Introduction

The period of two decades under consideration in the present study is an extremely tumultuous one in the political history of the country, especially in the years of the nineteen-forties culminating in the 'divide-and-quit'[1] transfer of power from the colonial British rule to that of an independent, albeit partitioned, new state. Before we begin with a discussion of the issues in the field of visual arts, it will therefore be pertinent to briefly recall the pattern of events which form the political and social backdrop against which the different groups of artists felt the need for a shift in visual language and expression, varied and multiple, in the prominent centres of art activity in Bengal.

For the purpose of the present study we may begin with the closing year of the preceding decade, when the Indian National Congress as a political party experienced an internal conflict with the election of Subhas Chandra Bose as its president at the Tripuri session (29th January 1939). It was followed by political intrigues leading to his resignation from the post and the formation of the splinter group Forward Bloc. Further intrigues followed in the form of disciplinary action, debarring him from holding any Congress office for three successive years[2]. Following this firm ousting, Subhas Chandra Bose was arrested under the Defence of India Act (2nd July 1940) and later interned in his own house following his hunger strike in prison; on 17th January 1941 soon after midnight, Subhas escaped from home disguised as a Pathan, via Kabul and Moscow to Berlin, aiming to utilize the help of Britain's adversaries for a patriotic, militant, armed

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[1] To adopt the title of Penderel Moon's book "Divide and Quit" on the 1946-47 riot in Punjab (London 1961) as quoted in Sumit Sarkar, "Modern India/ 1885-1947", Macmillan India Ltd., 1985 reprint, p. 435.

[2] "..... Why, then, did Gandhi decide to nominate Subhas as Congress president for the Haripura session of the Congress due to meet in February 1938? ..... He hoped to tame Subhas by making him Congress president and use him as he had used Nehru to neutralize all opposition to his move."; (Suniti Kumar Ghosh, "India and the Raj 1919-1947/ Glory, Shame and Bondage", Research Unit for Political Economy, Bombay 1995, Vol II, p. 142).

struggle towards the liberation of his country. Thus the "Azad Hind"/Indian National Army (I.N.A.) was formed in Singapore with the recruitment of the prisoners-of-war in Japanese camps and financial aid from Indian trading communities settled in South East Asia[3].

When the Second World War began, Viceroy Linlithgow's tactless obstinacy associated India with Britain's war on Germany (3rd September 1939) without consulting the provincial ministries (elected two years back). The provincial ministries resigned, but the Congress civil disobedience measures were relatively tame; the Left (with the exception of the M.N. Roy group[4]), however, advocated a strong anti-war stance until a total reversal of its standpoint following Hitler's invasion of Russia (22nd June 1941). After six months of deliberation,

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[3] Subhas Bose had set up the Indian Legion in Berlin (1941) but developed difficulties with the Germans when they tried to use it against Russia. Deciding to shift to South East Asia, he reached Japanese-controlled Singapore by submarine (July 1943) to form the Azad Hind Government and the Indian National Army on 21st October 1943. (Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., pp. 410-411).

"By escaping to Germany when other doors were barred against him, Subhas objectively joined the most reactionary forces on earth whatever might have been his subjective wishtes and however much he might have tried to assert his independence. The plunge that he took in January 1941 landed him from the frying pan to the fire." (Suniti Kumar Ghosh, op. cit., pp. 202-203).

[4] "..... Indian Communism really sprang ..... from roots within the national movement itself, as disillusioned revolutionaries, Non-Cooperators, Khilafatists, and labour and peasant activists sought new roads to political and social emancipation. Its founder was the famous Yugantar revolutionary Naren Bhattacharji (alias Manabendra Nath Roy), who came into contact with the Bolshevik Mikhail Borodin in Mexico in 1919, helped to found a Communist Party there, and went to Russia in the summer of 1920 to attend the second Congress of the Communist International. Here he embarked on a celebrated and significant controversy with Lenin concerning the strategy of Communists in the colonial world. Lenin urged the necessity of broad support to the predominantly bourgeois-led national movements in the colonies and semi-colonies; Roy with the enthusiasm and sectarianism of a new convert argued that the Indian masses were already disillusioned with bourgeois-nationalist leaders like Gandhi and were 'moving towards revolution independently of the bourgeois-nationalist movement' .....

In October 1920, M.N. Roy, Abani Mukherji (another ex-terrorist convert who later quarrelled bitterly with Roy) and some *muhajirs* (Khilafat enthusiasts who had joined the *hijrat* in 1920 and crossed over through Afghanistan into Soviet territory) like Mohammed Ali and Mohammad Shafiq founded a Communist Party of India in Tashkent, together with a political-cum-military school. When hopes of penetrating India through Afghanistan faded away in early 1921, some of the new recruits joined the Communist University of the Toilers of the East at Moscow. Roy himself shifted his headquarters to Berlin ..... Other émigré Indian revolutionary groups were meanwhile turning towards Marxism — most notably the old Berlin group headed by Virendranath Chattopadhyay, Bhupendranath Dutt, and Barkatullah .....

By the end of 1922, through emissaries like Nalini Gupta (another ex-terrorist) and Shaukat Usmani (who had been a *muhajir*), Roy had been able to establish some tenuous and often-intercepted secret links with embryonic Communist groups which had emerged from out of the Non-Cooperation and Khilafat experience in Bombay (S.A. Dange), Calcutta (Mujjafar Ahmed), Madras (Singaravelu) and Lahore (Ghulam Hussain). Abani Mukherji made similar though less successful efforts on behalf of the rival Chattopadhyay group ..... Indian Communist groups on the whole tried to work within the nationalist mainstream even while sharply criticizing the Congress leadership for its many compromises with imperialism ....." (Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., pp.247-249).

and resorting to the logic that Britain was part of the same camp in the war as that of the sole socialist state, Russia, the Indian communists raised the call for support to an anti-fascist "People's war" in January 1942.

Wartime British imperial strategy involved the encouragement of the Muslim League claims, and in the Lahore session of the League (1940), the "Pakistan" slogan was formally adopted[5]. "Pakistan" became a useful tool for the British in maintaining a constitutional deadlock in India.

