Chapter III

# The modernist premises of the "Calcutta Group" (1943-1953)

"..... In the West, kings have long been dethroned and the reins of the State have passed into the hands of the common man. Today the artists no longer decorate the baroque palaces of kings or the interior of the chapels but work independently in their studios or decorate the communal buildings. The great French movements in art — Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, etc., — all evolved through this changed ideal in art. Such a movement is under way in our country too ....."

"..... The guiding motto of our Group is best expressed in the slogan "Art should be international and inter-dependent". In other words, our art cannot progress or develop if we always look back to our past glories and cling to our old traditions at all cost. The vast new world of art, rich and infinitely varied, created by Masters the world over in all ages, beckons us. From Egyptian and Assyrian arts to the works of Italian, Dutch, French masters — we have to study all of them deeply, develop our appreciation of them and take from them all that we could profitably synthesise with our requirements and traditions. This is all the more necessary because our art has stood still since the seventeenth century. But during the past three hundred years the world outside of India has made vast strides in art, has evolved epoch-making discoveries in forms and techniques. It is absolutely necessary for us to close this hiatus by taking advantage of these developments in the Western world."[1]

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[1] Introductory note in the Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue, anonymous and undated.

So wrote the Calcutta Group in the collectively voiced note in the publication that has been usually referred to as the "Calcutta Group handbook". Presumably published to accompany an exhibition, the handbook/catalogue does not credit the authorship of the note to any single person; further, although the publication is undated, internal evidence would argue that it could not have been composed prior to 1953.[2] Despite a wide span of time from the Egyptian to the modern masters and despite the claims for an intended synthesis, implicit within the proclaimed ideal of the group is a preferential leaning towards the art of the West. The intention behind this preference is regenerative, the infusion of a lost vitality and new life into the dissipated vigour of the then contemporary Indian art, through the invention of a visual language suitably modern (equated in this instance with "international") and therefore capable of being the vehicle for expression of the diverse nuances of transformed experience of a new time.

The opinion that stagnancy has become the sole nature of the dominant art practices (the 'Bengal school' tradition as well as the academic art-school training) and the conviction that new developments from the West could show a possible way out, is perhaps not so unique or exclusive as an attitudinal position for the 1943 group as it initially may appear to be. The basic faith in the West as role model in the context of the Calcutta Group has a pre-history in the art-practice in Calcutta ever since the institutional introduction of the European academic mode through the art school curricula, and has been a strong opinion in an ongoing polemic. Simultaneous to the significant transformations in institutional pedagogy brought about by the Havell-Abanindranath combine at the Government School of Art and Crafts, an equally strong and opposing opinion has continually provided the foil to the newly evolving indigenous-national trend.

To trace the debates briefly, one can begin by recalling the fact that Ernst Binfield

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[2] Hemanta Misra joined the Calcutta Group in 1953; he is included in the publication, in the section listing the individual artist-members of the group.

Havell had joined as the Principal of the art-school on the 6th of July 1896.[3] His acquaintance with Abanindranath Tagore began the following year, and the latter joined him as the vice-principal on the 15th of August 1905.[4] As the nationalist re-invention of tradition in pictorial language, initiated by Abanindranath Tagore, began to assume the proportions of a movement among his disciples and followers, this generated a debate in the domain of aesthetics. While the new "Indian" style found supportive feedback from Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, O.C. Gangoly and others, there emerged all along a strong oppositional front advocating the rejection of the nationalist prerogative because of its limiting nature for visual arts. From Akshay Kumar Maitreya to Sukumar Roy to Benoy Kumar Sarkar, this advocacy for European pictorial conventions and an opening up to a heritage unrestricted by nationalist/geographic limits was strongly voiced as the call of the hour. The latter's essay "The Aesthetics of Young India" spurned a debate that began in the art journal "Rupam" in 1922, and spilled over into the vernacular literature as well.

E.B. Havell's restructuring of the Government School of Art curriculum and the transition from an Western academic-mode pedagogy towards the new stress on Indian traditions, caused a section of the disgruntled students to quit the art school and establish the "Jubilee Art Academy" under the leadership of Ranadaprasad Gupta. Three decades since its formation, the Jubilee Art Academy provided training in the Western academic mode as an alternative, with a complete stress on European techniques and skills in painting and sculpture. As an institute of considerable repute, it provided the initial training to artists like Atul Bose, Hemendranath Majumder, and Prahlad Karmakar.

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[3] The dates and other details in the forthcoming paragraphs refer closely to the following sources of information: Asok Bhattacharya, "*Banglar Chitrakala*" (Bengal Painting), Paschim Banga Bangla Academy, Ministry of Information and Culture, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta 1994; Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "The Making Of A New 'Indian' Art/ Artists, Aesthetics And Nationalism In Bengal/ c. 1850 – 1920", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York/Victoria 1992; Partha Mitter: "Art And Nationalism In Colonial India/ 1850 – 1922/ Occidental Orientations", Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York/Victoria 1994.

[4] In this context, one can recall that the 'Partition of Bengal' of 16th of October 1905 saw Abanindranath's response in the painting "*Bharatmata*".

When Abanindranath withdrew from the art-school, his nephew Jamini Prakash Ganguly replaced him on the 19th of June 1916. Jamini Prakash had taken lessons from Charles Palmer the Royal Academy (London) trained painter. So had Abanindranath initially, but unlike his uncle Jamini Prakash had retained his allegiance to the Western academic-realist mode and was equally adept at historical/mythological themes as well as landscapes and portraits. Just as the Abanindranath era in the art-school was dominated by his aims and conviction, Jamini Prakash reversed the trend, returning the earlier primacy of Western academic-realism in the art school curricula. Even more significantly, he dealt a grave blow to the new movement by instituting the infamous split between the "Fine Art" and "Indian Art" as two distinct sections within the art-school. The privileging of western academic realism as *the* 'Fine' art, and the segregation of Indian art as an independent category outside it, speaks enough of the transformed emphasis.

