The Gift of Fellowship: India, Modernism, Abstraction, and New York City

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Abstract

From 1963, first through the JDR 3rd Fund and then from 1979, through the Asian Cultural Council (ACC), several Indian painters were granted time, stipends, materials, resources, and travel budgets to explore the United States. Krishen Khanna, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Avinash Chandra, Jyoti Bhatt Natvar Bhavsar, Bal Chhabda, V.S. Gaitonde, K.G. Subramanyan, Paritosh Sen, Bhupen Khakhar, Ram Kumar, Paritosh Sen, and Rekha Rodwittiya each went on to have remarkable careers. My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center was to look at the artists’ articulation of their practice, and their desire to expand it, at the moment of their applications. Using fellowship materials and correspondence from a range of Indian artists, art historians, and critics from 1960 and 1990, I reconstruct here the significance of a year’s travel and study in New York City and its implications for artistic education and practice. At the same time, I explore the breadth of correspondence between Indian artists and the ACC, which offers rare primary source materials for the reconstruction of the history of abstraction and the history of art history in postcolonial India; and indicates the significance of the shared experience and memory of applying and experiencing the fellowship as creating bonds of solidarity between Indian artists.
From 1963, first through the JDR 3rd Fund (henceforth “Fund”) and then from 1979, through the Asian Cultural Council (henceforth “Council”), several Indian painters were granted time, stipends, materials, resources, and a travel budget to explore the United States.¹ Krishna Khanna, Tyeb Mehta, Akbar Padamsee, Avinash Chandra, Jyoti Bhatt Natvar Bhavsar, Bal Chhabda, V.S. Gaitonde, K.G. Subramanyan, Paritosh Sen, Bhupen Khakhar, Ram Kumar, Paritosh Sen, and Rekha Rodwittiya—went on to have remarkable careers. My research at the Rockefeller Archive Center (henceforth “RAC”) was to look at the artists’ articulation of their practice, and their desire to expand it, at the moment of their applications. During my time at the RAC, I worked through the full extent of these materials in the Rockefeller Foundation records (henceforth “Foundation”) and the Asian Cultural Council records. My primary interest was in recovering a range of primary source materials—correspondence, catalogs, reports, and drafts—unavailable in the artists’ own archives.²

The Circuit

After India’s formation as a nation-state in 1947, there was a felt need to develop an artistic vocabulary adequate to the new nation-state. Developments in North America were seen to be significant, not only because of the movement of European painters and pedagogues to that country during the war. These developments were also occurring because of the institutional support, through museums and universities, for fostering the discipline of art history, for encouraging the emerging scholarship on “Indian” art, and for criticism on modern painting internationally. In most cases, the artists would work for a year to settle on itineraries for themselves, and often for their partners, from India through select destinations in Europe (as part of “world tour” tickets), before reaching New York. While in New York, they would see art in the city, meet artists and gallerists, and attend lectures, classes, and performances arranged through the Foundation. From New York, they travelled domestically in the United States, visiting major collections of Indian art. For example, they would go to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston; the (now) National Museum of Asian Art in Washington, DC; and the Philadelphia Museum of Art; also see significant collections
of modern and contemporary art in Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, and Los Angeles; and view landscapes crucial to artistic formations, especially the deserts of North and Central America.

The RAC maintains a full record of applications and correspondence of every artist who applied for this fellowship, as well as the activities of those who procured one. Bal Chhabda, for instance, applied to survey contemporary North American painting for eight months, looking closely at works at the Museum of Modern Art in New York while also attending Leo Steinberg’s lectures on Pablo Picasso and familiarizing himself with the emerging scholarship on Indian painting. In the files, I was particularly interested in the artists’ a) travel itinerary b) scheduled programing and c) articulations of their own practice. Additionally, after the conclusion of their fellowship terms, they would send the Fund and the Council exhibition materials, new criticism, updates on progress, and often personal notes inquiring about the families and wellbeing of their friends in New York. V.S. Gaitonde, “Gai” told Porter McCrary, director of the Fund, for instance, of the artists he met in Asia and India long after his fellowship and updated him on his experience of daily life in New York; McCrary, in turn, visited him in Bombay frequently through the 1970s. McCrary had vouched for Gaitonde after visiting his studio as a representative for the Museum of Modern Art, which acquired a painting on his recommendation in 1964.

