

Chapter IV

The formulation of a “contextual” modernism in Santiniketan

If one of the issues shared by both the artists of the Calcutta Group and those comprising the trend of socio-political realism in the art of the nineteen-forties in Bengal happen to be the common rejection of the “Bengal school” mannerism of classicised, romantic and mythic representation of themes remote from contemporary experience, then it becomes pertinent to discuss what was happening in the same period in Santiniketan. The relevance of such a consideration comes from the fact that despite close links with the so-called “Bengal school”, Santiniketan evolved a distinctly different course from the same to bring about a sort of transformation-from-within. The foundational ideals of Rabindranath Tagore’s educational institution coupled with the efforts of Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij among the foremost, led to the formulation of a “contextual modernism”¹ in this semi-rural, away-from-the-city retreat.

On the one hand, the need that was generated in Santiniketan to view art and craft as unified phenomenon rather than as starkly distinct entities, brought about the search for, as well as revitalizing of, traditional practices which went beyond the limited confines of mere ‘revival’. On the other hand, a concerted attempt to liberate art from its museum/gallery location and to (re)introduce a more intimate link in the relationship between art and daily life, gave a dimension of purposiveness to practice. Rabindranath Tagore’s educational experiment in Santiniketan began with the simple core of the school for young minds, with the fundamental alternative in its philosophy of aiming to remove the alienation of knowledge through a close contact with nature. From this humble beginning in 1901, the experiment grew into a University finally in 1921 extending the concept

¹ cf. R. Siva Kumar, “Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism”, exhibition catalogue, N.G.M.A., New Delhi, 2000

of close contact with nature to education of a wider context beyond the school, where Kala Bhavana as the faculty of fine arts was to play a key role in this "Visva Bharati".

Santiniketan — the process of concretisation of a 'poet's dream', and the defining of its ideals

As a poet's dream realized, the history of Santiniketan is closely tied up with Rabindranath's persona, his life and career. However, he did not discover the location, for that the credit goes to his father, the 'Maharshi' Debendranath Tagore, who soon after his son was born, had been on a visit to a friend's estate, some hundred miles west of Calcutta. The nearest railway station was Bolpur from where he had to take a palanquin. On the way, passing through the open stretch of scanty-vegetation landscape then characteristic of the Birbhum district, he felt a desire to sit under a pair of *chhatim* trees for his regular evening meditation. The spiritual realization that he is supposed to have had at the spot gave him a tremendous motivation to procure land here for a permanent association with the place. So it was that in 1863 he bought sufficiently enough land from the landlords of Raipur and eventually laid the foundations for an *ashram*, with a guest-house (christened *Santiniketan* which ultimately lent its name to the place), a library and a "temple" — a large hall with coloured-glass walls, bare floor and no image or paraphernalia of worship save devotion to the formless ultimate — so that people may spend a couple of days here away from the hustle of daily life to meditate for spiritual peace. Simultaneous to the establishment of the *ashram* there began a greening of the red laterite soil and a transformation of the ambience. It was to this Santiniketan that Rabindranath accompanied his father, for what was to be his first visit, after his *upanayan*²

² The investiture with the 'sacred thread', the sign of being 'twice born', was a right that Brahmins enjoy, and the ceremony involved the shaving of the head (which embarrassed the young Rabindranath, especially the thought of being ridiculed at school), a period of meditation on the mystery of life and the universe, and the initiation to the Vedic rites along through the *Gayatri* chant. Despite liberated and unorthodox in his views the Maharshi did maintain some of the ceremonies meticulously, the *upanayan* being one of them.

ceremony in 1873. Away from the confines of the 'servocracy'³ and the school, Santiniketan spelt freedom for the young boy.

"It was evening when we reached Bolpur. As I got into the palanquin, I closed my eyes. I wanted to preserve the whole of the wonderful vision to be unfolded before my waking eyes in the morning When I woke at dawn my heart was thrilling tremendously as I stepped outside There was no servant rule here, and the only ring which encircled me was the blue of the horizon which the presiding goddess of these solitudes had drawn round them. Within this I was free to move about as I chose In the hollows of the sandy soil the rainwater had ploughed deep furrows, carving out miniature mountain ranges full of red gravel and pebbles of various shapes through which ran tiny streams revealing the geography of Lilliput."⁴

There was indeed nothing exceptionally beautiful about Santiniketan then; the enchanting landscape of groves and flowering bushes was a much later development. The chief merit lay in the openness of the stretches of land broken by the ravines of red earth, and the bare simplicity of earth and sky facing each other.

Contact with a different Bengal countryside occurred once again, when sometime in 1890 he could no longer evade his father's instructions to take over the charges of their family estate in Shelidah (currently part of Bangladesh). He had been here before, as a young boy accompanying his elder brother Jyotirindranath Tagore, but that was without responsibilities. This time, the

³ Being entirely under the control of a routine where the servants looking after him had the authority, this was Rabindranath Tagore's later coinage for such a system. (cf. Krishna Kripalani, "Rabindranath Tagore/ A biography", Visva Bharati (Calcutta), second edition, 1980, p. 39)

⁴ "My reminiscences", as quoted in Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 49. Along with this freedom, his father made him learn the hymns and gave him lessons in Sanskrit, Bengali and English literature, as well as astronomy at night under the clear sky full of stars.

discipline of years spent on the houseboat Padma on the river of the same name, provided him with an inspiring intimacy with nature and the people of the heart of rural Bengal. This was not only stimulating for his poetry, but also provided an insight into the life of the common people, the social and economic patterns with all its ills and shortcomings. His sensibility as a poet was inseparable with a widening sympathy for people, and the preliminary efforts for rural reconstruction began here, later to become an important part of his Visva Bharati. And in the nature of Shelidah he found two appealing aspects, that of space and flow, in the sky and the river. In the short stories of the period he left the indelible mark of this experience with man and nature.⁵

In 1898 Rabindranath Tagore took his wife and children to Shelidah. Despite engaging a teacher for English, he personally supervised his children's education. His own childhood experiences in school now prompted him to try to put his principles and alternative ideas into practice. From here the idea of an organised and wider field of systematic education arose in him and he decided to shift to Santiniketan. So began the *Brahmacharya Ashram* at Santiniketan with just five students, his eldest son being one of them, on the 22nd of December 1901, on the ideals of the ancient *tapovan*-s of the Upanishadic age but suitably modified to the needs of the present. The existing soulless and mechanical system of education was to be replaced with one in which both teaching and learning would be pleasurable; however life in the ashram was adequately austere and simple. With the conviction that nature was the best teacher, classes were held under the trees, in the open and students were encouraged to study and love nature in all its changing moods and seasons; education in the sciences was to begin naturally from the study of nature and

⁵ In a letter, he had described the episode of his estate manager's enquiries for his dinner, thus: "As soon as the patter of words came to an end, the peace of the stars descended and filled my heart to overflowing". The trivial chatter for food had seemed discordant to a poet's sensibilities, but the contradiction led to deeper realizations: "The very spot on which the moonlight falls is my landed property, but the moonlight tells me that my ownership is an illusion and my landed estate tells me that this moonlight is all emptiness. And as for poor me, I remain distracted between the two." Krishna Kripalani wrote of Rabindranath's short stories, that the India he depicts "is not falsely romantic India of the Maharajas and tigers, and snake-charmers and naked sadhus, the India of Kipling and of the tourist guide books. Tagore's India is of men and women rooted to the soil for centuries, India in transition where different classes and types are reacting differently to the impact of the machine age the characters in his short stories are real and vivid". [cf. Kripalani, *ibid*, pp. 142 & 163]

the training of the senses developing the child's curiosity and aptitude. For him education meant the growth and development of the complete person, of the emotions and the senses as much as the intellect, with the individual in its fullness overflowing into the community. Community service encouraged in this school almost took the form of a self-governing body. While individual self-expression and development had all the possibilities of leading to a bloated ego, Rabindranath felt that this could be countered with the awareness of a universal and divine power, pervading and uniting all life and nature, the common and redeeming feature of various faiths of mankind.

"The ideas with which we stuff ourselves for some twenty years or more enter into no chemical combination with the lives we live, with the result that our minds present a fantastic appearance. Some of our ideas remain as it were gummed on, while others fall off in course of time We swagger about with a few cheap, flashy English words, bringing out profundities of English learning at inappropriate times and in completely wrong places, unable even to see ourselves as unwitting actors in an absurd farce It follows inevitably from the present system of education that the acquirements in which we pass our whole childhood fits us for nothing but a clerkship or a trade, and that we have no use for them in our everyday life at home, but take them off and fold them away in a box along with our office and turban and chaddar"⁶

Seventeen years since the founding of the school, on the 22nd December 1918, Rabindranath Tagore laid the foundations for his Visva Bharati, the world-

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university, with the motto "*yatra visvam bhavati eka nidam*" — where the world meets as in a single nest.

"'Visva Bharati', he declares, 'represents India where she has her wealth of mind which is for all. Visva Bharati acknowledges India's obligation to offer to others the hospitality of her best culture and India's right to accept from other's their best.'"⁷

Visva Bharati had a truly active beginning. As an example, Leonard Elmhirst accompanied William Pearson to Santiniketan to devote himself to Rabindranath Tagore's rural reconstruction programme. Sylvain Levi arrived as the first visiting professor and organized the first ever department of Tibetan and Chinese studies in an Indian university. On December 23rd 1921 Visva Bharati was formally inaugurated.

If the Santiniketan educational experiment begun incidentally at the inception of the *Swadeshi* movement, appears to carry any trace of a nationalistic search for an alternative to the repressive colonial education system, and if it seems to bear the stamp of the revivalist/reformist attempt to hark back to the days of the past in its initial ideal of the forest hermitages of bygone days, then it becomes imperative at this point to realize Rabindranath Tagore's differing point of view from that of a contemporary political personality, Mahatma Gandhi. Between the poet and the Mahatma, there was indeed a close relationship; nevertheless, the two great men agreed to disagree in a healthy spirit. It will aid our understanding of what Rabindranath Tagore intended of his Visva Bharati if we consider briefly the differences that surfaced in the salient encounters between the two men.

Although it was the Mahatma's second visit to Santiniketan (he had been there a month before but Rabindranath Tagore was not present in Santiniketan then), Rabindranath Tagore and Mahatma Gandhi met for the first time in March 1915.

⁶ From Rabindranath Tagore: "*Shikshar Herpher*" (1892), [translated as "Topsy-turvy education" in the English rendering, *Visva Bharati Quarterly*, 1947] as quoted in Krishna Kripalani *ibid*, pp. 197-198.