When Mukul Chandra Dey was appointed the Principal on the 11th of July 1928 following the retirement of Percy Brown, students feared a turn of the tide once again. Mukul Dey, initially trained under Abanindranath, had been affectionately close to Rabindranath Tagore. Later he had also been to the United States and England for further training. Displeased with his appointment, Jamini Prakash who had long been serving as the Vice-Principal (and carrying on the responsibilities of the acting-Principal since Brown's retirement), submitted his resignation. A student's protest-demonstration at the art school, following the introduction of a new set of (disciplinary?) regulations, led to a temporary closure and the subsequent expulsion of the students leading the protest. These students, among whom were Abani Sen, Govardhan Ash, Annada Dey, and Digin Bhattacharya, joined hands in 1931to form the "Young Artists' Union". Renting a studio space and sharing it by turns, their effort was to follow the ideals of a commune. The union even went to the extent of organizing an exhibition of paintings by artists working in the academic-realist mode, by hiring a stall at the Town Hall in Calcutta during the 70th birth anniversary celebrations of the poet Rabindranath Tagore being held in December the same year.

When the short-lived Young Artist's Union drew to a close, its initiators along with new members formed the Art Rebel Centre in 1933. Senior painter Atul Bose spelled out the shift in focus in the introductory catalogue-note to their April 1933 exhibition. The note said that the artists of the "Art Rebel Centre" aimed to practice an art that would primarily be anti-sentimental — that the group is fearless and forward in the search for new paths. While anti-sentimentalism referred obviously to "Bengal School" romanticism, the artists simultaneously also rejected the art-school brand of academic realism in practice, and turned towards the relatively contemporary art languages that had evolved through the European modern art movements, for inspiration. However, like the previous collective, the Art Rebel Centre too did not last long enough. This expanded horizon, beyond the debate over academic realism, and their advocacy of the formal-stylistic features of the European modern movements in art sounds closely similar and almost like a prediction of what was to be the motivating spirit for the Calcutta Group formed a decade later.

It will be of relevance here, in the context of the issue of modernity, to recall the shift in perspective introduced by Mukul Dey. In 1922 and then in 1932 he organized at the venue of the art school, two exhibitions. The first was one of the major exhibitions of the paintings of Jamini Roy, and the second of Rabindranath Tagore. For the first time the city had the opportunity to see such a large collection of paintings of these two artists put up for public viewing. Dey's choice of focusing on these two artists and the decision to project their work through such retrospective exhibitions, indicates the shift he intended away from the mere debate over an "East-West" divide towards recognizing the possibilities of a rooted modernism from within one's own context.

Formations of artists' collectives with a faith in the developments in European art therefore, has an almost continuous and repeated past for the Calcutta Group, and so does the overall atmosphere of a pro-European linguistic choice beginning through the institution of academic art-training in the city. The Calcutta Group could then be seen as an extension and an ongoing part of the same

process in operation. The significant differences however, come about through the historic moment of its inception — the famine of 1942/43, the World War, the Quit India movement and the popular upsurge forming the backdrop against which the artists of the Group would like us to view their coming together. But unlike the artists who had engaged in formulating an iconography of the famine, thereby a direct thematic response to the contemporary socio-political developments, the Calcutta Group attempted to define its modernist slant devoid of any political connotations of the "progressive". The stress on form and style is therefore the unifying characteristic in the works of the members of the Group.

It shall be of relevance then, to follow their formal-modernist standpoint not only through analysis of their pictorial/sculptural output, but simultaneously also through the consideration of statements in catalogues, reviews and articles as revealing at least through the avowals their artistic choices. Before we attempt an analysis of the pictorial and sculptural examples of the artists of the group, we can therefore take note of the statements in contemporary publications, as well as those in later articles and essays relevant for this study.

The 1953 Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue

> "Man is supreme, there is none above him" — this was the guiding slogan when the Calcutta Group was formed in 1943. Those were dark days for Bengal. Famine and pestilence were then stalking the land. The barbarity and heartlessness all around moved us, a few young artists, deeply. We began to think, to search our hearts and ask ourselves: '..... which way?'"[5]

The note in the 1953 publication of the Calcutta Group, as mentioned earlier, appears to be the only contemporary statement by the collective as a united voice during the days of its existence. Moreover, it comes from the group a

[5] Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue, ibid.

decade after its initial formation, when a considerable change in the configuration of its constituent members had already taken place. As such, not only is there the possibility of an element of hindsight, but also that of an anachronistic superimposition of later realizations/rationalizations over those of the actual moment of inception. However, strictly speaking, the note is not a manifesto, but attempted to express what it considered to be common motivating ideals, interspersed with retrospective recalling of the Group's past history.

The essay began by claiming the period between 1910 and 1943 as "the most eventful one in our country's recent history" when "secularisation of politics and an expansion in the democratic consciousness in our country" provided art with its new ideals. Without any further elaboration or qualification of the statement the essay continued with what it considered a significant change in the West — the common man's claim to the reins of the state, which was then directly referred to as the major factor leading to the developments of the French art movements, Impressionism, Cubism and Surrealism.

The focus on "Man" became specifically grounded when the authors turned to the history of their collective. Nineteen-forty was indeed a period of "barbarity and heartlessness". The humiliating degradation to which humanity enforced itself was ideally the setting for the activation of humanist forces in creative expression. The man-made famine and the worldwide violence of war were suffering beyond expectations that humanity inflicted upon itself. It is only natural that artists, responding to such disasters, should have felt impelled to ask themselves "which way?" The question remains then of the way they ultimately chose. One group of artists had responded to the same situation through a certain set of choices — stripping art bare to the elemental basics, direct and even to a certain extent topical — developing an iconography of the famine itself. As they took on the responsibility of showing the viewers starkly in their faces, the disasters all around directly as theme and unmitigated in representation, political propaganda and art often walked a tightrope balance

together. But in the instance of the Calcutta Group it was a different choice. For them, although the immediate factors triggering off their quest were the socio-political transformations, primarily it did not assume the question of direct thematic representation. Rather, they saw it as an era on the thresholds, moving across into a period when past languages no longer seemed adequate. The stagnancy required being broken with the innovation of a totally new, and necessarily *modern*, visual language.

This modern language, they claimed could evolve only when we stop looking back "to our past glories and cling to our old traditions at all cost". A language to articulate the contemporary had to begin from fresh grounds altogether. And the call of the hour was that art had to become "international and interdependent". In the catalogue note the intention to synthesize influences and absorption from other cultures was followed by a self-negating remark that "our art has stood still since the seventeenth century"[6]. The reason for such a strong self-critical comment is evident in the fact that Calcutta Group artists obliquely refer to the romantic sentimentalism of the "Bengal school", pointing out the past-clinging anachronism that they wished to discard. Yet again, this statement itself has to be viewed presently as a generalization since it views the school as a monolithic entity with a rigid, revivalist, stultified mode of practice. What began originally as a personal style and language in the hands of Abanindranath, underwent several shifts in Nandalal Bose, before it became a "school" in the hands of the not-so-imaginative followers. Further changes from within would then consist of the later works of Nandalal, (even the late example from Abanindranath himself), as well as the complete transformation of the same in the works of Benode Behari Mukhopadhyay and Ramkinkar Baij into a "contextual modern"[7] language. These, coupled with the uniquely significant attempts by Rabindranath Tagore and Jamini Roy to formulate a viable contemporary alternative outside

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[6] Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue, ibid.