Another close personal relationship is evinced in the correspondence between Bhupen Khakhar and Richard S. Lanier, president of the Council. Khakhar frequently sent catalogs and slides long after his fellowship. In a letter to Lanier reflecting on his time in New York, where he deployed his characteristic tone of irony:

New York is an entity, frighteningly aloof, objective, indifferent, and energetic. But when I was sitting for greyhound [sic] bus stand at South Carolina it was not New York. It was a different country all together. It was like being in India...I am glad to be back. I appreciate India more—I have started noticing people, their behaviour, shop windows, and traditional art. This is due to my visit to U.S.A. I experienced India while I was in U.S.A. Today I talk about U.S.A while being in India.
For Khakhar, North America produced a feeling of estrangement or displacement that made him see differently what was familiar. The encounter with North American painting was, in some instances, transformative. This was certainly the case for Tyeb Mehta, whose practice completely changed after his fellowship year between 1968 and 1969. Mehta’s application objectives were “to acquaint myself with the state of American paintings as it has developed over the past two decades” and to visit European art in American collections such as at the Museum of Modern Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, and the Barnes Foundation. Mehta had been considering the problem of the figure in postcolonial painting as against the two-dimensional materiality of the canvas. His encounter with modernist developments in North America, particularly the abstract works of Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko, who he felt provoked a bodily “presence” in their works through scale and the use of color, suggested to him the significance in addressing flatness as a material condition with which all paintings must first contend. As a result, Mehta’s technique shifted dramatically in 1969, from painting expressionistically rendered, hurtling bodies constructed with a palette knife to painting and arranging steamrolled body parts formally, as flat colour, on the surface of the canvas. His report, now at the RAC, allows us to account for this transition in material terms, and also points to the dilated period of encounter, sometimes resulting in a generative “silence” of work, produced by a fellowship, marking him in the Council’s evaluation as a most intense grantee.

**Abstraction and India**

A central question in my dissertation is the history of abstract art from the perspective of South Asia. In particular, I argue for the materialism and historicism of modern Indian abstraction as against civilizational defenses for its timelessness in India. The latter position was best argued by L.P. Sihare, who would go on to be the director-general of the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi, and who was funded by the Foundation to complete a dissertation, “Oriental Influences on Wassily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, 1909-1917,” at the Institute for Fine Arts at New York University, on the significance of Indian aesthetics to early experiments in abstraction. In 1963, Sihare curated a show, *8 Contemporary Painters from India: Interaction of East and*
West, where he asserted that the “concepts of non-representational painting derive essentially from genuine Indian manifestations, it must be evident that the Indian artists face a challenge to transform the substance of their cultural heritage into the logic of modern art.”

An exhibition of eight artists reclaiming, it would seem, this inheritance, was mounted at the India-America League between June 21 and July 7 1963, at Lever House, 390 Park Avenue, New York. Of the artists in the exhibition, five were affiliated with the Fund. Khanna had already received a fellowship from the Council of Economic and Cultural Affairs, New York in 1962 to study art in the United States; and Gaitonde, Kumar, Padamsee, and Samant would go on to receive Fund fellowships. The Fund kept records, including catalogs and corresponding, with at least one other artist in the exhibition, Maqbool Fida Husain.

At the same time, the RAC has reports of artists who did not subscribe to such a theory of abstraction. It holds a special and rare collection of slides of experiments in color and collage by the artist who is the focus of my dissertation, Nasreen Mohamedi (1937-1990), from 1969, who was articulating a materialist position for abstraction as a transformative and historical labor. Mohamedi sent eighteen transparencies for review in 1969 to the Fund (Fig. 1). Of these materials, which incorporate readymade elements such as newsprint and commodity wrappers along with painted shapes, graph paper, only one has been publicly exhibited or reproduced in the artist’s catalogs. They indicate stages in her procedural experiments, including her investigation of Cubist collage, her “discovery” of elements such as the right angle, the triangle, the chord, and the line, that would continue to structure her works for the subsequent decades, and demonstrate the material interests that drive her practice. Mohamedi offers us a strong counterargument to the theory of abstraction developed by Sihare and supports her reception in the twenty-first century as a Third-World practitioner utilizing the resources of international abstraction. Abstraction in South Asia, then, can be understood and justified on the grounds of its response to the conditions of postcolonial modernity, rather than as the site of its immanent origin.

Trips to the United States were mirrored by trips to India by McCrary and, later, Richard Lanier. A full record of whom to meet and for what purposes shows the breadth of the interest in supporting to Indian cultural institutions, and also the interest in representing to them cultural developments in North America. An early
instance of this interest was the Council’s funding of the traveling MoMA show *Two Decades of American Painting* to India and Japan.\textsuperscript{12} The show was meant to show a representative selection of contemporary North American painters. It was accompanied by the critic Clement Greenberg, who had been since 1961 putting forth a model of modernist abstraction in North America as the most significant international art of his time. The folder, as well as other correspondence files at the RAC, shows the mixed reception Indian audiences had to this view.

