

The proposed synopsis for the P.H.D thesis

The women artists of early 20th century Bengal their spaces of visibility, contributions and the indigenous modernism

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Introduction and scope

In early 20th century Bengal there was a conscious effort to bring the women within the folds of institutionalized art practice and bring them to the public view through the reproduction of their paintings and graphics in magazines. Moreover it was all the more interesting to find them engaging themselves in teaching art or involving professionally with design studios. The attempts to bring about an indigenous modernism in art by the Bengal school masters like Abanindranath and Nandalal put forth waves of change which swept the entire Indian art scenario. The women were no exception. Kalabhavana, Vishwabharati, Santiniketan gave it a momentum with the inclusion of female students and appointing women as teachers. It is in no way a parochial project aimed to glorify any region but to stress on the fact that how the world of women artists was taking a shape in the context of modernity which took deep roots through the colonial structure in early 20th Bengal.

When I started documenting there were very few documentations and only stray articles pointing to the lacuna in the art historical writings and a complete silence about such a large body of work. The major art historical writings on the art trends of these period make it all the more visible being completely oblivious to their presence like in the 'Making of new Indian art' by Tapati Guhathakurta or 'Contextual Modernism' by R. Shivakumar. In the catalogue essay for Indigenous modernism in Bengal, a few facets (curated by R. Shivakumar) in which Pratima Devi's work was exhibited, not even her name was mentioned. Though tokenist inclusions take place in The Expression and Evocation, a Marg issue on women painters edited by Gayatri Sinha, the chapter always has to begin with Amrita Shergil as the first professional women painter of India. In Invisible chemistry; Deeptha Achar has written – "The recognition of the emergence of women who were professional artists and not hobbyists paved the way for the construction of the modern women artist in India indeed, of a tradition of women artists".¹ This means reducing all their effort, their struggles to leisure and again returning back to how the male artists framed their works in terms of aesthetic objects for beautifying home.

These artists didn't proclaim feminism as their agenda and neither prominent marks of feminism marked their art but the gendered reality of which they were a part definitely plays a role in their art making. Kumkum Sangari points out 'Feminist historiography now implies in some sense a move towards the integrated domain of cultural history. Such a history acknowledges each aspect of reality is gendered and is thus involved in questioning all that we think, we know, in a

¹Invisible Chemistry: The Women's Movement and the constitution of the Indian Women Artist by Deeptha Achar, This paper was presented at the National Seminar on Elite and popular Interface: India's Art History, Dept. of art history, 2004

sustained mode of examination of analytical and epistemological apparatus and in dismantling of the so called gender neutral methodologies.”² Thus to construct the world in which they produced art, the thorough understanding of the social fabric is important. The early 20thc art, literature and institutions bore the marks of gendered realities complexly responding to the nationalist ideologue’s formulations. Griselda Pollock points out –‘As early as 1971 Linda Nochlin warned us against getting into a no win –game trying to name female Michelangelos.’³ The criteria of greatness was also related to the question of genius which was considered as the natural property of men. All the norms of art practice was being formulated and canonized by Abanindranath which was to be followed erasing almost ones subjectivity. The criteria of what is good and who are the successful artists was defined which seldom had a place for women as an art practitioner with Rabindranath trying to understand the necessity of economic independence of women which surfaces in many of his novels, discussions and letters.

The concept of women artists is again aligned to the question of women’s education during that time which was still in it’s nascent stage moving out from the informal zenana education and moving toward a more formal domain of institutions .This question of women’s education is again situated in the context of nationalism and its reformist tendencies. Regarding the women’s question one can start within the nationalist ideology itself. What constructs it becomes important .Nationalism resolved the women’s question in complete accordance with its preferred goals .The nationalist resolution brought about a separation in the domain of culture in two spheres—the material i.e bahir and the spiritual i.e ghar. Alongwith the redefining of ghar i.e home the concept of new women or bhadramahila was also being defined in a new way. This new women being situated at such a position as it not only contrasted with the modern western but also was different from the indigenous tradition of patriarchy which was also reformulated in new terms. It (andormahol) is called the inner domain or antormahol. It is no more the excluded other but also referred as the antormahol or the inner domain of mind or the spiritual domain. It was glorified as the unspoilt domain where only the ideas of progress could proliferate in swadeshi terms. It led to the opening up of these spaces to the larger narration of the nation. The alpona, brotokatha and the ritual of arandhan which belonged essentially to this domain was incorporated to imagine swadeshi

