



Santiniketan

The Making of a Contextual Modernism

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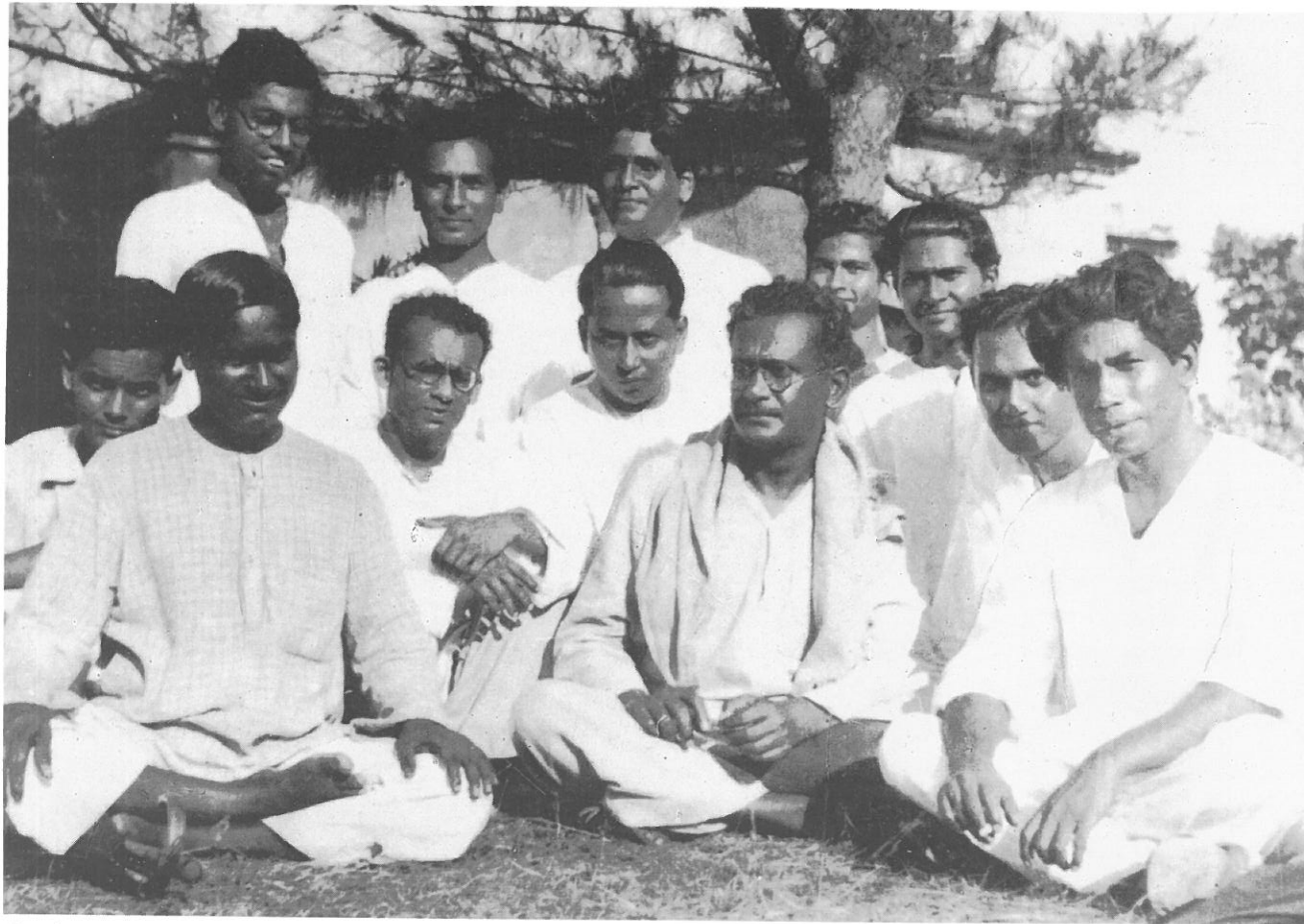
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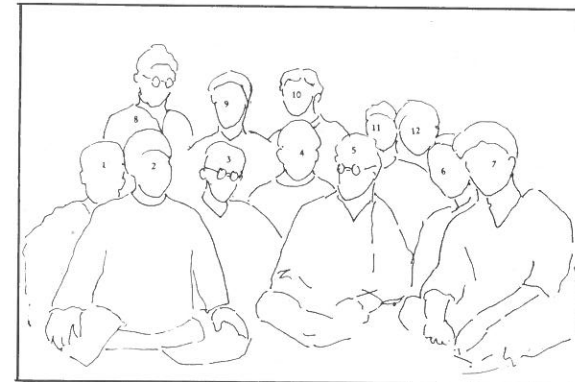
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October 1936 at Santiniketan

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|----------------------|------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Prafful Kumar Das | 2. Kalu Miya | 3. Benodebehari Mukherjee | 4. Mani Bhushan Gupta |
| 5. Nandalal Bose | 6. Visvarup Bose | 7. Ramkinkar Baij | 8. Nihar Ranjan Choudhury |
| 9. Rudrapa Hanji | 10. V.S. Hasoji | 11. Sukhamoy Mitra | 12. A. Perumal |



Santiniketan :

The Making of a Contextual Modernism

R. Siva Kumar

In 1901 when Rabindranath Tagore founded a small school at Santiniketan modelled after the old tapovans or forest schools Santiniketan was an unknown village with no claims to learning, culture or history. It was the most unlikely of places from where one expected an intervention into the arts of India to be mounted. Yet this is what Santiniketan is now known for. The initial goals set for Santiniketan were simple, but fundamental. Rabindranath wanted to develop an alternative approach to education that did not alienate the learner from nature but brought him or her into contact with it. He was initially thinking only of the education of children. But he soon realised that the arts should have a place in any education to make it complete; that culture and nature should come together in education. This became something of a guiding principle, a credo, at Santiniketan. The school had an art teacher of sorts from the outset, and very soon Rabindranath became convinced that the arts should not only have a place but have a central role in his educational programme. To put this conviction into practice he invited Nandalal Bose to join him. And followed it with the founding of Kala-Bhavan, the art School at Santiniketan, in 1919 which later, with the establishment of Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan in 1921, became the first faculty of fine arts in an Indian University.

Rabindranath and Nandalal worked together to make it more than an art school in the limited sense. They wanted to develop it into a centre of creative activity from where a movement could emerge. Benodebehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij the most talented pupils of Nandalal, and later his colleagues, joined them in their quest in the 20s, and for the next 25 years the most seminal thoughts and works on the Indian art scene came from

Santiniketan. When Kala Bhavan came into existence the Nationalist movement in art was intellectually and theoretically well established but it had no formidable body of work to support it. On the one hand Nandalal removed this lacunae and on the other hand in the 40s when the progressive groups in Calcutta, Madras and Bombay tried to give a new direction to Indian art based on individualist modernist assertion and contact with contemporary reality their credo was more than anticipated by the work of Benodebehari and Ramkinkar. This in a nutshell reveals the historical role played by Santiniketan in the evolution of modern Indian art.

Rabindranath and Modern Indian Art : Early Years

Rabindranath made a three fold contribution to modern Indian art. Firstly as a creative writer and nationalist leader who took a keen interest in art he was a centre of influence. His views influenced the development of modern Indian art. Secondly besides being a multifaceted creative person he was also a philosopher who speculated on the nature of art and creativity and made a distinct contribution to aesthetics. And finally as a painter he was equally seminal. But chronologically his career as a painter followed the other two. His interest in the contemporary art scene can be traced to 1890s but his career as an artist began only in the 1920s. So while he affected his contemporaries through his views on art he affected the next generation as a painter. And we shall begin by considering his early views on art.

His earliest known response to art is contained in a letter written from Shelidah in 1893. Referring to a summer morning spent looking at the pictures of Ravi Varma, he writes that though certain defects in the rendering of anatomy

are easily discernible the subject, imagery and emotions of these pictures are evidently Indian. And because of this our mind co-operates with the artist and his pictures are clearly understood. In December, 1898 in an early piece of art writing he praises G.K. Mhatre's *To the Temple* for perfectly combining Indian theme and feeling with classical realism. An year later he reiterates the same values while discussing J. P. Ganguly's oil paintings based on Banabhata's *Kadambari* and recommends the combination of realism and themes drawn from classical Indian literature to Indian artists at large. Thus at the turn of the century we find Rabindranath sharing the perceptions and tastes of his elite compatriots who saw academic realism as the highest form of art and Ravi Varma as its finest Indian exponent.

Rabindranath's early views on art were thus not original or forward looking but he was soon jolted out of it by the nationalist challenge spear-headed by his nephew Abanindranath Tagore, E.B. Havell, Sister Nivedita and Ananda Coomaraswamy. Around 1897 Abanindranath felt that nationalist art should not be confined to using Indian mythological and literary subject matter but committed to combining it with an Indian approach to style. At this point though Rabindranath was not yet thinking along these lines he advised Abanindranath to begin by assimilating Indian emotional and aesthetic sensibilities, and, on the basis of his own experience, he recommended a study of Vaishnava literature to achieve this. The next turning point in his views came in 1904 when Havell who was trying to bring about an Indianisation of art education decided to sell off the collection of European art objects in the art school gallery, mainly consisting of copies, and replace them with a select collection of original Indian works. In the public debate that ensued Rabindranath came out in Havell's support arguing that a passing acquaintance with inferior copies and third rate originals of Western art cannot be a good introduction to Western culture or to culture in general, and on the other hand a fine grounding in one's own culture would also be the best preparation for a fruitful encounter with other cultures. Significantly even during his Swadeshi years Rabindranath did not see the argument for a national culture as an argument for cultural insularity. Though at this point Rabindranath

seems to have been following the lead given by the nationalists in matters of art his own experimentation with school education at Santiniketan was not unlike Havell's attempt to Indianise art education. However it needs to be said that Rabindranath's views on art during this period are no indication of his important contribution to cultural nationalism made through his poems, songs, stories, educational experiments and programmes for rural reconstruction. These taken together were important enough to make Coomaraswamy describe him as the finest exemplar of Swadeshi.

Even more important than the assimilation of nationalist views on art was his attempt to bring his own experience as a creative writer to bear on contemporary art practice. Asked by his father to take charge of the family estates Rabindranath was forced to move to Shelidah in 1891. Despite his initial misgivings it had a profound impact on his life and literary career. It was for him like awakening to reality from a long self-engrossed dream. In rural Bengal, coming into intimate contact with nature and life without frills, he learned to see man and nature as a continuum, to notice the sadness and pleasures of rural life in India and to meet the infinite one-to-one. This quickened his sensibilities and had a liberating effect on him as a writer. What was beneficial to him as a writer, he believed, would also be beneficial to contemporary artists. He had already tried to share his interests and insights with them by asking them to illustrate his writings and now he decided to invite artists like Nandalal, Mukul Dey and Suren Kar to join him at Shelidah.

He also brought his experience at Shelidah to bear on the educational programme at Santiniketan by turning nature into his classroom, by bringing the students into contact with the villages around and by keeping life on the campus almost as frugal as that of the villages. He visualised education as a way of bringing knowledge and life together. The role he visualised for art was not different. He himself wrote many of his songs and plays to be sung and performed by the Santiniketan boys and girls. He expected Nandalal, his colleagues, and students to relate their art to the life and needs of the community.

After Shelidah the next turning point was his visit to Japan in 1916. He was greatly impressed by the role of art in Japanese lives as it came close to his own ideal. He also noticed that Japanese art had a scale and impact that contemporary Indian art lacked. He wrote of these to his nephews who were leading the new art movement in India. To Abanindranath he wrote :

The more I travel and see of Japan, the more I feel that all of you should have come with me. Sitting in your south verandah you will never realise how much contact with the living art of Japan we need to revitalise the art of our country. The winds of art has not blown in our country and art has no vital links with out social life.... So you can never draw full sustenance from its soil. If you have come here just once you will know how this nation is nurtured by its art; their whole life speaks through their art.

