

# LOOKING AFTER LIBERALISATION: ETHNOGRAPHY, CONCEPTUAL DRIFT, AND THE PROBLEM OF VISUAL MAKING IN INDIAN CONTEMPORARY ART

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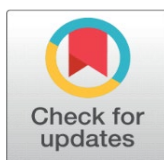
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## ABSTRACT

Since the economic upheaval of 1991, modern Indian art has been moving more and more toward research-based and ethnographic methodologies. What started as a plan to fix social division, political violence, and the effects of forgetting history has slowly become part of the institution. This study investigates the nuanced shift in the equilibrium between cognition and perception resulting from that consolidation.

I use Henri Bergson's ideas about duration, Jacques Rancière's ideas about the distribution of the sensible, Fredric Jameson's ideas about late capitalism, and Ann Cvetkovich's ideas about emotional archives to show a conceptual shift in post-liberalisation art. The artwork is progressively susceptible to transforming into a medium for argumentation—explicit, research-backed, and discursively fortified—rather than a domain of perceptual uncertainty or visual involvement. The study analyses the reconfiguration of form, audience engagement, and pedagogy within the framework of liberalization, focusing on the methodologies of Shilpa Gupta, Riyas Komu, Gigi Scaria, Raqs Media Collective, and CAMP. I support a renewed emphasis on emotion, duration, and visual thinking, rather than rejecting ethnographic or conceptual approaches. This is not a retreat from politics, but a necessary complication of it in modern art and its pedagogy.

**Keywords:** Indian Contemporary Art, Liberalisation, Ethnography, Visuality, Pedagogy, Conceptual Art

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the last thirty years, research-driven and ethnographic methods have been important to Indian contemporary art. They give artists tools to deal with socioeconomic inequity, political violence, and the erasure of history in a culture that is changing quickly. These approaches were first welcomed because they broadened the ethical and critical horizons

of Indian art in cities, economies, and media that were changing quickly. Over time, they have become an institutional norm in which conceptual legibility often takes precedence over visual and sensory inquiry. Research-led approaches have facilitated urgent political participation but have also led to the relative marginalization of form, duration, and perceptual openness in much modern work. This paper engages in discussions on post-1991 Indian art by contending that the institutionalization of research-based practice has produced a phenomenon of “conceptual drift,” in which pictures function more as instruments of argumentation than as independent arenas of perceptual exploration. It doesn't throw out ethnographic or conceptual methods; instead, it calls for a recalibration that brings back affect, visual cognition, and temporal experience into modern art. This study examines the impact of conceptual drift since the 1990s on the production, consumption, and pedagogy of art, drawing on the theories of Bergson, Rancière, Jameson, and Cvetkovich. By analyzing the case studies of Shilpa Gupta, Riyas Komu, Gigi Scaria, Raqs Media Collective, and CAMP—selected for their institutional significance and distinctive research-driven methodologies—it elucidates the transforming function of artworks as representations of argument rather than as nebulous perceptual realms.

The article examines how exhibition forms, funding regimes, and educational frameworks have bolstered conceptual clarity while compromising visual confusion, contextualizing these practices within the broader shifts in globalization and neoliberal cultural economy. It ends by calling for more focus on slow gazing, material experimentation, and embodied inquiry in both art education and art making. This change doesn't undermine criticism; instead, it reaffirms visual and performative practice as ways of thinking that can provide us political understanding through perception instead of prescription.

## **2. SINCE 1991, VISUAL CULTURE, GLOBALIZATION, AND NEOLIBERALISM HAVE GROWN**

The economy changed quickly after 1991, and money came in from all over the world. This changed how people in India saw things. According to Geeta Kapur (2001), Bombay (now Mumbai) went through a lot of changes in the early 1990s. The city had a lot of ads from different countries, corporate logos, and new media technologies. Kapur calls it a “media blitz on daily desires” that made new consumers feel less connected to the city they lived in for the first time in independent India. At the same time, big building projects like flyovers, highways, and gated commercial zones changed how people thought about cities by separating the flow of global capital from everyday life.

These changes had a direct impact on the way artists worked. *Edge of Desire* (2005) and *Indian Highway* (2008–2009) were two international shows that helped Indian art grow quickly. The India Art Fair, which began in 2008, and the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, which began in 2012, were also important events in India where artists could get noticed. MAP Academy (2024) says that after liberalization, artists often reacted to how people bought things, moved to cities, and were bombarded with images. The commercial art market, on the other hand, liked modernist painting as a stable type of collectible and didn't like experimental, process-based, or time-dependent practices.

