

CHAPTER - III

Women visible and women invisible

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'It is interesting to note the conspicuous presence of woman as the subject-matter of art historically and her conspicuous absence as the producer.'¹

' If what the woman does is invisible there can scarcely be anything more visible than what she is within (and in the terms of) a modern consumer culture.'²

-Rosetta Brooks

This chapter does not focus on any standard formalist reading of art historical objects or the concept of an artist as a singular independent entity. But it tries to assess the paintings as cultural products. It attempts to understand the conditions which favoured women's art and those which restricted it in real historical terms.³

In the very beginning I have quoted Brook's comment on the conspicuous presence of woman as subject matter of art history and her conspicuous absence as a producer. The discussions in this chapter focuses on this absence presence. First half of the chapter attempts to discuss women as objects of desire and ridicule. The idea is to open up idea of the scopophilia (taking other people as objects, subjecting them to controlling and curious gaze) present in colonial India during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The scopophilia which construed the colonial gaze and its project of othering, the popular culture of the colonized which conflictual in nature: at times gave in to the titillatory aesthetics and at times became satirical of the discourse of modernity. The discussion on femininity also includes the discourse of colonial masculinity

1 Rosetta Brooks, Woman: Consumer/consumed, Framing feminism-Art and the women's movement, p.139

2 Rosetta Brooks, Woman visible: women invisible, Framing feminism-Art and the women's movement, 1970-1985, p.139

3 Griselda Pollock, Feminist art histories and Marxism; Vision and difference, p. 43

and the concept of effeminate babus. The concept of colonial masculinity engages with the power/knowledge nexus in the colonial discourse. In the earlier chapter, in Abanindranath's writings on aesthetics, the feminization of Indian aesthetics can be read; which argues against the accusation of effeminate art of India written large in the discourse of the biased/racial strains in art historical discourses of occidental orientalism. 'Maculay mentions - The men by whom this rich tract was peopled, enervated by a soft climate and accustomed to peaceful employments, bore the same relation to other Asiatics which the Asiatics generally bear to the bold and energetic children of Europe. Whatever the Bengali does he does languidly. His favourite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and though voluble in dispute, and singularly pertinacious in the war of chicane he seldom engages in personal conflict, and scarcely ever enlists as a soldier. There never perhaps existed a people so thoroughly fitted by habit for a foreign yoke.'⁴

The effeminacy thus becomes a clause of colonial domination. This imagined effeminacy of the colonized also construed the idea of an 'effeminate babu'. The babu meant native clerk who writes in English. The Hobson-Jobson, a glossary of British words and phrases in India compiled in the 1880s, suggests that in popular colonial imagination the word babu had come to mean primarily a 'native clerk who writes in English.'⁵

However, it was noted that the word at times had connoted effeminate Bengali. Mrinalini Sinha points to the different late nineteenth century historical developments which determined the signification of the word Babu. She mentions – "My discussion of the Age of Consent Act controversy of 1891, for example, suggests at least one such over determined context for the concept of 'effeminacy' : the intersection of the notions of Bengali effeminacy with contemporary discourses about the regulation of sexual practices and sexual

4 Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial masculinity, p.15

5 Ibid, p.18

identities in Britain. The British demonstrated the Bengali's lack of 'manly self-control' in arguments about excessive sexual indulgence of the Bengali male, represented by the premature consummation of marriage as well by the overtly sexual atmosphere in the Bengali home that allegedly had such practices as masturbation."⁶

'This idea of derogation was further carried on by the early nineteenth century social satirists. These early Bengali social commentators used the term 'babu' to satirize the culture of the nouveau rich in Bengali society, the term was associated with Bengali parvenus who adopted Persianised and later Anglicised manner for upward economic and social mobility.'⁷ This image of the effeminate Babu bound up by their jobs/chakris is an image of subordination. This become explicit in Mokshadayini Mukhopadhyay's proverbs – ' Bangalir Babu'.

' Hai Hai oi jai Bangali Babu Doshta theke charite obdhi. Dashyobritti kora saradin boite hoi Dashotwo poshora. Sara din khete khete, rakta othe mukhe. Peger Barai hoi ghare boshe sukhe...'⁸

Alas the Bengali Babu goes/from ten to four he slaves/the entire day he carries the merchandise of slavery/his mouth bleeds due to day's hard work/in home he brags about having pegs.

Hence there is a re-articulation of the word 'home' the inner domain. *Andarmahal* becomes the *antarmahal*. The ideas of nationalism subsumes the spaces of femininity, constructs a cult of motherhood, imagines the nation as mother and refers to mythologies to construe the ideas of womanhood which also serve the ideals of nationhood. Within these visual spaces of desire and nationalist reconstruction also opened up the new spaces of visibility where one sees the women being trained as artists and practicing art.

⁶ Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial masculinity, p.19

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Sripantha, Keyabat meye, Keyabat meye, p.34

(i) Women visible: objects of desire, objects of ridicule, goddesses and the narration of self/nation

“An example can be found in the common practice of equating India with ritual violence and sacrifices. This is then opposed to European civilization or rule of law. Europe therefore is never equated with witch-burning or other frequently held auto da fe or brutalities of punishment. These are never considered ‘essential’ or characteristic to European civilization, while the sporadic occurrence of Satidaha (burning of a widow on her husband’s pyre) in India is seized upon as the ‘essence of Indian Civilization and worked into the colonial justice system and the moral regulation of Indian Society.’”⁹

The idea of sublime and picturesque haunted the colonizer’s mind. The landscapes and ruins had the cartographic and archaeological objectives behind it. The other fact was itemization of the Indian life. It opened up gender relations in colonial society and sometimes also portrayed sexualized images of women’s bodies. I will start the discussion with the presence of sublime in Company painting which can be seen in the live burial of a widow, the sati or the child marriage. (fig.1, fig.2) The abolishment of sati and the Age of consent incited a huge debate in colonial discourse. About seventy thousand satidaha or burning of sati took place post Battle of Plassey i.e. since 1757 to 1825. 2,365 widows were burnt alive. Raja Rammohan Roy was the pioneer in the movement for the abolition of Sati. He called it ‘*Stri vaadh pratha*’ or the ritual of killing of women. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio criticised and protested Sati burning ritual. In 1829 the Act of Abolition of Sati ‘passed, commemorating that Derozio wrote-

⁹ Himani Banerjee, *Writing India Doing ideology, Inventing Subjects, Studies in hegemony, patriarchy, and Colonialism*, p.39

'On the abolition of suttee'-

'Hark! Heard ye not? The widow's wail is over;
No more flames from impious pyres ascend,
See mercy, now primeval peace restore.'¹⁰

The other images were meant to be the souvenirs of ethnotypes like the Ayahs, matranees (sweeper) or colonized women serving the European ladies. These images functioned as the images alluring the British women about the comforts available in the colony.



Fig.1 Burning of Sati, Solvyns



Fig.2.Live Burial of a widow , Solvyns

Another type that was present was of itemization of the sexualized bodies, the exotic oriental bodies of the nauthches .There was also the presence of the *bibis* with their exotic aura whom the Britishers married. The opulence and exoticization in the personal memoirs and paintings by British men and women are found in large number.(Fig.3) I will compare the texts and related images. William Hodges in a testimonial mentions about bathing and observing the younger women-'Sporting and playing like naiads or Syrens....To a painter's mind, the fine antique figures never fail to present themselves when he observes a beautiful female form ascending these steps from the river in wet drapery, which perfectly displays the whole person, and with vases on their heads, carrying water to the temples.'¹¹

¹⁰ Quoted by Andrea Major, *The Sati, A historical Anthology*, edited by Andrea Major

¹¹ Pran Nevile, *Portrayal of Indian women by British artists*,p.77

Colonel James Skinner was very popular in both the western and Indian front for his extravagant nautch parties. He took delight in presenting pictures of the same nautches to the audience. There is a description of a fisherwoman found in the colonial memoir of an unknown British woman, she wrote: 'her dress is striking; the skimpy mantle or sari is slung tight between the legs and over the upper thigh so that every movement of limb and curve of figure shows in bold lines as the fisherwoman carries her basket on her head to the crowded market.'¹² (Fig.4) This reminds one of Griffiths 'Fisher woman'.



Fig.3, Indian wife of an early settler, 1787, T. Daniell, oil

A British woman whose observations on India were published in the American Journal Virginia Gazette gives a picturesque depiction of a nawab's wife whom she met in Madras. She mentions- 'Her person slim ,gentle ,middle stature ,her complexion tawny, her eyes black as possible, large and fine, and painted at the edges; her lips were coloured red ,and between every tooth ,which were white and regular, was painted black ,to look like ebony....Her face was done over with frosted work of leaf gold; the nails of her fingers and toes were painted red ,so were the insides of her hands; her hair was black as jet, very long and thick, combed neatly back and braided ;it hung much below her waist.'¹³

¹² Pran Nevile, Portrayal of Indian women by British artists p.79

¹³ Pran Nevile, Portrayal of Indian woman by British artists, Stories from the Raj, p.76

Apart from these eroticized and exotic representations of the Indian women by the Britishers there existed a completely different vocabulary which were satisfying the male gaze of the colonized Indians. Some of them were satirical in nature whereas some of them were explicitly sexual.



Sati, Solvyns

The Kalighat Patas emerged at that juncture where the patuas travelled from the rural to the newly developed urban centre of Calcutta .They were amused by the new societal changes, the gendered spaces of masculinity of the new elites/babus and the hypocrisy inherent in it. Santo Dutta compares the floating world of the Ukiyo-e prints of the 18th cent. Japan and that of the 19th century. Kolkata. The women of *Patas* are all commodities of strong titillatory aesthetics .The people who came from pilgrimage in Kalighat collected these patas, some of which had gods and goddesses and some were common women. The gods were placed in the worship room and the scenes of dalliance found their place in the drawing room or bedroom. They were the 'pin ups' for the commoners. Thus these bibis became accessible for the visual consumption for the common people though in reality they were consorts of the rich only. Women with roses, signifying passion, musicians with lyre or doing their toilet or with their babus in lascivious positions, thronged these floating world. These images revolved around the discourse of body /exploitation of the subal-

tern body: a female body in the margins exploited by the people in the centre of the society, the new upper and middle classes. The newly constructed city saw a flux of population from the villages. These people who shifted from the village were free from the, moral codes of the village and empowered with the new economic capability had access to the unfettered pleasure found in the bordellos.

