

Tracing Ravishankar Raval's Art Pedagogy in the Gujarati Periodical *Kumar*

Vasvi Oza

There has been a fair amount of scholarship on the history of formal art education in India and the role played by colonial art schools of the 1900s. Located within or near important cities and centers of trade and governance such as Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, these schools taught a syllabus rooted in the values of Western art with a pedagogy structured around examinations. Both these aspects, prominent in other fields of colonial education as well, faced criticism from native educators, artists and social reformers in different parts of the country. The early 20th century saw these criticisms leading to the setting up of two major alternative educational institutions, which were rooted in the burgeoning nationalist movement of the time. These were the Santiniketan art school started by Rabindranath Tagore near Calcutta in 1919, and the Gujarat Vidyapith, established by Mahatma Gandhi in Ahmedabad in 1920. These enterprises soon inspired other contemporary educators and thinkers, one of whom was Ravishankar Raval. Raval was a prominent Gujarati artist who took it upon himself to create new spaces and resources for art education, an area that had thus far remained exclusive and inaccessible under colonial administration. However, unlike Gandhi and Tagore, Raval's vision took shape from within the mobile space of a print periodical called *Kumar*, whose words and images came to articulate new approaches to art education and writing.

Raval was trained at the J.J. School of Art, Bombay, in the early 1910s, and wrote extensively about his experiences as an art student in his illustrated autobiography, *Gujarat ma Kala na Pagran* (Ushering of Art in Gujarat) (1967/2009). The following lines from the book reveal his disappointment and frustration with the colonial education system in Bombay: "Even though I got new values and dreams, I could not find any traces of imagination and creativity in the art school's curriculum. [...] There was not much purpose or thought explained behind drawing a group of objects as they appear to our eyes." [1]

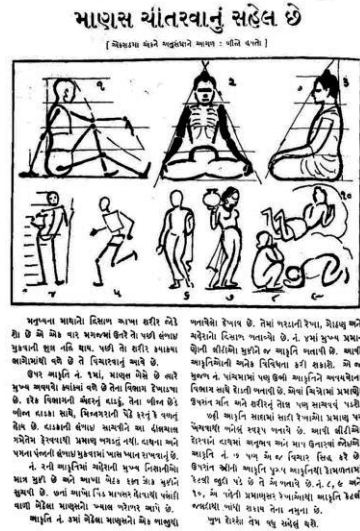
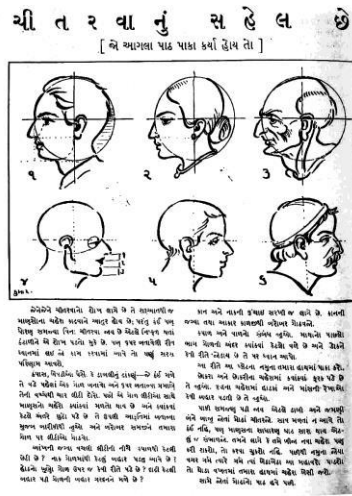
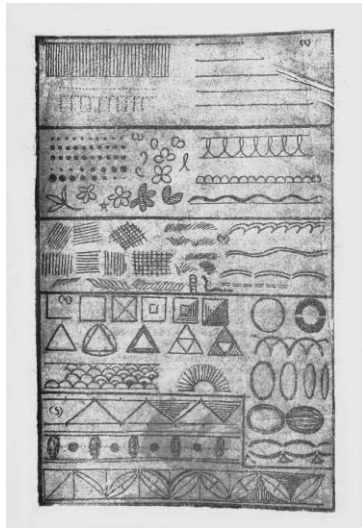
Raval's sentiments shared resonances with the larger resistance against colonial education in the early 1920s, an era when print journalism was actively used by Indian nationalists and social

reformers to voice their concerns in this field and make the public aware about existing problems. Raval was also greatly influenced by Bengali revivalist artists, such as Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy, and imbibed their language in his own practice as an artist and art educator. It was in this context that, along with his friend Bachubhai Ravat, a noted print expert, designer and poet, Raval started *Kumar*, a monthly Gujarati periodical with a vision to impart educational and cultural values to young Gujarati readers. [2] Providing basic art education became one of the important features of *Kumar*.

