

Chapter II

**From the Famine to the Tebhaga movement:
dimensions of the socially responsive trajectories
in the art of the nineteen-forties and fifties in Bengal**

Historiographies tracing the advent of the "modern" in the visual art of India have established its intricate interconnection with the dream of realization of a "nation" in the early passages of such a narrative. One would refer to Ratnabali Chatterjee's discussion on Abanindranath Tagore¹ and more specifically Tapati Guha-Thakurta's essay supporting her thesis with the selection of Raja Ravi Varma, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose² as examples of such a claim. Through such accounts, the "national" as an agenda in art is located from the late nineteenth century onward to the nineteen-thirties³.

With the world engaged in yet another devastating war (having obvious consequences for India as a British colony), the turn of events in the fourth decade of the century briefly saw the emergence of a distinctly different mode of artistic expression with characteristic concerns regarding a suitable pictorial form and expression for a primarily socially-responsive content, that made it a deviant from the dominant narrative of the 'national'. In the context of a rising alternative possibility of the Marxist-Communist parallel initiative in the political sphere, and the concurrent cultural manifestations of the Anti-fascist protest-movements, this genre in the art of the nineteen-forties owes itself considerably — directly or indirectly — to the evolving transformation in consciousness. One section of the artists constituting such a genre were directly associated with the Communist party, like Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore. Since such artists

¹ Ratnabali Chatterjee, "From the Karkhana to the Studio/ A study in the changing roles of patron and artists in Bengal", Books and Books, New Delhi 1990, chapter 4: "Nationalism and Form"

² Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Visualizing the Nation/ the iconography of a 'National' art in Modern India", Journal of Arts & Ideas, Vol. XXVII-XXVIII, New Delhi, 1995; also her book "The making of a new 'Indian' art/ Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal/ c.1850 - 1920", Cambridge University Press, 1992.

³ Perhaps with a shift in the choice in sources of reference from the elitist high art to that of the popular/ folk as in the case of Jamini Roy.

were working from within defined parameters of a particular political agenda, the term “political art” could possibly be used to denote their practice. However, there simultaneously existed another group of artists like Zainul Abedin, Gopal Ghosh and Govardhan Ash who did not profess a strictly leftist political faith nor had direct connections with any political party. Such artists nevertheless found it impossible not to respond, in terms of theme and content, to the current socio-political turn of events. Affiliation to a political party or otherwise, one basic shared element between both the groups of artists is a humanitarian concern for the suffering people.

Being extremely brief, both as an ethos as well as within the individual trajectories of the artists concerned, this *moment* of a presumably “social-realistic” dimension in the art of the nineteen-forties in Bengal does appear evanescent to an extent, making it difficult to pin down its characteristics in terms of shared general features. Such speculation could possibly evolve and attain a concrete definition after a scrutiny of the specific individual expression of the artists concerned. Traced up to and beyond the point where the shift occurs in the individual concerns — the transformation of pictorial language and content in later stages of the artists’ careers — a consideration of what carries over, if it does, and what is rejected or discarded for other set of choices, would throw light on the characteristics of this deviant mode of art practice at a historical juncture. With humanitarian concern as the common denominator, a burst of activity can be therefore located centring on the infamous Famine of 1943.

Chittaprasad and the “Hungry Bengal”

In Bengal, the notion of the “progressive” has been synonymously perceived with Marxist ideology of social change. With Britain and Russia forming part of the same camp in the War, the progressives in India, in ideological support, gave the call for a “Peoples’ war”. Overlooking immediate concerns of a national liberation from imperial British domination, the anti-fascist protest-movements

ventured into larger cultural manifestations. It is from within such a politically motivated ambience that artists like Chittaprosad responded to the famine in terms of a social theme and content.

Chittaprosad was born in 1915 at Naihati (present North 24 Parganas district in West Bengal), elder son to Charuchandra Bhattacharya and Indumati Devi. As a civil servant, Charuchandra's government service involved transfer from one location to another. Therefore, Chittaprosad grew up in Chattagram (Chittagong in present Bangladesh), attending the Municipal school and later the Government College for a degree course in the humanities. From an initial enthusiasm for the nationalist movement, participating by painting cartoons and posters as well as independent drawings, he came into initial contact with the rising Communist movement while at college, around 1937-38. Since 1940, with a personal introduction from the secretary P.C. Joshi, who had come to admire his artistic proclivities, Chittaprosad became a whole-timer for the Communist party, working in the capacity of an artist for their publications and propaganda. It was in 1941, following the Japanese threat and subsequent "scorched earth" policy adopted by the British, that Chittaprosad accompanied a team of volunteers to Chattagram. This brought him face to face with the rural community, and initiated his active engagement with posters and drawings for the Communist party. Thereafter, the political party sent him (from Bombay, where he had been deputed in the meanwhile) to Medinipur (Midnapore) to cover the ravages of the 1943 famine.

Chittaprosad's first-hand experience of the famine in Midnapore culminated in the account the "Hungry Bengal". As an eyewitness report of his travel through the district in November 1943, it comprised of a written text and profuse sketches executed in stark black-and-white, mostly linear. In the published version selected twenty-two of these sketches were reproduced, but unfortunately very few copies of this first *and only* edition survives today; because as soon as it was published as many as five thousand copies of the book were confiscated and destroyed.

The text of the account, (as it appears in Someshlal Mukhopadhyay's translation in the *Jogasutra* magazine⁴), followed a simple narrative sequence from Calcutta to Medinipur, then on to Kanthi (Contai) subdivision, and the return journey to Calcutta via Medinipur. Chittaprosad's account is not so much a meticulous daily diary as a total impression punctuated with a collage of prominent individual memories, albeit in a chronological sequence. Significant experiences, encounters with people, and his empathetic response to the famine ravaged rural community, constitute the text of the "Hungry Bengal".

Following the text one finds that even as Chittaprosad took the train from Calcutta to Medinipur, he kept recalling the dead and the dying he had seen on the pavements of Calcutta. "Five corpses I saw with my own eyes in the small lane between Sealdah Station and Amherst Street"⁵, he wrote in dismay. A conversation between two passengers seated right in front of him in the train gave him the first shock of realizing how those very people who had been assigned the task of carrying relief to the afflicted were involved in making money by removing grains from the relief supplies to the "black-market". In Medinipur town, smaller in comparison to the metropolis he left behind, he encountered a destitute community who were trying to survive by working as labourers for the military, or else as prostitutes. He reached Kanthi to find it a field day for goldsmiths and traders of metal ware. Villagers had been selling off their last valuables — mostly bronze-and-copper-alloy utensils at whatever meagre exchange they were being offered. He saw a man selling off even his family idol and wrote in despair, "the gods shift their residence the gods are deserting the poor who took refuge in them; [and are shifting] to the majestic abodes of the corpulent Hindu *bania*".⁶ Accompanied by a Kisan Sabha activist

⁴ This "little magazine" edited by Binoy Ghosh, and published from Calcutta, carried in its October-December 1991 issue a translation of the text and fifteen pages of drawings from a rare copy of a surviving original. Nearing fifty years since the day when almost all copies of the book were destroyed, this provided the exceptional opportunity for many to have a first-hand knowledge of what the historic publication actually contained.

⁵ Chittaprosad, "Hungry Bengal, *Jogasutra*, *ibid*, p. 38.

⁶ Chittaprosad, "Hungry Bengal, *Jogasutra*, *ibid*, p. 42-43.

Tarapada Chakraborty, Chittaprosad proceeded on a long journey by foot from village to village following the massive destruction caused by the cyclone and the resulting food-shortage.

Throughout the account that followed Chittaprosad continually emphasized his strong political identity, commitment and partisanship. Searching for a place to rest after the arduous journey by foot, they found the Congress, Hindu Mahasabha and the Gujarat Seba Samiti activists in the region equally non-cordial and uninviting. Their political affiliation, once revealed, only lead to debates and closed doors. And yet, consider their encounter with a village physician at the house of a village landlord, four miles away from their ultimate destination Gopalpur. When the physician-friend of the landlord began venting his anger at the Congress for apparently bringing about the recent calamity, Chittaprasad was quick to reply. He wrote that it took him almost two hours "to explain this to the gathering: that Gandhiji was not the organizer of the 'sabotage' that had recently rocked the country, that it was not the Congress, but the C.S.P.⁷ and the Forward Block, who had been unduly usurping the name of the Congress. We could also convince them that the people who had been snatching away the last morsel of food and the final strip of cloth from the destitute were not dacoits, but ordinary farmers. They had been driven to such desperate extremes by the pangs of hunger. They cannot be resisted with the gun only a modest meal can quieten them And if you cannot achieve that by the forthcoming a 'aman' crop, even you would not be spared their wrath. And with it will come the ruler's bullets, Japanese aggression and bombs"⁸.

Chittaprosad's monologue gives us a picture of the artist as a political activist convinced of his party's perspective and guidelines, and not just an uninvolved pictorial-reporter of the scene. His commentary is transparent in his analysis of the situation. For instance, his comprehension is quite clear when he refers to the emotional upsurge of nationalistic resistance in August 1943, when the

⁷ Presumably, Chittaprasad implies the Congress Socialist Party.

⁸ Chittaprosad, "Hungry Bengal, *Jogasutra*, *ibid*, p. 55-56.

farmers of the Medinipur district in their refusal to hand over a single grain to the British had instead either burnt their barns of paddy or sold all their produce to hoarders of Indian origin. Little did they realize, writes Chittaprosad, how suicidal such an act would turn out to be till the same hoarders changed their chameleon-shades by tying up with the police forces once the same farmers came begging for rice. Again in another instance, in Gopalpur when he is able to convince an ex-Congress leader of the validity of Communist strategies in the recent politics of the country, he could simultaneously write in his account that he is not recounting the episode as a triumph in converting a die-hard Congress follower into the Communist path. "I remember telling him", he wrote, "that being a true Communist is no less difficult a task than being a true follower of the Congress. No, he did not become a Communist. We had only been able to release him from the strains of hopelessness [that had crept] in his political conviction. We only made a Congressman more conscious of his potential and responsibilities in this current situation"⁹

Amidst such political dictum, are moments when the acutely sensitive artist in Chittaprosad observes and records purely pictorial details. Consider the brief moment of disbelief when amidst the endless desolate fields of death and destruction, the team stumble upon an incongruous patch of glowing golden paddy in a small strip of field, with a dark-skinned emaciated boy hiding in that golden yellow. The boy was later rehabilitated but the travelling group to a makeshift orphanage, for the moment the description of colours and of contrasts and emotions, of an almost symbolic faint gleam of hope amidst the despairing devastation, is a supremely poetic passage from a keenly observant artist. Very similarly, he describes his shock in finding an old lady sitting under a dead banyan tree with an empty water-pot — and not a drop of water in sight in the vicinity. Her red eyes had a piercing look; her swollen veins and wrinkled skin brought a "sharp pain in the heart" for Chittaprosad.