A popular saying went so-

‘Ajob shahar Kolkata

Rarhi bari juri gari micha kathar ki keta

It means,Kolkata is a strange city,(with)its prostitutes,houses,coaches and lies.’¹⁴

Fig.4. Fisher woman,Griffiths,watercolour



The nawabs faded away and this meant a loss of patronage for the nautches who found new patronages in the newly found Kolkata. With the widows, many marriages and child brides the occupation thrived. There were also narrations of contemporary scandals of the priest from the famous Tarakeshwar temple who had a sexual affair with Elokeshi, a married woman. Elokeshi was

¹⁴ Sripantha, Poter Bibi, Keyabat meye, p.112

killed by her husband Nobin.(Fig.6) The narrative opened up the corrupt practices of the priest class. The patas also talk about a vulgar femininity, sexual prowess with the concept of *Bibibilash* where one sees the woman sporting a hookah or turning a Babu into a docile goat. This image also remind of the witches, thus highlighting the idea of Eros and thanatos/danger in this particular work.(fig.5) These women are shown with bare breasts or sometimes partially



Babu and Bibi, Kalighat Drawings

revealed. These kind of representations objectifies them. The babus were either shown in splendor with their neatly arranged hair, with a musical instrument or in their European attire or sitting on a European art deco chair wearing a Chinese shoe. The other being them with their female companions either in a subdued position or embracing or drinking. These women are not shown in any domestic aura. They are mistresses-temptress of the bordellos which were popular during the babu culture. The sensuous lines brings out the voluptuous sensuality of the female figures. Sripantho compares the women from the terracotta plaques and the Kalighat patas. The Kalighat *Poter Bibi* that is the women represented in the pata connoting women of certain class having certain agency to their sexuality and prowess.(Fig.7) They are outsiders they do not belong to

the *Andarmahal*. They are not part of the unspoilt inner quarters. They represent the bordellos around the temple. They explicitly stand for the pleasure principle in all its openness. Sripantha mentions- 'A mother of a new bibi advises- "Don't learn music! Your youth is enough. It will mesmerize. Even if you are not enriched by music or any other quality, you are no less as you have your youth."' ¹⁵



Fig.5,Bibi changing the babu into a goat, Kalighat Drawing

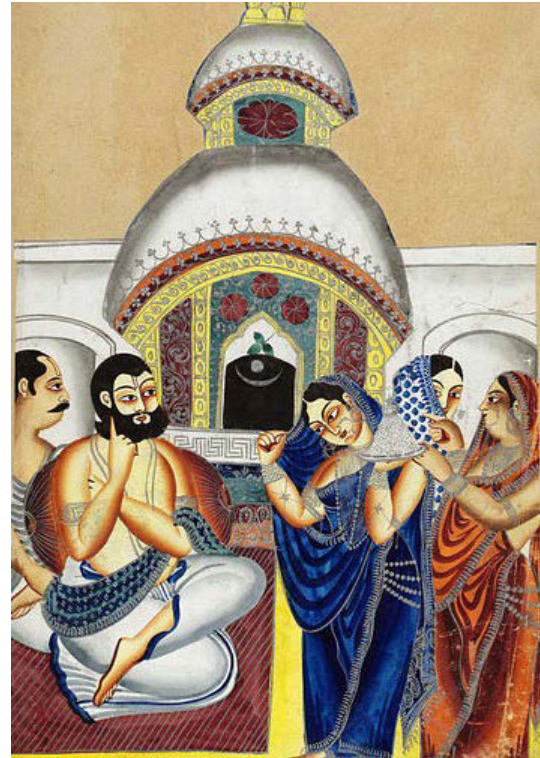


Fig.6.Elokeshi and the Mahanta, c.a.1875,watercolour

Somewhere these images confirm the stereotyping of the babus as effeminate, subdued by the femme fatale. There is an interpolation of the religious and the secular. A jhumur song about Kali also reminds of a Kalighat *pata*. It says-

'Magi minshekey chit Korey phele diye buke diyeche pa

Ar chokhtar jusul juslus,mukhey neiko ra

That means, the hussy has thrown the broke flat on his back, with her foot on his chest. Wordless she stands, glaring in anger.' ¹⁶

¹⁵ Sripantha, *Poter bibi*, *Keya bat meye*, p.126

¹⁶ Sumanto Banerjee, *Nineteenth century Calcutta folk culture, The parlour and the streets*, p.113

The Kalighat *patuas* were gradually influenced by the western academic realism. One sees that there are washes around the contour of the figures to give it a sense of naturalism. The illusionism of the oil painting attracted the native painters and they started painting in oil. The subject matter was mainly mythological. Native *potuas* were involved. They used the medium of oil and tempera. The seductress from the Kalighat *patas* entered the canvases.



A Battala print depicting a shameless educated woman from Pash Kora Mag



Men and woman in dalliance, Terracotta from a temple

Another form which gave these kind of literature related to passion and the popular literature commenting on the changes like women's education, the laws of consent and the widow re-marriage was the battala literature with their visuals as illustrations of such narratives. *Keya bat meye*-the romance by Panchanan Raychowdhury talks about a woman who is highly educated and has fallen in love. She rejects the marriage arranged for her by her uncle and pretends to faint. An exorcist comes tries to take out the spirit. But the spirit doesn't leave. The exorcist gives up, tells that there is a new ghost, a nobeli ghost: a ghost born due to the excessive reading of novels, it speaks about

the ill effects of the intellectual enlightenment of women. In *Pash kora maag* (The educated women), she is shown as promiscuous and goes beyond the domestic identity. (Fig.8). In this text the heroine is educated in Bethune School and she tells her friend Kironasashi- 'Even if I am a Bengali girl I am not uneducated like them....the day you were married, your husband became thunder-struck by the English speech given by me and looking at my dress, he thought I was a fairy and lost all sense of the world.'¹⁷ The sentence also evokes the idea



Fig.7.Poter bibi in oil painting



Fig. 10. Two friends, (reminds Kalighat style), oil, Murshidabad, 19th c.

of a fairy, given the transience and inaccessibility to the fair-skinned white women who became the object of desire for the gentry of Kolkata. The fairy fountains and Venuses in the gardens and houses stand to tell this tale of desire. Jogendranath Basu's *Model bhagini*, the ideal sister portrayed the newly educated women as being careless about their domestic duties, made husband servile and took sexual liberty. (FIG.9) Even Jyodirindranath Tagore in his early career as a playwright criticized women's education in the play *Alik Babu*.

There were also caricatures published to criticize the new women. Jatindra

¹⁷ Sripantho, *Keyabat meye*, Keyabat meye, p.24

Kumar Sen, Binoy Kumar Basu and Gagendranath Tagore captured the contested domain of women empowerment. This also reminds of William Blake's works on the Blue stockings group. These visuals reflect men's fear of losing their spaces of domination both in the public and the private domain. (Figures.11-17)



Fig.8. Kiransashi and krishnababu,
A scene from Paskara mag



Fig.9. A scene from Model bhagini
(The ideal sister)

Battala had the influence of Indian miniature paintings especially which were based on Pauranic narrations hence one sees the clothing like Rajput women. (Fig.18) Parallel to these art forms were the terracotta temple which had images of Goddess and had women being represented in their day to day activity-they represented the unspoilt domain of domesticity. Though there are representation of dancers and performers and even the Europeans in dalliance.

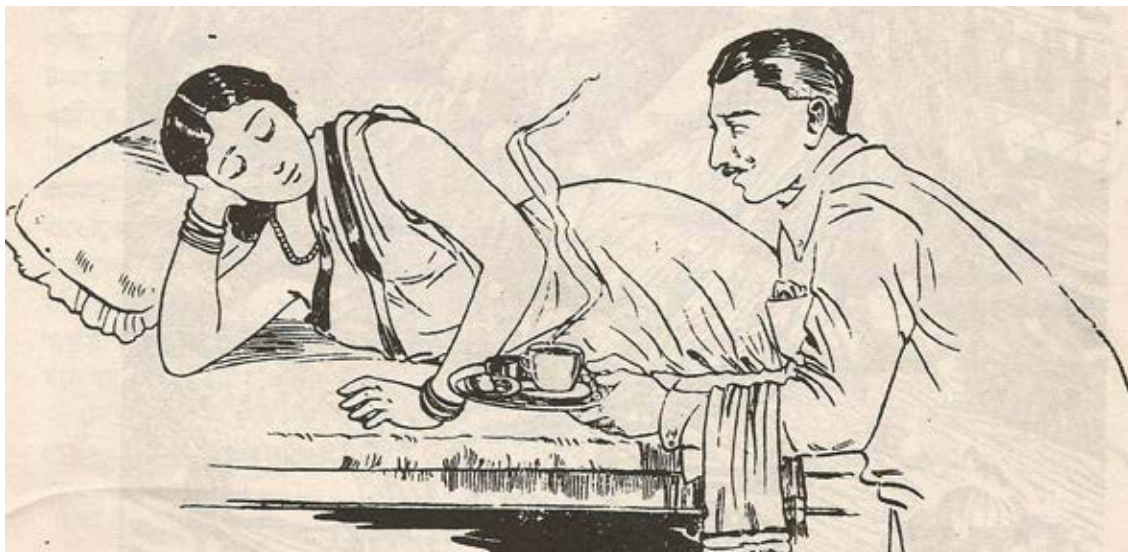


Fig.11.Ulatpuran, Jatindrakumar Sen, pen and ink



Fig.12.Jatindrakumar Sen,
A modern woman, pen and ink



Fig.13.Jatindrakumar Sen,
A woman boss, pen and ink



Fig.14.Jatindrakumar Sen,
Woman with bob cut, pen and ink



Fig.15.A caricature of women's hair by
Jatindra Kumar Sen,pen and ink



Fig.16.Binoy kumar Basu
A woman going to office, pen and ink

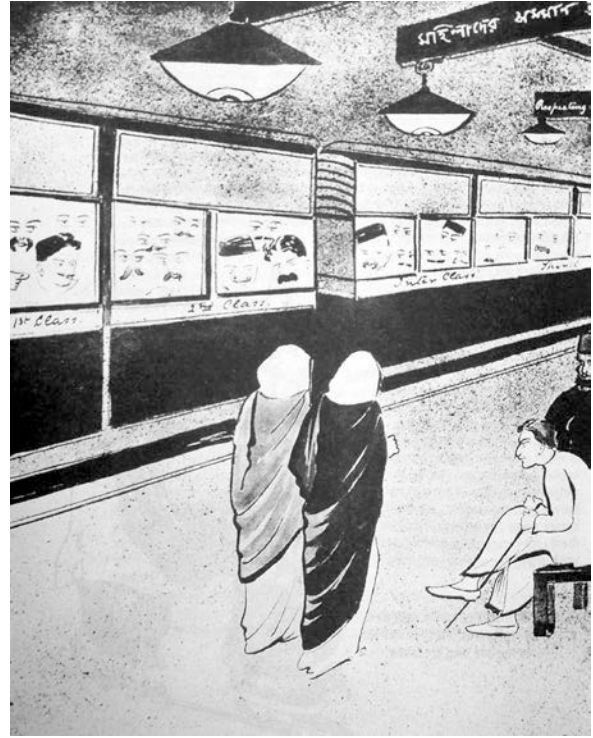


Fig.17.Gaganendranath Tagore,
Women in public, pen and ink

There are also painters like Hemen Majumdar who painted women bathers drenched in water, with their clothes clinging and revealing the figure of the women from underneath. This reminds of Kenneth Clark's discussion on Greek sculptures. He says- 'So rare are nudes figures of women in the great period of Greek art that to follow the evolution of Aphrodite before Praxiteles, we must not look for absolute nudity, but must include those carvings in which the body is covered by a light, clinging garment, what the French call a *draperie mouillee*. This device was used from archaic times onward, the earliest sculptures seeing to recognize how drapery may render a form both more mysterious and more comprehensible. The section of a limb as it swells and subsides may be delineated precisely or left to the imagination; parts of the body that are plastically satisfying can be emphasized, those less interesting can be concealed and awkward transitions can be made smooth by the flow of line.'¹⁸ His painting like *Dilli ka Laddu* emphasizes on the titillatory aesthetics, the pleasure principle connecting it to the colonial narrative of women bath-