And to Samarendranath Tagore he wrote of the comparative merits of Indian and Japanese art, underscoring what he thought Indian art lacked:

A certain yearning of the mind finds expression in your art. For this you concentrate more on the nuances of colour than on the clarity of lines. Having thought over it I feel this is India's direction too. India loves the vibrancy of colours, the reconciliation of black and white is of prime importance in Japanese art — this may be seen even in their costumes. If Indian art moves ahead with full vigour and effort then it shall be unequalled in depth and the expression of emotions. But it should be charged with the vigour of life, so that it may prove bountiful.

Now it is more like a prime-garden of tiny flowering-plants. We need a forest of towering trees, ever resounding with the thunder of storms. I surmise, if we cut down our dimensions our range of emotions too will narrow down with it.

And finally as he realised that it would be futile to urge them to get out

and make this contact he got a few Japanese works copied and decided to get a Japanese artist to go to Calcutta and teach at the Vichitra Club which he had recently started at Jorasanko. After giving much thought.... I am sending over an artist named Arai, he wrote to Gaganendranath, 'It will do a lot of good even if he stays for six months at our house and teaches. A new jolt from outside will do you at least so much good'.

Although his views were chiefly addressed to his nephews it was Nandalal who responded to them most readily. In a way Rabindranath's efforts were a continuation of the Pan-Asian cultural contacts that began with Okakura Kakuzo's first visit to India in 1902. The differences lay in the new orientation he was trying to give to it with his stress on contact with the realities of life and nature and a new reconsideration of traditional antecedents from this perspective. It also marks Rabindranath's transformation from a respected dilettante to an involved motivator and mentor. The Vichitra club was his first organised effort in this direction. However, it was short lived, and lamenting this he wrote to his daughter : 'I had hoped that from our Vichitra would flow a great stream of art fertilising the whole country; but there was nobody capable of dedicating himself whole heartedly to the cause'. When the Vichitra Club folded up he decided to start anew at Santiniketan with the help of Nandalal. And of his effort at Santiniketan he wrote to Abanindranath in 1919:

The seed you have sown in this country it is my wish that it might germinate, become lasting and belong to this country for ever.... Since it did not take roots in Calcutta, I have started work here, and signs of success are also visible.

Nandalal and Kala-Bhavan:

Nandalal was the most gifted pupil of Abanindranath. Recognising his talent Rabindranath invited him to Santiniketan and gave a ceremonial welcome on his first visit in 1914. For the next few years Nandalal continued to visit Santiniketan during the weekends. In 1919 Rabindranath requested him to take charge of the newly started Kala Bhavan and Nandalal moved to

Santiniketan with his family. But Abanindranath who also valued his abilities as a teacher wanted Nandalal to teach at the Oriental Society of Art in Calcutta. This put Nandalal in a quandary. Unable to disregard his guru he once again returned to Calcutta. But finally persuaded by Rabindranath, Abanindranath relented and Nandalal moved to Santiniketan for good in 1920. Two years later he became the head of the art faculty and remained its guiding spirit until 1951.

Despite his reverence for Abanindranath and his early success with the wash technique in paintings like *Sati*. Nandalal chose not to follow the master. Unlike most of his fellow students he intuitively realised that Abanindranath's techniques were an expression of his sensibilities. To imitate it would be to carry the burden of a style that did not suit his own temperament. Nandalal's own genius lay in synthesising different nationalist perspectives into a comprehensive programme that went beyond nationalism. From Abanindranath he inherited his commitment to art and his vision of art as a calling rather than a profession. His deep interest in the traditional arts of India was developed under the influence of Abanindranath and Havell. Nivedita encouraged him to link his practice to an outwardly nationalist and inwardly spiritual calling. Along with Havell she raised the issue of public art as an instrument for reviving the national art scene and raising the national taste, and, unlike Abanindranath who did not find it in consonance with his sensibility, Nandalal responded to it more readily. From Ananda Coomaraswamy he learned to see the panorama of traditional arts as levels of a visual language linked to a hierarchy of functions and communicational needs. This along with Okakura Kakuzo's precept that a balanced conjunction of tradition, nature and individuality alone can produce an art that is culturally rooted, experientially authentic and contemporary became the key ideas of his credo. He internalised and built upon them both as an artist and a teacher.

Rabindranath should have appeared to Nandalal as a living embodiment of Okakura's precepts — a writer who combined history, reality and individuality into a personal vision. Rabindranath sensitised him to the

importance of nature and urged him to relate art to society. And at Santiniketan he provided Nandalal with the opportunity to relate art to various social needs and thus put the idea of a connected spectrum of art and language into practice. Thus while Coomaraswamy and Okakura helped him in formulating his precepts it was Rabindranath who helped him to act upon them. And finally there was Gandhi. Their attraction was mutual, Nandalal saw in the Gandhian programme an approach to nationalism to which he could respond readily and Gandhi saw in Nandalal the artist who came closest to his ideals.

His career evolved with the progressive assimilation of these influences. He started off as a close follower of Abanindranath using both mythological themes and the wash technique. Many of these were seen by his contemporaries as representations of nationalist values and aspirations. The first shift from this came after his visit to Ajanta during the winter of 1909-10 as a member of Lady Harringham's team to copy the murals. At Ajanta he saw an art that was very different to Abanindranath's in scale, in the quality of figuration, in its narrative mode and technique. The style and technique of Ajanta appealed to his temperament more than wash painting. Its immediate impact can be seen in his paintings *Jatugriha Daha*, *Siva and Sati*, and *Parthasarathi* etc. Although they are marked by certain mannerisms reflecting current revivalist concerns they also indicate a preference for greater representational realism and robustness.

A greater change in sensibility and perspective came under the influence of Rabindranath. Under the influence of Rabindranath he realised that an art that responded to the everyday realities of contemporary life and environment could be a more authentic form of national art than a revivalist art dealing with mythological or historical themes. He now committed himself to the aesthetic enrichment of national life, and this became a part of his educational programme at Santiniketan.

In an essay titled, 'The Place of Art in Education' he explained that the function of art education is 'to cultivate the understanding and

communication of the messages of the outer world through the senses and sensibility of man'. In the same essay he went on to outline the means for promoting what he called 'an all round cultivation of art' in the art schools. These included a campus adorned with works of art, a programmed and broad exposure to the arts through quality art books and illustrated lectures, sensitising the students to nature, planning festivals to nurture environmental contact, and an annual art fair that will bring art to the community. All these he made a part of his programme at Santiniketan.

The murals and environmental sculptures which now make Santiniketan a major open air gallery of early modern Indian art was the outcome of his effort to put art into the campus. If art in public spaces could effect the sensibility of the community, so could, Nandalal believed, the design of everyday objects mould their taste. The attempt by Abanindranath and Gaganendranath to orientalise decor and costume during the Swadeshi years had its impact on the Santiniketan experiment. But the objects they designed were rather exclusive. Nandalal wanted to reach out to the middle class and change the taste of a larger segment of the society. And he succeeded in this to a large extent as objects produced in Santiniketan set the standards of Indian design until the 50s. From the point of art teaching at Kala Bhavan this meant the study of crafts along with fine arts and the learning of different skills.

Besides painting and sculpture the Santiniketan artists also used a variety of printing mediums both for creative work and illustrating books. This was innovative for though print making techniques were taught in the government art schools as a part of their commercial art course they were seldom seen as a communicational medium bridging the functional and creative sides of art. Nandalal's illustrations for Sahaj Path the Bengali primer written by Rabindranath is a good example of such use. There were also facilities for weaving, carpet making, pottery, wood work, leather crafts, lacquer work and book binding at Sriniketan with traditional craftsmen or artists-craftsmen in charge of each. Nandalal often collaborated with them and also encouraged his pupils to do so. Batik and alpona were revived and popularised,

and they were done by artists and non-professionals alike. And this was in keeping with Nandalal's belief that a quantum of non-professional art-practise will add breadth to the art spectrum and give an added depth to professional work.

By the mid-20s Kala Bhavan was beginning to resemble Bauhaus. Incidentally the two institutes were founded in the same year. Bauhaus, however, began with a planned programme. Kala Bhavan did not begin with such a blue print. But Nandalal's interpretation of Rabindranath's brief gave it a comparable orientation. It was Nandalal's view that each medium and function needs to be addressed differently, that each communicational problem leads to a different formal solution. Thus versatility and communicational efficacy were underscored. Stylistic unity was considered incidental, it reflected the sensibility or the idiosyncrasy of the artist, not the underlying similarity of all the problems he addressed. This led him on to the analysis of different conventions and their linguistic rationale. These aspects of Nandalal's thinking had a lasting impact not only on the thought and practise of Benodebehari and Ramkinkar but also on the Santiniketan artists of the next generation.

In his own practise he gave a Gandhian slant to these ideas. Moving from wash painting to tempera allowed a greater use of local colours and grounds. Working in Santiniketan with meagre infrastructure this was also a strategy for sustaining creativity. Later it acquired an ideological underpinning. In December 1936 before the village congress at Faizpur Gandhi sent for Nandalal and asked him to, 'build the township at Faizpur using only, rural material and employing country craftsmen', adding 'The conception should be indigenous. As for the decoration you are in sole charge'. Gandhi was impressed by the result. The next year Nandalal was again called by Gandhi. And in Nandalal's words, 'This time the instruction was to make the exhibition clearly visible to the rural people passing by. "Cover the entire area", he suggested, "with examples of art". Following the pat style we did a large number of paintings and hung them everywhere.' These paintings are now famous as the *Haripura posters*.

The *Haripura posters* which are a land mark in his career also exemplify his appropriation of the folk arts. There was a wide spread interest in folk culture in post-swadeshi Bengal. Rabindranath following his exposure to rural Bengal took an interest in its poetry, music, stories, lullabies, and festivals. He also encouraged others, including Abanindranath, to study them. Abanindranath's *Banglar Brata*, a study of the rural rituals and the visual arts associated with them, was a fall out of this advice. Their interest in folk traditions left an imprint on the literary works of both Rabindranath and Abanindranath. But though Abanindranath took an interest in folk arts as a part of the traditional Indian scene and encouraged his students to study and collect them what impact it had on his own art was rather belated and (contrary to prevalent critical opinion) not very rewarding. Nandalal's interest in the folk arts can be traced to around 1910 when for a short while he drew pictures in the Kalighat style and sold them cheaply to jute mill workers through a local grocery.

His discovery of folk and Ajanta paintings happened about the same time. So in some of the works that followed we see him trying to combine them. Though he collected folk art for the Kala Bhavan museum and continued to admire them; barring a few exceptions like the *Village Marriage* (1928), he seldom tried to imitate their style. He realised that the folk and the modern artists have very different work circuits and that the idiomatic brevity of the folk artist loses its semantic significance outside his original social structure. The modern artist cannot afford to be so circumscribed by a cultural situation, he has to draw on it without submitting himself completely to it, and his statements should have a certain self sufficiency without losing out on cultural innuendoes. The most important lesson folk art holds for a modern artist is not one of style but one of using a rudimentary visual language with enviable communicational efficacy. And the *Haripura posters* show that Nandalal had learned this lesson well.

In their apparent simplicity they evoke *patas*, he described them as a 'playful extension of Kalighat *pat*', but in their images and technique they are

more singular. They also show up Nandalal as an artist with a total design sensibility. They are now viewed as independent panels but they were originally conceived as an integral part of the structures. He used rural skills and materials to make the pavilions and they resembled village constructions. Having done this he knew that he had to decorate his structures as a *patua* or a village artist would have gone about it. Anything else would be visually jarring and would not reach out to the rural viewers as something they can readily identify with. But he was too individual an artist to imitate the folk artist, and so he creates a parallel that carries the stamp of his personality and individual talent.