⁹ Chittaprosad, "Hungry Bengal, *Jogasutra*, *ibid*, p. 61.

The text of the narrative has an attention-arresting flow despite the grimness of the details of the famine. One is left to wonder when and how amidst the laborious trudging on foot from village to village did Chittaprosad pull out his ink, pen and brush. He certainly did, but in the text there is only a casual mention of the simultaneous record of the sketches — only once — when the gathering at the landlord's house leaf through his pictures along with the pamphlets he had been carrying with him. What is obviously certain is that amidst such a journey by foot, he could not have spared himself more than an extended moment for each swift record, and a sort of abbreviated notation evolved as a pictorial language out of this compulsion. The urgency of the situation that he faced and the necessity to grasp the totality of the disaster brought about a characteristic modification of his line. He caught the essentials of the emaciated forms of the famine victims in swift strokes that terminated in brisk turns and sharp jabs. In places the strokes became broader, the thick black mark emphasising the skeletal frame beneath the skin. Through such modification the "Hungry Bengal" drawings have achieved an unflattering directness, almost factual in details like a record. Effective as a mode of representation that evolved from the immediacy of the situation, Chittaprosad's drawings produced scathing images of the famine through the very linguistic possibility of such an abbreviated notation.

The sketches in "Hungry Bengal" did not necessarily replicate the text in all instances. However there are a couple of pictures where close resemblance parallels the text. There is a sketch of the Kanthi metal-ware dealers buying off the farmers' final belongings. Visualized from a diagonal top view, Chittaprosad looks over the shoulder of the plump trader, as he sits calculating on a piece of paper, while the accomplice sits to his right weighing the hoard on a pair of scales. Featuring prominently amongst the pots and vessels, as in the artist's description, is a metal idol and other ritual objects of worship. The artist played with the contrast as he emphasized the neatly brushed hair of the businessman against the dishevelled appearance of the people who surround him, as much as a pair of naked children contrasts with the cluster of accumulated forms in

the foreground. The tonal contrast between the patches of ink on the lean torso of these children and the otherwise basically linear mode of drawing in the rest of the picture serves to form a pictorial focus as well as a comment on the paradox of the situation. Operating from within the linguistic code of an abbreviated realism that Chittaprosad devised to suit his purpose, he nevertheless guided his pen and brush to pick out the requisite details as in the lines of the forehead or the folds of the unkempt dress — such details in which the broken nervous jerk characteristic of the linear stroke equated with the pathos of the person's expression. Not only is anxiety and worry coded in the gesture of a man resting his head upon his hand, but it is spelt out in the resigned slump of the figures and moreover in the rough and wrinkled lines that outline the forms.

In the picture of the old lady seated beneath the dead tree with an empty water-pot, Chittaprosad had so composed his subject that she nearly merged with the tree behind her as a single form. The exposed roots of the tree appear to be extensions of her feet, the dead branches bear the same characteristics as her limbs — dry, wrinkled, knarled at the joints. The way in which Chittaprosad built up the figure and the tree with varying thickness of black strokes against the empty white of the sheet of paper, a compact central form strongly impinged upon the viewer.

More penetrating as images are his sketches of the dead, of the corpses and broken pots lying in front of a cyclone shattered hut. But the ultimate ghastliness of the famine is a sketch of a jackal (or is it a dog?) feasting upon an already half-devoured corpse, as vultures await their cue in the background.

Judging from the date and place-names accompanying his signature on the pictures, Chittaprosad followed up his 1943 sketches with another set of pictorial records in Bikrampur, Cox Bazar, Munshiganj and Chattagram regions of the eastern part of pre-partition Bengal, between June and August 1944. A number of these sketches continue his evolved pictorial notation for human figures but also indicate a tendency towards a greater controlled and precise

drawing. There are single images of suffering individuals, mostly supine, but there are notably other compositions that show his attempt to integrate and situate human figures in a setting, filling in the earlier empty background with details of a rural backdrop. In these, a wider diversity of linear strokes attempt to match the observed object reality of human figures, plants and foliage, and the straw-mat and bamboo structures with almost equal attention, and an increased patience.

Detail and preciseness of another kind would be found in Chittaprosad's propaganda posters for the party. Taking recourse to a satirical mode of caricatures for the oppressors, the British and their associates, these pictures employ an increased anatomical realism for a protagonist representative of the suffering countrymen. Invariably, in facial expression as well as muscular strength these figures, often blown up in gigantic proportion to the rest of the picture, stand for a constricted energy that intends to burst open all bondage. The rousing propagandist image of a farmer (symbolically standing for rural economy), over and around whose body has been constructed a military air base, and ammunition storage, is shown grimacing and clenching his fists at the humiliation of bondage, as the turbaned guard salutes the military general driving in to the fenced enclosure. Or even more literally, in another poster, a similar representative figure is "hounded" by fierce dogs tearing away at him. The promise and possibility of an armed uprising is pronounced in the picture of the almost strangled farmer, whose sickle drops to the ground as he reaches out for the rifle lying just outside the framed border of picture. Finally in the February 1946 poster of the R.I.N. uprising, we find a successful amalgamation of elements of such a language for an image of lasting impression. On the mast of a ship flutters the three flags representing the three major political parties, in a gesture of united strength, while from behind rises a single powerful muscular figure, gigantic in proportion, the snapped shackles held up in triumph, and the rifle firmly gripped in the other hand, eyes burning with determination.

From 1946 onwards Chittaprosad had settled more permanently in Bombay

with occasional visits to Calcutta. By 1948-49 there was an internal transformation within the Communist Party for what has been called the "sectarian" line¹⁰. Realising his increasingly differing perspective from that adopted by the party, Chittaprosad 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. Thereafter he found himself more in tune with the newly evolving world peace movement and dedicated his art to the cause of peace. His images henceforth speak more of happiness and plenitude, the fullness of beauty and bounty, rather than his earlier themes of struggle and protest. This is also remarkable in a personal sense. Since his detachment from the political party he had been financially barely able to survive and had "shut himself up almost like a recluse in his modest room in Andheri a suburb of Bombay"¹¹, staunchly refusing all offers of help from friends and well-wishers considering them to be grants of pity. It was from this period onwards that we find Chittaprosad expressing himself more in the medium of black and white prints taken from the linoleum sheet or wood block. Amongst these are the 1952 prints depicting children of the poor and oppressed sections engaged in daily labour and thereby denied of their childhood. Alongside these are his images of the family, of lovers and couples, and above all of motherhood (— could it be a personal longing?). These pictures have an extremely healthy abundance and exude an unperturbed and hopeful calm of peace.

Zainul Abedin and the destitute influx in the city of Calcutta

"..... by July 1943 the streets were full. To start with, relief was confined to personal charity and to kitchens organised by charitable organizations, but by August relief for the destitutes in Calcutta was accepted as an official policy. While cautious

¹⁰ Refer Prabhas Sen and Somnath Hore's statements in the Lalit Kala monograph on Chittaprasad, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1993.

¹¹ Prabhas Sen, *ibid*, p. 5.

parsimony prevailed — meals were given 'at the same time in all kitchens, to prevent destitutes from getting more than one meal' — there is little doubt that a destitute who had found his [*sic.*] way into Calcutta had a better chance of survival than anywhere else in Bengal. Nevertheless, since the relief was quite inadequate unattended dead bodies could be found everywhere in the city
.....

"The Bengal famine was essentially a rural phenomenon. Urban areas, especially Calcutta, substantially insulated from the rising food prices by the subsidized distribution schemes, saw it mainly in the form of an influx of rural destitutes".¹²

The chronicler of the urban scenario of Calcutta, the influx of destitutes and the unattended corpses scattered on the streets of the city, was the painter Zainul Abedin. Born in 1914, at Kishoreganj in the Mymensingh district of the eastern part of pre-partition Bengal (presently Bangladesh), he was the eldest son of Tamizuddin Ahmed and Zainabunnessa¹³. It is recorded that he fled from home in 1930 to visit the art-school in Calcutta where he subsequently obtained admission in 1933 — even before appearing for his Matriculation examinations. Zainul Abedin had proved to be a very competent student in the academic realist mode with a significantly more-than average result in his graduation — he topped his batch in the First class. He also acquired the Governor's Gold Medal of the Academy of Fine Arts in 1938 for a set of watercolours of the river Brahmaputra. It was in 1938, even before he had completed his course of study at the Government School of Art, Calcutta, that the erstwhile principal Mukul Dey appointed him to a teaching post in the same institution.¹⁴

¹² Amartya Sen: *op. cit.* (p. 57, 63).

¹³ As mentioned in the biographical notes, "Zainul Abedin", Art of Bangladesh Series 1, Bangladesh Shilpakala Academy, 1977.