Having disbanded his Phoenix school in South Africa, and following the suggestion of the common acquaintance Charles Freer Andrews, the boys had earlier been sent to Santiniketan where they had been eagerly welcomed by the poet. During his six-day visit the foundation for the Gandhi-Rabindranath friendship was laid, but the contrast of personalities and ideals was increasingly evident.

"Beneath this mask of contrast was a kinship so deep and subtle that only they themselves were aware of it The so-called disciples or 'devout followers' of both saw mostly the grimace in the mask and not the smile concealed behind it."⁸

Mahatma Gandhi put his finger on the weak spots that he noticed, most frankly. He expressed his shock that despite Rabindranath Tagore's intolerance of Brahmanism vestiges of the same persisted in the sanctuary of Santiniketan, as in the practice of separate seats for Brahmin students in the refectory. This relic from the phase of social conservatism in Rabindranath Tagore's spiritual development in the initial stages when the *ashram* was founded on the monastic ideals of forest hermitages, was later duly abolished. But for the moment Rabindranath Tagore's reply perhaps expressed his unwillingness to admit his own limitations. He justified his practice by saying that he did not believe in forcing other to do against their will — should the pupils willingly decide to sit at the same table, he would be most happy but would not compel them to do so. Mahatma Gandhi also pointed out the contradiction that though the inmates of the *ashram* professed their belief in self-reliance, the contradiction lay in the fact that they relied on the labour of others. He suggested that the students and teachers do away with paid labour and take upon themselves all tasks of keeping the campus clean and cooking the meals. With Rabindranath Tagore's permission the experiment was launched on the 10th of March but did not last

⁷ Krishna Kripalani *ibid*, p. 282.

⁸ Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 257.

long as a permanent practice.⁹

In March 1921, while in Chicago Rabindranath Tagore wrote to C.F. Andrews saying that, despite the fact that he loved his fellow-beings and treasured their love for him, he had been chosen by destiny to ply his boat at that spot where the current was against him. “What an irony of fate is this”, he wrote, “that I should be preaching co-operation of cultures between East and West on this side of the sea just at the moment when the doctrine of non-co-operation is preached on the other side”. He was referring to Mahatma Gandhi’s national non-cooperation movement in India against the British, which began almost concomitantly as his establishment of the Visva Bharati. Rabindranath Tagore found that the sudden upsurge of patriotic zeal had resulted in an exaggerated sense of self-righteousness and a contempt of anything that was foreign.¹⁰ In September, Mahatma Gandhi visited Calcutta, and there was an extended closed-door meeting between him and the poet, with C.F. Andrews being the only other person present. While no authorized reports exist, Leonard Elmhirst claimed that the poet later gave him a gist of what had transpired between the two of them. When Mahatma Gandhi declared that his entire movement was based on non-violence, Mahatma Tagore is supposed to have told him, “Come and look over the edge of my verandah, Gandhiji. Look down there and see what your non-violent followers are up to. They have stolen cloth from the shops in the Chitpore Road, they’ve lit that bonfire in my courtyard and are now howling round it like a lot of demented dervishes. Is that non-violence?”¹¹ On the appeal from Mahatma Gandhi that the poet take to the spinning on the wheel, he is supposed to have smiled and said, “Poems I can spin, songs I can spin, but

⁹ It survives today in the form of *Gandhi Punyaha*, an annual observation of a single day when the students and teachers of the university engage in a token spring-cleaning, and give the day off for all paid servants.

¹⁰ He ended up in a debate of opposite opinions when he voiced his own in a public lecture in Calcutta titled ‘*Sikshar Milan*’; it produced a rejoinder from the young novelist Saratchandra Chattopadhyay titled ‘*Sikshar Birodh*’ — a further clarification of his position in ‘*Satyer Ahvan*’ fetched Gandhi’s own reply in the pages of the weekly ‘*Young India*’ under the caption ‘The Great Sentinel’. (cf. Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 303)

¹¹ Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 304.

what a mess I would make, Gandhiji, of your precious cotton!"¹² It is during this meeting that he made clear his conviction, that India has always offered hospitality to all nations and creeds, and that it still has "much to learn from the West and its science", and "to collaborate among ourselves" through education. Rabindranath Tagore did not doubt Mahatma Gandhi's faith; he feared that the followers were moved more by passion and prejudice to work up a fever of nationalism.

When a further and stronger opposition of views surfaced in Mahatma Gandhi's second reply to Rabindranath Tagore's "The call of truth" in the *Modern Review*, the poet unwilling to prolong the futile debate retired to Santiniketan. As Krishna Kripalani wrote, he went back not to sulk, but to sing, choosing to bear all opposition in the capacity and identity of the poet that he was.¹³

Yet, in February 1940, when Kasturba and Mahatma Gandhi visited Santiniketan, it was the Mahatma to whom he expressed his concern about the future of his institution. In a letter that he handed over to Mahatma Gandhi he made this appeal:

"Accept this institution under your protection, giving it an assurance of permanence if you consider it to be a national asset. Visva Bharati is like a vessel which is carrying the cargo of my life's best treasure, and I hope it may claim special care from my countrymen for its preservation."¹⁴

¹² Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 304.

¹³ Admonishing himself, he had written earlier, "If you cannot march in step with your compatriots in the greatest crisis of their history, beware of saying that they are in the wrong, and you in the right! But give up your place in the ranks, and go back to your poet's corner and be prepared to meet with ridicule and public disgrace." (Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 309)

¹⁴ "The Mahatma's reply was characteristic — modest and noble: 'Who am I to take this institution under my protection? It carries God's protection, because it is the creation of an earnest soul. It is not a show thing. Gurudev himself is international, because he is truly national. Therefore all his creation is international, and Visva Bharati is the best of all. I have no doubt whatsoever that Gurudev deserves to be relieved of all anxiety about its future so far as the financial part is concerned. In my reply to his touching appeal I have promised all the assistance I am capable of rendering. This note is the beginning of the effort.'" (Krishna Kripalani, *ibid*, p. 427.)

The Mahatma kept his promise, and in 1951 Visva Bharati became a central university.

The murals of Santiniketan

The Santiniketan education experiment came as an alternative to both the colonial schools as well as the revivalist/nationalist reform attempts. In Santiniketan, the valuing of tradition was not aimed to culminate in inflexibility, resistance to change, or cultural insularity. Neither was the stress laid on the modern expected to equate with repudiation of antecedents. With the intention to "go to the fundamentals of growth", wrote K.G. Subramanyan, the Santiniketan experiments "were not just a poet's dream, they had a solid rationale".¹⁵

It is in the light of this rationale that we have to comprehend Kala Bhavana, the faculty of fine arts in Visva Bharati, as an institution that was originally conceived to go beyond the limiting confines of a professional art school. It was to spill over into a wider context, initiating a broad-based art movement, bridging the east and the west, past and present, into a harmonious encounter. It was expected to develop into a centre of creative activity from where a movement could emerge. While the survey of its own environment led to a modest collection of art works that was to become the Kala Bhavana museum, Rabindranath Tagore's personal initiative led to a sizeable art library with a diverse collection of books on world art, including the modern, admirably rare for an institution of its time.

The other determining factor behind the distinctive characteristic of Kala Bhavana was Rabindranath Tagore's first hand experience of Western art. Although it may be said to have begun with William Rothenstein's visit to India in 1910, the more direct impact was the poet's March-April 1913 visit to Chicago. At the Art Institute in Chicago, he saw the famed "Armory show" with

¹⁵ K.G. Subramanyan, in the Introduction to the catalogue "Santiniketan/ The Making of contextual modernism", op.cit., (unpaginated)

its nearly 1600 exhibits comprising a comprehensive spectrum of modern European art. In 1920, after attending a lecture by Stella Kramrisch in London, he invited the art-historian to Santiniketan. She arrived there in 1921 to deliver a series of forty-three lectures spanning Gothic to Dadaism.

It is this air of catholicity and a claim to a world heritage that fostered the artists of Santiniketan. And it is in this context, with the foregoing as the backdrop for Kala Bhavana, that we have to understand its distinctive formulation of the "contextual" modernism in the language of art. It was here, that following the ideal to link art with life and make it part of the daily experience, that the format of the mural became an important vehicle for self-expression. Murals, by definition, belong to walls, and should ideally be integral parts of the whole, which is the building that supports it. The murals of Santiniketan, one must also remember, were not commissioned projects — they were integral parts of the community's own cultural life. Neither were the murals dictated by strictly political agenda, therefore they carried a different message, if at all. As examples of interrelating art and life, and extending art into the environment — thereby aesthetically transforming the ambience — the early murals of Santiniketan have certain features that place them apart.

"The early Santiniketan murals work with, not against, the architecture and contribute to its personality, often transforming the total environment and making the site more exciting, or intimate. They are not just paintings or reliefs on the wall; they generate in the building or its surroundings a new kind of vitality. Their role, therefore, is organic, not ornamental. In return the paintings and reliefs gain a new dimension or physical context from the architecture they did not in themselves possess (except notionally)."¹⁶

By the end of the nineteen-thirties, the mural project in Santiniketan had already

¹⁶ K.G. Subramanyan, Foreword to *The Santiniketan Murals*, J. Chakraborty, R. Siva Kumar, Arun. K. Nag, Seagull Books in association with Visva Bharati, Calcutta 1995, p. xi.

progressed from its initial tentative attempts to those of the Patha Bhavana Old Library building, the Sriniketan murals (including the *Halakarshana* by Nandalal Bose), the Santoshalaya paintings, the copy of Bagh murals in Kala Bhavana as well as relatively smaller ones in the boys and girls hostels as well as the Malancha and Uttarayana buildings.

The beginning of an interest in murals dates back to 1909 when Nandalal Bose had been part of the team that accompanied Lady Christiana Herringham to copy the murals at Ajanta. The scale and complexity of the paintings paved the way for Nandalal Bose's shift from the small-scale intimacy of Abanindranath Tagore to a broader and monumental vastness in his own paintings. Through the catalytic presence of Rabindranath Tagore, who became an active agent in the transformation of the new 'indigenous' art movement in its Santiniketan phase, Nandalal Bose outgrew his pre-Santiniketan days. He discovered that murals were apt vehicles for the intended art-community link envisaged to bring the teachers and students together in a common pursuit on a single project. In 1921, a trip to the Bagh caves became a more immediate inspiration to try out murals back in Santiniketan.