[7] R. Siva Kumar, "Santiniketan/ The making of a contextual modernism", exhibition catalogue, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 2000. This will be taken up for a more detailed consideration in the following chapter on contemporary activities in Santiniketan.

the "Bengal School" practice, are left out in the tracing of the pre-history, whereby the Group almost tended to project itself as an exclusive phenomenon. Calcutta had already had the two major exhibitions of the last two artists as mentioned earlier, and the omission is indeed problematic — members of the Group could hardly be believed to have been unaware of these efforts or those of their 1931/ 33 precursors.

This then emerged as their prime claim — a claim to a modernist position vis-à-vis art-practice. And in that light, the concluding paragraphs of the catalogue note contain statements worth the attention. The Group maintained that while India had remained stagnant, the world outside had "evolved epoch-making discoveries in forms and techniques" in the same period. They also expressed the necessity to "close this hiatus by taking advantage of these developments in the Western world"[8]. What emerges from these claims is a focus on formal/ stylistic stress in viewing the modernity of contemporary "Western" art. And yet, formal and technical innovations, as we know, far from being ends in themselves, evolve as a logical consequence of a search for a new language system. The consideration of modern movements in world art at merely the level of formal and technical innovations tends to overlook the internal necessity and logic of such a development that led European modern art from one movement to another.

This lack in clarity in defining the "achievements of the West" is similarly noticed in the defining of the indigenous traditions. "It is better that we consciously, discriminatingly, choose and integrate foreign influences with our national style and tradition; for otherwise influences unconsciously imbibed might distort rather that enrich our art"[9], the note said. It remained to be clarified what the authors intended by a seemingly *singular* "national" style. Even if one were to look back past the two intervening centuries towards that of the seventeenth — that

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[8] Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue, ibid.

[9] Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue, ibid.

era when according to the Group the indigenous practices still had viable modes of self-expression and the relevant linguistic vehicle — it would be increasingly impossible to speak of a singular national style. The schools of traditional painting, that flourished then, had defined regional specificity and temporal limits. Beyond these, even variations of a given stylistic feature tended to constitute another way of speaking, and hence, multiple voices had always been present beyond whatever may appear to take on the look of a "national" character.

On the whole then, this catalogue-note, an essay composed in the early nineteen-fifties, ten years after the formation of the Group, and its existence through numerous splits and re-constitutions, is a document that bears testimony to the looseness in the theoretical-conceptual bindings that characterize the Calcutta Group. Coming at such a late period of its life, in fact the final year of its cohesive existence, the disparities and incongruities seem even more glaring as unresolved issues.

The 1953 article in the periodical "Marg"

The other contemporary literature of considerable length is the article "The Calcutta Group" by Klaus Fischer in the periodical "Marg".[10] The text of the essay is interspersed with photographs of the works of art by members of the group — an invaluable documentary source for ascertaining the date of these published examples, since these could not possibly be later than the date of the publication itself — and short biographical entries accompanied by brief introduction to their individual proclivities. Barring a few instances, these notes were mostly taken from the Calcutta Group's 1953 handbook/catalogue, often verbatim.

Divided into three sections the essay has the following subtitles — "Art and Nature in Past and Present", "The Ten Years' Work of the Calcutta Group", and

[10] Klaus Fischer, "The Calcutta Group, *Marg*, Vol. VI, No. 4, *Deepavali* 1953, pp. 53 – 72.

"Art and Life in East and West". The first section began in the slippery domain of the "creative moment in the sphere of art"; slippery, because it easily tended towards mystification of the artistic persona. Klaus Fischer claimed at the outset that despite advancements of knowledge in science, psychology, sociology and philosophy, the "creative moment" remains a secret. In the same section a few paragraphs later he also wrote:

> "..... Regardless of specific natural forms, regardless of particular iconography of the various countries and continents, religions and doctrines, true artists today are able to render their ideas in forms intelligible for the whole of mankind. The artists may be literally isolated from the sources of historical and holy books; but as far as *pure artistic expression* is concerned, they are important links in *one unbroken chain of world ideas.*"[11] [emphasis added]

Two themes turn out to be the dual concerns between which the essay oscillates — the attempt to define the alchemy of artistic image-formation, and the claim to an international language in visual art. The author supported the Calcutta Group between these two stilts, and attempted to establish it as a major phenomenon in the history of modern Indian art.

Thus, on the one hand the essay has such claims as that of art activity being the product of the "reciprocity of imagination and imitation", whether in the "East" or the "West". The dynamics of this pull is supposed to have lead some movements from naturalism to abstraction, examples of which are given as "Spanish cave painting, Cretan art, Ajanta, Occidental ornament, Picasso, Keyt". The opposite to this tendency, of "developing typical and abstract schemes into figures of naturalistic observation" is cited in "Egypt under Akhenaton, classic Greek art, Chinese art between Han and T'ang period, Gothic and Picasso during the last decade".[12]

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[11] Klaus Fischer, ibid, p 54.

[12] Klaus Fischer, ibid, p 53.

On the other hand, the author proceeded with the "creative moment of imagination", claiming that to understand it "one must be an artist oneself. This does not mean that one has to paint or write verses, but one must be sensitive to values. Modern psychology and biology explain this fact: basically everyone is an artist, as 'child art' demonstrates. This skill gets lost or is not sufficiently developed; but still everyone is known to possess a certain creative equipment enabling him to perceive art, literature and music."[13] But what began as a perceptive claim logically leading to the demystification of the artistic genius, returned full circle to a self-negation of the argument with the difference between the artist and the contemplator being located in the presence or absence of the "anima" factor.

Between these two alternating strains, comes the discussion on the Calcutta Group, where the Parisian leaning is unwaveringly stated.