18 Kenneth Clark, *Venus I, The Nude, A study in ideal form*, p.75

ers.(Fig.19, Fig.20) It also points out to the presence of nudes as an independent genre in Indian art without any narrative of mythology associated with it. There were portraits of the male members of the aristocratic families but the women were rarely represented, they were usually aged mothers or grandmothers, not their wives. Though during an exhibition when a curator hung Hemen Majumdar's paintings his son opposed as one of the nudes was his mother's. This speaks again of exploitation of women from the familial structure. May be some goddess like *Annapurna* or *Jagaddhatri* or Sita and Shakuntala were painted based on the women of the interiors. There were also goddess idols based on European features. This desire to talk about one's own stories with European forms, to open up the interiors in the garb of mythology became a new agenda in the art practices of early 20th century. Raja Ravi Varma appears in



Fig.18.Illustration from Vidyasundar,Battala,woodcut

this context. Balendranath Tagore praises Raja Ravi Varma as a combination of modernity and Indianness and also for taking this new form to the middle class from the narrow circuit of wealthy patronage. He also points out to the combination of naturalism and that of *rasa* and *bhava* .In his '*Hamsa damayanti*', he uses the image of the waiting *Nayika*.(Fig.21) She receives instead a message

from Nala her lover from the swan which becomes the only metaphor which suggests the mythological relation of this female figure which otherwise would seem to be alluding to the posture of the neoclassical nude. There is *Shakuntala Patralekhan* which was heavily criticized by Sister Nivedita .(Fig.22) Nivedita states-‘Not all the scenes are suitable for painting this should be the concern of today’s Indians since taste is degrading as it moves towards fashion. In the country where a girl lying in that posture is considered vulgar-in that context it is seen that this painting of a voluptuous young girl lying flat on the floor writing a letter on the lotus leaf adorns the walls of each house.’¹⁹



Fig.19. Hemen Majumdar, Dilli Ka Laddu, c.1930s, watercolour on paper



Fig.20..Hemen Majumdar,Palli Pran ,1921,oil on canvas

The work ‘*Madri*’ shows a woman with a bowl of fruit and confronts the viewer with smile.(Fig.23) The voluptuousness and posture alludes the *poter bibi* but the name *Madri* again relates her to a mythological narration. This is also prominent in *Santanu* and *Matsyagandha* where *Matsyagandha* a lower caste women is being shown without her upper clothes looking at the viewers no differently than the *poter bibi* (The *Bibi* represented in the

¹⁹ Sister Nivedita, Indian art, The Complete works, Vol.3, p.19



Fig.21. Raja Ravi Varma , Hamsa Damayanti, oil painting, 1899



Fig.22. Raja Ravi Varma, Sakuntala patralekhan , oleograph

patas) and the place of the male voyeur outside the painting is being filled by the king Santanu again mythifying a tale of voyeurism. (Fig.24) 'Galaxy of musicians' is another such work about which Geeta Kapur says- 'Thus we have at once the relay of male desire, female vocation, and national culture (deferring to regional types), posed for the unabashed viewing outside the margins of history but potentially inside a national pictorial schema.'²⁰

There are also reclining Nair women or Nair women playing a musical instrument or bathing which speaks about an attempt to create regional incarnation of classical nayikas. Ravi Varma also created mother and child images like 'Suckling the child' which reminds one of Krishna and Yashoda from Tanjore paintings. (Fig.26), (Fig.27)

This symbol of motherhood would become an important trope to frame the discourse of nationhood. The mother image appears as the nurturer of values which are untouched and unspoilt, who resides in 'ghar' (home). The idea of nation gets embodied in the female body of a mother. Here emerg-

²⁰ Geeta Kapur, Raja Ravi Varma's unframed allegory, Raja Ravi Varma, New Perspectives, National museum, p.103

es Abanindranath's 'Bharat mata' in the context of the partition of Bengal in 1905. The portrait was of his daughter who had died. It was named *Bangamata* and later was called *Bharat Mata*. This painting was enlarged and made into a silk banner by a Japanese artist which was carried in the anti-partition processions. Sister Nivedita comments on Abanindranath's *Bharat Mata*-'Using



Fig.23.Raja Ravi Varma
Madri ,Oil



Fig.24.Ravi Varma
Santanu and Matsyagandha

all the added means of expression which the modern period has bestowed upon him, the artist has here given expression never the less to a purely Indian idea, in Indian form. The curving line of lotuses and the white radiance of the halo are beautiful additions to the Asiatically conceived figure with its four arms, as the symbol of the divine multiplication of power. This is the first masterpiece, in which an Indian artist has actually succeeded in disengaging as it were, the spirit of the motherland, giver of faith and learning, of clothing and food, and portraying her, as she appears to the eyes of Her children. And yet in every detail, of 'Sankha' bracelet, and close-veiling garment, of bare feet, and open, sincere expression, is she not after all, our very own, heart of our heart, at once mother

and daughter of the Indian land, even as to the rishis of old was Ushabala, in her Indian girlhood, daughter of the dawn?'²¹ (Fig.28)



Fig.26.Krishna and Yashoda,
Glass painting



Figure 27.Ravi Varma,Suckling child,oil

Sumathy Ramaswamy attempts to contour the idea of Bharat Mata. She says- 'In the closing decades of the nineteenth century in a land already thronging with all the manner of Gods and Goddesses there surfaced a novel deity of nation and country who at moments in the subsequent years seemed to tower over them all .Invoked in English as 'mother India' and most usually in various Indian languages as 'Bharat mata',literally 'Indian mother'. She was over time imagined as the substantial embodiment of national territory-its inviolable essence, its shining beacon of hope and liberation-and also as a powerful rallying symbol in its long hard struggle for independence from the modern world's largest empire.'²²

For the subjugated bhadrakalok of higher caste, the devi, the larger than life Durga or the naked Kali, with her garland of skulls standing on the supine male Shiva represented both the protector and the sacred domain to be protected from alien violation. The same' bhadrakalok 'led the way in the nationalist movement in modern India, but felt singularly powerless vis-a-vis the colonial masters. The myth of Shakti was invoked again and again to compensate for the feeling

21 Sister Nivedita,Art appreciation,The complete works of Sister Nivedita,Vol.3published by Advaita ashram,p.57

22 Sumathy Ramaswamy, ,Prologue, Yearning for form, The Goddess and the nation,p.1

of powerlessness by making it stand for the motherland as well as awakening of conscience of her humiliated sons. This was one of the strategies for mythification taken up by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda. The last stanzas of Bande mataram evoke this myth-

'Thou art Durga, Lady and Queen,
With her hands that strike and her
swords of sheen,
Thou art Lakshmi lotus-throned,
And the Muse a hundred-toned,
Pure and perfect without peer,
Mother lend thine ear,
Rich with thy hurrying streams,
Bright with thy orchard gleams,
Dark of hue O candid-fair' ²³



Fig.28.Abanindranath Tagore
Bharatmata, 1905,water colour

²³ Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Vande Mataram as translated by Sri Aurobindo Ghosh, Karmayogin, 20th century, 1909

In his novel *Devi Chowdhurani*, Bankim strategically deals with the class caste/ outcaste and mythification/deification. Prafulla, the daughter of an outcaste widow is not accepted by her in-laws and in her way back to the jungle meets Bhavani Thakur the nationalist and a dacoit who plunders to serve the common people, he trains Prafulla in martial arts. He gives her the name *Devi Chowdhurani* and compares her with the mother goddess *Durga*. Abanindaranath's 'Sita in captivity in Lanka' represents the captive lady and the transcendental symbol of sacrifice which Nivedita linked to sacrifice for the nation and it is being observed that Sita's image had been evoked again and again to highlight the idea of woman as a sacrificer.

One of his earlier attempt to imbibe the influence of the past is '*Abhisarika*' which has elements of the *Mughal* infused with *rasa* and *bhava*. Sripantho points out that this *abhisarika* is different than the women of repute who goes pompously, she moves silently, anxiously towards her destination. In his painting *Black girl*, a santhal woman is being depicted. He says-'I painted a dark girl. I didn't paint a portrait, I painted a type.'²⁴ He is stressing on the subalterneity of the santhals, essentialises their identities. He mentions about observing some converted santhals girls wearing blue gowns and carrying bibles in their hands and his apathy towards such depiction.(Fig.29)



Fig.29.Abanindranath Tagore,Black girl, watercolour



Fig.30,Abanindranath Tagore, Tissarakshita, watercolour

'Tissarakshita, queen of Ashoka'(1910)stands as one of the best examples of Abanindranath's independent creation of a legend out of a subject chosen from ancient Indian history. She is shown thinking, she was jealous of Asoka's devotion to the Bodhi tree. There are railings from Bharut in the background.²⁵ Thus there is a reconstruction of an ancient Indian History , situating Tissarakshita in the context of devotion: an idea highlighted in the nationalist trajectory again and again. (Fig.30) Nandalal Bose as I mentioned earlier was deeply inspired by the nationalist ideals of Sister Nivedita .He illustrated the Cradle tales of Hinduism, where he shows the women's body as a veritable tool of mythification and thus underlined the nationalist ideologies like sacrifice and devotion written large on these female bodies though they are hardly featured in the nationalist movement as a discourse having its own agency. His *Sati* was highly appreciated by Sister Nivedita. She says-'Here I see a woman, no doubt beautiful, dressed like a bride, in that moment of great victory she concentrates, but unconscious about her pride. Embodiment of purity. Flames are engulfing. The upward flames are her throne where she sits with folded hands-without fear. Praying. She does not cry for her near departure. Her eyes see nothing-may that be the flames, or dear ones-no, nothing, only-her dearest is in front of her eyes with whom she will be reunited.'²⁶

Rabindranath and Abanindranath exalted the idea of sati. In his *Raj Kahini*(Stories of the rajas)he writes-'Rani Padmini jumped into the fire pit with twelve thousand Rajput women, all the sweetness from all the homes of Chittore,all sweet words and laughter turned into ashes in a moment.'²⁷ (Fig.31)

Tapati Guha Thakurta points out to the glorification of this ideal of sati- 'Its appeal, particularly to admirers of Indian art in the west, was closely tied

25 Tapati Guha Thakurta, Abanindranath and the New school of Indian Painting, The making of new Indian Art,p.262

26 Sister Nivedita,Sati,Nandalal Bose,The complete works of Sister Nivedita,p.66

27 Abanindranath Tagore,Rajkahini,p.11

up with Coomarswamy's rhetorical pamphlets on 'The oriental view of woman (1910) and Sati: A vindication of the Hindu woman (1913), where the act of Sati was glorified as 'Eternal love', representing the most sacrosanct image of Indian Womanhood. Reacting against the colonial reformist declamations that