The contrast of personalities between Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee becomes evident if one were to compare even early examples of their respective murals. The earliest surviving mural in Santiniketan happens to be the lotus scroll in the Patha Bhavana office (then the library) done by Nandalal Bose sometime around 1923. Executed in an improvised technique of pigments mixed with rice starch as the binder, the motif and style of this painting derives heavily from the tradition of Buddhist reliefs and the paintings at Ajanta. Inspired by his experience of assisting Nandalal on this mural, Benodebehari Mukherjee ventured to paint sixteen niches on the south verandah of the Santoshalaya (the kindergarten hostel) in 1925. Using the same improvised technique he painted scenes from the immediate surroundings, the life of the *santal* community, in a style completely free of the influence of Ajanta.

Systematic technical expertise was made available in Santiniketan in the nineteen-twenties. In 1924, Pratima Tagore introduced the ‘fresco buono’ process she had learned in France¹⁷, while Narsinghlal, a traditional craftsman from Rajasthan demonstrated the Jaipuri Fresco technique in 1927. Following these, Nandalal Bose’s *Halakarshana* mural (1930) commemorating the first symbolic tilling-of-the-land ceremony in Santiniketan (1928), explored the fresco buono process for a contemporary event. Historical by nature, recording a real event in contemporary times, the mural translated it into a narrative of monumental and iconic stature. Actual historical personalities such as the poet himself in the role of the ploughman, and Vidhushekhar Shashtri as the officiating priest, became part of a majestic narrative. The mural, divided into day-piece vertical sections along its horizontal span, utilised varying rhythmic animation in the figure groups, and the modelling, to unify the whole into a single flow of the event.

Unlike the problematic efforts at forging a parallelism of styles as in the pedagogic experiments in the north east block of the Kala Bhavana boys’ hostel, or the conglomeration of diverse themes ranging from the literary to the immediately historical as in the Patha Bhavana verandah, the ceiling mural by Benodebehari Mukherjee in the north west block of the Kala Bhavana boys’ hostel (1940) is a single painting with a coherent theme in a personal pictorial style. With nature as the central dominant he has interwoven vegetation, birds and beasts, and human figures in a harmonious coexistence reflective of the Birbhum village ambience. There is nothing overtly expressionistic in the way in which he has dealt with the landscape elements, but rather in a calligraphic range of brush strokes he attempted to depict the diversity of foliage and the structural distinctiveness of each form — especially the trees. Painted without a cartoon or a layout, the ceiling composition began with a central pond from which the artist took the viewers in a walk through the village, transferring the perceptual experience into alternating scale and orientation. There is no

¹⁷ She had studied under R. La Montagne St. Hubert, whose book “The art of Fresco Painting” later proved to be a source of information to the artists of Santiniketan.

dominant angle of view or point of vision in the composition. Coupled with the fact that one is looking up at a ceiling, the way in which the viewer is expected to follow the pattern of forms removes the experience from that of a single-point-of-view picture-on-the-wall (therefore, of all associations with the notion of a illusory penetration into perspectival distance) to a constantly changing directional stress. The effect of a picture *overhead* becomes close to that of a canopy, painted with myriad interpenetrating views of a village. Quite obviously, there has been no attempted to frame the picture in the sense of a confining border. Figures and forms spill out from the painting on to the wide band of colour that runs along the perimeter, suggesting continuity and movement. From a central origin — the waters of the pond around which the daily life of the village revolves — to the outer directions, the possibility of unlimited visual extension almost parallels the organic process of growth of a village that spreads outward from its humble beginnings of a cluster. In this the mural owes to the aesthetics of the Far Eastern tradition of scroll-paintings, combining it with the local character of the land¹⁸. However, one has to realize that, the ceiling mural offers a very positively optimistic view in the sense of reflecting the greening of Santiniketan — the luxuriant nature of the painting is certainly not the dry and arid landscape of the *khoai*¹⁹ in Birbhum district.

Despite the reference to the Far Eastern tradition, the calligraphic brushwork that the artist devised for his painting was not merely an adoption of the Chinese/Japanese conventions. He devised distinctly individual grouping of strokes to correspond to the physical character of the forms that he observed all around, be it human, foliage or animal, to arrive at a linguistic vocabulary that stems from immediate experience. The effectiveness of the painting lies in its colour palette as well — the forms painted in white, ochre and green, and bounded by contour lines in darker shades of the same, are relieved against the red of the

¹⁸ By 1936 Benodebehari's interest in the Far Eastern traditions had culminated in a self-financed trip to China and Japan to study the art of these countries in the first hand.

¹⁹ The local term for the rough, pebbly, reddish-brown laterite topography. The visual parallel to Benodebehari's use of the central pond around which the village expands, has been noticed in Egyptian paintings that employ a similar device. Benodebehari's wide interest in world art and its synthesis in his own paintings stand testified through this observation.

earth. The use of egg-tempera as the medium allowed the flexibility of a touch-work immediacy that enlivens the forms and animates their grouping together.

"It is the triple maturity in the combination of experiential depth, terminological clarity and technical dexterity that makes the mural a work of effortless spontaneity, a free improvisation upon internalised knowledge and experience in response to a context, and not a laboured composition. We see this in the lucid rhythmic unity that pervades it, in the relaxed gestural quality of its calligraphy and in the holistic intermingling of nature and human life it effects."²⁰

Parallel to the ceiling mural in chronological sequence was Nandalal's 1940 embellishments in the 'Dinantika' (literally, 'of the day's end') or the 'Cha Chakra' (tea-drinkers' alliance) building. Originally in effect, a structure without walls it is a two storied pavilion where the embellishments on the lintel and the ceiling of the first floor follow a light-hearted mood. The allusion to Japanese prototypes here, as in all instances of eclecticism in Santiniketan, has been sufficiently modified by the experience of the rugged landscape of the land, just as the formal solemnity of the tea-ceremony was transformed into the light-hearted relief of friendly gathering of colleagues. In this pillared pavilion the first-floor paintings by Nandalal Bose consist of mythical figures of *kinnara*-s and a mermaid on the ceiling and indulgent dwarfs on the lintel space. While the ceiling is a rich chromatic density, the lintel contains light-bodied figures painted with white-line contours against a red ground, which reverses the accustomed form-background tonal relation. In the Dinantika Nandalal Bose emphasised his conviction in the legitimacy of embellishment as a function of mural paintings, but amply transformed it by infusing the spirit of joviality and good humour.²¹

²⁰ R. Siva Kumar, "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", op. cit.

²¹ In the ground floor, the central pillar and the walls were painted with motifs taken from the metal engravings on a chariot from Bonkathi near Burdwan, by girl students of Kala Bhavana.

Two years later, in 1942, Nandalal Bose undertook another mural in the Cheena Bhavana, the department of Chinese studies, and he chose Rabindranath Tagore's play titled "Natir Puja" for the theme. His involvement with the play dates back to the early performances, in which his daughter Gauri took part in the leading role (of the court dancer who is converted to Buddhism and subsequently gives up her life for her new faith), and finds one of the early representations in the single figure of the dancer in his 1933 mural in the Patha Bhavana verandah. From such single images he ultimately reached the horizontal scroll-like composition of the Cheena Bhavana through the intermediate exercise of eight card-sized drawings. Evidently for Nandalal Bose, the theme held significance in the context of the department of Chinese studies because of its thematic link with Buddhism. Moreover, Rabindranath Tagore's play dwells with the psychological crisis of the queen Lokeshwari — who having been deprived of her husband and favourite son by the Buddhist faith, vacillates between personal and religious emotions — as much as it deals with the personal sacrifice of the dancer.²² If one were to follow Rabindranath Tagore's literary text, one would first have to take into consideration the fact that the theme had initially found shape as a poem ("*Pujarini*", 1899) and had been later converted by the poet into a play for convenience of performance. Obviously, there are differences of emphasis in the two. The poem contains verbal passages that lend themselves more easily to visual images than the play, which relies more on the content of the dialogues. Nandalal Bose not only took both into consideration as his reference, but also resorted to a personal interpretation of the theme. He divided the narrative into eight sequences, as a series of card studies demonstrate, and proceeded to depict the play shorn of all its subplots as a central theme of the dancer's transformation and selfless devotion. And within this structure, dominated as in the literary composition by female characters, he took liberties of departing from his sources, for instance by changing the character of an aged nun in the play into a much younger lady

²² The theme gains further significance if one considers that it was composed in the after of the 1926 Hindu-Muslim riots. (R. Siva Kumar, "Santiniketan Murals/ A brief History", *The Santiniketan Murals*, ibid, p. 47)

in a monk’s robe with a shaven head in his painting. The contrast brought about by such a change becomes potent with implied readings for the mural — when one observes this humble yet resilient figure of the young nun confronted by the queen, it becomes possible to read her as a representation of the new faith — supple yet firm in her stand. Another significant change in interpretation is the replacement of nature for god — the mural opens with the figure of the dancer in the palace garden with offerings in her hand and ends with the slain form of the dancer in the foreground of a vast landscape where the rising moon echoes the form of the *stupa*. This subtle substitution of god with nature perhaps follows the roots of Nandalal Bose’s own transformation as an artist in Santiniketan, and follows the pantheistic rhythm of the institution.

Nandalal Bose took three days to complete the painting although he had planned to complete it in an even shorter period of time. His use of the egg-tempera medium modified by substituting the conventional use of brush with bits of folded rags as the colour-applying tool resulted in the characteristic discarding of details in favour of the rhythmic essence of the components of the composition. The setting of the composition clearly indicates a performance on stage; that a real incident of a performance was the basis of the pictorial composition endows the painting with a certain quality of historicity distinctly different from imagined rendering of a mythic narrative. However, the mural, in its necessity to adjust to the given space of the wall, had to go through an easing of the strict scene division in the card drawings and introduce spatial overlap and condensation; while this served to concentrate attention on the figural content of the composition, the original expanse of figure-space relation in the drawings suffered in the final version to quite an extent.

It was not only Nandalal Bose who was present at the Cheena Bhavana in 1942; almost the entire Kala Bhavana had been involved in a huge project of decoration of the department. While others were working on the available spaces in the ground floor, Benodebehari Mukherjee painted a mural on the walls of a staircase landing leading to the first floor of the building. Choosing campus life in

Santiniketan as the theme, he painted a picture where he turned his limiting physical condition of a failing eyesight to the best pictorial advantage, by devising the composition on the lines of the compositional matrix of Japanese screen paintings. The painting begins on a left wall and continues along the landing stretch. On the short width space of the left wall, the painting opens with images of monks and scholars engaged in study (and even dozing over their books) and continues along the corner into fragmentary views of people ascending and descending a staircase on the next wall — referring back to (and thereby connecting with) the actual experience of the viewers moving up the steps and along the landing. Figures strolling through landscape, conversing with others beyond windows, form the next segment, as the viewers are then taken inside an art-studio interior in the following section, where the guiding teacher closely resembling the artist himself a little detachedly observes his students engrossed in their practice. Using architectural segments as devices to coordinate the span of the mural into units that hold the figures, Benodebehari Mukherjee had created a composition of fluid transitions from the interior spaces to the exterior, such that at times a curious ambivalence results — the bounded units of space become ambiguous connectives or open areas — much the same as in the structure of the screen paintings that he emulated. The location in a staircase landing also had a determining role for such compositional strategies. The shallow space that is available to step back does not easily allow a total view of the entire composition at a time, enabling only part-by-part transition from one segment to the next. The composition, in keeping with this physical reality, has been dealt with in the nature of an assemblage of views, not as a strictly sequential narrative, and tends to give a parallel experience to that of a stroll through the campus itself with shifting attention stringing together diverse glimpses that meet the eye.