¹⁴ Nazrul Islam writes in the introductory essay, that Zainul Abedin's mother supported her son by selling her only gold necklace and his father could offer him "an allowance of ten rupees a month". Principal Mukul Dey's recommendation brought the award of a monthly scholarship of rupees fifteen from the Mymensingh District Board. ("Zainul Abedin", *ibid.* 1977)

It is said that the early memories of the life and the landscape of Bengal village had an impact on the artistic proclivities of young Zainul Abedin. Two studies, one of a the Brahmaputra river in Mymensingh (1933), and the other a portrait of the artist Anwarul Haque (1942)¹⁵ are proof of the skill that Zainul Abedin gradually acquired through the art-school curricula and training. But this training in the art school brand of academic realism received a jolt following the famine of 1943 and found him evolving a personal visual language for the first time. Like Chittaprosad, he too came down to the stark rudimentaries of the black ink. The dry-brush technique, whereby tonal modulation is almost excluded save for the points at which the split hairs of the brush create a textural modulation of the line, does away with all the softness and romanticism of chiaroscuro, emphasizing the harshness of the reality. In this technique, using thick black lines on coarse wrapping paper, Zainul Abedin placed the figures squarely on the centre of the field of vision, reducing all accessories to the barest minimum. The barest suggestion of the edge of the pedestrian foot-path beside the road, the dust-bin on the street-corner, or the lamp-post, in as minimum a mark of the brush as possible, offer the necessary setting for the starkness of the situation. Consider the picture showing a mother with her two children walking away towards our left. Despite Zainul Abedin's use of a thick line to delineate the forms, the profile view of their bodies as they move parallel to the pictorial plane, shows emaciated thinness of the torso where the broken edges and the terminal points of the dry-brush line conveys a forceful statement of their situation. The natural posture of the right hand holding the empty begging bowl becomes compositionally a focal point in the picture. The emphasis on the utensil and the mother's face connects up in a gesture of attempted cohesion as the mother extends her left arm to hold on to the elder child. There is nothing else in the picture save the few vertical lines behind the group to suggest an almost unspecified urban background. Similarly one has to observe the firm sweep of the line indicating the circular curve of a pedestrian footpath possibly at a street-corner or a junction, in the picture depicting a child seeking its mother's breast for milk, unaware that she lies dead. Zainul Abedin's pictures

¹⁵ Refer the first two reproductions in "Zainul Abedin", *ibid.* 1977

are so composed that the human forms are central and tend to fill up the entire pictorial space. In an organized pictorial composition such as this where the placement of forms have most certainly been consciously devised, the limiting of the accessories to the significantly necessary minimum enhances the disastrous effect of the calamity. An ideal example of such a picture is the man seated on the pavement licking at discarded leftover, lifted from the drain right in front of him. Not only because of the posture — the almost inhuman desperation with which he bends to our right to lick the object held in his hands — but also because of the bare few lines towards the lower end of the picture that indicate the setting, this image of the disposed becomes a powerfully expressive form silhouetted against the blank nothingness surrounding him.

The dogs, and the more importantly the crows in Zainul Abedin's famine drawings are another set of carefully chosen elements that bring about through the contrast of their coexistence, the haplessness of the victims. They surround the two children as they empty the very last morsel from their food dish, they sit on top or against the body of a person who has covered him/herself with a cloth, they peck at the dead woman's face or eat from the overflowing dustbin. The crows do not simply retain the identity of useful scavengers in the city — their gestures indicate the element of opportunism, of snatching away given the slightest chance, which in the context of the famine turns the birds into a symbolic recurrent motif.

These pictures were not studies executed directly in front of the model, but were worked out from memory-images and brief notes into proper composed drawings. Thus while the content determined the style and the form, it is evident that the artist, instinctively explored the possibilities of arrangement and composition for an optimum effect. He also employed an amount of distortion in the figures elongating them to lay stress on their frail structure. The use of exaggeration to achieve an expressive advantage is best evident in the picture where an almost naked man digs into the roadside dustbin to search for a morsel of food while beside him a mother with her child join the search. The

thrust of the woman's neck and more prominently the bend of the man's head forward from the shoulder, work out as distortions that serve the purpose of emphasis of the content. Without working directly in front of a given model and through a pictorial style much different from that in which he had been academically trained, Zainul Abedin was maturing out of his academic initiation.

There is no loud protest in Zainul Abedin's drawings of the famine. It is significant that the figures he painted never look out towards the viewer. Lost in their own trauma, they become the equivalent pictorial images of the "fatalism" that Paul R. Greenough had observed,

"..... that the victims accepted, virtually without protest, their victimisation. The separation of husbands from wives seems to have occurred without rancour, and there is little evidence that abandoned peasants resisted their fate While there were instances of unusual violence during the famine neither food rioting nor insurrection seems to have been a typical accompaniment of starvation"¹⁶

Above all, Zainul Abedin's victims are not particular individuals. His figures represent the nameless multitude that had once tilled the soil but suffered the ignominy of starvation. By isolating figure-by-figure Zainul Abedin built up an iconography of the famine — of the family that gradually lost its cohesion, scattered in the huge city and claimed by death. However, as images of death without protest, the pictures of Zainul Abedin would certainly be expected to raise self-critical responses in a sensitive viewer.

As early as 1943, the Communist Party arranged an exhibition of Zainul Abedin's pictures in the College Street market in Calcutta. And later in 1945 the same

¹⁶ Paul R. Greenough, "Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal/ *The Famine of 1943-44*", Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford 1982, p. 255-256. While Greenough's analysis argues sufficiently on the psychology of this fatalism, the possibility of an organised "insurrection" remains to be addressed with reference to the political movements, and the space and nature of their operation.

pictures were seen in an exhibition titled *Amader desh* ("Our country"). There was even an illustrated report in the "Peoples' War" journal of the party, although Zainul Abedin was not directly associated with politics.

After the partition of the country in 1947, Zainul Abedin chose to shift to Dhaka in East Pakistan (presently Bangladesh), as an art teacher in the Normal School in Armenitola and finalized the plans for the setting up of the Government Institute of Arts in Dhaka, in the following year. Six months after his appointment as the Chief Designer for the Information and Publication Division of the Government of Pakistan, Zainul Abedin returned to Dhaka in February 1949 and joined his envisioned art-institute in the capacity of the Principal in March. A government scholarship enabled him to visit England, Europe and the Middle East in 1951/52 and he also attended the Slade School of Art in London.¹⁷ He attended the First UNESCO Art Conference at Venice, and then in 1956/57 took a world trip funded by the Rockefeller Foundation visiting Japan, United States, Canada, Mexico and Europe. By the end of the decade, he had been awarded the Pride of Performance by the Government of Pakistan, as well as the civilian title *Hilal-e-Imtiaz*.

In his paintings from the period immediately after the famine, there is a return to the tonal use of colours in Zainul Abedin's images. For instance, in one of the pictures published in the Bengal Painters' Testimony showing a crow, he has allowed the fluidity of watercolour to create diffused edges for the strokes of the brush, such that they create the equivalent to the fluffiness of the bird's feather. The surrounding area has been similarly treated as an undefined setting where the colour has been allowed to spread on the damp surface of the paper without maintaining a strict contour. The same tonal use of colours can also be observed in a painting titled "Waiting for Ferry across the Brahmaputra river" of 1951. Despite the closeness of the way in treating the human figures, the

¹⁷ Simultaneously he held exhibitions at the Imperial Institute and the Berkeley Galleries in London, drawing acclaim from the likes of Eric Newton. He also had a travelling exhibition to Belgium, Paris, Ankara, Istanbul in the same year, and two other exhibitions in Pakistan in 1953 and 1955, and another at the Smithsonian Institution in 1957.

painting differs from the 1943 drawings specifically in the way the delicately liquid tones of colour recreate the softness of the forms in place of the harshly cruel slashing strokes of the famine sketches. Quite clearly, Zainul Abedin was neither contemplating continuing with a strictly political, social-realism, nor conceiving of personal signature style in a new-found stylistic mannerism. For him, the drawings of 1943 calamity had evolved its own logical pictorial grammar specifically suited to its period.

It is from this conscious choice, coupled with the ambitions of a newly formed state, that his pictorial language took a turn for a modernist statement in the fifties. Coupled with it, what must have been inspiring and instrumental in creating such an awareness regarding the necessity to formulate a modern pictorial language, were his travels abroad and his direct exposure to the modern art of Europe and the United States. However, the fact that he held exhibitions of his paintings in London during his visit to England indicates an amount of self-confidence regarding his own achievement and the contextual validity of his paintings. While the pictures of *santal* men and women from 1951 are executed in a lyrical and undistorted naturalism, with fluid lines and colours that depict the simplicity of a rural lifestyle, it is from this period that one finds pictures like the "Village Woman" of 1953, where the forms have been conceived within a geometry of linear arabesques and colour areas. The difference of such paintings from the ones titled "Village Maiden"¹⁸, "Two Women", "Women Dressing Hair" (all 1953), involve an increased use of the bright hues of pure colours combined with an emphatic brush-stroke that recalls gusto of the folk craftsman in the painted embellishment of toys and objects, or the swiftness of the brisk white strokes that decorate the terracotta pottery from the Bengal village. The forms in "Two Women" and "Women Dressing Hair" equally recall the Bengal-folk link and therefore increasingly indicate the artist's attempt at a synthesis of modern European art languages and the elements of folk crafts closer home in evolving a personal language contextually modern in the link it

¹⁸ Alternatively, and fondly, called in the local dialect "Painyar ma" (Mother of Panya) by the artist.

maintained with Zainul Abedin's immediate roots in the tradition without necessarily denying or rejecting it entirely.

For Zainul Abedin, life in rural Bengal remained the theme of his constant inspiration. And it would be appropriate to close this section with a mention of two of his significant paintings, "The Rebel Cow" (1951) and "Struggle" (1959). Both these paintings deal with the motif of working against the tide and the force of resisted effort. That which was absent in the 1943 famine drawings, the depiction of applied effort in a struggle against opposing forces, ultimately finds expression in the decade of the fifties. The pictorial style employs an anatomical realism in both these paintings, where correspondence in our reading of the gestures in terms of translated visual experience holds the key to the expression of the forceful struggle. And yet it is not limited to such a reading only, because the success of the compositions lie as much in the directional forces of the compositional pattern as in the quality of the line and the brushwork which communicates the pent-up energy of such an effort. It would be useful to contrast these two paintings with the "Pulling The Boat" (1953) where the rhythm of the two men modulated by the pictorial style — the lyricism of the line, the fluid elongation of the human forms as well as the calm and composed facial expression — turns an act of enormous physical strain into a synchronized effortless dance-like rhythm.