In the meanwhile, repressive measures continued, and in March 1941 four *kisan* teenagers of Malabar were sentenced to death following a peasant-landlord clash; this incident gained national fame as the death of the "Kayyur martyrs". But despite militancy, Communist led Kisan movement was still scattered and far removed from a countrywide challenge to the British rule.

With the war daily approaching India (fall of Singapore 15th February, Rangoon 8th March, Andaman Islands 23rd March 1942) British efforts at a mediated settlement took the form of the [Stafford] Cripps Mission (23rd March). Plagued throughout by ambiguities, the mission was restrained — for crossing beyond scheduled limits and conceding far too much — via a telegraphic message from the War Cabinet (9th April). Mahatma Gandhi's "Quit India" movement eventually, and rapidly, followed this failed dialogue.

In a period when the Communists were bound to keep aloof Gandhi adopted a uniquely aggressive mood in the summer of 1942, culminating in the "Quit India" declaration of the 8th of August[6]. Yet, more than what had been planned by the Congress, a spontaneous popular outburst followed after the arrest of the leaders

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[5] The genesis of the call goes back to Urdu poet Iqbal's 1930 address referring to the need for a "North West Indian Muslim State" — then a reorganization rather than a partition call — and the Choudhury Rehamat Ali pamphlets from Cambridge (1933 and 1935) in which the name "Pakstan" referred to the states Punjab, Afghanistan, Kashmir, Sind and Baluchistan. (Sumit Sarkar, ibid, pp. 377-378).

[6] Despite the call for "mass struggle on non-violent lines on the widest possible scale" Gandhi in his 'Do or die' speech; of the same day as that of the declaration, said that "..... if a general strike becomes a dire necessity, I shall not flinch". (Sumit Sarkar, ibid, pp. 388-389).

on the 9th of August. In terms of regional variations, the best account happens to be that of Midnapore, a district in Bengal that had a long tradition of militant anti-imperialist struggles by the peasants and the national revolutionaries. A rebel "national government" — the *Tamralipta Jatiya Sarkar* — in the Tamluk sub-division of Midnapore was set up underground on 17th December 1942, and survived till September 1944 with an armed *Vidyut Vahini*[7] and arbitration courts to settle claims. Less violent and elemental than Bihar or the U.P., the movement here was more organized and sustained, offering resistance to the policies of "boat denial" and "scorched earth", which the British had adopted in the name of aiming to foil access of supplies to a possible Japanese attack. The Tamluk resistance suffered only subsequently from the terrible cyclone of 16th October and the man-made 'famine' that followed in the next year.

In March 1943, the Fazlul Haque ministry in Bengal was replaced by the Khwaja Nazimuddin ministry, as part of the rapid advance of the Muslim League, which took full advantage of the suppression of the Congress. It was during the tenure of this ministry that the infamous man-made famine in Bengal saw the loss of life and values on an unprecedented scale.

The March-June 1944 campaign of the I.N.A. in Imphal along with Japanese troops ultimately ended in a total failure, and the I.N.A. men were taken prisoners, while Subhas Chandra Bose disappeared, in what has still remained a much-debated issue of the so-called air-crash. The revolutionary attempt by the I.N.A. survived at the level of an inspiration for the disaffected British Indian army in the 1945-46 Naval strike in Bombay.

With elections in Britain round the corner, Prime Minister Winston Churchill permitted Viceroy Wavell to begin negotiations with the Indian leaders. With the release of the Congress leaders, the Viceroy proposed talks to set up a new, entirely-Indian, Executive Council, but the Shimla Conference that followed

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[7] Sumit Sarkar, ibid, pp. 400-402; Suniti Kumar Ghosh mentions a *Mukti Bahini* (Liberation army) and a *Bhagini Sena* (Army of sisters), op. cit., pp 234-235.

(25th June – 14th July 1945) broke down when the Congress refused to be seen as a purely 'caste-Hindu' party insisting on the right to include members of all communities among its nominees, while the League demanded absolute right to choose Muslim members and the right for a communal veto in the Executive Council. While a massive Labour victory followed in Britain (July 1945), the worldwide situation was also changing (Nazi Germany had been subjugated, Japan had surrendered after Hiroshima, Communist leadership had been emerging in Eastern Europe, and a tremendous anti-imperial wave was sweeping south East Asia with Vietnam and Indonesia resisting restoration attempts of French and Dutch colonial rule). If the Labour victory did quicken the process of British retreat, the initial steps were not quite radical.

The decisive shift came after a mass pressure in India following the British decision to hold public trials for the several hundreds of I.N.A. prisoners. In November 1945 the British put on the dock in the first trial held at the Red Fort in Delhi, a Hindu, a Muslim and a Sikh prisoner. The countrywide protest that followed had explosive effect in Calcutta from the 21st to the 23rd of November. A Forward Bloc student procession was joined by Communist Students' Federation cadres, as well as students from the Islamia College; spontaneously they tied together the Congress, League and Communist party flags as symbol of all-in anti-imperialist unity. As police firing killed two students (significantly, a Hindu and a Muslim) the taxi and tram-workers' strike as well as strikes by workers in some factories led to massive unrest in the city. A simultaneous issue was the protest against use of the Indian army in the bid to restore French and Dutch colonial rule in Vietnam and Indonesia; by February 1946 the Indian soldiers were withdrawing from both Indo-China and Indonesia. But on the 11th to the 13th of the same month Calcutta exploded again in protest against the seven-year rigorous imprisonment imposed on I.N.A. prisoner Abdul Rashid, and remarkable unity was once again witnessed.

The greatest threat however, was posed by the Naval strike of 18th to the 23rd of February, which began initially in Bombay from a protest against bad food-

supplies and racial insults. Remarkable fraternity from crowds on land who brought supplies for the men in revolt, and the unity among the naval community who once again displayed their faith in united strength of all political parties by hoisting the three flags of the respective parties on a single mast on their ship, however was let down through the joint call for surrender from Sarder Vallavbhai Patel and Mohammed Ali Jinnah (23rd February), while Gandhi condemned the rebels for setting a bad example for India in accordance with his conviction in non-violent means.

