a construct. Another layer of distancing was added when she began creating variations on found images from art, film and the mass media as vehicles for the exploration of this constructed identity.

Dodiya's development is only the most clear among that of a number of painters who followed a similar trajectory in the nineties, moving from a late modernist form amenable to existentialist exegesis or Freudian analysis, to a postmodernist interest in irony, play, and the appropriation of available images. These artists might collectively be called Generation i, because they deal with identity in an intellectual, ironic manner, imitating images rather than the world at large. Properly speaking they span two generations, and include, among others, Atul Dodiya, Subba Ghosh, Subodh Gupta, Anant Joshi, Jitish Kallat, Bharti Kher, Bose Krishnamachari, Surendran Nair, Shibu Natesan, Baiju Parthan, N Pushpamala, T V Santhosh and Nataraj Sharma.

The output of these artists arguably represents the third major phase since independence in the development of the idea of identity in Indian painting. The first period is best represented by Akbar Padamsee and Jehangir Sabavala. Their figures can rarely be located in any particular space or time; identity, for painters of this generation, is defined by a *universalist* humanism. It is instructive that this should be so of the first generation of modernist painters in India, given that European modernism was linked to extremist political configurations and an often explicitly anti-humanist aesthetic.

There are particularist painters in this first phase as well, most notably M.F.Husain, who has been for half a century the primary mythifier of independent India. But the model



Jitish Kallat. *Womb Study II* (from a series of V). Mixed media on jigsaw puzzle. 11" x 8½". 2000.

defined by Padamsee and Sabavala remains true with a few modifications for a large proportion of their contemporaries.

The paintings of Krishen Khanna form an important link between the universalist period and the second phase, which was inaugurated in the 1970s. Artists of the seventies see identity in distinctly *social* terms. Class and physical location are integral to selfhood and relationships for Bhupen Khakhar's tradesmen, Sudhir Patwardhan's labourers, Jogen Chowdhury's Bengali middle-class couples and Gieve Patel's steetside vendors and beggars. This socially defined identity dissolves in the course of the nineties, as the self becomes more fluid, less integrated, and can encompass biography, fantasy and even political statement all at once. The unitary, expansive space which had hitherto dominated painting is often replaced by a patchwork of juxtapositions. Elements within compositions might be locatable in space and time but do not necessarily share those features with their neighbours.

Most Generation i artists have experimented with the self-portrait, a form seldom seen in India previously. The theatrical and fanciful are highlighted in the way they depict themselves. We see Anju Dodiya as a sumo wrestler entering the ring; Nataraj Sharma as a macho, gun-toting Hindi film hero; T V Santhosh as the receiver of an annunciation from a Renaissance angel; Anandjit Ray's alter-ego as a hack out of a pulp fiction novel sitting at his typewriter; Subba Ghosh in the garb of a bandit; Atul Dodiya as a shadowy impresario orchestrating a blend of Hindu myth and European modernist art.

Where geography does play a role, it is at one remove, seen through the lens of an already existing representation. For instance, Subodh Gupta used the miserable reputation of his home state as the take-off point for a self-portrait in which the word 'Bihari' appears in lights near the bottom. He has gone on to examine his status as a migrant from mofussil Bihar through a series of stainless steel, aluminium and bronze sculptures featuring emblematic objects: country-made revolvers, bicycles with dangling milk cans, and the baggage of lower middle-class travellers. Identity here is not so much a straightforward function of place as a self-conscious reflection of popular prejudices and stereotypes.

Bharti Kher dealt with locational identity in a more idiosyncratic mode by getting men from her Delhi colony to model for a grid of precisely painted moustaches; More recently, she has commented on her British-Indianness by creating digital images featuring monstrous hybrids, part ape, part human.

Jitish Kallat's engagement with identity, which has recently branched out into the public sphere, began with theatrical self-portraits around which personal totems were arranged. The second phase of his career, taking in the years 1998 to 2001, is the most interesting one in the context of the present discussion. In these years he investigated connections between the present and the past in paintings which had an unusual emotional resonance without a hint of sentimentality. The recurrent motifs he used included organs of the body, double-helices and images of germination, along with self-portraits and representations of family members. Taken as a whole, these paintings appear to underline the gap between knowledge and experience; between information encoded digitally for transmission



Subba Ghosh. Kishenlal Dhabewala.
Oil on canvas. 654 x 165 cms. 2000.



