

**SHAPING OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN 20TH
CENTURY INDIA : A STUDY OF THE WORKS
OF THREE PAINTERS**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled "SHAPING OF CULTURAL IDENTITY IN 20TH CENTURY INDIA : A STUDY OF THE WORKS OF THREE PAINTERS", submitted by Ms. MAMTA SHREE OJHA in partial fulfillment of the award of the Degree of MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY of Jawaharlal Nehru University has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or any other university. We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.


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(MAMTA SHREE OJHA)

INTRODUCTION

Social and cultural identification is a process in which people come to feel that some other human beings are much the same as they are and still others are more unlike them. It is both a cognitive and an emotional process : perceived similarities and differences provide a basis for effective involvement and detachment.

The problem of cultural identity for India as a whole is the outgrowth of European colonization. It was a consequence of the way European culture constructed its own identity in relation to the colonized cultures. In the process, Indian culture, as other colonial cultures, was attacked and declared to be inferior.

Cultural identity is an intellectual concept and hence this quest for self definition was taken up by the group of new intellectuals who were informed of the European view of India, and had faced a sense of alienation. The rise of new class of intellectual artist made the artist a part of this ongoing cultural endeavour.

In India the quest for personal and national identity arose simultaneously. Therefore in the pioneering figures of modern India the influence of the modern concept of a unique individuality coalesce with the needs of emergent nationalism to inform the quest for selfhood.

But identity itself is a changing concept and the changing concerns of the world environment brings up the need to revise and reformulate an identity. This work attempts to see how this problem of identity was sought to be resolved by artists in the 1920s and 30s.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Art, down the ages has been recognised as one of the most indefinable, unpredictable and incomprehensible aspect of human endeavour. Historically

speaking, it has meant different things to different people at different times. Various approaches have been employed to study art : fabricational and technical study, metaphysical and aesthetic study, and socio-historical study. A basic premise that is agreed upon by most writers is that art has, throughout history played important roles in man's attempt to enjoy his environment and to liberate himself.

Herein we will consider a few works from post- independence years written on the history of modern Indian art.

Works from the first two decades after independence were strongly influenced by the cultural debates of the colonial period. The colonial struggle to evolve an identity for the nation had continued into the post-colonial period. Thus, we see in these works the similar struggle for definition of the categories 'modern' and 'Indian'.

The concern primarily is to see as to when the 'modern' commenced and as to who were its most genuine representatives.

The whole debate about when did modern in Indian art begin revolves around the Bengal school of Abanindranath. It is either considered to be the first phase of modern in Indian art¹ or is rejected as a 'false start'.² The criteria of modernity varies from author to author. *W.G. Archer* thinks that 'genuine' modern art in India began only when Indian artists were able to blend an international 'modernistic manner' with the strength of their own 'national character', when they could effectively tap those aspects of traditional Indian painting and sculpture with the clearest 'modern' potentials.³ For *Ajit*

1. See, P.R. Ramachandra Rao, *Modern Indian Painting*, Madras, 1953.

2. See, W.G. Archer, *India and Modern Art*, London, 1959.

3. Ibid, pp.43-48.

Mookerjee,⁴ it was the affinity with primitive and folk art that constituted modernity. True modernity of Indian art lay in 'quest for primordial sources of inspiration'. Depending upon these definitions of modernity, India's modern art history found a beginning in Gaganendranath Tagore, Nandlal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil.

These works also tend to see the 19th century as a period of decline and degeneration and the history of modern art for India begins only in the 20th century with the establishment of Bengal school (not withstanding the fact whether the Bengal School was lauded or rejected)⁵ Ravi Varma occupies a very insignificant place in these works. He remains an example of a westernised Indian, a product of the Government art school academism and hence to be overlooked. This westernisation of Indian art was followed by nationalist phase of Bengal school which was replaced by the modern phase.⁶

A change can be seen from the 1970s. *Ratan Parimoo* in his collection of essays entitled "Studies in Modern Indian Art".⁷ sees the story of Indian painting during the last hundred years as that of conflicts, confusions, and changes, of the struggle in quest of a national identity.

The modern, according to him, involves a war with its own times, with complacency and stagnation, and with whatever becomes a hindrance with the so called accepted rules and norms. In the action of a revolutionary then, there is an affirmation of the individual bringing to the fore his spiritual crisis. In the

4. Ajit, Mookerjee, *Modern Art in India*, New Delhi, 1956.

5. Jaya Appasamy, *Abanindranath Tagore and the Art of His Times*, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, 1968, pp. 1-14; Ramachandra Rao, *Modern Indian Painting*, op.cit., p.5.

6. This evolutionary nature of Indian art becomes evident in the name of chapters in W.G. Archer's book : 'Art and British', 'Art and Nationality', 'Art and Village',; 'Art and Primitive', etc.

7. Ratan Parimoo, *Studies in Modern Indian Art*, Book India, New Delhi, 1975.

modernist phase then, the purpose of art for individual also changes. The painter now paints not for the satisfaction of the patron but paints through a compulsion to satisfy his urges and needs. Parimoo also connects the concept of avant garde to the modern. For him the revolutionary is also the leader. Modern is then, an attitude to the past, a reinterpretation. and fresh sorting out of relevant from irrelevant, the significant from insignificant, in accordance with the spirit of the time or *zeitgeist*.

What distinguishes Indian art scene from Western art scene is primarily India's colonial experience, according to *Parimoo*. Colonialism, he says, has led to socio cultural contradictions in India. India does not have the cultivated urban elite base which has been the mainstay of modern movements of the West. Modern Indian psyche is an admixture of rural and urban; poor and upper middle class; conservative, religious upbringing and secular ideas. This causes serious dilemmas that can have a crippling effect on creative imagination.

He says that every Indian artist is conditioned by the inevitability of 'synthesis', as the influences absorbed from the West have been playing a major role in the way he visualises the problem for his creative exploration.

*K.G. Subramanyan*⁸ believes that an artist's wish to be a part of living tradition, that is, innovative and individual and yet a part of one's own culture, involves a struggle and does not come automatically. Each artist has to think and respond to a 'real need'.

He says that art needs a tradition to sustain itself and gain breadth and resonance. Past gains significance only through the present, in response to the needs of the time. The tradition or the cultural inheritance of a society is therefore not immutable, nor does it get obsolete with time. Tradition is a

8. K.G. Subramanyan, *The Living Tradition, Perspectives on Modern Indian Art*, Seagull Publications, Calcutta, 1987.

dyanmic concept which is read differently by each individual according to his own experiences by virtue of being placed in a particular time and in certain circumstances.⁹

According to *Subramanyan* there are two ways in which tradition is perceived- the insider's view, and the outsider's view. The concept of insider's view of tradition arises from a belief that every individual is shaped by forces inherent in the society in which he is born. Tradition here is not a set of unchanging thoughts and actions passed over generations. Rather ideas and activities in a society are reassessed by each individual and every generation. The outsider's view is somewhat different. It is an individual's observation of the continuity of the group structures in any complex of events in term of an accepted category of value bases like classical, romantic, southern, northern, etc.

Subramanyan believes that in modern societies man's heritage is not as compact and uniform as in older societies. Therefore the responsibility of the artist increases, and greater demands are made on him. The artist now needs to be a scholar to understand the past,"to identify his own terms clearly."¹⁰

For *Subramanyan*, art is a specialised form of communication. When communication overshoots its usual function of putting across a message and goes to heighten our insight and sensibilities and ushers us to a vision beyond, it becomes art. It presupposes the existence of a composite community with shared values, symbols and language. But modern art with its symbols standing for a

9. Ibid, pp.27-33.

10. Ibid, p.33.

wide range of meanings became opaque because of the absence of one common language of communication shared by all. Consequently man loses a sense of belonging with the others.¹¹

*Geeta Kapur*¹² says that national culture is preferable to that of regional cultures from the point of view of cultured resistance, because nationalism, though a bigoted concept, is not a "devolving" one. This becomes important in the face of the fact that capitalism cannot easily co-opt the "political and therefore volatile and alert category of nation", but it does succeed with the ethnic communities one by one. The interplay of modernism and nationalism in India creates a curious situation in India involving, what she calls, a 'continuous double-take'. Whereas nationalism helps resist imperialism to a point and also serves as a check to unhindered modernism, modernism interrogates the "dangerously totalising ideology" of nationalism. Therefore, the ambiguous position of the modern in Indian society had its own advantages.¹³

Indian art, she says, should not be studied in terms of the question of protest alone. This art has a hermeneutic task of providing historicity to the the cultural traits and then of reconsidering the history in terms of ethical options put forth by the political consciousness developed against colonialism. This is the basis on which past, extant, and invented traditions are out into play to bring together different histories and evlove a more complete whole.¹⁴

11. Ibid, p.29.

12. Geeta Kapur, "Place of Modern in Indian Cultural Practice", *Economic and Political Weekly*, December, 7, 1991.

13. Ibid, p.2805.

14. Ibid, p.2806.

In "Further Narratives"¹⁵ she says that within our heritage of 'romantic nationalism', cultural practice has been conceived of as functioning under the sign of myths. She places Coomaraswamy's idealism, Tagore's version of modernism and Gandhi's projection of organic communities replete with symbols in the same context. And these attempts to exaggerate historical identity, to multiply mythic personae are seen as parts of the anti-colonial struggle in which they lead to well made solutions, to vexed problems.

In another article,¹⁶ she says, that in the nationalist phase the colonial intelligentsia contextualized the terms tradition and modernity. Tradition then is not seen as simply an anthropological phenomenon as it was conceived of by western modernists when they discovered western cultures. Nationalism, by the very fact of inventing tradition at particular time, provided it a contemporaneity. Tradition, then becomes an effective method to politicize culture, and at the same time it struggled to resist reification of Indian artefacts in the wake of Western modernism.

*Partha Mitter*¹⁷ and *Tapati Guha Thakurta*,¹⁸ their books appearing almost simultaneously, provide a comprehensive study of Indian art during the 19th century and upto the swadeshi period. Art, in the British period, is seen against the interplay of colonialism and nationalism. Art, the vital cultural expression of India, was intertwined with assertions of nationalism, the equations of modernisation and westernisation, and a desire to preserve the

15. Geeta Kapur, "Further Narratives", *Journal of Art and Ideas*, No. 20-21.

16. Geeta Kapur, "Contemporary Cultural Practice, Some Polemical Categories", *Social Scientist*, Vol.18, No.3, March 1990.

17. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

18. Tapati Guha Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

cultural heritage of India. These works address the tensions and contradictions that attended the advent of European naturalism in India, as a part of the imperial design for westernization of the elite and trace the artistic evolution from unquestioning westernization to the construction of a Hindu national identity.

Indian art in the 20th century was influenced by the conflict between two world views represented by nationalists and orientalists, which emerged at the turn of the 19th century, with the rise of national consciousness and the rediscovery of Indian civilization by nationalists and orientalists. The ^{line} of this debate is traced parallel to the nationalist movement.

But these orientalist and nationalist formulations of Indian art, it is argued, operated within a wider milieu of aesthetic self awareness and thriving middle class culture in Bengal. Colonial rule had introduced radically new models of 'art' and 'artist' in Indian society, bolstering these models with education. Nationalism internalised these models and appropriated them towards its own ends. There emerged a dominant ideology of Indian art, which was propagated and established as the only legitimate and 'national art' of modern India.

Nationalist ideology made the categories 'western' and 'Indian' sharply polarised ones, but distinction between the two was more ideological than actual.

These works break away from the earlier trends to see the development of modern Indian art in the evolutionary manner. Each artist and artistic trend that tried to establish a generic image for 'India' represented a particular historical option of resolving the demands of both 'modernity' and nationalism. Therefore the Bengal school is the product of the very trend it militated against- those of mythological paintings done in western styles.

From the foregoing discussion we can infer that there are certain important issues discussed by scholars which form the problematique of the History of Modern Art in colonial India.

It becomes clear that art history is based on the notion that art emerges from a socio cultural matrix. Hence, alongwith the aesthetic aspect of art, recognition must be given to its social and communicative function. Art is always ideological, not only in the sense that it contains a political message, but also that its meanings are the representations of extra aesthetic. Meanings are never fixed. Rather they are constructed at various levels.

Therefore the modern Indian art movement has to be seen within the broader context of colonialism and nationalism. The story of changing styles and techniques can then be situated within a broader spectrum of encounter with new dominant forms of knowledge and constitution of new social aspirations and identities. The changes in pictorial styles and modes of representation assume their real significance only as a part of a wider process of changing visual tastes, expectations and ideologies. Even the ideas and judgements about 'modern', and 'tradition' need to be situated in a particular social and ideological milieu in which they were produced. Far from being fixed, the perimeters of these categories tend to be constantly shifting even within a specific time and culture span, according to the sense of its utility for the artist in shaping his present.

It emerges that tradition is a concept that is essential for the growth of the artists' art, yet tradition is not an unchanging concept handed down through generations in 'pristine purity'. What has been received from past is reassessed by the new generation, and innovations are incorporated. The artist has the freedom, in this case, to choose any inspiration he finds congenial to his work, in a particular context. Such an interpretation demands that the modern artist be

an intellectual accomplished to understand the past, so as to fulfill his advanced role in the formation of a more universal world culture. The very act of handling tradition is considered political as it involves rediscovery, selection and gradation of a past that has been buried. In the cultural context of colonial resistance, tradition served a purpose to provide a safeguard against British attack. What emerges out of the discussion is a progressive role of tradition as providing a base upon which to build an identity; and providing a past which had to be contested in the process of modernization.

Closely linked with the concept of tradition is that of 'modern'. Many scholars believe that since Ravi Varma's time the modernising impulse is best understood as the beginning of historical self consciousness under the twin banners of past and future. But the notion of unilinear evolution of modernism in Indian art needs to be questioned. The need is to recognise that various earlier Indian art forms formed fresh linkages, were mutated and transformed to modernism. The 'modern' art movements were the outcome of the very discontinuities they protested against.

It is also contended that modernism has no firm canonical position in India. Sometimes it serves to make indigenist motifs progressive, sometimes it seems to subvert, if not nationalism then that on which it rests and purports to grow, that is, tradition.¹⁹ But this ambiguous position of modern in the Indian cultural content has provided several advantageous options. It allows for the growth of "Indian modern", with its own set of canons which serve to signal towards the west but encourage indigenous practices to function, often via popular modes.

19. Geeta Kapur, "Place of Modern in Modern Indian Cultural Practice", *op.cit.*, pp.2803-2806.

Not all scholars consider this as advantageous. Vivan Sundaram²⁰ thinks the concept of modern that has been imposed upon the society as a part of cultural production by nationalism and its contemporary manifestations has an anarchic quality to it with an absence of any consciousness of what would be collective language that is being produced. It is always "Indianness" which is foregrounded, in an artist from the colonial period. His or her choice of indigenous subject matter, or his /her rejection of western training is given more important than the struggle the artist's underwent to develop a modern language.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM:

This study is a modest attempt to explore the works of three painters in India in the 1920s and 30s in the context of the cultural matrix of the first half of the 20th century. The aim of this work is to investigate certain questions so as to attain a better understanding of the cultural and artistic moorings of the period. How far did these artists conform to the dominant cultural discourses of the period? Can we see their works merely in the anti imperialist perspective? How is the identity question resolved by them?

CHAPTERISATION AND SOURCES

The first chapter deals with the developments in the sphere of Indian art in the 19th century. This chapter is divided into two sections.

The first section deals with the way Indian art shaped up in British minds over the ages and especially in the 19th century. The purpose is to see how different concerns within their own societies were influencing the way Indian art was perceived. The views of the earliest travellers and traders from the west continued to affect the way India was conceived. It will also be seen how by constructing an image of 'India' their own identity was being formed.

20. Vivan Sundaram, "A Tradition of the Modern", *The Journal Art and Ideas*, No. 22-21.

The second section deals with the way 'modern' art developed in India in the 19th century, in the wake of the decline and marginalisation of the traditional and artisanal pictures. It will also be seen how new categories of 'artist', 'fine art' and 'taste' developed with the opening of the Government Art schools. How did the rising tide of cultural nationalism influence these 'gentlemen artists'?

In the second chapter an attempt has been made to discern the cultural views of the Indians in the first half of the 20th century. The cultural battle against the western onslaught was fought primarily in the contemporary journals like *Modern Review*, and *Prabasi*, *Arya*, and newsletters from *Vishwabharati*. Herein, this cultural debate is sought to be comprehended through journals, *Modern Review*, *Vishwabharti News* and *Arya*- and through a few books. *Modern Review* published from Calcutta was considered the mouthpiece of the Bengal School of Art. The *Vishwabharati News* echoed Rabindranath's views on culture. *Arya*, a monthly (later became a weekly) from Lahore, was representative of the Arya Samaj views on Indian culture. Havell's, Coomaraswamy's and Sister Nivedita's writings give us the views of the sympathetic foreigners. Their views become important in that these art historians laid the foundations upon which the later cultural histories of India were written.

In the first section an attempt will be made to see the nature of culture and tradition being constructed for India. What kind of motifs, symbols and past was being resurrected? What are the primary cultural concerns of the period? Did such concerns necessarily, and consciously have communal, homogenising tendencies? And how did these concerns change with the changing milieu.

The second section deals with the kind of role envisaged for the Indian culture that was being created. Was it to assume a retrogressive role of a revivalist culture or a progressive role in keeping with the demands of the time?

Connected with this is the question whether the attempt was to revive the past or use the past as a tool to construct an image of modern 'Indian'.

The women become conspicuous in this whole affair, as a plethora of articles appear about the Indian woman and her place and role in society. The next section therefore deals with the portrayal of women in these articles and how women become the symbols of the highest values in Indian culture.

The third chapter will deal with the way this contemporary cultural discourse was reflected in the works of Nandlal Bose, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil. A select range of paintings of these painters have been studied. These paintings largely belong to the period 1920s and 30s- the period under study. The writings of these artists (in form of occasional articles and published conversations) have also been used. These writings become important at times to gain an insight into the mind of these "intellectual artists" and provide a psychological and ideological background to the pictures.

An attempt will be made to see how the cultural concerns of the period were influencing their pictures. In this context it will be seen how each of these artists represented a struggle to develop their over historical and personal consciousness while attempting to generate a social consciousness.

METHODOLOGY

In this work, art is not treated as a metaphysical experience as many artists tended to do. Nor is it treated as a mere sociological phenomenon wherein subjectivity plays no role. Here art is seen as a nodal point of psychological, sociological and stylistic causal lines.

Art includes such varied activities such as music and dance, literature, painting, sculpture and architecture. However when we talk about art in layman's term we usually mean paintings and sometimes also sculpture. Herein the word is used primarily to denote the art of painting, and artist, to represent the painters.

The role of art in modern Indian history is little talked about. There is a sad dearth of writings in this field. This could be probably because there is a problem with art. Its idioms and expressions are special and personal and hence not easily comprehensible. Its accent keeps changing fast and the common man cannot respond to the nuances of new language. Hence the artist and the common man remain strangers. This is another reason why art is often ignored.