The first issue of *Kumar* was published in January 1924 from Ahmedabad, and in his editorial note, Raval emphasized the objectives of the periodical, which included making available informative and inspirational material grounded in Gujarati cultural consciousness. The periodical was to publish enlightening articles, stories and poetry, along with writing that helped nurture empathetic personalities and instructed readers about developing various skill sets and improving physical health. Interestingly, “learning to draw” was given a lot of attention within the area of skill development.

Raval wrote a series of illustrated articles between 1924 to 1937 to teach basic drawing skills to the readers through simple activities/exercises. In the first article (June 1924) in this series, titled “Drawing is Easy” (Chitarvanu Sahel Chhe), he used an easy conversational tone, inviting people to try their hand at drawing different kinds of lines. To provide encouragement, Raval stated: “Anyone can create an artwork by using the simplest lines or colours; provided they have enough concentration and basic skills.” [3]

Along with the conversational text, the article also included three full-page illustrations by Raval, demonstrating different uses of lines (Fig. 1), shapes and human faces. The readers were asked to use their “eyes, hands and minds” while practicing these drawings. Raval wrote five more articles in this series over the next few years, gradually moving towards teaching readers to draw different human faces (Fig. 2) and various poses and angles for a human figure (Fig. 3).



(left to right)

Fig. 1: Illustrated page from “Chitaravanu Sahel Chhe” (Drawing is Easy), *Kumar*, June 1924.

Fig. 2: Illustrated page from “Chitaravanu Sahel Chhe”, *Kumar*, July 1927.

Fig. 3: Illustrated page from “Manas Chitaravanu Sahel Chhe” (Drawing Human Figures is Easy), *Kumar*, April 1929.

As the series progressed, Raval changed its title to “Self-education in Art” (Chitrakala ma Swashikshan), where the word “swashikshan” carried the influence of the words such as “swaraj” and “swadeshi”, reclaimed as part of the nationalist movement against the colonial government. [4] The later set of articles continued discussing drawing with different techniques and was published across the issues of *Kumar* that came out in 1937. After this, Raval turned his focus towards an idea that had been brewing in his mind for the last few years, which involved starting a physical space for art education among the Gujarati public.

In one of the pages of the June 1934 issue of *Kumar*, Raval made an announcement about Chitrakut Kalasangh (Fig. 4), an informal art school he wished to establish in Ahmedabad. In a short note accompanying the announcement, he pointed out how the art of painting/drawing had always been significant in aiding human development, and since Gujaratis had already honed a strong sense of cultural consciousness, this would strengthen their proclivity towards a fine taste

in the visual arts. The note also lamented the lack of a systemic educational centre for visual art in the region, and proposed to impart holistic education on the subject to interested students, offering them classes within a humble physical space in exchange for a nominal fee. Along with this, Raval also clearly set the goal of his school apart from colonial art institutions, declaring that it would stay away from the culture of evaluation through examination.

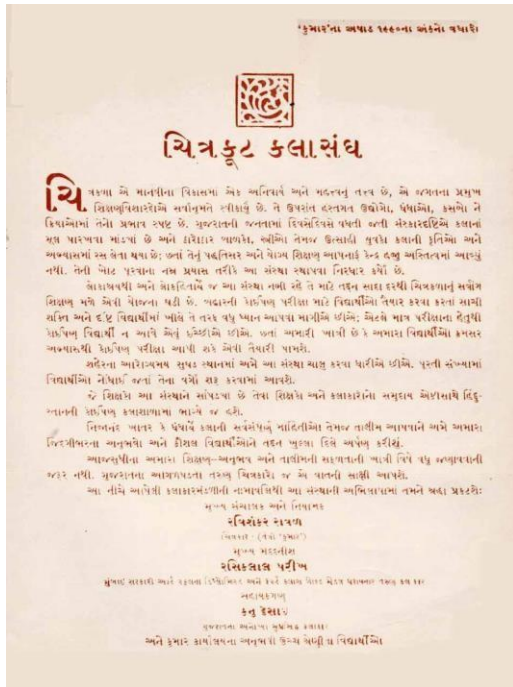


Fig. 4: Print advertisement of Chitrakoot Kalasangh, *Kumar*, July 1934.