Underlying the *Haripura posters* are a distinct approach to nature study and the concept of representation central to Nandalal's art and pedagogy. Despite the nationalist rhetoric even his early paintings have a realist base. Subsequent to his visit to Ajanta and his exposure to Far Eastern ink painting he began to combine a broadly realist approach to study with a preference for Eastern work methods. We can notice this as early as 1913 in a series of crisp ink drawings (now in the Kala Bhavan museum collection). In these he moves from leaves and their grouping to whole trees and landscapes, progressing almost step by step in the way they are demonstrated in Far Eastern manuals on drawing, only the motifs are local. They already show an attempt to combine the Western realist idea of drawing from nature with the Eastern concept of drawing from memory. The images underline detailed observation but the brush marks not only reveal that the observed objects have been analysed and broken down into simpler components but also that they could be recalled and rearticulated through a combination of marks and gestures which function as the basic units of his visual language. Following this idea he made drawing from observation and drawing from memory an important part of his pedagogy. This influenced the stylistic aspects of the Santiniketan artists. While drawing from observation stresses the individuality of objects drawing from memory underscores the pattern mind projects on internalised facts. Nandalal thus saw a close connection between drawing from memory and composition, and for him it was established through the dual function of rhythm as an

expression of the life content of the figure and as a means of determining its image. This also helped him to think of representation and decoration as compatible, rather than as mutually exclusive, concepts. And in concepts, though not in style, this brings him close to an artist like Matisse.

During his Santiniketan years Nandalal's work also changed significantly. During his early years in Santiniketan though he did not discard his nationalist views altogether he was, as Benodebehari observes, 'coming closer to earth'. Rural life and landscape began to displace mythological and historical themes. In 1921 when he went to copy the Bagh murals he was not only drawn by their artistic merits but also by the relation he thought they had with the *bhils* who lived around. Such an overlap of life and myth becomes characteristic of his Santiniketan work. The *Santhals* around Santiniketan inspired him to do the series on Sabari, the fishermen he drew at Puri and Gopalpur led to *Christ among Fishermen*, and so on. Sometimes as in the *Birth of Chaitanya and Sujata* the mythological content is limited to the title. That they are transpositions from life is self-evident. Though less obvious this is also true of *Chaitanya on the Sea Shore*, *Grief of Uma*, *Arjuna*, *Radha's Viraha*, *Radha in the Grove*, and many of his later mythological paintings. True some of these have a poetic quality but it comes more from life than from their mythological or literary sources. We also see this in *Piau*, *Woman Sitting under a Tree*, *Jaba Flower*, *Autumn*, *Spring*, *Summer and Winter* (done as a series), *Lady in Woods* and *Pratiksha* — all based on observed facts. If some of these are consciously romantic there are others which are more direct — the *Haripura posters*, *Road to Bolpur*, *Starry Night*, *Ashram*, *New Clouds*, *Coconut Planting*, *Burning Pine* and *Santhal Dance* etc. Placing this last painting next to his early lithograph of the same theme will be enough to demonstrate the direction and extent of his post-Santiniketan change.

During the 40s paintings inspired by specific locations began to grow in number and occupy a special place in his oeuvre. *Alakananda*, *Parasnath Hill*, *Road at Bagda*, *Hazaribagh Road*, *House at Tagda*, *Mayavati Ashram*, *River at Barakar*, *Herd of Buffaloes*, *Lal Bandh*, *Buildings in Rain*, *Goalpara*, *Mukdum*

Kunda, *The Backwaters at Gopalpur*, *Gopalpur River-side*, *Floating a Canoe*, *A Boat on the Ganges*, and *Darjeeling in Mist* belong to this group. On the one hand they carry forward a development that began with his Santiniketan landscapes of the 30s, but on the other they also show a new departure. Panoramic, and usually in ink on paper, they convey an experience of space that is different from those of his earlier landscapes. In his earlier landscapes there is often a surfeit of objects, or at least objects are what catch our eyes, but in these space finds greater presence and articulation. In his terms we could describe it as a shift towards the Chinese ideal and perhaps more accurately as a cross between Western realist and Chinese approaches to space.

These larger works, numerous as they are, should be taken along with the countless drawings he did on small cards — which he always carried — to gain a complete picture of his keen sense of reality. It is in these smaller drawings that he is at his innovative and versatile best and comes closest to anticipating Benodebehari and Ramkinkar. His mountainscapes done between 1937 and '46 hold their own beside Ramkinkar's 1945 water colours of Nepal and Benodebehari's Mussoorie landscapes from the early 50s. His drawings of the sea and the fishermen at Puri done during 1947-'48 compare well with Ramkinkar's 1951 representations of Puri and Gopalpur (1951). The list can be extended but even where their subjects do not converge their qualities do. As a draftsman he had remarkable breath, and Benodebehari thought he ranked with Rembrandt.

His last suit of drawings were done in the early 60s, these show him moving further towards abstraction and an extreme simplicity of statement. With his movement curtailed by illness and confined to his chair and bed Nandalal continued to draw certain motifs incessantly, shedding details and gaining in brevity and ambivalence as he went along. In these land, water and sky become large stretches of space animated by the barest of marks suggesting rustling grass or birds, trodden sand or rippling waves.

Among those aspects of his work that influenced the best of his

followers was the creation of a middle space between the narrative and representational modes. If his later paintings are still broadly narrative they are also more representational than the works of his Bengal school contemporaries. While he focused on the issue of language in his teaching and writings, his works—specially his drawings—show that he was equally responsive to visual facts. This attempt to overlay the two influenced Benodebehari and Ramkinkar. In his own work this allowed him to combine the realistic with the decorative.

As we have seen there are many levels of realism in his work. Similarly there is also more than one level of decorative to it. At the most decorative end of his oeuvre we have his many *Mahishamardinis*, paintings like *Ganga* and *Vina Vadini* belong to the next level, and *Birth of Chaitanya* and the series on the life of Buddha a third level. In the first group the decorative aspect is dominant in the others they strike different kinds of juxtaposition or balance. Further, in the *Haripura posters* and *Summer*, etc. the decorative becomes an abstract value subsumed within the narrative. The conjoining of representation and decoration was at the core of Nandalal's eclecticism. This is specially noticeable in his murals, in each of them he attempts to combine a different mode of decoration and representation, sometimes reconciling them, sometimes juxtaposing them.

As a muralist the first model he had before him was that of Ajanta. He began by noticing its narrative mode, followed by how the decorative and the representational are held together in its total scheme and how they interpenetrate each other. Then came his visit to Bagh in 1921, and to the Far East in 1924. These allowed him to see at first-hand other idioms in which the representational and the decorative were conjoined. He also thought that the reliefs on the Indian temples were governed by a similar ideal. A reflection of this is found in his first major mural, *Halakarshan*, done in 1930. He began with the idea of a long narrative panel consisting of a row of well modelled figures connected by a lateral rhythm but eventually he broke it down into a sequence of episodes making the mural look like a series of reliefs. He followed this process in most of his murals. In his next mural painted in 1933

he divided the whole surface into a number of panels representing a different subject in each of them. Of these the panel representing aspects of Santiniketan life, woven together as in a scroll with shifting focus, stands out. Here he follows a different concept of decoration—combining flat colour areas with graphic emphasis—drawn more from the miniature traditions.

This was followed by the relief decoration of two mud buildings in Santiniketan, the Shyamali and the Black House. Here the works were not all by Nandalal but the concept was his. In both of them the reliefs are an integral part of the architecture and thus a balance between design and representation is established. At Haripura Nandalal applied the same concept but doing paintings rather than reliefs.

His next important mural, the *Natir Puja*, was done on the outer verandah of the Cheena Bhavana, in Santiniketan, in 1942. Based on Rabindranath's play of the same name it is the most outstanding of his murals. Painted spontaneously with bits of folded rags it has some of the qualities of his drawings. Using a spatial division inspired by Japanese screens he also manages to keep the episodic division and narrative continuity in balance. His last mural project was at the Kritimandir in Baroda. Here he did four murals between 1939 and 1946—*Gangavatarana* in 1939, *Life of Meera* in 1940, *Natir Puja* in 1943 and *Abhimanyu Vadh* in 1946. In each of these he tried to strike a different balance between representation and decoration, most dramatically in *Abhimanyu Vadh* where a mannerist mode of figuration is combined with an ornamental mode of decoration. This is Nandalal's eclecticism trudging the thin edge between daring and failure.

During the 20s and the 30s Nandalal was a liberating force on the Indian art scene. But in the 40s he began to alternate between conservatism and liberalism. The direction Santiniketan was taking after Rabindranath's death and his own approaching retirement made him anxious about the future of Kala Bhavan which he had guided so long, this pushed him into a conformist stance. But his own commitment to creative freedom almost immediately pushed

him in the opposite direction and he declared that he wanted 'to set every one free'. Similarly in the late 40s on the one hand he was making copies of his early mythological paintings, and, on the other, painting some of his most radical landscapes. But these inner conflicts do not over-shadow his most enduring contribution to modern Indian art as a bridge builder between tradition and modernity.

Nandalal did not see tradition and modernity as mutually exclusive, he explained their continuity using the analogy of the seed. Tradition is the outer shell of the seed and modernity the new life it guards within it. Coming at a time of cultural hiatus and technical oblivion as an artist and teacher, unlike Abanindranath, Nandalal thought it necessary to revive traditional knowledge and sensibility but this did not imply revivalism or conformism. To him it was merely the preparation necessary to revive creativity. His attempt to revive mural techniques is a case in point. When he began to do murals he had little knowledge of the necessary techniques. To overcome this he began to learn them from traditional manuals and craftsmen. The effect was not revivalism but resourcefulness. Each of his major mural was done in a different medium. He valued resourcefulness but did not confuse it with technique or see technique as a value in itself. He wrote :

If the aesthetic impulse of form is quite clear and intense, then you almost do not need any technique... If you question an artist only about his techniques it is like insulting him... What is there in technique? If you lay a stroke of colour on white paper that is all there is to technique. If you can press a lump of clay with your fingers, you have learnt all the skill there is to model an image.

And about himself he wrote in a letter to Kanai Samanta, one of his pupils, in 1954 :

The sense of fight and challenge that can be seen here and there in my painting is not there in those of Guru Abanindranath....

This came out of my spirit of nationalism... I do not any more have this spirit of challenge; I now know that with such a spirit you lose on the side of rasa.... I pray now to Visvakarma that he may (in my next life) give me access to the rasa of all great art from everywhere.

Rabindranath : Aesthetics and Art

Rabindranath's ideas upto 1916 played an important role in modelling Nandalal's artistic personality and his pedagogy at Kala Bhavan. The elements he stressed were national awakening and social transformation from within through self-realisation, developing an intimate contact with nature and knowing the human world as a part of it, and the need to nurture an Eastern response to the West and the historical conditions that governed their relation. There was a method in this progress from Swadeshi to Pan-Asianism. This, however, was only a stage in his unfolding, while he was writing the famous letters to his nephews urging them to learn from the Japanese example he was also writing his essays on nationalism — which are a comprehensive statement of his critique of nationalism in English.

In his essay 'Japanese Nationalism' he expressed both his admiration for Japan and his distaste for its new nationalist posturing. About the first he wrote :

What has impressed me most in this country is the conviction that you have realised nature's secrets, not by methods of analytical knowledge, but by sympathy. You have known her language of lines, and music of colours, the symmetry in her irregularities, and the cadence in her freedom of moments; you have seen how she leads her immense crowds of things yet avoids all frictions; how the very conflicts in her creations break out in dance and music; how her exuberance has the aspect of the fullness of self-abandonment, and not a mere dissipation of display.... I have felt that you have been able to assimilate these secrets

into your life, and the truth that lies in the beauty of all things have passed into your souls.

He admired Japan for breaking the shell of tradition and 'facing the world', and for being 'the first in the East' to do so. But he also warned her against imitating the West, her role must be, he wrote, to 'infuse the sap of a fuller humanity into the heart of modern civilisation', and not, 'the acceptance of the motive force of the Western nationalism as her own'.