Govardhan Ash, Gopal Ghosh and other artists

Besides Chittaprosad and Zainul Abedin there were several other artists who had responded to the calamity from within their own ambit. The pictures of Chittaprosad and Zainul Abedin had an almost immediate circulation in the city. As already mentioned, the exhibition organised by the Communist Party of Zainul Abedin's drawings in 1943 was followed by the publication of his pictures in the party-periodicals. In contrast, for an artist like Govardhan Ash (whom we shall have to discuss from a varying point of view in the following chapter on the Calcutta Group), famine pictures were primarily personal notes, though personal

statements too do have political implications. Although he had painted almost forty pictures in watercolour, not until 1945 were they discovered and subsequently publicly viewed¹⁹. The pattern therefore has a distinct difference for Govardhan Ash; neither did he undertake a journey with a mission nor was he recording the destitute-influx in a city. Picture after picture, in the form of personal jottings, he painted an exodus — villagers setting out on an indefinite journey from his village Begampur. As an artist, Ash had already been searching for a modern language, and had been actively associated with the formation of the 1931 Young Artist's Union and the 1933 Art Rebel Centre, and was later invited to join the Calcutta Group in 1950. But during the famine, he came up with an expression where medium, style and content harmoniously blended to give images of persisting impact. There are quite a few paintings of Govardhan Ash where the figures are observed from close quarters, therefore possessing contour lines that define the frail torsos, but increasingly from picture to picture the human forms appear to dissolve like apparitions into the distance — into the paleness of monochrome brown. Brown and ochre become the colours of the famine for him — the equivalent of the bleakness of a destination as much, or even more, unsure as the village the destitute left behind. In his paintings, the figures do not even have the clarity of details of a Zainul Abedin drawing — they are blocked out as silhouettes of a darker tone against the lightly tinted backdrop. They are absolutely anonymous, unidentifiable like an apparition lost in a nowhere landscape, caught in the famish and hopelessness that envelop them. Zainul Abedin's pictures had shown the disintegration of families on reaching the city; even more starkly, the same can be observed in Govardhan Ash's pictures. In one of his paintings of a family that has set out leaving the village behind, the man carries a small bundle at the end of a stick on his shoulder, as his wife supports and holds on to the children. Pictures of scattered singles, dazed and vacant, increasingly outnumber this image of a tenuous link at the outset of an unsure voyage. Even where more than a couple of figures are present, each is frighteningly enveloped in a strange loneliness, with hardly

¹⁹ This happens to be the same exhibition of 1945, titled "Amader desh" where Zainul Abedin's drawings were exhibited.

any communication between the depicted people. Ash's experiences pushed him on to portray the bleakness of a ruptured social cohesion with deep poignant feeling.²⁰

Quite a different approach would be observed in a painter like Atul Bose, trained thoroughly in the Academic realist mode. Yet, he too failed to remain unmoved by what he saw, but his response was conditioned by his academic training and the related norms of picture making. In the year of the famine he executed an oil painting significantly titled "The Birth Of Kalki". There is an oil-sketch of the final painting and at least three preparatory layouts in pencil visualizing the composition in the artist's family collection. And there are at least ten or more detailed individual studies of human figures done in pencil, some of which are definitely supportive sources for the final composition. From the bare skeletal structure of the composition that has been drawn on a small piece of paper, the picture is progressively clarified in the subsequent layouts, adjusting the placement and the inclusion or exclusion of the constituent figures, as he felt necessary. What appears from the fact is that somewhere he must have encountered the scene of the birth of a child amidst the disaster of the famine, perhaps even the subsequent death of the mother, but could not attempt the final canvas until he was absolutely sure of the anatomical details for each figures constituting the composition. Whether he got people to pose for each study is a matter of debate, but it is certain that some the studies, which contain details to the extent of chiaroscuro and tonal suggestions in parallel strokes of the pencil, must have taken a prolonged period of time to execute. The composition therefore, after such rigorous discipline, has a planned clarity and preciseness, but the urgency of expression and feeling in the drawings of Chittaprosad or Zainul Abedin are entirely absent in the studies of Atul Bose, which have the characteristic studied elegance and balance of arranged postures.

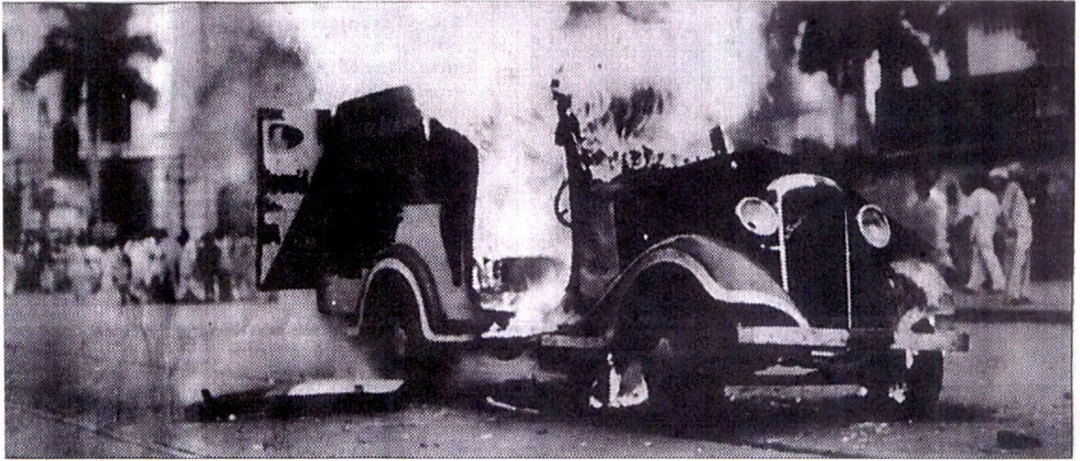
²⁰ The Progressive Writers' Association discovered his famine drawings and held an exhibition in 1945. (cf. Sovon Som: "Govardhan Ash: An Early Modern", Art Heritage annual catalogue No.3, New Delhi, 1983-84, pp. 24-25.)

Gopal Ghosh, another painter whom we shall discuss in greater detail in the context of the Calcutta Group, is also said to have sketched in the lanes of the city during the famine. Two such pictures appear in the Bengal Painters' Testimony, which shall be discussed later. As far as his academic training is concerned he had been a student at the Maharaja's School of Arts and Crafts in Jaipur between 1931 and 1935, and later from 1935 till 1938 he was a student of D.P. Roy Chowdhury at the Madras Art School. However, for the present we shall concentrate on a complete composition (once again in the artist's family collection) done in the traditional wash technique signed and dated 1350 of the Bengali era, equivalent to 1943. As in the instance of Govardhan Ash, for an artist addressing the famine of 1943 as a theme for his picture, the dominant colours are muted shades of brown. Against an undulating emptiness Gopal Ghosh has picked out a group of three human beings who huddle together. The sky is a dirty greyish blue while the only vegetation appears to be the thorny cacti in the distance. And yet, the pictorial image tends towards the sentimental because of the very language and the stylistic mannerism. While tonal focus has been attempted for the three human figures painted in lighter opaque tones, the affected expressions on their faces and the neatly drawn fine lines in the features fail to evoke the necessary seriousness and pathos of the situation despite the genuine intention in the anatomical emphasis of thin limbs, swollen belly and projecting rib-lines. Paradoxically, the affected expression coupled with the neatness of execution and the elegance of the linear sophistication, attributes the feeling of an enactment to the scene, rather than evoking the actual trauma of suffering. Even the projecting legs of an unusually elongated corpse that intrudes from the right edge of the foreground into the pictorial frame remains at the level of niceties of pictorial design, failing to command the power that could be expected of an image of the famine.

In contrast a 1946 page from a sketchbook contains a painting that far surpasses the former in the evocative configuration of its elements. How the memory of the famine lingered on and was stirred up once again during the days of the riot, for a painter otherwise inclined towards a modernist expression based on

colour, is apparent from this picture. The characteristic energetic sweep of the brush that one associates with the landscape paintings of Gopal Ghosh have been successfully employed for a stirring image of a yellow-green field cut across by the dark road running through it, and the verticals that stand for the bare tree trunks. Beyond the high horizon is a red sky from which the black vultures descend to seek the last bits of flesh on the white skeletons that dot the ground. The shorthand black marks that capture the characteristic bend of the long neck and the wings of these scavenging birds and the speed of flight, as well as the minimum of strokes for the skeletons (indeed, for all the elements in the picture), convey the urgency and compulsion with which the painter wished to transfer his fleeting, haunting vision onto the paper. Much like the black crows in the famous Van Gogh painting of the wheat-field, the vultures in the bleak landscape carry an ominous feeling of an end.

It was perhaps only Gopal Ghosh among the many artists in Calcutta who alone felt impelled to respond to the riot as theme. The painter of the majestic expanse of rural landscapes, for once turned to his burning city, extending the pictorial characteristics of line and colour just mentioned into images of violent flames and burning vehicles. The forceful strokes of yellow create an almost audible explosion as the automobiles go up in flames. Limited colour palette and an expressionistic use of the brush in a frenzy that perhaps parallel the mob in the street evocatively recorded a city torn apart, despite the fact that in none of them are the human figures, if present at all, prominently visible as the source of the violence. Violence has been transcribed on to the possibilities of a pictorial language, the expressive potential of contrasting colour and the mark-making stabs of the brush. How the otherwise optimistic artist had been affected by the transformed situation is visible in the pages of a sketchbook — in an apparently normal drawing of a house seen from top with a garden and a wall in the lower end of the picture, the fields beyond contain, not cultivation, but bodies of dead human beings as armoured tanks roll by in the distant street. In another, the artist steps back a little further and a wreckage of broken walls and dead bodies occupy the foreground as clashing groups can be seen in the



"Torchted vehicle, riot of 1946"
Photograph (published accompanying Arnab
Bhattacharya's review article of Manikuntala Sen's
"In search of freedom – an unfinished journey"
Telegraph daily, 18th May 2001)

distance. In yet another drawing, he looks down at a courtyard or a road corner where a woman lies murdered near a lamp-post, and beyond the wall of the boundary (or the road itself) people with upraised arms rush towards a rising flame. In each of these drawings, there is a tension that is communicated by the composition and the brief nature of the lines that do not go in for intricate details but attempt to encompass the entirety of a disastrous locale.

The "Bengal Painters' Testimony" of 1944

The above-mentioned artists were not the only ones to be thus moved to respond to the current calamities in Bengal. In a recent exhibition²¹, there were two more pictures of the famine, lithographic prints by Niramoy Roy and Quamrul Hassan, where the language of illusionist realism effectively conveyed the harshness of the disaster. In the former, it is a frontal view of a mother with a child on her lap and an older girl beside her with a pot on her head. In the latter, it is the emphasis on the close-up view from a low angle where the gory details of the vultures actually pulling out the entrails become a repelling sight that is impossible to ignore because of the way it covers the entire pictorial space and thereby the field of vision of the spectator.

