

## **The Premise and Practice of Sculpture in Kerala**

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### **Introduction**

Since the beginning of human civilization, sculpture has played an important role. In the very ancient times it was focussed only on the utility value. As it involves an act of shaping in tune with each need, it is called Plastic Art, in the sense that it is a shaping art. It is also called Spatial Art as it exists in a space.

The growth of sculpture in the social sphere was based on the legends and rituals that were the value sources of ancient society. It was the public asset of the society. Sculptures existed in human society as idols and ritualistic icons. The meaning of them was not definite or limited. According to the civilization and circumstance of life, works of art change their forms. In the society of aborigines where life was in a primitive state, and in the complex contemporary times, sculpture solidifies history and the present times at a historical point. That's why Ernst Fischer defined art as the solidification of social experience.

It is not possible to understand sculpture or art itself by keeping it outside the social discourse. An artist making a creation is a social experience. The evolution of sculpture endorses the observation that art is a social experience. Sculpture grew and developed as a symbol suitable for the common communion of people or a tribe in relation to religious and social rituals. Just as an accidental social creation turns out to become a recurring ritual, the sculpture becomes a ritualistic edifice that keeps repeating in social life. Sculpture exists by maintaining the legends and beliefs within a social structure, and transferring from one

generation to another. A society or a tribe achieves stability and permanency, and creates the emotions of mutual trust in the minds of all believers in its social structure in the presence of a concrete receptive idol. It is through the unification of emotions created in the social sphere that such a receptive idol is created. It is in this premise that sculpture acquired the form of a ritualistic image.

Of the creations from prehistoric times, only the terra cotta and stone sculptures remain to this day. In the 1920s the relics of Indus Valley civilization were unearthed. It is the language of sculpture that enables us to read that period and civilization. Only sculpture and architecture did we get as the mark of that civilization. In all ancient civilizations, the visual language of sculptures has helped historical research a great deal.

Perhaps in the initial stage, the sculpture didn't necessarily have direct association with religion. The early human might have trained himself to be a spiritual seeker than the follower of a religion. Before the thought of religion was born, the sculpture had existed as part of everyday life. So it can be assumed that sculpture acquired definite religious connotations only after religion reached the heart of people. The sculptures thus created became part of the social being and inseparable from people's life.

In Kerala, painting and sculpture grew up as a progression of handicraft. As a result, tribal and secular characteristics are found embedded in such sculptures. During the later periods, with the invasion of Shaivism and Vaishnavism, a sort of religious hegemony greatly influenced Kerala's own sculpture style. We all know the history of Buddhist-Jain creations evolving to become Shaiva-Vaishnava sculptures – for instance, the Nilambeerur Bhagavati temple (in Ernakulam district). We have got numerous pieces of evidence proving the existence of a large number of Buddhist and Jain temples in ancient Kerala. Most of them are now turned into Hindu temples. So, art has been transforming according to the social changes.

The forms and models of Kerala's sculpture were created through the interaction with a number of media. The sculpture in Kerala was presented in different media like stone, metal and wood. The presence of once-active Buddha-Jain sculptures reveals the expressive perfection of this art form. The ninth-century sculptures of Buddha and Jain do not have the splendour and magnificence of Gupta-period creations. On the other hand, they are meditative and are the expressions of an active inner light shone by the enlightenment of the soul. Apart from the presence of Buddha-Jain sculptures, the creations found all across Kerala are of Hindu Gods in various forms. Existing as question marks along with them are Dravidian symbols as relics of an early civilization not fitting into any religious interpretation. The Hindu religious creations exist in sculpture through their bizarre forms and figures. Many of them are abounding with the uniqueness of the idol making process. On evaluating them in an aesthetic perspective, they are different in terms of the sense of movement and the strange narrative techniques. The Kulashekara Mandapam at PadmanabhaSwamy temple and the Ramayana tales carved on them, and the sculptures at Thirunavaya are a treasure trove of fantastic narrative creations. The specimens of Kerala's sculpture beginning from Kaviyoor Temple as archetypes of religious beliefs express the deep creative spirits inherent in a society.

The idols of worship found in the traditional sacred groves and the Bhagavati temples all across the State help in broadening the knowledge of traditional sculpturing culture in Kerala. Exploring the evolution of Kerala's sculpture must be in the particular background of the cultural invasion that happened in South India and then spread to Kerala.