He called nationalism 'the apotheosis of selfishness' commenting on the Japanese-American relationship he wrote prophetically: 'The wisdom of the Nation is not in its faith in humanity but in its complete distrust.... and Nation can only trust Nation where their interests coalesce'. He saw a clear connection between nationalism and imperialism, and between imperialism and orientalism. He wrote :

All the great nations of Europe have their victims in other parts of the world. This only deadens their moral sympathy but also their intellectual sympathy, which is so necessary for the understanding of races which are not one's own. Englishmen can never truly understand India, because their minds are not disinterested with regard to that country.

But his critique of nationalism had its roots in his experience of Indian nationalism. In its initial years he was one of its leaders but as it moved from cultural assertion to political activism he realised that it often came into conflict with more fundamental human values. This led him to distance himself from nationalist politics and concentrate on education and social reconstruction. The concept of nationalism he argued was alien to the Indian mind and yet an idolatry of the nation was being taught by the new nationalists. 'I believe', he wrote in 1917, 'I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my country men will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the

ideals of humanism'.

Rabindranath saw germs of moral degradation and imperialism in nationalism, and the First World War was for him a proof of the virulent inhumanism it could unleash. This critique of nationalism and his idea of universal humanism were formulated against this background. His concept of universal humanism thus should not be confused with an outward internationalism that could be achieved through the global spread of Western modernisms. It was a counter force against all jingoism and found an immediate and concrete expression in the form of Visva-Bharati, the university he founded at Santiniketan in 1921. The motto he chose for it — where the whole world meets in one nest — underscores his express desire to build bridges between cultures. It is also emblematic of Rabindranath's personal transformation that the school he began in 1901 as a nationalist gesture should in 1921 become a place where the East meets West in a cultural dialogue. Incidentally the year of Visva-Bharati's founding was also the year of the Non-cooperation movement under Gandhi and Visva-Bharati was an intellectual counterpoint to non-cooperation. Rabindranath expressed his fears about the non-cooperation movement in the light of his own experience of the Swadeshi and engaged Gandhi in a public debate. Gandhi while trying to allay the poet's anxiety also fittingly described him as 'a sentinel warning us against the approach of enemies called Bigotry, Lethargy, Intolerance, Ignorance, Inertia and other members of that brood'.

Rabindranath saw cross-cultural cooperation not only as an answer to imperialism but also as a better historical imperative. He wrote:

The most significant fact of the present age is that all the different races of men have come close together. And again we are confronted with two alternatives. The problem is whether the different groups of people shall go on fighting with one another or find out some true basis of reconciliation and mutual help; whether it will be interminable competition or co-operation.

Rabindranath saw cross-cultural cooperation as a force promoting modernism. In his essay, 'What is Art', written at the same time as his essays on nationalism he writes :

There was a time when human races lived in comparative segregation and therefore the art adventurers had their experience within a narrow range of limits... But today that range has vastly widened, claiming from us a much greater power of receptivity than what we were compelled to cultivate in former ages.

He urged Indian artists not to cultivate cultural bigotry in the name of Indian art and argued that borrowing from other cultures was not a sign of weakness except when you are unable to pay back the debt in your own coin. He asked them to free themselves from the hoarded patrimony of tradition and strike out on their own.

The purpose of art was for him self-expression or more precisely 'the expression of personality' and by personality he meant the intimate and mutually transforming dialogue between individual man and the world. 'If this world were taken away', he wrote, 'our personality would lose its content'. There was in Rabindranath's thinking a reciprocal relation between the personality of the artist and his contact with the world. However, to the artist 'it is not the fact... but its relation to ourselves which is the object of perennial interest'. And, therefore, 'pictures and songs are not merely facts — they are personal facts. They are not only themselves, but ourselves also. They defy analysis and they have immediate access to our hearts'. This is what distinguishes art from science, science deals with the world as objective facts and know it through analysis and art experiences the world as personal facts and know it through emotional empathy.

He made a similar distinction between utility and self-expression while recognising that they tend to meet and mingle at times. Thus, he wrote :

Man cannot help revealing his personality also in the world of use. But there self-expression is not their primary object. In everyday life, when we are mostly moved by our habits, we are economical in our expression; for then our soul-consciousness is at its low level... But when our heart is fully awakened in love, or in other great emotions, our personality is in its flood-tide. Then it feels the longing to express itself for the very sake of expression!

He also called this art for art sake or art free from the claims of necessity. By this he did not indicate the conventional division between functional and non-functional, or between art and craft, or between art with and without social relevance but art based on two opposing ways of relating to the world — one governed by the 'superfluous' in man, the other by his sense of utility. He also made a parallel distinction between creation and construction.

To grasp Rabindranath's understanding of art for art sake it is necessary to see it in opposition to utilitarianism which he considered to be at the root of nationalism and imperialism. Taken in its context he did not mean by it a commitment to formalism. Art as an expression of personality has no place for abstraction or the separation of content and form :

Matter taken by itself, is an abstraction which can be dealt with by science; while manner, which is merely manner, is an abstraction which comes under the law of rhetoric. But when they are indissoluble one, then they find their harmonics in our personality, which is an organic complex of matter and manner, thoughts and things, motives and action.

His philosophical and social thoughts were related to his thoughts about art. So when Rabindranath began to paint around 1924 he was a person who had already thought deeply about art, its role at the present moment in history,

and its ultimate values. He also had the immense insights of a person creative in other art forms. So the only preparation he lacked was technical. And yet his emergence as an artist was totally unexpected for usually artists begin with lessons in techniques and develop a vision as they go along. Rabindranath was thus an aberration to this usual practice. Abanindranath compared his emergence as a painter to a volcanic eruption. So it is common to see it as a product of the unconscious. In a letter to Rothenstein Rabindranath himself wrote, 'Art belongs to the region of intuition, the unconscious, the superfluous'. That his picture making began from turning crossed-out lines in his manuscripts into rhythmic patterns have also encouraged critics to persist with the theory about the unconscious origins of his art.

Without dismissing it entirely two things can be said with certainty. Firstly, he always wanted to be a painter, he expresses this desire in letters written long before he took to painting. When the Vichitra club folded up without making much headway he wrote to his daughter, 'I am no painter myself or I might have shown what had to be done'. Of course this can be interpreted as an involved supporter's response to the failure of his team in the field. But this is not the only time he has expressed such a desire.

In 1893 he wrote to his niece: 'very often I cast looks of longing, after the fashion of a disappointed lover, towards the Muse of Art. But, alas! she is difficult to win, for I am past the age when I could woo her'. And again in 1900, to J.C. Bose :

It will be some surprise to you to hear that I have been painting in a sketch book... The trouble is that my progress is retarded by the exigency of erasing more than I can ever draw — with the result that I have become more an adept with the eraser than with the pencil. So Raphael dead can rest in peace in his grave — at least I shall not be the rival to lower his colours.

So, to sum up, Rabindranath's desire to paint goes back at least to 1893,

and he tried his hand at painting intermittently, declaring himself unfit each time. It is also clear that his archetypal artist being Raphael the idea of art he had at this point was skill based. As long as he persisted with it, as he knew, it was not possible for him to become a painter of substance. So somewhere along the road his concept of art changed, and his earlier efforts, whatever their merit and volume, had nothing to do with his later paintings. The question is, what changed his concept of art? This leads us to the second observation that needs to be made. And it is; Rabindranath had a greater exposure to modern and primitive art than is usually realised and that this exposure played a definite role in changing his concept of art.

His contact with modern western art began with Rothenstein's visit to India in 1910. But his real exposure came in 1913. During March-April 1913 he was in Chicago and visited the Art Institute twice, on the first occasion for a reading of his play *Chitra*, and on the following day to see the Armory show which, with nearly 1600 exhibits, was the first comprehensive exposition of modern art. In June the same year he meets Rodin. Their meeting was arranged at his request, and from a letter of the same year we also learn of his admiration for the sculptor's style. In 1920 after listening to a lecture by Stella Kramrisch in London he invites her to Santiniketan where she arrived at the end of 1921. The next year she delivers a series of forty three lectures on Western Art, from Gothic to Dadaism. Rabindranath not only attended her lectures but for some time also functioned as her translator. In 1921 he visited Franz Chizek at his child art centre in Vienna. During this tour perhaps he also visited Weimar, where Bauhaus was then located. We are not sure on it but it is known that the Bauhaus exhibition at Calcutta in 1922 was arranged at his behest. The catalogue for this exhibition was possibly written by Johannes Itten who was responsible for the basic course at Bauhaus and had an interest in oriental spirituality. He corresponded with Rabindranath and had plans of coming to Santiniketan. It appears he had also written to Rabindranath outlining his pedagogic ideas.

Rabindranath visited galleries and museums in Paris and Germany. He

was also familiar with primitive art, through books definitely, but probably also through visits to ethnographic museums. During his visit to China in 1924 he should have seen ancient Chinese bronze vessels among other things. Some of his paintings strongly suggest this. During his 1926 visit to Europe he met James Frazer and Kathe Kollwitz and paid a visit to Durer's house. And finally among those who helped Victoria Ocampo to organise his first Exhibition in Paris in 1930, was Henri Riviere, a curator at the Museum of Man, and Andre Lhote, cubist painter and critic.

Thus the echoes of modern and primitive art we find in his work were not entirely fortuitous. Even if he did not draw on them consciously but began with semi-automatic doodles, sub-conscious projections and conscious elaboration of these associations followed. His decision to erase whole pages, to turn them into complex, sometimes unified, images and to preserve them already implies artistic intentionality. Doodling becomes a part of his process and he begins to pursue more conscious ends in his later work. A virtuoso in other art forms this should have come naturally to him. This interplay of sub-conscious impulse and conscious nurturing comes out in two of his letters written in 1928. In the first of these he writes :

The subject matter of a poem can be traced back to some dim thought in the mind. Once it leaves the matted crown of Siva, the stream of poetry flows along its measured course — well-defined by its two banks. While painting, the process adopted by me is quite the reverse. First, there is the hint of a line, then the line becomes a form. The more pronounced the form becomes the clearer becomes the pictures of my conception.

And in the second letter, written a few days later, he writes :

I wander about with my eyes open in the world of form where lines crowd upon lines. As I watch the trees, I seem to see so much of them. It is borne on me that this visible world is a vast

procession of forms — not in any emotional, sentimental or intellectual manner, but purely for the sake of assembling different forms together. And strangely enough this has become a source of great joy to me.... The joy in a picture is a joy of a perfect sense of proportion. The restraint of lines makes the picture distinct and definite.

Lines not only revealed forms to him in his doodles but also in the world around. The dialogue this suggests between image making and seeing the world in terms of one's linguistic resources is fundamental to conscious creativity.

To begin with his means was limited to rhythmic articulation of lines. 'The only training which I had from my young days', he wrote, 'was the training in rhythm in thought, the rhythm in sound. I had come to know that rhythm gives reality to that which is desultory'. Thus it was only natural that as a painter he should begin with the rhythmic articulation of simple forms. This gave his early work an Art-Nouveau look. It came from the process but, given his familiarity with both Western and Japanese art, it is an association that he should not have missed noticing. As his technique became more assured and the reach and complexity of his visual language grew his images also became more complex. This meant that his work was not unified in style or approach. The changes we notice in his art are less in the nature of a stylistic evolution and more in the order of shifts from one language level to another — the first is related to attitudinal shifts and the second to linguistic resourcefulness. And as he became more resourceful his personal vision began to find greater expression in his work rendering what similarities with modern and primitive art we notice in the earlier phase less significant within the context of his total oeuvre.

Compared to the changes in his language, small as they are, his inner vision remained nearly changeless. The growing resourcefulness of language however facilitated a freer and more elaborate communication. Central to his

vision is a sense of drama and in his paintings it gets expressed in myriad ways, most obviously in paintings with theatrical grouping of figures. But it also gets expressed in the form of a gesture, in the transformation of a form, in a creature or object caught in the middle of a metamorphosis, in the juxtaposition of men, animals or even trees and sky, in faces that are half caricature and half portrait or half person and half persona or half resemblance and half mask, there is a sense of the theater in all this. And all these images exist half way between the perceived fact and the perceiving mind — they are, in his vocabulary, 'personal facts'.

