TALES TOLD BY A RIVER : JOURNEYING THROUGH THE MAKING OF THE MURAL 'LIFE AND TIMES OF A PLACE : CONTEXTUALIZING MAVELIKARA'

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Figure 1: Meditating Buddha Statue at Mavelikara

Abstract : Mavelikara, a township situated in what is now Alappuzha district in Kerala, has been thriving since ancient times along the banks of the Achenkovil River. Between the 3rd century BC and 13th century AD it was part of Onnattukara or Odanadu - a thriving cultural principality of ancient Kerala which flourished as a Buddhist centre after the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka convened his proselytizing missions to spread Buddhism. It was a progressive faith promoting an egalitarian and inclusive way of living which did not seek exclusion of women from mainstream dialogues. Peace and prosperity was enjoyed, as the agrarian economy prospered as the byproduct of a community that was able to work harmoniously. However, after a few centuries, the presence of Buddhism was entirely obliterated from social consciousness through the hegemony of institutionalized faith systems. It was appropriated and assimilated, and tangible forms destroyed until its existence could hardly be traced. This raised a need for a cultural institution such as Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts, situated here, to have a cultural responsibility to extract the subaltern stories hidden within and place it alongside mainstream narratives. And this was best realized through the mural project that was undertaken by the faculty and students of the institution titled 'Life and times of a place: Contextualizing Mavelikara' which was not merely a formal exercise, but a tool to retrace time and rouse silenced voices.

Keywords : Buddhism, mural, Mavelikara, Rama Varma Raja, Kerala

LIFE AND TIMES OF A PLACE: ITS CONTEXT

When a culture loses its sway over an area, subsequent hegemonic cultures obliterate their existence from social consciousness through appropriation, assimilation and deletion. However, of late, contemporary art education in India have been showing interest in bringing to the fore this genre of stilled subaltern voices,

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Figure 2: Mural panel showing the meditating Buddha emerging from the waters
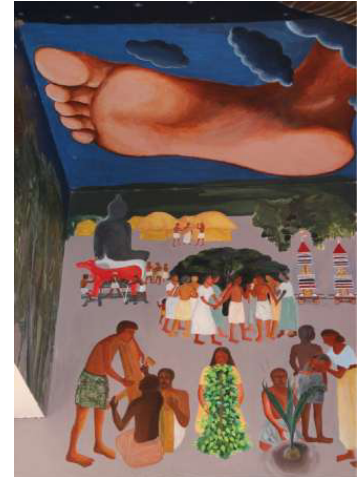

Figure 3: Panel details of the myth of Mahabali

due to influences from emerging fields of study like Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies. It hence veers towards an interdisciplinary assimilation rather than the previously held notions in which various disciplines occupy autonomous roles. This enables art students to transcend traditional exercises focusing merely on artistic technique and form towards engaging dialogue systems that are intellectually, environmentally and culturally viable. A framework is built for a more holistic reading of culture by contesting dominant modes of knowledge and focusing on subaltern existences. Conclusions about a culture are therefore derived not through artificial constructs of a mainstream hegemony but by studying popular cultures excluded from social inclusion.

It was in this context that a collaborative project in mural making involving the faculty of Painting and Art History aided with students from all the departments was conceived by the then Principal, Professor Ajayakumar, at Raja Ravi Varma College of Fine Arts in Mavelikara, during the Academic year 2011-2012. The mural was going to be the first attempt by any fine arts institution in Kerala for producing a relevant site-specific and culture specific visual rendering conceived not from mainstream dialogues but from alternate readings submerged within it. It was also considered a unique episode in the history of this institution (established almost a century ago in 1915), as it was going to shed light on its founder Rama Varma Raja, rather than on his father Raja Ravi Varma. Though an artist himself, apart from being a teacher and a social activist, this 'Artist Thampuran' did not share in his prodigious father's limelight.

The mural was thus conceived, to serve as a platform to rouse silenced voices and give due honour to the land as well as to the founder of this institution and for shared learning - bringing faculty and students into a democratic space, working together as a community, in order to frame an understanding of the immediate environment in which one is placed.

CULTURAL MAPPING OF THE LAND

The most significant aspect of the entire mural was the cultural mapping of Mavelikara which were fragmented local narratives and legends that needed to be threaded together to make a seemingly coherent whole. The image or written word was not taken at face value but seen as encrypted messages that required decoding. The dearth of any prominent records posed a significant challenge. After much rummaging, a few books were unearthed, and this was aided by brainstorming, discussions and field tours to significant locales. Along with this, a search into the roots of certain local words and names of places and a closer study of the local festivals and cultures helped at the arrival of a more or less convincing cultural record of this land.