Artists had to deal with two kinds of stress: they had to deal with problems in their own communities that needed to be fixed right away, and they had to stay visible in the global art market and curatorial systems. These conditions made it easier to use ideas, stories, and research methods to explain how things work. Visual form changed from a way for the senses to understand things to a way to talk about things.

We should think about how globalization has changed the economies of making and watching exhibitions and how that has changed how artists think about their work. Curators were more and more interested in works of art that could easily move from one place to another and were accompanied by stories that people from other countries who didn't know the historical contexts of the settings could understand. People from other countries learned about Indian art from wall texts, essays in catalogues, and talks by artists. They wanted ways of translating that put research and political positioning first. In this case, visual ambiguity might seem risky, but conceptual articulation seemed like a safe way to figure things out.

There were more private museums, corporate collections, and charitable foundations, which changed how institutions were run and how art was made. Before they could get money or a place to live, artists often had to write research proposals and social goals for their projects. This made the culture even more focused on ideas before making things. More people liked installations that could quickly sum up complicated social situations because there were more biennials and big surveys. This made readability more important than long-term perceptual engagement.

After the economy opened up, cities were full of billboards, digital screens, and amazing buildings, which made it hard for artists to find a quiet place to think. As people consume more media, artists frequently employ investigative and

conceptual techniques to decelerate perception by examining objects rather than altering their appearance. Because of all the changes in the economy, institutions, and how people saw things, it became more important to talk about art than to make it. This allowed art based on research and ethnography to become popular in India.

## 2.1. THE GROWTH OF RESEARCH-BASED AND ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

After liberalization, a lot of artists used research-based and ethnographic methods to link their work back to the real social conditions in India. People started to dislike modernist formal autonomy more and more because they thought it wasn't helpful in politics (Kapur, 2000). This is the beginning of the "ethnographic turn." They used interviews, old documents, legal records, fieldwork, and being involved in the community to talk about caste violence, communal conflict, migration, and government spying. This change happened at the same time as changes in Western art in the 1970s and 1980s, when feminist, civil rights, anti-war, and queer movements fought against institutional authority and for the freedom of the art object. Foster (1996) and Bishop (2005) claim that ethnographic and site-specific practices aimed to put art in a social and spatial context by combining making art with doing anthropological and sociological research.

In India, CAMP and Raqs Media Collective are two examples of research-based groups. CAMP highlights how the government uses things like open-access platforms, maritime archives, radio transmissions, and CCTV systems to make things run better. The Neighbour Before the House (2009) is one initiative that flips surveillance on its head by letting people in a community make their own stories about their own locations (MAP Academy, 2023). Raqs, on the other hand, sees research as philosophical and speculative. They create installations that make people think about time, work, circulation, and the politics of the commons (Raqs Media Collective, 2010).

Individual artists also put a lot of stock in research that never ends. Using interviews, records of censorship, and legal papers, Shilpa Gupta talks about language and borders. Riyas Komu, on the other hand, looks at citizenship and exclusion through constitutional archives. Foster (1996) does, however, say that ethnographic art can make hierarchies of representation stronger and become a clear genre in the biennale and funding economies. This paper emphasizes the effects of these strategies on appearance and observation rather than their relevance. It is absolutely crucial to say that these activities were conducted because they were ethically imperative in response to violence, marginalization, and the erasure of history. Many artists rejected ornamental nationalism or aestheticized misery due to their well-defined convictions. The criticism is not directed at ethnography itself, but rather at the institutionalization of it, which has established a norm that prioritizes explanation over perception. Sarai and the Khoj International Artists' Association are two examples of study platforms and other places where people can learn that helped the ethnographic shift by encouraging long-term residencies, collaboration between diverse fields, and field study. Critical theory includes postcolonial studies, Marxist cultural analysis, feminism, and media studies.

This kind of theory is becoming more prominent in art school. This has impacted how artists talk to curators and funders about their work. It was highly vital to keep records, develop proposals, and speak in front of groups. People's views of Indian art changed because of these changes. The art became more ambitious in terms of thoughts and morals. People began to appraise works more and more largely on how difficult their research questions or political beliefs were. This meant that the material form didn't always get enough attention.

Over time, these kinds of standards made research-based practice the most common way to do things. This set the stage for the next section, which will talk about the conceptual drift.