In a publication that virtually came out of an exhibition commemorating the fifty years of the famine²², the author has published two sketches by Paritosh Sen of the famine-stricken on the streets of the city, as well as paintings of Bhabesh Sanyal, Prankrishna Pal and Sunil Madhav Sen, all claimed to have been executed in 1943. Paritosh Sen's drawings are executed in brush and ink, but acquire their poignancy through a feeling different from that of Zainul Abedin's dry brush technique. The scraggy nature and hardness of Paritosh Sen's treatment of the line lends it a distinctness in comparison to Zainul Abedin's line, which nevertheless has a smoother flow. The forms of Zainul Abedin and Paritosh

²¹ "Art of Bengal, 1850 – 1950", organised by the "Calcutta Metropolitan Festival of Art" committee to celebrate the 50th year of India's Independence, December 13 to 24, 1997; Calcutta Information Centre

²² 'Sri-Pantha': "Daay", Punashcha, Calcutta, 1994

achieve their specific characters to a large extent from the linear distinctiveness. Considering the pictorial language in which Prankrishna Pal and Sunil Madhav Sen had been addressing the famine in their paintings, it will be logical to discuss their work in the chapter on the Calcutta Group of which both of them were members.

The "Bengal Painters' Testimony", an album of pictures published on the occasion of its 8th Annual Conference by the All India Students' Federation in December 1944, carried reproductions of paintings, sculptures and prints by twenty-eight artists, of whom at least fourteen had dealt with the disaster as a theme and content. It is nevertheless also true that almost half the number of images in the publication were neither thematically concerned with the famine nor related to contemporary social concerns. It does serve the purpose, however, for our present discussion to realise the fact that apart from the individuals already mentioned there were others as well who were negotiating the changing times from within their own orbits.

This album, edited by Arun Das Gupta, 'Kamrul Hasan' (sic.), Adinath Mukherjee, and Safiuddin Ahmed, had a foreword by Sarojini Naidu²³ and an introductory note by the poet Bishnu Dey. In the brief note to the publication, Bishnu Dey began with the history of the ascendancy of the Tagore house in the cultural renaissance, and went on to indicate the "great understanding and appreciation of the strength of folk-culture in Bengal" in Abanindranath's epoch-making study of the "Homely Rituals of Bengal". But the wonder for him was the achievement of Jamini Roy's artistic strength. And to this he added the change of values that Rabindranath himself had signalled, carried forward in Santiniketan by Ramkinkar and Benode Behari Mukherjee "who had left the dilettante world of

²³ "In these moving and piquant pictures the artists of Bengal have paid the homage of love and pity to the vast anonymous legion of the hunger stricken and heroic people of Bengal. Talent has very rightly become the handmaid of human suffering to offer a little amelioration of great distress. I hope that all who feel sincerely for the destitute, the homeless, the devitalised in our midst will prove their sympathy by purchasing a copy of the Album. All proceeds will be given to the Famine Relief Fund." (Sarojini Naidu, Foreword to the "Bengal Painter's Testimony", 1944)

pretty decoration".²⁴ Although he was perceptive enough to have realised and mentioned the significance of Gaganendranath Tagore — "the painter of slashing cartoons and poetical book illustration who also experimented fluidly with cubist forms" — and the achievements and shifts in Santiniketan, it is ultimately Jamini Roy only whose contribution is to be seen as "the splendid beginning of a varied movement in our art world".²⁵

Of the pictures that relate in some measure to the contemporary thematic concern are Asit Kumar Halder's "On evil day's fallen", Deviprosad Roy Chowdhury's "When Calcutta Sleeps", Ramkinkar Baij's "The storm", two drawings by Atul Bose, Sudhir Khastagir's "In search of food", Zainul Abedin's "The citizens", two sketches by Gopal Ghosh, Indra Dugar's "Madonna" and "Awaiting", Nirode Majumder's "Orphan", Pradosh Das Gupta's sculpture ("Food queue"), Kamrul Hasan's "After the storm", Muralidhar Tali's "Begging by a crowded tram car", Adinath Mukherjee's "The destitutes" and a sketch from Chittaprosad's "Hungry Bengal" series. Chittaprosad's drawing of the mother is the same as that which appeared on the cover for his "Hungry Bengal" and bears all the characteristic stylistic features of the sketches in that report — the evolved pictorial language of abridged and adjusted realism suited to the necessity of a rapid recording of the famine. Similarly, Atul Bose's drawings of the famine-afflicted individuals are in the same vein as the ones already discussed. Zainul Abedin's 1944 picture of the crow has already been mentioned; his other picture in the album is executed in a similar treatment and although undated this watercolour of the destitute family on the streets of the city appears to be of the same year. Asit Halder and Indra Dugar's works were

²⁴ "But the wonder is the development of Jamini Roy. The most competent of his generation among the academic painters, he did not follow the mystique of orientation but at the height of success discovered the rootlessness and the mere luxury value of his academic art. How he resolved his own crisis, how he rediscovered the sources of dying folk art and strode forward in the midst of a hard day-to-day struggle cannot be discussed here today. Let it suffice here to remark that his own problems of artistic realisation of the artistic creation took him to the extreme edge of *conscious search after pure form and colour*, as well as to the realisation of the artistic strength of the unconscious people." [emphasis added] (Bishnu Dey, "Bengal Painter's Testimony", *ibid.*)

²⁵ This opinion, pertinent as part of a 1944 document, will be even more significant in the discussion on a viable modern language and the issue of Jamini Roy as an inspiring precursor for the artists of younger generation, in the context of Calcutta Group.

executed in a Bengal School stylistic idiom. While Indra Dugar's monochrome brush drawings, especially the "Madonna", have an excess of affected posture and artificiality, Asit Halder's painting of the stormy disaster recalling perhaps the cyclone that had caused widespread havoc, steers clear to a large extent through compositional discretion. The treatment of the rain as it lashes upon the mother and child, the carefully subdued details in the rest of the painting resulting in a concentrated attention to her face, and an overall tonal harmony suffuse the picture with an amount of genuine empathy and stand proof of that fact that even within the otherwise manneristic confines of a style it is nevertheless possible to evoke the necessary response from an image. On the other hand, despite the anatomical stress on frail figures and the baroque light relieving the bodies in spatial depth, Devi Prosad Roy Chowdhury's "When Calcutta Sleeps" does not become a comparable image of felt experience, specifically because of the undifferentiated repetition of figures, the stereotyping of features and the almost enacted loudness of postures. The title suggests a comment on the residents of the city who were less affected by the famine than those suffering in the streets, but the pictorial image does succeed as much. In contrast Muralidhar Tali's print is a usual framed segment of a daily encounter, and so is Adinath Mukherjee's print of the street, with the contrast of the dustbin and the animals picked out in the falling sunlight against the pavement dwellers in the shade. Among the pictures in such illusionist representation, Kamrul Hasan's "After the cyclone" has the most evocative power — a straightforward representation of the destruction with blown away thatched roof and fallen trees that block the way. Sudhir Khastagir's family is executed in exaggerated elongation of the faces, combined once again with over-emphasized expressions. The picture however has a queer duality of a positive-negative impression as in photographic print procedures, perhaps because of the way in which the incised white lines are used to draw the contours of the features, which read in a certain way could be seen to tie up with the content of a fleeting hope of survival. The sketches of Gopal Ghosh, unlike his pictures discussed separately above, are too cryptic, insubstantial and ephemeral to carry the gravity of the situation. Barring the odd staring eyes of the mother, the second

drawing is relatively the better of the two where the stylistic dash and curves of the line nevertheless convey a part of the frailty of the forms. Nirode Majumder's "Orphan" is an effective pictorial design in this group, with a formally central standing figure of the naked child against the reclining figure behind it. Yet, the reclining figure is hardly expressive of a dead mother and rather looks like a gracefully sleeping lady. Ramkinkar's painting bypasses all these problems with a linguistic concern that rises above the documentary or the immediate event. The non-specific devastation is a powerful image of controlled abstraction where the impasto pigment can yet be identified as the equivalents for the tree and the skeletal remains. Among the few sculptures reproduced in the album, Pradosh Das Gupta's example is thematically based on the results of the famine. Broadly modelled in clay, the group stands with an unmistakable slump of their shoulders and tired resignation as the resultant effect. Eliminating descriptive details he has focused on the postural, where expectant wait combined with fatalistic resignation become not so much a narrative content as the expressive possibility of sculptural form.

It does not appear that the artists represented in the album were put together to demonstrate any stylistic conformity or thematic uniformity. In fact the actuality of the situation and the need to put together an album to generate funds is apparent in the editorial note in the album, which said that the "story behind the collecting and printing these pictures is one of deep patriotism The painters of all schools, the Indian and European Publishers, the Hindu and Muslim pressworkers all have stood as one behind our object". In a list of thanks they acknowledge all the publishers who had readily responded "in giving us the blocks and thereby minimizing the expenses to the bottom". The album was sold for rupees five. Somewhere the factor of a low budget publication, the greater sale of which might be prompted by the low price, was perhaps expected to raise a larger contribution than a costly album, and had mediated the choice of pictures to go in the Bengal Painters' Testimony. Coupled with it must have been the attempt to portray a large cross-section of artists of Bengal whose very representation in the album would stand for sympathetic unity for a

cause. Therefore, despite the political identity of the publishing body, the Bengal Painters' Testimony remains a not-so-coherent mixed collection of pictures.

Responses from Santiniketan

The issues pertaining to art practice in Santiniketan were determined by a different set of concerns, and will be addressed in a later chapter, yet responses to the current social situation in theme and content were not altogether absent in this idyllic setting. It is evident in the work of Ramkinkar Baij, and features significantly as a proposition in at least one painting of Nandalal Bose. In an essay titled "Locating Gandhi in Indian Art History: Nandalal and Ramkinkar" Tapati Guha-Thakurta emphasized that "Ramkinkar's marginality in the arena of our public sculpture confronts us side by side with his seminal position in the annals of modern Indian art"²⁶. She also referred to Geeta Kapur's observation, of Ramkinkar's "brave gesture" in introducing modernist vocabulary into an "orientalising institution" through his articulation in a "post-cubist expressionism: to openly valorise primitive peasant bodies: to give them an axial dynamic, so to speak".²⁷ This dissidence is then recognised as "central in the articulation of an alternative indigenous modernism Thus it seemed inherent in his self-positioning that he should stand outside and apart from all that was 'official', all that symbolized establishment"²⁸.

