

Elastic Dreams

Joydip Sengupta is a new age chronicler of urban spaces. In his works urban spaces appear as a reality and crisis. Joydip's creative meanderings through the omnipresent urban localities result in various expressions that include paintings, water colour drawings, sculptures and video works. Instead of generating logical narratives that would define the cultural issues engendered by the urban spaces, Joydip prefers to delve into a discourse of signs, which are both in common use and self-generated, that would further engage the viewer with the already existing discourses on urban spaces. This system of signs seen in the works of Joydip simultaneously endorses what we call the urban reality and its irrevocability, and the possible critical viewings of the same. And he generally qualifies all these works as 'Elastic Dreams'.

A space assumes meanings within a given time when the human beings interact with it and make relational choices. The choices and the modes of interactions are determined by cultural and historical continuities, hence the space to which the personal engagement is made also comes to have properties that make this particular space of engagement similar to several other spaces existing elsewhere. Joydip's location of discourse, the city of Delhi, in this way gains an emblematic status, which could exemplify any other urban space in the global scenario. It would be interesting to see how the artist, facilitated by the global connectivity of 'localities', speaks not only of Delhi and its reality but of any metropolis in the world. He, in his works, at once captures the essence of urban contradictions and the possibility of a critique within the impossibility of disassociation.

Apparently there are three pronounced features in Joydip's painterly works. One, the images and events that he creates are placed within grid like formations created by specific colour patterns. Two, there is a forced juxtaposition between what we call the natural and the cultural. Three, there is an attempt to find the invisible linkages between cultural memories and the contemporary thoughts on the necessity of cultural memories. Subconsciously, the grid formations in the paintings simulate the location of their origin and discourse; urban spaces. The artist's conscious juxtaposition of 'natural' with the 'cultural' suddenly spurs up a series of associations, which in turn would help the viewer to make ruminations over the 'truth' and 'ethics' of their own locations. Cultural memory as evidenced by the references to the '*pata chitra*' folk painting tradition of Bengal aesthetically place the contemporary painterly idioms within a continuum; impossibility of creative engagement in isolation.

A closer look at Joydip's works informs that the artist perceives urban space as a constituent element of contemporary culture. A culture that deliberately tries to be distinct with all its technological and time-space transcending communication and life style devices, when seen through the works of Joydip, seems to have inseparable associations with a time when the human beings were connected to each other through intuitions and emotions. Hence, the new urban culture (in other words the global techno-communication culture) is not a severance from the past but an outcome of human endeavors. This outcome, according to the artist, cannot be seen as an imposition. The

visual commentary of the artist goes on to say that each individual, whether he is an active participant or a victim in/of the urban culture, should take the responsibility of the truth and ethics of their own locations.

This is a concern, an anxiety and the point of origin of a dream, which could be extended, for the artist. To express this concern, Joydip creates a few icons that are to be read in affirmative and negative terms simultaneously. Reading a cultural icon positively and negatively at the same time is one of the problems that the contemporary culture poses. Especially when the artist's role is defined as a chronicler, it would be difficult for him to pose a direct critique on what he comments upon. However, the very act of painting (of sculpting and video making) uses its own dynamics to save the artist from just being a recorder. His ethical notions come to play in the articulation of images, the way sun comes goes in and out of clouds on a winter day.

The critique of urban culture, for the first time took the shape of an icon in Joydip's works when he presented a solo in Delhi in 2004. He created the icon of a robot as a major metaphor with a sense of apprehension. The robotic image that he got from a newspaper and the caption attached to it became a point of departure for him as the robot in the picture had something 'humane' about it. The humaneness of a robot, though a paradox in a very practical sense, with its hands outstretched looks so 'natural' than 'cultural'. Joydip cites how in Japan the decreasing number of young people proportionately increases the number of old people and thanks to the busy life style the young people are not finding enough time to care for their ageing parents and grand parents. In the technologically advanced countries like Japan, it is reported that robots are increasingly put to use for attending ageing people. In the long run, the old people develop emotional ties with the robots.

Robot, though a product of culture and of a menacing technological revolution, taken in a different context, is more facilitating than an actual human being. With emotional faculties these robots become surrogate human beings that in long term would redefine the very context for/in which they are produced and put into use. Then, can one accuse urban culture of dehumanizing tendencies? This is the question that Joydip also raises in his works. The iconic robot, both in a humorous and melancholic futuristic thought, could attain the status of godhead; a path and destiny rolled into one. This paradoxical situation is handled subtly by the artist in his paintings as well as in his sculptures.

Religion and war, perhaps the two sides of a coin called urbanization/globalization (as both cannot sustain without mutual support and growth) are also articulated as Joydip works further on his canvases and papers. While creating a benevolent robot (with all malevolence implied), he produces a counter character in the form of a supreme soldier. His point of reference is G.I.Joe toys that he has been seeing around him for a long time. On the one hand the artist places the robot on a tortoise, these action men are placed on a firm ground, with all war paraphernalia in place. In Indian iconography tortoise is one of the incarnations of Lord Vishnu and he is also seen as standing on it. Joydip's robots too, when rendered in sculptural medium, stand on turtles as if they were representing a religious icon. The urban/global paradox is humorously reiterated in this rendering.

An implied parallel between the action men toys and the 'ready to act' robot subtly generates a critical discourse on the very act of viewing a culture through a chain of symbols. In Joydip's ensemble, the meanings of the signs are either replaced or reversed. The action men as protectors become destroyers of humanity and the robots as 'robot-cops' (with destructive potentials) become protectors of humanity. In most of his works, Joydip, plays between these polemical images and derives a new way of association. The irony of juxtaposing disparate images and styles comes to be pronounced when, as mentioned elsewhere in this essay, Joydip uses the *Pata Chitra* style to portray potential terrorists/soldiers. The connectivity to cultural memory, when used for vested interests, can yield destructive results, it seems to say.

'Elastic Dreams' is not about a nostalgic longing for the golden past. The elasticity that Joydip intends to see in his dreams, an extension of pleasure in hope, is all about envisioning a world order, which is not drastically different from what we see around us today, but qualitatively different in freedom and choice. The artist is optimistic in a sense that he plunges all his negative thoughts in a kind of memory vault. The video work opens up this vault for the viewer. The images that are seen continuously merged one after another in darker tones look more like the images from a personal diary. It is a registration of images and incidents without the filtering of consciousness. The only conscious act in the video is the deliberation in editing; a conscious flipping through to see what is inside. Joydip dips in a river of memories and comes out to breathe the air of contemporary culture.

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