Benodebehari Mukherjee's mural compares well with Nandalal Bose's painting on a similar theme, which is part of the 1933 mural in the Patha Bhavana verandah. Where Benodebehari Mukherjee's mural is light-hearted and indulgent, and carries a detached sense of humour (the maxims that he

incorporated within the painting as scripts carry double meanings when read in association with the images they are placed against), Nandalal Bose was more concerned with the seriousness of a theme of ideal coexistence, of man and nature, as well as that of man's diverse pursuits — rustic, artistic and scholarly. Considering the space where it has been painted, Benodebehari Mukherjee's mural is at the same time public in the general nature of all murals and yet, invites intimate individual experience through its compositional structure and formal devices.

While Nandalal Bose's murals in the "Keerti Mandir" at Baroda (executed between 1939 and 1946) have been read as "a vision of Indian history"²³, Benodebehari Mukherjee painted a 'vision' of a different kind in 1946/47 at the Hindi Bhavana in Santiniketan. Since the department concentrated on the study of medieval Hindi literature, the mural to be painted in the library of the same department naturally suggested the theme of medieval Hindi saints-poets. That the mural, as R. Siva Kumar points out, is well above a man's full height, and runs on three walls determining our mode of relating to it — "and the point at which it is designed to come alive is simultaneously determined"²⁴. Also, unlike the 1940 ceiling painting, it is sufficiently "framed" by a red band, and the painting does not allow the viewer any privilege of proximity.

"Being above a-full-man's-height we are free from the psychological oppression of a head on confrontation with sheer size ,,,,, As viewers we grow aware of our 'position' and note the separateness of the work; its distinctness; its totality that does not do away with us, its audience, but calls for a new mode of

²³ From the image of the "*Trikaleshwara*" to the Mahabharata panels to the painting based on Rabindranath's play "*Natir Puja*" and finally the panel dealing with the life of Mirabai, a hypothetical linking stream from Aryan to the Hindu to the Buddhist and then the *Bhakti* trajectories, has been suggested by Syed Mujtaba Ali as the common conceptual thread running through and linking the otherwise apparently unrelated subjects. (Syed Mujtaba Ali, "Kabiguru O Nandalal", *Syed Mujtaba Ali Rachanabali*, Vol. II, Calcutta 1979, pp. 300-303, as quoted in R. Siva Kumar "The Santiniketan Murals: A brief history", *ibid*, p. 52)

²⁴ R. Siva Kumar "The Santiniketan Murals: A brief history", *ibid*, p. 23.

empathy. The invitation here is *not to participate but to perceive and reflect.*" [emphasis added]²⁵

With the mural at the Hindi Bhavana, Benodebehari Mukherjee shifted from his earlier interest in landscapes to that of figurative compositions. Extending over three walls of the room, this is a composition that is, strictly speaking, not a narrative in the sense of episodic continuity. Rather, it has a more complex structure in which the rhythm and movement of the figural forms carry the eye from one end to the other beginning with the recluse in the mountains in the left-hand extreme and culminating in the militant version in the plains on the right. The figures are linked together, by their position with relation to the adjacent, their gestures and postures, while the mural brings together personages from different periods of the past, connected together in an implied continuity of thought. The gestures do not follow any predetermined iconographic scheme but arise from the expressive necessity of communicating the characteristic personality of the individual represented. They gather meaning in relation to the associated and the adjacent gesture, connecting up to create a sort of personal gestural vocabulary for the artist.²⁶

Since the mural is obviously not an illusionistic exercise, there is a variety of scale and dimensions in the figures, which allows a much necessary flexibility for the viewer as one moves along the length of the wall or lets the eye follow the flux from a distance. Despite indications of the far and the near, the telescoping of the same into each other allows the moving eye to adjust to the

²⁵ R. Siva Kumar: "..... And the theme is destiny", 'Nandan', Benodebehari Number, Santiniketan, 1981, p. 24.;

"Presumably planned in units covering a span of manual reach, the mural evolved a continuity with the physical pace and rhythm of work. The viewer senses intervals and links in the process of artistic execution as he walks the length of the mural. The units of space conceived as continually growing forms suggest several trajectories. The itinerant eye is led to traverse in multiple directions with the result that it returns to the point of take-off with a series of focal surprises." (Gulam mohammed Sheikh, "Viewer's view: looking at pictures", Journal of Arts and Ideas, April-June 1983, p.11)

²⁶ "The physical actions and gestures, culled from and observation of life are behavioural, not mimetic." (Gulam mohammed Sheikh, *ibid*, p. 12);

"The figures in gesture are not oriented towards the viewer, the non-gesticulating perceiver, but towards their responsive neighbours". (R. Siva Kumar, *op. cit.*, p. 25.)

immensely compact composition almost brimming with figures and shapes. This crowded feel nevertheless does not become oppressive because of the telescoping itself, which renders a throbbing vitality to the painting through its adjustments of distance and proportion. Such palpable space gives a tactile feeling over and above the visual sensation.²⁷ It is in the same measure that the Hindi Bhavana mural conveys to some the feeling of "an endless rhythm, an infinity of figures Here it's as though the solid plane has *become* figures, conjured out of the wall, not imposed on it."²⁸

The crowd that easily accommodates itself in the mural give it the flux of a procession. On the left extreme the mountainous terrain is peopled with *sadhus*, bearded, block-like, as they ponder or preach. As the hills come down to meet the plains a mendicant is found begging for alms amidst the rich plethora of images from daily life including that of a mother and child. The first of the large figures of the *bhakti* saints is that of Ramanuja, in discourse among his disciples including the engrossed Ramananda. Further groups of figures from common daily life — the cotton carder, the men carrying a palanquin, the dyer wringing the cloth — lead on to the second *bhakti* saint Kabir, solemnly seated with folded legs, yet open to the world of work in contrast to the secluded figures of the Himalayan heights. Once again, like a refrain a mother-and-child framed by their small dwelling intently watch the saint, as the world of the craftsman continue on to the next wall leading to the riverside of busy Varanasi. Amidst the flow of the river, stands Tulsidas and his mentor, the humble submissive gesture of the former (his folded hands overlapping the flames of the burning *ghats*, the cremation grounds, behind) contrasting with the unconvinced mocking

²⁷ Commenting on the crowded feeling of the mural, Gulam mohammed Sheikh wrote: "One feels that it could be possible only if the space becomes elastic enough to expand as humans push in for accommodation. The logic of elastic space closely following the life-pattern seems to inform the structure of the mural as figures diminish in scale to fit into narrow enclosures or grow in size as they come out in the open. It provides the mural with a kind of heaving wall-space that ebbs and swells as the figures change dimensions." (Gulam mohammed Sheikh, op. cit.)

²⁸ "This crowding of figures is essential for the creation of the hall as a brimming vessel, full to overflowing. Hence, perhaps, the opening inscription above the door: 'Wherever Tulsi goes, with his monk's bowl of *Karma*, he finds it cannot hold a drop more of anything, whether he dips it in river, well or lake'" (Timothy Hyman, "Some notes on Benodbehari Mukherji", '*Nandan*', Benodebehari Number, Santiniketan, 1981, p. 15.)

gesture of his *guru* who holds a serpentine staff in his hand and gesticulates in an assertive *mudra*. As the flow of the river transmutes the world of work into the world of performers to the right of the master-disciple group and on to the third wall, the calm and convinced total surrender of the blind poet Surdas is matched by the innocence of the boy who guides him by the gentle touch of the hand. Once again the refrain repeats itself, as a mother looking on in awe and reverence at the poet-saint clasps her boy (of almost the same age as the poet's guide) to her bosom. The final scene begins on a staccato rhythm of the entry of the mounted Guru Govind Singh, sword in hand, into a village — but the village completely occupies the final half of this section, where joyful daily activity absorbs the religious fervour. The concluding figure, not unexpectedly, is the refrain, a mother with her new born in a hut amidst a grove with a lotus pond behind.

Quite clearly although there is not centrality in the mural there is nevertheless a dominant directional flow that leads on from one end of the mural to the other. Through his depiction, not only does Benodebehari Mukherjee remind the viewer on the one hand of the flowing rhythm in the tradition of scrolls from China and Japan but also of the early Italian monumental paintings like those of Giotto, and certainly examples from the past in his own country, like the relief at Mahabalipuram and the paintings of Ajanta. The reference to Giotto, according to Geeta Kapur, is not fortuitous. The use of the fresco buono technique is an important link while the Assisi murals of Giotto, deal much like the Hindi Bhavana mural, with the life of a saint, that of Saint Francis who is "astonishingly close in spirit to our own *bhakti* saints".²⁹ R. Siva Kumar is of the opinion that Benodebehari Mukherjee has not only adopted but transformed the Giottesque tradition, even in the stylistic-technical aspects as well. According to him, Benodebehari Mukherjee's avoidance of over-definition of contours and modelling, and the suppression of highlights, integrates the figures to the wall surface, while his treatment gives the mural a drawing-like spontaneity. "He preferred", writes R. Siva Kumar, "the rougher surface favoured by the 18th century

²⁹ Geeta Kapur: "The Great Procession", *Nandan*, Benodebehari Number, Santiniketan, 1981, p. 4.

muralists like Tiepolo to the smooth ground prescribed by Cennini".³⁰ It was Benodebehari Mukherjee's integrity and sensibility that liberated him from the sources that he referred to and gave his art the stamp of an eclectic and coherently singular style.