> "The artists of the Calcutta Group acknowledge that the Paris of Sartre, Stravinsky and Picasso is the art centre of our days and that, perhaps in the near future, Italians, Mexicans or Russians may point out new trends; but for the moment, painters and sculptors of West Europe are developing forms of international understanding ....."[14]

Despite the promise of the subtitle, the second section hardly dealt with analysis of the actual output of the artists of the group in the decade preceding the essay. Rather, there is the statement of a set of generalized principles, beginning with the claim that even in a "scientific age", the "Human and Divine are valuable contents, and the artists of the Calcutta Group serve them best by rejecting traditional forms and by finding new ones".[15]

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[13] Klaus Fischer, ibid, p 54.

[14] Klaus Fischer, ibid, p 54.

[15] Klaus Fischer, ibid, p 57.

> "Unlike other modernists imitating the inventions of one leading master, the artists of the Calcutta Group have not fixed themselves to one style or 'ism' ..... Every member has full scope to develop himself and so look forward and beyond the narrow limits of tradition and prejudice ....."

> "The sculptors and painters of the Calcutta Group agree in their obvious preoccupation with formal problems. While ignorant critics reproach them with following extravagant ways, they find themselves in the neighbourhood of two splendid traditions. In ancient Indian sculpture and painting we witness the same religious contents modified by endless and always beautiful formal variations ..... Both ancient and modern poetry and music in East and West are basically variations on the given subjects ....."[16]

As in the previous sections, the third section also contains statements that are not followed up by logical reasoning. For instance, the author expressed his view that in art "'styles' do not follow one another, but the 'archaic' and the 'classic', the 'naturalistic' and the 'surrealistic', and the 'abstract' are present, possible and even necessary *everywhere and always*"[17] [emphasis added]. However, despite such sweeping universalism in a statement that tends to generalize beyond the specificities of a place and time, the author did not qualify his claim any further, so that the logic of his claim is left to the viewer's wonder. Reverting to the oblique reference to erstwhile practices, the author continued:

> "..... We have gained knowledge of the history of art, but have lost correct understanding of the artistic quality; otherwise we would not be misled into appreciating something just because it is ancient (or is a good copy of an ancient work) and to discard

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[16] Klaus Fischer, ibid, pp. 61 – 62.

[17] Klaus Fischer, ibid, pp. 66.

> something which is not traditional. On the other hand, not every sculpture or painting of the contemporaries is a perfect work of art, and no member of the Calcutta Group will claim to do one masterpiece after another; but all artists of this Group, and like-minded contemporaries, agree about just principles: they prefer a failure in experiment to successful imitation. Such an attitude will provoke the opposition of the Eastern public; for the traditional Oriental theory of aesthetics involves the principles that the beautiful consists in correct rendering of well known and familiar subjects. And modern-minded Indian painters who seek for truth and freedom must risk the adventure of deviating not only from traditional subjects but from canonical beauty. ....."[18]

Despite the tone of a pragmatic forward-looking openness, the generalization of a supposed "traditional Oriental theory of aesthetics" is obvious.

"How can contemporary artists express the Eastern mind? Not by imitating Ajanta, Sigiriya, Borobodur and other glories of the past, but by adding new moderns"[19], wrote the author. And he proceeded to offer an example from the rebuilding of the cities of Cologne and Conventry, devastated in the world war, where "architects rejected the idea of copying old plans and facades; they erected new buildings which are both useful and beautiful and worthy to stand besides the remains of ancient greatness"[20]. But then the final conclusion is almost prescriptive:

> "How can the contemporary artist best serve his country?" Not by producing obtrusive works of religious or social contents, but *by entirely devoting himself to art for art's sake, by developing his*

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[18] Klaus Fischer, ibid, pp. 69 – 71.

[19] Klaus Fischer, ibid, p 71.

[20] Klaus Fischer, ibid, p 71.

> *forms as best as possible* and even by departing from the contemporaries' demands, always following his own views and ideas ..... In contrast to politicians and businessmen, the artists are not passive members of society, who merely execute what the incalculable mind of people demands. By their spiritual activity artists inspire and change society. They do not imitate meaningless traditions, but they create new ideas. And they feel responsible for the results of their works, as everybody should who is the instrument of a powerful imagination ..... as a member of the mechanical age, it is to him that we owe the awareness of the fact that beauty is possible even in factories, in dam projects, in aeroplanes and in our daily life."[21] [emphasis added]

Other articles and relevant books

Reviewing the winter 1949 exhibition of the Calcutta Group, poet and critic Bishnu Dey wrote an article that was later included in his collection of essays titled "*Shahityer bhabishyat o annyano prabandho*" (The future of literature and other essays)[22].

In the essay, Bishnu Dey began by saying that the exhibition was a lively event in the face of the "weak" art-scenario, and that following the achievements of Jamini Roy, the "hope of Indian art" lay with the artists of the Calcutta Group and their colleagues. Similar hopes, he wrote, had arisen from a then-recent Sheila Auden exhibition, and had prompted him to expect one from "Chittaprasad of Bombay". He expressed the expectation that the Calcutta Group would volunteer the initiative for such an exhibition, since they had proven the capacity and the taste necessary to coordinate such an event in their recent

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[21] Klaus Fischer, ibid, pp. 71 – 72.

[22] Bishnu Dey, "*Shahityer bhabishyat o annyano prabandho*", Signet Press, Calcutta 1359 *Bangabda* (1952), pp. 90-92.

show in the city. Drawing attention apparently to the fact that proper presentation of the works of art is of equal importance as their production, he praised the Group's "use of light and wall-space"(!) in their recent exhibition.