Nandalal in the nineteen-thirties, wrote Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "comes to fulfil the Gandhian criteria of a 'national' and a 'people's' artist"²⁹. His moving to Santiniketan signalled the moment of a seminal change in his own art and subsequently had "an invigorating and emboldening urge that would sweep

²⁶ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Locating Gandhi in Indian Art History: Nandalal and Ramkinkar", *Addressing Gandhi*, Sahmat, New Delhi, 1995, p. 137.

²⁷ Geeta Kapur: "When was modernism in Indian Art", *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Nos. 27-28, March 1995, as quoted in Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *ibid*, p.137.

²⁸ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *ibid*, pp.137-138.

²⁹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *ibid*, p. 141.

through the sterile unit of 'Indian style' painting"³⁰. Among the influences would now be included Chinese brush-and-ink drawings as well as Japanese prints, blended with the freshness of spontaneous outdoor-sketches. The gradual shift away from the technique of 'wash painting' would be complemented by the leaving behind of the literary subject matter, or what she calls the 'classical'. The entry of the ordinary and the common as themes, would however be transmuted through a process of aestheticizing refinement. From here, one could see the "urge to embody the 'popular'"³¹ in the Haripura posters (1938) as a consequential move. "From the Haripura Congress project, Nandalal moves smoothly into the national canon of Indian art."³²

With the above observation regarding the artist's position within a national canon, it would be relevant to consider at this point a 1943 painting by Nandalal Bose showing a skeletal Shiva dancing before the deity of plenitude — usually cited as the singular exceptional image in which the artist reflected upon the contemporary situation of the famine. It is also known to be a reworking of an earlier composition, modified to suit the present. When the initial painting was published in 1910 in the *Bharati* it was accompanied by a quote from Rabindranath Tagore that emphasised the play of opposites — of song enveloping the silent, of frolicsome dance embracing the calm and composed. The 1943 version replaced this quote with another one from the poet Bharatchandra, which now supported the picture with reference to the contradiction of having and not having of food (rice).³³ This certainly endowed the image with a relevance, albeit obliquely, to the then current situation. But considered in terms of its iconography and more importantly the linguistic mode, the painting is a metaphoric statement garbed in a cloak of the "classical" and thereby sufficiently refined, sophisticated and aestheticised. The paradigm in

³⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *ibid*, p. 142.

³¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *ibid*, p. 146.

³² Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *ibid*, p. 147.

³³ Samir Ghosh: "Panchasher Manwantar Shilpey Shahitye" (1994)

which Nandalal Bose operated made it possible for him to allude to the famine, if at all, via mythology — almost as if to purge the actual suffering and the pain of starvation to the elevated ecstasy of philosophical speculation.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta believes that “it is only through mapping the contours of what came to be the mainstream nationalist project that one can suggest the spaces and positions that prevail outside its demarcated frame. It is only in the context of Nandalal’s singular success and national eminence that one can confront the issue of Ramkinkar’s dissent and difference in the same period.”³⁴

A comparison contrasting the sculptural projects of Ramkinkar Baij that went on simultaneously with Nandalal Bose’s murals, reveal the validity of the claim.

The “stark, savage, elemental effects” of Ramkinkar Baij’s sculptures became distinct from the “linear grace and rhythm, neatness of colour design, and the naïve charms”³⁵ of Nandalal Bose’s pictorial effort. This choice of the stark

and savage in the working process of Ramkinkar Baij is also evident in a painting depicting a lady carrying food to a man ploughing in the field. In the foreground lies an old man, hardly able to lift his frail frame out of sheer starvation, as his form and posture reveals, but who desperately thrusts his hand holding an empty bowl right into the visual centre of the composition, blocking the striding woman on her way, like a conscience-call. The jolt comes further through the presence of the foetus-like form of a child lying beside the old man — deserted, sleeping or more probably deep in eternal slumber.³⁶

The incisive lines of this painting and the jagged planes with which Ramkinkar Baij builds up his forms are in contrast to the elegant though emaciated figure of Nandalal Bose’s dancing Shiva; herein lies the distinctive difference not only

³⁴ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

³⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *ibid.*, p. 151.

³⁶ Alternatively, one could possibly read in the juxtaposition of the old man and the child the difference between a wasting present and the hope of a better future.

of their respective linguistic choices but thereby an essentially different world-view.³⁷

In the direct-cement sculpture titled "Harvester", from the year of the famine, Ramkinkar Baij has produced a powerfully modelled figure of a woman, threshing the bunch of produce grasped firmly in her hands. The figure has been conceived without the head and the entire dynamic in the act of threshing has been condensed into the limbs and the torso, with the bunch being threshed held back in a suspended moment of the action. It is significant that Ramkinkar Baij decided to construct an icon of harvest (hence "new crop" — *Nabanna* — therefore hope) in the trying times of the disaster. Here in one gesture, he sublimates the angst of his paintings and prints referred above, to one powerful affirmative statement. In fact the "Harvester" also contrasts with another 1943 composition by Ramkinkar Baij, which is a savagely expressionistic rendering of a female bust. In the three point triangle from the shoulder to the arms and the body, the collar-bone that juts out in prominence, the staring eyes which are nothing less than large spheres placed within empty sockets, the pronounced cheek-bone and the pendulous breasts of the woman, a geometric amplification of the leanness of human form combined with the queerly insane smile on her lips become a stirring image of the delirious impact of the famine. The difference with Nandalal Bose's sublimation into philosophical speculation effectively underscores Ramkinkar Baij's distinctly positive and humanist approach.³⁸

³⁷ In a later etching and a wood-cut image on the theme of "Hunger", both of which share a common compositional design, Ramkinkar is direct and non-sentimental in the representation of the destitute with a proportionately large head, gaping mouth, bursting eyes. The overall frightening appearance relies on the sharp incisive linear treatment and the ruthlessly expressive cuts on the wood block. The impulsive contrasts in scale between the hungry figure in the foreground and the two men in the background — who have sat down at a meal, and who almost recoil as the bowl is thrust out towards them — effectively communicates the pathetic condition of the protagonist.

³⁸ He had sent a maquette of the same sculpture to the Bombay committee of the International sculpture composition on the theme of the "Unknown political prisoner". Replying to a query by Sankho Chaudhury he explained, in what sums up his position on the matter: when wars rage and famines ravage, the political prisoners may be held up in prison, but it is the striving multitude on the fields who actually suffer, who fight, and hence for him are the actual prisoners of the situation. [cf. end note 11 in Prakash Das ed., "Ramkinkar Drawing" (1400 Bangabada)

Somnath Hore: the transition from famine sketches to the Tebhaga pictures

For an artist like Somnath Hore who was six years junior to Chittaprosad, the famine was more than just a theme. The scars remained permanent and gradually transformed into the life-long metaphor of the “wounds”, explored in drawings and prints (and in more recent times, bronze sculptures). Referring to a much later upheaval in the seventies, Somnath Hore wrote, what sums up his perennial and haunting observation:

“Wounds is what I see everywhere around me. A scarred tree, a road gouged by a truck tyre, a man knifed for no visible or rational reason.”³⁹

Born in 1921 in their ancestral village in Chattagram, he lost his father (Rebati Mohan Hore) at the young age of thirteen. Obvious financial and social crises apart, he completed his Intermediate Examinations with a merit scholarship that he had earned because of his matriculation results. He joined the City College in Calcutta for a B.Sc. course in 1940 and simultaneously came into contact with the Communist Party. The onset of war and a personal financial crisis forced Somnath Hore to leave Calcutta for his native Chattagram (“as I did not have money to cling to Calcutta”⁴⁰). Chattagram in 1942 faced the threat of Japanese bombardment, and Somnath Hore observed his first sight of devastation and the strewn dismembered bodies in a village near his own. The desire to document the ghastly sight turned him to the world of visual records — these sketches are said to be the earliest essay in picture-making by him. Through Purnendu Dastidar who was the chief functionary of the Communist party in Chattagram, Somnath Hore came to know Chittaprosad. Inexperienced at start, he began to follow what Chittaprosad had been doing, and when Chittaprosad was asked to tour his home district Midnapore, Somnath Hore took up the charge in Chittagong. His sketches began to appear besides

³⁹ Somnath Hore, “Wounds”, a booklet published to coincide with an exhibition of sculptures, and works on paper (1992), p.16.

⁴⁰ Somnath Hore, *ibid*, p.6.

Chittaprosad's in the Communist party journals. As in the case of the latter, the Communist Party soon discovered in the young Somnath Hore a flair for hand-drawn posters as well.

As a mentor Chittaprosad taught Somnath Hore to sketch directly from the suffering people he has been observing all around.

"He was my first mentor. He took me virtually by the hand and guided and encouraged me to draw portraits of the hungry, sick and dying people. Whenever he was in Chittagong he gave me company."⁴¹

They must have met again when Chittaprosad returned to these eastern provinces of undivided Bengal in 1944. The early sketches and drawings published in the Communist party journals were mostly scenes of hapless victims of famine and portraits of peasants. They were executed in what Pranabranjan Ray calls the "definitional lines following representational contours of the objects depicted"⁴², with occasional tonal devices in portraits (Pranabranjan Ray mentions the portraits of "Devicharan" published in the Janajuddha of 11th January 1944, and those of "Sheikh Gomhani" and "Ramesh Seal" in the 15th March 1945 issue). We can also refer to the sketches of 1944 published occasionally with accompanying short notes as well in the Communist Party journals, as in the case of the emaciated man seated at a meal on the road of Chattagram, or the portrait of Manohar⁴³.

The Communist party realised the potential to train Somnath Hore in an institution of technical proficiency and the year 1945 saw Somnath Hore back in Calcutta for a formal training as a student of the Government School of Art⁴⁴.

⁴¹ Somnath Hore, "Chittaprosad — the humanist", Lalit Kala monograph, Lalit Kala Akademi, New Delhi, 1993.

⁴² Pranabranjan Ray, Hunger and the Painter: "Somnath Hore and the Wounds", Cressida Transactions, Vol1, No. 2, p. 203.

⁴³ Both the pictures are reproduced in the booklet "Wounds", *ibid*.