Art did not directly play a role in shaping the consciousness of the people during National Movements. Yet these artists were very much a product of the same society, trying to resolve the contemporary cultural question through their medium of expression. And a study of their lives and works provide another insight into the complexities of the national struggle against colonial domination.

The 1920s and 30s provide an interesting period for study of art in India. This period was one of intense nationalist activity-in political as well as in cultural spheres. The earlier modes of functioning were reviewed and new means of struggle emerged from this reappraisal . These changes had a great impact on the art movement.

The influence and reputation of the Bengal school of Abanindranath spread outwards-to Lahore, Lucknow, Jaipur and Madras, making the nationalist alternative it offered to the academic naturalism an all India phenomenon. In the same period there also surfaced powerful criticism and reaction against the styles and forms used by this school. This led to various departures in Indian painting, with each trend trying to assert a more authentic identity for India.

The three painters under study-Nandlal Bose, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil represent three such trends, while at the same time sharing the same space for an alternative that had emerged in this period.

Nandlal Bose effected a departure from the Bengal school while working within its precincts. Jamini Roy chose to work in individual capacity assimilating the folk styles and idioms while at the same time inserting innovations to make it relevant for his present purpose. Amrita Sher-Gil presents a curious case in this period by virtue of being half Hungarian and half Indian. With her European upbringing, her quest for an identity as an artist, ^{and} her visualisation of India becomes particularly fascinating.

LIMITATIONS

Art is the domain of the specialists -the artists and art critics. And since I belong to none of these categories the interpretation of art may at times appear too literary or too superficial. An attempt is made to look at the works of art from a historian's point of view.

A selected range of paintings belonging to the period 1920s and 30s are used. This selection was largely determined by accessibility to the paintings in Delhi. Another limitation of the work is inability to reproduce the pictures in coloured print. The black and white prints fail to convey the impact of the colours in the paintings.

In the study of cultural concerns in chapter three, articles were selected from a plethora of articles appearing in *Modern Review* on all kinds of topics. An attempt was made to cover all important cultural concerns of the period but such a selection may inevitably miss out or put less emphasis on one or the other aspect of culture.

This work is meant merely as an exploratory endeavour to understand the way the art nuances are influenced by historical trends and at the same time the way historical consciousness is shaped by the art practices. It does not seek to be an innovative statement in this field nor does it make a claim to provide a fresh insight.

CHAPTER I

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE FIELD OF INDIAN ART IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

The nineteenth century in India was an era of immense change. Every sphere of life was affected by the shifts in political power and changes in the economy. The traditional economic set up was fatally upset impoverishing the majority of the Indians. The new cities gave birth to an urban middle class and this class became instrumental in the rise of new socio religious reform movements as also of the national consciousness.

These changes in different spheres were also reflected in the art field. This century saw the decline of traditional art and emergence of modern art with its new categories of styles and tastes. This chapter will focus on these developments in the field of art. The first section deals with the way Indian art shaped up in the minds of the Europeans, especially the British. The next section studies the developments in Indian mainstream art in the light of the view of the Europeans and the rising tide of nationalism.

BRITISH VIEW OF INDIAN ART

India had held a special importance for Europe since the time of Alexander. It has been responsible for much discussion among intellectuals from the classical periods of Greek and Roman civilisations. The European travellers.¹ down the ages wrote about men and manners, rites and customs government and princes, fashion of dress and building, arts and manufactures. Much of what they saw in India was unfamiliar or unknown to Europe, and

1. Lightbown has categorised European Travellers to India into 2 kinds - one whom he call the curious traveller who come for mere purpose of exploration. Such travellers were very few until the 18th and 19th century. The second category was that of ambassadors and missionaries, merchants, soldiers whose experience was limited to the route they took.

therefore was of particular fascination. But whereas in classical studies India and Indian religion made more than a fabled appearance, from the close of Roman Empire, the lack of actual knowledge about India gave rise to certain myths. These myths in turn affected the way art was seen in the West, down to the colonial period.

In the Middle Ages, India was seen by the Europeans as a land of riches and rarities, the home of pearls and spices porcelain and silk, of powerful oriental princes, of strange idolatrous religion and rites, of elephants and monkeys of palms and banyan trees.² These stereotypes framed the outlook of the early travellers and the way they depicted Indian society and Indian deities. The observations of these travellers were also due to their Christian background, difference of tastes and sensibilities arising out of two very different traditions, and a total ignorance of Indian iconography. Therefore, multi limbed monsters were presented in books as true portraits of Indian gods.³

The seventeenth century rise of scientific interest in oriental studies⁴ helped diffuse this "monster myth" to a large extent, as now demand arose for information about Indian mythology and authentic pictures of Indian gods. new concern arose with comparative religion and mythology, especially from second half of eighteenth century. Parallels were drawn between Hinduism and the religion of classical West. In fact a number of Hindu gods were considered as Indian forms of Egyptian and classical gods. Scholars now became increasingly aware of the importance of sexual imagery in ancient classical religion, whether in myth or in sacred art. Authors like Pierre Sylvain Marechal, Richard Payne

2. R.W. Lightbown, "British Views of India", *History Today*, July 1982, p.23.

3. Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1977, p.1.

4. The deliberate policy of patronising learning followed by Louis XIV of France under the inspiration of his minister Colbert, gave a great impulse to these studies.

Knight, Charles Dupins and d'Hancarville insisted that the use of frank sexual imagery by Indian sculptors and painters must be accepted as reflecting essentially different religious values.⁵

The anti clericalism and free thinking encouraged by Enlightenment and French Revolution resulted in authors like Marechal and Dupins upholding paganism as 'natural, noble, ancient religion at once dignified and appealing to the senses, and branded Christianity as a religion of terror as compared to them⁶.

Late eighteenth century also saw the emergence of archaeology which became an indispensable tool to study past. Another development of this period was the beginning of travels for the purpose of pleasure or exploration. This period also saw the discovery of Sanskrit and other main Asian languages, which helped the collection of facts relating to Indian art and architecture. All this, in turn led to the emergence of art history.

These art histories applied a teleological notion of progress to their study of stylistic evolution. Influenced by Biblical interpretation of history, they tended to progress on lines of universal development of arts in all nations. Therefore the assumption was that all the existing nations in the world sprang from a single original nation. The debate as to which society can be considered to be the original went well into the nineteenth century. From the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries societies like China and India replaced Hebrew and Egypt to occupy the pride of place. Through seventeenth and eighteenth centuries India rapidly found more favour, and influence of Indian learning and philosophy on classical societies was increasingly stressed upon.

5. For a detailed discussion on the view of these authors, see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, op.cit, pp. 78-84.

6. *Ibid*, p.92.

Antiquity of Indian art was found in the use of gigantic figures and in their puerile taste in decoration, all of which indicated a primitive stage of art preceding the rise of taste. The reason for the bad taste and uniformity in Indian art was found in the influence of the enervating climate and the rich and varied nature of India. In ancient India, it was felt the progress of art had been arrested in its infancy, unlike in Greece⁷

A similar trend is seen in the works of Hegel in 1830s and 1840s. According to him, by its very nature of antiquity, of having arrived before 'progress' had begun, Indian art was to be always left outside history and was to be fixed for all eternity. Hegel, like others, failed to take note of the immense richness and variety of Indian art. Yet he stressed upon the subjective character of art and also assigned essential value to the spiritual and religious element in it. Since a peculiar national 'spirit' permeated all spheres of life of a nation, in order to judge a particular tradition of art, the national 'spirit' ruling it must be understood.⁸.

Nineteenth century also saw a protest against Victorian materialism. The Industrial Revolution, it was felt, had obliterated the methods of training of the artisans which led to serious decline in its craftsmanship. And this had affected the quality of manufactured products. Therefore a new aesthetic movement demanded the reformation of industrial design. Indian ornamental design was looked to infuse new life into the moribund industrial arts of Britain.

7. B. Rode and A. Rien in Winckelman, *History of Ancient Art*, 2803, as in Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters*, op. cit pp. 198-202.

8. *Ibid*, pp. 208-220.
See, G.S. Morris, *Hegel's Philosophy of State and of History*, Chicago, 1887, P.b.
Osmaston, *The Philosophy of Fine Art*, II, London, 1920, Spiers and J.B. Sanderson, *Lecture on the Philosophy of Religion*, II, London 1895.

On the recommendations the 1835 Parliamentary committee⁹, art schools were set up in Britain in 1837. Eastern design, and Indian design in particular became the model to be emulated by students in these school. A Great Exhibition in 1851 was held in London with the main object of improving design by bringing together artifacts from all over the world for comparison. This brought the non illusionist designs of Indian artistic tradition into sharp focus and were acclaimed by the majority. The reformers like Henry Cole and Owen Jones continued to arrange exhibitions of applied art in which Indian objects figured prominently. The Museum of Ornamental Art was set up which brought out a catalogue in 1853 containing descriptions of Indian objects.

Jones attributed the strength of design in Eastern decorative art to the living tradition which deeply influence the works of Eastern craftsmen. There had been no break in tradition for the East, as had happened in the West with the Industrial Revolution. As a result the workers in the east were still deeply rooted in their own culture.¹⁰ Sir George Birdwood, on the other hand found the strength of Indian decorative arts in the simple life of the Indian villages, and in Indian social structure. He condemned the Indian government for letting the Indian applied art decline while large scale industries were set up in India. Yet, he condemned Indian sculpture and painting and blamed Hindu mythology for the monstrous nature of Indian Art. But, Buddhist art appealed to him for dealing with human stories¹¹.

Unlike the utilitarians, John Ruskin found an escape from Industrial materialism in Evangelism, an ideology that was gaining ground in nineteenth

9. Set up to consider the aesthetic quality of English industrial products. This committee found the English products to be inferior to those produced on the continent.

10. See, Owen Jones, *The Grammar of Ornament*, London, 1856.

11. George Birdwood, *The Industrial Arts of India*, London 1880.

century Britain. It equated the material superiority of the West with the moral superiority of Christianity. Ruskin felt a need to revive the medieval social values in order to produce vital art as only a morally viable society, according to him, could produce a superior form of art. He saw India as primitive, cruel, and despotic, that needed to be saved by Christianity. Hence, there existed no 'high art' (painting and sculpture) in India. A worthy art, according to Ruskin, had to be based on an empirical and scientific study of nature. It was this study of nature which distinguished Indian art from Europe art.

But he appreciated the Indian decorative art and the strong and instinctive colour sense of Indian craftsmen. However, these qualities did not indicate a higher moral and intellectual conception of art as decorative art did not involve either intellect or a developed moral sense.

William Morris, on the other hand, recognised India as a viable alternative to industrialism. He promoted the concept 'art for the people' and recognised that art was the achievement of ordinary and anonymous craftsmen, who were the real hopes of a society. Like Birdwood, he criticised the economic imperialism of Britain which was depriving Indian craftsmen of their means of livelihood and forcing them to copy the 'blank vulgarity of their lords'.

Late 19th century saw vast collections of Indian art object being made in European Museums, as also the new archaeological discoveries like that of Gandhara art and other object of 'Buddhist art' like Sanchi Stupa and Stupa at Amaravati.

The Discovery of Buddhist art especially Gandhara art excited the European scholars, as it proved that there existed in India a style of art that owed its origin to the classical tradition. As classical art was the exemplar of perfect taste, Gandhara art by virtue of having been influenced by it was better than other styles of Indian art. Hence, we see in works of Henry Cole, James

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Fergusson and Vincent Smith¹² art history of India being divided into three period-Brahmanical, Buddhist and Muhammadan, with Buddhist period at the apex. Of the three, only Hindu art was perfectly indigenous and its styles reproduced the thoughts and aspirations of the country. The other two were influenced by foreign styles. In this hierarchy Hindu art occupied the lowest rung implying that India had no art worth the name. The important pieces of art were only the result of foreign influence.

Concept of race was also introduced to explain a particular style of Indian art. Therefore, according to Fergusson, Buddha was a pure blooded Aryan whereas decadent Brahmanism was a non Aryan faith. Social decline in India started when Aryan Buddha was rejected in favour of non-Aryan degraded Hinduism of Brahman priests. He even claimed that contemporary Vaishnavism was a corrupt form of Buddhism.

These British views about India, as we saw, primarily were worked within the same framework of a foreigner studying. Indian art with pre conceived notions about Indian art. Indian art was never studied objectively and the earlier notions about India always shaped the way in which Indian art was perceived. Hence, India always remained a mysterious land of strange ways and beliefs which drew different responses.

Yet these views did influence to a large extent, the way Indian art shaped up in the 19th and 20th centuries.

II

INDIAN ART IN THE 19th CENTURY :

By the nineteenth century, the decline of the imperial Mughal dynasty and

12. See Henry Cole, *Catalogue of Object of Indian Art*, London, 1874; James Fergusson, *On the Study of Indian Architecture*, London, 1867; V.A. Smith, *A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon*, Oxford, 1911.

the other local courts had led to the loss of patronage for the traditional artist. These artists started moving into the new cities and found new patrons in the British. But this new ruling class in India could not avert the end of traditional art for long. Officers, officials and merchants, the British in India were not really interested in promoting Indian art that was also utterly strange to their whole background. Indian art was collected mostly as souvenirs of a career in an 'exotic' country of strange ways and beliefs.¹³ These paintings now generally known as 'Company Paintings' focussed on subjects which interested the new rulers Indian occupations, costumes, methods of transport, religious ceremonies, deities, birds, animals, flowers, and picturesque views.

Indian artists soon registered the British interests in these subjects and began to produce paintings for sale to them. They also incorporated many of the techniques favoured by the British - use of thin sheets of paper, water colour and combined them with the traditional Indian style.¹⁴ In the mid 19th century the arrival of photography gradually effaced the demand for these 'Company Paintings'.

At Kalighat and Puri, taking advantage of the religious pilgrims and visitors, artists of Patua tradition of the villages of Bengal presidency began to settle down. These artists produced painted scrolls, illustrating popular stories such as the Ramayana and the Krishna Lila and wandered from village to village, singing songs and showing their work. Like the Mughal artists, they adopted the water colour medium as it facilitated rapid production.¹⁵ Cheap

13. "The Modern Movement of Art in India, A symposium", *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, No.1, p.10

14. For further details on Company paintings, see Mildred Archer, *Company Drawings in India Office Library*, London, 1972.

15. As these pictures were mostly sold at an average of one anna per picture, speed was essential to earn a living.

thin paper and shading to suggest rounded forms was also adopted. Forms were increasingly simplified, again to serve the purpose of shift production. With its British and urban clientele, secular subjects were incorporated freely, like Englishman on an elephant shooting a tiger, or a voluptuous woman holding scarlet roses.¹⁶ In 1870s these Kalighat painters painted themes showing the disapproval of the European influences on Indian society. But the most common subjects were Hindu gods and goddesses, as the clients were largely localised, non westernised and plebian.

The traditional artists also tried to seek out other means of living. The Jaipur sculptors and painters maintained themselves by organising an export of marble idols, stencilled Ragmala sets, etc. The Udaipur painters worked for the pilgrims visiting Nathdvara, Kankroli etc., or decorated houses with crude murals.¹⁷ But more and more switched over to other professions.

In spite of the various adjustments made by these artists to the changed circumstances, the Kalighat paintings remained 'traditional' and 'bazaar' paintings separated from the exclusive area of 'high art' which India lacked, according to the colonists.¹⁸ Differentiation was also made between the 'artisan' and the 'artist', and the executors of these Kalighat paintings were relegated to the category of 'artisan'.

The accusations of William Morris, Owen Jones, George Birdwood and other champions of art manufactures that the neglect of Indian government has led to the decline of Indian applied arts, prompted the government to take over the western art schools founded privately in Madras, Calcutta and Bombay to train artisans. The government acted on the advice of the Department of Science

16. W.G. Archer, *Kalighat Paintings*, London, 1971, plate 1 and p.50.

17. "The Modern Movement of Art in India", *op.cit.*, p.11.

18. Refer to section I, Chapter I.

and Art in South Kensington.¹⁹ It was felt that Indian craftsmen did not lack taste but needed to learn western drawing, as sculpture and painting as fine art did not exist in India. Hence the art schools, it was felt, should work towards resuscitating the moribund crafts through art school teaching.

Yet when the handicrafts of India were exhibited in Paris in 1878, the schools of art were condemned for slow destruction of industries. Sir George Birdwood, who had organised the exhibition blamed the government as "chief offender against Art in India," by "the propagation of a bastard English style, blindly followed by the people themselves."²⁰

The reason for the failure of the art schools to achieve their objectives lay in the artificial dichotomy introduced by asking students to emulate Indian decoration while ignoring sculpture and painting. The policy also demanded that drawing should be taught only for the industrial purpose, and must not lead to fine arts. But this restriction was ignored by art teachers especially Henry Locke in Calcutta. Some students like Amada Bagchi became book illustrators, others portrait painters. Thus, with the introduction of elementary drawing in art schools, new employment opportunities opened up. The government also could not recruit enough children of the artisans due to their poverty and illiteracy. The sons of the elite composed the majority of the recruits. These artists took to Western Art with enthusiasm. Needs for Western skills was growing among the elites as realistic illustration, block engraving etc. were coming into use with the introduction of new kind of education and new methods of communication. The white colonial rulers who formed the first order of the social hierarchy in the

19. Partha Mitter, "Art and Nationalism", *History Today*, July 1982, p.29; Madras School was founded in 1850, the Calcutta School in 1854, Bombay School in 1857 and the Lahore one in 1875.

20. George Birdwood, as quoted in P.R. Ramachandra Rao, *Contemporary Indian Art*, Hyderabad, 1969, p.4.

cities,²¹ did represent a certain kind of perfection that had to be emulated. These Indian elites were also inspired by the European Romantic image of artist struggling against the philistine world.²²

Therefore, these schools with their systematised courses in drawing, watercolour and oil painting, modelling, engraving and lithography brought to the fore alternative groups of middle class professional artists. In them the skills of accurate copying and illusionist oil painting acquired a new respectability, and a new self confident and literary attitude to art was developed.

These art school trained artists, with their superior social status and their painting and printing expertise posed an unequal competition to the 'bazaar pictures which led to the increasing marginalisation of the 'traditional artisans. They also radically altered the nature of imagery and reworked their iconic appeal. The scale of production and multiplication of pictures and their circulation was enlarged. The clients cut across many layers of education and social hierarchy. Thus increasingly a homogenised mass visual culture was developed.²³

In the last decades of the nineteenth century there was a change in the way the Indian elite responded to the Western art. The several controversies regarding antiquity and value of Indian art tradition fought by Western art historians, and the rising national consciousness did to a large extent shape these responses.

21. See Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets : Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1989.