Apart from their proportionately larger forms that serve to locate the *bhakti* saints from among the other figures in the composition and thereby allow the viewer to concentrate on their expression, they do not otherwise carry the look of the extraordinary — in fact apart from the distinguishing scale, the figures are kin to the multitude around them engaged in all the diverse daily chores. This removes to a large extent the possibility of hierarchy, which would be untenable to the spirit of the movement itself. Above all, well aware of his temporal separation from the characters in his painting, Benodebehari Mukherjee has not treated the figures of the medieval saints as 'true' portraits in the sense of bearing strict visual exactitude with the actual person. Although they stand for historical personalities, they are psychological types, though in all probability, modelled on actual people he had observed around him.³¹

"The lone squatting figure in the Himalayan heights is an image of the withdrawn, the one on the plains beneath bathed by the sun and the looks of his disciples, by contrast, sits exposed; the strong-gripped-man standing pointing to himself and the earth asserts human authority while another with folded hands denotes devotional submission; the diffident-blind reaches out to his guide by intuition, and the mounted and confident one dictates his gospel at the sword's edge. The gestures multiply and with it the sharability."³²

³⁰ R. Siva Kumar, "The Santiniketan murals/ A Brief history" op. cit., 58.; Benodebehari was known to have been interested in Cennino Cennini's book "Treatise on painting" for the references about mural techniques. Cennini was "a direct inheritor of the Giottoesque tradition".

³¹ "..... For Binodebabu, however, Ramanuja, Kabir, Tulsidas, Suradas, and Guru Govind Singh were not living personalities of contemporary times, but still a vital force in the literary lore and life. He looked for their likeness and found his Kabir in a common weaver." (Gulam mohammed Sheikh, op. cit.)

³² R. Siva Kumar, "..... And The Theme Is Destiny, op. cit., p. 25.

The choice and treatment of theme reveal Benodebehari Mukherjee's concern with a tradition of non-conformism, with the individual's intervention into tradition and thereby the opening up of a path of personal liberation from organised religious dogmatism.³³ In this light, a significant feature about the mural is the equal stress laid on the daily life of the common people and the depiction of the saints. The balance that the *bhakti* saints themselves maintained between the "spiritual solitude and social care" is visually underscored through this stress.³⁴ It is here that the river that runs through the middle section of the mural (with the shed-like cluster of roof tops along its banks, obviously in response to Benodebehari Mukherjee's experience of Varanasi) becomes something like a metaphor of the flux of life and faith that the mural seeks to represent. The small interior spaces inhabited by figural forms that almost fill them to the brim, are notational, serving to structure and facilitate the flow of the life stream.³⁵

"Here we read a history of religious development itself, the segments representing the growth and its transformation from abstruse metaphysics to the palpable and the approachable, in terms of the *bhakti* movement."³⁶

In this context of Benodebehari Mukherjee's varied sources of reference, and thereby the evolving of a personal pictorial language in contemporary times in

³³ The Bhakti movement was a peoples' movement, and a large number of *bhakta*-s came from the lower class ultimately succeeding to "unloose moksha from the brahmin stronghold" through a movement that "built up resistance against the cultural authority of the sanskritized elite". In a pluralistic society this spelt social dissent. And it is here that one has to remember the medieval *bhakti* saints' sense of community, the "fine balance between spiritual solitude and social care". (Geeta Kapur, *ibid.*)

³⁴ A close parallel of this in examples of ancient Indian art would be the Buddhist reliefs, especially those at Sanchi, where the Jataka tales unfold "through allegories that return the divine to ordinary folk". (Geeta Kapur, *ibid.*)

³⁵ "The architectural components serving as 'conjunctions' to divide and link the narrative are reduced to a relative significance in the process. The figural imagery overflows and dominates the entire environment and simultaneously provides another, if not too obvious, a structural cue. The human movements exude a rhythm of work and relaxation which is in fact derived from occupational habits." (Gulam mohammed Sheikh, *op. cit.*, p. 12.)

³⁶ R. Siva Kumar, "..... And The Theme Is Destiny", *op. cit.*, p. 26.

this country, it is also relevant to remember that his concerns were markedly different from that of another major mural movement in world art in the modern period — that of Mexican muralists. Unlike them he was no activist, and did not believe in painting as a political statement. Nor did he share their enthusiasm for collectivism, or even Nandalal Bose's belief in the public art aspect of murals. Santiniketan, as well as Nepal where he shifted later, provided him with his much necessary seclusion whereby he could practice an art that was "environmentally local, not archaeologically national". Neither did he follow a conscious modernism of technique, nor were his adjustments of form distortions for self-expression, satire or allegory. All this amounts to an art that is personal and autographic. His relation to modern art therefore needs to be understood in this aspect, and in the specific context of contemporary art practice in the country. Apart from the significance of the stylistic-linguistic shifts, it then becomes historically relevant that the mural was painted between November 1946 and September 1947, a turbulent period in the history of the country.

"These were the last days of the freedom struggle and the first moments of independence what was proclaimed as a non-violent struggle got sullied by the communal holocaust that began in August 1946 and continued for more than a year. The mural was painted against this unfolding tragedy although not in direct response to it In the manner in which he depicted his protagonists and constructed his mural we see a humanity emerging the stands in counterpoint to the macabre dance of death and life he saw around him. It was his belief that art reflected the humanity of the artist, not through the obvious subject of his work but through an uncompromising exercise of freedom"³⁷.

R. Siva Kumar points out that the *dohas* (couplets) of the *bhakti*-saints included as text in the top of the final section above the figure of the mounted Sikh guru, speak of destiny as the theme. Destiny — not as the fateful and the

³⁷ R. Siva Kumar, "The Santiniketan murals", op. cit., p. 55.

undeterminable, but as a choice that one opts for, and allows to grow into a life-philosophy governing one's acts. Despite the fact that on the surface the mural deals with the path layers of spiritual destiny, it coincided with that period of the country's history "when collective destiny was once again our urgent concern, this time the political destiny of modern India. The bhakti movement becomes parabolic of the new political milieu".³⁸

Following the Hindi Bhavana mural, there were other murals being painted in Santiniketan in the late forties and fifties — but mostly these were student exercises, like the 1949 copies from Ajanta in the 'Havell Hall' of Kala Bhavana (in the same room where the Bagh copies had been done earlier) or the continuing exercises in the Kala Bhavana boys' hostel (west block) of themes from the life of Jesus Christ and Hindu mythology. But there was a general gap in the practice of murals in Santiniketan of a decade since the early fifties and one had to wait till 1972 for the next major project, once again from Benodebehari Mukherjee, by then tragically blind but working on a mural with glazed tiles, where the whole was determined by the sense of touch by which he organized space and form aided by his acutely sharp visual memory. However, that takes us well beyond the defined limits of the present study.

Benodebehari Mukherjee

By the time Benodebehari Mukherjee embarked on his murals he had already developed a sophisticated personal visual vocabulary and an understanding of art as a language. Such a development, as well as the absence in him of any

³⁸ R. Siva Kumar, "..... And the theme is destiny", op. cit., p. 27.

"The critical rediscovery of Benodebehari's work among contemporary Indian artists seems fateful; it marks the passing of an often shallow-rooted modernism; and the emergence of a more positive relation to tradition. The general case against all the products of Santiniketan — against Tagore and Ray in particular — was that they breathed an atmosphere essentially nostalgic, *fin-de-siecle*; this wistfulness often insipid; in the last analysis escapist In some respects, it's true the vision of the Hindi Bhavan may seem 'out of date'; both the political vision, with its aspiration for a unity of all Indian faiths; and the aesthetic, with its hope for a public art based on a revival of mural techniques. Everything which took place after 1946 might seem to have nailed all such hopes securely into the coffin of lost causes, most immediately, the horror of partition (and this for a man with a Sindhi wife) Yet amazingly the Hindi Bhavan mural has survived, to preach its gospel to a new generation" (Timothy Hyman, op. cit., p. 18)

dilemma as an artist, came about because of his beginning with what has been defined as a "terminological search".³⁹

Born in 1904 in Behala (a south suburb of Calcutta), Benodebehari Mukherjee was affected with weak health, especially of the eyesight, from an early age. In his autobiographical account titled "*Chitrakar*" (1977; 1384 Bengali era), one finds in his early memories that despite the physical handicap of weak vision, it were visual facts that made indelible impression on the young inquisitive mind. He was sent to the *Brahmacharyashram* in Santiniketan in 1917, and was motivated by his senior friend Dhiren Deb-Burman to join the Kala Bhavana in its year of inception as one of the first batch of students. In 1925 he joined as a teacher in the same institution, with added responsibilities of the Librarian and the Curator of its museum. While Nandalal Bose had faith in his wisdom, Benodebehari Mukherjee had boundless respect and admiration for his teacher. His deep interest in Far eastern art forms and philosophy took him on a self-financed trip to China and Japan in 1937, when he spent almost a year in the island country. The trip deepened his perspectives and self-assurance and he even had an exhibition of his paintings in Tokyo in 1938 receiving wide acclaim. In 1942 he visited Varanasi and the city with its riverside *ghat*-s had an immense impact for his later work especially the 1946-47 mural in the Hindi Bhavana. After thirty-two years in Santiniketan he left for Kathmandu as the Curator of the Nepal Government museum. In Nepal the tradition of an art-craft panorama was alive, and along with the landscape and the people, it exhilarated his artistic sensibilities. On his return, forced by political instability, he had brief and mostly unsuccessful stints at Vanasthali Vidyapith (Rajasthan, 1951-52) and the Government art school at Patna (Bihar, 1954-56) before returning to Santiniketan in 1958. In between the unsuccessful eye operation of 1956 in Delhi had resulted in total blindness. Despite the disaster his art practice did not stop and he searched for media suitable to cope with his changed perceptual experience.

³⁹ K.G. Subramanyan: "Moving Focus", Lalit Kala Akademi, 1986, p. 73.

"His love for nature was in place even before he came to Santiniketan. He spent most of his boyhood days in rural Bengal, much of it at Pabna which was just across Shelidah on the opposite bank of Padma. Here unable to pursue formal schooling due to a congenital weakness of eyesight, and friendless, nature became his companion. Thus the same aspects of rural Bengal, first at Shelidah and later at Santiniketan, that transformed Rabindranath and Nandalal also became his inspiration."⁴⁰

That Santiniketan should have been a moving force in the life of Benodebehari Mukherjee evokes no doubt, for it always did so to responsive individuals who happened to pass through Rabindranath Tagore's institution at some point of their lives. However, there seems to be a (mistaken?) overstress on the role played by the rural landscape of Pabna, since such a suggestion tends to offer a comfortable parallel that could be postulated between Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee. Acknowledging the role played by boyhood memories in one's life, Benodebehari Mukherjee wrote in his autobiographical essay "*Chitrakar*":

"The most insignificant events [are] of boyhood days, nevertheless none can shrug them away with contempt. Like the pure light of the morn-of-life these memories remain bright in the minds of men."⁴¹

In the same essay Benodebehari Mukherjee mentions his stay in Pakshi (Pabna?), but he does not define it with any exceptionality in terms of the formative basis for his proclivities as an artist. In fact, as one reads the essay one can locate a diversity of episodes that are as much, if not more, significant in this respect. Benodebehari Mukherjee's early memories recorded in the

⁴⁰ R. Siva Kumar in "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", op. cit.