Following a summary account of the individual achievements of the artists as evident from the exhibits, Bishnu Dey ventured onto a discussion of much wider implication. Addressing the fact that the Calcutta Group had adopted a strongly divergent and resistive attitude to [the tastes of] "the decomposing *bhadrolok*-community and its worn out art-trends", he laid a claim to their progressive standpoint arising out of the "dialectics of a resistive movement". The Calcutta Group artists, he felt, need not pay much heed to the sharp words of criticism from "those critics who don the mantle of Marxism"; he cited, as instance, the Marxist critic Jourdain's words in support of the paintings of Cézanne. He quoted, through a free translation from issue number twenty-one of the journal La Pensée, where Jourdain wrote, that the deduction that Cézanne's art is bourgeois because he belongs to that social class, is an ideological apriorism which has strange echoes with fatalist approach. To claim that because of his class identity Cézanne would be incapable of producing anything beyond the expectation of his class, simultaneously and similarly expresses doubt regarding Marx's ability to break free of the iron-grip of bourgeois thought. Marx' thoughts were not bourgeois; nor Cézanne's paintings. "Which is why", Bishnu Dey continued from Jourdain's conclusion, "Cézanne's interiors and apples are far more progressive than [the paintings of] contemporary so-called realistic and popular artists — those whom Jourdain had labelled as cake-bakers".[23]

Dey concluded his short essay with an appeal to the Calcutta Group. Having reached the current level of their quest, it could now be expected that they concentrate more on the deeper aspects of the subjective-self. That will be possible, he wrote, only when the artists look beyond the problems of the painted-surface and address more wider issues, by allowing the visible world to penetrate their eye and impinge upon their mind's vision. The viewers need to

[23] Bishnu Dey, ibid, p. 91.

practice patience, patience of a revolutionary nature; but the artists too must not deviate from their patient search by refraining from quick startles of exhibitions that might serve to relieve monotony for the viewers but which ultimately chokes self development of the creative personality.

Keeping in view the fact that this review article comes four years before the 1953 catalogue of the Calcutta Group, it will be observed that Bishnu Dey with his defined political orientation differs significantly from the Calcutta Groups' standpoint. While the Calcutta Group refrained from the use of the word, not only does Dey refer to the "progressive" but attempts to redefine it from any dogmatic limitations liberating it from petty political implications and opening it up to wider possibilities. It shall be relevant to recall this fact when we consider the later disavowals, especially by Prodosh Das Gupta, regarding any political ideology as an inspiration for the Group at large[24].

Despite the initial praise, the article has a camouflaged critical tone that surface in the end. With his depth of analysis, Bishnu Dey goes beyond the form/style question — and the initial acclaim regarding exhibition-display then tends to read not only mock-serious but to a large extent sarcastic. The final words of caution as well as the reference to Cézanne, quite obviously, aims to operate as an eye-opener pointing towards an artistic engagement deeper than an urge to bask in superficial surprises. Whether the members of the Calcutta Group realized this critical undercurrent in the essay and how far it transformed their art-practice, however, is open to debate.

Read from this point of view, Bishnu Dey's expectation that the Calcutta Group would organize a Chittaprasad exhibition becomes significant. Having settled in Bombay, in the late nineteen-forties Chittaprasad had gradually shifted from his initial overtly political statements to relatively more humanist concerns and images of happiness, beauty and bounty. The Calcutta Group who had carefully avoided any links to political ideology could not even conceive of co-opting him

[24] It would be ideal to refer back to the discussion on Jamini Roy in the introductory chapter at this point.

into their group along their more-than-once reconstitutions, nor even invite him to exhibit along with the Group members, unlike the instance of Ramkinkar. It would be too simplistic to suppose that Bishnu Dey was ignorant of Calcutta Group's aversion to political identity. Rather, his redefinition of the term "progressive" and the expectation regarding the Chittaprasad exhibition are but two parts of the same logic.

The Calcutta Group had stirred up controversies since its inception. The group, as we know, did not begin with a declared manifesto. Apparently, what could be presumed to be the first articulation of its supposed objectives appeared as an introductory note to its second exhibition, which was organized by the I.P.T.A. in Bombay[25]. The "progressive" identity of the group that was subsequently hailed by certain left-oriented journals was an attitude that most members of the group could not agree. Prodosh Das Gupta, founder member and joint secretary, has ever since consistently refuted in all his writings, any political guideline/ideology as the motivating factor for the coming together of the artists of the group.

When constituent members of the Group recall their memories in articles decades after the Group had ceased to exist, one may well expect a certain amount of critical self-evaluation. However, in reality fond attachment has often led to over-emphasis and even over-statement, with conflicting opinions initiating debate.

In 1976, Paritosh Sen attempted an overview of the Calcutta Group in the "Kabipatra" magazine[26]. The famine had been mentioned as a stirring event even in the 1953 catalogue, but in the opening paragraph of this article, Paritosh Sen rightly stressed the "man-made" nature of the catastrophe. Yet, he dumped the entire responsibility and the blame solely on to the "ruling British community"

[25] The note was authored by Bishnu Dey, and Prodosh Das Gupta had later expressed strong reservations regarding its content.

[26] Paritosh Sen, "Calcutta Group", *Kabipatra Shilpashankya*, 34 *Sankalan*, 1976

rather than a wider nexus.

Recalling the frequent gatherings of artist-friends that led to the formation of the group, Paritosh Sen wrote that the themes for discussion extended beyond the concerns for contemporary Indian Art (with what he called its "post Abanindranath-Gaganendranath-Jamini Roy vacuum") to issues concerning the modern in European art.

> "The prime question was this, that do the revolutionary creative values that evolved in modern European art have any significant location in our art practice? Is it possible to establish link with these? And would that enrich our art? In today's world of aerial flight is it any way justifiable to deny these radical contemporary realizations and remain a 'frog-in-the-well'[27]? Despite the apparent simplicity, the issue is complex. For instance, will it be proper to allow ourselves to float along on the waves of nationalism, just as our predecessors had let themselves float on the spate of indigenism? Or do we need to get familiar with the wider ocean and its choppy waves?"[28]

Paritosh Sen found a couple of "positive" effects of war beside the usual destructive rampage. It was the war that brought numerous foreign personalities into the city from whom the artists of the Group had their major visual exposure to the works of "Cézanne, Van Gogh, Renoir, Gauguin, Manet" through large sized collotype prints. Sen also recalled the roles played by Kamal and Nirode Majumder and Prithwish Neogy in stimulating thought provoking discussions about these artists. Such a vast contemporary consciousness was also typical of the post-Tagorean poets amongst whom Sen identified Bishnu Dey as the closest to the Group. The problem, Sen wrote, thus became two-fold — one,

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[27] "Frog-in-the-well" is a common Bengali metaphor for complacency.

[28] Paritosh Sen, ibid, p.59 (free translation).

how to conflate these contemporary consciousness with one's own ancient heritage, and the other, how to connect the awareness that has been brought forth by the war and famine with the first.