His experience of painting and his experience of the world as a painter led Rabindranath to reconsider other art forms, the relationship of form to content in each of them, and their true value. As a painter he was compelled to relax his control over his means considerably, he also came to see it as a new freedom from rules, from professionalism. In his critique of nationalism by equating professionalism with nationalism he had already implied the value of non-professionalism. In 'Creative Unity' he wrote, 'the ideal of the nation, like that of the professional man, is selfishness'. He also realized that writing is tied up with language and with change in language it loses its power to communicate and move. Compared to it music and painting are less effected by such changes. 'I often think', he wrote towards the end of his life, 'only painting has a deathless quality'. Painting is more like nature he thought, it is like seeing through the eyes while literature is seeing through language.

The emotions and the messages that come through his work are generally universal but the images are always rooted in specific experiences. A close look would reveal that certain types and images are always related to certain places. The figures he did at Adayar, in Santiniketan, in Lahore, in Baghdad and in Moscow are distinct not only in appearance but also in spirit. Many of these should have grown from the actual people he observed in these places. But his landscapes were all inspired by his experience of Santiniketan at twilight.

Rabindranath saw a relationship between knowing the world as a personal fact, knowing oneself, and seeing the world as a painter. 'The world, while I am perceiving it', he wrote, 'is being incessantly created for myself in time and space'. Thus there exists a relationship between seeing and the consciousness of being or what he called soul-consciousness. 'When we are able fully to make use of our sense-perceptions', he wrote in a letter to Jamini Roy, 'we realize we exist'. Painting 'bears witness to this sense of absolute and perceptible truth of our existence.' Art being a record of a personal fact also means that its images are not generalized, but always concrete. An artist drawing a tree 'looks on that tree as unique, not as the botanist who generalizes and classifies. It is the function of the artist to particularize that one tree', and '...to compel the unperceptive majority to share in his joy of the visible, concrete world — directly perceived'.

Many of his views are in line with the aesthetics of modernism but Rabindranath's concept of personal vision was different from the Western concept of individualism and his concept of cross-cultural mingling was different from the modernist concept of internationalism. He was not arguing for a formalist strait jacketing of world art. What he was arguing for was a non-hierarchic dialogue between cultures which would encourage individual initiative and change but not wipe out all differences. He wrote :

While I agree... that the spirit of the race should harmonize with the spirit of the time. I must warn them that modernising is a mere affectation of modernism... One must bear in mind that those who have the true modern spirit need not modernise, just as those who are truly brave are not braggarts. Modernism is not in the dress of the Europeans in the hideous structures, where their children are interned when they take their lessons; or in the square houses with flat, straight wall surfaces, pierced with parallel lines of windows, where these people are caged in their lifetime; certainly modernism is not in their ladies' bonnets, carrying on them loads of incongruities. These are not modern, but

merely European. True modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European schoolmasters.

He points to the possibility of a free-wheeling dialogue between the individual and the world, between the near and the distant. In his own life we notice the intermingling of the desire to be rooted in the intimate and a wanderlust that compelled him to go out into the world and meet it. He described this using a string of metaphors — connecting his personal disposition with the collective temperament of the Indian people — in a letter written as early as 1893 :

India has two aspects — in one she is a house holder, in the other a wandering ascetic. The former refuses to budge from the home corner, the latter has no home at all. I find both these within me. I want to roam about and see all the wide world, yet I also yearn for a little sheltered nook; like a bird with its tiny nest for a dwelling, and the vast sky for flight.

Benodebehari

Between Nandalal's researches into the linguistic rationale underlying different art traditions and Rabindranath's eclectic modernism — both combining experiential rootedness and contextual relevance with cross-cultural contacts at varying levels — space was opened up by Benodebehari and Ramkinkar. Benodebehari who was already a student at the Santiniketan school in 1917 and when Kala Bhavan started he became one of its first students. Nationalist issues did not find their way into his art. In this he was unlike Nandalal. Referring to his detachment from the national struggle he later wrote :

As a child, I witnessed the Swadeshi movement — processions of people passing along the road, playing on harmonium tied to their waists and singing "*Banga Amar Janani Amar*" (Bengal my

land, my mother); or youth marching by reciting "*Beth mere ki ma bholabi, ami ki mar she chele*" (am I such a son as would be flogged to forget his mother?)... This was part of my childhood experience. The Gandhian movement started from my early youth; under its influence I wore home-spun, gave up cigarettes for *bidis*, even tried a bit to spin on the *takhli*. But nothing more....

During the non-cooperation movement a friend of mine asked me whether I was not ashamed to sit and smear paint on paper in those days of national distress. But I have done precisely that all my life; shamelessly. The fact is that my nature does not let me identify myself with any social responsibility. The recent history of India and Pakistan unrolled before my eyes; there was famine, flood and earth quake. But I could not relate myself with any of these too closely, nor do any paintings based on them.

My objectives have always been around an artist's ultimates — have sought to know myself, and in the process unfold it to others, never forgetting that I am just one amongst the many.

From the outset he also desisted from painting literary and mythological themes. Instead he began with nature and until the 40s he was primarily a painter of landscapes. He saw nature not so much as landscape in the Western sense but as an all encompassing theme as in Far Eastern art. His love for nature was in place even before he came to Santiniketan. He spent most of his boyhood days in rural Bengal, much of it at Pabna which was just across Shelidah on the opposite bank of Padma. Here unable to pursue formal schooling due to a congenital weakness of eyesight, and friendless, nature became his companion. Thus the same aspects of rural Bengal, first at Shelidah and later at Santiniketan, that transformed Rabindranath and Nandalal also became his inspiration. 'Khoai, the sal forest of Surul, the banks of the Kopai river', he wrote, 'these were my standing companions'. Some of his early paintings were based on them.

After nature Nandalal played the most important part in his development. In Nandalal he found an involved teacher and mentor. And in the liberal environment of early Santiniketan alongside honing his skills under Nandalal he also furthered his intellectual interests. He was an avid reader and benefited from his friendship with young scholars and contacts with illustrious teachers both visiting and permanent. Of them a special mention must be made of Stella Kramrisch who took an interest in his work and contributed to his understanding of Indian and Western art. Commenting on this he wrote :

I often wonder who my real teacher was - Nandalal? The library? Or the stark environment of Santiniketan? Without Nandalal I will not have learned my skills, without the library know what I know and without the experience of this stark image of nature painted as I did.

In Santiniketan like many of his contemporaries he was drawn to Far Eastern art but more by temperament than by the prevailing taste for Pan-Asianism. Drawn to Far Eastern art he, even more than Nandalal, began to explore its conventions and formats as part of a perceptual system. Inspired by the pronounced horizontal spread of the Santiniketan landscape he began with the scroll format. As he went ahead and saw that it implied a whole perceptual system, specially with regard to the perception and representation of objects in space. Connected to this was calligraphy or the use of a repertoire of marks which combine like the units of a language to produce a graphic equivalent of the sensed reality. Unlike many of his contemporaries he did not try to learn the specific brush techniques of the Chinese artists or imitate their rendering of certain trademark motifs. Instead he focused on the underlying linguistic rationale and develop a parallel approach that took into account the specialities of the local environment. Both the scroll format and calligraphic representation he realised were complementary elements within a single way of seeing. Together they defined a representational system where form and space were not rigidly demarcated but open and fluid enough to allow an interplay, and give a breathing-animation to the image through the tension between the calligraphic

mark and the object identity.

During the 30s he explored this in a set of scrolls that represented various aspects of the local landscape and, occasionally, rural life. Having internalised the mode of perception implicit in the scroll he attempted a daring improvisation by attempting to realise its values in a mural he did on a ceiling of the Kala-Bhavana hostel. Unrolling to the four ends from the pool at its centre the mural is a comprehensive image of a Birbhum village. With the pond blazing white in the summer light, the earth a deep red, the scrubby trees crowned with green foliage, and sprightly bunches of flowers, dogs, donkeys, monkeys, cows, buffaloes, pigs, ducks, cranes, men and women at work or rest, children at play, hunters and entertainers it is as varied and interwoven as life itself. And as in Far Eastern landscape scrolls the viewer comprehends the mural not as a whole but by moving from one motif to another — leading to a diachronic comprehension of a synchronic presence.

Though Benodebehari's love for nature and to an extent his interest in Far Eastern art were independent of Nandalal, the linguistic approach he brought to bear on it owes much to Nandalal's comparative study of conventions as a part of his exploration of art as visual language. Benodebehari carried this aspect forward both as artist and teacher and tried to relate language to perception, the way of telling or picturing to the way of seeing, more than Nandalal. Despite his intellectual independence Benodebehari shared a community of ideas with Nandalal and in all the major projects Nandalal undertook between 1923 and 1937 (including the *Haripura* decorations) Benodebehari was his chief assistant. In many respects they were artists engaged in a dialogue, and, though he did not collaborate in the later projects in the later years Benodebehari came closer to Nandalal in his precepts than ever before.

But before we proceed to discuss his later works it needs to be said that in his early career a proclivity towards expressionism ran parallel to his interest in the Far East, in fact even preceded it a little. His was not a confessional or autographic sort of expressionism but a restrained projection of inner feelings,

a projection that wrapped things up in a mood without deviating from representational objectivity. Stella Kramrisch called it 'the impersonal pathos'. After the 40s this continued mainly in his prints, specially in the woodcuts that remind us of the German Expressionists. But this aspect of his personality became progressively sublimated — with his contact with Nandalal, the study of Far Eastern art and aesthetics, and his intellectual maturity contributing to it. And in terms of his aesthetic theory he explained this transformation thus :

We may say that art holds together the extremes of the visible and the invisible, the objective and the abstract by a kind of magnetic power. The objective part of art that we see, hear or touch is subject to language and technique. But that part that leads it to abstraction comes from the fire of the artist's heart.

And a little further in the same essay he writes :

Art grows out of the emotional impulses diverse sensations of shape and gesture generate in us, in this bright and colourful world..

The expression moves from emotional impulse to mood, from mood to aesthetic beauty. An artist's creation cannot attain its full stature until it brings into harmony his experience of reality and his mind's emotional bias.

These thoughts also find visual expression in a self portrait from the early 30s now in the Kala Bhavan museum (not in the exhibition). It shows him seated at the far end of his studio totally engrossed in his work. The tools of his craft and the objects in the foreground — including the large cane chair that politely blocks our way in — are rendered with a craftsman's care that borders on reverence. The figure of the artist by the open window is both deeply engrossed in his work and in harmony with the world outside, and both these contribute to the sense of peace that pervades the image. It is the image of an

artist craftsman and a philosopher — recluse rolled into one. And in image and spirit it reminds us of Durer's St. Jerome.

Painted in 1932 his painting the Tree Lover is the portrait of a kindred spirit, of a teacher at Santiniketan who had made it his mission to plant and nurture trees. In his vegetal corpulence and naturalness he stands like an icon framed by the flowering *simul*. He like the artist is in harmony with nature and yet they are different. His simplicity is closer to that the peasant while by comparison Binodebehari represents in his self-portrait the urbane simplicity of a man of culture.

The culmination of his interest in Far Eastern art was a self-financed visit to Japan and China during 1936-37. This gave him the opportunity to see the works of the old masters first-hand and to interact with the contemporary artists. On his return he began to do tree and flower pieces — on silk, Nepali paper, and on silver and gold boards. Though small in size they show a certain influence of Japanese screens. The motifs — a tree or a flowering branch — are usually part-objects or 'fragments' of nature, and they are neither landscapes nor still-lives in the Western sense.