Photograph of Flirting Woman.
Film still from a 1990s Kannada film.

through DNA and the analog personalities created as a result of the transmission; and between the individuals at different ends of the process. The affect of these paintings derives from two intuitively incompatible views of identity being placed side by side without one being favoured over the other; it's a bit like the current which flows between two electrodes that are close to each other but don't touch.

Subba Ghosh has produced some of the most explicitly political Generation i art. He paints giant portraits of working class people: murals, cut-outs and long, unframed canvases which hang from ceiling to floor. The monumentality of these works provides the subjects a solemn dignity which they are denied by Indian society. Ghosh's concentration on class identity, his political consciousness, and his use of real models rather than appropriated images might suggest that his oeuvre sits uneasily within the Generation i framework, and could more profitably be seen in the context of, say, Sudhir Patwardhan's paintings. Unlike Patwardhan's figures, however, Ghosh's portraits depend on their relationship with popular representations of politicians and film stars on giant hoardings. He iconises working-class individuals, often



News photograph of arrested chain snatchers. 2002.
The old colonial system in which the police released the arrested person's photos with full personal details has been modified.
The photographs released now usually show the accused wearing a facemask. Identification slates are seldom used.

solitary ones, as a way of censuring a society in which a few larger-than-life figures wield enormous power and influence. His portraits, then, are less connected with the integrated protagonists of Patwardhan's paintings and more with the contemporary trend that plays on two meanings of identity: One sense of the word refers to that which defines oneself. But the word also denotes that which is exactly like another, *identical* to something or someone else.

Interrogating identity by employing the identical is a strategy adopted by N.Pushpamala for the past six years. In collaboration with photographers like Meenal Agarwal and Clare Arni, she has created four major sequences of self-portraits drawing on images from film and the news media. Her latest project, called Native Women of South India, involved the creation of elaborate settings, costumes and lighting, apart from a judicious choice of reference images. Pushpamala's attention to detail forces viewers to engage with the components of popular image-making. These are mocking images, in the double sense of the word 'mock': it means 'to mimic', but also 'to ridicule'. Both connotations of the word are used in Shelley's sonnet 'Ozymandias' to describe a sculptor's portrait of his sovereign:

*"...Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed..."*

The sculptor 'mocks' the king's visage in two ways, reproducing the monarch's features while also satirising his overweening ambition. The idea that ridicule is an essential component of Pushpamala's mimesis gains strength from the examination of one of the less successful images in her latest series. It is a version of a newspaper photograph depicting two women arrested by the police. The woman in the reference image has a blankness in her eyes, an utter lack of expression which makes her desperation all the more apparent. Pushpamala produces an excellent copy, apart from a touch of extra sentiment in her downcast countenance, as if she were afraid there would be doubts about where her sympathies lay, and made her photograph more 'readable' to guard against such a reaction.

If this interpretation of Pushpamala's work is valid, then it demarcates the boundaries of her project. Wherever the reference image goes beyond kitsch to represent something horrific, her own version is doomed to be weaker than the original, because one aspect of the mockery at the heart of her method is ruled out. In another image she has found what might be a solution to this impasse. Dealing with a nineteenth century photograph of an Andamanese woman, she departs significantly from the source and creates a startling image which has resonances beyond the purview of the original (*images on pages 26/27*). A hint of the mendicant is visible in her combination of dark make-up and 'Toda' robes. Even the measuring apparatus on which her forearm rests appears to be a distant echo of the traditional forked wooden stick of the sanyasi. The point is not whether this particular reading seems appropriate or not, but rather the fact that the 'Toda' image sparks associations in a way in which her other photographs, more closely tied to their source, do not.