> "Only time can tell if we found the answer to our questions; for us, the question was more important than finding the answer."[29]

The next important factor that Paritosh Sen drew attention to is the necessarily urban character of the Group. Referring to the erstwhile religious-mystical subjects in vogue, he wrote:

> "In Benode Behari's paintings we found for the first time the narrative of the common man, the village life. But since we were all city dwellers, the urban experience and the life of its citizens became the prime concern of our paintings and sculptures. Which is why Gopal Ghosh painted townscapes besides his rural landscapes, Prankrishna Pal painted the racecourse, and in Nirode Majumder's paintings one identifies the urban middle class. So too in Prodosh Das Gupta's sculpture one notices two urban middle class women, the labourers in Rathin Maitra's painting, and the war-tired pair of boots in Abani Sen's picture. To sum it up, conspicuously the establishment of the industrial civilization left its mark upon art-practice".[30]

Quite surprisingly, Paritosh Sen referred not just to the oft-mentioned Quit India movement and the war-famine combine, but even the Russian revolution "that had provided the promise of a new social order and a new human being" as significant motivating forces.

> "Expressionist painting appeared in India for the first time ..... the new consciousness had opened up a new vision. Thus the eye not only saw human beings afresh, but also trees, flowers

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[29] Paritosh Sen, ibid, p. 60.

[30] Paritosh Sen, ibid, p. 61.

and foliage, and the sky — everything."[31]

Paritosh Sen proceeded to identify the stylistic resonances and roots drawing attention to the familiarity with the Impressionist and post-Impressionist languages through Jamini Roy's landscapes and still-lifes, as well as the "flood of colours" characteristic of Fauvism, from the same paintings. He also linked the non-descriptive use of colours as an already existing practice in Indian folk art.

> "No doubt Benode Behari had already painted pure landscapes by then, but in Gopal Ghosh's series of landscapes of Dumka there was a beautiful temporary indication of how it is possible to draw upon the Indian tradition and yet arrive at a contemporary landscape image."[32]

Paritosh Sen refers to Ramkinkar whose "astonishing contribution we all agreed upon" but extensively praises Prodosh Das Gupta as an artist who was not only a great sculptor but a teacher as well — evident through the trail of efficient students who carried on the newly found tradition in their individual stylistic expression.

Analysing the break up of the Group as the effect of the dispersal of the members to various other centres and to foreign trips, Sen laments the lack of mental link between the original founder-members and later recruits. His final sentence expresses the desire to organize a retrospective exhibition of the group, which were it possible, would allow the scope of self-evaluation.

Still later in a 1981 essay[33], Prodosh Das Gupta provided his account of the Group. He began, (by now predictably), with an assault on the Bengal School,

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[31] Paritosh Sen, ibid, p. 61.

[32] Paritosh Sen, ibid, p. 62.

[33] Prodosh Das Gupta, "The Calcutta Group — Its Aims and Achievements", Lalit Kala Contemporary 31, 1981, pp. 5-12.

which as a "new national upsurge was possible only because of its political background. People suffering politically under the domination of a foreign power became conscious of their national art heritage ..... They never thought that the image of Gods and Goddesses and the borrowed themes from the Epics and the Puranas were a total misfit in the new conditions of the society where the awakening of man as the supreme being must have a unique position in human society and thus should occupy a major role in the concept of aesthetic expression." He quoted relevant statements from Rabindranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher Gil in support of the same. Referring to the "tremendous impact of science and industry after the 2nd World War" he wrote:

> "The drastic change in the social environment, the political thinking and its economy had its influence on the Indian artistic scene. In this ominous situation the Calcutta Group artists tried to get over the nostalgic feeling of the Bengal School and inspire a new ideology creating a new synthesis between the East and the West. Their forerunners — Gaganendranath, Rabindranath and Jamini Roy had already paved the way in this respect. But it was only as a matter of individual exploration in the fields without formulating any collective effort to a new systematic reorganization that these three artists worked .....
>
> ..... The young painters and sculptors of the Calcutta Group took up the challenge and raised their voice against the Bengal School of painting. The time to preoccupy oneself with Gods and Goddesses was over the artist could no longer be blind to his age and surroundings, his people and society. This realization took concrete shape in the birth of the Group ....."[34]

Following this however, Prodosh Das Gupta makes a statement that is of

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[34] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 5.

importance to the present discussion. Whether one views it as a later revelation or otherwise, (given the long gap in time between the formation of the Group and the essay), his admission that the artists of the group worked "*without having any common bond of artistic realizations* but they formed into a group as a matter of conviction with the sole idea of propagating the cause of their views on art and life"[35] becomes a significant observation in our understanding of the Group's cohesion in terms of shared ideology. Quite obviously, the aspect of individual artistic independence of expression was of paramount importance, and was preferred to the presumably limiting impositions of a commonly shared ideology that binds a collective together. The passage quoted by the author from Mulk Raj Anand's essay in the journal "Marg" titled "Prolegomena to Contemporary Indian Painting" bears out this preference, that the artists of the Calcutta Group "were aware of the crisis of Indian painting. But, as they were all individualists who had got together in a group, their work fortunately proceeded in unique directions without any subservience to the written word of a manifesto. And if they achieved only a few pictures and sculptures of great worth, they had shown tremendous courage in confronting the conservatives with a new direction for creative art"[36].

While shared work-program within a group was seen as one limitation to artistic freedom, the other corollary and equally resisted stricture was political ideology. With reference to the "period of concomitant creative activities in literature, dance, drama and to some extent music" whereby "new interesting forms particularly infused with social content" were created, Prodosh Das Gupta briefly mentions what in his opinion are the significant markers in these cultural expressions. He concludes with a quote from the poet Premendra Mitra that reads:

"I am the poet of the carpenters,
of the brass-workers, of the labourers,

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[35] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, pp. 8-9 [emphasis added]

[36] As quoted in Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 9.

I am the poet of the low".

He hastens to add that although "many would find this credo an incentive towards communism, Premen Mitra or for that matter, any of his colleagues never aligned himself with the politics of communism"[37]. The words of caution that Prodosh Das Gupta quotes from a 1945 exhibition review in the Amrita Bazar Patrika daily, similarly point out to the "shrewd and subtle" attempts being made to "rope in our artists to function as cheap propagandists for politics. It is hoped that artists will escape these traps to strangle their freedom in the name of a political substitute. The spiritual gold is much more precious than political platinum."[38] Finally, the author recalls his answer to Gopal Halder's query, as an ultimate clarification. He told the veteran Marxist leader that they "never took a pledge to follow the path of socialist realism. All we want is to understand life and interpret it in terms of creative art. Indeed, we believe in humanism without any political binding or direction."[39] Prodosh Das Gupta preferred the loss of a friend in Halder to, "but in our aims and achievements we felt progressively enriched"[40].