² Introduction to recasting women :Essays in Colonial history by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid,p-2p

³ Feminist interventions in the histories of art :an introduction by Griselda Pollock,p-1 from Vision and difference ,Routledge(London and New York)1st in 1988

aesthetics. Adaptation of these elements into the domain of high art and the mapping of the classical standards like the invocation of Sadanga and stylistic tendencies from Ajanta or the pan-Asian styles like that of the Chinese and Japanese were common. An aesthetic standard was structured with all these elements as well as that of the folk idioms and crafts.

The Jorashanko Thakurbari gradually moved away from the conventional traditional systems and also from the Western mode of education. Some of the artists I have chosen belong to this circuit. They are related to each other through familial bonding; it is not to demean their individual status but to show how the familial ties became important. The concept of family became prominent for the nationalist concern. The question of public/private opposition became complex and is seen in a new light. The new domestic space was by definition oriented to a 'public' realm. 'For even if the Europeans dominated the arena of salaried employment, nationalist activity would constitute a form of public arena for the nationalist. The home itself was in this sense a public arena of action.' ⁴

From its very inception Kala bhavana had female students. Girls from educated and elite families found safe shelter in Santiniketan. Mr B.W Tucker points out – 'One of the most striking aspects of Modern India is the rapidly increasing share that Indian women are taking in public affairs of the country. In recognition of this fact most of the colleges are opening departments for women. Santiniketan has long been vanguard of the movement for the female education. Believing as we do in the unity of all life we have not created a separate women's department but have long welcomed women as equal members of our corporate life. Our experiment with co-education has been criticized by our more conservative fellow countrymen but in our years of experience not a single incident has occurred to give us a reason to doubt the wisdom of our policy. Living in a progressive community that enjoys the influences of the family who have been the pioneers in the movement for the full development of their personalities unrestricted by outworn conventions. Here they are thrown into living and direct contact with the finest expression in modern Indian art music, literature and drama. They are also guided into the ideals and arts of home making. Because women have not yet felt the pressure of economic competition as men have it is our hope that the guardians of the young women of Bengal may appreciate the unrivalled opportunities that Santiniketan furnishes for the education of women and that large number of young women may come to us for their education.' ⁵ Kala bhavana also held classes for the women who were interested in Fine arts, at the beginning they were mainly the relatives of the staff members of Viswabharati.

Their works can be read in the background of the new formulation of art practice developed by Abanindranath which passed on to Nandalal and became an ideal for

⁴ Family fraternity, salaried labour, Subchapter – Nationalism and theme of domesticity, p-224, Provincialising Europe by Dipesh Chakravorty, Oxford university press 2001

⁵ The Santiniketan Ideal (The Vishwabharati News), Modern Review, October 1939, p-457 edited by Ramananda Chattopadhyay

students who were struggling to find their way. Mythology had been the dominating influence on Nandalal's imagination in his early age ;and this naturally made him susceptible to the fascination for the traditional Indian art particularly, sculpture. Another influence had been the way decorative art had been absorbed into the major art form. Alpana or floor painting had been an important part of transforming design elements which can be seen in his book *Drishti o Srishti*.