⁴¹ Benodebehari Mukherjee, "*Chitrakar*", Aruna Prakashani, Calcutta 1385 *Bangabda*.

essay are those of urban Calcutta. There he mentioned how since infancy he was prone to acute visual observation — the hawking salesmen selling glass bangles for girls, the barber-lady who applied the red “*alta*” on the feet of the married women, the cobbler and his paraphernalia, and the men setting off for their clerical offices.

“The people at home would ask me ‘Go and see who calls’. And I would come back to report, ‘A man in a green bordered cloth, a coat and *chaadar*, and a staff in his hand’. My exasperated guardians would grow impatient, ‘Haven’t you asked his name?’ I would say, ‘No, that I didn’t!’⁴²

That, for a boy who soon discovered that he had problems with his vision, and the eye-specialist gave the verdict that should the boy go through the rigours of normal education he might soon lose even the faint eyesight that he still possessed.

His early memories of exhibited paintings is also interesting; he recalled accompanying one of his elder brothers to the Harrison Road-College Street crossing in Calcutta, where each afternoon a man held open-air exhibition of small oil-paintings, mostly landscapes, hung on the roadside railings. The exhibition in time gave way to gaudy calendars for sale while the salesman also offered prints of “oriental art by Abanindranath, Suren Ganguly, Priyanath Sinha, Nandalal and others”⁴³ from the U. Ray or the K.V. Sen Press would be sold for a paisa or two each on the same pavement. His brother bought the prints and took them back home to copy.

A couple of paragraphs later Benodebehari Mukherjee gives a brief but insightful clue to the formation of his psychological predisposition.

⁴² Benodebehari Mukherjee, *ibid*, p. 6.

⁴³ Benodebehari Mukherjee, *ibid*, p. 9.

"In our family, there was ample scope for the pursuit of knowledge, but not quite for the pursuit of the path of devotion, nor any restriction to it either. Plainly said, no one was a puritan in our family. So I never had to listen to the advices from the moral-school."⁴⁴

This, rather than the link with rural Bengal, seems to me a more concrete factor behind his liberated outlook. In fact, his early memories of rural Bengal begin with the trip to "Godagari" where he accompanied his mother to stay with one of his elder brothers, who had been appointed as a physician to the railway colony in that village.

"Never before have I stayed in a thatched roof building nor seen the *mankachu* plant. A large garden, one side of it dense and dark with banana plants, the rest covered dense with wild shrubs In the distance a *chhatim* tree stands tall with its umbrella shaped foliage. I wander it. It resembles no other tree in either form or the shape of its leaves, which attracted me immensely to it."⁴⁵

In Pakshi, unlike the isolation in Godagari, he had the company of his immediately senior brother, with whom he roamed the countryside. Here his memories are those of the Sara Bridge, the river Padma with its boats, fishermen and the call of the birds, and the *shimul* tree. He also relates the exploits of shooting birds with burnt clay pellets, the sight of the *koi* fish moving upstream during the rains ultimately to crawl on the ground and even up the trees, and the sight of an owl which his brother brought home to demonstrate that the bird does not see in daylight.

⁴⁴ Benodebehari Mukherjee, *ibid*, p. 11.

⁴⁵ Benodebehari Mukherjee, *ibid*, pp. 12-13.

The formulation of a "contextual" modernism in Santiniketan



"..... certain special virtues of his approach also came from the way he saw things. With his kind of eye-sight he saw things at a distance in broad images, in a grand gestalt; while the objects in the vicinity he saw in great minutiae, almost caressing each thing with his eye. In bringing these two into relationship he devised a visual code interpreting the former with the latter and vice versa, the broad distant image gaining thereby a syntactic definition and the near image an integrated unity; and the final result was an extraordinarily lively synthesis, something one might call a 'calligraph'"⁴⁶

This went hand-in-hand with the sublimation of his early expressionist tendencies in landscape images through the contact with, and growing interest in, Far Eastern art and aesthetics; which is why early paintings like "Laughter" are never revoked and got thoroughly transformed into a different sort of 'fragments' of nature after his 1936-37 trip to Japan and China.

With respect to certain paintings of Benodebehari Mukherjee, I would personally prefer to reverse the stress that R. Siva Kumar appears to lay on the structural as against the spontaneous, the extreme precision as opposed to the impression in the images⁴⁷. It is true that Benodebehari Mukherjee's paintings give the feeling of spontaneity and structural firmness, almost simultaneously, or rather alternately. Being of an intellectual bent of mind, the sophisticated refinement of the intellect upon the pictorial construction, the calculated balance of form and colour structure is but a natural consequence for an artist of his nature. However, beneath the 'extreme precision' his 'terminological ambivalence' results in an ambiguous dissolving of object identities as well. In the undated tempera-on-silk composition titled "Restaurant" it is the preciseness of the colour structure and the formal balance that impress upon

⁴⁶ K.G. Subramanyan: "Benodebehari Mukherjee", *Visva Bharati News*, Benodebehari-Smarana number, Vol. XLVIII, No. 9-10, March-April 1981, p. 307.

⁴⁷ R. Siva Kumar: "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", *op. cit.*

the eye first, along with the swiftness of the minimal black lines that serve to relieve the barest necessary details in the figures — as if he was just pulling back from becoming absolutely non-representational. And yet the preciseness tends to dissolve away in the thin layer of paint as the strokes of red on the dress of the woman, and the ochre and blue colour strokes increasingly assert themselves as brush marks independent of their object associations. Substance dissolves into amorphousness as the zigzag lines in black between the chairs and the legs of the table emphasize the two-dimensional reality of the pictorial surface. Below the cursorily defined faces and hands the bodies of the three figures tend to dissolve into incorporeality. Matter and space appear to assume transparent, interchangeable identities. The same duality pervades similar works of the late forties and fifties, in differing degrees. The 1948 painting titled "In the garden" utilizes a similar compositional structuring device in the way in which the preliminary strokes of blue, white and red, block in the basic architectonic distribution of colour tones against the ochre of the silk. And then the defining lines of black — more descriptive than in the previous example, especially in the range of foliage patterns — are *laid over* on this swiftly blocked in colour structure. Once again, as the colour patches keep asserting their identity as marks beneath the black lines that try to pin them down, the figures appear insubstantial despite the geometric firmness and rootedness with which they are drawn. As a result the forms tend to interpenetrate — the neutral blankness of the dress of the ladies barely defined by the thin wash-like strokes of white aiding the process — presumably into a statement of the harmonious coexistence of man and nature.⁴⁸

However, it would be frankly unjust to label this tendency as a universal constant,

⁴⁸ "..... when you see these paintings you almost seem to hear the unfurling of leaves or the snapping of the branches, or, alternatively, feel the trembling touch of the green sprouts or the soft resilience of the delicate flowers.

But this seeing or hearing or touching is, paradoxically, incorporeal. It is not on the level of primary sensation; the image does not stick to your finger-tips, as it were. It stands apart and self-dependant, keeping a tenuous distance from its object-correlate, and gaining thereby a special codal extension which invest even simple events with complex dimension He puts around in these paintings various opposing values in tension, limpidity against density, lightness against weight, animation against quietitude" (K.G. Subramanyan, "Benodebehari Mukherjee", *Visva Bharati News*, op. cit., p. 306)

and a painting like "Doli" from the same year as the previous example is relatively less ambiguous. Precisely defined, tonally modelled in its forms, it is an architectonic composition, where the cloth cover of the makeshift palanquin is made to conspicuously echo the shape of the mountains peaks behind; the thicker lines of darker hue on the ochre bodies of the palanquin-bearers are not only contour lines, they also serve to create modelled volumes with their tonal variation, while the painting of interspaces between the forms gives an earth-bound solidity of mass to the forms in the composition.

It is however Benodebehari Mukherjee's landscapes, especially those of Mussorie, where he moved to in late 1951 following his return from Nepal, in which we once again find structural firmness and mysterious spaces co-existing. In the "Mussorie landscape (Mist)" of 1952-53 this happens almost literally as the dense white cloak of the mist descends from above among the broad washes of ochre, blue, green and burnt sienna, creating the dissolving effect of a contesting amorphousness and solidity. However, in a 1956 composition — painted not in Mussorie but in Patna — recall was playing an important role. The misty bluish white among the branches of the trees and the strokes of raw umber and sienna on the ground lead the ground up into a mysterious, lost path. Of this and other landscapes it has been said that compared to Nandalal Bose's paintings of lyrical continuity, there is nothing smooth in a Benodebehari landscape which has dramatic undulations and spatial twists create spatial disjunctions — the hills may not always be connected by valleys, but might end in deep chasms.

"The space is dramatised on the one hand and structured on the other. Distance is always a mental construct for Benodebehari, conjoining the experience of physical movement with details seen from near. This explains why there is no atmosphere in his landscapes. The only exceptions being the few landscapes he did in Mussorie showing the mountains wrapped in mist"⁴⁹

⁴⁹ R. Siva Kumar in "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", op. cit.

Turning to compositions where the human figure as subject is of prime importance, an example like the tempera on paper titled "Temple Bell" (1951) from Benodebehari Mukherjee's Nepal phase shares similarities in treatment with the "Restaurant" discussed above. And yet, the ultimate effect is closer to the Doli, because of the role played by the colour strokes like the ochre on both sides of the woman's hand or the blue bordering the dress of the girl — these colour strokes serve to relieve the figure from the back ground and thereby give it substance. Ambiguity, in the sense in which it is present in the "Restaurant", is absent here; the structuring colour strokes are clearly defined in terms of their object correlates. Also from the Nepal phase are the pen-ink-and-wash pictures like the "Procession" (1949) and "Dhara (Nepal)", which operate more on the level of brisk sketches that effectively trap the animated movement and the spirit of festivity in the former, and the characteristic intimacy of two women working together (washing clothes?) through the quality of the fluid lines and the thin wash of colour tones. In contrast to these the oil on hardboard from 1952 titled "Play (Santal boys)" or the oil on wood of the same date titled "Lama" are distinctly different in their approach. The choice of the medium, with a view to the solid density of the shapes and the feeling of mass in the forms, achieved in the compositions a modelled earth-bound and structural stability. This, despite the gesture of the figures in the former, which appears more performative than actual. While the "Play" is a composition where the painter was concerned more with the formal aspect of the composition, the "Lama" is a relatively more inspired picture where the treatment of colour merges with the theme and the expression in the central figure of the monk to create an evocative totality of image. It would be too obvious to reiterate the fact, how these pictures as images stand apart from the generalised notion of the so-called "Bengal school" mannerism in their understanding of pictorial statements as a language system, involving a balance of relation between theme, treatment and technique.