### Art and Expansion

A major revelation at the RAC was art’s basis in friendship, community, and pedagogy in postcolonial India. Krishen Khanna, who first received a travelling fellowship from the Council of Economic and Cultural affairs, New York, 1962, frequently recommended other friends; and most applications, both successful and unsuccessful, refer to peers as references.\textsuperscript{13} They included each other’s catalogs in mail, celebrated each other’s victories, and offered honest criticism on the development of each other’s practice. They encouraged each other to apply, or to keep at it, and they were committed to bringing back the concentration of resources at their disposal to their home country. This is also demonstrated in the Foundation’s and the Council’s work supporting art historians such as Ratan Parimoo,\textsuperscript{14} Stella Kramrisch,\textsuperscript{15} and Karl Khandalavala\textsuperscript{16}; in fulfilled requests for books, slides, prints, and projectors for Indian institutions\textsuperscript{17}; and in their conversations about funding programs such as Krishna Reddy’s printmaking workshop of 1973.\textsuperscript{18} Ratan Parimoo used the Fund’s fellowship, for instance, to request books, audit Kramrsich’s course on Indian Sculpture, study archives of Asian art at the New York Public Library, and develop the slide library at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda.\textsuperscript{19} The critic Richard Bartholomew used it to develop curatorial strategies; review contemporary American art; while his partner Rati surveyed developments in contemporary North American theater for Indian audiences.\textsuperscript{20} That was, for Indian scholars and artists, at the heart of the grants: to return, enriched, to their home countries.

When I applied for the RAC stipend, I had not yet embarked on the two years of
generous fellowship that constituted my dissertation research in India, Europe, and the United States. When I reached these materials, near the closing of this time, they felt familiar for practical reasons — I, too, went to those same museums or institutions, or I, too, had those same experiences of fear and exhilaration and dislocation and expansion, I, too, had that exact same route, staying that exact same hotel. But they also felt rare: primary source materials, slides, and exhibition catalogs that render the richness of practices characterized by a plentitude of output that are well preserved at the RAC but not always in the corresponding personal archives. And finally, to dwell in this archive, following their path and tracing the work of one as one’s work, is to swell in their expansiveness. As Rekha Rodwittiya put it:

Growth is difficult to quantify, and yet one feels it within one...The privilege of a grant for a painter is immense, for it allows one time to gather and put together the fragmentation that occurs within one in the process of everyday living. It is like emptying one house and being left with only the bare structure to once again devise within...New York offered me the chance to look at myself after a long time, and for this I am truly grateful.21
Fig. 1, Transparencies from Nasreen Mohamedi, Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Series 3.4, Box 32, FA427, Folder: Nasreen Mohamedi, RAC.
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2 As Rekha Rodwittiya told me, there was no practice of storing copies of these handwritten or typewritten material, personal correspondence with Rekha Rodwittiya, 04/11/2023.
3 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Subseries 17.5, Box 791, FA1403, Folder: Bal Chhabda, RAC. See also Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Subseries 17.5, Box 791, FA1403, Folder: Akbar Padamsee, RAC
4 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Subseries 17.5, Box 791, FA1403, Folder: V.S. Gaitonde, RAC.
5 Asian Cultural Council Records, Grants, India, Subseries 17.5, Box 792, FA1403, Folder: Bhupen Khakhar, RAC.
7 Application Form, Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Subseries 17.5, Box 791, FA1403, Folder: Tyeb Mehta, RAC.
8 Rockefeller Foundation Records, Fellowship Files SG 10.1 (FA244); Fellowships, Scholarships, Training Awards, Subseries 464.E, Box 285, Folder: Laxmi Prasad Sihare, RAC.
9 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Series 3.4, Box 24, FA427, Folder: Maqbool Fida Husain, RAC.
10 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Series 3.4, Box 32, FA427, Folder: Nasreen Mohamedi, RAC.
11 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Series 5.1, trip Notes, Richard Lanier, Box 103, FA427, Folders 3368-3398, RAC.
12 Asian Cultural Council Records, Grants, Asia, Subseries 17.1, Box 775, FA1403, Folder: Two Decades of American Painting, RAC.
13 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Series 3.4, Box 26, FA427, Folder: Krishen Khanna, RAC.
14 Asian Cultural Council Records, Grants, India, Subseries 17.5, Box 792, FA1403, Folder: Ratan Parimoo, RAC.
15 Rockefeller Foundation Records, Projects, SG1.2, Series 100-253, International and United States FA387a, Folder: Stella Kramrisch, RAC.
16 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Series 3.4, Box 26, FA427, Folder: Karl Khandalavala, RAC.
17 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Subseries 17.5, Box 791, FA1403, Folder: K.G. Subramanyan, RAC.
18 Asian Cultural Council Records, Administrative Files, Records of the JDR 3rd Fund, Subseries 17.5, Box 791, FA1403, Folder: Krishna Reddy, RAC.
19 Asian Cultural Council Records, Grants, India, Subseries 17.5, Box 792, FA1403, Folder: Ratan Parimoo, RAC.
20 Asian Cultural Council Records, Grants, Series 6, Box 471, FA1403, Folder: Richard Bartholomew, RAC.