Banerjee assigns second place in the social hierarchy to the first generation of Bengali millionaires - the compradors, the banias, the mutauddis, etc; the third place goes to the English educated bhadralok; the rest of the city population which comprised the itarjans, the Chhotolok, occupied the last rung of the ladder.

22. Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism*, op.cit., p.29.

23. Tapati Guha Thakurta, "Women as 'Calender Art' Icons : Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India", *Economic and Political Weekly*, October 26, 1991, p. WS-92.

The setting up of the Calcutta Art Studio at Bowbazar in 1878 by the ex-students of Government School of Art, Calcutta, is one such significant development. The significance of it lies in the fact that these artists had left their lucrative careers as art school teachers and portraitists to set up their own lithography press to produce mainly Hindu mythological pictures. After the decline of the importance of Kalighat painters, the mythological pictures were being produced by the artisan press of Calcutta. These artisans had adopted the medium and mode of oil painting to suit the changing tastes of the local 'babus' and 'zamindars.'²⁴ Now the arrival of the studio 'Hindu mytho-pictures' with their new stylistic and technical standards, displaced the 'artisanal' pictures. These Studio artists also indigenised the Western styles at different levels to accommodate local tastes and fancies.

European imagery and techniques were emulated, as found in the depiction of the grieving Savitri cradling Stayavan's body, which according to Thakurta derives its formula from the biblical image of 'Pieta' (Madonna and the dead Christ).²⁵ But this new 'realistic' mode also led to the humanisation and domestication of the divinity. There were emotional scenes of Durga's wedding, her homecoming with her children and her departure for her husband's abode, all cast within the familiar rituals and sentiment. The rigours of realism were adjusted at times to create its own stereotypes in the form of highly fantasised setting and use of fair, plump women, bedecked in silk and gold as central icons, began to appear.²⁶ We can infer that models for Indian ideal

24. These artisan presses were set up in the native art centres of Calcutta, like Chitpur or Garanhata, and in other places of European settlement, like Chinsura and Chandernagore.

25. Tapati Guha Thakurta, "Women As "Calender Art Icons", op.cit., p. WS93.

26. Ibid, p. WS93.

beauty and divinity were found in the artists' own social circles. This can be contrasted with the pictures of Kalighat painters. The figures drawn by artisans were not bedecked in glittering jewellery and costumes, but were rather plain, the models having been derived from the lower rungs of the society.

Though these 'mytho pictures' were probably intended for a cross regional public, they were possibly restricted in their circulation within Bengal. The first pictures to enjoy the cross regional and all India clientele were Raja Ravi Varma's oleographs.

Ravi Varma (1848-1906) of Kerala was the first professional artist from the upper strata whose unprecedented and rapid success went a long way to popularise art as a profession.²⁷ He was a curious amalgam of two worlds of modern Western and traditional Hindu. He learned the techniques and styles of Western art from watching the English painters, Theodore Jensen and Frank Brooks, at work in the palace of Travancore, and also by studying the reproductions of European paintings. At the same time he also got traditional education in the Sanskrit works, Malayalam literature; and also in the contemporary thriving trend of Sanskrit style, 'mahakavyas' in Malayalam. This mixture of different choices was well represented in his Hindu mythological oil paintings. He employed the techniques of European realism to depict Indian 'classical' or religious themes. This curious mix can further be realised from the fact that though his works were exhibited in Vienna in 1873 and Chicago in 1893, he refused to go abroad for the fear of losing caste.

In Ravi Varma's paintings can be seen the beginning of historical self consciousness, of an attempt to revise Indian civilisation. In his works can be

27. After painting was introduced in the school of Arts in Trivandrum in 1888 the number of students kept increasing steadily. From 15 in 1899 the number increased to 51 in 1900-01 and 80 in 1912-13 out of which 19 were girls, R. Nandkumar, "Raja Ravi Varma in the Realm of Public", *Journal of Art and Ideas*, Numbers 27-28, p.50.

seen response to both orientalists and the nationalists who were trying to invoke India's 'classical' past and to create an 'Indian' identity in terms of that past. Hence, his works gained accolades from both the groups. He presented the past not in metaphoric forms but clad in actual flesh and blood and costumes.

Images of women and Hindu mythic heroines especially appeared as ideal national prototypes. Drawing heavily upon the depiction of nude Venuses and Psyches by French Academy artists, he garbed them in elaborate Indian costumes and placed them within a mythic narrative, thus transforming them into 'devis' of Hindu legends. These women assume the roles of ideal womanhood, depicting the emotions associated with such a woman - love, tenderness, care, dignity, desolation, suffering, shyness etc. Herein can be found an implicit project of creating 'Indian'. Hence, although the paintings were mostly based on the live models (from one locality or other) these figures were posed in an act of which could be universalised for whole of India. Thus women were depicted either combing their hair (Lady with a Mirror) or waiting for their lovers (Shakuntala) or playing a Veena (Malabar Beauty) or in role of devoted wife (Savitri with Satyavan).

The vast popularity of Varma's work can be attributed primarily to the growing westernisation of Indian taste in the nineteenth century. The use of religious, mythic and feminine imagery also lay at the heart of this appeal, as it fulfilled the demands of the fast developing national consciousness. Ravi Varma's art managed to break the exclusivity of 'high art' to some extent and make it mass art. He set up an oleography press on the outskirts of Bombay in 1892 and began mass production of his mythological paintings. The chain of British fine art exhibitions and the network of British and Indian patrons provided other major channel for popularity.

Ravi Varma's pictures found active support and patronage in the moderate nationalist leaders like Naoroji, Ranade, Gokhale and Surendranath, who

believed in sharing of powers with the Britishers After his death, Varma was hailed as the greatest modern Indian painter and nation builder by *Modern Review*, a nationalist journal.²⁸

The reasons can possibly be found in the developments that had taken place in late 19th century. Development of Bengali as a modern language provided Indians with a vernacular language which was equipped to handle the nationalist aspirations of the Indians. Then Hinduism received a boost with the success of Vivekanand at Chicago Parliament of Religions and with theosophists offering it an spiritual alternative to the materialist West. This along with the archaeological discovery of Indian past, restored India's self confidence.

Abanindranath Tagore with the inspiration and help from Havell started a new nationalist school of art called Bengal School. This school discarded Western academism and realism and looked at Indian art tradition of miniatures and Ajanta paintings for inspiration. Inspiration was also sought, and drawn from other 'oriental' art traditions like that of Chinese and Japanese. The artist was now to place inspiration above training, self expression above technical expertise, feeling above forms. This school brought art into direct contact with the nationalist movement. In the swadeshi period art acquired a new, more active role in the movement and hence strove towards attaining a purely 'Indian' style, form and theme.

28. 'Ravi Varma', *Modern Review*, Vol.1, 1907, pp.84-88.

CHAPTER II

SHAPING OF CULTURAL IDENTITY : STUDY OF CULTURAL VIEWS IN EARLY 20TH CENTURY INDIA.

The prevailing views about Indian art and culture were essentially formed during the latter half of the nineteenth and first two decades of the twentieth century, when the first cultural histories of India were written. It is therefore important that we understand the views and attitudes reflected in these reconstructions of Indian cultural history.

Large scale translations of ancient texts, undertaken by various European as well as India societies and some Indian intellectuals, aided these reconstructions.¹ So did the numerous advances in archeological researches which led to the discovery of Gandhara art and major sites like Sanchi and Amaravati and a whole new civilisation in Harappa. All this helped to view culture in its entirety, and in chronological fashion from the beginning to recent times. Different kinds of interpretations which came up fuelled a fierce debate relating to Indian culture. This was aided by the fact that "cultural nationalism" reached its peak during this period. The growing national consciousness

1. In 1776, the law book of Manu was translated into English as "A code of Gentoo Laws" to aid the administrative process in Bihar and Bengal. The initial efforts to understand ancient laws and customs culminated in the establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784 in Calcutta. "Bhagvadgita" was rendered into English by Charles Wilkins of this society in 1785. William Jones translated "Abhijnanashakuntalam" into English in 1789. Jones also emphasised that originally European languages were very much similar to Sanskrit and Indian languages. In the first half of nineteenth century, chairs in Sanskrit were established in universities of Britain and several other European countries. Among Indians Rajendralal Mitra published some Vedic texts and wrote a book entitled "Indo-Aryans" R.G. Bhandarkar reconstructed the history of Deccan and of Vaishnavism and other sects. V.K. Rajwade published sources of Maratha history in twenty-two volumes. Pandurang Vaman Kane wrote "History of Dharmasastras".

demanded an evolution of a truly indigenous culture, stripped of its western moorings, so as to bring about national regeneration.

This battle for recognition of indigenous culture in opposition to the western one was also fought with pen in contemporary journals like Modern Review, Prabasi, Vishwabharati News, Vishwabharati Patrika, Arya etc.,

I

A key issue was that of cultural "otherness", of how far and in what sense Indian societies may be seen as founded upon fundamentally contrasting principles to those of the West. In spirituality was found a new weapon to combat the Western accusation of inferiority in the materialistic sphere. These categories were put forth by Europeans like Havell, Anand Kentish Coomaraswamy,² who turned the material weakness of India into a virtue. They emphasised the aesthetics of Indian art and culture and not merely its archaeological significance.³ It was pointed out that it was spirituality, which enabled the Indians to resist the "evils of technological progress that faced the West". These writers sought to reawaken the powers of a mystical kind in the Indian quest for selfhood.

The most distinctive feature of Indian art, Havell points out, is its idealism. The Indian artist, he feels, "regards all that we see in Nature as transitory, illusive phenomena and declares that the only Reality is the Divine

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2. A.K Coomaraswamy has been included in the category of Europeans because the reactions of a Westernised Indian belong more appropriately to European than to Indian intellectuals.
 3. The archeological approach was put forth by people like Henry Cole and James Fergusson. According to them, classical art and culture was the example of perfect taste against which all periods of Indian art and culture were to be judged. Therefore, even the highest form of Indian art was inferior to the classical.

Essence or Spirit".⁴ European art, on the other hand is realist, naturalist, "merely an imitation of phenomena in Nature". So, while European art "limits its mental range to the realm of Nature". Indian art is always striving to realise something of the universal, the eternal and the infinite".⁵ He also suggests that this idealism was a result of a conscious choice by the Indian artist who wanted to create

a higher or more etherialised type than a Grecian athlete or a Roman senator, and suggest that spiritual beauty which, according to his philosophy, can only be reached by the surrender of worldly attachments and suppression of worldly desires.⁶

This also allows Havell to ask of the contemporary Indian artists to make a similar choice. At the same time, the idea of renunciation advocated could mean an attempt to wean away Indians from the politico-economic struggle against the colonial power to a more safe struggle in the cultural sphere.

Havell believed that India art was a visual embodiment of Indian philosophy, for which the only reality was the spiritual world. And to prove his point, he chose the Vedanta school as an example, according to which the world of perception was illusion or maya.⁷ He traced the rise of Indian art to a "Vedic philosophy of art". The philosophy was put in the form of sculpture between fourth and tenth century A.D. as all sectarianism was overcome and "all India

4. Havell, *Indian sculpture and painting*, London, 1908, p.6

5. *Ibid*, p.6

6. *Ibid*, p.7

7. *Ibid*, p. 24

became one in spirit". Buddhist art was also seen as having been inspired by Vedic philosophy. Havell wrote that Buddha was the "Hindu of Hindus" and that Upanishads had inspired Buddhism.⁸

The stress on the spiritual as against the material world was a reflection of the widespread anti materialist tendencies in the nineteenth century. They had their origin in the discontent with industrialism, voiced by the likes of Ruskin and Morris. These people advocated the revival of medieval social and cultural values. The theosophists came to represent the religious aspect of the movement. They felt that the spiritual values of the human race were preserved only in the pre-industrial East. The English theosophists in particular, turned to India, as it had been a land reputed to be spiritual since the days of the invasion of Alexander.

Havell expressed this search for untampered spirituality, when he said that "the West, surfeited with the materialism of Renaissance, is turning again to the East for spiritual instruction. The East, reawakening, is becoming conscious of the truth of her inspiration".⁹

At the same time he says that Indian art could not be properly appreciated by means of categories of taste belonging to Renaissance art. He says that Indian art is "a living thing.....of such unique value to India and the world..... The half hearted admirersdo it most injury".¹⁰ European misunderstanding of India arose because "Indian artistic expression begins from a starting point far removed from that of the European. Only an infinitesimal number of Europeans, make any attempt to understand the

8. Havell, *The Ideals of Indian Art*, London, 1911, p.15

9. Ibid, p.41.

10. Ibid p.xv.

philosophic, religious, mythological and historical ideas of which Indian art is an embodiment".¹¹ Therefore, to appreciate Indian art, says Havell, a European should "divest himself of his Western prepossessions" and endeavour to understand Indian thought and place himself at "the Indian point of view".¹²

Coomaraswamy compares Indian society with medieval European society, which, he says, was traditional and religious. Therefore, the values of Indian society, were very different from that of the renaissance. He felt that in these societies the artists did not engage in self-expression or in an objective discussion of aesthetic problems. In these societies the whole "conception of human life in operation and attainment is aesthetic. Art is religion, religion art, not related but the same".¹³

The materialism of the West was seen as the chief reason for the destruction of creativity in the artist in the West. The loss of artistic understanding is also considered as the chief reason for the ruin of the Indian industries and it also prevents their revival. One of the unfortunate outcomes of industrialism was that, art lost its assigned function in society and it became divorced from life.¹⁴ Hence, Coomaraswamy argued that art should not be isolated from religion and other facets of life.

His disapproval of the Renaissance tradition, was because it sought to set up art as an autonomous and isolated social activity, thereby losing the 'unity of consciousness' which characterised the earlier medieval societies and Asian (meaning primarily Indian) societies. He declared that Indian art was ideally

11. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, op cit p.8

12. Ibid, Preface p.2

13. A.K Coomaraswamy, *The Transformation of Nature in Art* (Cambridge, 1934), New Delhi, 1995, pp.60-61.

14. A.K Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994 p.1.

determined yet he made a distinction between "ideal" and "sentimental or religious" when he said that Asiatic art did not represent an 'ideal' world, "perfected and remoulded nearer to the heart's desire". Rather, he says, "Asiatic art is ideal in the mathematical sense: like Nature (*natura naturans*) not in appearance (viz, that of *ens naturata*) but in operation".¹⁵ Nature, therefore, forms an important aspect in Eastern art also. But this nature is defined differently for the East. Here, nature, unlike in the classical tradition, meant something beyond the world of appearances-the metaphysical world. In India, he says, the formal element of art represents a purely mental activity, *citta-sanna*, and hence it was natural that "India should have developed a highly specialised technique of vision".¹⁶ According to him, the technique of yoga was used to translate the mental vision into art forms.

"The maker of an icon, having by various means proper to the practice of yoga, eliminated the distracting influences of fugitive emotions and creative images, self willing and self thinking, proceeds to visualise the form of the devata.... The mind `produces' or `draws' (*akarsati*) this form to itself, as though from a great distance ... The true-knowledge-purity-aspect (*jnana-sattvarupa*) thus conceived and inwardly drawn (*antarajneya*) reveals itself against ideal space (*akasa*) like a reflection... or as if seen in a dream."¹⁷

15. A.K Coomaraswamy, *Transformation of Nature in Art*, op. cit., p.7.

16. Ibid p.3.

17. Ibid

Havell and Coomaraswamy were primarily responsible for laying the foundations on which the later histories of Indian art rested. Both of them attempted to answer the charges levelled by the classical critics that the Indian tradition could not represent the objective world. Indian tradition became a perfectly balanced intermixture of subjective and objective.

The charge of the European archeologists that all the works of art in India were the results of Western influence¹⁸ was vehemently opposed by both European and Indians. Havell says that the charge that India derived her art from Greece holds little significance as the ideas that inspired the Indian art were definitely not borrowed from Greece; Indian art was distinct.¹⁹ Extensive studies were made of ancient texts, art and architecture. The discovery of Shilpa Shastras was celebrated, for in them was seen the fulfillment of an ancient treatise on art²⁰. Examples were cited extensively from Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*, Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, Ramayana, Bharata's '*Natyashastra*', Bhasa's *Swapnavasavadatta*, Kalidasa's *Meghasandesa*, Amsumadbhedgama, *Shilpasastras*, *Sadhanamatas*, *Nitisastras*, *Sahitya Darpana*, etc., to prove that 'kalas' like dancing, singing, painting, playing on musical instruments had strong roots in ancient India.

