

Art as a Vehicle of Social Change: Identity, Resistance and Modern Indian Painting

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Abstract

Art has historically functioned as both a reflection of society and an active agent of transformation. Modern Indian painting emerged at a crucial historical juncture marked by colonial domination, nationalist awakening, and the subsequent challenges of post-independence nation building. Far from being a purely aesthetic endeavour, modern Indian art functioned as a powerful visual medium through which artists negotiated questions of identity, resistance and social transformation. This paper examines how modern Indian painters used visual language to articulate personal, cultural, and political concerns, positioning art as an active agent of social change. Through a critical analysis of selected works by Amrita Shergill, M. F. Hussain, Tayeb Mehta and Nalini Malani, the study explores how issues of nationhood, mythology, marginalization and dissent were represented and contested in Modern Indian painting. Shergil's empathetic representation of marginalized women, Husain's reconfiguration of myth and nation, and Malani's feminist interrogation of violence and memory demonstrate how artistic practice intersected with social and political critique across generations. Employing a social art historical and postcolonial modern methodological framework, the paper situates these artists within broader socio-political contexts while analysing their stylistic strategies and thematic preoccupations. By foregrounding identity and resistance as

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cultural concerns, the research demonstrates that modern Indian painting not only reflected social realities but also intervened in dominant narratives, offering alternative visions of selfhood, history, and power. The paper argues that modern Indian painters operate not merely as an aesthetic endeavour but as a dynamic site of negotiation and social intervention.

Keywords: Modern Indian painting, Social change, Identity, Resistance, Post Colonial Art, Visual Culture, contemporary Indian art.

Introduction

Art is not merely a reflection of society but also developed under conditions of profound political, social and cultural transformation. The encounter with colonial modernity, the struggle for independence, and the challenges of postcolonial nationhood reshaped not only political institutions but also modes of identity and resistance. Art has served as a medium for expressing ideas, challenging norms and fostering social change. Indian artists of the twentieth century were confronted with the dual task of engaging with international modernist idioms while responding to local histories, social inequalities, and cultural traditions. The emergence of modern Indian painting coincided with the late colonial period, a time marked by intense socio-political transformation and the growing momentum of nationalist movements. Artists were confronted with the challenges of negotiating between Western artistic conventions introduced through colonial institutions and indigenous traditions deeply rooted in Indian cultural history. This encounter led to the development of new artistic languages that sought to redefine Indian identity in visual terms. Unlike earlier courtly or religious art forms, modern Indian painting increasingly addressed lived social realities. Modern Indian painting is not a homogeneous category but rather a complex and evolving field characterised by diverse styles, themes and ideological positions. From the revivalist tendencies of the Bengal school to the experimental approaches of post-independence artists, the trajectory of modern Indian art reflects broader shifts in Indian society. These shifts include the transition from colonial rule to independence, the challenges of nation building, and the ongoing struggles related to inequality, marginalization, and cultural representation. Artists began to interrogate themes such as gender oppression, communal identity, displacement, violence and the construction of national culture. Painting, in this context, became more than a formal exercise in style or technique; it emerged as a potent medium for articulating social critique, negotiating identity, and envisioning alternative futures. These concerns were not merely illustrative but were embedded within formal

experimentation and conceptual innovation. Modern Indian painting thus emerged as a critical visual discourse that challenged colonial representations, nationalist idealizations and later the exclusions of the postcolonial state.

This paper examines **art as a vehicle of social change** by focusing on how modern Indian painters articulated **identity and resistance** through visual narratives. Identity here is understood as a complex and evolving construct shaped by nation and cultural memory, while resistance refers to artistic strategies that question dominant ideologies, power structures and historical narratives. Through selected case studies of Amrita Shergill, M. F. Hussain and Nalini Malini, these artists represent distinct yet interconnected phases of modern Indian art. The paper explores how modern Indian painting became a site of critical engagement with society. The central argument of this research is that modern Indian painting did not merely reflect social change but actively participated in shaping critical consciousness. By visualizing marginalized identities and contesting hegemonic narratives, artists transformed painting into a medium of social critique and resistance.

This paper seeks to examine how modern Indian painting functions as a vehicle of social change by focusing on three interconnected themes: identity, resistance, and socio-political engagement.

Literature Review

The relationship between art and society has been a central concern in art history and cultural studies. The study of modern Indian art has evolved significantly over the past few decades, moving beyond stylistic and biographical approaches toward socially and theoretically informed analyses. Early art historical writings, particularly those produced during the nationalist period, tended to emphasize the recovery of an “authentic” Indian aesthetic tradition. However, later scholars have foregrounded the ideological and political dimensions of artistic production. Figures such as Ananda K. Coomaraswamy viewed Indian art primarily through the lens of spiritual and philosophical continuity, often distancing it from contemporary social realities.