The initial discussions of the Cabinet Mission of June 1946 aiming to address the twin issues of interim government and the procedures of formulating a constitution were stalled with the League insistence of Pakistan; but this was followed up with what is known as the "long term" plan[8]. The League withdrew its initial acceptance of the "long term" plan and called on the "Muslim nation" to go in for "direct action" from 16th August to achieve Pakistan. Despite the swearing in of a Congress-dominated interim government (2nd September), the scene had already become violent with communal riots of an unprecedented scale that began in Calcutta and spread to Bombay, Bihar, U.P., and Punjab. Even as the Mahatma made a personal charismatic attempt to quell the communal holocaust through his threat of a fast-unto-death, partially and temporarily effective[9] in Bihar (6th November 1946), Calcutta (1st to 4th September 1947), and later in Punjab (January 1948), the unworkability of a Congress-League coalition increasingly tipped the scales in favour of a partition of the country.

Through the decisive and swift decisions from Viceroy Mountbatten who had replaced Wavell, the process of partition and transfer of power was achieved

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[8] For details, refer Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., pp. 428-432.

[9] Suniti Kumar Ghosh lists a four point limitation of Gandhi, that (i) his charisma failed to work on the Muslims; (ii) a large section of scheduled castes and tribes remained untouched by his charismatic influence; (iii) his ability to inspire and influence politically inclined youth was limited; and (iv) towards the end of his life, his charisma ceased to work on his close associates who had earlier cherished implicit faith in him. (op. cit., p. 361); "When in January 1947, Gandhi was asked 'How did your *Ahimsa* work in Bihar?', he replied: 'It did not work at all. It failed miserably.'" (op. cit., p. 367).

at remarkable speed in the final two and a half months of the British rule. Nevertheless the process failed to stop the Punjab massacre, and boundary lines were drawn with little or no consideration of the local details.

Five months after the August riots, students in Calcutta were once again on the streets (21st January, 1947) with the call of "Hands off Vietnam" and demonstrating against the use of Dum Dum airport by the French aeroplanes; all communal divisions once again seemed to have been forgotten. This demonstration coincided with the eighty-five day tram-workers strike which began on the same day, followed closely by the strike by postal employees and those of the Howrah engineering works.

On 27th January 1948, Mahatma Gandhi was invited by the Muslim community (paradoxically those very people who had been for long taught to mistrust him), to address them at a shrine near Delhi. Three days later, bullets from the gun held by Nathuram Godse — a Hindu — silenced the man. On the eve of his murder Gandhi is supposed to have said that the country still had to "attain social, moral and economic independence in terms of its 700,000 villages" and that the Congress had created "rotten boroughs leading to corruption and ..... institutions, popular and democratic only in name". He emphasised his conviction that it would be better to replace the Congress with a genuinely dedicated, self-sacrificing "Lok Sevak Sangh" village workers unit.[10]

The foregoing brief summary presents a case where more than once there has been the evidence of a potential among the masses for united uprising which had failed to gain proper dimension due to the lack of a coordinated political plan-of-action on behalf of the major political parties, enmeshed as they all were in their respective collaborative links and inter-party conflict of aspirations. Such a confusion in the political atmosphere, most certainly gets connected to the general attitude of confusion among the people. Cultural expressions taking

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[10] Sumit Sarkar, op. cit., p. 453.

shape against such a backdrop, if they are not led by individual quests determined by personal convictions, obviously tend to reflect the confusion of doubtful deliberations characteristic of the times.

The man-made famine of 1943-44

Since the cultural practitioners of the Communist party responded prominently to the disastrous conditions of the man-made famine in Bengal, it would be relevant to take note of, to the extent necessary within the scope of this introductory section, the salient features of the catastrophe. As early as 23rd September 1943, the "man-made" nature of the disaster had been already recognised, implying that human intervention *itself* could have averted the sufferings, or at least the degree of it.

The roots of the disaster trace back to 1939, the association of India with Britain's war on Germany that raised voices of protest but could not resist the drain of resources from the country chanelled into war-efforts. The war no longer seemed distant, when the fall of Rangoon to the Japanese cut off the supply of rice from Burma. The "Quit India" call, as already mentioned, stirred up a determined movement in Tamluk and Contai sub-divisions of Midnapore, but this also brought severe repressive measures as backlash. The repeated bombings on Chittagong not only caused much damage but raised a threatened tension in Calcutta. The soldiers of the Allied forces were stationed to combat. Amidst the bleak circumstances, and policies that had seriously disruptive effects on the economy of the region ("boat denial" and "scorched earth"), natural calamity struck a blow in the form of the cyclone that hit the coastal regions on the 16th of October, causing massive devastation to the two subdivisions where the resistance was most firm. With the destruction of several villages and the consequent loss of lives, the worst effect was felt on the paddy crop.

> "Before the cyclone, Midnapore had been a surplus district, exporting large amounts of paddy and rice. But, just as the winter

> crop was maturing the cyclone changed Midnapore into a deficit district with very limited local supplies. A troubling crop disease broke out at the same time ruining much of the paddy that had survived the cyclone."[11]

Yet this was not the entire story. Studies reveal the orchestrated man-made nature of the famine. While the above account appears to be a classic example that could be explained by the "food availability decline" principle (as the Famine Inquiry Commission had done), Dr. Amartya Sen in an illuminating analysis[12] has argued against this theory, with statistical data to prove that despite the cyclone the yield in crop in Bengal in 1943 had actually been more than that of 1941 which was a non-famine year. Another more detailed analysis by Paul R. Greenough, while reaffirming this fact investigates the issue from the a cultural construct — that of the notion of prosperity and subsistence modes in Bengal — in an attempt to understand the experience of the famine and the response patterns of those affected by it.

> "In one sense saying that the famine was 'man-made' (*manusyosristo*) asserts, quite rightly, that Nature was not to blame — no drought, flood or crop failure caused a shortage of rice so great as to make widespread starvation inevitable ..... In another, more pointed sense, the epithet 'man-made' expresses the conviction that greed and maladministration were responsible for unnecessary hunger, suffering and death ..... While pronouncing the famine man-made is not irrational, it is clearly a mistake to attribute it to the malefic actions of a few. The causes of the famine were complex and it scants the evidence to grant responsibility to particular persons."[13]

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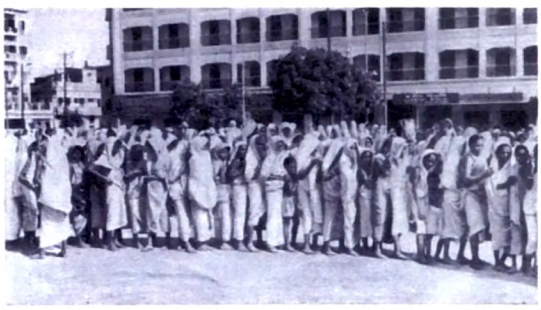
[11] Paul R. Greenough, "Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal/ *The Famine of 1943-44*", Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford 1982, p.94.