## 2.2. FROM VISUAL INQUIRY TO CONCEPTUAL DRIFT

Research-based methods have made Indian contemporary art more critical over time, but they have done so at the cost of visual and sensory engagement. In a lot of recent works, ideas take centre stage, and form becomes just a way to show something. Wall labels, curatorial essays, and catalogues often guide interpretation, placing explanation above perception.

Fredric Jameson's (1991) critique of postmodern "depthlessness" is pertinent in this context. In numerous contemporary pieces, social contradictions are identified yet not permitted to manifest visually. Images work as signs instead of fields of experience, so you need text to understand them. Visuality becomes more symbolic than emotional, making things seem less complicated.

Jacques Rancière's (2004) notion of the distribution of the sensible elucidates this transition. When meaning is predetermined through explanatory discourse, the spectator's interpretive agency is limited; rather than redistributing perception, art validates sanctioned interpretations. Henri Bergson's philosophy of duration says that creativity happens throughout time, specifically in lived, qualitative time, not through instantaneous cognition (Bergson, 1911; De Groot, 2022). Art that is based on ideas often breaks up this time, preferring quick understanding to long-term involvement. Ann Cvetkovich's idea of a "archive of feelings" (2003) also stresses how art can keep emotional traces that can't be put into words. When cognition takes over from feeling, sadness, recollection, and vulnerability may just be indications. All of these objections point to the fact that conceptual drift has made it harder for consumers to enjoy modern Indian art.

The discourse of professionalism that accompanies modern practice also helps keep conceptual supremacy alive. Artists are employing more and more phrases like "research," "investigation," and "archiving" to gain help from institutions and show that they are smart.

This has made art criticism stronger, but it has also created a situation where visual uncertainty is seen as a methodological weakness instead of an aesthetic strategy. Without clear interpretive frameworks, ambiguity, silence, and too much formality may not be taken seriously.

This tendency is also strengthened by the design of the exhibition. Installations often use diagrams, timelines, transcripts, and documentary footage to lead viewers along set interpretive paths, turning galleries into something like archives or research labs. The physical and emotional interaction with objects and images is put off until after the cognitive decoding.

This change doesn't mean that the formality will go away. Instead, it shows that work is being moved from form to discourse: materials are being used more and more to make arguments instead of to make meaning through perceptual indeterminacy. Visuality lives on, but in a more controlled way. It can be read in global networks, but it can't surprise, disturb, or go beyond what it says it is.

### 3. CASE STUDIES: ARTISTS AND GROUPS

Shilpa Gupta's work shows how research and form can work together and against each other. For, *In Your Tongue, I Cannot Fit* (2017) is one of many works that turn the stories of censored writers into sound-based installations that break up speech and silence. The experience is immersive and emotional, but its political meaning depends on how it is framed (Bastardo, 2019). *I Live Under Your Sky Too* (2004–present) depicts broken communication with floating neon letters, creating a weak optical rhythm that encourages people to stay while still being based in border politics (Kapur, 2000).

Riyas Komu takes a very different perspective that is both archival and political. *Salabhanjika and the Wall – I* (2023) displays a picture of Gandhi by Nandalal Bose next to a Harappan design. The picture has bullet holes in it. The installation is like a visual essay about exclusion and remembering the Constitution. Its importance is mostly based on how it is told in history and what the artist meant to say (Komu, 2023).

Gigi Scaria utilizes sarcasm and montage to challenge nationalism and neoliberal urbanization that benefits the majority. *Who Deviated First* (2008) and other works use satire to shake up national clichés by using over-the-top pictures and silly acting. The paintings are visually fascinating, but they stick very closely to their ideas, thus there isn't much space for interpretation (Ramaswamy, 2015).

Raqs Media Collective focuses on research as a form of speculation, making installations that value complicated discourse over quick impression.

CAMP also puts together dense installations out of data and documents, which require a lot of mental effort to understand. In these approaches, research increasingly prescribes visual form, positioning images as representations of argument rather than as autonomous perceptual experiences. When you look more closely at the formal tactics utilized in these practices, you can see how conceptual imperatives subtly affect how people make visual decisions. Gupta's installations generally use weak, small materials like thin wire, faint neon tubing, and low audio loops to make people feel vulnerable.

These sensory effects slow down perception and make people feel more connected to the work, but because they are so few, the work needs more explanation to make its political references clear. The perceptual field thus fluctuates between immersion and instruction.

In contrast, Komu's surfaces are thick and build up over time. Layered pigments, burnt textures, and punctured images create a material rhetoric of violence and erasure that hits the viewer in the body first. But the symbolic system that organizes these marks—Harappan motifs, constitutional calligraphy, Gandhi's face—ultimately leads to a historically specific argument that values narrative coherence over ambiguity.

