

The dalin Kuralgal – The Art and Sculptural Movement of Tamil Nadu

By Indran

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The Voice of a New Search

The book '*The dalin Kuralgal*' (The Voices of Search) by Indran, written in Tamil, is a remarkable piece of work. Not only is it a documentation of all the artists who have contributed to the art movement in the State of Tamil Nadu, but also a wonderful, concise look into the history of art in the region, through the ages.

Before I begin to critique the book, I cannot but marvel at the quality of the publication itself. In most Tamil books, printing quality, cover design, layout, proofreading, paper quality – all seem to be words that printers have never heard of, or concerns reserved for the world of English books. Here is a Tamil publication that has an eye-catching cover, good paper, excellent printing, and very well laid out text and pictures. I do realize that I am spending quite a bit of my time on this matter, but it is such a refreshing change from the usual drab, magazine-like publications that usually hit the stands! Indran, being a critic himself and a poet as well as an artist has surely had a hand in this presentation – maybe a whip hand?

To get past the packaging, the book is precise, neat and easy to understand. I especially like the fact, as said in his own words in the foreword, Indran has tried to evolve a language that is not too literary and yet not too prosaic to deal with the world of art. His turn of phrase is neither dry and pedantic, nor self-conscious. It is an easy flow, almost as if the written account of a single train of thought. Even the technical aspects of art are put forth in an easy style that would appeal to both critic and lay reader.

Adding to the uniqueness of the book is the fact that it is the first of it's kind in Tamil – the first, full-length criticism on art, contemporary art at that. Also for the first time, the book uses full-page colour plates, 35 in all, representing the work of each of the artists.

Indran has been involved in art criticism, writing poetry in Tamil and English, translation of world literature and editing of some prestigious art related magazines and publications for over 25 years now. This experience stands him in good stead as he recounts the art movement in south India.

The book kicks off with a historical birds eye-view, or in the whimsical Tamil equivalent, a hawk's look, at the history of art in India and how it has come to speak the many different voices that it has acquired today. The account brings moving images of men bent over canvases or stone, under the burning sun or the flickering oil lamp, putting together images

under the stern stare of the British lords. In marked contrast the words paint the world of the pre-British Indian who was given gold and riches to produce great works of art at his leisure or even further back, the men of the ancient times leaving behind an expression of their times for posterity.

Indran spends a great deal of time on the British era in Indian history, which has been the catalyst of many changes, good and bad, in our society. The *St. George's fort*, the first British fort in India also houses the first church that the British commissioned in this country. Here, after the defeat of the French army in Pondicherry, the first European painting to be displayed in India was hung on the church walls – a painting of *the Last Supper* by a student of the great painter Rafeal. Soon after the British crown established their supremacy in the south and created the 'Madras Presidency' they were able to turn their attention to concerns like documentation of this new, foreign land that they had acquired. They taught the "locals" how to paint and sketch in a way that they could appreciate or even accept the finished product. In due course the town of 'Chennapatnam' now Chennai, saw the birth of the first art community that was in the employ of the East India Company, to paint and record the landscapes that were unique to India.

Soon the crown decided to establish the first College of Art in the country, in the Madras Presidency. Great names in the art world began to be known, over the years, such as Devi Prasad Roy Choudhry. Indran spends quite a bit of time on the likes of Roy Choudhry, K C S Panikker, S Danapal, R Krishna Rao, K Srinivasulu, S V Ramgopal as the men who were instrumental in creating a definition of modern art in India. In his attention to detail Indran manages to inspire awe and respect in the reader when he speaks of the passion and art of these great men.

At this juncture, Indran spends some time on the development of the cartoon tradition in newspapers in India. He speaks of the contribution made by the freedom fighters like Subramanya Bharatiyar who made sure that cartoons subtly carrying the message of freedom were published in the papers and periodicals; *Crescent*, *Native Public Opinion*, *The Peoples' Magazine*, *The Hindu*, *Madras Times* and *Madras Mail* to name a few. The first such cartoons appeared in the Tamil paper "India". Indran makes a startling comparison between Raja Ravi Verma's paintings of goddesses *Saraswati* and *Lakshmi* and how they were the bases on which the cartoon of "Bharat Mata" has been painted in this newspaper. Many of these images still endure and yet this is the first time I have come across this comparison being made. As Indran says in this book, very few people can or do unduly criticize the work of Ravi Verma, but I wonder how many of us realize what a deep impression he has left behind on all of us. He will always be regarded as probably the first ever painter who has truly been a representative of the whole country and an inspiration to a great many artists.

There are a few questions and observations Indran brings to mind in his book that struck me as important, that should be voiced more often. The first is that museums in India are different from those in the 'developed world' in that they carry artifacts that are still a part of a living culture. Most museums elsewhere house the evidences of a life gone by, a culture long since dead.

Soon after, in his chapter dealing with the post-independence era of Indian art, he asks what is the difference between "Indianness" or tradition in art and the modern movement? Where

do the two paths split? And who determines the aesthetics that govern the difference? Further on, Indran brings to mind the fact that while a certain beauty can be brought about through art that has shorn off all its past moorings, there is also a great scope for innovation in learning well from the past. After all, there is a certain level of abstraction that many groups of Indians have touched upon at various intervals in history. He also deals at length on the fact that modernism in most parts of the world is a movement that seeks to travel away from all established forms of art. The challenge before the Indian artist is to recognize the modernity in form of the art of the tribals, the mountain dwellers and folk art that finds walls and floors as their canvas. Abstraction in art in India has been explored for centuries in fabric, religious symbols, cave paintings, folk puppetry, idols, lamps and so on. It is indeed refreshing to see an art critic paying homage to the rich, living tradition of art that is older than the advent of "Europeanisation" in this country.

Giving us a teasing glance at the works of artists from Roy Chaudhry and K C S Panikker to K V Haridasan, Nandan and Nandagopal, from the time of Rabindranath Tagore and the end of the British Era, to Cholamandal and the living art of today, the book leaves the reader with a thirst to see each of the paintings or sculptures or etchings or line sketches that are recorded here. Indran says in this book that the modern art movement in India, thanks to the British, began in the Madras Presidency. It has since spread throughout the country. Today the language in art is so varied yet so individual. The only hope is that the art community doesn't lose touch with the world at large.

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