Identity and the Cultural Left

In an explanatory note about the Native Women of South India venture, which has been funded by the India Foundation for the Arts, Pushpamala writes, "While we started the project as a sort of feminist exploration, as well as an exploration of South Indian women's images in the media, one of the very important areas we got into was that of ethnography. We began seeing the images as types and linking it to representation of 'native types' from the colonial era to the present. This refers also to the history of photography as a tool for ethnographic documentation which continues till today. This has led us to touch anthropology, anthropometry or the science of measuring humans (an outdated discipline which we learnt has come back into fashion because of the Human Genome Project), ideas of race and caste. For example, one of our key images is a mid-19th century photograph of an Andaman islander (which we changed to a Toda woman as the original woman was shown naked). We found later that the original photograph was from a now notorious British colonial study whose object was to compare the skulls of aboriginals, criminals, prostitutes and the insane as primitive and under-developed types."

Her account encapsulates an approach to identity characteristic of what the philosopher Richard Rorty has called the Cultural Left. The rest of this essay is devoted to a brief account of this type of identity politics. They may not appear to impinge directly on cultural production, but they underpin much politically oriented contemporary art.

As Pushpamala records, natural science was frequently used in the colonial period as a tool for legitimising racist and sexist ideas. In the 1960s, Left-leaning political philosophers expanded upon this fact and argued that science is no more 'objective' than any other kind of knowledge; it is just as susceptible to ideological manipulation. The Cultural Left developed, in other words, a belief in the relativism of knowledge. Closely linked to this was a belief in the relativism of values. Just as colonisers had imposed their brand of science, they had also sought to show their own culture to be the superior of the cultures of colonised nations. Cultural relativism evolved as a counter to this, asserting that the value system of any culture is as valid as that of any other. Since neo-imperialists usually appealed to the commonality of human beliefs and aspirations as a way of propagating their own ends, the cultural relativists responded by rejecting such commonality. Those anthropological accounts were favoured which concentrated on divergence rather than similarity between groups. If disparities in customs between cultures were as great as some anthropologists suggested, it followed that there was no unitary human nature governed by biology, at least at a level of sophistication higher than the basic drives. Identity was malleable, or plastic, rather than 'hard-wired'. It was a social construct.

This kind of thinking is postcolonial (because it considers the denigration of colonised cultures a crucially relevant historical fact), postmodern (because it values heterogeneity over homogeneity) and post-structuralist (because it questions, following the thinker Jacques Derrida, the existence of any universals; and highlights, following the philosopher Michel Foucault, the ways in which knowledge is made a slave of power).

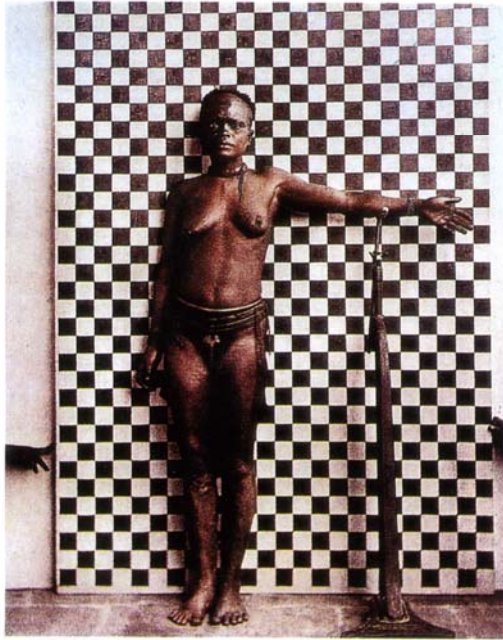


Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni. Response to the Kannada film image. Photograph. 2003.

It is easy to see, in this context, why Pushpamala should think of anthropometry as an 'outdated discipline' which has returned to fashion thanks to the Human Genome Project. At first sight, the statement seems false in two ways. To begin with, the measurement of humans continues to be useful in understanding the way our bodies work, and has been greatly extended through new modes of physiological investigation such as Magnetic Resonance Imaging, for the invention of which the Nobel Prize in Medicine was awarded last year. Secondly, there is no causal connection between such investigation and the study of genes. But given the recent shift from psychology to physiology in the understanding of identity, and the fact that the Human Genome Project is billed as the Big Daddy of such physiological research, it is easily



Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni. Response to the image of women in police custody. Photograph. 2003.



Photograph of Andaman Islander, mid 19th century. Anthropometric photograph from a notorious British study comparing measurements of 'primitives', criminals, prostitutes and natives deemed insane.

seen as a symbol of the trend as a whole. For the Cultural Left, this trend is baneful; it signifies a return to locating identity in biology, an attempt which has an unsavoury past.