Discovery of Ajanta murals led to extensive writing on the superior painting traditions of India. Talking about Cave XIX at Ajanta, Sister Nivedita says,

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18. The archeologists claimed that the Taj Mahal was a work designed by an Italian architect and the best pieces of Indian sculpture were the result of Greek influence. Of painting as such there was not much worth the name. See Vincent Smith's and Max Muller's views as quoted in Ordhendra K. Ganguly, "Painting in Ancient India", *Modern Review*, 1919, Vol XXV.
 19. Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, op.cit., p.
 20. See A.K Coomaraswamy, "References to the Theory and Practice of Art in the Shilpa Sastras and Other Indian Literature", *Modern Review*, 1917, Vol XXII p.40

"We are accustomed to think of the hotels de villa of Belgium as the crown of world's communal architecture. But Belgium has nothing for simple unity and mastery to compare with this.... Ajanta merely reflects the life of India, during one of the greatest periods of her history. Cave-XIX remains, carved in imperishable rock, when all the buildings of its day have disappeared, a memorial of splendour and restraint of Indian cities during the age of Gupta rule".²¹

A Danish artist, M. Axel Garl called the paintings in rock Caves at Ajanta, "the classical art of India". He says, that as Europe got its Renaissance through learning from Greek antiques, "India will get hers if she turns to Ajanta".²² Although the differences of Indian art from the classical art was greatly emphasised upon, surprisingly we notice no protest whatsoever against this advocated aim for Indians-attainment of Renaissance. In fact we do occasionally come across in *Modern Review*, some articles like that of Upendra Kishore Ray, which argue for the superiority of the European cultural tradition over Indian ones".²³

Various articles were written comparing Indian and Eastern cultural traditions with the European traditions. Abanindranath Tagore, in a paper read at the Government School of Art, Calcutta compared the Hindu, Greek and

21. Sister Nivedita, "Ancient Abbey of Ajanta", *Modern Review* Vol-1915, pp.173-174

22. "Danish artist on Ajanta Cave Paintings", *Modern Review*, 1916, Vol XX, pp.543-544

23. U.K Ray, "The Study of Pictorial Art in India", *Modern Review*, 1907, Vol-1, p.542

Japanese schools of art.²⁴ He says that though the objects of these schools may appear widely different to a superficial observer, they essentially aim at the same thing. But, he says, the aim and standard of Greek art were lowered with the fall of Greek empire and rise of Romans. With the decline of the Papal influence, according to Abanindranath, all the high ideals of European art were abandoned, and imitation and copying found favour with "half educated people and now it is vain to expect any success from the fallen standards of modern European art".²⁵

Abanindranath criticises the training given to the Indian art students in the Government Art Schools, as it was developing a sense of contempt for indigenous Indian art in the minds of the students as well as the public. These schools, he says, were getting the tastes of an Indian student "vitiating by foreign imitation and not causing him any good".²⁶

He also denies the charges that India had lost its art and cultural richness. According to him, the 'Indian artists' were working towards lifting the art from the 'unholy spell' of European art. And as to who these Indian artists were, he states in clear terms, that they were certainly not the students of Government art schools. Indian artists were :

"Those people whose hereditary occupation in Indian villages is to make images of Gods.... Those who, from childhood upwards, are occupied in reproducing in clay, in gold, in stone and silver the images of

24. Abanindranath Tagore, "Three forms of Art", *Modern Review*, 1907, Vol p.34

25. Ibid, p.395

26. Ibid, p.393

deities conceived in spirit only. They have not yet violated the canons laid down by Indian sages, hence their fall has not yet begun".²⁷

These statements of Abanindranath caused a great deal of resentment among the students of Government Art Schools. Upendra Kishore Ray protested against the view that "Indians had no talents for European art" or that "Indian art was more suited to our talents or temperament".²⁸ He believes that both Indian and European art "employ the same language.... the former talking like a child, the latter like a man". Therefore, the Indians needed to learn from Europeans in order to "improve our `grammar' and `rhetoric'".²⁹ He finds it significant that the Europeans perceive the subtler beauties of Indian art quicker than the Indians themselves; and this is attributed to their superior art culture, which in turn is the result of the European system.³⁰

The importance of nature study is stressed upon by Ray. In fact he goes on to say that if Indian art is something to be practiced in disregard of the forms of the material world, then it is a "monstrous misnomer and unfit for serious study of an artist".³¹

Ray condemns Abannindranath's suggested remedy for counteracting the `evils' of European art-by contemplating the clay images of the Indian artist,

27. Ibid, p.397

28. U.K.Ray, op.cit , p.544

29. Ibid, p. 544

30. Ibid, p.546

31. Ibid, p.547

especially the image of Durga. He emphasises the "religious neutrality" of Art schools which did not produce art meant for devout Hindus only.³²

This is related to the concept of 'Indianness' that was being defined and shaped in this period. Indianness was defined primarily as 'Vedic Aryan', which, often, consciously or unconsciously excluded other religious and cultural trends. This trend, to glorify the 'Hindu period in history' is found not only in 'Arya', which was the mouth piece of the Arya Samaj, but also in books and articles by the likes of Abanindranath, Havell and Sister Nivedita. 'Pre Muslim' Age and texts became the reference point for writers. The great emphasis on 'spirituality' and symbolism in Indian culture made the writers look for symbols in everyday lives, of the dominant religious section of the population,³³ and antiquity was traced for these symbols in the religio-philosophic texts of ancient, pre Islamic India. Therefore Abanindranath's 1905 painting of the 'Four-Armed Mother India' is painted in the style of a Hindu goddess.

The European concept of 'golden age' was applied to the 'Brahmanic Age' to counter the persistent British imperialist propaganda that India has no history, except conquest by a continuous succession of foreign invaders. Hence, the best in Indian history was attributed to the period of 'purely indigenous rule'.³⁴ Indian culture declined under the 'alien Islamic rule' of the Arabs,

32. Ibid, p.548

33. In most cases, it was also a matter of familiarity, as most of the articles found in *Modern Review*, *Arya* and *Vishwabharti News* are written by upper caste Hindus.

34. To counter the western they that Indian culture sprang from Greco Roman influence, pre Buddhist or Vedic age at times became the source for later cultural trends In fact the existence of such modern western concepts like individualism in India was also traced back to the Vedic age. See. Ajit Kumar Chakravarty, "Art, Religion and Society, *Modern Review*, Vol XXII, 1917, pp 280-284.

Tartars, Mongols, and Persians,³⁵ which now needed to be reconstructed. 'India', thus being reconstructed, excluded Islam, and became synonymous with Hinduism.

Yet, there was also realisation about the multicultural aspect of India. In his Vageshwari lectures, Abanindranath recognises that "like India has not one religion, Indian art has no exclusive purity", and accepts that India is "larger than Hindu India, Indian art is greater than Hindu art".³⁶ Others like Syamacharan Ganguly also emphasise the multi-religious and multilingual nature of India. He rejects Gandhi's suggestion to accept 'Hindi' as the national language of India, because, he says, in the prevalent form Hindi was written in Devnagari characters with a highly Sanskritised diction. "Hindustani," according to him, is more suitable because it covered both Hindi and Urdu and therefore "may more appropriately be applied to the desired common national language for India."³⁷

The Hindu monthly, *Arya*, though exalting the Vedic Age, condemned the role of 'Brahmanic Age' in the history of India. The Brahmins are blamed for the conquest and raids of India by outsiders like Ghori, Ghazni etc. The rigidity brought about by them in the caste system made the masses uneducated and weak, and this was the main reason why invaders were lured to India.³⁸

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35. Abanindranath in *Three Forms of Art* has divided Indian art into three stages-Brahmanic stage, when art excelled, as there was exuberance of supernatural element in art, Buddhist stage when art grew closer to humanity but the absolute freedom of the Brahmanic age was curtailed to an extent, yet art standards remained lofty still, Moghul stage, when art lost its freedom in the service of Moghul emperor, AN. Tagore, "Three forms of Art", op cit, pp.394
 36. Abanindranath Tagore, "Vageshwari Lectures", Translated Excerpts as published in Alokendrenath Tagore, *Abanindranath Tagore*, National Book Trust, India, 1989, pp.83-84.
 37. Syamacharan Ganguly, "Indian Nationality and Hindustani Speech", *Modern Review*, 1920, July-Dec., pp. 195.
 38. See Pandit Janjeey Vidyalkar, "Karm Ya Janma, *Arya*, March 1926, p.37

Though the Western accusation that Indian culture was based entirely on borrowed motifs was denied vehemently, the influences of other cultures on India was not denied. Rabindranath Tagore echoes a popular idea when he says that the "distinguishing characteristic of this spiritual civilisation..... its all comprehensiveness. Aliens were also assimilated".³⁹ The need for change was recognised by Abanindranath also, and he said that "any society, art, philosophy or science is always impure when, it is growing, and therefore "Indian art" did not fight shy of contact with the art of Greece, of the hill cultures, or the primitives."⁴⁰ Thus there was no claim for exclusive purity for Indian culture and art. In fact, contemporary Indian art is condemned for its confinement within the "rules of tradition" or "latest contemporary art", and hence the advice given to artists is -

Great artists do not come to build ideals of beauty but to explode such super-structures as grow from time to time and push them into the running stream of life, in which beauty and non beauty flow together⁴¹

The attempt then was not to revive Indian tradition or to overlook the western impact upon Indian culture, but to move forward and use the varied experiences to a "larger repossession of ourselves in which we shall make a better living, more real, more self possessed."⁴²

39. Rabindranath Tagore in a letter to Mr. Phelps in 1911, *Vishwabharati News*, Vol II, September 1933, No. 3, p.27.

40. Abanindranath Tagore, "Vageshwari Lectures", op cit, p.83.

41. Ibid, p.82.

42. Aurobindo Ghosh, "Indian Culture and External Influence", *Arya*, March 1919, republished in *Modern Review*, September 1919, p.512.

But an important prelude to such openness of society was that Indian culture needed to be strongly rooted in its own traditions. Prof. Raghuvira says that once the Indians stand firmly on the bedrock of their own civilisation, they would be in a much better position to appreciate and assimilate all that is best and useful in western civilisation,⁴³ and to do this, it was necessary to bring about certain alterations in the present Indian society. The barriers that obstruct the flow of human sympathy to reach all points of the social system⁴⁴ produced 'fatal weaknesses' that easily gave way to all attacks, of evil.⁴⁴

This need for reform was stressed in a renewed manner after the creation of separate electorates for Muslims in the 1909 Morley-Minto Reforms, and Ramsay MacDonald's Communal Award, 1932. Rabindranath emphatically states that salvation for the problems of Indian society can never be found by artificial means, "some apportionment of votes, some political machinery imported from foreign markets". The remedy, for him, lay in the realisation of deeper bonds of human relationships.⁴⁵

There also existed a realisation that the evils associated with imperialism and colonialism - that of carrying on missions of depredation in countries helplessly open to their inroads, were not evils that could be associated with a particular race. It was a problem of humankind, and Indians were as susceptible to misuse of power as the Europeans. For instance, Japan is condemned for having joined the "stampede towards general annihilation".⁴⁶

43. Prof. Raghuvira, "How to Advance Sanskrit Studies", *Modern Review*, July 1940, p.104.

44. See Gurudutt Siddhantalankar, "Varnvyavastha aur Pauranic Mat", *Arya*, February 1926, pp.2-5

45. Rabindranath Tagore, "Reply to the Madras Corporation Address", 22.10 34, *Vishwabharati News*, November 1934, p.35.

46. See "Buddhi Ki Chutti", *Arya* May 1926 p.19, and Rabindranath Tagore, "Reply to Madras Corporation Address", op.cit., p.36.

The talk of humanism in Indian culture gained ground especially in the 1920s and 1930s and we find a number of articles condemning the over-emphasis of the spiritual and theological nature of Indian art. Benoy Sarkar lashes out at the "Oriental pessimism" in the works of European and American scholars. He says,

Comparative art history would indicate, however, that Hindu plastic art or drawing has not been the handmaid of theology to a far greater extent than the classical and medieval works of Europe.... Indeed, art has long been more or less illustrative of history, legends, traditions and myths, both in the East and the west.⁴⁷

By emphasising on humanism, the writer was trying to counter the charges of western scholars that since the motifs used by Indian art was incomprehensible to non Hindus, the art was necessarily "local" or 'racial' Sarkar says that such difficulties may also arise with regard to western art, and hence, the difficulty in appreciation by foreigners do not make an art work less universal and less humanistic in its appeal.⁴⁸

Another reason for this shift in focus from spirituality to humanism can possibly be found in the beginning of the phase of national movement, in which the social base was broadened to include even the peasants, women and workers. There was a greater focus on folk culture and tradition. In the villages was seen tradition that was living, and this living tradition now became the source of inspiration for the artists. The motifs and symbols used by artisans, craftsmen,

47. Benoy K. Sarkar, "Humanism in Hindu Art", *Modern Review*, 1920, p.518.

48. *Ibid*, p.520.

and even by women in everyday housework, were now considered to be more important than the dead tradition of ancient times.⁴⁹

Another reason for the stress on humanism, as the ultimate ideal inspiring all world cultures, was lay in the view of the likes of Earl Ronaldshay, that the source of Indian unrest in 1920's and 1930s was the clash of ideals of Indian and European cultures. They do not consider the economic and political grievances of the Indian people, arising out of World War I or the Turkish imbroglio as important causes for unrest. These grievances are described as at best being "transient in nature". The real problem, it was felt, lay in the conflict arising due to the "great if perverted" ideal to attain "irreligious ends". It was this "vague ideal of spirituality and religiosity which was the motive force behind all the major national movements, be it the 1905 swadeshi movement in Bengal, the Gandhian movements, or the voices raised against the system of education in the government, run institutions.⁵⁰ We come across severe criticism of these views by several Indians. It is said that if what Lord Ronaldshay said about ideals were true, how was it possible that the "chief protagonists of the new Art movement"-the Tagore brothers, Nandlal Bose and O.C. Ganguly-did not have anything to do either in "leading or in a subordinate capacity with the unrest." For had clash of ideals been the chief reason for the unrest, the Calcutta school of Abanindranath would have been among the leaders of unrest, as, the school professed, according to Ronaldshay himself, the revival of Indian spiritualism in Art.⁵¹

49. The need was felt to save this part of tradition and culture that was fast dying out in the villages mainly because of the stupidity of our "educated communities", who were completely out touch with the country. See, "On Dancing" (excerpt of letter by Rabindranath to Gurusaday Dutt), *Vishwabharati news*, February 1936., p. 59; "Music at Santiniketan", *Vishwabharti News*, Vol.II, No.10, April, 1934, p.71

50. Earl of Ronaldshay, "A Clash of Ideals as a Source of Indian Unrest", *Modern Review*, April 1923, pp.448-55.

51. "Clash of Art Ideals as Source Unrest", April 1923, *Modern Review*, p.636.

He (Ronaldshay) speaks of political dislocation produced by the world war and of the Turkish imbroglio..... but there is..... not a word to indicate that there has been anything of a political character to cause the present unrest among the Hindus (the majority of the population) or among the Sikhs. Yet he cannot be unaware that thousands of Hindus and Sikhs, along with Muslims, have suffered..... imprisonment death from lathi blows, gun fire and, bombing from the air.⁵²

There appear in this period a profusion of articles showing compatibility of art and science, of religion and science.⁵³ Rabindranath talks of humanist science, and in this, he sees the solution for the various maladies prevailing in modern societies.⁵⁴

II

What was the *aim envisaged* for this Indian culture that was being shaped?

A primary role envisioned for this culture lay in the demands of nationality. Culture, especially art, was believed to epitomize the whole development of the people that produced it. Especially important in this respect, is the emotional aspect, as " it can elevate, chasten, subdue and discipline our emotions, and awaken noble and kindly feelings in those in whom they are

52. Ibid. p.636

53. See, "Dharma Aur Vigyan", *Arya*, April 1933; "Art and Science in Contemplation", *Modern Review*, October 1921, p.515.

54. Rabindranath Tagore, "Can Science Be Humanised?" *Vishwa bharati News*, Vol II, August 1933, No. 2, p.11.

dormant".⁵⁵ Art, science education, industry, trade, it was felt, should now be followed for the remaking of the "Motherland" and no other aim. The need was to free India's inner-most soul from the European hold, alongwith political and economic freedom.⁵⁶ This was because, the growth of nationality involved, amongst other things, " something like the spontaneous appearance of sovereign faculty amongst us," and the perception of unity and interrelation amongst different parts of a "single organism" Hence related to each other, the Indians then would be able to "sit in national commission-on the problems of our own society and our own future".⁵⁷

Therefore, Indian painting should have the capacity to arouse in the spectator "a certain sense of revelation for which he is the nobler."⁵⁸ And to do this, Indian painting must appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way. It must convey some feeling or idea that is either familiar or immediately comprehensible. Hence, it was necessary that an Indian artist be familiar with his own tradition, and express in a language familiar to him and approved by a "communal taste".⁵⁹

All great expression, whether by writing or drawing or sculpture or what not, is to some extent the outcry of a human heart for human sympathy, and men do not so cry in an unknown tongue.⁶⁰

55. Ramananda Chatterjee, "Ravi Varma", *Modern Review*, Vol.1, 1907, p.84.

56. Sister Nivedita, "The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality", *Modern Review*, 1907, vol 1 pp.52-53

57. *Ibid*, p.49.

58. *Ibid*, p.49.

59. C.F. Andrews, "National Literature and Art", *Modern Review*, 1907, Vol II, pp.359-366

60. Sister Nivedita, *op.cit.*, p.50.

It was necessary to release art in India from the confines of the conventions of caste guilds, and develop it into a language, through which "great minds" would express their outlook on the world. Therefore art should no longer remain a mere craft confined to a particular caste but should be open to all. The artist is now assigned a role of an intellectual with a responsibility "to direct" public taste, and not succumb to it",⁶¹ to create a supreme expression of Indian culture, the chief characteristic of which is its spirituality. Hence, though freedom from confines of caste guilds will provide "vastness and freedom of imagination", there will be no conflict of ideals, as one thought permeates all classes alike, one mind, one spirit is every where." Such an artist then will become the "mouth- piece of a national impulse".⁶²

Public appreciation of cultural traits become very important. The lack of appreciation of Indian tradition by Indians was lamented. Coomaraswamy found it distressing that it was easier to find a European audience capable of admiring fine examples of Indian art than to find such an audience in India.⁶³

Another reason why this appreciation was required can be found in the need to restore an economic basis for arts and crafts, for the creative impulse of man⁶⁴

The craftsman has become a parasite, not of his own choice, but because there is no public need for his

61. Abanindranath Tagore, "The Three Forms of Art", op. cit., p.395.

62. Sister Nivedita, op. cit., p.53.

63. A.K. Coomaraswamy, "Medieval Indian Painting", *Modern Review*, Feb 1920, p.322. The lack of interest and appreciation of the Indian art tradition becomes clearly evident in debate proceedings on "Indian Art" in Bengal Legislative Council Sir Ashutosh Chaudhari's favour for Oriental society of Art is based entirely on the fact that their work is less criticised than Cubist Art, and they produce good orators. See. "Indian Art in Bengal Legislative Council", *Modern Review*, September 1922, pg 401-406.

64. "Art in Every day Life", *Modern Review*, November 1921, p.594.

services and until his services are regarded as similar in character to those of men of science, who work not for their individual profit and glory only but for the common welfare, a parasite he must remain.⁶⁵

Thus, inspite of the fact that there was regular emphasis on "art for art sake only",⁶⁶ the utilitarian aspect of it was focussed upon, and the association of art in the everyday life of people was pointed out. The primary reason was to dispel the popular idea that art is distinct and distant from life, so as to increase the number of "cultured and intelligent men who could appreciate art," because "welfare and development of the nation depends entirely on this development."⁶⁷

But culture was not seen merely as a hand-maid to the economy and polity of a nation Rabindranath points out that none of the aspects of the life of a nation exist in isolation from the other. If India is suffering from economic poverty, side by side it is also faced with a cultural poverty, both of which need to be redeemed. Therefore, Rabindranath appeals to Gandhiji to not consider art as a mere luxury of the well-to-do, for the poor man needed it as much and employs it in cottage building, his floor decorations, his clay deities and in many other ways.⁶⁸ The poor also feel the need of "transcending the merely utilitarian and of feeling the joy and beauty at some moments of their being.

65. "A Basis for Appreciation of works of Art", *Modern Review*, February 1913, Vol.XIII, p.125.

66. Amal Chandra writes against the mission assigned to the poet and artist. "They seem to forget that the true role of poet is not leadership: he does not intentionally show the way to my heroic time to come... It is an accident that his record of their prowess is their best movement." "A Few words on Art and Life", *Modern Review*, August 1916, p.327.