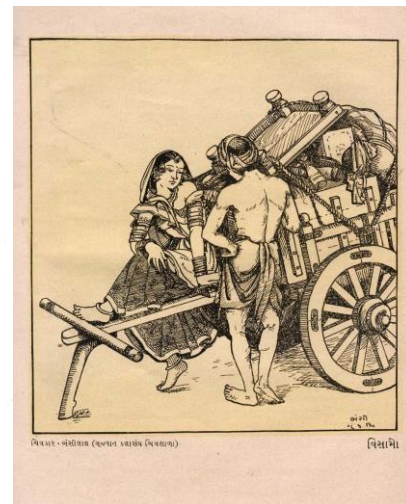
Apart from Raval being mentioned as the main teacher-mentor, the note included the names of two other Gujarati artists who would be associated with the centre. These were Rasiklal Parikh and Kanu Desai, both familiar to the readers of *Kumar* through their paintings which were regularly published in its pages. Pushing towards a vision of making this school Gujarat-centric, Raval also changed its name to Gujarat Kalasangh Chitrashala (GKC from hereafter), adding an emphasis on its regional connect.

At the inaugural function of GKC, Raval spoke about how the centre wished to fill in the lacuna of well-equipped art schools, and informed art teachers who valued self-reflectivity, a sentiment that seemed to be rooted in the critique of colonial art schools and educators. Keeping in mind the Gujarati public, he also spoke about how his centre would be more accessible, unlike other art schools which were located too far away or were too expensive for the common man to afford. [5]



પાવગઢ (પાવગઢ - ગુજરાતી પેશા (સરખાલ સ્થાનમાં વિશાળ))

હરશદ્દલ પાન્ડ્યા 'પાવગઢ'નું ચિત્રણ



વિસામો - શરીરનાં અવસ્થા (વિસામો)

વિસામો

(left to right)

Fig. 5: “Pavagadh”, painted by Harshadlal Pandya, trained at GKC. Image reproduced in *Kumar*, March 1935.

Fig. 6: “Visamo (Rest)”, painted by Bansilal, trained at GKC. Image reproduced in *Kumar*, January 1936.

Apart from Raval’s own recollections of GKC in his autobiography, there is very little information available about it. To find any more traces of this art school, one has to return to *Kumar*, where full-page colour reproductions of students of GKC were published from time to time till about the late 1940s. Most of these paintings were centered around themes and styles related to Gujarat, a vision that was evident in Raval’s own practice, in line with the revivalist movement. The focus of the works is either on local sites (Fig. 5) or the sartorial

characteristics of people of the region (Fig. 6). The images also carried the names of the students and the school below each colour reproduction, a format that helped promote the institution among the Gujarati public.

Raval's vision for art education did not stop at only imparting drawing lessons to his readers. It also included efforts to introduce them to the history of art. He published articles in *Kumar* on older and contemporary artists in India and on Gujarat's heritage. For example, in an October 1928 issue, he wrote an extensively illustrated 15-page piece on "Shilpacharya Shri Abanindranath Tagore", drawing references from the writings of E.B. Havell, Asit Kumar Haldar and Ananda Coomaraswamy. Other articles authored by Raval included one titled "Gujarat nu Sauthi Junu Shilp" (Antique Sculptures of Gujarat), and another called "Gujarat ni Kala na Razadta Avashesho" (Disregarded Remains of Gujarat's Art). These were published in the January and May 1929 issues of *Kumar*, respectively, and offered insights on previously ignored aspects of local art history.

Both *Kumar* (which is in print till this day) and GKC functioned as an integral part of Raval's endeavours to carefully engage with historical material and make art education accessible to the Gujarati public. They highlighted the crucial interdependency between print and pedagogy that emerged from the critique of colonial education at large. These initiatives also shaped a new vocabulary of native art and pedagogy, that in turn influenced both regional and national aesthetics in the 20th century.

Figure Acknowledgements: All images are courtesy the author.

Vasvi Oza is an artist, translator and researcher, currently teaching at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Arts, Design and Technology, Bengaluru.

Endnotes

[1] Ravishankar Raval, *Gujarat ma Kala na Pagan* (1967) (Ahmedabad: Kala Ravi Trust and Archer, 2009, Reprint), 155. The translation here is mine.

[2] The Gujarati word “kumar” refers to a young boy on the brink of manhood.

[3] Raval, *Gujarat ma Kala na Pagan*, 2009, 222. The translation here is mine.

[4] Gandhi reclaimed the word “swaraj” as the possibility of self-rule to counter the colonial government. The word “swadeshi” refers to the Swadeshi movement that spread to different parts of India in the early 1900s and advocated the use of locally produced goods and nativist enterprises over British imports.

[5] Raval, *Gujarat ma Kala na Pagan*, 2009, 399.