[12] Amartya Sen, "Poverty And Famines, An Essay In Entitlement And Deprivation", Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1981.

[13] Paul R. Greenough, op cit, p. 85.





Famine photographs, 1943, from contemporary newspaper reports (Famines in Bengal)

Famine photographs, 1943, from contemporary newspaper reports (Famines in Bengal)

Sunil Janah: "Bengal famine"
1943, photograph
(*The India Magazine of her people and culture*,
1989)

Therefore, the freezing of supplies for the war front and the greed of the stock-hoarders, coupled with a general maladministration to form the human causes for the immense suffering and the numerous deaths. In the brilliant socio-economic analysis by Paul R. Greenough, there are quoted eye-witness accounts from those who had actually passed through the trying times; these reveal the social disruption that resulted most notably in women taking recourse to prostitution for subsistence.[14] There are also evidential records of separation of family members, abandonment, sale and abuse of children.[15] Also on the increase was the number of people who had turned into beggars. The reaction to the 'famine' has been described as fatalistic; fatalism being noticed in the general lack of violence, with no major report of food rioting or insurrection in response to the acute starvation. However, the "Congress rebels in Midnapore had no such political inhibitions [as the Communists] and pushed hard to mobilize antagonism against the government and landlords", with the underground publication *Biplabi* openly advocating "attacks on landlords and big tenants"[16]. Despite such exhortation, the result was disappointing; and the pattern of response has a distinct uniqueness.

> "..... In the European tradition, famine violence was turned 'outward' and 'upward' against offending landlords, merchants, and officials; in Bengal the tradition was to turn violence 'inward' and 'downward' against clients and dependents. This was the cold violence of abandonment, of ceasing to nourish, rather that of bloodshed and tumult ..... Mendicancy, cries and wails, imploring gestures, the exhibiting of dead or dying children — all were part of the destitutes' attempts to evoke charity and to transfer responsibility for their nurture to new 'destined providers' ..... Throwing themselves in the path of those who visited these

[14] Paul R. Greenough, ibid, pp. 147-149.

[15] Paul R. Greenough, ibid, pp. 215-225.

[16] Paul R. Greenough, ibid, pp. 268-269.

shops, starving victims ensnared well-to-do strangers in nets of reproach."[17]

From the above accounts, we could now turn to the more specific issues in the field of visual arts, taking brief note of some of the aesthetic debates of the earlier decades which one supposes should have been relevant to the decade under survey (as debates already passed through), and then examine a monographic-essay from the nineteen-forties where the authors propose a dimension of the "progressive" in the paintings of an artist who rose to prominence in the past decades and was hailed as a path-breaker for the younger generation that followed him.

The 'aesthetics of a young India' as already advocated in the 1920s; responses that followed in Bengali essays

In a 1922 article in the journal "Rupam"[18], Benoy Kumar Sarkar, came up with his responses to a May 1921 article in the same journal by "Agastya", who happened to be the editor O.C. Gangoly writing in pseudonym. The issue at stake were the sculptures of Fanindra Nath Bose, trained in Italy and France, whose sculptures failed to draw 'Agastya's' admiration because though the "subject is Indian there is nothing in it, which could not come from the chisel of a non-Indian sculptor ..... we search in vain for the revelation of the Indian mind of an Indian artist, the peculiarity of his point of view, and the traditions of his great heritage".[19] Benoy Sarkar begins his response by pointing out that the East has always been postulated and expected to ever remain different from the West, and yet "what else is Indian literature of the last two generations, but the product of India's intimate acquaintance with and assimilation of Western

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[17] Paul R. Greenough, ibid, pp. 270-271.

[18] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, "The Aesthetics of Young India", *Rupam*, No.9, Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta, January 1922.

[19] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, quoting 'Agastya', ibid, p. 9.

literary models?"[20] Ridiculing this very limited and dogmatic view of the arts, he teased that an extension of such a logic could be that an Indian must never investigate the acoustics of a violin since the instrument finds not much mention in ancient Indian texts on music, nor have any interest in the advancements of modern scientific gadgets.

Referring to the art traditions of the West, Benoy Kumar Sarkar claimed that the worship of "the unknown, the infinite, and the hereafter" is certainly to be found in the art of the "Catholic Europe" and not just in the art of India. He observed, that "the moderns in Euro-America have succeeded in profoundly secularising the arts. In the second place they have attained certain conspicuous results in technique and treatment of materials ..... Whether there have emerged some new emotions or not, the advance of the creative mind in technique is already obvious."[21] He further emphasised the universal in art when he wrote about the need to "meditate upon the art-in-itself, the only feature in all these productions" if one were to detect, for example, the difference of a Cezanne from a Corot landscape. The multitude of specimens and the plurality of types in art "compel us at last to come down to the fundamentals of beauty and truth in *shilpa* and to try to decipher the alphabet of plastic and pictorial art".[22] On the whole, Benoy Kumar Sarkar came up with a pertinent criticism of the then-current trend in art criticism, but his overtly formalist approach has its own problems of over generalization without acknowledging the context of production. However, his advocacy of a rejection of short-sighted insistence on the purity of one's own tradition, and being able instead to open up to a greater claim to world heritage, is significant for its time.

'Agastya' came up with a rejoinder in the same volume. He precisely responded to the sweeping internationalism of Benoy Kumar Sarkar, and disagreed saying

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[20] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, ibid, p. 10.

[21] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, ibid, p. 13.

[22] Benoy Kumar Sarkar, ibid, p. 17.

that, despite "far-fetched and superficial analogies" an Apollo and Nataraja are not identical. "An aesthetic esparanto is a contradiction in terms"[23], he wrote.

