

# Harvesting tradition



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As a growing animator in the mid-nineties my pre-occupation with the moving image did not stop at the well-crafted and -told animated offerings from US studios. I could see that there was amazing mastery over movement and the highly engaging stories could be mesmeric.

The spell of these fluid images was broken permanently when I was exposed to other world animation — the Russian Masters, Eastern European work, films from the UK and France and Canada. These were the real influences on my mind. My deep love for the medium was born through viewing these films.

The diversity in the telling of tales, the maturity of subject and image, the great demands on the viewer to engage with the material were fascinating, as was the enormity of the breadth and depth spanned by these works.

These films were strongly rooted in both form and

content in the histories and cultures and politics of the countries they came from, and each represented new and independent thought, going well beyond entertainment or fascination with movement.

These films prompted me to think about my stance as an animator. I could study the strongly etched tenets of classical animation and strive to match up to the seductive grace of US animated films, and almost certainly come nowhere near the dexterity they embody and symbolize. This because, as the other films taught me, my work did not come from within my being as an Indian. I had other life experiences, another visual culture, and another relationship with the moving image. Animation can be a lifelong journey of evolution for the animator — being conscious of who one is and where one comes from and then being able to represent this.

I had to first realize and explore the varied aspects of my reality and then make the translation to the moving





image. Only then would I truly discover what my connection to the world of animation is with regard to my own identity.

I started with exploring stories around me and found that we were indeed amazing tellers of tales in many forms, traditional and contemporary, each of these destroying and overstepping the comfortable boundaries of animation that we were consuming. This then was the fertile ground to spring from.

One of my explorations led me to a hut in a village not far from the Mumbai metropolis. The simple reed and mud hut I visited had no windows. The person who lived there led me inside. I found my way by the light of the lamp he held. The dark interiors of the house were austere. He showed me a painting he was working on. The images were resplendent. White rice paste was used as paint on a mud covered surface, using a simple stick as a brush. To my eye it looked like a decorative, patterned landscape dotted with people and animals. The images were quirky and had an inherent energy. I could feel the wonderful quality of the work but could not fathom much more about it. Bhimsen Kondya Koti then

told me the story he was painting.

This was the story of a man and woman who decide to fill the land near their hut. They work hard all year round and labour equally, agreeing to eventually also share the harvest equally. After

toiling for many days the time comes to share the crop. The man takes the top 'half' leaving the bottom half for the woman. He has kept his word and cleverly short changed the woman. Undeterred, the resilient woman plants a new field with the root, while the man makes merry and drinks away his ill-gotten gains all year long. After the new crop sprouts and grows the woman takes all of it home, the root as well as the grain while the trickster is left high, dry and sorry.

I was amazed to find that this incisive story was a sharp comment on gender politics. Although the tribal imagery looked naïve the great sophistication of the story brought to me the fact that our art forms are contemporary and alive to social situations. The narrative started unfolding from the left corner of the painting, crossing the river that divided the space of the painting diagonally and then crossing back and coming to the beginning. It followed the cyclic life pattern of the Warli tribe people, connected closely with the seasonal cycle, the cycles of birth and death, of day and night. Each stroke of the stick brush was meaningful and necessary. The evolved syntax of the painting was well understood by all members of the tribe who could then ascribe semantic value to the images clustered together based on their shared world view.

The humbling experience for me was to find a centuries-long storytelling tradition with its obvious connection to unfolding narratives in animated time and space, living quietly beside all the clutter of alien images and stories we were trying to emulate and claim.

In a dedication to the art, thought and life of the Warlis, and in my quest for a socially and culturally relevant identity, I animated the world inhabited by Kondya Koti's painting.