In his article, 'Is sculpture a language?' Roland Barthes questions the purpose of art as follows: "In fact, the question whether painting and sculpture is a language is a moral one. The answer for that should be simplified. It should be one that protects the rights of an individual, an artist and the values of the entire humanity. The meaning and evolution implicated by art as the symbol of a society is the meaning and evolution of people and their culture. This cultural transformation was evolved in tune with the value systems that change with the time.

The grass roots of Kerala's culture can be traced to the amalgamation formed as a result of invasion and tradition. The culture of a people lying so coherent with their works of art is an extraordinary experience. The vision that art is a social experience and how the style of expression defines the culture of people is a significant proposition.

In the social backdrop of prehistoric art, there was no differentiation between art and life. Many irrelevant things in that context are relevant today. It can be seen that in the traditional art, the function of space was deployed more powerfully than today. In all the civilizations of the world, figures of women exemplifying the mother goddess concept have been found. There are lots of examples in Kerala as well.

One should know the sculptural tradition of Kerala to understand its contemporary creations. To say in one word, our tradition is one of public art. Public art stands for an art that exists by enabling public discourse of the people. It includes the figures carved in wood and the murals in temples, the sculptures in palace structures, idols of worship, and statues of kings.

It was in the definite and dominant premise of caste and religion that the Indian sculpture existed. This sculpturing method clearly divided by the caste system restricted the devotion to God within the walls of the society. It was by the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Indianness from being a concept became a reality. Max Muller and Sir William Jones let the world and India see the greatness of Indian art. During this period, Indian art moved from the concept of public art to introduce the 18<sup>th</sup> century European contribution of individualism. When romanticism appeared in the Western world in the period of 1789-90, the thoughts of individual freedom became more powerful than before. While the artistic activities till that period were in connection with the organised religions, here we saw art negating them. The sculptor declared himself that he did not belong to the shackles of a religion.

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For sculpture, the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the period of change. In place of the traditional media like stone, wood, etc., sculpture takes up the production concepts put forward by industrialization. Each product born in a factory is, in fact, a sculpture. In Russia, the aesthetic concept of constructivism grew as a revolutionary step from the finding that “the art that the modern world can create should be modernistic in nature”. They insisted that the work of art should be as remarkable as a product manufactured in the factories of the revolutionised Russia.

The sculpture in the industrial era was preparing for a new step forward. Until then, the sculptor was just a creator. During the time of industrialization, the sculptor also turned to become a producer. The alienation formed in individuals in the aftermath of industrialization was the basis for the sculpturing method of constructivism. As a result of this, a perspective change happened in the production of sculptures. It broke away from the traditional methods. The techniques like welding, assembling, and bolting were begun to be used in sculpture. It moved away from the concept that sculpture is stationary.

In modern times, sculptures exist at many levels. By depicting subjects related to contemporary life, by protecting the tradition of organised religions, as decoration in architecture, and as the most modern installation art, it outlives the time.

The freedom struggle years were a renaissance period for Indian sculpture. The aesthetic concepts of Bengal school emerged as a new revelation in those days. This movement explored the nature of India's tradition. They found that the energy of Indian culture flowed from the folk and primitive art traditions of India. It was during this period that important thoughts about India's freedom appeared in visual arts. It was the sculptor Ramkinger Baije who introduced freedom concepts in sculpture before 1947. What led to modernism was the exploration of how to include the thoughts of individual freedom, freedom of society, and political freedom into the medium of sculpture while making creations influenced by the folk art tradition. It was Ramkinger Baije who took a leap forward in Indian sculpture at the beginning

of 20<sup>th</sup> century. He made changes in the art form so as to bring in folk characteristics to sculptures.

Even as the Indian sculpture was trying to discover its roots, a silent revolution was brewing in Kerala. Here a society was reconstructing its memories in sculptures. The installation of the Shiva idol at Aruvippuram by Sreenarayana Guru was the most symbolic idol installation in Kerala's public art history. This can be understood on the basis of the vision that art is a social experience.

The history of Kerala itself makes it clear that the historical texts of Kerala's art and sculpture before the renowned painter Ravi Varma have not yet been comprehensively recorded. Even though the rich past of wooden carvings and murals still exist on the walls of temples and palaces in Kerala, they were not done depending on one person.

It can be understood that Kerala's sculpture in those days was existing as a ritualistic art or a public art movement.