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Figure 4: Panel details showing the trio - Rama Varma, Subhananda and Gandhi

The inspiration for the conception of the mural was a visual artefact. At a cursory glance, the ancient statue of a lone meditating Buddha, located in close proximity to the institute, appeared to be visually and culturally incongruous in a landscape mostly occupied by palaces and Hindu temples. (Fig. 1) However, its very insistence on asserting its presence is what sparked a series of inquiries beneath mere appearances. Studies revealed that Buddha's icons were introduced into Kerala by merchants from Ceylon between the 4th and 6th century AD.[1] However, the presence of Buddhism in these regions waned over the following years with the advent of institutionalized religions - Brahmanism subsequently followed by Christianity and Islam.[2] The carving located near the institute is part of a group of statues that have 'survived' in the face of repressive practices in the past and recovered from regions around Mavelikara. They were all discovered in a similar manner- forced face down in temple ponds or in marshy fields, bearing the marks of religious fury, and laying there in a state of oblivion for centuries together, testifying to the obliteration of the faith from collective consciousness.[3] Every effort to wipe the presence of Buddhism by hegemonic structures ruling over the land in those days can be seen in the very lack of tangible forms of the faith.

It was more from intangible sources that the search continued. The very name Mavelikara, or land of Maveli and Onattukara (translated as the land of Onam), held within itself certain mysteries, particularly in terms of the association that the harvest festival had in relation to this land. This made it necessary to peer deeper into the legend of Maveli or King Mahabali in whose honour the festival is celebrated. He is recalled in the social psyche as a 'good asura' king whose glorious rule promoted a peaceful world that celebrated egalitarianism, but who was suddenly stamped into the netherworld by a 'Brahmin' dwarf (Vishnu as the Vamana avatar). The myth had a question ringing in our ears - why would a benevolent king who promoted so much peace and harmony be exiled? Could the tale contain within its hidden recesses the recollection of a Brahmin value system whose hegemonic position ousted Buddhism from the collective consciousness? It still remains to be answered.

The etymology of words continued to provide further evidence to the prominence of Buddhism in this region. The term *'Palli'* used profusely till date is a Pali word signifying a Buddhist place of worship. A sizable number of places with *'palli'* either as prefix or as a suffix are seen to be concentrated around this locale. This helped in establishing the extent to which Buddhism once held its power in these regions. Other terms included *'pallikootam'* which … became the *'roof under which one is prepared for the palli'* or sanctified institution or school. The term *'asan'* [the village teacher] is a corruption of the Pali form derived from the Sanskrit word *Acharya* (teacher) … It (was) the village Asan who preserved and promoted the Buddhist

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traditions of eradicating illiteracy from society over six dark centuries beginning with the 14th C when caste-Brahmanism imposed ignorance and superstition on the masses as a pious social necessity for establishing their superiority and unquestioned sway'.[4]

Other areas of research included the local festivals that are part of the mainstream culture today. S N Sadasivan the author of the book *A Social History of India* alludes the origin of *utsavams* or religious festivals to Buddhist traditions, introduced as a means to popularize the faith and harbor a sense of brotherhood within the society. He states that *'... each major festival (celebrated today) reflects its concealed Buddhist past.'*[5] Beneath the surface, the *Kumbha Bharani* festival in particular, celebrated annually at the Devi Temple in Chettikulangara in Mavelikara, holds within itself the egalitarian ideals of Buddhism wherein it is facilitated to reaffirm the role of women within the social and spiritual realm. The *Kettukāzcha*, a cultural spectacle pertaining strictly to this region, comprising of temple cars resembling pagodas (*Kuthira and Teru*) as well as the *Kettukāla* - fabricated pair of bulls is again attributed to Buddhist celebration of an agrarian community whose prosperity was ushered in by the bulls.[6]

The strict imposition of caste system by the *Nambudiri Brahmins* remained undisputed throughout Kerala for centuries following Buddhism. However, the nineteenth century witnessed a wave of social reform sweep through Mavelikara. Stilled voices were roused with the rigorous social activities initiated by a Dalit leader- Swami Subhananda, for eradicating untouchability from a caste-ridden society. He forged an alliance with the artist Rama Varma Raja, an aristocrat and founder of our institute. Of import is the meeting between Rama Varma Raja and Swami Subhananda during Mahatma Gandhi's visit to Travancore in 1934 as part of Nationalist movement to support the same need.[7] However, it is indeed strange that this significant historic event has not been accorded a magnitude that could earn it a place within the pages of national history, and has therefore been subsumed into the subaltern realm.