After the ceiling mural, Benodebehari turns to figure and narration, specially in his murals. In 1942 while Nandalal was painting his *Natir Puja* at the Cheena Bhavana Benodebehari did a mural on the walls of its stair well depicting vignettes of campus life knit together with visual surprises and wit. Like Nandalal in the mural downstairs Benodebehari too uses the organisational values of Japanese screens. This was followed by his magnum opus the mural he did in the Hindi Bhavana in 1946-47. Painted in what used to be its library the central figures in this mural are the Bhakti saints who contributed seminally to the growth of Hindi literature, but he weaves them into a grand pageant of figures that cover three walls and gives us a vision of a composite culture with many strands. Beginning with self-denying seekers and progressing to the system builders, to the great unorthodox leaders of the Bhakti movement and its militant reformers the mural leads us on to the village with

its nameless bards, progressing like a river with life on its banks swelling and becoming more varied as it moves ahead.

Done in fresco without the aid of cartoons it is a *tour de force* and one of the landmarks of modern Indian art. Its images are drawn from different sources and its style is eclectic. While carrying forward the comparative study of conventions that Nandalal initiated Benodebehari always tried to explore the possible contact-points between different conventions. In the Hindi Bhavana mural elements drawn from Giotto, Pallava reliefs, Jain miniatures, *Pats*, Chola bronzes, Persian miniatures, Far Eastern calligraphic scrolls and Japanese screens exist side by side, with their idioms fully reconciled within the eclectic whole.

At the end of 1948 Benodebehari left Santiniketan and went to Nepal where he worked as the curator of the government museum at Kathmandu for the next two years. Living like a Taoist self-exile in a country where the medieval world was still lingering he came into contact with an art scene where the art/craft divide was very thin and craftsmen were often remarkably individualist. This led him to appreciate Nandalal's vision of an art/craft continuum in individual practice more than ever before. Following this he tried to reconcile the classical and the folk in his work, with his efforts in this direction culminating in the mural he did at Vanasthali. But we can see such a leaning in his works from 1948, and thus the Nepal experience was more of a catalyst that helped him to realise fully ideas which were already beginning to take shape before he left India. But in the works he did subsequent to his stay in Nepal there is also an attempt to reconcile the calligraphic and the folk with the modern, specially the post-Cubist.

Restaurant and the *Garden* (which also reminds us of Dufy) demonstrate this. What distinguishes these and other works from the early 50s from the work of other modern artists who evoke the folk is its deceptively simple but calculated use of terminological ambivalence. In this his work also goes beyond the *Haripura* posters.

Benodebehari's is not an art of impression but of extreme precision. Representation meant for him a definite inscription not an evocation of effects. His calligraphic idiom can give us a sense of spontaneity. But on closer look it is not difficult to realise how different it is, every mark is a well considered notation in space and a false note is a rare thing in his work. When it occurred he preferred to begin afresh rather than salvage it — he also advised his students to do so. The process of painting for him was not a process of approximation through making and correction, but a one-shot performance. In this his approach is similar to that of the Indian musician but this is not surprising in a truly calligraphic artist. He was acutely sensitive to spatial values and painting for him was an act of defining a space on a surface as much as delineating objects.

After returning from Nepal Benodebehari was keen to set up a centre and put his new ideas into practice. Towards the end of 1951 he moved to Mussoorie and started what he called 'Benodebehari Mukherjee's Training Centre of Art and Craft'. The effort was to develop a training programme for students and teachers in which art, craft and art history could go hand in hand. It was his way of rethinking the Kala-Bhavana experiment. This however proved short-lived and he moved to Patna with a brief to reorganise the art college there.

During his stay at Mussoorie he once again turned to landscape mostly featuring mountains enveloped in mist or revealing all their dramatic undulations and spatial twists. His images of mountains were different from Nandalal's in the way they considered space. Nandalal seldom saw it as a barrier — except from close by — but always with the valleys as one large stretch of undulating surface folding in and opening out. The mountains added a rhythm to his articulation of land as the waves did to the articulation of water. His landscapes are thus panoramic views to be viewed from a vantage point with long, caressing, gliding movements of the eye. Benodebehari by contrast paints as one walking through the mountains. Nothing is smooth here, the space is vast but not a continuous surface unfolding lyrically, the eyes shoot from peak

to peak, but spatial cleavages separate them. The hills are not always connected by valleys, they periodically end in deep chasms. The space is dramatised on the one hand and structured on the other. Distance is always a mental construct for Benodebehari, conjoining the experience of physical movement with details of objects seen from near. This also explains why there is no atmosphere in his landscapes. The only exceptions being the few landscapes he did in Mussoorie showing the mountains wrapped in mist and these are also his only works in which the ephemeral finds a place.

Recall now begins to play a greater role in his oeuvre. Many of his Mussoorie landscapes were painted in Patna. Nepal and Santiniketan also kept reappearing, though, unlike Nandalal, he never repeated his older images. With his declining eyesight there was an upsurge of nostalgia, Benodebehari himself wrote in the preface to his memoir: 'The closer a man approaches his end the more he recalls his past; in other words, he looks for himself in the world of memory'. He was not old yet, but an end was approaching.

In 1957 after an unsuccessful operation he became blind and the next year he returned to Santiniketan and began to teach art history. It should have been a great setback but blindness did not stop him from remaining creative, it helped him to draw on his inner resources more fully and experience and express a new realisation. The contemplative and recollective aspect of his work method came to the fore. Freed from the distraction of matching the image with reality visually it became possible to focus on the inner vision and its material actualisation, an important part of the creative process that usually goes unfocused.

Blindness meant for him knowing the world by body contacts and movement, and creating through gesture and the physical remodelling of (or shall we say grappling with) materials. From 1957 to until the late 70s he continued to do drawings, lithographs, paper cuts and sculptures in this manner. He also did a mural in 1972 consisting of figures done in folded paper and made permanent in ceramic tiles. Naturally his themes came mostly from

his inner store of images and many recall his earlier work but the recalled motifs are always reinterpreted in terms of his new work process, thus bringing into focus the innate relation between the mode of knowing and the mode of expressing. Since he could manipulate colour only from memory he had to limit himself to standardised and mass produced colour papers but paradoxically this made his paper cuts the most colourful of his works. His late works are therefore the products of a dialogue between inner vision and outer perception — both at the level of creativity and its reception.

As one always deeply interested in theoretical and literary issues, and one who possessed a contemplative bend of mind, Benodebehari now turned to writing in a bigger way. He re-read the classics and wrote about them, he also wrote on art and art education, and above all wrote biographical and literary pieces of rare sensitivity.

'Whatever is significant in my life', he wrote, 'has found expression in my painting; so without seeing my painting no one can know my life's essence'. The general impression his paintings produce is one of detachment, introspection and tranquility — the qualities we also noticed in his self-portrait in the Kala Bhavan collection. Yet this picture of Benodebehari is partial, these surely where the values he sought to acquire, his aesthetic and ethical goals, but an aloofness lurks behind the engrossed artist. Behind the calmness of the Taoist-recluse simmers the inner loneliness of the exile. But this inner drama does not leap out and make visible at first viewing, it yields itself slowly and suggestively, not as an intimate confession — he is too reticent and self-conscious to do that — but like a nameless inner agitation that we might sense through a veil of placid exterior in a friend.

However, he brings these two aspects of his personality and their inner conflict into scrutiny in his literary works from the early 70s. In Kattamosai he evokes the image of an artist engaged in 'self-less endeavour'. He remains oblivious of everything including his friends and those who come to bestow fame and immortality. He learns to ignore permanence and discovers that the

difference between the existent and non-existent is rubbed out by action. But this does not come naturally to him and self-doubt persists. His inner conflict takes the form of a dialogue between fate and him, and in part it runs as follows:

'If my entire name is wiped out what will remain? What will I be then?'

'I can't answer your question. Among God's creations you cannot understand one thing on the example of another. Such questions have to be figured out by each one for oneself. You do not seem to have thought about all these'.

'Where have I had the time? My whole life has passed in making all these things'.

'Your figures have no names. How will people recognise them? They don't resemble God's creations. Neither are they just paper or lumps of wax, still you cannot deny their unique existence. If this is so for them, why are you worried for yourself?'

'How do you say that they are nameless? All these are distinct from other things because of a name. If all names are wiped out there will be no rationale for creation. Then everything will be uniform. May be there are certain supreme laws or may be there aren't. But I work with name and form. Where everything is uniform I get nervous'.

'But your creations are a composite of the lawful and the lawless. They have attained timelessness on the borders of uniformity'.

There is a second image that could also be placed beside his painted self-portrait as a counterpoint the image of Kirtikar nursing an inner wound in one of his stories. He compares Kirtikar, with his inner wound, to a glass that has not broken into pieces after a fall but has merely developed a crack. The narrator tells us, 'How he came to this he never explained in words; but his look and gesture told their own indirect story'. He then proceeds to narrate a story that Kirtikar once told him, of an enormous tree that once grew in a

desert, a tree that for all its form and grace and beauty did not have any peace at heart. The tree kept calm during the day but was not so sure in the dark night. The tree, its roots eaten by weevils, falls and disappears without a trace. When he completes his story Kirtikar asks, 'Do you get the message?', and answers it himself: 'All these things around us are meaningless and do not last. The only thing that lasts is the barren space'.

For Benodebehari a tree in a barren space was a personal symbol, a self-image. In an interview, also from the early 70s, he told Satyajit Ray: 'Khoai and a solitary palm tree in it. That is it. My spirit, my life's essence, if you find it anywhere it is here'.

Ramkinkar

Ramkinkar came to Santiniketan in 1925. It was the posters and the portraits of nationalist leaders he made during the non-cooperation movement that led to his talent being noticed by the local nationalists, including Ramananda Chatterjee who brought him to Santiniketan. In his involvement with nationalism he was closer to Nandalal than Benodebehari. Again, unlike Benodebehari, he was more open to the influences of Abanindranath and Nandalal in his early years. During his pre-Santiniketan years — besides what he did for the Congress — he also did drop-curtains for the local theater, portraits of family and friends, and a few paintings influenced by popular taste. These were mostly in oils but after coming to Santiniketan he began to do highly finished wash paintings depicting both romantic and mythological themes, and some of the latter were influenced by the work Nandalal did soon after his visit to Ajanta. Thus he was talented but highly impressionable. As Benodebehari has observed when he came to Santiniketan Ramkinkar already had all the skill an artist needs, the only thing he was left to acquire was discrimination and direction.

Ramkinkar is often described as the first artist in Santiniketan to use oil paint and do distinctly modern and abstract work. However, it would be more accurate to say that though in the early 20s many in Santiniketan learned

the technique of oil painting from Andree Karpeles it took roots in Kala Bhavan only after Ramkinkar and some of his contemporaries began to use it in the 30s. Similarly before Ramkinkar came Stella Kramrisch had lectured on Modern Art at length, Rabindranath had started painting, and there were already books and reproductions of modern art in the Library. So the ground was prepared and the climate was congenial for the kind of work Ramkinkar began to do in the mid-30s.

His interaction with Nandalal and Benodebehari helped Ramkinkar to find his direction. During the early years the three met daily at a wayside tea shop and discussed art over cups of tea, both Benodebehari and Ramkinkar have described these discussions as seminal. A theater enthusiast from his pre-Santiniketan days Ramkinkar also found Nandalal's costume and stage designs remarkable, and inspired him to experiment with stage, costume and direction. He was also infected by Benodebehari's interest in literature and the two often got together with a few students for joint readings that included recent Indian and Western literature. K.G. Subramanyan remembers reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* to him on one such occasion. Russian realists and Bernard Shaw were his particular favourites. And these, it can be seen, helped him to develop his own responses to the modern movements.

