



## Preface

Art-practice in Bengal has been prominently central in the rich scholarship on the trends in early twentieth century art of modern India. From the urban-folk imagery of the Kalighat pictures and contemporary prints in wood-block and lithographs to the emergence of the three Tagores (Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Rabindranath), and then on to the legacy of the "Bengal School" with Nandalal Bose and his students creating a distinctive movement from Rabindranath Tagore's educational institution at Santiniketan, as well as the role of Jamini Roy in introducing a folk-inspired alternative, significant transformations in the art of Bengal have an acknowledged eminence in the historiography of the early "modern" in the art of India.

This research project, as the title suggests, began with the following decade of the nineteen-forties, but a little intentionally had an almost undefined upper limit for the time span that was to be investigated. Initially, the project originated from a personal quest to figure out why certain artists and art practices in the period under consideration had remained marginalized in the dominant narratives charting the "modern" in the art of India, and to realize if the reason for this lay somewhere in ideological preferences regarding the choice of pictorial language, the aims, objectives and ideals of these artists. In the course of the investigation, increasingly the two decades of the 1940s and the 1950s appeared to be sufficiently and logically coherent as a case study and hence determined the point of termination for the project, without extending it into the decades that follow, when a significantly different and transformed set of issues and concerns would justifiably demand a separate study altogether.

The present project therefore revolves primarily around three coordinates — the modernist proposition of the Calcutta Group on the one hand, that of the socially responsive/social-realistic practice centred on the socio-political events

of the period under survey on the other, and the concurrent shifts and elaborations at Santiniketan as the third. Realising the fact that there was an intricate interconnection in the nineteen-forties between the different forms of creative expression with several common issues being debated in all of these, there was reason enough to discuss these as parallel themes in a separate chapter in the project. Such a discussion not only gives a totality and comprehensiveness to the period and the ethos, but also forwards the discussion with our understanding of the issues in one of the arts supplementing and shedding light on the connected issues of another. Thereby, relevant discussions on the literature, music and theatre of the period have been included at the outset of the thesis.

The prime concern has been to comprehend the formulation of personal pictorial languages for artists within each of the three different coordinates of the project, such that the multiplicity of voices come to reveal the complexity of a situation at the given time and location, rather than any comfortable solution of a singular, uniform and unilinear progression or tendency, or a privileging of any one of these trajectories over the other. More than any attempt to write the artists of the Calcutta Group or the social-realistic trajectory back into a national narrative of the "modern" in the history of Indian art, the aim and intention of the present study has been to arrive at a balanced overview and understanding of their pictorial achievements as well as shortcomings (especially, in being able to realize art as a language of expression, thereby necessitating a logical coherence of pictorial style and content); therefore the evaluation of the visual expressions has been based on analysis of the documented body of work, as well as against the available relevant literature (of the period as well as later) which provide a contextual framework for the specific individual, period and region.

The thesis has been broadly structured into four major chapters, supported by an introduction and a conclusion, as follows.

In the **introductory chapter** discussing the context of the investigation, an overall picture of the period has been attempted with a brief but relevant recapitulation of the historical background in terms of the political scenario. The context of the Second World War, and the implications of such a worldwide devastation and staking for power with respect to a colony, has been discussed in the context of the so-called 'Famine of 1943' (in effect a man-made food shortage) that left its ugly mark on Bengal. The chapter also discusses briefly some of the relevant debates of the decades prior to the scope of the present study, to arrive at the paintings of Jamini Roy and the issues that were raised with respect to his oeuvre in the early part of the decade of the nineteen-forties, which should be found relevant in the context of the discussion centering on the category of the "modern", especially for the Calcutta Group.

The **second chapter** deals with cultural manifestations other than those of the visual arts. It begins with the shift in the field of theatre, with Bijon Bhattacharya's play "Nabanna" signifying a serious deviation from the erstwhile theatrical performances both in the theme and content as well as in its form and performance. The theme of the play has been analysed in sufficient detail, with a consideration of the plot as it evolves from the initial act through those that follow up to the concluding scene of the final. Simultaneously the play has been situated in the context of an existing tradition of Bengali theatrical performances, thereby providing a historical perspective to the importance of the play and the significant differences brought about by it in the realm of what may be called a move "toward a political theatre".

The same chapter then continues with literature and the debate of a post-Tagorean contemporaneity and the defining of the "modern" in Bengali literature in that light. While post-Tagorean modernity in the nineteen-forties will attempt to (re)define itself against the overpowering and almost all-encompassing presence of the multifaceted persona of the deceased poet (Rabindranath passed away in 1941), it will also become a debate concerning the judgement of literature by political standards and ideological affiliation. The leftist and

rightist leanings would also be evident in the newly emerging literary magazines around which the authors would be grouped according to their conviction and commitment. Politicized statements, however, would become inevitable with the death of the young poet Somen Chanda, after an attack on an anti-Fascist protest-rally of which he was a part, leading to the formation of the Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association, in which creative personalities of diverse political conviction would come together. However, amidst all these, modernity in contemporary literature as a tendency that does not necessarily address overtly political agenda can be discerned in many authors, an example being the poet Jibanananda Das, whose poetry has been discussed as statements that bear the distinctive mark of a post-Tagorean era.