⁴⁴ Pranabranjan Ray mentioned the assistance of Communist party individuals like Nikhil Chakraborty and Snehanshu Kanta Acharya, who "saw to it that he not only got admission to Government School of Art and Crafts but got all other forms of assistance he needed. (Pranabranjan Ray, *op. cit.*, p. 204)

Here he met Zainul Abedin as a teacher, as the second person crucial to his artistic development, who encouraged the young artist's endeavour to develop a skilled hand for powerful drawing. Some time in the year 1946, wrote Pranabranjan Ray⁴⁵, the cultural activists of the Communist Party received an album of contemporary Chinese woodcut prints that caused comprehensible excitement. Somnath Hore shared the enthusiasm and made it a point to learn the medium at the arts school from Safiuddin Ahmed. It was from the art school, as a second year student at the art school that Somnath Hore accompanied party members to North Bengal, to document the peasant movement "Tebhaga", the sharecropper's claim to two-thirds (*te-bhag*, a third) of the produce in place of the existing rule of *adhi* or half-share (hence their erstwhile name *adhiar*). But 1946 was different from the grey days of the famine, and the Tebhaga has been called "the outgrowth of the left-wing mobilisation of the rural masses the first *consciously* attempted revolt by a politicised peasantry in Indian history"⁴⁶. Like Chittaprosad's famine-account, Somnath Hore's record of the peasant movement took the form of a text accompanied by sketches, called "Tebhagar Diary". "His intention perhaps was to do the kind of visual reporting that he had done in 1943-44"⁴⁷. Also perhaps the concept of a diary was an inspiration from the precedence of the "Hungry Bengal" which he must have known and which must have gained his admiration. There is an obviously optimistic tone in the text (Samik Bandopadhyay and Pranabranjan Ray differ in their opinion on the issue) and becomes the essential difference between the "Tebhaga" drawings, and therefore the diary, and its presumed role-model. The optimism is marked in the diligently mentioned dates for each day's entry — "a day-to-day record of living with the people who were undertaking unusual actions with great enthusiasm and expectations"⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ Pranabranjan Ray, *ibid*.

⁴⁶ D.N. Dhanagare, "Peasant Movements In India, 1920-1950", New Delhi, 1983, p. 155. as quoted in Samik Bandopadhyay's introduction to Somnath Hore's "Tebhaga/ An Artist's Diary And Sketchbook", trans. by Somnath Zutshi, Seagull Books, 1990, p. vii.

⁴⁷ Pranabranjan Ray: *ibid*, p. 205.

⁴⁸ Pranabranjan Ray: "The political in art", *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, New Delhi, 1992.



"Friday 20 December 1946

..... About a hundred and fifty people had gathered with virtually every one carrying a sickle and a lathi. Even children of five or six were carrying sickles or holding up banners.

The red flag was raised in the middle of the field. The boundaries were indicated with flags. The lathis were planted at one spot and everyone trooped into the field with sickles in hand. The air reverberated with slogans. People broke into song, 'Your red flag's, your red salute, O peasant.'

They could not even have imagined all this a year ago, for till then both the harvest and the law had belonged to the rich. The sharecropper would slave the year round, growing the paddy, and at the end of the year, deposit with the jotedar, and spend another long year in suffering and hunger. And now for the first time he was free through unity"⁴⁹

The pictures of the Tebhaga are mostly affirmative images, of faith in the endeavour, of enthusiasm and expectation. The determination is evident in the faces of the people whose portraits Somnath Hore drew. It is also marked in the pictures of collective group-activity, of harvesting, gathering at a meeting and marching in processions of protest. These drawings show a much more technically matured and skilled Somnath Hore whose training at the art school had obviously equipped him with a systematic and methodical working process, an increased ability to portray likeness, and arrange the elements in an effective composition.⁵⁰ Somnath Hore had begun to print his first couple of wood-

⁴⁹ Somnath Hore, "Tebhaga....", op. cit., pp. 22-23

⁵⁰ The development is obvious if one compares these drawings with the earlier attempts published in the pages of the "Janajuddha", two or three years before the present ones. Ray differs with Bandopadhyay regarding the "photographic" in these sketches, and sees in them "an ontological endeavour, the gradual progression of which we see in the seventies, in the *Wounds*, made in pulp-relief". (Ray: *The political in art* op. cit.)

block pictures around 1947, which are not remarkably innovative beyond minor adjustments of academic essays. However, in the fifties, the sketches of the Tebhaga group activity formed the source material for a series of wood engravings by the artist. These show his understanding of the possibilities of the medium, with the solid mass of black and the minimum cut-away areas of white effectively building up the anticipating excitement of the meetings at night, or the almost impressionistic view of the villagers rallying out in procession with flags along the banks of the pond. A couple of years later, in 1956, he was continuing with the print medium in wood as well as linoleum sheet, and the pictures of the "Pavement Child" and the "Mother and child" reveal his conception of a picture not just as dramatic chiaroscuro, but as a balanced distribution of black and white areas through the bold incision of the block.

Unlike Chittaprosad, Somnath Hore did not immediately feel a distance from the party when it underwent a transformation in its political agenda (1948), shifting away from the liberal progressivism of the era of P.C. Joshi. He even went "underground" along with other leading members in 1949 when the party was declared banned. His studies were disrupted and he did not resume regular classes at the art school when he came out of hiding in the following year; much later, in 1957 he finally took his diploma from the institution as an external candidate. The turning point in his life came through the invitation from Atul Bose to join a teaching post at the Indian College of Art and Draughtsmanship, in Calcutta, in 1954. Gradually his work began to shift from the topical immediacy of the past years into transformed images of a suffering humanity irrespective of the specificity of incidents. Elimination of the inessential, dictated by the artistic propensity of the artist went hand-in-hand with his exploration of the line as an expressive device, especially in the etching prints of this period (cf. "Children", 1958). In November 1958, he left Calcutta to join the Art department of the Delhi Polytechnic (later the Delhi Art College). Another transformation, resulted now from viewing a Krishna Reddy exhibition in December, and the urge to try out multi-colour viscosity prints from a single metal plate. Aided by references from published books he not only grasped

the technical process but was able to hold a solo exhibition of his prints at the A.I.F.A.C.S. gallery by 1960. The "Genesis" (1959) may be taken as a representative of these pictures and certainly shows a world of turmoil but markedly different in tone from his earlier images of the suffering humanity. And what might appear to be a formal exercise in the technical possibilities of a medium was to hold for Somnath Hore an implication of wider significance. Technical possibilities of a medium proved to be pregnant with meaning implications, and the very process of an acid bath that "bites" the metal plate was suggestive enough for a sensitive artist like Somnath Hore to read into it his recurrent metaphor of the "wounds". How this happened in the following decades, is beyond the scope of the present study. For the present it shall suffice to recall that Somnath Hore severed his connections with the political party only in 1965, but his concern for a suffering humanity has remained an inspiration, throughout.

The languages of socially-responsive art

Unlike the paintings and sculptures of Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij, works-of-art dealing with the famine or other socially responsive themes have not yet graced the "repository of the nation's modern art", and have not yet formed part of a canon. In fact the very term "chronicle" used to describe such works of art is indicative of the view most commonly adopted by those who prefer to relegate the relevance of these visual images — the recognition of the documentary nature, and the resultant valuation possibly determined a qualitative-judgement in the marginalisation of these works in a hierarchical scheme of what could be considered significant as works-of-art in the mainstream narratives of the modern in the art of India. That, however, opens up the liberated scope of considering these works to be "early modernist markings outside the mainstream trends".⁵¹

⁵¹ Shivaji K. Panikkar, "Modern Indian Art: Art movements and social space", *50 Years Of Indian Art/ Institutions, Issues, Concepts And Conversations*, Conference Proceedings 1997, Mohile Parikh Centre for the Visual Arts, N.C.P.A., Mumbai, 1998, p. 46.

What is important to realize is that the non-interrogated dominant gradually acquires the dimension of the 'natural', of validity and authority. And the ability to perceive beyond such a conditioning involves the self-critical analysis as well as a process of 'unlearning', because from one's position within a discipline there occurs a gradual subsumption of the consciousness to the dominant discourse. A valid alternative vantage point from which one could consider these images is perhaps the way out of such a situation — not necessarily to write these works back into history but to realize the dynamics that shape such practices and make them possible at a given historical point of time, the points at which they fail and where they succeed.⁵²

⁵² Of the discourse being referred to the following are a few examples. The catalogue note to an exhibition titled "Contemporary Indian Art" (Geeta Kapur, introductory note to the exhibition held at the Royal Academy of Art, London, 1982; part of the Festival of India in the UK) constructs an untrammelled genealogy from Rabindranath, Sher-Gil, Jamini Roy to Benode Behari and then moves in an uninterrupted line on to the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay, before discussing the individuals of the exhibition. Dissent is only seen as an "unique relationship" with community and is considered a "radical consciousness of traditional India. Another essay by the same author, (Geeta Kapur, "Modern Indian Painting: A Synoptic View", *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, New Delhi, October-December 1982) similarly moves directly to M.F. Husain from Sher-Gil and Benode Behari, and traces the path of the romantic model from Rabindranath to the generation that "linked itself consciously with expressionism", therefore introducing Souza, Padamsee and Tyeb Mehta. In "When was modernism in Indian art" (Geeta Kapur's article, as originally published in *Journal of Arts and Ideas*, Nos. 27-28, New Delhi 1995), there is however an acknowledgement that "there is of course a strictly left-wing intervention in the process of defining Indian modernity", with the I.P.T.A. as a phenomenon in "a period when the communist movement posed a real alternative in political and cultural terms". The statement is subsequently modified to state that it "provides the ground for a great many innovations in theatre, cinema, literature and to a lesser extent, in the plastic arts". [emphasis added] The relative insignificance implicated for the visual arts is evident of the opinion. Nowhere in the book "The Living Tradition" (K.G. Subramanyan, "The Living Tradition", Seagull Books, Calcutta 1987) or in the body of writings by the same esteemed author does one find the mention of the politically motivated practices. Similarly, "The Bengal School And The Modern Art Scene In Bengal: Some Observations" (R. Sivakumar, in the catalogue to the exhibition *Trends and Images*, C.I.M.A., Calcutta 1993) does mention the "social and political orientation in the Forties when a large number of artists were shocked at the devastations wrought by famine and war", but the determinate factor becomes that "no common style or aesthetics emerged and artists like Chittaprosad, Zainul Abedin and Ramkinkar employed folk, academic and modernist formal devices respectively". In an article in the same catalogue, (Sundaram Tagore, "Historical overview of Indian artist's response to international modernism: Formative Phase 1940s to 1960s", in *Trends and Images*, op. cit.) the Calcutta Group is hailed for being anti-nostalgic, anti-sentimental and subversive of hierarchies, but the likes of Chittaprosad and Zainul Abedin to whom the same could equally apply are not mentioned perhaps because of the difficulties in situating them within the context of "international modernism". In monographic studies most often these works of art are treated as stepping-stones for future development in the career of the artist concerned. On the other hand, texts in Bengali devote complete chapters as if from a sense of hurt pride of being left out of larger historical studies, without addressing the issue from an analytical point of view (cf. Asok Bhattacharya, "Kolkatar Chitrakala", publication coinciding with the Tercentenary celebrations of the city of Calcutta, Director of Culture, Department of Information and Cultural Affairs, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta 1991; also Asok Bhattacharya, "Banglar Chitrakala", Pashcim Banga Bangla Academy, Calcutta 1994). Against the foregoing, more recent studies like the co-authored paper "Art, Subjectivity and Ideology: Colonial and post-Independent India" (co-authored paper by Shivaji K. Panikkar, Preetha Nair, and Anshuman Das Gupta, for the seminar "Modern India: Terms Of Discourse", I.I.A.S., Shimla May 1994) comes up with a pertinent analysis. The authors point out that the socialist/communist trajectories of the 1940s in Bengal "failed to radicalise the question of subjectivity" and connect the same to the "national pacifism" as the "other repressive double" of colonial repression to which the artist is subjected. According to them, the question of a "model" (for the "recording-function") "gets replete with that of the political sphere over the question of culture" and in the "constant attitudinal swing over the issue of culture between taste and ideology".