Fig.31.Nandalal Bose,Sati,watercolour



Fig.32.Nandalal Bose,
Shabari, watercolour

poined to the barbarism and cruelty of the act, the projection of the real spiritual essence' of sati became synonymous with the assertion of the oriental point of view.'²⁸ Such images of virtue and stoicism and martyrdom of Indian women in legend and history would frequent these paintings, using similar effects of the wash-as in Nandalal's portrayal of Gandhari, who had a blind husband, Dhritarashtra for whom she sacrificed her vision by tying a cloth over her eyes. His *Natir puja* also becomes a narration of sacrifice and surrender, a tale of transformation from the danseuse to a devotee. The mythification process also engrosses/subsumes the subaltern body of the santhals, young and old santhal women become *Shabari* waiting to serve Rama, who is glorified as Aryan, the ideal statesman the ideal man.(Fig.32) Thus here it can be observed that there is an endeavor by the colonized artists to get rid of the stigma of both the sexual

28 Tapati Guhathakurta, Abanindranth and the new school of Indian painting, The making of new Indian art, 'p.288

and moral debasement inherent in the bazaar images and construction of a highly rarefied ideal of femininity inscribed itself into nationalist ideology, to be maintained in careful seclusion and kept insulated within the zone of tradition. The values were often clearly Victorian, even as the ideal was projected as quintessentially 'Indian'. The nationalist ideal of the 'new woman, subjected to a new liberal and reforming patriarchy, was constructed through many differentiations. Distinguished from the earlier patriarchy of the feudal tradition, and from her counter parts in modern western society, she was also contrasted with the vulgarity of the common man.'²⁹

(ii) Of women invisible and the opening up of spaces of visibility

' The two central themes in this context are the familial social space designated as *andarmahal* / *antahpur* (inner-quarter) and *griha* (home/ household); the main creator-organizer of this space is named in the latter half of the century as *grihini* (the mistress of the home or the homemaker), especially in her incarnation of the *bhadramahila* as the mother. There is a shift in focus from the *andarmahal* to the idea of *griha*. 'Andar a space opposed to the public was mainly a space of femininity where men habituated after their jobs outside. Whereas a *griha* represents a state of mind, an ideological venture propounding a conscious moral and social being, rather than a functional place on earth. It is here that self-consciously advanced moral (and social) projects of 'mothering' and 'conjugalinity' bloom, and it has to be 'achieved' through a process of ideological clarifications, and conscious practical socialization.'³⁰

Thus *Griha* opened up the public sphere for women. But the situation was ambivalent and in memoirs like *Amar jibon* by Kailashbashini or Swarnakumari

29 Tapati Guhathakurta, *The woman perceived, Women as nationalist icons; Restitution and reconstruction of the lost Ideal of the nayika*, p.161

30 Himani Banerjee, *Fashioning the self, Inventing subjects, Studies in Patriarchy and colonialism*, p.148

Devi's *Shekele katha* or Gyanadanadini's writings they mentioned the loss of self or their spaces of subjectivity. Krishnabhamini Das a writer and educationist wrote about the new patriarchy which talks about a male defined educational sphere which was not useful for the women in real sense. 'She argued against '*paranirbharata*' (dependence on others) and speaks for *Swadhinata* or independence. The loss of their subjective space had to be filled up with 'real education' that will make the women more informed and equipped to intervene in the division of labour and not restricted to the domestic labour but emphasize their roles as mental producers. And finally, not only do women feel that they should have the right to 'come out' and live in the mixed company, but they also do not wish to do so in the older feminine terms; rather, they set a new terms and conditions for their emergence and emancipation.'³¹

One observes echoes of these search for agency in the organization of informal art organizations to make the women economically sustainable. Education became one of the important sphere of the reformist movement taken up by the new elite. This endeavor being very much related to the shared culture of the colonizers and the colonized. The latter trying to conceptualize colonialism as a necessary step to progress. The education system prior to this institutionalized efforts were informal ---it was in the form of zenana education.

The Vaishnavi would come for the ladies confined within the four walls of the antahpur; newlywed young wives and young married daughters of the house would receive education from her. This has already being discussed in the first chapter. But the *Jorasanko Thakur Bari* (The Tagore household) gradually moved away from the conventional traditional systems and also from the Western mode of education. The artists I have chosen belong to this creative circuit. They are related to each other through familial bonding, it is not to de mean their individual status but to show how the familial ties became impor-

31 Himani Banerjee, *Fashioning a self, Inventing Subjects, Studies Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism*, p.157

tant. The concept of family became important for the nationalist concern. The question of public/private opposition becomes 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"³².

Before going for further discussion on how this concept was taken over by bigger formal institutions, it will be worth seeing how women perceived it and how they adapted it for their own ends. Hiranmoyee Devi writes—'Their training in arts and crafts should stand them in better stead. When an ornament is sold off, the money that comes in is spent in no time, whereas the training would be lifelong asset. In good times this would make them and their homes look aesthetically pleasing and in bad times it would help them fend for themselves. Though a few women are earning a living these days as teachers, doctors and Nurses, these are not suitable in a culture like ours where ordinary women are confined to the limits of the *antahpur* [the inner quarters for women in a household]. Some time ago we held a week long 'Mahila Shilpasamiti' conference at Rabindranath Tagore's house at 6, Dwarkanath Tagore street.'³³ The training to be imparted were on needlework, knitting, machine work, handicrafts, fine arts, music. They proposed that there should be a differentiation between hobby and the other as a means of earning a livelihood. With this thing in mind they framed the association's work. They tried to establish a Narishilpasala at Tagore's house and also at six different places all over Calcutta which were to be held at the member's house. These will be called Antahpur Kalabhavanas. They also proposed for the literary sessions and held their organization as a women's organization for nurturing artistic aptitude.

32 Dipesh Chakravorty, Chapter—8, Family fraternity, salaried labour sub chapter—Nationalism and theme of domesticity from Provincializing Europe, p.224

33 Dipesh Chakravorty, Chapter—8, Family fraternity, salaried labour sub chapter—Nationalism and theme of domesticity from Provincializing Europe, p.224



Fig.33.Nandalal Bose,
Vichitra Sabha, pen and ink

The informal education by the Vaishnavis and the European teachers in the *andarmahal* or *antahpur* now got a new dimension. The glimpses of which can be seen again in the Jorashanko Thakurbari with the founding of *Vichitra sabha*/club/*Kala-bhavana*. 'The transformation of the *andarmahal*/*antahpur* into *Griha*, the emergence of the *Bhadramahila* as a mother and conjugal partner, even when captured at a conceptual level through an organization of the common sense of the propertied class into an ideology, both anticipate and mark the moment of advent of a 'modern' society where men and women can overstep the older sexual division of labour. In this new construct and proposed mediation women can come out and be public and men can go in and yet the psyches and social relations become increasingly more individualized-that is privatized and personal.'³⁴ It is in this context that one sees the creation of '*Vichitra sabha*' which Rabindranath conceived as a *grihavidyalay*. The beginning of this informal educational space took place due to the shifting of his son Rathindranath and his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi.(Fig.33) Nandalal after completing his education in the art school thought of renting a house where the artists will live together, eat and paint together like a family. Nandalal denied the job offered to him by Percy Brown as he was against any kind of employment relat-

34 Himani Banerjee, Fashioning a self, Inventing subjects, Studies in Patriarchy and colonialism, p.175

ed to colonial education. This reminds of a comment by Sumit Sarkar, which articulates Nandalal's decision and the founding principles of both *Vichitra Sabha* and *Kalabhavana*, Santiniketan .He says- 'What made chakri intolerable was- its connotation of impersonal cash nexus and authority, embodied above all in the new rigorous discipline of work regulated by clock time. Disciplinary time was particularly abrupt and imposed innovation in colonial India.'³⁵ Abanindranath's thoughts are almost tangential to this, he ridicules the idea of job— he says— 'Men spread their soul through form, colour, rhythm, lyric, movement and freedom in the universe .The art is like this, when the rishis give us the right to this, we say let these whims be as it is ,let us take a job.' ³⁶

Vichitra sabha was given a space in *Lal bari* in the western side of Jorashanko. Nandalal was invited to join this endeavor so was, Asit Kumar Haldar, Surendranath Kar, Mukul Chandra Dey and Kashinath Debal. Their salaries were given from the treasury of *Takurbari*. This varied endeavor was named Vichitra/Vichitra club/sabha. The Lal bari was also renamed *Vichitra Bhavana* or *Vichitra Bari*. The second floor consisted of the meeting room and the *Kala Bhavana* the space for art practice. Downstairs there was the library. Rathindranath gives a description about the functioning of this space. In the morning it was transformed into Kala-Bhavana, where Nandalal , Asit Haldar and Surendranath Kar used to paint in their individual studio, Mukul Dey would draw and Kashinath Debal would sculpt. The girls and boys would roam around them. In the library people would gather. Weekly once the studio would transform into a collective space for the writers and musicians. This art space was an extension to a wider social space. Sometimes dramatic acts and music performance would also take place. Specimens of Folk art was collected for Vichitra, and it is from Vichitra itself that Abanindranath's *Banglar brata* was published. There

35 Sumit Sarkar, 'Kaliyuga,' 'Chakri', and 'Bhakti': Ramakrishna and His Times,' 'Economic and Political weekly (hereafter EPW), no.27-29 (18 July 1992), pp.549-550

36 Abanindranath Tagore, Shilpe Anadhikar from Bageswari Shilpa Prabandhabali, p.5

were changes in the interior decoration in the Tagore Household as I mentioned earlier. In the Vichitra griha, wall papers were removed and (shital pati) a finely woven mat was used. It was used for sitting also. Furniture too were designed negating the Victorian pattern. Vichitra was founded on the concept of 'Studio practice' which Rabindranath imbibed from his trips abroad. It was not conceived as an art school which prepared the young minds for the salaried job just like the babus working for the colonial mechanism. There was no routine, blackboard, model or copying of specimens of European art and neither was it meant to train the artists with technical virtuoso. Teachers would paint, sculpt and the students would observe and learn. This would inspire the students in their art practice and they could also seek advice and assistance of the teachers when needed. Rabindranath considered Vichitra as a cultural Centre. There developed a new taste which influenced the Bengali intellectual milieu. Two most ignored practices of the revival ignored by Abanindranath were sculpture and printmaking. In Vichitra one observed sculpting was given importance and so was printmaking. A litho press was acquired by Gaganendranath and placed in Vichitra. Earlier this medium was used for commercial use and not for art making. Young men, women and children of the Tagore family got art education from this space. Ajit Kumar Chakravorty used to teach literature. Rathindranath was the secretary and Surendranath framed the rules and regulations of Vichitra. Rabindranath took the help of his nephews Abanindranath and Gaganendranath. But they didn't completely understand the intension of Rabindranath. Vichitra was renamed, 'Bichitra Studio for the artists of the neo-Bengal school'. The intension was to bring the school under strict discipline. Gaganendranath became the director, Abanindranath was the principle. Sir, John Woodroof, N.Moller were made visitors. They were all part of the Indian society of Oriental art. Nandalal, Asit Kumar Haldar and Mukul Chandra Dey were the founding members. It became an extension of the familial

'Southern Verandah', a place where Abanindranth and his brothers, Gaganendranath and Samarendranath were engaged in art practice, writing and social interactions.