The above debate in the pages of the "Rupam" did not remain restricted to the English journal exclusively and spread over into 'vernacular' literature, notably the weekly magazine "Bijoli" and later into "Prabashi" as well.[24] Barindra Kumar Ghosh the editor of "Bijoli" could not restrain himself from responding to the debate in the pages of the "Rupam" and on the 20th of April, 1922, he commented in an article on the unnecessarily complicated situation that has risen out of the said debate.[25] He could not accept the logic in Benoy Kumar Sarkar's essay because it fanned out into so many associated arts in trying to draw the similarities that ultimately the focus seemed to have diverted a significant distance away from any conclusive understanding of the issue.

This article was followed by another essay by Pramatha Choudhury, who wrote under the pseudonym "Birbal".[26] Full of humour and satire, in his essay he advocated the necessity to rise above the limiting confines of race and nationalism in the context of art. The editor of "Bijoli" could not accept this sharply written commentary, no matter how well constructed it may have been and he took up the pen again in a following issue, to reiterate his opinion.[27]

The relevance of this ongoing debate for the present discussion is not so much the content of the individual essays, but the fact that in the twenties there was a viable scope for Bengali journals to enter into a potentially serious debate

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[23] "Agastya", the Aesthetics of Young India: a rejoinder", *Rupam*, No.9, Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta, January 1922, p. 26.

[24] There was yet another rejoinder in the "Rupam" from Stella Kramrisch, in April 1922 issue.

[25] Barindra Kumar Ghosh, "*Panditer lagey dhanda*" (the scholars are affected by delusion), "Bijoli", Calcutta 28th April, 1922.

[26] "*Birbaler patra*" (Birbal's letter), "Bijoli", Calcutta 22nd May, 1922.

[27] Barindra Kumar Ghosh, "*Kachayaner jabab*" (reply from the realm of verbosity), "Bijoli", Calcutta 9th June, 1922.

pertaining to art and viewing, thereby choices of style and language. The shortcomings and limitations of the discussion are obvious as one attempts to analyse the essays in detail, but the very fact that a question of choice between indigenous nationalistic roots and an international heritage of wider consequence was already the matter of debate two decades before the nineteen-forties, would prompt one to expect that the issues should have by then reached some form of a resolved understanding. Whether it did, and if so how far it extended into art-critical essays of the nineteen-forties will be evident if we look into the following discussion of a co-authored book on Jamini Roy.

Bishnu Dey and John Irwin's 1944 essay on Jamini Roy, and the debate of the "progressive" in art.

As a consequence of the colonial experience, the emerging modern in Indian painting was strongly motivated by an urge to define a national identity. In Bengal, revivalism in art sought to regenerate the present by harking back to a glorious "golden" past, nostalgically searching for themes historic and even mythic. For style, the parallel effort traced back the models to the pictorial conventions of the courtly aristocratic traditions of manuscript illumination, like the Mughal and the Pahari schools, or even further backwards to the classical past of the Ajanta wall-paintings for its formal characteristics. In contrast to such a nationalist invention of a dominant tradition, an artist like Jamini Roy stands out as an individual with a distinctly different choice. He opted for significantly alternative sources to define tradition — that of the folk-paintings and temple terracotta-relief panels of Bengal — and from these formal and stylistic references attempted to build up a viable personal pictorial language.

However, Jamini Roy had begun with an institutional training at the Government School of Art, Calcutta, where he acquired sufficient skills in the European academic-realist mode to operate as an accomplished portrait painter. Such proficiency would have provided him a prolific and lucrative professional security. His rejection of the same, therefore, and his subsequent evolving of a

distinctly personal style, indicate a modernist aspiration for individuality and innovative excellence, thereby recognition of his talent and artistic genius.
It is possible to claim that for Jamini Roy the interest in folk art carried deeper implications than the merely formal or stylistic possibilities. For, he tried to actualise the link by emulating a mode of artistic production parallel to the craft-guild collective effort of the village folk-artist. He turned his family into the production-unit, as they joined him in grinding the colours, preparing the glue, and even filling in the paint. And yet it is simultaneously true that even though Jamini Roy hailed from the rural background of the village Beliatore in Bankura district, he did not *actually* come from a traditional family of *patuas* (scroll painters). His attempt, therefore, to follow the craftsman's production system inevitably invited a problematic, in social relations and in pictorial form. Although his pictorial style does remind us of the folk-conventions because of a similarity in the norms of abbreviation, his urbane self proclaimed itself over and above it, in the way in which he remodelled and restructured his sources. The vivacity of his references often turned into vigorously disciplined, highly refined and cerebral schema, the neat, sophisticated pattern standing at a remote extreme from its comparable sources. This characteristic feature becomes even more pertinent if one compares Jamini Roy's paintings with another obvious linguistic similarity, that of the urban-folk imageries of the Kalighat paintings, where Jamini Roy's significant differences mark his distinctively differing point of view from the "bazaar" artist, and his refined, cultivated self of a modern artist becomes evident. The modernist reading of traditional models is also clearly evident in the drawings of Jamini Roy, where the preparatory sketches and layouts for compositions that base themselves upon past styles/schools of painting show a remarkably keen sensibility in the way the forms are built up through freely drawn, and often overlapping, multiple lines, that carry the nervous urgency of a contemporary artist's eagerness to capture the emerging form onto paper.

This later linguistic shift in a mature Jamini Roy thus needs to be viewed in the context of his early academic training and the subsequent initial dilemmas before he could make his final choice. It was in this period of quest that the

need he felt for a modern vocabulary found expression on the one hand in a series of imagined landscapes which were executed in a post-Impressionistic colour-palette and a free brush handling of swift dabs of paint. Simultaneously he was also experimenting with another set of paintings on the theme of the *Santal* mother-and-child, which carried traces of the "Bengal School" romanticism in posture, composition and the use of colour. Although distinctly different from each other these two trends indicate a common rejection of his academic training. Further dissatisfaction with what he could thus achieve, then led to the final break with both, the "colonial" as well as the "national", through the adoption of the folk.