I want to argue that it is in the interests of the Left to move away from its entrenched cultural relativist and social constructionist positions, because they have been outflanked by developments in science. Neither social constructionism nor cultural relativism is integral to Leftist thinking, which is defined primarily by its commitment to equality and social justice. For a while, these two ideals may best have been located within the postcolonial, postmodern, post-structuralist framework. These ideas did a lot of good, fostering a respect for cultural difference in the citizens of industrialised democracies. A sign of this is the filtering of revisionist history down to mainstream blockbusters like *Dances With Wolves*, *Gangs of New York* and *The Last Samurai*. But now the framework needs to be abandoned like a snake abandons its old skin in order to grow. I will deal with a few of the problems inherent in relativism and social constructionism, and suggest an alternate direction.

The British philosopher Bernard Williams analysed the self-contradictory nature of cultural relativism three decades ago in his book *Morality*, but his refutation was never taken on board by the Cultural Left. Cultural relativism has three central tenets: a) Cultures have differing value systems; b) The value systems of different cultures are equally valid; and c) One culture ought not to impose its values on another. The last of these tenets is a moral imperative ('ought not'). Williams pointed out that, in order to make the moral statement, cultural relativists are forced to assume the overarching ethical code whose existence they

deny. To be consistent, they could make no moral statements about relations between cultures *at all*. If the values and customs of Culture A involve slaughtering citizens of Culture B, well, relativists must take that as a valid choice unless they invoke a universalist morality against it. The entire complex post-colonial critique of imperialism, insofar as it adheres to cultural relativism, has a simple, moral sleight-of-hand at its root. It depends implicitly upon that which it explicitly rejects.

The second problem with cultural relativism is that it tends to take cultures as hermetic entities and fails to get to grips with complexities *within* cultures. As a result, in an attempt to safeguard cultural identity, Leftists often end up supporting practices which should be anathema to them. Take, for instance, the argument against legislation to outlaw female genital mutilation (euphemistically called circumcision) in north Africa; Or, closer to home, the argument in favour of the perpetuation of religious civil laws for Muslims in India, although these are, and will always be, unfair to women by liberal standards. The fact that Indian feminists turned against the idea of a single, secular civil code around 1993 indicates that post-modernism and post-structuralism appeared at the same time in Leftist political thought and contemporary art. The Right, of course, marched happily into the terrain vacated by the post-modern Left, even mouthing phrases like 'gender justice'.

A third argument against relativism is that it can weaken the thrust of politically committed art. In Anand Patwardhan's documentary, *Ram Ke Naam* (1991), a very effective scene involves the film-maker asking Kar Sevaks if they know when Lord Rama was born. None of the Kar Sevaks is certain about the century, or even millennium, of Rama's birth. The director then asks if it isn't odd that they have no clue *when* Rama was born, but nevertheless know exactly the spot *where* he was born. In *Ram Ke Naam*, myth is repeatedly opposed to history. By the time Patwardhan made *Father, Son and Holy War* (1994), cultural relativism had taken hold in India, and he ended up opposing myth with myth, a far less successful strategy. The film, an exploration of masculinist impulses behind religious aggression, starts off with a shot of a sculpture made by Pushpamala in imitation of a traditional fertility goddess. The voice-over contends that in ancient times war was unknown and a matriarchal culture prevailed. Then patriarchy took over and things went seriously awry. This story, unfortunately, is only as true as the belief that Rama ruled over a land free of war after he, assisted by an army of monkeys, had defeated King Ravana. Anthropologists have yet to find any evidence that a peaceful matriarchal culture ever existed. While sophisticated weapons and warfare can only be a feature of modern societies, studies show that homicide rates in hunter-gatherer cultures usually greatly exceed those of contemporary urban societies. Cultural relativists, of course, attribute such findings to the imperialist, patriarchal bias of anthropologists.