Until the early 30s he worked more or less in tandem with Benodebehari, often painting the same motifs and sharing the same concerns. A work like *Kali* (the figure of Santhal woman draped in yellow) marks the beginning of a more personal vision. It still carries the romantic resonance of the Bengal school, it even looks a little like a blown up wash painting, but its size and its realism strike a new note. This becomes clearer in paintings like *Golden Crop* and *Santhal Family*. These images being more rooted in reality their romanticism is more nuanced and subsumed to the representation of life's vitality and its small pleasures. Santhal life as a subject matter had antecedents in the work of both Nandalal and Benodebehari. However there was a marked difference in Ramkinkar's approach.

In Nandalal not only the Santhals but human subject matter in general was seen as a part of the larger reality of nature, and the human figure was shown in close-up or represented monumentally only when man assumed a larger than life role as in myths or history. A striking example of this is his 1930 fresco. *Halakarshan*, where Tagore as ploughman appears surrounded by villagers, including Santhals. The earliest representation of the figure in Benodebehari are the sixteen panels he painted in the niches of the Santoshalaya in 1925 depicting scenes from Santhal life. What distinguishes Ramkinkar is not chronological precedence but that for him the Santhals represent the archetypal man, and that man stands in the foreground of his vision of life. Being no introvert or recluse, unlike Nandalal and Benodebehari, we find him responding to the Santhal's natural zest for life, and take a greater interest in the human figure, its body language, and in the human drama in general.

Ramkinkar did not share Nandalal's and Benodebehari's enthusiasm for Far Eastern art — perhaps because it was essentially a painterly tradition. Modern Western art and pre and post-classical Indian art were his main points of reference. Knowledge of traditional Indian sculpture and contact with visiting Western sculptors were decisive in his development as a sculptor. The first to come was Liza Von Pott, an Austrian sculptor. She was followed by Marguerite Milward and a British sculptor called Bateman. Milward who was a student of Bourdelle was perhaps the most important, incidentally she was also an early admirer of Rabindranath's paintings and suggested that he exhibit them in Paris. Ramkinkar's assimilation of the Rodinesque tradition is best seen in one of his early *Mithuna* images and in *Hunter*, one of the three large reliefs he did on the mud building at Santiniketan called Shyamali. The latter was based on a small maquette by Bourdelle gifted by Milward to the Kala Bhavan museum. This and the other reliefs on Shyamali depicting life-size Santhal figures that fill the entire panel represent not only a thematic preference but also a growing commitment to realism. They dramatize the shift from the Bengal school that Santiniketan began to represent in the 30s.

Ramkinkar's reliefs on the Shyamali were some of his first important

environmental work. The tall and poised *Sujata* was also done about the same time. Its romanticism is comparable with that of *Kali*. He conceived it as a sculptural response to the tall, slim figure of Jaya Appasamy who was then a student at Santiniketan. Nandalal, Ramkinkar tells us, gave it a narrative twist by adding a small pot and transforming her into Sujata carrying payas to the nearby image of Buddha by Rudrappa Hanji — however, Ramkinkar accepted this literary conceit and when Rudrappa's clay image broke he remodelled it in cement. But the reliefs on the Shyamali and other contemporary paintings show that he was on the way to curing himself of such literary romanticism.

These were followed by his first monumental sculpture the *Santhal Family* (1938). It was based on a small clay piece he had done before he left for a short stint at the Modern School in Delhi at the end of 1932 and which was salvaged and repaired by Nandalal who found it in a broken state. Nandalal himself used the motif in his *Road to Bolpur* done in 1934. But in 1938 when Ramkinkar gave it a monumental scale it took on a new dimension that went beyond that of a genre. It was both a landmark in modern Indian sculpture and arguably one of his greatest achievements. He was merely thirty two and he was already a master, little wonder that Benodebehari considered him the genius among them.

Such an imposing presence of the figure conjoined with such restraint, such a combination of realism and emotional empathy was not achieved in any of his later monumental sculptures. The technique was innovative and in the Santiniketan tradition of employing local materials advantageously. He worked combining the skills of a modeller and a carver, and made the cement and lateritic-gravel mix suggest the sensuousness of flesh and the structural strength of stone. These massive and slow moving figures originally made by the side of a mud road with clusters of reeds around and seen against an uncluttered space had a solemn presence. He always considered the surroundings when he planned his outdoor sculptures and his work gained in nuances from it, but since the environment is no more the same these original effects can now be grasped only from old photographs.

The decade between 1935 and 1945 was one of the most fruitful periods in Ramkinkar's career. As already noticed during 1935 - 38 his works veered around Santhal life and, in quite a few, around the family. In them man and women appear as equals — as they indeed are among the Santhals — full of self-respect, and in close contact with nature. These are the most positive and peaceful images of life Ramkinkar ever produced. On a more universal plane and in a more abstract idiom he explored similar ideas in a series of Mithunas begun in the early 30s. This brings to the fore the question of the relation between abstraction and realism in his work. That some of the *Mithunas* slightly preceded the more realistic reliefs on Shyamali and the *Santhal Family* and that the *Santhal Family* was in turn succeeded by other abstract sculptures suggest that he did not see realism and abstraction in a teleological or evolutionary relationship but as alternate modes; and this we see was also the way he looked at modern styles as a whole. While his works are realistic they are not realistic in the Western sense. The movements of his figures are imbued with a rhythmic quality alien to Western realistic sculpture but characteristic of Indian murals and sculptures. By overlaying Western representational values with Indian rhythmic animation he produces works that are realist in attitude but not quite so in style. This was the sculptural equivalent to the post-impressionist technique he used in his paintings from the mid-30s.

Both his sculptures and paintings during the mid-30s were rooted in factual reality and stamped by his subjective sensibility. In the late 30s they were followed by a series of post-Cubist, post-Futurist works showing birds in flight against a landscape, or trees and houses fused into a composite image focusing more on the structure and movement underlying the scene than on individual objects. These drawings were done in black and white and therefore have a pronounced structural quality. On the one hand they led him onto one of his first abstract environmental sculpture the *Lamp Stand* (1940) and a few smaller abstract sculptures, and on the other to a group of post-Cubist paintings. *The Pond*, *Mother* and *Mother and Child* belong to the latter group and remind us of Picasso's post-Cubist works from the mid-30s which he seems to have known through the issues of Cahiers d'art.

The Pond is based on a drawing made during a Kala Bhavan excursion and shows a pond seen through a tent and a medley of elements, including figures and trees, combined into a complex and composite graphic configuration. While the objects lose in volume they become part of an intricate drawing in space achieved through a dissolution of Cubist facets. *Mother* is a post-Cubist image with a metaphorical and Surrealist twist. The emotional overtones takes on a more Expressionist dimension and the surrealist insight becomes more unsettling in *Mother and Child* where an image of 'endearment and love', as Subramanyan says is 'turned into one of undisguised violence; showing the new preying on the old'. In these paintings his natural optimism and *joie de vivre* for the first time yields to a murkier vision.

The source of this growing darkness was the Second World War and the Bengal Famine of 1943. Ramkinkar was deeply troubled by these developments and they once again awakened his social concerns and prompted him to express them through his works. This led him to transform facts into metaphors and individual events into general symbols. *Yogin's Death* and *After the Storm* (both not in the exhibition) are representative of his work at this point. Yogin was found dead in his tea-shop which was frequented by Ramkinkar, Benodebehari and Nandalal and Ramkinkar while mourning his death in a painting transformed the image of dead Yogin — his body dry and bony as the rickety structure of his shop, painted in tones of elegiac blue and tender pink — into an archetypal image of suffering and death. *After the Storm* is also based on the metaphorical reading of a factual event. It was painted in the wake of a storm that left behind a trail of destruction. Ramkinkar read into this experience of natural fury and destruction an analogous vision of destruction by man's inhumanity. In the painting on a grey ground that evokes soaked earth seen in the morning light he painted a human skeleton white and flattened like the petals of a flower pressed between the pages of a book. These images are poetic and moving, and suggest a reawakening of his romanticism along with his social concerns.

The figurative and the abstract were the two poles of his art. Though the

two in many ways represent opposing tendencies in art Ramkinkar used both to express a common theme — the vigour and vitality of man. His sculptures relate to an Indian tradition that runs from Karle to Sanchi, and, after bypassing the classical, continues through Ellora to Konarak — a long tradition devoted to the celebration of the human body that moves from the contained vigour of the primitive to the exuberance of the baroque. His sculptures also relate in equal measure to the modern Western development running from Rodin through Epstein, to a post-Cubist like Duchamp Villon. While the Western sculptors connected the development of abstraction to progressive dehumanisation Ramkinkar rejoined it with the organic and the human.

Reconciling the two was central to his vision and work process up to the late 40s after which their counterpulls become somewhat disruptive. Among his sculptures one of the last works where the two are held in a fruitful tension is his small but powerful Gandhi. Done immediately after his assassination it shows Gandhi as a man striding triumphantly through a crumbling world. He saw Gandhi as a moving colossus, a whirlwind of action.

Human interest and post-Cubist abstraction are also held in a rewarding balance in *Shifting Generations* which can be read as an allegory on the existential predicament of man, specially of the toiling man. The uncared child in the foreground, the labour-couple in the middle and the suspended skeleton behind allegorise the absurd progress of life. Though the painting is clearly allegorical it was occasioned by a skeleton dug up from a construction site in Santiniketan and thus born of an actual event. The allegorical co-implicitness of life and death finds a visual analogue in his post-Cubist interplay of definite lines and ambivalent planes which he develops into a visual hide and seek in the picture.

His themes became explicitly social after this and his images of the Santhals more monumental. But popular as they are they do not have the same contact with life of his earlier works. They are charged more by ideology than by perception, and more by pre-disposition than experience. His *Thresher* (1950)

for instance looks like a pneumatic figure, almost monstrous compared to his sculpture *Harvester* or the sensuously elegant figure in the even earlier *Golden Crop*. There is something unreal about its heroic monumentality, its exaggeration is comparable with that of socialist realism. This is also true of *Maternity* and his variations on *Mill Call* (1956-57). An ideological imprint is also visible in some of his overtly allegorical paintings like the *Birth of Krishna* and *In the Castle*. In his early work the primary value of the subject matter always came from experience and the symbolic was only an additional value. But in *Birth of Krishna* the subject matter is clearly symbolic and the sole reason for its choice. With the literary significance of the theme becoming more important than the visual experience of the image his Cubism became an academic device, a grid, that pegs the figures in a space to which it has no organic relation. This is even more true of *In the Castle*, the superimposition of images used in it is a literary rather than a Cubist device, it is more closer to post-Expressionist montage than to Cubist collage.

What is problematic is not choosing to be literary but continuing to use Cubist devices that do not readily lend itself to involved narration. But this was not Ramkinkar's problem alone but of a generation of artists, who began as post-Cubists and then in the wake of the Second World War turned to Expressionist and more socially committed art. It is significant in this context that in 1950 he exhibited at the Salon de Realite Nouvelle. But the painter with whom he can be best compared is Renato Guttuso, the Italian artist who like Ramkinkar began as a post-Cubist but after World War-II turned to figurative and allegorical painting as an artist strongly committed to social issues. For both of them this came with an ideological commitment to the left, though with differences of degree. And both oscillated between two stylistic ideals represented by Picasso — specially in *Guernica* — and socialist realism. Ramkinkar's *Birth of Krishna* compares with Guttuso's reworking of Gericault's *Raft of Medusa* or *Crucifixion*, Ramkinkar's *In the Castle* and *Woman with Cup* can be compared with Guttuso's representation of Sicilian peasants occupying land and *Spagetti Eater*. And both painted post-Cubist abstract work in tandem with these. The question of compatibility of Cubism and allegory has been

raised also in connection with Picasso, specially with reference to *Guernica*. However, the central problem in *Guernica*, as Max Raphael points out, is that of the polyvalence of his symbols which lead to equally plausible but conflicting interpretations of every detail that finally compels us to suspend judgement. This is not Ramkinkar's problem, the thematic and political meaning of his images are not only clear but even obvious.