Scaria uses moving pictures and photo montages to make things easier to see fast. His works often use visual juxtaposition and theatrical gesture to make it easy to see sarcasm or criticism right away. This clarity makes political communication easier to understand, but it also limits how much freedom viewers have to form their own interpretations, which leads them to predefined readings.

CAMP and Raqs use visual grammars that are less concentrated. Raqs likes poetry fragments, speculative graphics, and textual overlays that create associative constellations instead of straight tales. But these constellations are frequently surrounded by extensive concept.

CAMP's multi-screen environments and data-rich displays create moving visual fields, but the rise of transcripts and technical schematics draws attention to investigative logic. In both instances, perceptual excess is integrated into explanatory frameworks.

When you put all of these formal trends together, they don't show that visual invention is going away; instead, they show that it's being recalibrated within research paradigms. Visuality endures, yet it increasingly functions under the influence of concept, substantiating the paper's principal assertion that contemporary Indian art post-liberalisation often converts images into instruments of argument rather than independent realms of perceptual exploration.

### **3.1. EFFECTS ON ART AND EDUCATION**

This way of teaching has changed the definition of artistic competence in a subtle way. Students are often judged on how clear their ideas are, how well their research subjects fit together, and how sophisticated their theoretical framing is before they have fully looked into the substance. Students are often told to turn their visual choices into conceptual language during studio critiques instead of focusing on what works for them. In some cases, talking could be better than looking. As research-led practice becomes more common, so does the use of academic jargon in the studio. Bibliographies, methodological statements, and ethical considerations are now common, even in preliminary research. These techniques encourage intellectual rigor, but they might also stop creative methods that are based on guesswork or intuition too soon. Students may refrain from using unclear or too formal gestures due to the belief that they cannot be effectively communicated verbally. This can make works that are unclear, excessively planned out, or too formulaic.

Ranci re's insistence on the equality of intelligences makes things very difficult in this setting. Trusting the learner does not mean giving up on criticism; it means giving up your right to interpret things for a short time so that perception can work on its own (Ranci re, 2004). Bergson's focus on duration suggests that creative insight comes from spending a lot of time with something rather than from thinking about it beforehand (De Groot, 2022). Slow looking, repeated making, and embodied trial-and-error are not ways to avoid being critical; they are different ways of thinking.

From this point of view, changing the way we teach would mean changing the way we grade, letting students critique work that isn't finished, and letting sensory experimentation come before theoretical framing. Students might not be able to use explanatory texts for a short time during workshops. Instead, they would only have to respond to colour, scale, rhythm, texture, or sound. *Playing Slow* says that slowness and collaboration are epistemological assets rather than things that get in the way of seriousness (Karjalainen et al., 2021; Vaishna, 2021). These strategies reflect that.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Contemporary Indian art after 1991 has gained significant critical acclaim, but this success has led to a new orthodoxy where conceptual clarity often eclipses visual experience. This article contends that conceptual practice requires recalibration rather than outright rejection. Indian art can keep its political power while also keeping the open-ended qualities that make visual art a way of thinking by bringing together emotion, time, and visual thinking.

The future of Indian contemporary art will be influenced as much in classrooms and studios as in biennales and museums, extending beyond mere artistic production. If research-based and ethnographic practices are now the most common, the way that teaching is set up can either make their aesthetic effects stronger or change them. The studio is not only a place to learn new skills; it is also a place where attitudes toward risk, uncertainty, and experimentation are

passed on. When conceptual articulation is prioritized from the beginning, form becomes secondary to argument; conversely, when material exploration is emphasized, visuality reestablishes its ability to engage in critical thought.

This distinction has repercussions on both institutions and aesthetics. Funding organizations, residency programs, and evaluation systems are increasingly acknowledging work that demonstrate social relevance and scientific rigor prior to the full development of visual methods. These standards show that you care about ethics, but they could also stop artists from trying new things. A pedagogy that acknowledges time, emotions, and sensory engagement would resist the reduction of process to mere proposal. It would let political insight arise through form instead of just stating things.

In this context, reclaiming visuality constitutes not a retreat from critique, but rather its revitalization. By fostering pedagogies that embrace slowness, uncertainty, and embodied inquiry, Indian art education can maintain the critical energies generated post-liberalization while safeguarding the perceptual openness that differentiates artistic knowledge from other forms of social analysis.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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