

# New Dimension in Modernism: Emergence and Impact of Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association

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## Abstract

The emergence of the Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association (RPSA) during the late twentieth century marked a critical shift in the trajectory of modern Indian art. Moving beyond formalist modernism, the movement introduced an ideologically driven practice rooted in political consciousness, material experimentation and resistance to institutional authority. This research paper examined the historical conditions that led to the formation of the Radical group, its philosophical foundations and its impact on contemporary artistic practices in India. By focusing on the Keralite context, sculptural interventions and interdisciplinary approaches, the study explored that the Radical movement opened a new dimension within modernism—transforming art from aesthetic production into a site of social critique and dialogue. The research paper adopted a synchronic approach to analyze how local realities and global radical discourses intersected, resulting in a distinct and contextually grounded artistic language.

**Keywords:** Radical Art Movement, Indian Modernism, RPSA, Sculpture, Political Art, Kerala Art, Contemporary Indian Art

## 1. Introduction

Modernism in Indian art has often been associated with formal innovation and the search for national identity after independence. However, by the late twentieth century, this trajectory faced increasing criticism for its detachment from lived social realities. The emergence of the Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association in the 1980s signaled a decisive break from this tendency.

The Radical group did not merely introduce a new style; it redefined the purpose of art itself. Their practice questioned institutional authority, challenged market-driven aesthetics and foregrounded socio-political engagement. Art was no longer treated as an autonomous object but as an active participant in public discourse.

This research paper explored how the Radical movement created a new dimension within modernism—one that integrated ideology, materiality and social responsibility.

## 2. Historical Context and Emergence of the Radical Movement

The formation of the Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association must be understood within the broader socio-political climate of post-independence India. The late twentieth century witnessed economic shifts,

political unrest and the growing influence of leftist ideology, particularly in Kerala.

Artists associated with the movement expressed dissatisfaction with:

- Academic formalism
- Institutional dominance in art practice
- Commodification of artworks
- Elite-centric narratives of modernism.

The landmark exhibition “Question and Dialogue” (1987) became a turning point, marking the public articulation of their concerns. The movement emerged not as a stylistic school but as a collective intellectual resistance.

### **3. Conceptual Foundations: Radicalism in Art**

Radicalism in art, in this context, referred to a fundamental rethinking of artistic practice rather than surface-level experimentation. It involved questioning systems of power, representation and cultural authority.

The ideological grounding of the Radical movement drew from:

- Marxist thought and class consciousness
- Postcolonial critique
- Subaltern and identity discourses
- Institutional critique in global art practices

Unlike Western avant-garde movements, Indian radicalism remained deeply embedded in local socio-political realities such as caste, labour and regional identity. This produced a hybrid form of modernism—globally aware yet contextually rooted.

### **4. The Keralite Context and Artistic Consciousness**

Kerala played a crucial role in shaping the Radical movement due to its unique socio-political environment. High literacy rates, strong leftist politics and a culture of public debate influenced artistic thinking.

Artists from this context emphasized:

- Social responsibility over aesthetic autonomy
- Collective experience over individual expression
- Political engagement through visual language

Their works often depicted human suffering, labour and marginalization using distorted figures, raw textures and expressive forms. While parallels can be drawn with Western Expressionism, the thematic grounding remained distinctly Indian.

### **5. Radical Approaches in Sculpture**

One of the most significant contributions of the movement lied in the transformation of sculptural practice. Sculpture was redefined from a static object into a dynamic medium of resistance.

#### **5.1 Material Experimentation**

Radical sculptors rejected traditional materials such as bronze and marble, opting instead for:

- Industrial scrap
- Organic materials

- Found objects

This shift challenged established hierarchies of artistic value and resisted commodification.

### **5.2 Anti-Monumental Aesthetics**

Traditional sculpture emphasized permanence and grandeur. In contrast, radical sculpture embraced:

- Fragility
- Temporality
- Process-oriented creation

This anti-monumental approach reflected social instability and political tension.

### **5.3 Spatial and Public Interventions**

Radical artists moved beyond galleries into public spaces. Sculpture became:

- Site-specific
- Participatory
- Politically charged

Such interventions disrupted institutional control and engaged wider audiences.

## **6. Individual Artistic Journeys and Collective Ideology**

The Radical movement maintained a balance between collective ideology and individual expression. Artists shared a common political framework but developed distinct visual languages.

Their journeys reflect:

- A shift from academic training to conceptual practice
- Integration of personal experience with social critique
- Continuous negotiation with institutions and markets

The artist was redefined not as a creator of objects but as a cultural critic and social interlocutor.

## **7. New Dimensions in Modernism**

The Radical movement expanded modernism in several significant ways:

### **7.1 From Aesthetic Autonomy to Political Engagement**

Art became a tool for questioning power structures rather than a purely visual experience.

### **7.2 From Object to Process**

Emphasis shifted from finished artworks to creative processes and ideas.

### **7.3 From Gallery to Public Space**

Art moved into everyday environments, engaging broader audiences.

### **7.4 From Individualism to Collective Dialogue**

The movement encouraged collaboration and intellectual exchange.

## **8. Impact on Contemporary Indian Art**

The influence of the Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association continued to shape contemporary practices in India.

### **8.1 Expansion of Media**

Contemporary artists now use installation, performance, video and digital media as extensions of radical practice.

## 8.2 Socially Engaged Art

Art increasingly addressed issues such as:

- Identity politics
- Environmental crisis
- Gender and caste inequalities

## 8.3 Democratization of Art Spaces

Radical practices have contributed to making art more accessible and participatory.

## 8.4 Reclaiming Marginal Narratives

The movement opened space for voices from marginalized communities, transforming art into a platform for representation.

## 9. Challenges and Limitations

Despite its significance, the Radical movement faced several challenges:

- Lack of institutional support
- Fragmented documentation of works
- Market resistance to non-commercial art
- Internal ideological differences

These challenges, however, also reflect the movement's oppositional and experimental nature.

## 10. Conclusion

The Indian Radical Painters' and Sculptors' Association represented a decisive moment in the evolution of modern Indian art. By challenging institutional authority, rejecting commodification and foregrounding socio-political engagement, the movement introduced a new dimension within modernism.

Its significance lied not only in its artistic innovations but in its redefinition of art as a critical and participatory practice. Radicalism in this context is not confined to a historical moment; it continues to influence contemporary artistic discourse.

The movement demonstrated that modernism in India is not a fixed category but an evolving field shaped by dialogue between local realities and global ideas. In this sense, the Radical movement remained an enduring force—one that continued to question, provoke and transform.

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