Ramkinkar's problem is his attempt to conflate figuration and extreme abstraction within the same structure as in *Tender Seedling* and *Festive Eve* or to use the two styles alternately as different containers for the same theme as in *Mill Call* and the related paintings. While the first two with the tenuous relation their figures have to the tapestry of colours onto which they are inscribed points towards *Guernica* (a more obvious reference to which is seen in *Atmoic Venom*) *Mill Call* and most of the related paintings with the symmetrical disposition of the limbs, the repetition of rhythms and the Baroque sense of movement point towards socialist realist sculptures. Although in *Mill Call* this is overlaid with a sensuous quality derived from Indian antecedents in the related paintings the socialist realist elements predominate. A more direct reference to socialist realist imagery can be seen in the preliminary drawings (1958) for *The Birth of Fire* (1966) which show a man and a woman standing symmetrically holding a torch in their raised hands. However in the finished work while adopting the figures to the pedimental shape (marrying socialist image to classical composition) the original reference was almost lost.

Despite all his socialist commitment Ramkinkar was essentially an artist who worked for himself. And although he did so many monumental sculptures in Santiniketan on his own initiative he was never successful with commissions. A commission might trigger the exploration of a particular idea but the outcome was often not works leading to the final image and the final image was not necessarily more engaging than the studies. The many studies for the *Yaksha* and *Yakshi* demonstrate this. Conversely a painting like *At the Foot of the Arakan Hills* — done much after the studies and maquette for the proposed statue of Subhas Bose — shows how even after a commission fell

through he continued to be engaged with a theme.

We also see the same spirit in his portraits. All his major portraits were done during the 30s and 40s when representation and personal vision were more focused than social concern. His first portraits were conventional but he soon began to take them beyond likeness by projecting a personal response into them and giving them an image presence. He was inspired by Rodin and Epstein but his own innovations are often comparable to those of Matisse and Picasso.

His portraits from the outset had an Expressionist underpinning and subsequent to his assimilation of Cubism he moved towards a post-Cubist and post-Surrealist Expressionism. Thus his development as a portraitist followed his general development as an artist and it can be exemplified with *Ganguli* (1936) *Preeti Pande* (1939) and *Abarani-II* (1942). *Ganguli*'s head emerging out of an abstract vortex of forces formed by the folds of his shawl is modelled with an Expressionist urgency. In contrast to this gestural extravagance *Preeti Pande* has a clipped and compact body-line. The anatomical units are marked out without the excessive focus we find in *Ganguli* and resynthesised with a greater plastic articulation employing Cubist principles, not allowing the exuding sensuality to burst into expressive violence or the formal structure to suppress it. The suffused sensuality we see in this portrait runs through many of his works including the almost contemporary painting *Picnic*, and the small sculpture *Perambulator*, and the mid-50s painting *Summer Afternoon*. It acquires more pronounced erotic and surrealist overtones in *Abarani-II* comparable to what we have already noticed in *Mother and Child*. *Abarani* is more thoroughly dissected than *Preeti Pande*, the excesses are further lopped off and the parts — nose, forehead, eyes, jaws, arms, rib-cage and breasts — are given a near autonomous completeness and reassembled with a freedom that makes it something of a sculptural collage. As a portrait it conveys psychological penetration more than semblance. The Surrealist insight it brings to the perception of the human form considerably undermines the Cubist call to formal order and transforms the portrait into an icon of primeval eros. The post-Cubist,

post-Surrealist dismantling of the head makes *Abarani* comparable to Matisse's *Jeannette* series and Picasso's *Bisgeloup* heads, but it represents an extreme point where portrait gains in expressive and revelatory power but almost destroys the objectivity of the model. Viewed from this point *Mathura Singh*, voluptuous as a *Yakshi*, is his counter-point to *Abarani*.

A similar comparison can be drawn between his two portraits of Rabindranath. The first which he called *The Poet* (1938) is actually a symbolic portrait where the features are subjected to analogical and metaphorical transformations which are more literary than visual and not always in harmony with the physiological logic of the head. The second portrait done two years later began as a realist bust with hands done from life but was transformed radically and completed without the model. The final version with its broad taunt shoulders and thoughtfully bowed head rising from a ravaged bust (now without hands) is a virile monolith. It is not a representation of Rabindranath as he appeared in his last days or a smooth-faced idol of the famous man but the image of a remarkably creative man standing face to face, at the end of his life, with what he reckoned to be a 'crisis in civilisation'. This *Rabindranath* is a counterpoint to his Gandhi and he had once thought of doing a monumental double portrait of the duo.

It was usual for him to arrive at the final image after many cancellations and to finish the portrait without the model. For him it was a means of arriving at the appropriate equation between the objectivity of appearance and the subjectivity of experience. And each portrait was for him a different concretization of the artist-model interaction, and each encounter — regulated by admiration, intimacy, passion or awe — a particular gradient of intersubjectivity. It is difficult to view any of his portraits without becoming aware of this. In this respect his painted portraits *Soma Joshi* (Girl with Dog), *Swapnamoyi*, and *Binodini* deserves special mention (The first and the third are in this exhibition). *Soma Joshi* — rotund, beady-eyed and doll-faced, seated beneath a flowering bower, book in hand, pet dog by her side, the curves of her body echoing the surrounding plants and flowers — is a symbol of cultured

bliss. In contrast to her *Binodini* (in Subramanyan's words) is 'an image of soft perplexity, a female Hamlet'.

Her ambivalence comes partly from the strange disjunction between her hands — suspended in mid-air like probing tentacles — and the reared head beaming passion. Though charged by the same emotion they seem to be acting in mutual oblivion. Similarly while she pins down the artist/ viewer with her pointed and aggressive glance her body is in turn compressed, flattened and unfolded side-ways like a fan. From a number of associated drawings and independent water colours of Binodini it is possible to see how her image turned from that of a passive and sensuous odalisque into an aggressive and tense *femme fatale*. This is one of his most personal portraits and it can be read as a condensed history of the artist-model encounter. And how it differs from fantasy can be seen by comparing it with a small etching which is now called the *Artist and the Model* but he had titled *Comrade*.

Ramkinkar's water colours stand a little apart from the rest of his oeuvre. They represent his immediate response to visual facts and are free from pre-concepts and after thoughts. The medium and his work process contributed to this considerably. They were done on the spot and with great speed and often came in a series recording a perception or experience close on its heels. Occasionally when an oil painting is done on the basis of a water colour the difference is readily noticed. A comparison of *Summer Afternoon* with *Rest*, the water colour on which it was based, is a particularly instructive example. In his water colours an unregulated expression of his sensibility comes through, in them Ramkinkar can be said to be chasing the transient. Even where the image is reminiscent of an earlier work the momentariness gets focused. In *Lady with Pitcher* for instance the woman emerging out of the pond carrying a pot of water on her hip and a lotus leaf in her free hand, and seen from behind, resembles one of his pre-Santiniketan paintings on the one hand and certain popular realist works by artists like Hemendranath Majumdar on the other. But in the water colour version of the motif its sensuality and romanticism are rendered subtler. By introducing a duck diving into the water from which she is

emerging our focus is shifted from the body as a sensuous object made available for eternal contemplation to its perception as an element in a momentary experience. The water colours are Ramkinkar's equivalents to Nandalal's sketches on cards and taken together they form a visual diary.

It is also in the water colours that his response to nature is best expressed. Though he was a man who spent a lot of time under the open sky this does not come out clearly in his oil paintings and sculptures where he is more preoccupied with human drama. In the water colours nature dominates and he is more closer to Nandalal and Benodebehari. Besides Santiniketan they also include images of Shillong, Rajgir, Gaya, Nepal, Kulu, Puri and the various other places he visited. And they show nature in different moods, and each motif and mood is rendered in a distinct manner.

His Cezannesque landscapes are a case in point. Associated primarily with the mountains, specially of Nepal, the motifs seems to have played a role in the development of this style. It gave him an opportunity to explore landscape as a structured space constructed from imbricated facets that both unites the scene and holds it on to the surface. The graphic emphasis in these probably stem from the fact that he knew Cezanne's paintings mainly through black and white reproductions where the edges get emphasised. This is also true of his post-Cubist water colours where the motifs are primarily trees or landscape with trees. Incidentally these are also the water colours that come closest to his oils.

The importance of the graphic element suggests that for all their uniqueness of execution his water colours are a variation on the style developed by Nandalal combining flat colour with linear accent. While Benodebehari gave a calligraphic quality to the linear accents Ramkinkar transformed the calligraphic stroke into an almost arabesque flourish. Some of his earlier water colours have a calligraphic quality of sorts but this becomes an idiosyncratic linear scroll in his later works. But even at his most idiosyncratic he exhibits great virtuosity. He often gives spatial depth to a landscape with a whip lash

line across the sky, or suggest a wealth of details with a dab or two, or give a sense of life with a few sprightly strokes. Unlike Benodebehari he was a master of suggestion. His works were based on facts but for him representation was a quick approximation rather than a meticulous inscription. However, his touches are well placed and show a great sense of spacing, more intuitive than Benodebehari's but almost equally judicious.

To Ramkinkar his painting was like the world seen in daylight. He compared it to a beautiful garden or the smiling face of a child seen in the light of the day, and his sculptures to the experience of a father who feels the body of his son in the darkness of night and presses it close to his body. Compared to his sculptures and oils Ramkinkar's water colours are the purest of his daylight vision of beauty; pure visual opulence.

The Shared Perspectives

This brief survey of the individual works of the core Santiniketan artists and the thought perspectives they open up makes clear that though there were various contact points in the work they were not bound by a continuity of style but by a community of ideas. Which they not only shared but also interpreted and carried forward. Thus they do not represent a school but a movement.

Primary among the ideas they shared was the belief in the need for a renaissance by which they understood a comprehensive rethinking not a revival of the past in form or spirit. Such a rethinking was necessary because on the one hand the historical context had changed and on the other it was only through a rethinking of the basic issues from time to time that art can remain in contact with reality. They also understood that such rethinking held the key to modernism and that the new developments in art concept and practice, we call modernism, have to be contextual or related to history and environment.

This meant that they reviewed traditional antecedents in relation to the new avenues opened up by cross-cultural contacts. They also saw it as a historical imperative. Cultural insularity they realised has to give way to eclecticism and cultural impurity. 'We belong to the age of *guruchandali*' (a hybrid of Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit) wrote Benodebehari. And he was speaking for all of them. They also realised that this eclecticism should not be limited to hybrid style but one nurtured by local experience. 'I do not know what I am doing is modern or not, but it is based on my experience', said Ramkinkar. The centrality of experiential reality was one of the factors that linked the four, and the realism of their works — as opposed to the Bengal School for instance — came from this.

Rabindranath was responsible for introducing many of the concepts which were carried forward by each in consonance with his sensibility and critical understanding. Among them two were specially important in setting the agenda for the Santiniketan artists, they were the key ideas that shaped their sensibilities and art. The first was the importance of a one to one contact with nature. Of this as early as 1892 Rabindranath wrote in a letter written from Santiniketan :

There are many paradoxes in the world and one of them is this, that wherever the landscape is immense, the sky unlimited, clouds intimately dense, feelings unfathomable — that is to say where infinitude is manifest — its fit companion is one solitary person; a multitude there seems so petty, so distracting.

An individual and the infinite are on equal terms, worthy to gaze on one another, each from his own throne.

We see this meeting of man and nature as equals, this solitary contemplation of infinity in the drawings and paintings of Nandalal, in the paintings and mural of Benodebehari and in the water colours of Ramkinkar. The second idea was the need to relate art to life, to the community. Taken together they gave a broader environmental dimension to the work of the Santiniketan

artists, that brought not only art and society but also society and nature together. The closeness to nature and this stress on life-contact made the common man central to their vision of reality and art.

Finally rethinking meant for them a comprehensive vision covering the whole spectrum of art, not a mere tinkering with its details. This also meant that they focused not on style but on language, and valued resourcefulness more than professionalism. The two important characteristics of their practice was therefore versatility and individual initiative. And each strove to become a total artist.