A comprehensive change as part of the national movement had not been seen in Kerala after the 40s. While the Bengal school explored the roots of the art form based on the concept of Indianness, the sculpture in Kerala turned to become weapons for political and social needs. For instance:

Social movements: Made statues of Sreenarayana Guru.

Political movement: Made figures like spinning wheel and sickle-hammer.

It was by imbibing the energy of Dravidian movements that Chola-mandalam and Madras School of Arts redefined sculpture in an academic perspective. K.C.S. Panicker and Kanayi Kunjiraman and his disciples experimented with the Western artistic methods in their creations on the lines of modernism. They were inspired by the neo-literal movement of M. Govindan and others. It was, in fact, the heyday of abstract art.

While the period of modernism happened in literature, the formless abstraction gained prominence in art and sculpture. When India was going through its political turmoil, Cholamandalam and School of Arts took refuge in political standpoints. The new theories of art that the extremist-leftist politics should have put forward in the 70s were unfortunately taken up by such political movements. Therefore, they were incapable of bringing in significant changes.

The Indian sculpture was falling victim to Orientalism, the commercial slogan of the Western marketing strategy. The Indian sculptors came to be seen as workers of a unique craftsmanship. The Western aesthetic visionaries viewed Indian sculpture as mere folk art, and encouraged such a tradition, detaching it from contemporary realities. It was based on these kinds of creations that the Tantrik art and other Oriental art theories took root in Indian sculpture.

In other words, it can be seen that all unique art movements are the local versions of the Negritude movement begun in Africa by Aime Cesaire and Senghor. When they talked about extremist politics, here in India politics was not in the discourse. When they talked about the racial pride of black colour, here we coiled ourselves into the national concept of Indianness. In other words, we didn't try to become secular beyond Hinduism.

It was in the 1960s that Kanayi Kunjiraman entered the scene splitting Kerala's sculpture into two, declaring that history was before and after him. After doing his studies in Madras during 1962-64 period, and higher studies abroad in 1965, he returned to Kerala in 1969. His first public art sculpture was Yakshi. He also had another sculpture by the name of Mukkolaperumal (1975).

Like all other great movements, the art of Kanayi Kunjiraman is now standing embarrassed in front of the time. The male-centred worldview did limit Kanayi's sculptures. Examples: the Nymph at Shankumukham and the woman figurines in Veli.

His abstract sculptures like Mukkolaperumal and Madanthara boast of high artistic quality. Notwithstanding all limitations, his role in making Kerala's sculpture contemporary and popular as a public art is undeniable.

The 1970s were a period of half-romantics, romantics and of theorization. Modernism became a reality, and the humans, individuals, society and everything were re-examined. In that situation where people prepared themselves to undergo a social evaluation, the artists here geared themselves up for some fundamental assessment of Kerala's society and art.

The Radical Painters and Sculptors Association formed at the beginning of 1980s, was against the apolitical approach of the 1970s. During the crucial two years period in Kerala's art history, this association created a new vision of aesthetics. They objected to the commercialisation of individual-based gallery practice that existed until then. To Indian art, they contributed a new definition on how popular art should become revolutionary. They showed us how the contemporary experiences of life could become the subject of art.

Some of the main sculptors among them were: K.P. Krishnakumar, K. Reghunathan, and Karunakaran. Parallel to this, many artists helped themselves to do new explorations in sculpture. They were the ones who discovered independent stands dissimilar to the radical group. M. N. Rimson, Asokan Pothuval, K.P. Soman, Rajashekar, V.K. Rajan is prominent among them.

In the torrent of commercialisation that happened after the 90s, Indian art was led to a new direction. It is now in a situation where the market determines the art. It also creates the artist required for such a scenario. Painting and sculpture are now confined to market-centred interests. This market-interest-based art is also creating an audience suitable for it. But we fail to critically understand or study the audience thus created. Art reviews turn out to become advertisements for the market. The whole artistic activities have been turned upside down to work as a backdrop for this economic structure. The value of an artistic creation has been



reduced to its monetary value. The marketing of painting and sculpture has become the playhouse of predatory brokers. But the isolated voices rising above such conspiracies give some solace.

## **Conclusion**

For the art to become free, popular and contemporary, it is necessary to deeply understand the social and political existence of art. It is the social responsibility of us as an individual and an artist.