Simultaneous study of comparable examples reveal the differences between the folk antecedents and the personal style of Jamini Roy, and the most obvious pair perhaps, is the reworking of a Kalighat painting of Krishna and Yashoda milking a cow. The late 19th-early 20th century painters, who sold their products near the Kalighat temple in Calcutta, were rural artists now settled in the city in search of a new market. Consequently, they had adapted their skills, technique and schema to meet the demands of a patronage quite different from their traditional circuit. Here evolved a kind of domestication of the gods, such that Krishna and Yashoda became more an expression of filial-parental affection rather than divine glory. The pictorial style matched this simplicity, with thin transparent wash of colours bounded by sweeping yet firm contour lines. The bold tonal gradation on the inner edge of the contour turned it into a device to suggest volume and tactile feeling in the form. Despite being removed to quite an extent in format and details from traditional *pata* (scroll) paintings, the imagery retained a vitality and organic simplicity in the unguarded directness of depiction. In the Jamini Roy version, this pulsating rhythm is stilled into studied formal arrangement, with precisely adjusted distribution of space-units, and balance of shapes. Most notably, the contour transforms into double-lines in places, dark on the outside, light on the inside. The spontaneity of the Kalighat line is reduced to a calculated perfection, from point to thickness and back, in uniform flow. Reducing all effects of depth and volume, Jamini Roy emphasizes a two-

dimensional design, of flat colour, calculated linear pattern and sophisticated elegance of feeling.

In traditional *pata*-paintings, groups of figures carry a sense of rhythmic vitality through free, impulsive drawing that intuitively brings about subtle variations in figural form even within the given schema, and a positive asymmetry in composition. In contrast, Jamini Roy's almost mathematical compositional clarity and measured uniformity of the figure type, as in the pictures of *Santal* dance, freezes a scene of lively movement into a carefully balanced precise design.

There is a complementary staticity in the thematic content of his images. Traditional folk painting, in comparison, could maintain a kind of dynamism. For instance, the *Saheb pata* and the *Santal-bidroha pata* are themes of the colonial situation and revolt against oppression. But oppression and release, a common aspect of traditional myths is here treated without recourse to any superhuman intervention. Similarly, Kalighat painting entered into the new genre of satire when faced with the vain pompousness of the new urban rich. Jamini Roy's paintings in contrast, only maintain a pretty vision of the world, unperturbed by the then recent socio-political upheavals.

However, Jamini Roy had a considerable range of interest — from the visual aspects of the home-sewn Bengal quilt (called *kantha*) to the Byzantine icon, from the mythic tales close to home to the Christian themes. Yet there is no major reworking of the sources beyond a certain limit, so that they do not tend to turn into reinterpretations. The "Flight into Egypt" is depicted in almost the same iconic scheme as "Durga, Ganesh and Shiva", despite being considerably different as a narrative. At the most, therefore, a theme of alien origin is made to appear comprehensively familiar by recasting the human aspect, as a universal.

Finally, by keeping the price of his paintings considerably low and combining

that with the workshop practice of manual duplication, Jamini Roy intended to achieve a wide circulation of his paintings. Hypothetically, such multiple copies could have served as a strategy for subverting the notion of the "masterpiece". Yet paradoxically, the search still persists in identifying and authenticating paintings *actually* by the hand of the master, as distinguished from the workshop products. Such an act reiterates the fact that the social circuit in which a modern artist like Jamini Roy functioned, was significantly different from that of the folk-painter, and simultaneously exemplified the subsuming role of the same.

In 1944, the Indian Society of Oriental Art published a monographic study in the form of a large essay, co-authored by Bishnu Dey and John Irwin. The former, a poet of considerable repute, was an ardent champion of the modernist attempts of the artists of the Calcutta Group, and had decidedly leftist ideological leanings. The latter, former keeper of the Indian section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, lived in Calcutta during the Second World War in the capacity of a British officer and the private secretary to the Governor of Bengal, Mr. Casey. Given these factors, an overall consideration of the premises in the essay, as well as the foreword to the publication written by the art historian Stella Kramrisch, could be expected to reveal some of the issues and debates around the defining of the post-revivalist modern in the art of Bengal, during the decades of the forties and the fifties.

In the brief but pointed foreword, Stella Kramrisch began with a eulogy, comparing the advent of an artist like Jamini Roy in the field of modern Indian painting to a "flash of lightning across Bengal's dust-laden brooding sky" which heralds the monsoon. Metaphorically, the impact is pronounced as an invigorating influence in a moment of stagnation. Characterizing the situation as a "conflict between outworn Western art forms and a formlessness arising from a futile desire to revive the great past of Indian art" she found that it was an artist like Jamini Roy who could "cut through the confusion of contemporary thought". In his paintings the essentials of form and content allowed "no vagueness in his wide curves, no emptiness in his spacious surfaces".

Therefore it was "based on universals of form which are understood by all who know art, whether from the East or the West". Quite obviously then, for Kramrisch, Jamini Roy is the epitome of liberation from revivalist insipidity, although she carefully avoids the mention of the "Bengal school" by name. And yet, despite the scathingly critical analysis of the erstwhile situation prior to Jamini Roy, she ultimately emphasizes a formalist universalism when speaking of the artist of her preference. This euphoric claim to universal comprehensibility leaves unaddressed the problematic question of Jamini Roy's training in an urban academic institution. Given his academic training and a presumable familiarity with European art trends, coupled no doubt with his intention to trace back to indigenous traditions (therefore his rural background), the choice of his mature style with aspirations to a folk-popular iconography could be seen as form of primitivism, characteristically not very dissimilar from such tendencies to be found in more than one European modern movement.

Even more surprising than the eulogy in the foreword is the beginning premise of the co-authoured essay. Almost in the tone of a foregone conclusion, the authors assume that a statement like "Jamini Roy is the only living painter in the country of four hundred million who has achieved a really pure and vital intensity of creative expression"[28] is a "simple claim" rather than an exclusivist and opinionated (therefore debatable) issue requiring substantiation.

Tracing the significance of Jamini Roy's birthplace, Beliatore, in Bankura district of Bengal, and the role of local cultures in the formation of an artistic predilection, the authors fall back upon an extensive passage describing the Aryan-indigenous conflict of cultures in ancient times, the "long process of revolt and assimilation"[29]. That history is then extended to the present to reinstate the picture of an unchanging, non-transforming village society. Even if, as they claim, that Beliatore had been able "to preserve its local culture long after village

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[28] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, "Jamini Roy", Indian Society of Oriental Art, Calcutta, 1944, p. 3.