Rabindranath could not relate to the kind of practice which was based on painting and imbibing sensibilities from the Indian past which would refer to the ancient Indian art or literature. It became more literary than experiential. He read the imperial interference or the danger of a remaking of another form of Orientalization by colonizers. He wanted to define the self in terms of the indigenous modern which would refer, defer, and differ from the past, would expand- be Pan Asian as well as get enriched by the best of western education too.

Sunayani Devi became a part of this informal visual space. The art experience was mediated by the domestic experience. Family became an important part of her art practice. It was the unspoilt domain of femininity where she expressed her agency and thus her works can be read within the context of the 'home and the world'. She mentions-'They work in the midst of the hustle of the outer world, I work in an inner world'. Manimala Chatterjee wrote-'I will narrate how Sunanayani Devi was involved in art practice within the boundaries of domesticity. Amidst the daily chores in the morning, she would express her art experience with a free handling of brush. I had the luck to help her. She would dampen the paper with a flat brush. Then with a different brush she would draw the line and render colour, she would bring out the forms. Prior to that, she would hold the paper equally and see to that the paper doesn't become more moist. She would say that she found forms in the water. No painting was done in a similar manner! The theme of each painting would be expressed beautifully through the colours. She would draw a line and tell me, 'Put that painting un-

der water and wash it! Later when it dried a little, she would paint the imagined forms with the line and colours...' ³⁷ Thus she transforms the earlier appropriated 'andarmahal', the space of interiority on which nationalism held it's sway to redefine masculinity into a domain of an artistic subjectivity which aligned with the 'grihavidyalaya' and thus more to the concept of 'griha' as I discussed



Figure 34.Sunayani Devi, Woman in toilet, watercolour

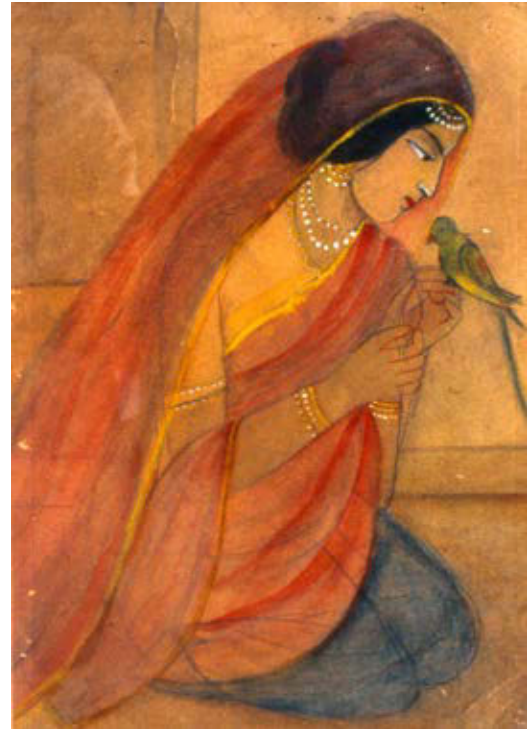


Fig.35.Sunayani Devi, Woman with a parrot, watercolour

earlier. Sunayani was born on the 18th June, 1875 and died on 23rd February, 1962. She was born to Gunendranath Tagore and Soudamini Devi. Her three brothers, Gaganendranath, Abanindranath and Samrendranath were artists. Though her initial inspiration in the development of her aesthetic sense was her aunt Kumudini Devi, her father's sister. Sunayani mentioned- 'Every evening I would go to her room and watch her arranging her long, lustrous hair. She was fond of birds and there were many in her room, from the walls hung paintings on mythological subjects. I particularly admired the paintings by Ravi Varma.' ³⁸ (Fig.34), (Fig.35) This narration gives a glimpse of the interior space-the

³⁷ Kishore Chatterjee, Sunayani Devi, Charukala, p.65

³⁸ Kishore Chatterji, Sunayani Devi, A pioneer amongst Indian woman painters, Abanindranath Tagore memorial lecture, p.5

contemporary taste of acquiring Ravi Varma. Sunayani may have imbibed the mythological narration from Ravi Varma but pictorially she absorbed the spiritual quality of Abanindranath's paintings and also from Japanese image making. The subtle, translucent water colour gave her paintings a dreamy quality where forms appeared and disappeared within hazy tints. She herself commented on this surreal aspect of her treatment as I mentioned earlier that she saw forms in the water she used for dampening papers. There is another comment about dreams and the mythical gods whom she painted. She says- 'Most of my paintings I have seen in dreams,-after seeing them I have them put down (painted),-the greater part of my paintings I have 'found' in my dreams'. She also says- 'At his (God's) request have I painted-mother and child, Saraswati, Laxmi, Mahadev,Radhakrishna,-all these.'³⁹ Her daughter-in-law mentioned about her daily elaborate rituals which she used to perform in the morning, this may also have contributed to the images. There were also reading sessions of different mythologies and other traditional narrations which too may have swiftly seeped into her imagining of those gods and goddesses. The themes



Fig.36.Suayani Devi,
A horse, watercolour



Fig.38.Sunayani Devi,
Self-portrait, watercolour

³⁹ Amina Ahmed Kar, Sunayani Devi - A primitive of the Bengal School, Lalit Kala Academy,p.7

like *Sati*, *Shiva*, *Ardhanarisvar*, *Krishna*, *Uma* and *Saraswati* were common to all other artists working in the creative circuit around her, like Abanindranath, Nandalal and Asit Haldar. There were also exaltation of these imaginings in the writings of Coomarswamy and Sister Nivedita. This was also apparent especially in Sister Nivedita's *Cradle tales of Hinduism* and was illustrated by Nandalal Basu. The importance of myths had already been discussed in the earlier half of this chapter. It is being mentioned that Sunayani started painting when she was between thirty and thirty-five. Her first signed pictures appear in 1923. Her most active years were between 1923 and 1940. I have already mentioned about her association with Vichitra Sabha which had been earlier than the dates mentioned by Amina Ahmad Kar. The informal nature of the *Grihavidyalaya* aimed at no routine or strict membership but emphasized on familial bonding. Sunayani says- 'I had seen my brothers paint and I wanted to paint like them, soak the paper, apply the brush and colour and again soak the paper. I told my husband about my desire to paint. He was very happy. The next day he returned from office in the evening with a small packet for me. My first colours ,paper and brushes arrived.'⁴⁰ In Purnima Tagore's reminiscences she says that Sunayani studied under painter Asit Halder for a short time. The influence of far eastern paintings is quite prominent in her works. Even Amina Kar, a painter and art historian of the 40's mention that Sunayani Devi used to collect reproductions and prints from the 'Prabasi' which was the vernacular review of the period and would sometime copy them. This was the time she was in Jorasanko. She had a small family at that time. As soon as her husband and children left the house she would take out pencil and paper and start drawing. She would hide her drawings before her husband returned. It is also being mentioned that her elder son once destroyed all her paintings. She was highly apologetic and under fear of not performing well and may have had in her mind the compara-

⁴⁰ Kishore Chatterjee, Sunayani Devi ,A pioneer Amongst Indian Women painters; Abanindranath Tagore national memorial lecture,p.7

tive aspect of being only a significant other of her illustrious brothers. She would often destroy her paintings or hide them.

Much later Meera Mukherjee another important woman artist narrated an incident- 'She knew that I also painted and one day shyly gave me one of her works and sought my opinion.'⁴¹

The structural sexism of art practice within a familial domain though restricted her also enriched her and gave her visuals a certain kind of subjectivity. If her eldest son had destroyed her paintings then there are incidents when she also paints a Japanese girl in response to the demands of a grandson. In her everyday life she juggles the home and the world, the world of painting.



Fig.38 Sunayani Devi,
Christ, watercolour



Fig.39. Sunayani Devi,
Ardhanarishwar, watercolour

Apart from the mythological paintings there were paintings of animals like her pet dog and horse. She reminisces- 'Chotda (Abanindranath) told me, 'you must paint other things as well, birds, cats and so on, -your work is all of a kind and beginning to get monotonous'. So I drew a horse.'⁴² A Horse's head was painted with bold lines quite different from those delineating her figurative

41 Kishore Chatterjee, Sunayani Devi, A pioneer Amongst Indian Women painters; Abanindranath Tagore national memorial lecture, p.8

42 Amina Ahmed Kar, Sunayani Devi-a primitive of the Bengal school, p.7

works. The lines are wide, thick and thin, brush marks are there with little modelling and slight washes here and there. Amina Ahmed compared it with Marc Chagall's work.(Fig.36) She also painted portraits. She painted her self-portrait in profile in her old age which links her to the practice of making profile portraits in the Tagore Household, especially to Jyotirindranath Tagore.(Fig.37)

The prevalent Far eastern influence is very prominent in her paintings. She watched her brothers interact with Okakura . Amina Ahmed Kar points out to this aspect in Sunayani's paintings. According to her-'One is reminded of the 'boneless style' of the thirteenth century painter Ch'ien Hsuan, whose method was that of colour application without any outline in the first place. Light and dark washes merged into each other,-solids becoming voids and vice-versa, until forms revealed itself in a moment of 'sudden enlightenment.'⁴³

Her works can thus be placed in the discourse of the indigenous modern. She differed from the colonial art practice and looked for the international references in Chinese and Japanese art. The pictorial design in some of her paintings is worth discussing. In *Mahadev –Sati* the clear pictorial division of almost equal halves is visible as in consisting of *Shiva's* and *Sati's* figures. It is painted with broad flat areas of colour thus again emphasizing on the larger three dimensional pictorial design. The wide oval of the halo around *Shiva's* head is not shown completely as if it is used as a trope to adjust *Shiva's* round head. This painting can also be taken as a painting of circles and curves complementing each other within a rectangular frame. The usage of the oval shape reminds of the fruit bowls of Cezanne's still life and the interplay of curves remind of Raphael's *Madonna Della sedia* . *Ardhanarishwar* is another painting which shows such pictorial balance and harmony. The painting again like the *Shiva-Sati* has curves dividing the composition which also has a kaleidoscopic effect. The faces are divided in two halves but they easily complement each other.

43 Amina Ahmed Kar, Sunayani Devi-a primitive of the Bengal school p.5

The treatment of the hair and ornaments remind of Indian miniature tradition. In all her paintings the detailed treatment of ornaments also make the viewer recall her fondness for her aunt's toilet. This painting also shows her acumen in using washes. The translucent veil framing Parvati's face is an evidence of that. The hands have the same organic rhythm as that of the lotus stalk. They remind of *sadanga* according to which the hands should resemble the *champaka* flower. It is also a brilliant combination of wash and gouache. There are layers of the circular halves which divides the painting into different colour zones.