In 1957, after his unsuccessful operation, Benodebehari Mukherjee became completely blind. This was an entirely different experience which should have

been amply disquieting, at least initially, for a person who was deeply immersed into the world of the visual. While he countered the handicap by devising different work-methods, where body contact and movement defined his world, he later wrote a touching fictionalised account titled "*Kattamosai*" ("Master of the household", 1972; 1379 Bengali era). He continued to work in drawings, paper cuts, lithographs and sculptures, working completely from his acutely sharp visual memory. Freed from the possibility of matching the forms to visually observed reality any more, they grew out of the depths of an inner vision. It would be remarkably relevant in this respect to remember that when he returned to Santiniketan in 1958 he joined Kala Bhavana as the *Adhyapaka* (Professor) in Art theory.

Ramkinkar Baij

With Ramkinkar Baij, we come to another dimension in the art of the decade of the nineteen-forties in Santiniketan. It is with Ramkinkar Baij that we shift from the purely painterly defining of art-environment relation, and enter into the domain of the tactile forms of sculpture. His monumental sculptures in the open-air ushered in another distinctive feature of the art movement during one of the most dynamic periods in the history of the institution. Besides the sculptural statements, Ramkinkar Baij's paintings and drawings also bear a distinctively unique character, starkly different from both Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee.

There is a differing opinion regarding Ramkinkar Baij's year of birth, between 1906 and 1910. However, it is known that he came from a family who by vocation were barbers. But he displayed innate tendencies for the visual art from an early age and was attracted to drawing as well as modelling. The local clay-image maker Ananta Pal supported the boy's keen interest and took him as his apprentice, although whether he actually taught him by the hand is not known. Therefore, Ramkinkar Baij was a deviant from his traditional family vocation when he turned to the visual arts. He did attend school, but here too the differing

opinions are divided between whether he completed the eighth standard or the matriculation (tenth standard). He had been painting portraits of political leaders, as well as drop curtains for the local theatre in his hometown of Jugipara in Bankura district, and even held an exhibition of his pictures occasioned by a "*Swadeshi Mela*" in Bankura in 1922-23, which is often claimed as his first ever solo exhibition⁵⁰. Therefore, when Ramkinkar Baij came to Santiniketan in 1925, he had by then an already developed and matured natural skill in the visual arts at his command. The diverse experiences not only gave him an unorthodox beginning but also opened him up to the possibilities of working on large dimensions. With a skill already at his command, Santiniketan provided him with the necessary direction and discrimination.

To trace the dimensions of Ramkinkar Baij's practice in the nineteen forties, we will have to remember that there had already been certain influences since his arrival in Santiniketan that moulded his tendencies. The foremost, without doubt, is the presence and the persona of Rabindranath Tagore himself. But more specifically in the field of visual arts, Santiniketan had already seen the arrival of Andre Karpeles in the twenties, when the medium of oil painting was formally introduced; in 1928 the Austrian sculptor Liza von Pott had demonstrated the methods of sculpture and so had Marguerite Milward who followed her. The latter was a student of Bourdelle, who in turn was a student of Rodin. She taught the students in Santiniketan the technical details of moulds and casting. So that when Ramkinkar Baij formally completed his studentship at Kala Bhavana, in 1929, he had already had an introduction to sculptural practice in Europe through these visiting artists. Apart from the individual sculptures ("Kacha and Devayani", the "Mithuna" images, etc.) of the late twenties and the thirties, Ramkinkar Baij was also engaged in the sculptural decoration of Rabindranath Tagore's mud-house "Shyamali" during 1935 and the boys' hostel called the "Black house" between 1936 and 1937. Already in 1935 and in 1938 respectively he had done two of his significant out-door sculptures, the "Sujata"

⁵⁰ cf. Prakash Das: "*Ramkinkar's drawing*", A. Mukherjee & Co. Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1400 *Bangabda*, p. 165.

and the "Santal Family", apart from the numerous drawings and paintings.

Therefore when we come to his first sculpture from the forties — the "Lampstand" of 1940 — we are looking at an artist who had already been experimenting with sculptural ideas for at least a decade. And yet, the "Lampstand" caused much furore in its days of execution, because of the abstract language. Its flame-like forms leap up towards the sky as it stands before the old guest-house (presently the Oriya department of the Visva Bharati) and faces the glasshouse *Mandir*. Even more austere are his 1948/1949 abstract compositions to which he did not even give a defining title preferring to leave them at the level of arrangement of forms to be freely interpreted by the active viewer. However, in these sculptures and more so in the "Lampstand", one common feature that he formally emphasised was that sculpture is an art of the three dimensions and that one has to move right round it following the rhythm of the forms — and as one does so, one becomes aware of the sense of animated movement in the abstract arrangement of forms whereby the same becomes for Ramkinkar Baij a motivating factor behind all works, whether in the non-representative or the figurative vein. From here if we for a moment shift back to our earlier discussion of his 1943 sculpture, the "Thresher", we can recall the logic of his abstraction, in the way in which he omitted the head of a figure threshing the crop to concentrate entirely on the dynamic of the act of threshing.

The 1956 "Mill Call" returns us once again to the majestic and heroic image of the *santal* community, like its preceding example of the "Santal family" of a little less than two decades earlier. There is however a marked difference in the spirit. In the earlier sculpture, Ramkinkar Baij was more concerned with restraint; emotional empathy moderated the expressive in this depiction of a family's move towards urban centres for wage earning, the dislocation of traditional modes of sustenance. Thus the composition, in keeping with his response to the theme, had been executed in an architectural stability of the forms, where formal balance was achieved despite the forward tilted elongation of the man's neck and the general posture of walking ahead. Somewhere in the man's

posture — from the shoulder upwards to the tilted head — and in the implied massive yet slow movement, there is an expression of pathos, of weariness, in the entire social displacement. The "Mill call" on the other hand, is boisterous, full bodied and forthright. It is this sculpture, rather than the previous, which testifies Ramkinkar Baij's significantly differing response to the *santal* community from that of Nandalal (or Benodebehari Mukherjee). For Nandalal Bose, the *santal*, like all human figures in his paintings, is part of the larger reality that is Nature; for Ramkinkar Baij, the *santals* "represent the archetypal man, and that man stands in the foreground of his vision of life"⁵¹. This cherishing of their zest for life found form in the attention he paid to their body language. So the forceful X-like pattern formed by the energetic forward movement of the two women establish a diagonal thrust through the disposition of the limbs and the flying drapery. This sculpture would be an ideal example of dynamic equilibrium.

A comparison between the 1938 "Poets head" and the 1941 portrait of Rabindranath Tagore once again reasserts Ramkinkar Baij's defiance of sequential chronology of styles as they evolved in the west. He moved from an overtly abstract image in the former, despite its roots in the actual person evident in the arrangement of the various units of form, to a more impressionistic portrait in the latter. This is a portrait of the poet that does not unnecessarily glorify him, but shows him in a majestic stooping posture, the head bent at the shoulders, the rough modelling of the surface reflecting a man who has seen the world and its disasters, pondering and distressed. It is easy to read into the expression of this face the concern for a "crisis of civilization". In the former, contrary to the route towards dehumanisation taken by abstraction in the west, Ramkinkar Baij infused his sculpture with both the vigour and the vitality that is characteristic of organic life. The apparently western representational codes have been overlaid with rhythmic animation and vitality characteristically typical of the artist.

⁵¹ R. Siva Kumar in "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", op. cit.

With such an intense attitudinal leaning for vitality and virile sculptural forms, it is understandable why Ramkinkar Baij would not share the interest in the sophisticate refinement of Far Eastern art and aesthetics shared by Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukherjee. His predisposition took him spontaneously towards pre-classical and post-classical sculptures of India and to modern western art for inspiration. However there is an outstanding output comprising of drawings and paintings, a considerable number in water colours and some in oil, that perhaps far surpass in quantity his sculptural projects. His "Pond" of the early forties, utilises geometric faceting that is an outcome of his efforts to comprehend the cubist logic. But once again, he deviates from the strict definition of the original movement, and interprets the formal devices according to the demands of his own. The complex graphic configuration that results fuses the cubist linguistic rationale with an expressionist gestural quality in the lines, and the staring eye of the man on the left, while the forms of the tent and the fish in the water and other figures form a medley of faceted shapes. Yet again, the paintings corresponding to the early forties, the period of the famine in Bengal, are of a different sort. "Yogin's death" and "Storm" (reproduced in the "Bengal Painter's Testimony") are not exactly direct factual records of the famine or any other natural disaster. They transform event into metaphor, into symbols that gain a universal implication. The colours and the treatment are also in keeping with the thematic concern, operating in broadly painted impasto of greys and earth tones. A painting like "Shifting generations" is an allegory of human predicament — the toiling couple, contrasted against the suspended skeleton that appears to stand for the past and the child lying uncared for representing the future. Although the geometric faceting may suggest cubist or post-cubist impact upon Ramkinkar Baij's pictorial imagery, it is more an impulsive combination of definite lines and ambivalent planes to evoke a sensation where not all is unambiguously given. This does not deny the fact that he was conscious of the European movements and had the scope and the interest to study them in thorough detail. The Kala Bhavana library had an enviable collection of reference books for an institution of its times. But the important fact in this regard is that Ramkinkar Baij could arrive at a

comprehension of the acquired knowledge to arrive at a distinctly individual expression.

However, in his choice to fuse the Cubist devices with the narrative, R. Siva Kumar finds a problematic combination. According to him the problem lies in the opting for a linguistic code that does not lend itself easily to narration. This, he feels, applies to such paintings like the "Birth of Krishna" or "In the castle", where the spatial device "pegs the figures in a space to which it has no organic relation"⁵².

In his portraits, Ramkinkar Baij is more in his spirits. His famous series of portraits of Binodini has been eloquently analysed⁵³, and indicate the artist-model interaction and not a passive rendering of the sitter's face. Admiration, intimacy or passion guided these pictures. R. Siva Kumar's analysis shows how in each of the pictures the sitter looks straight out at the artist (hence at the viewer as well by implication) and that this back and forth of the gaze, between the artist and his model results in the artist being the object of her scrutiny as much as she is his. Comparing and contrasting four drawings of Binodini, he has demonstrated how expression changes from one to the other such that we sense "his eyes shifting from the model to the drawing and back again, and each time finding her different, setting out to confirm her with a new image."⁵⁴ The images therefore range from the tender and the innocent to that of one consumed by passion.