67. Samarendra Nath Gupta, "The Place of Indian Art in Indian Industries", *Modern Review*, March 1914, p.459.

68. "Rabindranath Appeals to Gandhiji", *Vishwabharti News*, May 1935, No 11, Vol II, p.9

The folk dances and folk songs were seen as storehouses of simple and spontaneous joy as well as a fountain of inspiration for rejuvenation, simplification and purification of national life.⁶⁹ Rabindranath Tagore found the "true basis" of his lyric compositions in the folk music and folk songs of Bengal, discovering their eternal spiritual truth which makes them a part of our national cultural heritage. In Vishwabharti, great stress was laid on interaction with village folk artists and students. They went on regular "wandering tours" from village to village, either for constructive work there or to learn.⁷⁰

Therefore, we see that be it painting or dance the focus was primarily on the masses, whether to direct their tastes or to include them in " the national guild of artists" Talking about the creation of a national theater for India, Baldoon Dhingra says that an important criteria was to induce a common reaction among the spectator and to forge a common soul, whether in villages or in cities. He also says that the new dramatist should think not in terms of technical perfection but in terms of depiction of human conflict. The theme could be reached to people in form of mystery or miracle or ancient classics to suit the temperament or taste of people of a particular locale.⁷¹

The emphasis was on the development of the Indians as cultured beings as the first step towards the political development and self government. This, Rabindranath says, will lead to a proper healthy growth towards self rule, and will not be a self government borrowed by us from outside. Therefore Indians

69. G.S. Dutt, "The Folk Damces and Folk Songs of Bengal", *Modern Review*, July 1933, p.44.

70. Rabindranath, commenting upon the Non Cooperation Movement, said that one need not wait to find some cause for retaliation against other peoples country, in order to serve our own. "Non Cooperation appeared to me to be the progeny of the union of rejection from one party and dejection from the other party". "Rabindranath Tagore on Constructive Work", *Modern Review*, vol xxix, February 1921, p.355.

71. Prof. Baldoon Dhingra, "A National Theatre for India", *Modern Review*, January, 1941, p.95.

are called upon to take up full responsibility towards organising their own education, sanitation, prevention of Crimes and other such duties.⁷²

Whether it be wisdom, or political rights, they have to be earned to be attained by one's own *shakti*, after a successful struggle against obscuring forces. If they be put into our hands by others, by way of alms, they do not become ours at all.⁷³

Hence Indians needed to strengthen themselves having strong roots in their own tradition, ideals and values, so as to meet the outsider on equal terms and extricate maximum benefits from this contact. This was the first step towards the ultimate goal of internationalism, towards confluence of cultures, whereby each culture can contribute its highest ideal towards enrichment of others while at the same time. This in turn will save man's spirit from obscurity.⁷⁴

He who realises all creature in himself and himself in all creatures, is never obscured.⁷⁵

This internationalism was not to be a planned programme of a synthesis of existing cultures, it was rather like "social living" into which each and every culture is invited to contribute all the good it has to share. Each culture must then accept whatever it can use for the world of future and reject the rest.⁷⁶

72. "Rabindranath Tagore on Constructive Work", op cit. p.356.

73. Rabindranath Tagore, "East and West in Greater India," *Modern Review*, June 1921. Vol xxix, p.697

74. Rabindranath Tagore, "The Union of Cultures", *Modern Review*, Vol. XXX, November 1921, p.542.

75. Rabindranath Tagore, "The Union of Cultures", *Modern Review*, Vol xxx, November 1921, p.542.

76. Boyd Tucker, "Vishva Bharati-An Experiment in Internationalism", *Vihwabharati News*, July 1933, Vol II, No. 1, p.29.

III

In this section we will discuss the importance of gender in these constructions of 'culture', 'tradition' and 'nation'. Woman became an important motif around which the nationalist culture constituted its identity, in fighting the onslaught of colonialism. She became an ideal vehicle for conveying meanings beyond her immediate presence.

The women were assigned the roles, in the nationalist project against colonialism, as preservers of age old customs and rituals. Their roles in modern society were based on the ideals picked from "tradition-the Hindu mythology, "Indian values" and ethics. It is pointed out in *Arya* that the highest duty of an Indian woman, according to Dayanand Saraswati, is to protect "Arya culture, traditional values and behavioural patterns, traditional memories and past religious traditions."⁷⁷ It is lamented that the modern Indian woman, under influence of "modern western flow" was turning away from traditional Indian culture.⁷⁸ And an urgent need is stressed to protect them from the western influence.⁷⁹ So the requirement is to impose Kalidasa's ideal role for Indian women where he says that a woman should reside within the house as mistress of home, minister, friend and a disciple.⁸⁰

Therefore the Indian woman is defined as one who can help the men in their work and to guide them towards right path when they go astray. For if men

77. Kumari Jyandevi, "Strion Mein Arya Sanskriti Ka Hras", *Arya*, March 1926, p.33.

78. C.F. Andrews was greatly pained at noticing the spirit of independence in Indian Women in Fiji coolie settlements, as a result of which they had lost the "qualities of gentleness" which he had learnt to admire in Indian woman in India itself. C.F. Andrew, "The Indian Women in Fiji", *Modern Review*, September 1920, p.380.

79. Ibid, p.32.

80. Ibid, p.33.

No man can stand comparison with woman in the latter's, capacity to love absolutely disinterestedly, loftily, devotedly, to mother, to heal and cure, to comfort and solace, to sacrifice and give, to efface herself, to suffer. The stream of kindness and love that flow from her bosom, the creativeness that is her function in life, these alone put her head and shoulders above man....in his spirit of masterfulness, in his physical capacity to fight and endure, in his ability to rule, to conquer nature and also his fellow men, man is decidedly superior to women.⁸⁴

Andⁱⁿ this ■ "natural duty" of theirs, women and girls were expected to attain perfection. Their manners and behaviour should be impeccable for "it is ugly to be unmannerly and particularly for women it is unpardonable."⁸⁵

This portrayal of Indian woman in her pristine purity preserved from violation or Western contamination, helped shape the political symbol of "Bharat Mata", with outstretched arms rousing her sons' to patriotic action. Abanindranath. Nath's portrayal of Mother India is a true representation of a Bengali Hindu middle class woman with an aura of spirituality enhanced by drooping eyelids, her multi-armed figure, sacred beads around her neck. She appears to be a symbol of self sacrifice with minimum of jewellery and naked feet, and also of love and virtue.

To bring about women to accept and follow these ideals, it was felt that, they should be' properly taught and trained and should not remain steeped in

84. "The Position of Woman in India", *Modern Review*, January 1920, p.11.

85. Rabindranath Tagore, "My Ideals with Regards to Sreebhava", *Vishwabharati News*, August 1934, No. 2, vol. III, p.11

ignorance and superstition"⁸⁶ Hence education of women is stressed upon. But these educated women are expected to retain their "virtue and femininity" Hence, though we find the achievements of women in field of formal education being appreciated, yet the women who would achieve these accolades while fulfilling their 'natural role' in household receive greater applause,⁸⁷

Yet there existed a parallel school of thought that insisted on reconstruction of social life in India on a scientific basis. The blind imitation of what was going on in Europe and America would be detrimental to progress. But at the same time blind imitation of the Indian past is also condemned. So whereas they advice against accepting blindly the notion that Christian morality of marriage is last word on the subject, they call for revision of Indian ideas of sex, morality and changes in marriage laws, keeping in mind the different needs and beliefs of different classes and communities.⁸⁸

This point of view recognises the existing inequalities between the rights of men and women, in the matters of marriage sanctioned by law and custom, both Hindu and Moheemadan and feels that all efforts should be made to remove or at least lessen them. There is a vast propaganda for reforms regarding abolition of child marriage, widow remarriage, condemnation of polygamy, right of women to choose their own mates and greater participation of women in political and economic life outside their homes. Existence of different moral codes for women and men whereby woman was subjected to all kinds of socially imposed punishments and a man went unscathed for the same offense, was criticised in severest term The right of woman to seek divorce from a

86. Keshab Chandra Nag, or cit, p.188.

87. See Indian Womanhood, *Modern Review*, July 1940, p.102

88. Lala Lajpat Rai says that ethical and moral standards have varied with time, place and circumstances. And that there can be no universal code of morality for all communities. Lala Lajpat Rai, "Social Reconstruction of India", *Modern Review*, January 1920, p.8.

marriage that is unhappy, was also sought and various justifications were offered for a means to annul a disagreeable marriage. But in case of a divorce, the need to protect the economic needs of women and children was stressed upon.

The Indian woman had to struggle on two different planes, first against the homogenised stereotype that was being imposed upon them, and also create new avenues for their activities. The second was against the colonial rule as a part of the national movement, so as to bring about a "balanced development". Women were seen as "effective and efficient partners" in the work of "reconstruction that lies ahead". They were no longer viewed as "a mere appendage to her father, brother or husband." Krishna Hutheesing says that a woman is as much an individual as a man. She says that, inspite of participation of women in hundreds and thousands in the national struggle, which has helped women to do away with many a tradition and ancient belief, women are still not free. Her actual freedom is visualized in her right" to mould her own life economically and socially", that is in the attainment of right of subjectivity.⁸⁹

Yet, even this view could not be radical enough to separate a woman from her stereotyped role of a domestic housewife. Krishna Hutheesing says that a woman seeking "freedom" will have to reconcile her work outside with the work within home, "for that too must be seen to". A woman, she says, should not neglect her home and children for other interests.⁹⁰ This means that a woman can assume another role only in addition to her prescribed role at home. It is also evident that woman's work at home was not given due importance, for Hutheesing also states emphatically that a woman's only aim should not be merely to look after her home and her children.⁹¹

89. Krishna Hutheesing, "Women in Planned India", *Modern Review*, December 1940, p.640.

90. Ibid, p.641.

91. Ibid, p. 641.

CONCLUSION

The "cultural other" whose presence shaped the nature of Indian culture is the 'West'. The Indian is distinguished from the Western by applying the criteria of spirituality vs materialism, idealism vs rationality, organic world view vs scientific world view.

This need to identify a cultural other was the out come of a need for achieving a level of critical self understanding, a sense of identity. The challenges posed by the western ideologues evoked a response in Indians to built an integrated Indian identity which often transcended the diversity in Indian culture.

But this construction of an identity was not simple. It involved a network of complex and often apparently contradictory issues. There were also several concepts about the Indian and the 'West' within a given time. The perception of self and other, itself kept changing in response to the needs of time. Therefore, whereas the early decades of 20th century saw an emphasis on spirituality and idealism of Indian philosophy, the 1920s and 30s saw an attempt to find an inherent similarity in the world perceptions of India and the 'West'

Curiously enough the 'West' is treated as a homogeneous whole. Heterogeneity within the 'West' is not taken into account and there is hardly any mention of the new cultural movements in Europe.

CHAPTER III
A STRUGGLE FOR SELF DISCOVERY :
NANDLAL BOSE, JAMINI ROY, AMRITA SHER-GIL

THE CONTEXT

The 1920 s and 30s was a period of intense nationalist activities in the political as well as in the cultural sphere. The kind of changes in both these areas had a great impact on the art movement of the time.

The new phase of Gandhian nationalism in the post Swadeshi period brought the peasant to the centre and village was exalted. The need was felt to develop villages economically and provide them with dignity and self-confidence. Attainment of Swaraj was made equivalent to serving the villages and bringing about their development.

There was a widespread interest in folk and village cultures. Attempts had been made to study folk culture in Bengal even in the 19th century,¹ but there was a spurt of studies on folk culture and village life in the 1920's and 1930s. Rabindranath Tagore, following his exposure to rural Bengal, took an interest in its poetry, music, stories, lullabies and festivals. He published a collection of Bengali lullabies. Abanindranath's book on traditional Alpana, "Bangla Brata" also came out in the twenties. A French translation of the same also appeared around the same time from Paris. Gurusaday Dutt and Ajit Ghose travelled through Bengal in their attempt to revive the rich folk tradition of

1. Reverend James Long had collected native proverbs. Reverend Lalbehari Dey collected and published fairy tales prevalent in the villages of Bengal. Taranath Mukherjee made an ethnographic study of the Patua community and their vocation.

Bengal and wrote about the Patuas extensively². G.S. Dutt hailed the rural patua art as the "mother tongue" in the art of the Bengal. Ajit Ghose claimed that the Kalighat pats anticipated Cubism and Impressionism.

Hence the need was felt to move away from the Bengal School art mode, a mode that had elevated art to a high moral level, alienating it from the masses. The experience of the Swadeshi period had given to the artist a confidence in themselves, and now we see various departures from the Bengal school mould. The artists now felt confident enough to work independent of any movement or school.

In this chapter an attempt will be made to study the departures made by three such artists of the period: Nandlal Bose, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil. These three represent three different trends of departure, drawing from the vast resource of Indian tradition to develop their own individual style. Whereas Nandlal Bose remained a part of the Bengal school art movement, both Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil painted as individual artists.

NANDLAL BOSE :

Nandlal Bose (1882-1966) was the first Indian artist to react meaningfully to the various facets of the Indian art tradition. Under his leadership, the Indian art movement was able to break free from the stereotypes of the Bengal school, and respond to the everyday realities of contemporary life and environment. Unlike other individual artists of the period who also chose to reject the style of Bengal school, Nandlal Bose did not dissociate himself completely from the Bengal school of Abanindranath. Working first in Vichitra studio and then at Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan he provided a new direction to art students and encouraged them to experiment in new styles and themes.

2. See G.S. Dutt, "The Art of Bengal", *Modern Review*, August 1922.
Ajit Ghose, "Folk Art of Bengal", *Modern Review*, February, 1926.

Nandlal was born and brought up in a middle class religious family. He was fed on the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata. The village craftsmen and the forest surrounding his village had a great impact on his mind. He gave up formal college education and joined the art school of Abanindranath at Calcutta in 1905. Soon he became one of Abanindranath's favourite students, and his paintings attracted much attention. He utilised every opportunity to travel to different parts of India like Patna, Varanasi, Agra, Sasaram and South India. He thus learnt about different art forms of India and also about the ritual and habits of Indian in different parts. He also tried his hand at the Kalighat pats for a short time. His trip to Ajanta as a part of Lady Herringham's team had a tremendous impact on his art.

The 'aesthetic' and 'spiritual lessons drawn from Ajanta were incorporated in Nandlal's work, alongwith the flowing lines, the 'mudras', of the hands, the facial features and expressions.³ The Ajanta experience lived with him throughout and he often incorporated certain motifs and styles even while experimenting with different art traditons. He admits that "if a single artist has looked at them (Ajanta & Ellora), their truth will influecne and live through his work".⁴

The years in Santiniketan helped the artist to break out of the stylistic technique of the Bengal school. Rabindranath Tagore had been disillusioned by the insular nature of art practices at Bengal Art School, and decided to start a new Art Department in his University, Vishwa Bharati where art would be closer to nature and everyday life. Nandlal accepted Rabindranath's invitation to head this Art Department. This decision in itself indicates an urge to move away

3. See Appendix I.

4. Nandlal Bose, "The Discipline of Art", *Nandlal Bose (1882-1966), Centenary Exhibition*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, p.11.

from the Jorasanko style⁵ and to experiment in new and bolder lines, forms and colors.

At Santiniketan, Nandlal's work underwent a great deal of transformation. While under the influence of Rabindranath, he began a study of nature and rural crafts. He was also enriched by the experiences in Far Eastern art through his visits to Japan, China, Burma & Malaysia. Moving from wash painting to tempera allowed greater use of local colours and grounds. Rural life and landscape began to displace mythological and historical themes. Moving away from the literary tradition of art of the Bengal school, he now tried to locate myth in everyday life. He sought the divinity in "sky, water and mountains"⁶ According to him, just as Medieval Europe had been inspired by the ideal of Christianity, India had been inspired by Krishna and Buddha. But, as a personality had come to be worshipped as the symbol of this idea, the root idea had suffered. The solution to the problem then is to see this idea, reflected in Nature because - "all this is for the habitation by the Lord."⁷

The Santhals around Santiniketan also inspired him. He saw in them "a living sense of beauty as a part and parcel of his (their) daily life."⁸ Everything interested him. He painted insects, birds, animals, plants, flowers, mountains, mists, clouds, landscapes, and life around. The whole of India, except the urban elites and their culture, inspired him and stimulated his artistic genius. Nandlal was attempting to acquire a universality in art, an art which could find

5. Nandlal Bose was already a well known painter at Calcutta and the future of Kala Bhawan was unknown. Therefore it was neither material gain nor fame which induced Nandlal to go to Santi Niketan.

6. Nandlal Bose, "The Discipline of Art", *Nandlal Bose (1882-1966) Centenary Exhibition*, op.cit., p.3.

7. Ibid, pp.3,4.

8. Nandlal Bose, "The Place of Art in Education", *Nandlal Bose (1882-1966) Centenary Exhibition*, op.cit., p.15.

recognition in people's heart and not in their intellect. To achieve this, he believed it was necessary to recognise the essence of the subject, to develop close affinities with it and to 'paint from the heart'. A vision of unity was important for 'a genuine artist' to evolve. In this unity of vision the image of godhead and a blade of grass carry the same value and have the power to inspire the same "aesthesis".⁹

Being brought up on Hindu ideals and traditions, his mind remained conditioned by the Hindu philosophical texts such as Upanishads. For him art was *sadhana*. According to him both the artist and the *sadhaka* worked towards the same objective - attainment of "pure and unmixed universal bliss."¹⁰ Like the *sadhaka* who has to move through different stages to reach the supreme experience of *advaita* (non-duality), the artist has to shed what is transitory and insignificant, to be able to feel and express the unity that runs through all diverse phenomena. We find a correspondence for this precept in the development of new styles after his coming to Santiniketan. His pictures become shorn of 'unnecessary details' and the lines become bolder and simpler.

In his style can be observed numerous grammars of different climes and different cultures. For him technique was only a means to an end, to "feel within ... the omnipresent bliss of existence". Though he admired folk art, and worked in close association with the craftsman at Santiniketan he did not try to imitate them. He realised that folk artists and modern artists have very different work circuits and the folk idioms lose their semantic significance outside their original milieu. The modern artist, he believed, needed to draw from a cultural situation without submitting totally to it. He believed in Okakura's views about the three arms of the art triangle being tradition, observation, and originality.

9. Nandlal Bose, "The Discipline of Art", op.cit., p.1.

10. Ibid, p.12.

Creation, for him, was unfolding away from and not harking back to the origin.¹¹ Therefore for Nandlal, tradition formed the outer shell of the seed, and modernity was the new life it guards within it.¹² Tradition was necessary to revive creativity and only constant experimentation could sustain it.¹³

At Santiniketan, experimenting with new art teaching methods and developing Kala Bhawan into an organic art centre he rejected the demarcation that had developed between applied and fine arts in India since the mid 19th century. Art for him was not a hobby of ~~the~~ ^{the} luxurious rich to be shunned by the hard headed practical men of affairs. He tried to put into practice Rabindranath's view that utility and self expression should meet and mingle and that the function of art lay in "building of man's true world the living world of truth and beauty".¹⁴ According to him an important purpose in people's lives. The fine art rescue people from the drabness of the mundane existence by taking them into realms of joy. On the other hand the aesthetic sense made the objects of daily use beautiful which not just made them pleasurable but added to their commercial value. He attributed the poverty of India largely to the deterioration of Indian craftsmanship¹⁵

The people in genral, and especially the "so called cultured "classes," he felt, were losing the sense of beauty and art. Therefore they discarded the indigenous art of India while at the same time exalting the European and

11. Nandlala Bose, *Ornamental Art*, Santiniketan, 1940, p.1.

12. Nandlal Bose as quoted in *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 1997.

13. Nandlal Bose as quoted in Nagendra Bhattacharya "Nandlal, Fifty Years of dedication to Painting", *Rooplekha*, Vol. 36, No.1&2, p.139.