Fig.40 Sunayani Devi,
Basket sellers, watercolour



Fig.41 Sunayani Devi,
Still life, watercolour

There are plenty of references by Sunayani and her daughter-in-law about their family. In Sunayani's paintings the images are from her immediate environment. She did not have the luxury of a private studio, her art practice was part of her daily chores. Manimala etches out one such image of the artist as the matriarch. 'She would plan the cooking, cut the required vegetables by her own hand. She would dip her brushes inside the large pots for washing cut vegetables. Thus she would paint daily among her mundane activities. She would arrange for shopping and storing. She painted a lot .But they were not big.....the vegetable vendor, sweet seller would come and she would keep their accounts with eagerness. She would also paint them. The cake seller, vegetable seller, toy-seller, bangle seller.'⁴⁴

She taught painting to her daughter-in-laws. These images and the sub-

44 Kishore Chatterjee, Sunayani Devi, Charukala, p.67

ject matter reminds of Griselda Pollock's discussion about Mary Cassat and Berthe Morisot and their paintings of the intimates of the family circle and the spaces of femininity .The tragedies of her life also kept an impact on her imag-eries . Her eldest daughter Bina died.Her memories kept appearing in the form of little girls playing with toys and dolls. This had been seen in Kollwitz's works which would talk about the memory of her child who died young.

These intimate spaces of domesticity would be reflected in one of her still life, which again was rarely to be found in the paintings of Abanindranath, Gaganendranath or Nandalal .The still life shows fruits and vegetables kept in separate baskets. This painting does not follow the usual mannerisms of a still life painting. It is not consciously arranged but has the casualness of being just there as a part of the daily domestic ritual. The bowl of fruit is at the center in a wider basket nearer the pictorial plane and the flowers and vegetable baskets are at the back on the two sides of the fruit basket. Nothing is extraordinary in this arrangement, the sizes of the fruits and vegetable or the flowers are not enlarged but appears as being seen from a distance in their usual environment of being stored, the tuberose stand out from the basket of flower with prominent highlights of white, some of the flowers are spilling into the fruit bowl, these vegetables are of daily use in a Bengali household.(Fig.41) The Basket sellers show, an intimate composition- a family engrossed in their act of weaving .The man is seen working on a basket and the woman looking at it with her tilted head, her body bent a little towards the man due to the child who clings to his mother's shoulder. These figures are set in a corner of a room with minimal presence of any architectural elements. This intimate moment becomes important for the artist.(Fig.40) The opaque white dots bring out the decorative aspect of jewellery and gives prominence to the white flower adorning the women's hair. It again reveals Sunayani's ability to observe and her passion for costume designing. Kishore Chatterjee narrates that Sunayani trained her daughter-in-

law in western mannerisms and attire, grooming her for her foreign returned husband .But she also created her own dressing sense, she designed Mughal dresses for her daughter-in-law and draped her. She would also photograph her sometimes. Amina Kar points out that-

*'...she is preoccupied with the vivid trance-like immobility of a world she paints, she organizes the linear forms to best express a typical 'quietism' that may have been characteristic of many woman of that time living in the seclusion of home.'*⁴⁵

The *Moonlight sonata* is a painting which speaks of another intimate



Fig.42.Sunayani Devi,
Moonlight sonata, watercolour



Figure 43.Sunayani Devi,Man with a
hookah,watercolour

space, the terrace. The terrace being one of the most intimate space-where women would have their soliloquies and their own moment of contemplation. There are lot of references of the terrace and the women in the memoirs of Abanindranath, Jnanadanandini and Rabindranath. Abanindranth mentions about how the Jorashanko Tagore family was rebuked by other members of the family for letting the women out in the terrace. Jnadanandini mentions how she cried in the terrace after her mother –in-law rejected her appeal to meet

45 Amina Ahmed Kar,Sunayai Devi-A primitive of the Bengal school,Lalit Kala contemporary,p.5

her mother because she lived in a rented house.(Fig.42) There are also references of terrace in Rabindranath's memoirs where he reminisces the incessant adda, and musical soirees full of Jasmine flowers and lemonades arranged by his sister-in-law and friend Kadambari Devi. In the painting, a woman is seen looking at the moon which is half hidden by the bamboo-leaves. She has a jasmine garland hanging casually from her arm. She has draped herself in a blue sari and minimal jewellery and bends a little with her hand resting on the



Fig. 44.Sunayani Devi,The Dhol player,
20 X 29 cms., watercolour



Fig.45.Sunayani Devi, A Flute player,
20 X 29 cms., watercolour

wall waiting and watching the moon. She seems to be an *abhisarika* re-interpreted within a domestic frame, not as distant as her but more intimate and personal in nature from the artist's known ambience of the Tagore household. *A man with a hookah*, is a close up of a man, a portrait whose hands are idealized like the hands of gods and goddesses and the face has particular features, the eyes are not stylized. It has the quality of a candid photograph. But it retains the simplicity of her other paintings. Each form and portion is clearly delineated with easy flowing lines. (Fig.43)She paints a man playing a dhol(drum), his appearance speaks of his religious associations. The white cloth, the white anointment on the head and the holy-beads around his neck everything responding

to his rhythmic body which is swaying with the music he is creating himself. He has the same contemplative eyes of the gods and goddesses. The light washes with little highlights bring out the translucence of the white cloth which drapes him. She confessed that music played a leading part in her art and this painting crystallizes a whole world of India's folk musical tradition. (Fig.44), (Fig.45)

There are paintings of men with flute delineated with few lines, large poetic



Sunayani Devi,
A scene from Krishnaleela, Watercolour



Sunayani Devi,
A Japanese girl, watercolour



Sunayani Devi,
A woman decking herself, watercolour



Sunayani Devi, Untitled, watercolour

eyes and detailed rendering of hair .Gaganedranath said- 'Nobody could paint eyes and brows like Sunayani'. Amina Ahmed Kar discusses the painting of 'The young boy', the frontal pose of the figure and the linear quality of this painting and calls it 'true primitive'. The word primitive is used by her in relation to Ajanta. She was reminded of the head for its directness and intensity of the primeval jungles painted by Rousseau. She also mentions-'In this softly harmonious composition, the flower and the rattle are held as if they were divine attributes, while the head invested with an inherent spiritual quality could be that of Krishna or Kartikeya or any of the deities that she paints. She is also reminded of the 'Fayoum portraits' with their disproportionate haunting emphasis on the eyes which by Pharonic tradition were considered to be the mirror of the soul.'⁴⁶ Sunayani wrote -

'Dusk engrosses the road
The boys return to their homes.
Someone has lit a lamp
Painting alpana on the floor.
Veiled the wife goes with
A pitcher full of water
Slowly down the steps.
Her anklets are tinkling.'⁴⁷

Pratima Devi , Sunayani's niece was also trained in this informal visual space of Jorasanko. She was born in 5th November, 1893. Her father was Sheshendrabhushan Chattopadhyay and Binayani Devi was her mother. Binayani also painted, but those works didn't come to the public domain. Sunayani was married at the age of eleven years and was widowed soon after her marriage. Five years later she was married to Rabindranath's son Rathindranath Tagore.

Rabindranath took immense interest in educating his daughter-in-law. He wrote to Rathindranath-'You have completed your education, have collected experiences and have entered into a family life - but it was not like that

46 Amina Ahmed Kar,Sunayani Devi,a primitive of the Bengal school,Lalit kala

47 Chitra Deb,Thakurbarir Andarmahal,p.110

for your wife-she is only a child-she does not have knowledge about the self and the world...Hence your responsibility is to enlighten her mind-you have to enrich her, your responsibility is to see that all her energies are preserved.'⁴⁸ She was informally educated by her maternal uncle Abanindranath who acquainted her to Nandalal's paintings. But her art education began in *Vichitra sabha*. She was deeply influenced by the innovative ways of teaching by Nandalal Bose. She wrote-'He used to show different paintings and explain everything very lucidly, that used to enrich us. He used to explain each line. His teaching methodology was wonderful, the lines he drew were amazing. He would give form and shape through each line.'⁴⁹

Nandalal's ideas influenced her compositions/imaginings. Later in San-



Javanese dancers,
photograph



A Javanese dancer,
drawing

tiniketan they collaborated to design many theatrical/dance performances .In 1930, batik was being taught in Santiniketan . In 1927 Pratima went to Java with Rabindranath. At that time she got some examples/specimens of batik clothes and also learnt the process. The Indonesian instruments were not used, instead brushes were used. In 1926, and in France with the help of Andree Karpeles she

48 Pratima Devi Chithipatra, vol.3, p.175

49 Chitra Deb, Desh Binodan shankhya, Shilpokhsetre Nandalal Basur Chatrider Bhumika, p.150

learnt fresco under R .La Montagne St .Hubert. After her return to Santiniketan, she shared her experience and gave her notes on this process to Kala-bhavana . The students learnt from the notes and the practical experience with the cement slabs. In a letter written by Rabindranath in November, 1924, it is being mentioned that Rathindranath and Pratima Devi went to London. There she learnt pottery and Rabindranath suggested her to learn wood-engraving in Rothenstein's school. The correspondences continued. Tagore wrote from Yokohama, Japan. The letter is dated-2.9.1916. I would like to refer to it. It was as following-

I am sending some Japanese brushes for you, Gaganendranath and Aban .I am sad to hear that Vichitra is not functioning. These endeavors are not a pursuit for the amusements but a service to our country-it will not succeed without devotion. Many people with true strength and love uplifted their country's stature. Recalling our fancies which don't have strength and respect, (I) find no hope. I heard one artist would go from here - keep him in one of Vichitra's room comfortably. You would learn a lot from him.⁵⁰

Chitra Dev mentions that Pratima like her uncle Abanindranath learnt painting from the Italian artist O.Ghilardi. Binode Bihari Mukherjee spoke about Abanindranath's influence on Pratima Devi's paintings which she painted during the Vichitra period. But later her works had the bright colours and strong contours. Very few of her works were from the mythology. She learnt oil from Karpeles when she came to Santiniketan. Binode Bihari Mukherjee spoke about Abanindranath's influence on Pratima Devi's paintings which she painted during the Vichitra period. But later her works had the bright colours and strong contours. Very few of her works were from the mythology. Mostly they were experiential in nature and associated with her inclination for choreography and costume designing. She was carrying the ideals of *Vichitra sabha* with her lit

50 Letter by Rabindranath to Pratima Devi from Yokohama Japan,1916,no-17,Rabindrabhavana,Visva Bharati,Santiniketan

erary work, dramatics, and various forms of handicrafts as well as paintings. Dinkar Kaushik in his article '*Kalyanasundari*' mentions- 'She suggests with a tone of quiet assurance how Shyama can be given a form, as a dramatic persona, as a value of visual import, as an emotional counterpart of a dramatic situation, or as a new dimension of stagecraft. The poet feels reassured that his play is finding a proper setting, a significant focus in terms of expression. Now the poet's dramas find a vehicle of dance movements, an illumination of appropriate costumes and a unity of structure. It is a harmonious ensemble of movements of the body, speech, music and visibility of décor. The dance- drama, with its opera like origins, would be just a poet's dream, on paper, or in his mind, if *bouthan* does not pick it up at its infancy and nourish it with a feminine flair.'⁵¹