One of the foundational contributions to visual cultural studies is the work of John Berger, who argues that visual representation is deeply embedded in systems of power and ideology. Berger’s analysis emphasizes that images are not merely passive reflections of reality but actively shape perception and meaning. A major shift occurred with the emergence of critical art history in post-independence India. Scholars such as Geeta Kapur played a foundational role in redefining modern Indian art as a historically situated and politically

charged practice. In *When Was Modernism: Essay on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, Kapur argues that Indian modernism must be understood in relation to colonial history, nationalism and postcolonial conditions rather than as a derivative of Western modernism. His writings emphasize the role of artists as critical intellectuals engaged with social contradictions.

Partha Mitter's contributions have been equally significant in situating Indian art within global and postcolonial frameworks. In *Indian Art*, Mitter challenges Eurocentric art historical narratives and highlights the hybrid and plural nature of Indian modernism. He underscores how Indian artists negotiated Western artistic languages while responding to indigenous cultural and political concerns.

Tapati Guha Thakurta has focused extensively on the relationship between art, nationalism and visual culture. Her work examines how images contributed to the construction of national identity and how artists navigated the tensions between tradition and modernity. She also draws attention to institutions such as museums and exhibitions in shaping art historical discourse in India. More recently, contemporary art discourse has engaged with themes of trauma, memory and political violence. Nallini Malini's work, in particular, has been discussed in relation to postcolonial feminism, subaltern studies, and global contemporary art. Critics have emphasized her use of myth and multimedia practices to address issues of gendered violence and historical injustice.

Despite this rich body of scholarship, there remains a need for integrative studies that examine identity and resistance across different generations of modern Indian painters. This paper seeks to contribute to this discourse by bringing together early modern, post-independence, and contemporary practices within a single analytical framework.

Research Methodology

This research adopts a **qualitative interdisciplinary methodology** grounded in social art history and postcolonial theory. The study combines formal visual analysis with contextual interpretation to examine how artworks function as social texts. The primary method employed is **visual analysis**, which involves a detailed examination of artworks in terms of composition, colour, form, symbolism, and thematic content. This method allows for an understanding of how artists convey meaning and engage with social issues through visual language.

The methodological approach includes:

1. **Social Art Historical Approach:** This approach situates artworks within their historical, political, and social contexts. It examines how factors such as colonialism, nationalism, and state power influenced artistic production.
2. **Formal and Iconographic Analysis:** selected artworks are analysed in terms of composition, colour, form, iconography, and imagery to understand how visual elements contribute to narratives of identity and resistance.
3. **Postcolonial theoretical framework,** postcolonial theory is used to analyse issues of identity, hybridity and resistance to dominant narratives.
4. **In the case study method,** the paper focuses on three artists: **Amrita Shergill, M. F. Hussain, Tyeb Mehta, and Nalini Malini** as representative figures of different phases of modern Indian art. This allows for depth of analysis while maintaining a comparative perspective.

Primary sources include artworks, artist writings and exhibition catalogues, while secondary sources consist of scholarly books, journal articles and critical essays. While the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of modern Indian painting, it is limited by its focus on selected artists and movements. Future research could expand this scope by including a wider range of regional and contemporary practices.

Identity and Resistance in Modern Indian Painting

Identity in modern Indian painting is multifaceted, shaped by colonialism, nationalism, gender politics and globalization. Rather than presenting fixed or essentialized identities, artists often depict fragmented, hybrid or contested selves. The construction of national identity was a key concern during the colonial period, as artists sought to represent India's cultural heritage in opposition to Western dominance. This process involved the reinterpretation of traditional motifs and styles, creating a visual language that was both modern and rooted in indigenous traditions. Where art has played a crucial role as a form of resistance took on new forms, reflecting the changing socio-political landscape. Artists began to address issues such as political corruption, social inequality, and communal violence, using their work to critique and question authority.

Case studies

Amrita Shergill

Amrita Shergill occupies a seminal position in the history of modern Indian painting. Trained in Europe yet deeply engaged with Indian subjects, Shergill's work reflects a complex negotiation of identity, personal and cultural. Her paintings from the 1930's, such as *Three Girls* and *Brides' toilet*, focus on Indian women represented with dignity, introspection and emotional depth. Shergill rejected exoticized and idealized portrayals of Indian women prevalent in colonial art. Instead, her figures appear contemplative, often marked by silence and restraint. This visual language can be read as a form of resistance to both colonial stereotyping and patriarchal norms. By centring women as subjects rather than objects of the gaze, Shergill articulated a feminist consciousness ahead of its time.