14. Rabindranath Tagore, "The Religion of An Artist", *Tagore on Art and Aesthetics*, Calcutta, 1961, p.56.

15. Nandlal Bose, "The Place of Art in Education", op. cit., p.15.

Japanese art and craft. He sees the only remedy for this in cultivation of arts as part of education of this class, for, "it is they who set the standard for the people in general."¹⁶

At Santiniketan he put these precepts into practice. Murals, sculpture and other projects were undertaken in which the teacher, the students and, on certain occasions, the traditional artists worked together. At festivals like Vriksharopana, Vasanta Utsava and Varshamangal, the stage decor was taken up by Kala Bhavan artists. They also took up certain handicrafts, working on designing and painting sarees, artistic leather craft, and new calico print. It was because of Nandlal's efforts in establishing design that the Santiniketan Shilpa Bhavana products of this time acquired the reputation of being the best in the fields of textile for every day wear, leather work, batik and pottery. They also used the material used by the craftsman, extending the usefulness of these materials.¹⁷

Santiniketan's art faculty also enrolled girl students and employed lady teachers for the first time in India. Nandlal believed that art oriented women made good housewives and were economically secure.¹⁸

The Murals done by Nandlal are important examples of the 'opening up' of his work from the confines of the studio and taking it out into public places. The visit to Ajanta and Bagh caves inspired Nandlal to take up murals. In 1933, painting in Jaipur fresco technique he executed a mural on the walls of the ground floor of the Old Library building.¹⁹ It is important for the patchwork

16. Ibid, pp.14-15.

17. Sovon Som, "Santiniketan and the Bauhaus", *Nandlal Bose centenary Volume: A Collection of Essays*, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, 1983 pp.53-54.

18. Ibid. p. 56.

19. K.G. Subramanyan, "Murals of Nandlal Bose", *Nandlal Bose Centenary Volume*, op.cit, p.12.

amalgam of themes. The subject include the 'Khoai' landscape, cattle and herdsmen, banyan tree, birth of Sri Chaitanya, Santiniketan activities, scenes from Rabindranath's drama - 'Shap Mochan', Santhal girl decorating the mud wall of her hut²⁰ - interweaving myth with the natural environment.

Another effort to reach out to people can be seen in his lino cuts which he used for illustrating Rabindranath book for children entitled *Sahajpath*.²¹ The solid black and white of lino cut makes a strong impression upon the mind. The pictures are spare and simple, complementing in every way the easy colloquial language used by Rabindranath in his couplets. The subject depicted here are derived from the rural environment and the daily life: a child crawling, a woman cooking, a child dragging a goat, a drummer, a bullock cart. There is a degree of universality about these pictures, which makes them an integral part of every Indian child's life.

Nandlal Bose was also greatly influenced by the ongoing political struggle for independence. Work and life at Santiniketan had provided him with opportunities to come into contact with Mahatma Gandhi.²² He became associated with the national movement, and during the Civil Disobedience movement linocut political posters were made and distributed by Santiniketan

20. See, Plate 156, 157, *Nandlal Bose Centenary Exhibition*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, pp.202-203.

21. Rabindranath Tagore, *Sahajpath*, Vol. 1, Viswa Bharati, Santiniketan, 1931. See Appendix II.

22. Rabindranath greatly influenced Gandhi's views about art and was instrumental in driving home to the Nationalists the importance of art in the life of every person. Rabindranath pointed out that mere economic and political development was not sufficient for a country, the cultural poverty of India also needed to be remedied. See "Rabindranath Appeals to Gandhiji", *Vishwabharati News*, No.11, Vol. III, May 1935, pp.9.

artists.²³ The famous linocut of Gandhi²⁴ done in the same period comes forth as a powerful drawing. Gandhi is represented here as a man of resolve, full of inner strength and determination. It became a symbol of strength and inspiration for the Indians.

But apart from this brief political interlude, Nandlal's work is devoid of scenes of contemporary violence and political suffering. He also rejected the scenes of urban life in India. Yet, Nandlal's art found an important place in the national movement. In 1936 he organised an exhibition at the Lucknow session of the Congress, in which he presented through photographs and originals, the entire history of Indian art.²⁵ In 1937, at the Faizpur Congress, Nandlal was asked to build the township at Faizpur using only rural materials and employing country craftsmen. The conception had to be 'indigenous'. Faizpur was also the first rural venue for a Congress session. Nandlal used bamboo, hay, straw and cloth to design the township and a pavilion. An exhibition of handicrafts and textile was also held.²⁶

The Haripura posters form the most stupendous public project of Nandlal. In 1938, he took up the project to decorate the Congress pavilion at Haripura. A total number of 83 pictures²⁷ were made using hand made paper pasted on cheap straw board and colour made by grinding oxidised rocks. The emphasis was on economy and simplicity. The subjects were chosen from the rural life of

23. Nirmalendu Das, "The Place of Nandlal in Indian Graphic Art", *Nandlal Bose Centenary Volume*, op.cit., p.85.

24. See Appendix III.

25. Tapati Guha Thakurta, "Visualising the Nation", Op.cit, p. 3.

26. *Report of Faizpur Congress session, 1937*, pg.3.

27. For a list of this paintings see *Nandlal Bose Haripur Panels : Commemoration of 40th anniversary of India Independence and Jawaharlal Nehru Centenary*, National Gallery of Modern Art 1989, pp. 2,3.
See Appendix IV.

India and also from popular Hindu myths. The style adopted was that of the Kalighat patachitras in which Nandlal had already had experience. This style gave the pictures free brushlines and an array of bright colours. There is a great deal of activity and life in these pictures, and the mood is that of gay abandon. There is rhythm and grace in the poses and gestures. A curving arch that frames each picture adds a hint of classical tradition to the pictures.

The pictures include the images of village artisans and workers, tailors, carpenters, cobblers, etc., of a woman involved in activities like feeding a child, adorning her self, cutting vegetables, of musicians like drummers, sarangi players, shehnai players, shrikhol players; of mythological figures like Saraswati, Rati, *Gulnaudi* with a duck, images depicting Indian heroes, warriors, horsemen hunters, and motifs of animals, bird and decorative objects such as mangalghat. All these themes were either religious or traditional, and were portrayed in the folk style. The images appear to be a part of the panorama of Indian villages involved in most mundane of activities like bathing a child, cleaning ears or ploughing a field. These pictures then became the culmination of the process that had began earlier in Nandlal's life - of intertwining myths and reality, and also of accommodating the popular within the modern art movement.

JAMINI ROY

Jamini Roy (1887-1972) is often considered the 'Father of folk Renaissance' in India. He imbibed the spirit of the Folk and *moderated* the folk tradition to suit the demands of his time.

Jamini Roy was born and brought up in Beliatore, a village in the district of Bankura, where his father worked as a 'gentleman farmer'. Beliatore was,

according to John Irwin and Bishnu Dey,²⁸ able to preserve its local culture due to its 'special circumstances'. The simple village craftsmen- the potters, weavers and carpenters had a great impact on Jamini Roy, and provided him with motifs to experiment with, later in his life. He underwent a period of training at Government Art School at Calcutta, and then became a freelance portrait painter at Calcutta. After some years, he became dissatisfied with the vocation, because as a portrait painter, he could not stand out from the obscure lot. Moreover, his clients usually commissioned him to paint portraits from photographs.

Meanwhile he also experimented in 'Impressionist and Fauvist styles and painted imagined landscapes in an attempt to evolve a personal style. But this did not solve his problem. This crisis of identity that he faced, along with the cultural trends of the period made him look beyond European artistic movements.

Roy's experiments with Indian folk styles began around 1921 and continued in the 1920's and 30's. The shift from the style of modern European art to a new style marked a shift from the appreciation of natural appearance to that of imagined appearance. In an interview with Bishnu Dey, Roy said that the reason why he discarded European painting was that "ever the best European artists ... drew forms like Mary carrying the infant Jesus standing among clouds in the sky, but ... made to appear like a full human being - how is this possible?"²⁹ Folk art, on the other hand did not emulate nature. Rather, it constructed a new imagined nature through the use of suggestive motifs. Talking about Patua art of Bengal, he said that it conveyed the essence of nature,

28. Jamini Roy's biographers, John Irwin and Bishnu Dey, "Jamini Roy" *Jamini Roy Centenary Exhibition*, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 1987, p. 5.

29. Bishnu Dey, *Jamini Roy*, Calcutta, 1384 (Bangabda), p. 69.

rather than meticulously copying nature itself. The aim of this art was to express the "emotion aroused by the universal essence of the nature around".

A tree painted by the patua is unmistakably a tree
it has everything that is essential for a tree, though
nothing that belongs to the limitation of any
individual tree.³⁰

Therefore the search was also for 'universalism' in art, a language that could convey meaning across all barriers. The folk art being "simple and direct without any effort to make it delicate or subtle" was "magnificently colloquial".³¹ Its simplicity "touched the elemental truth of world art".³² The importance of this simplicity in Indian folk art was enhanced by the fact that these artist or 'patuas' were familiar with a parallel form of Indian art which spoke in "pompous language" and was "deliberately sophisticated". Therefore simplicity of style was a choice made by the patua.³³

This "choice" accounted for the survival of Bengal folk art in the face of several winds of change, whereas the "primitive art" of other countries died away with the advance of civilization. This line of argument served two points. On the one hand, it attempted to prove the superior capacity of Indians to maintain simplicity and austerity, while at the same time, attaining the greatest pinnacle of civilizational progress. Indian primitivism then was superior to not just Negro Art and Japanese wood cut, but also to the European art tradition. Hence, the point made is that the commonest of Indians had the capacity to

30. Jamini Roy, "The Patua Art of Bengal", *Jamini Roy Centenary Exhibition*, op.cit, p. 71.

31. Ibid, p. 72

32. As quoted in S.R. Gurtu, "Jamini Roy", *Jamini Roy Centenary Exhibition*, op. cit. p.75.

33. Jamini Roy, "The Patua Art of Bengal", op.cit, p. 73.

discard materialism in favour of austerity. On the other hand, it also established the antiquity of the "living" folk tradition of Indian villages. Therefore adoption of the folk tradition became a better alternative, not just to European art tradition, but also to Indian classical art traditions (as adopted by the Bengal school of Abanindranath) that were alien to the sensibilities of the contemporary Indian.³⁴ By emphasizing on the rich folk art tradition of India he pointed out the multiple nature of the artistic tradition of India. This was in a sense a protest against the monolithic treatment of Indian art tradition by the Bengal school.

But the need was also to prove that the folk traditions of India could represent 'India'. Jamini Roy says that these art traditions drew their 'emotional nourishment' from a "coherent myth or belief system" of India. The spirituality in this belief system sustained this art form for so long. The failure of European art to find such a belief system to thrive upon resulted in the present unrest in the European art scene³⁵.

The new style created by Jamini Roy then served three purposes. It was reminiscent of the folk forms, the survival of a past tradition which was unmistakably 'Indian'. Then their strong lines were comparable to those used by contemporary European artists like Leger. The simplicity of the styles adopted were similar to the new movement by the Primiivists in Europe. Thus, a link was forged with the international world of art. Roy's artistic style also provided an alternative to the stylistic convention of the Bengal school, which acted as a constraint on the dipiction of contemporary events.

But Jamini Roy was not a folk artist. His art appeared folkish because he derived largely from folk motifs and made use of their symbolism. Yet he never adhered to the format orientation and other rules and restrictions that the Patuas

34. Bishnu Day, "Jamini Roy", op. cit, p. 59.

35. Jamini Roy, "The Patua Art of Bengal", op.cit. p.72.

religiously followed. In fact, he remodelled and restructured any tradition to work out his style.³⁶ For instance, the model of the "Shringar"³⁷ painting showing a Santhal girl doing her hair, is obviously provided by the Kalighat pat showing 'Golap Sundari',³⁸ a girl putting a rose in her hair. Yet, we see that he replaced the original quality of line used by the Kalighat pat, with his own line. In his anxiety to do away with the imitation of nature, he did away with the bold contour lines of Kalighat which suggested both contour and volume. Instead he used his own line technique to flatten the form, to rule out any illusion of depth and attain a harmony. The girl in the picture attains an almost spiritual characteristic, with dreamy eyes, a serene and calm expression on the face, all her movements in perfect harmony. She ceases to be a highly sensuous, voluptuous and desirable woman of the 'Golap Sundari' pat. Roy's woman through her curves does exude sensuality, but at the same time she seems unaware of it.

Jamini Roy's inspiration for stylistic forms came from a variety of source. The traditions ranging from Byzantine to modern European art played a vital role in his quest for a new visual language. He did not hesitate to learn even from the drawings of his son Amiya (Known as Patal).³⁹ Benoy Kumar Sarkar⁴⁰ had remarked that Jamini Roy's primitivism came via Europe and Asok

36. The village Patua is anonymous in the fundamental sense that he does not seek to impress his personality upon his work.

37. See Appendix V.

38. See Appendix VI.

39. The large eyes used by Roy came from the childish drawings of Patal who found it extremely difficult to fit eyes into the face.

40. Benoy Kumar Sarkar as quoted by Sovon Som, The 'Art of Jamini Roy and the Bengal Folk Paradigm, *Jamini Roy Lalit Kala Academy*, 1992, p.28.

Mitra⁴¹ had observed that he had remodelled the folk elements within the framework of European art. Modern European art considered the configurative elements like line, colour, tone, texture as not mere means but as ends too. The attempt was to attain a significant form.

Roy's decision to cut loose from his academic phase was not abrupt as is suggested by some authors.⁴² He was experimenting in different artistic styles of Europe even while he worked as a portrait painter. In an attempt to find a tradition on which to base his personal style, he turned toward the Kalighat pats of suburban Calcutta. These Kalighat pats were a hybrid of rural and urban sensibility. They were an amalgam of various pat traditions brought by Patuas who had come to Kalighat from different villages, and were also influenced by the British, which not only modified their stylistic characteristics but also the attitude of the Patuas towards time and space. Instead of using a discursive narrative, which presented various events of a story progressing sequentially in time, Kalighat pats began to concentrate on representation of a single event.⁴³ This aspect was adopted by Roy and his concentration on one event of a narrative continued even after he moved on from Kalighat pats.

Jamini Roy consciously avoided the themes depicting city life in Calcutta, its industries, its ports, commerce, trade or the life style of the Anglicized Indian. There are no crowds in the streets, no factories, no machinery, no accidents, nor the modern man. Nor did he paint themes to reflect or sustain the anti colonial struggle. In fact, Kalighat pats were criticised for having acquired

41. Asok Mitra, *Four Painters*, New Age Publishers Pvt. Ltd., New Delhi, 1965.

42. See Austin Coates, "Jamini Roy", Prasants Daw, *Two Great Indian Artists*, Firma KLM Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1978.

43. See Chapter 1 section II.

an "urban bias", for giving up their rural and spiritual ideal, for adoption of city life as a theme.⁴⁴

The problem seen with changes affected by the British was restricted to urban life. The Patua work existing in Bengal villages which he calls "genuine patua work", he admits, had been acquainted with the "sophisticated art form" of pre-British urban India. Yet the fundamentals of Patua art were not totally lost, however mechanical might be the mode in which it is carried on. But Kalighat pats, by virtue of their adjustments to the urban life of British India had ceased to be patua art.⁴⁵ This line of argument can be extended to say that everything touched by the British way of life had to be discarded, and everything from pre-British India had to be revered and emulated as India's true tradition. and as this part of tradition survived 'untouched' in the villages and in the Indian belief system, it was here that Roy turned for further inspiration, to look for further motifs and models.

Now he began to draw increasingly from terracotta figurines on temple walls of his native Vishnupur, *alpana* or floor decorations by women folk, *Kanthas* or embroidery with pictorial designs, toys of wood and clay and even paintings from Puri in Orissa. He gradually gave up oil for tempera and mineral and vegetable dyes used by village craftsmen. His palette became limited to only seven colours: Indian red, yellow ochre, cadmium, green, vermilion, gray, blue, and white, which were prepared at his home, by using materials easily available, like local rock dust, glue of tamarind seeds, white of egg, mercury powder, indigo, lampblack etc. For surface he started using cheap home-spun

44. Jamini Roy, "Patua Art of Bengal", op.cit, p. 70 Saheb Pat depicted the oppression by Europeans who appropriated surplus from land. Santhal Bidroha Pat showed the protest launched and led by two tribals Kanhu and Sidho. The 19th century life around Kalighat surrounded by prostitute and religious frauds found reflection in the patas.

45. Jamini Roy, "The Patua Art of Bengal", op.cit, p. 70-71.

cloth, coated with alluvial mud and cowdung, cheap plywood, handmade cardboards, rough side of poster paper, *chatai* or woven mats, etc.⁴⁶ His family (as in the case of a rural craftsman) became his unit. They were occupied with grinding earth colours, making glue from tamarind trees and even putting in details to his paintings. He began to call himself a *patua*, adopting the simplicity of the *patuas* and imbibing it into not just his art but also in his life style. He even stopped exhibiting his pictures in the galleries of Calcutta.

...I do not paint at the eye level as the European painters always do. So hanging my pictures on the walls is beside the point. I am a *patua* and galleries are not for people like me.⁴⁷

His house became the exhibition place for his pictures where any buyer was equally welcomed and shown around.

Roy stressed on the accessibility of art. "Art", he believed, "is a pleasure that must be within the reach of all." He wanted his painting to be a part of the lives of ordinary people rather than remaining a monopoly of a few educated urban middle class, as had become the trend from mid 19th century. Therefore, he sold his paintings for small sums during his life time. The contemporary concern with the decline of village craft tradition and the need to create conditions in which it could be renewed and related to the lives of the people, found response in Jamini Roy. He started making quick 'pata' paintings in his individual style, for being sold to anyone who might care to buy them. He went a long way to remove the gap that had emerged, to separate the traditional craftsman and artisan from the modern artist.

46. John Irwin and Bishnu Dey, "Jamini Roy", op.cit., p.10.

47. Jamini Roy in conversation with Sandip Sarkar, Sandip Sarkar, "Jamini Roy" Prasanta Daw, *The Two Great Indian Artists*, op.cit., p.36.

In the choice of themes also can be seen a particular function Jamini Roy sought to perform as an "intellectual artist."⁴⁸ The themes, as we have seen earlier, purposely excluded any aspect of British influence on India. He painted the Santhals or animals or women or scenes from Hindu epics. All these either reflected the untampered tradition of India or the spirituality which was the essence of Indian life. The theory of Central Asian origin of Aryans put forth by Max Muller had led to the classification of the tribal population of India as non Aryan and as Dravid or even pre Dravidian. This classification made the Santhals, a remnant of a very ancient tradition and therefore held a special attraction for the Bengalis, as "purely Indian." Therefore Santhal themes appeared very often in Roy's paintings.