Pratima's involvement in choreography is also mentioned by Santidev Ghosh- "In one Tuesday of the third week of August before a music performance Pratima Devi asked me to show Gurudev Rabindranath the choreographic design and give him the copy for correction. When I went to Udayan I saw Gurudev and Pratima Devi were waiting in the hall for a musical. I gave Pratima Devi's copy and told him about her request. He flipped through the copy and asked me to keep the anthology "Sanchayita" in his bedroom. He told Pratima that he would correct it, he would go through it that night...on the third day I received a fifteen page bundle, I saw a new drama being written in it.....After reading it, I realised that it was a dramatic form of a dance choreography. But it had no name and I understood it was incomplete. A few days later, the name was known, it was *Tasher desh*(The land of cards).....instead of a performance based on dance and mime it was converted to a drama"⁵²

(Fig.46) The dance tradition which Pratima Devi developed was known as

51 Protima An album of Paintings,Santiniketan Ashramik Sangha,page.number not given

52 Santidev Ghosh,Tasher desh,Gurudev Rabindranath o Adhunik bharotiya nritya,chapter8,pp.66,67,68

Bhavanritya. According to Dinkar Kaushik she brought to the new stage a grace of reticence, of understatement and of suggestion. Santidev Ghosh a dancer and dance teacher who was also part of this dance experiment in Santiniketan, discusses that this suggestiveness was developed from the Manipuri dance. In Manipuri dance there is “gamak “which is suggestive acting. That means the meaning within a song is being expressed with an indication enactment of words through mudras. Pratima imbibed varied stylistic tendencies from different dance forms, be it regional or international .In 1924, Parsi professor Jehangir Vakil was inducted in the English department .His wife Kuverji knew garba, a form of regional dance of Gujarat . Pratima and Rabindra-



Fig.46. Pratima Devi, King of the Land of Cards,
20 X 29 cms, watercolour

nath requested her to teach it to the girls. Some of them learnt and performed it. Even the *Kathiawari* dance tradition was adapted to choreograph the song

"*Khol dar Khol*", (a Rabindrasangeet) for the school children of Patha bhavana during the Vasanta Utsav. A dance and music recital titled '*Shehsbarshan*' (The last monsoon) took place in Kolkata in 1925. The dance tradition which revolved around '*Sheshbarshan*' was based on garba and mime. Pratima Devi and Ku-verji was the exponent of this experiment. In 1925, Nabakumar Singha and his brother Vaikunthanatha Singha were inducted in Santiniketan for teaching Manipuri dance. Pratima Devi was in charge of monitoring these classes. In 1936, she wanted to plan a performance of *Chitrangada* through mime and dance. Rabindranath encouraged and wrote songs for the dance drama. This is a collaboration as were the earlier ones between Rabindranath and Pratima Devi where he would change according to the choreographic necessities planned by Pratima Devi. In Rabindra parichay sabha, in 1935 she planned '*Samanya kshati*' (a poem by Rabindranath) as a dance drama. In this year again one sees the collaboration between them for Chandalika. I would like to quote some reflections on her by Binode Behari Mukherjee – 'Protima Devi deserves special mention because in her we meet with a true reflection of the Sabha's ideals, in that she strove after a dramatics, a living realization of her artistic sense in literary work, various forms of handicraft as well as painting.'⁵³ In 1938, Rabindranath collaborates with Pratima and redesigns '*Mayar khela*' as a dance drama. Pratima's paintings also reflect her engagement with these projects of choreography and costume designing.

The result of these collaborations were the paintings based on the narrations of the plays. In the '*King in Tapati, First phase*' the confident and proud king is seen in all his defiance and arrogance. This painting reminds of Lautrec's boldness in his poster designs for theatrical performance. The colours of the costume are strong. Her drawing prominently brings out the forms. The portrait of the king is expressive in its agitation. The entire ambience of the painting is

⁵³ Binode Bihari Mukherjee, Her system of ideas, Published in Protima An album of paintings, Santiniketan Asramik Sangha (date and page no. not found)



Fig.47.Pratima devi
Portrait of Lady Ranu Mukherjee,Pencil on paper

theatrical. Her colour usage also speaks of strength and balance. The blue of the head dress and boldness of the black in the shirt is broken by the red of the sword which is again balanced by the red of the architectural element present in one corner.(Fig.48) *Tapati* is a play where King Vikram of Jalandhar falls in love with the beautiful Sumitra the princess of Kashmir. Sumitra rejects him but he forcefully marries Sumitra and forgets about his own kingdom. Sumitra becomes so embarrassed that she runs away and throws herself in fire. 'In Confrontation' Sumitra and King Vikram confronts each other.(Fig.54) Boldness of the lines can be seen. The lines are as lyrical as the dances she composed. She also used patterns from Far-Eastern art in her costume design. In 'King of the land of cards', the king is shown fully dressed, the costumes reflect the gesture of the king. The colours are bold, a balance of blue, black and red. His face

is sad and sombre, eyes are thoughtful. Hartani is another one from the kingdom of Cards.(Fig.49) The costume reflects the influence of a Balinese dancer. The sari is a batik sari, batik a form of wax resistant textile dyeing process which she learnt from Java and taught in Santiniketan. This costume reminds off Rabin dranath's reflection on a dance performance in Bali. '*Nati*' is based on the play '*Natir Puja*' by Rabindranath. The female worshipper became a symbol of devotion towards nation. She appears in many paintings by the painters of early 20th century. Bengal and is glorified in Tagore's poems and songs. The attire again reminds of Indonesian costume which she redesigned.(Fig.50) The flowing costume enhances the lyrical and delicate gestures of the hand. Every minute detail had been observed, the flowing black gown, over it the translucent light blue veil encircling her frail frame, the ornaments, the bun and even the red colour of alta (red feet paint) on her feet is shown .There are also portraits of people from her known circle like Rathindranth(her husband),Rabindranath(her father-in-law)and Lady Ranu Mukherjee. They are all in profile perhaps keeping in tradition with the Jorashanko Thakurbari. They remind of Jyotirindranath and Sunayani Devi.(Fig.47),(Fig.52) This trend of portraiture can be also related to the keeping of memoirs which sketched so many memories with words.

Another important contribution of Pratima Devi was in the realm of crafts. She along with Andree Karpeles and Sukumari Devi started the *Vichitra* studio, a crafts department, four years after the foundation of Kala-bhavana which was later transformed to Shilpa Bhavana at Sriniketan . Andree Karpeles wrote about the aims and objectives in the Santiniketan Patrika. They were ----
 'To establish permanent co-operation between the artists and the craftsmen. To prevent as far as possible that harmful separation between art and crafts which is quite contrary to the Indian spirit and deprives art of all decorative qualities.

---To keep up that love of beauty in the simplest objects of daily use which was so characteristic of Indian life and which provided the artists and craftsmen with such a wide field of creative expression.'⁵⁴



Figure 48. Pratima Devi, King in Tapati, 20 x 29 cms, watercolour



Fig.49. Pratima Devi, Hartani, 20 x 29 cms, watercolour

As I mentioned earlier the concept of '*Ganashilpa*' ie reaching the mass, art for common public was the main aim. Pulak Dutta relates Tagore's idea of *Ganashilpa* to that of Andree Karpeles's idea of art. He says- 'No country in the world has had such a rich past in the field of popular art as India and she must not be deprived of one of her most precious treasures. In no other country have the simplest people understood so clearly that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever.'⁵⁵

The common people from the village around Santiniketan came to *Vichitra* and learnt crafts, orders were taken from outside to make it economically sustainable. She was deeply involved in women's education and women's welfare. Pratima along with some girl students would visit the village to spread out art-education. She mentions – 'when I started to visit the village of Goalpara with Gauri and Sukumari, I saw nobody could use the needle. There was

54 Santiniketan Patrika, Chaitra, 1923

55 Pulak Dutta Karusangha, Bishwas o bhavana-Prabaher Sandhane, p.35



Fig.50. Pratima Devi, Nati, 20 x 29 cms, watercolour



Pratima Devi, untitled, 20 x 29 cms, watercolor

a caste barrier which restricted our interaction but gradually with interaction the situation became more comfortable. Earlier the girls would learn stitching without touching us, this also slowly disappeared.⁵⁶ Karpelese also mentions about Women's welfare. She writes- 'We also want to recruit from these villages, young boys who want to learn through some craft which will be of life-long use to them; we want to send a lady teacher into the different villages for all the young girls who are willing to learn embroidery or all the older women who still keep up the art of '*kantha*' and who will be provided with material and yarn for their own work. Widows and girls wanting to learn a trade or craft that would not interfere with their domestic duties should also study at *Vichitra*.⁵⁷ Pratima also worked with her husband Rathindranath. She added her design patterns on some of Rathindranath's own works. Thus developed new types of tray, flower vases and lampshades. The leatherbags, or leather stools (*moda*), bear the aesthetics developed by Pratima Devi. Pratima Devi found the *Alapini sammilani* where the women of the ashram met and found themselves

56 Chitra Dev Thakurbarir Andar Mahal, p.141

57 Shovon Shom, Bichitra Sabha theke Visva Bharati (1915-1951), p.366



Fig.51.A leather folder designed by Rathindranth and Pratima Tagore



A leather purse designed by Rathindranath and Pratima Devi in familial bonding.(Fig.51)

She was also a prolific writer. Rabindranath gave her the pen name- *Kalpita Devi* . *Smritichitra* is the memoir penned by her. She also wrote on Rabindranth's paintings in an article '*Gurudever chobi*', '*Nirban*' is the reminiscences on the last days of Rabindranath Tagore. She also authored '*Nritya*' 'which speaks about her choreographic endeavour. *Chitralekha* is a collection of writings by her. Like the collaborations of choreographic projects of dance-drama with Rabindranath, Pratima collaborated with him in literary projects. He wrote '*Mandirar ukti*' in response to '*Swapanabhilashi*' by Pratima. Chitra Dev points



Fig.52.Pratima Devi,Self Portrait,pencil sketch

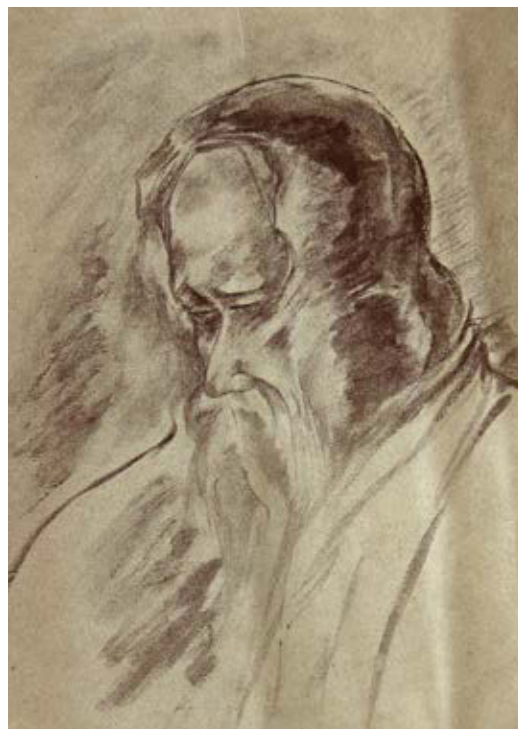


Fig.54.Pratima Devi,Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore,Published in her book Nirban

out to Pratima's influence in his short stories, like his short story 'Badnam', but the female protagonists were transformed into submissive female characters in Rabindranath's version. Pratima touched upon every aspect of growth in Santiniketan-be it crafts, dance and women's welfare. One can quote her own poem 'Smriti' to conclude the discussion on her. She wrote this poem on Rabindranath after his death, the poem speaks about his contribution and the emptiness he left.