With reference to the artists' collectives that grew up in the main art centres of India with a resultant shift to a new "liberal and refreshed outlook", the preoccupation according to Das Gupta "was based on experiments with the basic aesthetics of form, colour, rhythm, harmony etc." In conclusion, Prodosh Das Gupta wrote that their group "was basically tradition-bound although we had a liberal attitude borrowing from the outside world to enrich ourselves to express in a better and much fuller way — the immediate concern being our own social environment. Unless one has a firm foot in one's own soil one cannot assimilate any foreign influences ..... We always recognized the six limbs if

[37] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 9.

[38] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 10.

[39] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 10.

[40] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 10.

Indian art including that of "Sadrishyam" meaning verisimilitude."[41] It will be of relevance once again to trace back to the 1953 catalogue to note the apparently contradictory entry on Nirode Majumder:

> "..... He rebelled against the 'tyranny' of the six canons of Indian art. The search for form drove him to Cézanne, Picasso and the Moderns and his later paintings reveal their influence. He thinks the fundamental point in art is FORM, ..... the content, expression and impression are not worth a damn! There is no *formal* distinction between a living animated face ant the inert pot ....."[42]

The first truly art-historical analysis of the Calcutta Group was a large essay in a Bengali periodical written two years after Prodosh Das Gupta's English article. In this essay[43], art historian and critic critically evaluated the "aims, plan-of-action and outcome" of the Group from what one would assume to be the objective advantage of a non-insider. He wrote what must be the most exhaustive and scathingly critical analysis of the Calcutta Group, till date. In this long essay written in Bengali, he has called into question the very basis of the group-formation and its choice of equating the 'modern' in the context of art in India with the adoption/emulation of stylistic features following the development of French modernism. The essay is specifically important in the study of the Calcutta Group because it provides a chronological account of the series of exhibitions of the collective, the participants in each show, the titles of the salient exhibits, and relevant remarks quoted from contemporary newspaper reviews. However the practical limitation of the nature of the publication did not leave the scope for supportive visuals, which handicaps the otherwise rich research potential of the study to a large extent.

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[41] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 12.

[42] Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue, ibid, biographical entry.

[43] Sovon Som: Calcutta Group, "*Uddeshya, karmapantha o parinam*", in *Sharadiya Anushtup*, 18th year, 1390 *Bangabda* (1983).

Sovon Som based his essay on the conviction that social change and cultural expression are interrelated and integrated issues. They cannot be seen in isolation of either, which is why he also believes in the "social responsibility" of the artist as active members of the community. It is from this conviction that he appears as a scathing critic of the formalism of the Calcutta Group, vehemently pointing out the shallow depth of such an approach.

He also commented on the effects of colonial domination whereby the gradually establishment of a belief in the superiority of the colonizing nation leads to mental/intellectual subservience on the part of the colonized. Thereby the colonizer perpetuates the idea of the inferiority of the colonized nation's artistic tradition, or even the lack it. This then leads to the tendency of imitating the colonizer, or similar nations, with a faith in them as a superior race, and Sovon Som finds the Indian Society of Oriental Art as well as the Calcutta Group as examples of such an act. The 1907 Indian Society of Oriental Art was formed on the lines of the Society of Oriental Art in Paris, while the 1913 London Group found its name echoed three decades later in the Calcutta collective. Headed by Harold Gilman as its chairman, the London Group had among its members Walter Richard Sickert and Wyndham Lewis. The former was deeply influenced by Impressionism while the latter was moved by Cubism, both movements of French origin, and Sovon Som fails to locate any significant and distinguishingly original contribution from either of them[44].

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[44] The London Group was an exhibiting society of English artists formed in 1913 by an amalgamation of the Camden Town Group (which itself had been formed from an admiration for Gauguin and Van Gogh that led to its dissenting break-out from the realism of the New English Art Club in 1911) with several smaller groups of various artists who had shown at the Allied Artists' Exhibition organized in the Albert Hall from 1908. Roger Fry joined as a member of the Group in 1918. The first president of the Group was Harold Gilman and their first London exhibition was held in 1914. The group had strong post-Impressionist leanings, which resulted in the opposition between advanced art and semi-academism of the Slade School. Revived after the Second World War, the Group became something of an institution and lost it early mission. By 1950, it would have been impossible to say what the artistic principles were for which it originally stood. (cf. "The Oxford Companion to Art", ed. By Harold Osborne, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1970); "The purpose of the Group was to provide organised exhibitions for avant-garde artists of all persuasions. Its foundation was a protest against the conservatism of the Royal Academy on the one hand and the New English Art Club on the other, and its independence was stressed. Its strength lay in its range, and practically every avant-garde artist from Sickert to Wyndham Lewis was included in its exhibitions, either as a member or as a guest." ("Phaidon Dictionary Of Twentieth Century Art", Phaidon Press Ltd., Oxford/ New York, 1973.)

> "In the decade of the [nineteen] thirties and forties, this London Group was the flag-bearer of the so-called modernism in England. Apart from the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood there has been no further significant art movement in England in the modern times. In the current century too, England has only produced echoes of movements that originated [earlier] in the mainland Europe. It was Prodosh Das Gupta who had recently returned from England who proposed the name for the Calcutta Group in imitation of the London Group and the same was accepted as signifying the modern."[45]

Laying emphasis on the fact that no occurrence can exist beyond the dynamics of time and the specific location, the author briefly sketched the backdrop of the forties — war, famine, partition, riot, the struggle for independence and the transfer of power — to arrive at the cultural protest movements like the Anti Fascist Writers and Artists Association. Despite the overall humanist concern, the anti-fascist movement was primarily a Communist (party) initiative, though it is simultaneously true that individuals with diverse ideological faith had joined the movement. The leftists, in their attempt to coordinate a cultural resistance, began to identify what they called the "expressions of truth"; and they picked out the paintings of Jamini Roy as examples of what supposedly carried the signs of the "progressive". Jamini Roy's paintings, Sovon Som wrote, as well as his statements and his letters give a clear indication that stylistic individuality was of greater urgency for him than concerns over content or ideology.

> "Amidst the wails of famine, the untrammelled Jamini Roy continued to paint mythological, imaginary pictures of Krishna Lila, and then images of Christ for his new foreign patrons; and it was in his paintings that they identified the signs of the 'progressive'
> .....