Her stylistic synthesis of European post impressionism with Indian themes reflects a broader postcolonial struggle for cultural self-definition. Shergill's art thus becomes a vehicle for asserting an Indian modernity identity rooted in social reality and emotional truth.



Group of three Girls, Amrita Shergil, 1935. Oil on canvas, NGMA

M. F. Husain

M. F. Husain emerged as a leading figure of the Progressive Artists' Group, which sought to break away from academic realism and nationalist revivalism. Husain's work is characterized by bold forms, dynamic compositions and an engagement with Indian mythology and history. Paintings such as *Mother India*

and his numerous depictions of goddesses and epic narratives reinterpret traditional symbols through a modernist lens. Husain's use of myth was not nostalgic but critical; he employed it as a means to explore contemporary issues of nationhood, communal identity and cultural pluralism. The controversies surrounding Husain's work, particularly accusations of offending religious sentiments, highlight the political stakes of visual representation in India. His art became a site of resistance against cultural fundamentalism and censorship. Husain's insistence on artistic freedom underscores the role of modern Indian painting as a space for contesting ideological control.



Mother Teresa, M.F. Husain, c. 1980s. Acrylic on Canvas, NGMA

Tyeb Mehta

Tyeb Mehta's work is characterized by its exploration of violence and human suffering. His paintings often feature fragmented figures and stark compositions, reflecting the trauma of events such as partition. Mehta's work can be seen as a powerful commentary on the psychological impact of social and political conflict.



Diagonal, Tyeb Mehta, 1973. Oil on canvas. NGMA

Nalini Malini

Nalini Malini represents a later phase of modern and contemporary Indian art, marked by explicit political engagement and feminist critique. Her work addresses themes of displacement and historical trauma, often mythological figures such as Medea and Sita. Malini's paintings and installations challenge patriarchal and state violence by foregrounding women's experiences of suffering and resistance. Her reinterpretation of myth destabilizes traditional narratives, transforming female figures into symbols of protest and resilience. Through layered imagery and fragmented narratives, Malini visualizes the persistence of historical violence in contemporary society. Her work exemplifies how modern Indian art has expanded beyond the canvas to engage with global discourses on human rights and social justice.



Remembering Mad Meg, [Nalini Malini](#), 2007. Mixed Media installation.

Table: Artist, Artwork, and Social Change in Modern Indian Painting

| Artists | Artwork | Theme | Social issues | Relevance to social change |
|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|---|
| Amrita Shergill | Three Girls | Gender Identity | Women's Marginalization | Highlights silent suffering and inequality |
| Tyeb Mehta | Diagonal | Violence | Partition trauma | Reflects the psychological impact of conflict |
| M.F. Husain | Mother Teresa | Compassion, Identity | Human Suffering | Universalizes care beyond religion |
| Nalini Malani | Remembering Mad Meg | Feminist Resistance | War, Gender Violence | Critiques patriarchy and conflict |

Discussion: Identity and Resistance in Modern Indian Painting

These case studies reveal that identity and resistance are recurring and interconnected themes in modern Indian painting. The themes of identity and resistance are deeply intertwined, with artists using their work to negotiate complex social realities and challenge dominant narratives. While Shergill foregrounds gendered subjectivity, Husain negotiates national and cultural identity, Tyeb's work on exploration of violence and human suffering, and Malani addresses feminist resistance and political trauma. Together, their works demonstrate how artists responded to different historical moments while sharing a commitment to social critique.

Modern Indian painting emerges as a dialogic practice engaging with tradition while questioning authority, and embracing modernity without surrendering cultural specificity. Resistance in this context is not always overtly political; it is embedded in choices of subject matter, form and symbolism. By visualizing marginalized voices and challenging dominant narratives, these artists expanded the social function of art. Painting became a means of questioning power, asserting alternative identities, and imagining social change.

However, the impact of art on social change is not straightforward. While art can raise awareness and provoke critical reflection, its ability to effect tangible change depends on various factors, including audience reception and institutional support.

Conclusion

This paper has examined modern Indian painting as a powerful vehicle of social change, focusing on how artists articulated identity and resistance through visual narratives. Through the works of Amrita Shergill, M. F. Husain, Tyeb Mehta and Nalini Malini, the study demonstrates that modern Indian art is deeply intertwined with social and political realities. Rather than viewing modern Indian painting as a derivative of Western modernism, this research emphasizes its critical engagement with colonial history, nationalism, gender politics and contemporary struggles. The artists discussed here transformed painting into a site of resistance, offering alternative ways of seeing and understanding society.

In doing so, modern Indian painters redefined the role of art from aesthetic object to social intervention. Their works continue to resonate in contemporary debates on identity, freedom, and justice, affirming the enduring relevance of art as a force for social change.

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