Fig.53. Pratima Devi, Landscape, water-colour.



Fig.54.The king confronts Sumitra

‘This house, this garden revolving,
 which you imagined,the proud buildings.
 The moments were enlivened by the burning desire
 residing in the minute dust paticles.
 The desire that was in mind
 But was not fulfilled.
 The tired life left its shadow in the fields.’⁵⁸

Indira Devi (1938-39) belonged to a different sphere, she was born in Tangail, Bangladesh. From her childhood days she was interested in painting. She would draw and sketch with pen, pencil and use red and black inks. She received education briefly in Mahakali pathshala about which I have already discussed in the first chapter. At the age of fourteen she was married to Birendra Kishore Roychowdhury of Gouripur, Mymensingha, a zamindar. The Gouripur family was deeply involved with the Swadeshi movement. Indira would wear and weave khaddar. She learned Indian classical music and participated in musicals. Rabindrasangeet was also taught to Indira by well-known singers like Kanak Biswas. Between, 1931-36 Indira along with her husband and children moved to Shillong. It was a very different environment for her

⁵⁸ Chitra Dev,Thakur barir Andarmahal,p.136



Fig.55.Indira Devi, Shiva in mediation,
36 X 53 cms, watercolour, 1935



Indira devi, The dancer,
55 X 75 cms, watercolour, 1935

where, she met artists and writers. Her life style changed and western mannerisms entered her domestic space. She got her first formal lesson in drawing and painting from the nuns of Loreto convent. Her subjects were chosen from nature and local women. In 1936 she and her family shifted to Kolkata. It is during this time she got acquainted with Rabindranath and his family. Her husband showed her paintings to Abanindranath who appreciated them. Kshitindranath Majumdar was the Principal of the art school ran by the Indian society of Oriental art. He was appointed for teaching Indira. Her paintings carry Kshitindranath's stylistic tendencies. She pursued painting with utmost seriousness. She would paint every day, lock herself from 9am to 12 noon in her room. 'Her life as a painter was her own private domain where she was not accessible and her various social duties were strictly and consciously kept away from her for those few hours every day.'⁵⁹ During this phase she was working with watercolors following the tradition of 'Swadeshi Art' which flowed into her work from her teacher. The subjects were also mythological in nature. There are paintings of 'Krishna and Radha', 'A Dancer' done in late thirties. Other than these, there are village scenes or landscapes with deer and trees. The detailing of the trees are like Indian miniature paintings. (Fig.59)

⁵⁹ Indira Devi ,a biographical sketch,author unkown,catalogue of an exhibition organized in ICCSR

'Shiva in meditation' is the depiction of Shiva in his Himalayan abode. The mountain ranges become abstract forms enframing Shiva. The Shiva figure reminds of Nandalal Bose's Shiva drinking poison. The lines which contour the figure are sinuous and lyrical in nature. The facial features are idealized and reflect its association with the idealized types of Sadanga.(Fig.55)

A condolence letter at the time of her demise by G. Roerich shows that the Bengal school paintings were done in the middle period of her career. In the early 1920's she had started painting peaks, craggy mountain surfaces and



Fig.56. Indira Devi, Craggy mountains,
45 X 32 cms, watercolour

portraits of family members as well as eminent personalities like Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo with whom her family was closely associated. (Fig.60) The later part of her art practice after Kshitindranath left Kolkata to join Allahabad University was towards academic realism. Then she started taking lessons from Atul Bose. He was a great portrait painter and thus one sees a number of portraits painted by Indira. Here I have included one portrait of Rabindranath. During the world war European painters came to Kolkata. Indira imbibed the penchant for landscape painting from one such artist. These landscapes were very differently conceived from the artists influenced by the *Swadeshi* phase. Nothing is idealized. The landscape shows a craggy terrain almost reminding of Cezanne.(Fig.56) The other landscape titled 'Sentinels'

reflect the British tradition of landscape painting.(Fig.57) It is interesting to know that like many women artists whose sketches lie in the washing list or diaries, some of Indira's drafts and sketches in some books were found in the Gouripur Family papers.



Fig.57. Indira Devi, 'Sentinels', 46 x 68 cms, oil on canvas, 1938

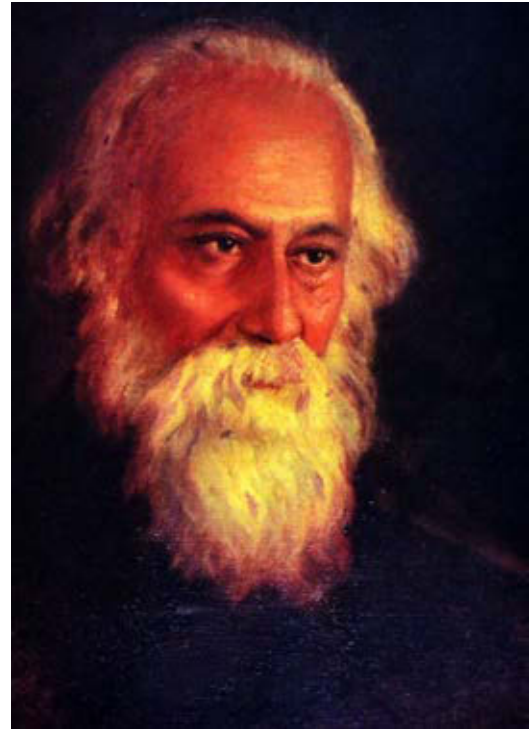


Fig.60. Indira Devi, 'Portrait of Rabindranth Tagore', 32 x 42 cms, oil on canvas, 1941



Fig. 58. Indira Devi, A Drawing which shows the resemblance to the ideals of Sadanga



Fig.59. Indira Devi, Trees, 28 X 45 cms, watercolour, 1940 - 42

In Indira Devi one sees the confluence of the two tendencies, the deep impact of 'Swadeshi aesthetics' and that of the British Academic art. Her works were exhibited and published in journals. Her struggle to maintain a studio space and studio hour within the informal domain of domesticity points to the transitional period in the late 1930 or 1940s, the opening up of formal or institutional spaces in Kolkata when Government art college starts enrolling women and the artist's collective created by Karuna Saha and Shanu Lahiri.

Sukhalata Rao (1886-1969) was educated in Brahmo Balika Vidyalay and Bethune college, took child care and mother care programmes. She established *Naari Sheba Sangha* in Kolkata. She was born in the illustrious family of the Rays, her father was Upendra Kishore Ray Chowdhury and mother was Vidhumukhi Devi. She wrote twenty books. In 1956 she received Government acknowledgement for the book *Nije poro*. She used to paint. She wrote the



Fig.61.Sukhalata Rao,Illustration for Behula an Indian Myth



Fig.61.Sukhalata Rao,Illustration for Behula an Indian Myth



Sukhalata Rao,Behula an Indian Myth



Fig.61. Sukhalata Rao,Illustration for Behula an Indian myth

book '*Behula an Indian myth*' in English and illustrated it as well. She illustrated it with twelve watercolors, reproduced in colours with an introduction by Rabindranath Tagore. It was published by U. Ray and sons. She received her art education from her father who was well known for his knowledge in half tone prints, writings for children and illustrations.

In Modern Review- Rabindranath wrote a review of the illustrations for Be-

hula, an India myth –(Fig.61) “Mrs Sukhalata Rao has caught in the web of her story the spirit of the village epic of Bengal, Behula which has sprung from the heart of our people & has lived in oral traditions & folk-lore, sung & performed by the local operatic troupes of this province. It gives us the picture of the ideal wife, her heroic sacrifice & conjures the atmosphere of home life in its humble majesty, touching simple hearts with the beauty & depth of its sentiments.”⁶⁰

On the same painter wrote Sister Nivedita-

‘In Sukhalata’s painting is seen Srimati lying at the step of the stupa, in



Sukhalata Rao, Behula an Indian Myth



Fig.62.Sukhalata Rao, Illustrations for Galpo ar Galpo



Sukhalata Rao, Illustrations for Galpo ar Galpo



Sukhalata Rao, Illustrations for Galpo ar Galpo

⁶⁰ Rabindranath Tagore ,Behula an Indian myth, The Modern Review for January,1933

her hand is the lamp of devotion and at the base of the stupa lies flowers for worshipping. It would have been better if the flowers were strewn on the floor, as because the flower casket is a cheap varanasi thali, very little of the stupa is seen hence it is the pujarini who is prominent & not the one who is worshipped'.⁶¹

Her Illustrations for *Galpo ar Galpo* are also worth mentioning. These are simple drawings illustrating the translation of popular English Fairy tales in Bengali. They also show her father's influences in regard to drawing and figuration. Hence the influence of the indigenous as well as western is visible in her work. (Fig.62)

Hashirashi Devi was born to Gopal Chandra Bandyopadhyay .She was educated in home. She started painting from a very early age, but in secret so that no one sees her painting. Her sister was a very well-known writer Prabhabati Devi Saraswati, under her influence Hashirashi started writing. She was also popular for her writings on children. She would visit Jorasanko with her sister and came in touch with Abanindranath and Rabindranth. She learnt painting from Abanindranath Tagore. Much later she took admission in Government college of art and craft(1960) to learn sculpture. Her paintings were appreciated in Paris and was sold. She had exhibitions in Delhi, Bombay and Lucknow.

Her paintings were printed in the journals: *Bharatvarsha,Bichitra,Basumati*. Rabindranath named her Chitralkha due to her artistic talent.She wrote the novels: *Nishpradip, Manusher Ghar ,Bhorer Bhairavi ,Raktalilar Ratnaraji ,Rajkumar jago*. She also wrote several rhymes which are now lost: they were mostly for children. She received Gold medal from Calcutta University. And was also a talented musician.

She was married at the age of eleven and widowed a few years later, she had a daughter who also died as a child. Her daughter's memories would appear in her work again and again. She lived a secluded and lonely life in

⁶¹ Sister Nivedita,Sukhalata Rao,Srimati,Martyr,The Complete works of Sister Nivedita. Vol.3,p.81

a moffusil town and in spite of having a weak vision continued painting and writing.⁶²(Fig.63)

Thus it can be observed that new spaces of visibility opened up within



Hashirashi Devi,untitled,Water colour

the visual spaces of ridicule and desire. These new spaces of femininity which though were constructed parallel to the imagination of nation and reformulation of a new patriarchy which appropriated these spaces of femininity and defined it in terms of interiority as against the external domination of the colonial power and brought women nearer to the public sphere by imparting art and craft education, held exhibitions and involved them in serious art-practices.

62 The main reference for Hashirashi Devi was the Nari Charitabhidhan by Jiban Saha,p.610