In rejecting the universal applicability of science, the Cultural Left does itself a great disservice. It denies itself a potent weapon in fighting the sectarianism and obscurantism which threaten Indian society. It is true that colonial anthropologists and anthropometrists often came up with racist theories. But it is equally true that these theories were refuted by better anthropology and better anthropometry. An essential component of science is the creation of testable and falsifiable

hypotheses. The connection between skull dimensions of aboriginals, prostitutes and criminals, which Pushpamala mentions, is one such hypothesis; It was convincingly refuted once anthropometric data were properly gathered. Recently, the Archaeological Survey of India has come to some questionable conclusions regarding early structures at the Babri Masjid site. These are best rebutted not by suggesting that all archaeology is politically biased, but by appealing to the same data used by the ASI and coming up with a better postulate, as historians like Irfan Habib, not caught up in the relativist wave, have done.

If new discoveries place a question mark against the Cultural Left's other prized belief, that of the social construction of identity, it may be well not to reject them out of hand. After all, while fascism's horrors were grounded in the credo that identity is fixed, unchangeable and based in ethnicity, the view of human nature as almost infinitely plastic has also had negative consequences. Stalin's favourite agronomist, Trofim Lysenko, was convinced that the crucial factor in determining the length of the vegetation period in a plant was not its genetic constitution, but its interaction with its environment. He was also persuaded, mistakenly, that acquired characteristics were transmitted to the next generation. In other words, if you made a couple sleep sixteen hours each day of their lives, it would result in their children tending toward laziness. Conversely, by training people to be ideal Soviet citizens, you could, within a few generations, create an unmatched feat of social engineering. Lysenko's stranglehold on Soviet biology not only set that country's research back thirty years, and sent many of the USSR's best geneticists to Siberia, but probably played a part in Soviet and Chinese famines.

A debate in 1976 between Noam Chomsky and the Marxist zoologist Richard Lewontin demonstrated that leftists could adopt different positions regarding the plasticity of identity. Lewontin cited Marx's idea that human needs were shaped by society and changed in different periods of history. Chomsky countered that a broad notion of a universal human nature was necessary in order to know what kind of society was desirable, and he referred to Marx's writings about the 'species nature' of humans in his defense.

Chomsky, in fact, struck a major blow in favour of innateness and universalism forty years ago, with his concept of Universal Grammar. But it took recent developments in hot-button political issues like sexual identity to ratchet up the nature-nurture debate once again. Researchers have gleaned a number of hints in recent years about the biological component of sexual orientation, although some of the findings have been misleading, like the famous 'queer hypothalamus' findings of the early 1990s. Interestingly, the neurologist who conducted that study, Simon LeVay, is a gay activist who believes that the discovery of a biologically fixed sexual identity would reduce discrimination against homosexuals. Most politically conscious gay men and women today reject the idea that they could have turned out any other way given a different upbringing.

Advances in neurology have offered substantial evidence of dissimilarities between the brains of men and women. Studies of children in novel environments, such as those brought up by lesbian couples, offer strong indications that gender differences have less to do with conditioning than social constructionist dogma would hold. Even the biologist



Pushpamala N. and Clare Arni. Response to the image of the Andaman Islander. Photograph. 2003. From Native Women of South India – Manners & Customs, Bangalore, 2000-2003. Funded by an arts collaboration grant by the India Foundation for the Arts, Bangalore.

Stephen J. Gould, the most trenchant opponent of biological reductionism, conceded that the idea of 'differential parental investment' is logical from an evolutionary perspective and probably underlies "some different, and broadly general, emotional propensities of human males and females."

The Left can continue to highlight the historically conditioned status of identity while also recognising universal patterns in human behaviour. In fact, a recognition of such patterns can provide new ammunition in the fight against discrimination. Knowing as we do now that every human being alive is separated from a common origin in Africa by only about 1,00,000 years is a powerful signifier of how alike we all are, and likeness is an excellent basis on which to build an egalitarian political theory. In cases where biological research foregrounds differences between groups, the Left can fight to ensure that individuals are not judged on the basis of such statistical inter-group differences.

Looking beyond the sphere of cultural relativism and social constructionism, a case could be made that postmodernism itself has entered its final phase. Its valorisation of heterogeneity and surface may be superseded by novel formulations of universality and structure. Even as the spectre of the post-human haunts us, the time may be ripe for a new humanism, different from that embodied by the works of Akbar Padamsee and Jehangir Sabavala, but capable of evolving a more integrated notion of identity than the view represented by Generation i. 17