Following this event, two visits were conducted by Subhananda along with his disciples on foot from Mavelikara to Kowdiar Palace, seeking royal favour from the Maharaja Sree Chithira Thirunal for the upliftment of the less fortunate. The first saw the extension of civil rights to the backward and scheduled classes, followed by the implementation of the *Temple Entry Proclamation* in 1936. The latter received wide praise not only within the locale but across the subcontinent, as a victory over caste hegemony, freedom from the notion of ritual pollution on the basis of caste, and the right to enter and worship freely at the sacred premises of a temple - a space which was until then under the sole control of the *Nambudiri Brahmins*.[8]

Raja Ravi Varma School of Painting- the present day college in its fledgling form in 1915, was a philanthropic venture by Rama Varma Raja honoring his legendary father. In tune with the social undercurrents of his day, it was established to give the right to education to all sections of society.

Apart from these, the land in all its topographic, cultural and architectural peculiarities unique in its distinctness within a universal whole, were carefully documented. Documentations were collected and reviewed, with distinct forms singled out and interspersed within the visual narrative conceived to contextualize the place. Events were woven together to create a more or less coherent and wholesome history at once 'local' and 'universal'.

LIFE AND TIMES OF A PLACE: ITS FORM AND CONTENT

Spanning an area of 568 square feet, the mural in its form, technique or content does not adhere to the language of Kerala's traditional murals; neither does it adopt a formalist modern vocabulary. Instead, a figurative narrative was adopted as part of democratizing the art language and making the local history legible to its own people. Unlike other public art however, it was conceived indoors in the main block owing to practical reasons. Acrylic paint was used in place of traditional tempera, since this medium allowed an easier execution due to its fast drying nature and suited the limitations imposed by time.

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Figure 5: Students, faculty and visiting artists along with the completed mural at the institute

The mural enriched in colour, form and content entwines organically along the facing wall of the entrance, climbing along the stairway and ceiling leading the ground floor to the first floor of the main block. On entering this space, one faces a meditating Buddha emerging from the waters, referencing to its historical findings (whose silhouette form is a derivative of the statue situated in this locale), amidst large graceful figures set against the bright red of the earth, walking in a sense of gleeful abandon, carrying the bounty of their labour. (Fig. 2) As the eye pans upwards, it travels along the line of a voluminous haystack piled high on the trunk of a coconut palm, after the paddy has been cut and threshed, burning brightly with the vigour of sunlight, under a star-encrusted night blue sky- silently bearing witness to the extent of prosperity that has come their way.

Reaping the rewards of a bountiful harvest, the agrarian community now rest from their labour, and prepare for an interim season of ritual and celebrations. This energetic scene, an exclusive creation of Professor Ajayakumar, celebrates the times when Buddha ruled and egalitarianism was practiced. (Fig. 3)A group of dancing figures in a circle, holding their hands bar colour, creed or sex occupies the centre in a pre-Brahmanic occurrence. Men prepare *teru* like chariots and spectacularly fabricated pairs of bulls, harbingers of agricultural prosperity, pulled on wooded wheeled chariots the presence of which recalls *Kettukāzcha* and the *utsavams* that form a vital part of Mavelikara's culture today and suggests the root source of these cultural occurrences. In a distance a group of figures move towards a *kāvu*, or grove of trees to offer worship to the nature deities and a river silently flows in the background bearing witness to their endless activities. A woman in the foreground tends a *betal* plant- betal chewing being a social custom particular to this land - as a man plants a young coconut. But Alas! The peace of this haven is interrupted with a menacingly large foot that descends from the clouds recalling the story of king *Maveli* who was relegated to the depths of the earth. (Fig. 3)

The next few panels bear witness to the advent of institutionalized religions - Hinduism followed by Christianity and Islam. In order to contextualize the place as Mavelikara, architectural, topographic and cultural peculiarities of the land have been represented. The forms of the church, temple and the mosque, have been depicted as 'types' peculiar to this region and not pertaining to a particular structure. The dominance of Brahmanism, insisted a segregation of the sexes as can be seen in the depiction of *Kutthiyottam and Kudamüthu,* religio-cultural expressions peculiar to this place separately performed by men and women unlike erstwhile Buddhist times. A gleaming turtle with the figure of a Dutch soldier donning Dutch uniform