The women, by virtue of staying at home and being saved from the direct contact with the Europeans, also became the embodiments of "pure tradition", not just for Roy but for a majority of Indian artists. In Jamini Roy's paintings, women were restricted within the confines of a specific experience, the life of a Bengali Hindu upper caste rural family. Their faces are oval with elongated eyes, which hold either a spiritual, or pious or an innocent expression. Their hair is tied in a demure coil at the nape of their neck and their bodies are covered, almost always completely, with saris.⁴⁹ The women are depicted as mothers holding a child, or sitting in a group, or busy in some domestic chore or adorning themselves. The ideals for the 'Indian' woman were found in Yasoda, Sita, Draupadi and Parvati who are portrayed as mothers or wives. In fact, in the painting 'Shiva, Durga, and Ganesh'⁵⁰ Durga is shown sitting on the Lion

48. For a list of Roy's paintings, see Prasanta Daw ed *The Two Great Indian Artists*, op.cit, pp. 48-51.

49. See Appendix VII.

50. Se Appendix VIII.

with Ganesh on her lap while Shiva stands on the ground beside the lion. It is obvious that the painting highlights the mother and child and the green Shiva almost merges into the brown background. This could mean to signify the importance of motherhood in Indian society. As mothers, women attained their completion, rising to a position superior to gods.

Yet two paintings of Jamini Roy stand out. These paintings, 'The Queen on the Horse and the 'Warrior Woman'⁵¹ depict women in the unconventional roles of a warrior and a ruler or a leader. In these paintings, the gestures of their hands signify the power and confidence of these women and this power definitely arises from their authority as a leader.

Hence, in Jamini Roy can be seen an attempt towards seeking a new individual style of art based on the folk traditions of India. There is a romanticization of folk and village in his paintings which omits the misery of the village. The activities in which his figures are busy, ~~in~~ are based more on convention than on observation.

AMRITA SHERGIL :

Another innovative experimentalism can be found in the paintings of Amrita Sher Gil, who was an enigmatic figure in Indian art scene of the 1930s. The honesty, forthrightness, frankness and arrogance of her personality combined with her intuitive power and human sympathy which came forth in her art, made her a difficult person to understand. Hence, she was either showered with unreserved praise both for her effusive personality and for her 'truly modern' and Indian' art,⁵² or criticised as being a European whose art was either sentimental or irrelevant.⁵³

51. See Appendix IX.

52. See Charles Fabri, "Notes Towards a Biography of Amrita Sher-Gil", *Lalit Kala Contemporary*, No.2.

53. Letter by A. Shergil to Karl Khandalvala, 6.3. 1937, "Amrita Sher-Gil Letters" Vivan Sundaram et.al., ed., *Amrita Sher Gil*, Marg Publications, 1971, Bombay, p.107.

In this section, an attempt will be made to consider the struggle she underwent as an artist to discover for herself an identity, during her stay in India from 1934 to 1941. This quest becomes even more fascinating by the fact of her being half Indian and half European by birth. In her we see a curious mixture of insecurity and confidence. She knew she was not on firm ground in India, that she hadn't fully absorbed the Indian ethos, and yet in India, she knew, lay her destiny. At the same time, we see in her a confidence, almost a pride, arising out of her intellect, her talents in art, her association with European art institutes, her European upbringing.

Amrita Sher-Gil was born to Marie Antoinette, a passionate and brilliantly gifted Hungarian lady, and Sardar Umrao Singh Sher-Gil, an aristocrat, a philosopher and a scholar from the Majithia family of Amritsar. She was given a European upbringing and hardly got to move outside the circle of Westernised Indians even during her stay in Shimla before leaving for Paris.

In Paris, modern art had emerged from a historical juncture when capitalism had reached its imperialist phase. Therefore they reflected the mechanization and dehumanization of the society. But this was alien to the conditions Amrita Sher-Gil had been brought up in, both in India and in Hungary. India being a colony of Britain, was caught up in an anti colonial struggle, and was riding on a wave of nationalism. Hungary was a backward country as compared to Western Europe and was therefore outside the mainstream of European culture. The rise of nationalism had brought to the fore the question of national identity which was partly answered through attempts made to catch up with the West, and partly through realisation of the Hungarian literary tradition.

Amrita's predominantly romantic outlook did not let her accept the changes in the contemporary art scene in Paris, and she could find affinity only

with the works of artists like Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin all of who belonged thirty years back in time. Therefore, she turned to India where she knew she could contribute, as there was nobody of significance in the field of art. Another reason for opting for India over Hungary, was the influence Gauguin had on her. Just as Gauguin sought his artistic destiny in Martinique and Tahiti from 1887 onwards⁵⁴ Amrita sought 'new sources of inspiration' for her 'artistic development' in India.⁵⁵

The fact that she chose to settle in India for the rest of her life was not based on her love for India. She was happier in Hungary.⁵⁶ Her interest in India, its culture, its people, its literature arose from her training in modern art which led her "to the comprehension and appreciation of Indian painting and sculpture."⁵⁷ Hence she let "that hard and bitter common sense" prevail and sacrificed the sentiments that bound her to Hungary to return to "appreciate India and its worth."⁵⁸

She came to India with a preconceived notion of India, "voluptuous, colourful, sunny and superficial, "India she had seen in travel posters. What she saw here was different. Her first impressions of India contrasted with the above image, yet they were impressions of a foreigner a Gauguinistic image.

It was the vision of a winter in India desolate, yet
strangely beautiful - of endless tracks of luminous
yellow grey land, of dark bodied, sad faced,

54. For further information on Gauguin, See, R.H. Wilenski, *Modern French Painters*, London, 1940.

55. Amrita to her Parents from Budapest, September 1934, in *Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters*, op.cit, p.92.

56. Ibid, p.93.

57. Ibid, p.42.

58. Ibid, p.93.

incredibly thin men and women who move silently,
looking almost like silhouettes and over which an
indefinable melancholy reigns.⁵⁹

These impressions bear the characteristics of what she calls 'tourist mind' - superficial, "impressions of impressions" with no penetration or insight. These views closely correspond to those of Somerset Maugham who had come for a casual visit to India around this time.⁶⁰

The society in which she moved on coming to India, also did not help her much in understanding India. She associated with the upper class westernized Indians, indulging in a fashionable, glamorous life. Yet the quest for an identity, as an Indian and modern artist had 'begun. She began with deciding to discard her European dresses in favour of sarees because she did not want to identify with Eurasians, who were the only ones in India to wear European dresses.⁶¹ And very soon, the milieu of upper class Indians among whom she moved, became a "dull, uninteresting and scandal mongering crowd" for her. But she could not reject them entirely because of her own upbringing. At the most she took breaks to lead a "sequestered life" for a period "instead of going out dancing every five minutes and staying up till 2 and 3 in the morning and sapping my energy."⁶²

The choice to paint the poor, wretched people was a conscious one. By 1930 the Indian villager had acquired an importance for the Indian intellectual-he

59. Amrita Sher-Gil, "Evolution of My Art", Vivan Sundaram et.al, ed. *Amrita Sher-Gil*, op.cit, p.139.

60. See Maugham's views as quoted by W.G. Archer, *India and Modern Art*, op.cit, p.81.

61. Letter from Amrita Sher-Gil to her mother, early 1935, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letter", op.cit, p.93.

62. Letter from Amrita to Indira Shergil, 25-1-'37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.104.

came to represent contemporary reality. In his condition was seen not only the present but also the future of India. Besides the influence of the romanticized tropical women of Gauguin with their brown sensuous bodies also inspired her. She made it her artistic mission to "interpret the life of Indians and particularly the poor Indians pictorially... to depict their angular brown bodies, strangely beautiful in their ugliness; to reproduce on canvas the impression their sad eyes created on me."⁶³

But she was interested in the poor only as aesthetic objects, the poverty of India merely inspired her artistically. She had no desire to change their condition, nor did she think the condition could be changed. The people for her were "silent images of infinite submission and patience" and this was the quality that excited her. Through her paintings she endeavored to raise these poor people to the aesthetic plane. She wanted to become "an interpreter of the life of the people, particularly the poor and the sad" and this interpretation was to be purely pictorial because she hated "cheap emotional appeal."⁶⁴

This romanticized version of Indian poverty can be seen in her painting titled 'Mother India'⁶⁵ which is one of her earliest paintings in India. The woman and her two children depicted in the painting with their brown faces with large eyes with an expression of sadness and resignation, seems the true embodiment of the 'poor India'. The crouched figures seem to lack in self confidence and belief in the capability to make any difference to the future. They appear as creatures to be pitied and Amrita idealized such subjects.

63. Amrita Sher-Gil, "The Story of My Life", as quoted in W.G. Archer, *India and Modern Art*, op.cit, p.93.

64. Amrita Sher-Gil, "Trends of Art in India", Vivan Sundaram et.al, ed., *Amrita Sher-Gil*, op.cit, p.142.

65. See Appendix X.

The emotions she characterised in her subjects was mainly derived from her own life experiences and the European literature and culture she was brought up on. Her favourites were Beethoven, Karinty, Dostoevsky, Ady, Van Gogh, Dezso Szabo, Bandelaire - all of whom were in different ways, introspective and passionate, all partaking of a tragic consciousness.⁶⁶

In "Hill Men"⁶⁷ though the passive, melancholic mood still pervades, the figures draped in shawls are not mere objects of pity. They are somewhat imposing and more dignified than the woman in 'Mother India'. The forms here become simpler and there is a hint of respect for the Indian villager who seems tranquil even amidst his misery.

In early 1937 Amrita went on a trip to South India and visited Ajanta and Ellora, Hyderabad, Cochin, Trivandrum, Cape Comorin and Madurai. In this trip she discovered the richness and variety of Indian art - from the Rajput and Basholi miniature paintings to the Ajanta and Ellora paintings, to frescoes in places like Mattancheri, to Kathakali dance drama. Her letters from the South are full of excitement and detailed observation of the people, the landscape and the art. She admits that "I have, for the first time since my return to India, learnt something from somebody else's work."⁶⁸ She discovered that Indian art offered "so many possibilities". In Ajanta, she found an analogy with Post Impressionists. She also discovered the rich colours that were a part of Indian life and landscape. Henceforth, her palette became varied and the earlier grey colours gave way to the inclusion of greens and reds and oranges.

66. Geeta Kapur, "The Evolution of Content in Amrita Sher-Gil's Paintings", Vivan Sundaram et.al., ed., *Amrita Sher-Gil*, op.cit, p.42.

67. See Appendix XI.

68. Letter by Amrita to her parents 5.12. '36, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.97.

The influence of her South Indian experiences can be seen in her four paintings "The Fruit Vendors", painted while still at Cape Comorin, 'The Bride's Toilet', 'The Brahmcharis' and 'The South Indian Villagers Going to the Market.' Whereas the Indian painters discovered in Ajanta the spirituality that for them characterised Indian art, Amrita with her European back-ground was moved by the sense of humanism in Ajanta paintings. Hence, the figures in her paintings now acquire grace and sensuousness and new sense of mobility.

In 'Fruit Vendors'⁶⁹ can be seen the colours that Amrita had mentioned while describing the Kerala landscape to her sister Indira.⁷⁰ The background is of rich emerald green depicting vegetation of all kinds. The ground on which the figures are squatted is red ochre. The figures (a woman and two children) are draped in white clothes. Their faces are strangely calm and poised, a marked difference from the 'Mother India' faces. The faces also appear more 'Indian' as compared to those in 'Hill Men.' In 'Hill Men' the facial features are reminiscent of the portrait of Marie Louise⁷¹ she did in Europe.

In 'Brahmachari',⁷² the characters appear even more authentic. The painting depicts some South Indian brahmins sitting together in a group, with one of them (a guru) preaching to the others. The poses and the gestures are characteristic of Indian villages. The central figure of the preacher comes out very powerfully as a man of intellect, a thinker, a magnetic personality. There is a degree of grace and nobility about his face. The awed presence of others is

69. See Appendix XII.

70. Letter by Amrita to her sister 5.1'37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.100.

71. Marie Louise Chasseny was a painter friend of Amrita's with whom she shared an intimate relationship.
See Appendix XI.

72. See Appendix XIII.

also clearly manifested. A deep red background is used with a grey-green foreground in an attempt to provide an environment, yet these colours do not disturb the calm of picture.

At around the same time, she also painted "Story Teller" and "Siesta" in which can be seen the influences of the miniatures she had seen on her South India tour and of Mughal miniatures. The landscape assumes importance in these pictures and the figures in the foreground usually blend with the landscape. These paintings were painted to convey "a sonorous modulation of colour and an unctuous texture". These and other paintings inspired by "Moghuls, Rajputs and Jains," depicted various kinds of group activities, like the grinding of haldi by women, a group of women involved in conversation etc. The huts, the trees, the animals, the bullock carts also assume importance. There is a great deal of activity in these pictures, though the themes are often borrowed from the miniatures rather than based on actual observation. There appears a greater degree of harmony between human and the natural and inanimate objects.

In 1938 Amrita Sher-Gil went to Hungary for a year to get married. She returned India in 1939 and stayed at Saraya, near Gorakhpur with her Uncle's family. The Majithia estate in Saraya was very feudal in character, and this prevented any real contact with the rural people there, who remained either servants or models for Amrita. Yet she does not seem to resent this life style, or the lack of contact with the villagers.

The paintings done from Saraya portray the view of a feudal India. "The Swing", "The Bride" and "Woman Resting on Charpoy"⁷³ are all about feudal women, their desires and their longings. There is a sub-consciousness fear that haunts their faces, at the same time there is a yearning. These paintings also seem to represent the fears and predicament she herself was undergoing in this

73. See Appendix XIV.

period. In a letter to her sister she wrote that she often woke up with "that sensation of unutterable lassitude and vague chimeric fear... how often do I not think of tomorrow and the many, many tomorrows with dread."⁷⁴ There was also developing a barrier between her and her husband which depressed her.⁷⁵ This was probably why she could sympathize with the suppressed desires and unspoken fears for future of the feudal women.

We see through Amrita's paintings a certain change in attitude towards Indian reality. From an attempt to evolve a stereotype of an Indian' she began to paint figures which suited the different contexts in which he is placed. Therefore, 'Indian' included a multiple variety involved in different activities. Emotions were expressed not just by faces and eyes but by the way the entire picture was done, the postures of the figures, the execution of the form. Over time her paintings became more human and more indigenous in their idiom.

Yet she seems to idealise the poor and the miserable⁷⁶ and this prevents her from recognising the essence and complexities of Indian village life, for, alongwith the 'beauty' of the poor existed a more ugly side of poverty.

She also chose to ignore the harsh realities of modern life in this country. She completely shunned any aspect of Indian life influenced by the British and chose to idealise the apparently unchanged life and culture of India. Therefore South India by virtue of being unpolluted by the presence of Europeans seemed to her as a haven where she could settle down and keep painting.⁷⁷ Yet

74. Letter by Amrita to Indira, 6.12.'40, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.136.

75. Ibid, p.136.

76. "There is a certain charm in faces completely devoid of intelligence in art, stupid faces intelligently painted, like stupid faces that stare at one with looks of blank idiocy from the Greco Roman paintings." Letter of Amrita to Karl Khandalvala, 24.8. 1937, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p. 115.

77. Letter by Amrita to Indira, 5.1.'37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.101.

curiously she does not seem to mind the Chinese influence on the art of Trivandrum temples.⁷⁸

While there is effusive praise for Maurya artifacts and Moghul paintings, she does not seem to appreciate the "atrocious Hellenistic heads and figures"⁷⁹ or the influence of Persian art on Mughal miniatures.⁸⁰ It might be probable that the ongoing debate about the indigenous development of art in India had coloured her views.

She showed concern at the "apathetic attitude" of Indian public towards the "fostering of cultural renaissance" and recognised that an effort must be made to educate public taste and thereby, give impetus to the production of real works of art, because if the great majority of artists have to cater to the low taste of the public for a living, there can be no improvement in the standard of art.⁸¹ But we see a contradiction in her views here. While she talked of developing public taste, she also priced her own paintings at rates that were exorbitant according to contemporary standards. The exhibitions did not make her works accessible to classes lower than upper middle class.

78. Letter by Amrita to Karl Khandalvala, 15.1.'37, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letter", p.101.

79. Letter by Amrita to Karl Khandelvala, 18.12.'39, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.130.

80. Amrita to Karl Khandalwala, Feb./March 1938, "Amrita Sher-Gil's Letters", op.cit, p.124.

81. Amrita Sher-Gil, "Trends of Art in India", Vivan Sundram et.al, ed., *Amrita Sher-Gil*, op.cit, p.142.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this work is to study the cultural concerns of painters in the 1920s and '30s in the context of the debates of the period. The work progresses in three stages. The first concern is with the way India was being shaped in European studies. It provides an important background to the artistic developments in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. The second stage deals with the cultural questions bothering the Indians in the first half of the twentieth century. The third and final stage concentrates on the period 1920s and 30s, wherein an attempt is made to study the works of the artists as a part of the ongoing struggle for self discovery.

The idea of progress which is central to Western scholarship since the days of Renaissance began to be rationalised in the 18th century, for universal enlightenment and advancement. The methodology used for this purpose was, to do comparative studies and analyses of world cultures and to establish their inter-relationships and their relative positions in the preconceived universal hierarchy. The concept of a universal art history was developed in the 18th century as a part of the colonial discourse, and it continued into the 19th and 20th centuries. The concept of a universal art history had, integrated in it, the notion of universal progress - determined and realised by the West. Within this concept of history, there were people (the primitives) who were considered to be incapable of any modern progress by themselves, and this incapacity was often attributed to racial differences. Non-Europeans were seen as belonging to the past and they became fixed entities with historically exhausted physical and mental abilities.

Great efforts were put into documenting, studying, contextualising and philosophising Indian culture. A complex ideological framework was built up to look at India as a part of the East and its culture. Indian culture was then placed

in the past historical period, thereby rationalising the position of the West as the final link in the chain of human evolution.

Wide ranging changes occurred in the art sphere in the 19th century. Traditional art declined, and was further marginalised by the rise of Government Art Schools. New categories of 'art' and 'artist' emerged, driving a wedge between the 'traditional' and 'modern'. A new class of 'gentlemen artists' emerged. These artists being intellectuals, were also affected by the rising tide of nationalism. Hence, some artists, responding to the demands of nationalism, tried to bring about certain changes within the framework of the academic naturalism of the Art schools. The themes became mythological though the style remained that of Realism. Towards the end of the 19th century and in early 20th century, Havell and Abanindranath Tagore started experimenting in the traditional Indian styles. Art now got associated with the political movement against colonialism and gained a new confidence that went a long way in new innovations by later artists.

