

ARTS AND THE WOMAN: A FEMINIST SATYAGRAHA

Women curators and artists are questioning if not redefining our notions of permissibility and perception



PIC: Tanya Abraham

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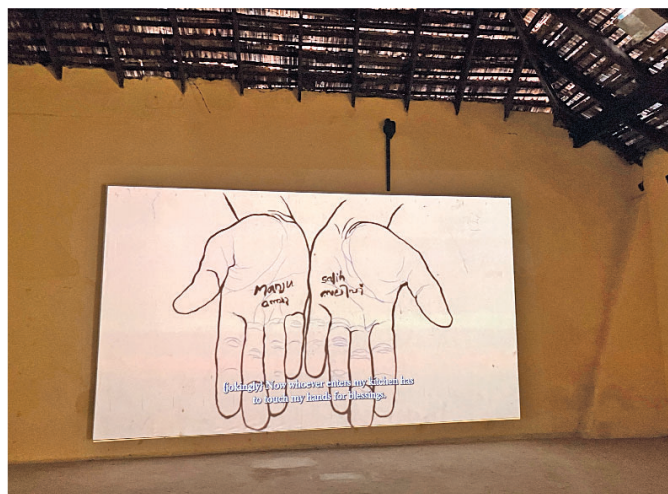
The Champaran Satyagraha is a watershed moment in Indian history. As per the directives of the British, tenant farmers in Bihar and Bengal were forced to grow indigo on their land. Their resentment led to the uprising that became known as the Champaran Satyagraha. Even a century later, indigo is controversial — for some it’s a symbol of historic oppression, while it is celebrated by others. In parts of south India, indigo is referred to as the ‘Blue Mother’ and is worshiped. Indigo has another characteristic, it affects everything it touches. Perhaps, Mario D’Souza considered this when he chose organic indigo ink to compose the illustration that runs along the walls at the gallery now showing ‘A Place at the Table - Where is Amma?’.

Curated by Tanya Abraham, the exhibition stems from her many dialogues with women,

concerning itself with “a world of inequality, patriarchy, and power struggles”. Mario’s work weaves into the others being shown at the gallery, a collection of exhibits that explore the position of women in the subaltern. In *Where is Amma?* Abraham uses the term Amma as a universal embodiment of the female.

KITCHENSCAPES

Like indigo, a kitchen too is filled with dichotomy. It can be a place of freedom or of bondage. The curatorial note references “socio-cultural frameworks, which position women to accept roles assigned to them irrefutably”. Abraham says, “For me the idea of bringing in the kitchen was that it’s a space that is always associated with a woman in India.” In one project, participating artists enter the kitchens of Kochi women to create a series of films. As the women cooked for their families, the artists captured



PIC: Sarah John

videos of their lived experiences — the films look partly like recipe documentation, and part anthropological study. A diversity of women were chosen for the project. “It’s really a performance that is happening in the kitchen, for all of the artists. The art that is

produced in the kitchen is ephemeral in nature. To capture that, film was the only medium I could think of that could show that interaction. Cooking can be an artistic practice for anybody, rich or poor, but it doesn’t become a

sang Kumar Sanu in the early ‘90s, but you are not quite sure of how to feel when you see the women on display at ‘Of Disappearance and Desire’, the exhibition hosted by the Hashtag Collective. First of all, the range of women — south Indian actresses from the black and white era — are depicted on lenticular panels that form, dissolve and reform as you move around the room. Forget objectification and the male gaze, here the women are literally optical illusions. The switch in perspective is both literal and topical. Parvathi Nayar, an artist from the collection calls it “a look at our cinema through the female prism”. The Malayalam film industry is broadly considered “progressive” for their portrayal of feminine themes, yet even here, there is scope for reimagining, feels Nayar. A panel in the style of a billboard upfronts the image of a Malayalam film actress. “There was a media student who came in recently who talked about how rare that still is, to have a female face on a movie billboard,” says Nayar. Some reimaginings go beyond the veil. In Adoor Gopalakrishnan’s canonical film *Mathilukal*, the character of Narayani is never seen, only

WAYS OF SEEING

“Ek ladki ko dekha to aisa laga”

heard. (KPAC Lalitha voices Narayani but does not appear in the film). The collective, in one of their panels, gives form

exhibition with questions around ‘What role does cinema play in the arena of gender conversation?’ and ‘Does the



PIC: The Hashtag Collective

to Narayani, letting her be seen for the first time.

In referencing Malayalam cinema, and showcasing Kochi’s kitchens, Abraham and Nayar have set up some of the more ‘local’ exhibitions this season. People are instantly enthused at seeing actresses and films they recognise or in seeing kitchens like those at home. “They are familiar with these stories and it is a ‘wow’ moment for them to see them in a slightly different light,” says Nayar who wants audiences to leave the

cinematic narrative hold up a reciprocal mirror to society?” Abraham says, “If someone is visiting from outside Kerala and they want to relate to something that is very local then this would be the place. It wasn’t easy winning the trust of the women you see, a kitchen is a very intimate place. We got permission only after speaking to their husbands first. Honestly, none of the women have come to the exhibition to see themselves. The husbands have come, which in itself, says a lot.”