[29] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 9.

life in other parts of Bengal had succumbed to a slow process of social and economic disintegration"[30], the fact is unproblematically treated as a "special circumstance" aiding the process of artistic evolution of a genius, whereby "when Jamini Roy was born, the village Beliatore still retained its self-sufficient medieval economy"[31]. If it was not so usual for the son of an upper caste landowner to grow up in such free association with village craftsmen, then the supportive privilege of a father who recognized his son's interest in scrolls and folk-images as latent artistic merit and something more than mere curiosity, is mentioned by the authors in a tone of patronizing fondness.

Bishnu Dey and John Irwin also refuse to term Jamini Roy revivalist "either in praise or censure"[32]. The reason, they say is that "he approached folk art not as an outsider but as one who had an intimate knowledge and understanding of the living experiences of the people"[33]. The issue of an insider-to-one's-own-tradition for a well-defined and categorical social stratification with traditionally assigned occupational roles, thereby a specified location within the social fabric, is an intricate issue, which has been discussed earlier in this study and needs to be recapitulated/reiterated for the validity of its logic at this point.

> "..... Jamini Roy never had to pursue Gauguin's far-away search of equivalence and symbolism, nor was it necessary for him to study the paintings of Matisse in order to develop an 'integral vision'. Level surfaces, a central focus, and the flattening-out of design-in-depth are conventional features of Bengal folk painting. So is the use of pure and positive colours which, for tonality

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[30] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 9.

[31] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 9.

[32] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 13.

[33] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 13.

depend upon the mutual interaction of full-tones and the equalization of planes .....".[34]

Despite an obvious nationalistic pride that comes forth from this passage in the proclaiming of indigenous roots for an evolving contemporary pictorial language, the defining of the characteristic features of a Bengal folk-painting are valid enough. Yet the collapsing of differences in intention and procedure (thereby the resultant image) of a Matisse and a Bengal folk-painting, such that one almost appears to be equivalent to the other, is a drastic statement in itself that refuses to accept the context specificity (therefore the significant differences) in the historical evolution of these visual languages. The authors continue, that the folk-painters "never had any desire to imitate our inimitable nature; they wanted only to convey the feeling and the vision of a mind reacting to the *universals* of nature ..... a world where, for instance, all trees are reduced to the single conceptual image of one tree, the universal tree, stripped of individual identity"[35]. Such an absolute claim amounts to a total denial of the linguistic flexibility and a relatively more active form-content equation in such practices. The fluidity of execution in a folk-painting, as noted earlier, allows variations to creep in between two otherwise similar figures (or trees, if you like) such that even if the artist was conceptually intending to paint *the* form rather than *an* individual, a lively dynamic quality relieved the image from falling into patterned and measured uniformity. Universal, as read by the authors, tends to be reductionist.

Similarly, the existence of myths (narratives?) that are observed as the basic difference between the universal in primitive art and that of Bengal folk-painting, falls short when extended to the context of Jamini Roy.

"The universals of nature with which the cave painter had been preoccupied, now gained a new significance as symbols. Take, for instance, Jatayu, the immortal, chivalrous bird of the Ramayana:

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[34] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 15.

[35] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, pp. 15-16.

> he is no ornithological specimen, but he nevertheless has something of the character of all birds ....."[36]

In fact, this swing between the universality of Jatayu as the mythic bird and the specific (symbolic?) hero of the epic, with a clearly defined role to play in the fascinating narrative, is the mode through which mythic characters come to life for us. Despite his universality, Jatayu is not just any other bird, but an individual character in the epic; even if Jatayu is a bird, all birds are not Jatayu-s. Precisely because of this reason, when Jamini Roy attempts to rework and refashion another such epic flying character, Garuda, by placing him on horseback, apart from the novelty of the juxtaposition, no new dimension to a myth generates from the image. Simultaneously, divorced from the narrative structure of shared mythologies, the image becomes distant in its new, and personal, iconography. Iconic staticity in terms of the form, freezes the possibility of the image growing in fresh dimension, through the lack of a narrative content or the 'new' myth.

Closely similar is the problematic analysis of how the artists of Europe handled Christian narrative themes. For Dey and Irwin, with Rembrandt, the continuous history of myths in the West began breaking down under new social circumstances, with a dual emphasis on "method" and "individuality of the subject".

> "Since then the break has widened even further; and the suffering of a Picasso, a Braque or a Rouault to-day is in a sense even greater than Rembrandt's ..... a turning back, however sincere, like Gauguin and, in a different way, Van Gogh ..... is bound to result in self-limitations."[37]

It is perhaps obvious to point out that today one rarely thinks of self-limitation in these artists in the sense in which it has been mentioned. If the new social conditions did result in the breaking down of the traditional modes of expression,

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[36] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 17.

[37] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 18.

then one does observe at least a genuine honesty in the artistic response, structured as it is to the given social transformation. A Rouault image of the suffering Christ therefore, becomes more a vehicle for expression of contemporary experience rather than the continuity of a normative tradition. And the individuality of the subject, as we are well aware, can be traced back not to Rembrandt alone, but to Renaissance humanism and therefore to artist much prior to him.

Coming to the pictures of Christ by Jamini Roy, the authors provide two impulses that supposedly guided the artist. The first, an attempt to figure out if his "new technique could be applied with equal effect to a subject remote from his personal life"[38]. And the second is his dissatisfaction with Renaissance masterpieces, which he saw as photo-reproductions — "he wanted to show that the human and the divine could be made one only by abstract symbolic means"[39]. We have already taken note of the "intense homeliness" of the images of Christ painted by Jamini Roy, to the effect that Christ and his suffering for humanity no longer remains a foreign intrusion. What one may add at this point is the fact that all religions (including Christianity, which despite the missionary zeal of its preachers is hardly any exception) have transformed to varying degrees when transposed to countries other than that of their origin. It is only the mark of a healthy adaptability of a people — and we do not necessarily need to fall back upon the rhetoric of the greatness of Hindu assimilatory capabilities or the fact that this country "1900 years ago gave asylum to St. Thomas"[40], as the authors do — that absorbs fresh inputs and transforms them into characteristically indigenous expressions. It is also the index of universality for a religious doctrine when it allows such transformations by incorporating the local faith and existing structures of thought without attempting to erase them completely. No wonder then, that the upraised arms of a crucified Christ in a

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[38] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 26.