"Hungry Bengal" and Chittaprosad's involvement introduce into the present discussion, the issue of the artist as an individual with a proclaimed political identity and conviction, and the concept of art as "reportage". Besides the propaganda poster (which was nevertheless one of the ways in which art was incorporated within the political agenda of the Communist party), the fact that the party periodicals regularly published in its journals sketches by the artists associated with its movement, accompanied with written accounts or otherwise as statements in their own right, prompts one to propose that they envisaged a "documentary" role for art. In other words, art was perhaps seen as possessing a "recording function", especially in the kind of realism that was employed in these visual documents. The simultaneous engagement of Sunil Jana's efforts with photography, from amongst which some of the remarkably stirring images of the famine were simultaneously published in the same journals, is a further pointer to this direction.

However, to read the "political" identity of this practice merely in terms of the new social-realistic content would be insufficient. What is involved in the process is a rejection of and a self-distancing from the academic traditions of the art school on the one hand as well as the "Bengal School" and Santiniketan legacies on the other. Thereby, the attempt had been to purge art of its mythic, classicised, literary and lyrical material, and it had been possible in the early forties by concentrating on the image of a suffering and debased humanity⁵³.

The documentary role of art in the work of these artists is a factor beyond the simple translation of event into representation. Realism operated as an ideological and representational strategy, and there were definite ways in which these artists devised the language for such a fact-sheet of the famine. The defining of what constitutes realism in the twentieth century involves on the one hand the distinguishing of the term from that of a picture being "realistic", in the

⁵³ For this and the preceding paragraph I am indebted to Tapati Guha-Thakurta's reflections to a paper presented at a Cultural Studies workshop in Gwalior arranged by the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (Calcutta). The paper was a preliminary draft of what constitutes the present chapter, and her critical comments and suggestions have been especially instrumental in the articulation of this section.

sense of “achieving a believable figurative illusion of some people or objects as they occur in the world”⁵⁴, and on the other liberating it from being solely defined against its paired polar opposite of the “abstract”. Such assumptions and conflation obscure the density and interest of the diverse historical debates over realism. If one were to begin from the fact that realism is related to reality, there are as many contesting definitions of reality at stake. Thereby, with competing definitions of reality, “realism is always going to reverberate beyond some bare conception of ‘styles of art’”. While realism is not identical with naturalist achievement of figuration, it also distinguishes itself from the idea of unchanging universal values such as the “classical”. This dimension of the term was quite evident, even to the Nazi Germany of the nineteen thirties, and the officially approved, classicised figurative style that was promoted against the “degenerate” avant-garde was not termed realism. In the wake of the Russian revolution, discussions of proletarian or socialist art were increasingly dominated by the term “realism”. In “Art For A Purpose”, R. Radford has mentioned how historians have “claimed to detect at least ‘five distinct strands of practice’ ranging from public mural art, through documentary work, to art either exemplifying or strongly influenced by notions of a ‘proletarian’ culture, all circumscribed ‘within the territory of Socialist Realism’”⁵⁵. In the thirties, with Hitler gaining power in Germany, Socialist Realism was widely perceived as a doctrine that could draw together artists throughout the world concerned by the spread of Fascism, and became the artistic component of a wider movement of anti-Fascist resistance. However, while there were artists who were dissatisfied with the doctrinaire aspects of Socialist Realism, one also has the instance of Picasso who had joined the Communist party. In the Universal Exposition the question of realism starkly posed a climax of the debate, in both the formal and technical issues as well as that of art’s relation to society — “the National Socialist German pavilion, with its vast classicizing Aryan heroes, directly faced the Soviet pavilion topped by Vera Mukhina’s monumental

⁵⁴ Briony Fer, David Batchelor, Paul Wood: “Realism, Rationalism, Surrealism/Art between the wars”, Yale University in association with the Open University, 1993.

⁵⁵ R. Radford: “Art for a Purpose: The Artists’ International Association”, Winchester College of Art Press, 1987; referred in Briony Fer, David Batchelor, Paul Wood, *ibid.*

Socialist Realist figures of "*The Worker and the Collective Farm Woman*" raising the issue far more forcefully through its focus, not on peace, production and leisure but on war — was the Spanish Republic's installation, in its pavilion, of Picasso's portable mural *Guernica*"⁵⁶. It was Picasso who could now write to Simone Téry that painting is "not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defence against the enemy".

The above note on realism may not have direct relevance to the work of all the artists discussed in this chapter, which should be evident in the diversity and multiplicity of choices that has proved to be an important factor in the languages of art arising out of the need felt for social responsiveness. On the other hand, it is very much pertinent in the discussion of the artists closely associated with the Communist party and therefore within the scope and range of its ideological directives. How the pictorial languages of Chittaprosad and Somnath Hore had changed, therefore how realism became central in their linguistic formulation and was subsequently redefined, remains the central core to this trajectory and the validity of such a practice.

It shall be of relevance here to refer John Berger's illuminating analysis of Picasso's "*Guernica*". He wrote,

"Three years earlier Picasso made an etching of *Bull, Horse and Female Matador* which, in imagery, is very similar to *Guernica*. But here the matador is Marie-Thérèse, and the meaning of the scene is wholly concentrated on the movable frontier between sexual urgency and violence, between compliance and victimization, pleasure and pain

When Picasso painted *Guernica* he used the private imagery which was already in his mind and which he had been applying to an apparently very different theme For *Guernica* is a painting about

⁵⁶ Commemorating the bombardment of the urban civil population of the Basque capital by the German Condor Legion on the 26th of April 1937, during the Spanish Civil War.

how Picasso *imagines* suffering; and just as when he is working on a painting or sculpture about making love the intensity of his sensations makes it impossible for him to distinguish between himself and his lover, just as his portraits of women are often self-portraits of himself found in them, so here in *Guernica* he is painting his own suffering as he daily hears the news from his own country.....

Guernica, then, is a profoundly subjective work — and it is from this that its power derives. Picasso did not try to imagine the actual event. There is no town, no aeroplanes, no explosion, no reference to the time of the day, the year, the century, or the part of Spain where it happened. There are no enemies to accuse. There is no heroism. And yet the work is a protest — and one would know this even if one knew nothing of its history. Where is the protest then?

It is in what has happened to the bodies — to the hands, the soles of the feet, the horses tongue, the mother's breasts, the eyes in the head. What has happened to them *in being painted* is the imaginative equivalent of what happened to them in sensation in the flesh. We are made to feel their pain with our eyes. And pain is the protest of the body."⁵⁷

A similar kind of subjectivity is discernible in Käthe Kollwitz's works depicting the common man in his plight or uprising. But in these pictures, as for example the "Outbreak, IX" (from "The Peasants' War" series, 1903), the "Volunteers" (from the series "War", 1920) and even the "Pieta" and "Woman with Dead Child" (1903) apart from a proletarian solidarity and protest they become images of profound impact specifically in the intensity of their expressionistic pictorial language and a visibly personal anguish that translates into the very basic elements of picture-making. They reach out to a realm beyond the immediate and the topical, beyond

⁵⁷ John Berger, "Success and Failure of Picasso", Pantheon Books, pp. 167-169.

the concerns of realism in a stilted sense, through the very personal subjective feelings that liberate her images from the pitfalls of mere propagandist trappings.⁵⁸

⁵⁸ According to the editors of the *Encyclopedia of World Art*, there are at least three different senses in which the term 'realism' has been used, viz. the generic sense of an artist's specific attitude to reality, the historical sense, and an aesthetic- philosophical sense. The term 'realism' initially came up with the French Revolution of 1848 and the rise of the artist Gustave Courbet, with Champfleury as the first theorist (the book "Le Réalisme" of 1857). It was also significantly defined in Courbet's pamphlet issued on the occasion of the 1855 Exposition Universelle in Paris. Realism in its opposition to the idealism of the classicists and the romanticists stressed object reality as a representationa theme valid in itself without recourse to any embellishment correction or preconceived choice. It established the necessity of treating themes of contemporary life, with the most humble classes as the protagonist of the work-of-art. Despite its position against romanticism it did not ignore subjective feeling which was considered as an index of artistic sincerity. In the context of the Soviet Union, in the 1932 celebrations of the 15th anniversary of the October Revolution (1917) a large exhibition was participated by established as well as groups of young artists, who reflected on the officially prescribed theme of 'the exaltation of the Revolution'. "While it was declared that 'realism is first of all the whole truth of the subject and of the artist's characterization of the phenomenon of reality', it was also affirmed tht Soviet artists 'want to interpret and reflect the beautiful, reject evil, through comprehensible forms, as the voice of their people'. Out of this came a monotonous repetition of populist themes and a return to 19th century portraiture, by then considered out of date in the rest of the world." (*Encyclopedia of World Art*, McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York/Toronto/London 1966, Vol. XI, column no. 887)