The very first question that came to my mind was that of the lyrical element which is usually associated with the feminine sensibility. Lyrical here has to be discussed in the context of revised notions of masculinity. The concept of femininity is adapted to define the ideal male bereft of colonial influence. As mentioned earlier art was also referred as *kala laxmi*, when Abanindranath talks about *rupavidya* he says –“From the very beginning people see *rupavidya* as the female companion (*sahachari*) of his *leelas* and till now looks similarly.⁶ Abanindranath prepares rules and regulations for the construction of a new Indian Art on the basis of nationalistic trends but through ideal realms of romantic aesthetics. These were the standards within which the art pedagogy was to be founded and to be followed by Nandalal who also became a teacher under whose guidance almost all the painters I would discuss worked. And how the art practices almost reach an uniformity through these teachings become prominent while discussing their works.

The artists were mainly from Kalabahvana, Santiniketan or Kolkata whose working span was approximately from about 1920 to 1950. Some of them were not directly part of any institution but closely and significantly related to the art movement and were being published and exhibited.

A rough list of the artists and the female students can be made: Pratima Devi, Santa Devi, Sukumaridevi, Srimati Hatisingh, Gouri Devi, Sabita Thakur, Basanti Majumdar, Indusudha Ghosh, Jamuna Devi Rani Chanda, Nibhani Devi, Hashimoto, Savitri Krishnan, Geeta Roy, Rosalin, Renuka Kar, Celina Vikramratne, Indira Devi, Kiranbala Sen, Chitranibha Chowdhury.

This project intends to represent that critical moment when the private public divide is in a paradoxical situation. Women were moving into the public arena of publishing and teaching art. This evolving concept of women artists cannot be read through a study of autonomous existence of the art objects. By locating them in the context of social practice which is again posited in the context of social practices becomes necessary. This only can intervene the structural sexism of the discipline of mainstream art history and bring forth the underlying gender difference produced through an interconnecting series of social practices and institutions of which families education and art studies were a part. The emphasis lies on the very basic grain of the women 's struggles .They are the forerunners of independent women artists of today. The questions that come up are how were their worlds shaped? how they take positions as artists.

⁶ *Rupavidya*, Bageshwari Shilpa Prabandhabali by Abanindranath Tagore, p-198

This is a history not of authority but of struggle and engagement. The project is an endeavor to document the omissions which are amiss from the archives of Bengal School by featuring the role these artists play.

Method:

The very first project was to find out their paintings. These paintings would rarely be found in museums or important collections rather could only be found in private collections of their descendants or the journals. The women's magazine become an important source where both their paintings as well as writings by them and on them could be found. Whatever is written about the prevalent art practice by the women remain scattered in these memoirs such as *Punyasmriti* by Sita Devi, *Purbasmriti* by Santa Devi or in various essays which were for the women's journal such as *Jayashri* and *Sreyashi*. So it will be of immense importance for me to visit the archives and libraries like the Csss, Kolkata, Cscs, Bangalore and the others present in Santiniketan. Moreover visiting the family archives spread in Bengal and outside will also be of help.

The theoretical understanding of gender, the stylistic analysis of the works will be the methods to structure the entire project. My intention is not to use the paintings as the sole object of a stylistic study but to see how they exist in varied relations, by whom are they represented and to whom. So along with the journals in which they wrote or they edited, the writings on their art by other male authors and letters written to them will also be of immense importance.

Tentative Chapterization

There is a structurization of tenets on art that become prominent in the canons on art which almost dissolves plurality for a more singular kind of identity formation. Regulation of both the *Kalalaxmi* by which art is referred and *grihalaxmi* i.e women occurred through various canon formations. The first chapter- The canons of art and the *Swadeshi Style* deals with the texts of that time which shows an attempt to formulate certain rules for painting and how it looked at the concept of the feminine.

The second chapter is Development of art institution as a space for women. It discusses how for the first time the women's art practice was institutionalized and brought to public domain.

Journals, memoirs were the main sources to know about the art practices of these painters as well as their places of visibility. The third chapter, Journals, memoirs and the questions of women's art practice discusses how these journals became the bridge to link the private and the public. The artists' role, their agency and struggle is the concluding chapter which doesn't conclude but opens an area of possibilities.

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