In the domain of the Bengali song-tradition, the nationalist tradition of the patriotic songs — the *swadeshi gaan* — was to encounter a new and politically different genre of the mass or peoples' song tradition in the nineteen-forties — the *ganasangeet* — evolving specifically from the politicised leftist ambience. Where the links between the two lie and where the links snap make a perfect analysis of the newly evolving trends with respect to their inherent characteristics and lacunae. It also leads on to the discussion of the form-content debate within the *ganasangeet* tradition and the later evolution of the modern in Bengali songs in the hands of a person like Salil Chowdhury.

The **third chapter** addresses the dimensions of the socially responsive/social-realistic trajectories in the art of the nineteen-forties and fifties in Bengal especially with reference to the 'Famine of 1943' to the Tebhaga movement of 1946. Within this chapter attention has been drawn to the artists who had direct political affiliation with the Communist party as well as those who did not, with the common bond between their expression being the fact that they were moved to respond to the calamities and the atrocities from a humanitarian concern for the suffering multitude. While conscious political agenda did motivate an artist like Chittaprosad in the initial stages of his career, it was not long before he realized his increasingly differing perspective from that adopted by the party,

and dissociated himself from active political engagement. But his basic faith in humanity and his sympathy and commitment towards those who toil remained undiminished throughout his life. In the example of Chittaprosad, and his lack of formal training in the visual arts, the early attempt at a modified realism in the pictorial language of the 1943 famine sketches culminating in the publication "Hungry Bengal" has been discussed. The later phase of the same artist, after his distancing from direct political attachment, consisted increasingly of images of hope and plenitude. This has been viewed as an expression of his conviction in the rising World Peace movement.

An artist of a different nature would be Zainul Abedin who also acquired initial fame with his sketches of the famine, strikingly different from the former in terms of a language but equally powerful, if not more, as a motivating image. His career is also important in the fact that he decided to shift to the erstwhile East Pakistan (later and currently Bangladesh), where he acquired the stature of an artist of national respect and acclaim, the reputed *Shilpacharya*. How Zainul's pictorial imagery transform from the turbulent days of the nineteen forties to the post-partition fifties constitute the second part of the same chapter.

Likewise the transformation in an artist like Somnath Hore, (for whom the scars of the famine keep haunting his memory till date in the metaphor of the "wounds"), from the early sketches in the pages of the Communist party journals to the pictorial diary of the 1946 peasant movement and further on to the fifties, have been discussed with reference to the content of the images and their execution. Amongst other artists Govardhan Ash and Gopal Ghosh significantly addressed the issues of famine and the communal riot and the body of work that has been documented indicate a serious engagement with the themes of their concern.

Also discussed in the same chapter is the publication brought out by the Students' Federation of India in 1944, titled "Bengal Painter's Testimony" which in the light of the Famine and the political identity of the publishing organization becomes a significant period document for the present study.

In the **fourth chapter** the modernist premises of the Calcutta Group have been discussed, beginning with a short history of the formation of artists collectives in Calcutta prior to the Group and the propensity for a pictorial language that is avowedly international in nature. In this regard the popularity of the Western Academic mode of picture making since the inception of the art-school curriculum, has been established as providing an ongoing polemic to the advent of the indigenous modernism of the Abanindranath-Havell combine who attempted to bring in a transformation in art-school pedagogy. This is followed by a critical analysis of the literature of the period as well as significant essays from later period, which devote themselves to the Calcutta Group. Among these are, the 1953 catalogue note to the Delhi exhibition of the group, the article published by Klaus Fischer in the 'Marg' in the same year, Bishnu Dey's review article of a 1949 exhibition that formed part of his later collection of essays, statements by Paritosh Sen and Pradosh Das Gupta, and the debate between the latter and art-historian and critic Sovon Som regarding the aims, plan-of-action and outcome of the Calcutta Group.

The chapter continues with the discussion and analysis of the works of the individual constituent artist-members of the group, where the paintings and sculptures of Pradosh Das Gupta, Kamala Das Gupta, Gopal Ghosh, Paritosh Sen, Nirode Majumder, Subho Tagore, Rathin Maitra, Prankrishna Pal, Abani Sen, Rathin Mitra, Govardhan Ash, Sunil Madhav Sen and Hemanta Misra provide the material to reflect upon the actual working out of the Group's avowed claims to a modern language suited to the changing times. This is followed by a consideration of the category of the "modern" in an attempt to formulate a working hypothesis specifically situated to the context of the Calcutta Group.

The **fifth chapter** is necessary to understand, that although both the modernist and the social-responsive groups define a standpoint distanced from the limiting confines of the so-called Bengal School, it was from within the environment of Rabindranath Tagore's institution at Santiniketan that a viable and relevant language was being evolved by two of Nandalal Bose's students, Benode Behari

Mukhopadhyay and Ramkinkar Baij, during the same period of the nineteen-forties and fifties. It was here, from within the ideology of a unified art-craft tradition and a comprehensive art-environment interrelation, that a movement in public art emerged both in painting and sculpture, in the murals executed on the walls of the various buildings, and the outdoor sculptures that form the focal points of the campus. Beginning from these instances the discussion continues with works of art on a smaller format by the same artists, as well as works by other artists (including those of Nandalal Bose) that fall within the defined time frame of the study.

The brief **concluding chapter** sums up the earlier discussion and concludes on a note of the possibility of a simultaneous existence of diverse pictorial languages in a given time and place such that all of them approach the answer of a response to the transformed times from the point of view of their own convictions. The quest for a modern language necessarily involves the integrity of the derivation-assimilation-expression equation, variously approached. Within these approaches and the logical consistency of their rationale lie the clues to their success as viable languages in art.