[39] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 26.

[40] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 26.

Jamini Roy painting, look recognizably more familiar as an iconographic gesture of assurance. The hands framed by the lines of the cross, rather than seeming to be nailed on to it, become a part of the overall compositional design. The posture and the form of the body are surprisingly forthright in iconic frontality, and do not express suffering on the tool of torture. The blood from the nail wounds spill on to the entire palm in perfect congruity with the iconographic stipulation for Brahmanical divinities popular in Bengal. If then Jamini Roy had been painting his Christ images , "the best of which were painted four or five years ago"[41], as the authors of the 1944 essay claim, then this was one of the significant shifts in an artist's (personal) imagery taking effect in the early years of period that concerns the present study.

> "The lonely search for form became for Jamini Roy a great intellectual adventure. No painter, not even Cezanne, has treated his art more seriously; few have sacrificed more to it ....."[42]

To an extent one can comprehend the loneliness in Roy's search for form, given the overall atmosphere of the art-world in Calcutta then, but the (once again) nationalist pride evident in the comparison is perhaps not only too loud and uncalled-for but untenable and unsound as a claim. The integrity of Cezanne's search for structure and form in painting is certainly no less serious than Roy's, if not more. But then what about the "intellectual adventure" in the latter's search for form? Cerebral, one does agree, and therefore involving the intellect rather than emotion or feeling, but the extent of the 'adventure' that the authors would have us believe is not too formally apparent from the images themselves, especially against the artist with whom they contrast in the comparison. In fact, a couple of paragraphs further the authors would themselves write that, "..... from then onwards, and during the years that he gradually came to wider recognition, we have to admit that there is no advance — only a restless patching of past achievements ...."[43] And further: "If only the hand comes to function and

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[41] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 28.

[42] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 19.

[42] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 28.

if there remains only an air of facility, the reason is not in an atrophy of the mind itself but in a failure of the mind to adjust re-itself to the objective world which is various and changing"[44]. Contrary then to the authors claim, Matisse *did* in his day move forward, and his later mural sized paper-cuts and the famous Chapel of the Rosary are proof of the fact. For in them design and decorative pattern reach a total sense of space organization — fluidity of rhythm and colour extend beyond two axes of the picture plane to the entire interior of the Chapel in an all-encompassing vision. Precisely because of this contrasting difference the fact that there is "not one violent man, not one shrewish woman, in the whole of Jamini Roy's world, with its calm of mind and subdued passion"[45] leads on to the unavoidable truth that he has been "a martyr to his own mastery"[46]. Quite rightly therefore, poet Sudhindranth Dutta's could express his expectation, that "..... could he but enlarge his sympathy, the demonstrations of organized labour should present him with fewer formal difficulties than the excesses of a Kirtan 'procession'"[47]. In fact, given the intimacy of Jamini Roy's relationship with his much younger contemporary Bishnu Dey, one finds it difficult why Dey stops by lamenting that the artist "was given no aid by the atmosphere of Calcutta's world of art, nor had he access, even through books to the contemporary art world in Europe where he would have found his fellow spirits"[48]. To Dey and Irwin's question — "Could we humanly expect more?"[49] — one has to say "yes". It would have been possible for the ideologues themselves to have intervened, If Dey was himself so well-acquainted with European modern movements in art (and we know that he was a sincere connoisseur of Western Classical music as well, in fact in general of world culture), as his references to Rouault-Picasso-Braque-Cezanne-Matisse prove, then there could have been no better

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[44] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, pp. 28-29.

[45] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 30.

[46] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 30.

[47] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 30.

[48] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 30.

[49] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 30.

alternative than him who could have extended this privilege to the painter. And the other reason for such an expectation is Jamini Roy himself — his early paintings in a post-Impressionist/Fauvist language of colour, which he subsequently relinquished, and the singular example of a copy of a Van Gogh self-portrait, show his acquaintance and response to relatively modern art languages of Europe.

It also required a shift of perspective to realize that the artist himself was working out a much more intense and valid proposition in his drawings. One would certainly differ with the authors that these brush drawings are "only of limited interest by themselves"[50]. If only the artist, and his admirers, could realize them as complete works-of-art in their own right and not just studies and notes towards his more static and predictable 'finished' pictures, the understanding of art as language could certainly have been established. On the contrary, other preoccupations overruled this possibility, and probably the time was not yet ripe for such a consciousness.

In a final analysis then, one has to locate the above within the changing political scenario of the nineteen-forties, which saw the rise of a specific anti-fascist movement and the consolidation of left-politics stressing the need for a cultural alliance with the masses. According to this new perspective, it was through the exploration of popular art forms that the bond could be forged. Explicit is a similar line of thought in the following passage from the Dey-Irwin essay:

> "Nevertheless, in spite of the contradiction, Jamini Roy is doing the only thing possible, for whatever pattern of community life India is going to have, this folk-culture will almost certainly provide the connecting initiative. Moreover, art and propaganda are more easily reconciled in those countries where the folk tradition is still living; and in India it is doubtful whether propaganda can ever

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[50] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 25.

> have power without drawing upon this formal heritage of the community life."[51]

Popular art, therefore, was believed to have a necessary social basis as a community activity where the notion of the lone-genius was alien. It was from this point of view, that Jamini Roy's response to folk-popular language and production-system was hailed as having ushered in a revolutionary change in the context of the modern in the art of Bengal. However, being evolved as a personal language by a single artist, increasingly the idea of a Jamini Roy signature style gained popularity. The central motif of the oval faced, and elongated-eyed demure girl became a new icon. Jamini Roy was typified. But it is simultaneously true that a more serious contradiction lies ahead — by confining his female figures within traditional roles and spaces, Jamini Roy actually reinforced some of those very feudal notions that the anti-fascist anti-imperial struggle was trying to challenge.

[51] Bishnu Dey and John Irwin, ibid, p. 19.