The colonial discourse of the European ideologies had a determining influence on the Indian intelligentsia, creating a feeling of anxiety and alienness in them. They sought to counter the Western claim of superiority, and, in the process created a romantic model of India for themselves.

But this battle was fought largely within the framework provided by the European scholars. The categories and interpretations made by the Europeans were adopted to make claims either towards equality or superiority over the West. Therefore, spirituality and idealism were adopted as categories to prove the superiority of the philosophy pervading Indian life over the material West. The European Orientalists were extensively quoted to authenticate their own claims further.

Another issue was that of antiquity of Indian culture. Archaeological discoveries like that of Ajanta were triumphantly used to prove the existence of a

classical tradition of highly developed culture in India Shilpasastras became important as a scientific text on art from ancient India. Various other Indian texts were constantly used to prove the antiquity and importance of the various arts in India through the ages.

In response to the charge of European scholars that India had been long dead culturally, a continuity and changelessness of Indian culture was propagated. And this kind of continuity existed only in Indian villages which were unviolated by the different outside influences, especially the "unholy spell" of European influences. Therefore the village was romanticised, and in its 'preserved culture' was seen a future for India.

The method of comparative study was also used. Hindu tradition was often compared with that of European societies. Modern Europe, it was felt, had fallen from its earlier lofty aims of idealism and spirituality (aims already attained and imbibed by Hindus). The fall was seen to have begun from the Roman period and had being completed during the Renaissance, both these traditions begin the ones exalted as high points in cultural history by modern Europe.

West was seen as a homogeneous category. This homogeneous image of West was being projected by the European ideologues. Against this overpowering image a need arose to expand a new generic image for India - an India as a homogeneous whole, not divided into various communities, tribes, philosophies. This basic unity of image for India was necessary to counter the 'West'.

Therefore, a search began to determine what could constitute this image or identity for India. The choice largely fell on 'Hindu India'. The reasons were primarily threefold. One obvious reason can be found in the familiarity with the Hindu symbols and beliefs, as most of the writers were Hindus. Another reason can be found in the numerical dominance of the Hindus in India.

Hence, inevitably the generic image for India became synonymous with the dominant practices. It is important to remember here that 'Hindu' itself is not a homogeneous category and what was actually being projected was the middle class Hindu ideal and value.

Yet another reason can be found in the European views about Indian history. The European historians divided the history of India into three periods - Hindu, Buddhist and Muslim. The Buddhist period, primarily due to the Greek influences on its art and culture, was held in high esteem. Muslim period, which was considered the result of Persian influence, came next in this hierarchy. The Hindu period was considered totally indigenous but also the most undeveloped and barbaric.

These same categories and inferences were largely adopted by the Indians to reach different conclusions. Hindu period, by virtue of being totally devoid of external influences became the true representative of 'India'. The Buddhist period was handled in two ways. It was either considered a period of decline from the earlier period, or was considered to be a part of the Hindu period. The foreigners who had come into India in this period had been largely assimilated. Muslim India became a period of maximum decline because of its complete foreign base. Hence, the Muslims fell outside this image of India. They became aliens who were not assimilated by the Indian tradition (read Hindu tradition).

Another strand of thought, especially after the recognition of separate political identity for Muslims by the Government and the rise of Muslim fundamentalism sought to find an answer to the question of 'originality' in Indian culture, by projecting a multicultural image for India. The 'impurity' of Indian culture, because of its contact with other culture, helped it to grow and enrich itself. This strand of thought projected a tolerant image for India, an India that is ever ready to learn from, and incorporate new thoughts and ideas. In changelessness was seen the stagnation and death of culture. An open society was, therefore, a healthy one and elicited better humanistic responses.

Humanism gained much attention in the post-swadeshi period, at times replacing the concerns with theology and spirituality. Gandhian phase of nationalism with its focus on masses provided an inspiration. Another reason can be found in the attempt of the Government, to dismiss the political struggle in India against colonialism as a mere "clash of ideals". Now the attempt was to find a compatibility between the ideals of the West and that of India, and humanism became one important concern. The universal concept of humanism was also meant to save Indian culture and belief from being relegated to the sphere of 'local' or 'racial' and therefore incomprehensible to other cultures.

Thus, we see that identity, being an ideological concept required ever-renewed confirmation.

The aims envisaged for this culture of India, lay in the demands of nationality, of remaking the 'motherland', to strengthen the cultural roots of Indians so as to enable them to meet the 'outsider' (Europeans) on equal footing and extract maximum benefit from this contact. This confidence in oneself was seen as the first step towards political development of India and self government. From the post Swadeshi period, the utilitarian as well as the aesthetic aspect of art and culture in everyday life of Indians was being stressed upon. The distinction that had arisen between art and life was sought to be resolved.

In this construction of identity, the woman's question became central. The women, largely because of their general exclusion from direct contact with European life, became the epitome of Indian tradition - of purity and innocence, of religiosity, of virtue and sacrifice. They were exalted in their domestic roles as wives, as mothers, as daughters as mistresses in the house. Within the household was found a nationalist project for them - of keeping intact the traditional values and ideals of society even in the face of outside change. Any

other role they took up could only be in addition to their prescribed domestic role.

This ideal of Indian woman also helped shape Indian male identity. The male became everything the woman was not. His importance in society was defined by his physical prowess, his intellect, his power to master both man and nature. Therefore, another identity was being created within the larger context of 'Indian' identity, and in this case the 'other' was the woman.

A painting is the expression and communication of man's deepest instincts and emotions reconciled and integrated with his social experience and cultural heritage. Therefore, in the artists of this period the search for national identity got intertwined with the question of personal identity. Though they occupied the same space for making a departure from the earlier trends, each of them represented a distinct trend, their differences arising due to their psycho-sociological experiences.

A new feature of the 1920s and 30s in the art movement in India was the rise of individual artists, unattached to any particular school. The successful experimentation with traditional art styles, by the Bengal school of Abanindranath, gave the next generation of artists confidence to further experiment with different art styles in an individual capacity.

Village and folk pervaded the works of the artists through themes, styles and idioms. In village was seen the existence of self-complete peasant communities, which provided a prototype for the future of India. In the village was found the perfect answer for all European accusations. Not only was the village representative of 'pure' tradition of India, it also fulfilled the need to prove the antiquity of Indian culture. In the motifs of village and folk art was seen the simplicity and universality which apprehended primitivism. The village life, in these artists' work became an exotic combination of gay abandon, spirituality, purity, idealism and universalism. The earlier concern with

spiritualism now found new form. It was infused into the village life. The mythical figures were now represented as rural people, often involved in one or the other mundane activities.

The new focus was on simplicity, both in form and style. The lines were reduced to minimum. The decorations were reduced and the paintings became more spontaneous and instinctive. The focus was to depict the spirit of the subject and not produce a replica. The materials used to paint also became simpler. The Indian artists began to paint on materials like silk cloth, cardboard, plain paper and the like. Very often tempera method was used and some like Jamini Roy used colours made out of local materials.

It is possible that the late 19th and early 20th century concerns of European artist with Primitivism could have influenced these artists (Amrita Sher-Gil admits to have been inspired by Gauguin). But there was also a tendency to counter the question of racism that underlay primitivism. Indian artistic tradition was seen to be made up of several parallel trends, two important ones being-the sophisticated art that existed as mainstream art, and the art that existed in the lives of villagers and tribals. The simplicity and universality of village art in India was therefore not due to its archaic nature, as in Negro art, but was due to a conscious selection made by these village artists to paint in a particular mode. Thus, village art became superior to both the 'Primitive' art of other countries, and also to the 'modern art' in Europe.

It is important to notice here that the artists did not become folk artists themselves. Rather, they appropriated the folk motifs, as other motifs from other art traditions to develop their own language. They deviated from the folk style and adjusted the symbolism to suit their needs.

Materialism of the West was still shunned, and this was done by maintaining a silence on the topic of British influence on India. The urban life, the urban settings, even the anti colonial struggle was largely ignored. Only a

few paintings appear as serving a direct nationalist purpose by depicting nationalist figures, and these pictures were primarily done by Nandalal Bose. The poverty and misery of the rural life was also not catered to. The aim was possibly to represent a utopian image of India - India that was spiritual, mystical, humanist, gay, and simple - and all the ingredients were seen to be present in the village. This image of India was devoid of the problems and hence there is no attempt to provide solutions to their problems.

The only solution attempted was the realisation to expand the clientele of art. Pictures were drawn and painted in amazing numbers and were made easily accessible, especially by Nandalal Bose and Jamini Roy. But all three emphasised the need to introduce art in people's everyday lives so as to make their life more joyous. Yet at times the public was expected to react to the pictures either at an emotional or at an intellectual level. Hence, the need was also to educate the public taste and not be guided by public demands.

Women acquire a special significance in the works of these artists. The obsession with women is noticed not only in Amrita Sher-Gil's work, but also in Jamini Roy's paintings. Women in Roy's paintings, as also in Nandalal Bose's, become pious Hindu women, as symbols of spirituality and domesticity. There is nothing evil about these women. They are involved in their daily household activities with a calm and peaceful demeanour.

The sexuality of women assumes importance especially in Roy's and Sher-Gil's paintings. Roy's women are certainly more sensuous than those represented by the Bengal School. Yet this sensuality is subtle, and the woman herself seems unaware of it. This combination of sensuality with innocence provides the women with a degree of mystique. This mystery also surrounds Sher-Gil's women. The suppressed desire of the feudal women is very well represented, yet there is an aura of secrecy about these women. It is interesting

to note that whereas Sher-Gil made several nudes during her stay in Europe, she did not paint many nudes in India.

Therefore, we see that an attempt was being made by the artists of this period to form a new identity for India, and this process was dependent to a large extent on, and in symbiosis with the constantly changing external forces.



SIVA DRINKING POISON

NANDLAL BOSE



A WOMAN COOKING

NANDLAL BOSE



A BULLOCK CART

NANDLAL BOSE

SAHAJPATH

PICTURES



A DEER

NANDLAL BOSE



GANDHI , LINO CUT

NANDLAL BOSE

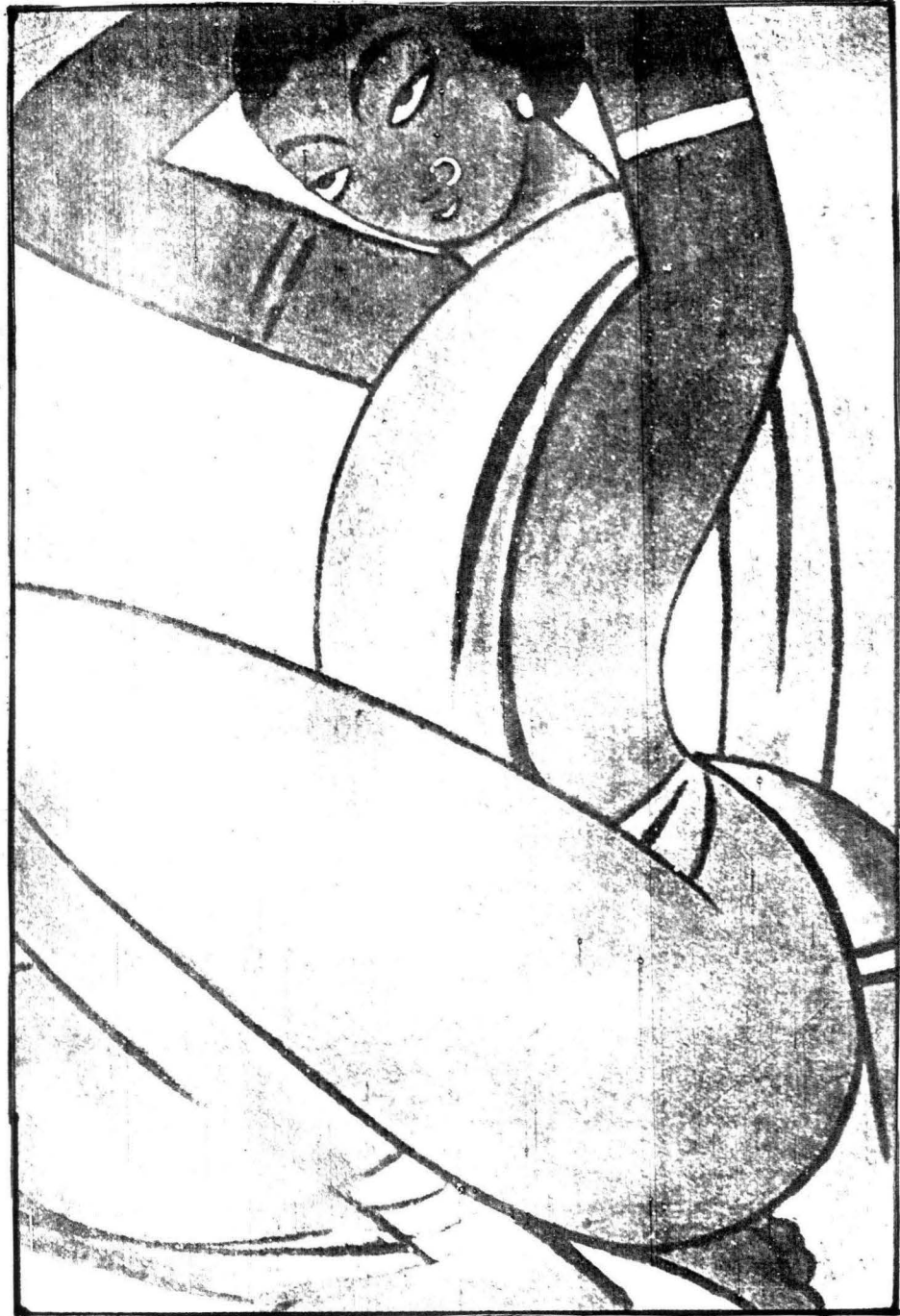


HARIPURA
POSTERS
(HANDLAL BOSE)

A TAILOR



A COBBLER



SANTHAL GIRL

JAMINI ROY

APPENDIX - VI

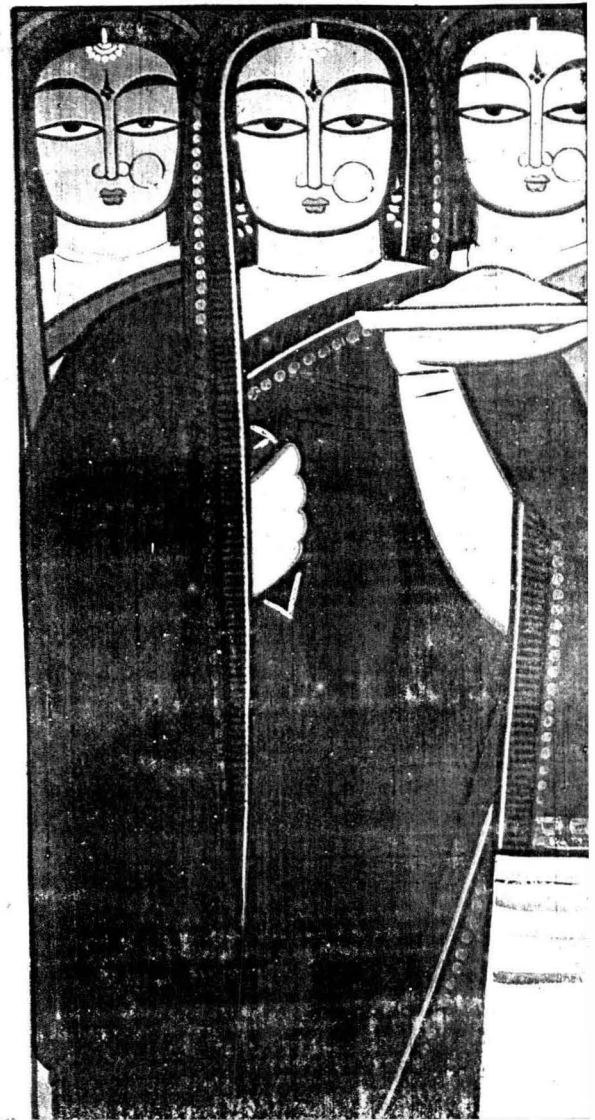


KALIGHAT : GOLAP SUNDARI

APPENDIX VII



MOTHER AND CHILD
(JAMINI ROY)



THREE PUJARINS
(JAMINI ROY)

APPENDIX VIII



SHIVA, DURGA, AND GANESH

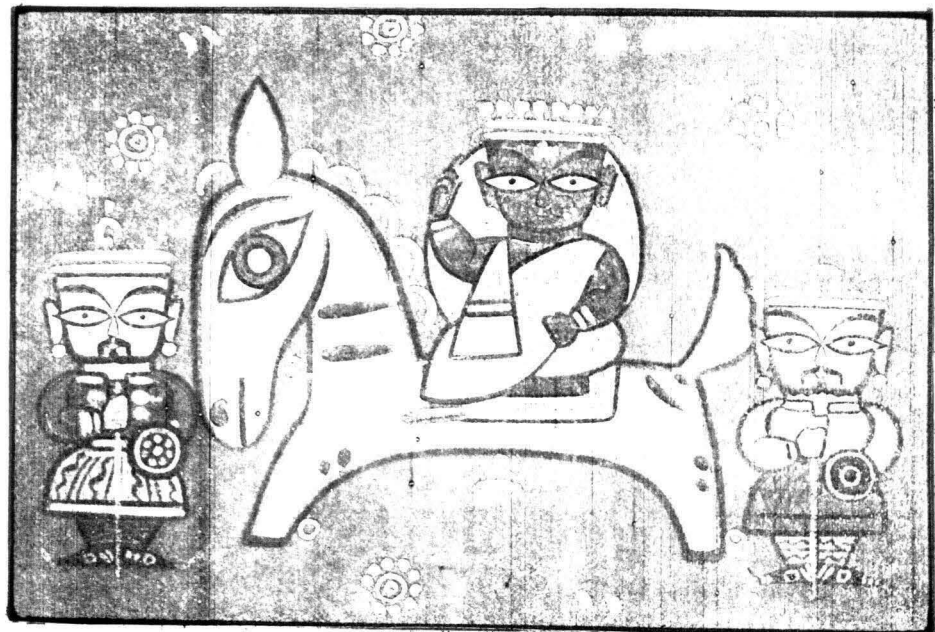
JAMINI ROY

APPENDIX-IX



THE QUEEN ON HORSE

JAMINI ROY



WARRIOR WOMAN

JAMINI ROY

APPENDIX X



MOTHER INDIA , 1935

AMRITA SHER-GIL

APPENDIX XI

HILL MEN,
1935
(AMRITA SHERGIL)



MARIE LOUISE, 1932(?)
(AMRITA SHER-GIL)

APPENDIX XII



FRUIT VENDORS , 1937

AMRITA SHER-GIL



BRAHMACHARIS, 1937

AMRITA SHER-GIL

APPENDIX XIV



BRIDE, 1940

AMRITA SHER-GIL

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