Ramkinkar Baij's watercolours are also distinguishably different from those of Benodebehari Mukherjee. Compared to the oil painting of Binodini, the watercolours, like the drawings, are spontaneous records; the liquid washes

⁵² R. Siva Kumar in "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", op. cit.

⁵³ R. Siva Kumar: "Binodini and other portraits of Ramkinkar", Nandan, Santiniketan, 1990

⁵⁴ R. Siva Kumar: "Binodini and other portraits of Ramkinkar", *ibid*, p. 72-73.

and transparent colours materialize an youthful gleam and vivacity, an intimate moment compared to the relatively remote and enigmatic oil painting. Because of the immediacy of the medium, and the absence of a possibility to probe, ponder and adjust, in his watercolours Ramkinkar Baij effortlessly fused spontaneity of observation with emotional response.⁵⁵ A watercolour like "Rest" is a rapid capture of the moment, of "chasing the transient". In his landscapes too, the same effect of a freedom from pre-concepts and after thoughts results in a lively spontaneity of the image. The Shillong landscapes of 1947, the Rajgir watercolours of 1949, the Kulu landscapes of 1956, and those of the sea in Orissa in 1951 are evidences of this. They reflect his response to nature more readily than pictures in any other medium, reflecting the different moods of nature in the most minimum of colours and lines. One of the characteristic features that distinguish his watercolours from those of Benodebehari Mukherjee as well as Nandalal Bose, is the quality of the black line that sweeps over the paper surface, across the skies and the clouds, over the waves, along the roads and around the trees — it is this impassioned line that adds momentum to the forms and therefore the image, it is the gusto and the brevity of such execution that breathes throbbing, intoxicated life into the forms. The result is a flourish, and the same carries over into his watercolours that depict human figures.

"While Benodebehari gave a calligraphic quality to the linear accents Ramkinkar transformed the calligraphic stroke into an almost arabesque flourish."⁵⁶

Nandalal Bose and a couple of other artists in Santiniketan

If his students were thus transforming the language of art in the forties and fifties in Santiniketan, one should also take note of the later works of Nandalal Bose during the same period. On the one hand, it was his arrival to Santiniketan that

⁵⁵ This has been summarized as the contrast between "images of observation" (water colours) and "images of ideas" (oils). cf. R. Siva Kumar: "Ramkinkar's Drawings", *Sahityika*, Poush Mela issue, Santiniketan, 1396 Bangabda.

⁵⁶ R. Siva Kumar in "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", op. cit.

weaned him away from what has been described as the hot house of culture in Calcutta, affording him the grounded reality of rural life in a greater intimacy of contact. On the other hand, as has been already mentioned earlier, the experience of the mural tradition had sufficiently kindled in him the desire for a greater robustness of form and composition different from the Mughal or Pahari miniature-painting tradition. "Parthasarathi" (1912) would be an ideal example of this shift. But in Santiniketan, where he finally shifted in 1920 (after the brief stint in the previous year), he was coming closer to the earth, when rural life and landscape replaced mythological themes. This resulted in the fact that even his characters chosen from mythology as evident from the titles, resemble more closely prototypes from the life observed than nostalgic harking back to past art styles. One may easily refer to examples like the "Birth of Chaitanya", "Radha in the grove", "Sujata [milking the cow]", "Arjuna", or the series on the theme of waiting Sabari.⁵⁷

During the nineteen forties, specificity of location began to increasingly make itself part of the pictorial layout. In 1941 Nandalal Bose visited Rajgir, Puri, Waltair and Varanasi; in 1942 he had been to the Mayavati Advaita Ashram in Almora; the following year he visited Pareshnath and Hazaribagh; in 1947 he visited Rajgir, Gopalpur, Madras and Waltair; in 1950 he visited Puri for a second time. The landscapes that he did with reference to these visits, as well as those that were inspired by the Santiniketan locale have panoramic space as the feature of paramount importance in the image. The result has been termed a "cross between Western realist and Chinese approaches to space"⁵⁸.

His "Burning Pine" of 1942 is an outcome of the trip to Almora. Despite the evocative strokes of bluish grey with which he paints the mountainside, there is ample reassuring detail in the picture including the burning pine tree in the foreground. Nandalal Bose created a transition from the foreground to the

⁵⁷ To these must be added the influence that various individuals had in his life including Rabindranath Tagore, Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Kakuzo Okakura, Sister Nibedita and Mahatma Gandhi.

⁵⁸ R. Siva Kumar in "Santiniketan / The making of a contextual modernism", op. cit.

middle distance in this painting that is neither awe-inspiring nor threatening despite the puny figure of the rider on the horse on the lonely road amidst the vastness of nature. The painting "Alakananda (on the way to Mayavati)" similarly shows a rolling undulation assuringly connected from the lower edge of the paper to the top, from the foreground to the distance. Unlike the disjunctions in a Benodebehari Mukherjee mountainscape, the images of Nandalal Bose do not contain ambiguities or mysterious loss of paths; on the contrary everything is harmoniously balanced in a rhythmic continuity and the lone traveller walking down the path in winding along the river's flow, is seen as a participant in the whole that is nature. The calligraphic touch of the brush that serves to create the trees on the banks of the river in "Barakar river" (1943) similarly form a rhythmic mass that is essentially a foil to the flowing strokes of the river and the rough texture of the rock that rises from the waters. In Nandalal Bose's paintings, the calligraphy in turn creates a tactile sensation of the object distinguishing the physical reality of the nature of one from the other. Or for that matter, in a painting like "Floating the canoe" (1947) from his Gopalpur visit, for Nandalal Bose it is the syncopation in the rhythm of the rising wave against which the two fishermen push their small boat that become the focus of the picture — despite the force exerted by the figures, the picture is essentially one of untrammelled harmony of man in nature with no hint of the struggle against the natural forces. Even when the waters of a canal come thundering down the fall in white clouds of froth, as in "The Bridge" (1959), the pictorial design is all rhythm in the snake-like pattern of the dark lines in the water, with three human figures contemplating the crashing waters from a small bridge.

And yet, it is not difficult to see how in these paintings of the forties and fifties, Nandalal Bose continues to evoke fresh observation and moves progressively away from the world of the literary and the mythologies, finding his true self in the observed reality of the world around himself. Despite this however, this was also a period of doubt for him and he turned back to his earlier compositions and did copies of them, for instance the "Sati" which was originally a composition of 1917, the 1943 copy of which is presently in the National Gallery of Modern

Art, New Delhi. This swing between radical freshness and conservative tracing back of the step, only serves to portray a very natural human dimension in his character, and that of doubt being constantly checked out through practice. Or else it would be impossible to explain the fact that the same could think of such landscapes as the "Bagdar Road (Hazaribagh)" in 1943 where quite visibly (though very little threateningly) armoured tanks roll down past the village hut, or paint a 1944 watercolour showing *santal* figures looking at Ramkinkar Baij's 1938 sculpture while the transformed social circumstance is indicated in the aeroplane that silently flies above them.

Apart from the three "masters" always referred to, there were certainly other artists proceeding on their own paths during the forties and fifties in Santiniketan. Some of their work can be seen in the grand mural project in the Cheena Bhavana verandah, among which mention could be made of Vinayak Masoji who did a painting based on another of Rabindranath Tagore's play titled "*Chandalika*" yet again based on the virtues of Buddhist devotion. However, compositionally there is nothing exceptionally revealing in the picture to be able to discern Vinayak Masoji's individuality; it follows closely the figural conventions and spatial divisions evolved by Nandalal Bose and compress the entire narrative into a single location, through "continuous narration" where the protagonists appear more than once in the same setting. It is not the fact that Vinayak Masoji chose to employ an already evolved language that relegates the painting to a position of insignificance; it is the lack of a forceful narrative rhythm in the arrangement of the figures on the pictorial space which could connect up as a powerful visual interpretation of a text that renders a predictability to the picture. The mural in Sriniketan, by the same artist, similarly is but an enlarged monochrome drawing in the typical "Bengal school" style.

In the Cheena Bhavana itself, the hall in the ground floor contains a large copy of the depiction of *Maravijaya* from Ajanta. This was painted by Nandalal Bose's daughter, Gouri probably with the assistance of students of Kala Bhavana. An efficiently rendered copy of the original, this is once again a painting where the

exercise of being able to approximate the past masterpiece became the determining criteria for excellence. Unlike the innovative compositions of Nandalal Bose or Benodebehari Mukherjee in the same building, it is more an ability to duplicate an existing solution to a given problem — the only link in the entire program being the link with Buddhism.

However, there were artists in the forties whose distinctiveness has only been recently recognised. Prosanto Roy, attended the school in the Patha Bhavana of Visva Bharati, and came to admire the senior students of the Kala Bhavana whom he had met. Deeply drawn to the visual arts, he began to paint and draw himself and ultimately took lessons from Abanindranath Tagore and Gaganendranath Tagore in the famed Jorasanko house in Calcutta. At the age of forty-four he became the curator of the Kala Bhavana museum. In his paintings one finds the blend of both the Tagore's styles and it is easily dismissed as derivative. However, on closer inspection it will be found that Prosanto Roy not only manages to blend the stylistic features of Abanindranath Tagore's wash and its associated sensibilities with the lessons in Cubistic faceting and world of mystery that he picked up from Gaganendranath Tagore, he combines with it a fresh look at the rationale of Chinese and Japanese conventions to arrive at a linguistic and thematic concern that differs from either. It is this ability to comprehend the rationale behind a language and then adopt it to suit the necessities of his personal inclination that transform his paintings into evocative images. It is here that he finds the ability to grasp the logic of a lyrical realism whereby his landscapes feature the most intricate details without suffering from a loss of integrity. It is here that he finds it possible to infuse the mysteriousness of Tantrik Buddhist images into an image that is obviously the product of his imagination and not the result of iconographic stipulation. The problem with Prosanto Roy is that he never dated his paintings and the establishment of a strict chronology remains a baffling issue. The problem is compounded by a stylistic uniformity and consistency, whereby any notion of individual 'progress' is also denied in postulating a chronological sequence for his paintings. Despite these, Prosanto Roy remains an example of the fact that it is possible to adopt,

re-read and re-interpret an existing pictorial language when one is basically looking into the deeper concerns of its linguistic rationale, and then employing that comprehended understanding into one's own visual language.