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is in reference to the *sthamba vilakku* found in Krishnaswamy temple, located near the institution. This giant bronze lamp stand carried on the back of a turtle, surrounded by four Dutch soldiers in the four corners holding rifles, was a memorial to an agreement signed by the Dutch in 1753 conceding not to attack the Travancore King as part of a peace treaty.[9]

The next panel represents the meeting between Artist Rama Varma Raja and Swami Subhananda during Mahatma Gandhi's Travancore visit as part of the Nationalist movement. And though artistic license has been employed to bring the trio together in an imaginary conversational space, this panel is the first ever attempt at visually recording the significant event united by the thread of ousting untouchability. (Fig. 4)

The following panel depicts the *pada-yātra* conducted by the Subhananda Guru along with his disciples from Mavelikara to the Kavadiar. This has been recorded as an event with Kowdiar Palace in the background and many a mural participant finding form within the procession headed by Subhananda Guru!

The final panel ends in the institution in its humble beginnings, as the School of Painting in Mavelikara undertaken by the artist Rama Varma Raja in his studio. The place is brought into context by the archway of the palace gate and the pond which is still a vital element of the college.

This mural was envisioned not as a practical exercise but as a means to encapsulate the local history of this region, through events of significance during the last millennium, Through the process of cultural mapping, these events of local history were exhumed from collective unconscious and its contents were laid out in a visual narrative at once 'local' and 'universal' - tracing not only the history of the locale but also the history behind the inception of this premier institution itself.

NOTES

1. Kumar, Ajit, "Buddhism in Kerala and its Socio-Cultural ramifications" *History Today - Journal of History and Historical Archeology* No.19, The History and Culture society, New Delhi 2018,p.179.

2. Menon, T. Madhava, *A Handbook of Kerala*, Vol. II, International School of Dravidian Linguistics, Trivandrum, 2002, p.200.

3. Kumar, Ajit, "Buddhism in Kerala and its Socio-Cultural ramifications" *History Today - Journal of History and Historical Archeology* No.19, The History and Culture society, New Delhi 2018,p.180

4. Sadasivan S N, *A Social History of India,* S.B. Nangia, New Delhi 2000, p.115.

5. *Ibid.,* p.140.

6. *Ibid.,p.141. 'The festival of* **Bharani'** *writes, Artist Ramavarma Raja, '(was) originally associated with the Buddhist goddesses, (but) now stands in the name of Kali and her several manifestations and the fabrication of juggernauts called* **Teru** *(tiered chariot or chariot in the form of a typical pagoda) and* **kutira** *(literally horse) or* **nedumkutira** *(high horse resembling a tiered tower on wheels) were a part of the programme of the festivals of Buddhist viharas. On the tier boards around the chariot and high horse and also on their prominent corner spaces, artistic images depicting the stories of Buddha's birth were tastefully displayed…One of the most creative and interesting features of the celebrations, was the* **Kettukazhcha,** *literally the* **'exhibition of the fabricated'** *… During the Buddhist period, scenes from the life of Buddha were made into tableaux…and dummy bullocks in pairs were fabricated as friends who ushered in agricultural prosperity and plenty. The juggernaut, chariot* **(teru)** *represented the wheeled vehicle in which Prince Siddharta was taken around Kapilavastu by Chanda and the other* **kutira** *on wooded wheeled carriage, symbolized the spiritual loftiness attained by Buddha. However after Brahmanism thwarted Buddhism, the two kinds of juggernaut continued but legendary heroes like Bhima and heroines like Panchali replaced the Buddhist tableaux. With the arrival of Sankara , observes Artist Ramavarma Raja, the Buddhist Viharas which in fact were the Buddhist churches, were transformed into the temples of Siva.*

7. http://www.abssc.org/Historical-events.php

8. http://www.abssc.org/Historical-events.php

9. Galletti, A., I.C.S., the Rev.Van Der Burg, A.J. and the Rev. Groot, P. Dutch Records No.13 *The Dutch in Malabar,* Government Press, Madras, 1911, p.93.

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4. Pachu Moothathu, Vaikathu, *Thiruvithamkoor Charithram,* Kochi, Prathibha, 1867.

5. Galletti, A., I.C.S., the Rev.Van Der Burg, A.J. and the Rev. Groot, P. Dutch Records No.13 *The Dutch in Malabar,* Government Press, Madras, 1911.

6. Sadasivan, S. N. *A Social History of India,* S.B. Nangia A.P.H Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 2000.

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