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[45] Sovon Som, ibid, p. 100.

> ..... His stylistic individuality was seen as a revolt and he appeared as a liberator for the artists, not only in the opinion of the progressive-camp, but simultaneously to all, irrespective of ideological convictions ..... they easily ignored the revolution in content and style that had already manifested in the paintings of Gaganendranath Tagore ....."[46]

Sovon Som also pointed out that not until 1953 did the Calcutta Group express its aims and objectives in writing. Nor did the members of the group come up with responses in agreement or protest to the numerous reviews and notes that were published on them in the contemporary journals and dailies. From this he implies the looseness of cohesion in aims and plan-of-action in the group.

According to the author, the citing of the famine, as a motivating thrust was also perhaps a later interpolation, the sole aim of the members being formalist concerns over the novelty of style. How else could one explain, he asks, the lack of a logical link between the claimed humanist concern and their choice of subjects that hardly reflect that claim? He also points out that the group began with a total rejection of past indigenous tradition while looking forward to the West as role model. Yet, in the ancient past, India had more than once exhibited the capacity to synthesise external influences harmoniously into a completely contextual expression. The exchange had then been mutual, without the superior-inferior gradient of a transfer. Moreover, according to Sovon Som, what the Calcutta Group identified as the modern in European art — Impressionism, Expressionism, Cubism — were already rejected and decade-old movements in the countries of their origin. In the 1920s Mondrian had already propounded his theory of Neo-plasticism, in 1922 the Dadaists had made a huge show, while Surrealism was already transforming the French art-scene, none of which was of concern to the artists of the Calcutta Group.

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[46] Sovon Som, ibid, pp. 104-105.

Regarding the claims for a "progressive" identity in the Left-oriented journals in the early days of the group, Sovon Som asks: "Did the Left-oriented magazines give a thought that the basic difference between bourgeois progress and humanist progress is vast?"[47] He also links this query to the initial involvement of the I.P.T.A. as it organised the Bombay exhibition for the group, and their subsequent lack of interest, signifying a loss of faith in the collective's efforts.

The Calcutta Group's plan-of-action was hardly anything but maintaining a status quo. The group carried on in the usual pattern of selective viewing in exhibitions, which would then be applauded in reviews by professional critics analysing the merits and flaws in the exhibits — nothing that transformed the exclusivism of art practice. Sovon Som concluded on the note of inheritance — of what the Calcutta Group passed on to its following generation. According to him, it spawned the other "progressive" groups in the various art centres of the country and opened up the flood-gates of unrestrained Western modernism into Indian art practice.

Prodosh Das Gupta came up with a defence of the group's objectives in his book "*Smritikatha Shilpakathal* Calcutta Group"[48]. To a large extent the book written in Bengali is an expanded version of his earlier article in English and follow closely similar logic and pattern. Apart from the chapters dealing with individual members of the group, two sections — titled "Art and politics" and "Artistic ideals of our Group", address the issue of Communist ideology and art-practice, vis-à-vis the choice exercised by the Group. The conclusion, titled "Shesher katha" and an appendix contain Das Gupta's attempts to answer the criticisms raised by Sovon Som.

In the first section mentioned, he refers to the conflicting political lines between Gandhi's non-cooperation and the Communist's "peoples' war" that proved to

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[47] Sovon Som, ibid, p. 134.

[48] Prodosh Das Gupta, "*Smritikatha Shilpakathal* Calcutta Group", Pratikshan Publication, 1986

be considerably confusing among the people[49]. In the second section referred to, he addressed himself directly to the term "progressive" — perhaps for the first time in the context of the Group. He recalled how there was a time when Communist friends had tried to insert the word within the name of the Calcutta Group (i.e. calling them by the name "Calcutta Progressive Group") and how he had resisted it, because the word "progressive" had by then assumed the identity of "something like a red label". With the experience of his visit to European countries, Prodosh Das Gupta realized that the Communists use the term "progressive" to imply Soviet Socialist Realism. Prodosh Das Gupta tended to differ from such a definition specifically on the issue of turning art into a political tool. Further, he implied that being stylistically related to academic realism, Soviet Socialist Realism could hardly be called "progressive". He also referred to the debate between him and "K.P.D." in the pages of the "Republic" magazine following his articulation of views regarding "Should art be created for the sake of propaganda only?" Prodosh Das Gupta made it clear that he had resolved the form/content debate by arguing for a balance between both. Content in true art, he clarified, however, was not the narrative part of a theme — but in the pure formal values of "colour, line and form, or in the structure of clay, stone, wood, in mass-volume balance, and rhythm".[50]

In conclusion, the author denied the accusation by Sovon Som regarding the Group's lack of an ideological cohesion. He referred to the incident of Rathin Maitra and Gopal Ghosh leaving the Group to join the orthodox Academy of Fine Arts (before the joint exhibition with the Progressive Artists' Group in 1950, held in Calcutta) as individual decision and not to be taken as reflective of the Group as a whole, since the Group continued with fresh recruits up to the 1953

[49] Das Gupta quoted a 1946 statement from the Russian Communist Party that expressed that Soviet theatre could discharge its function of educating the working people only if it becomes "an active propagandist of the policy of the Soviet State", and that the Soviet journals cannot be apolitical but are "powerful media of the Soviet State in educating the Soviet people". Prodosh Das Gupta contrasted this regimentation with George Lukacs' statement in the Hungarian Communist Social Review, where the latter wrote: "Direction must be such as to give complete freedom to the artist, otherwise he could do nothing good. Direction in art could never be the same as direction in any other field."

[50] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 46

final exhibition in Delhi. Furthermore, he added that on the other hand the more serious factor was that of Nirode Majumder and Paritosh Sen's long stay abroad, which had its impact on the Group — exhibiting the works of artists actually absent from the city had its own problems. In the long appendix Das Gupta primarily confronts Sovon Som on the basis of the latter's too strictly applied "socialist" art history. With specific dates and references that score an advantage above the latter, Prodosh Das Gupta refuted the so-called contradiction in the claims made by Group members regarding the founding membership and related issues of ideological basis. He summarily dismissed these contradictions as either the respective author's wilful interpolation or otherwise to be overlooked as statements of those members of the group whose memory failed them at this distance in time.[51] What is of relevance is the fact that Das Gupta even mentions an article that he wrote in the Republic journal of the 27th of August 1949, to coincide with the 1949 exhibition of the Group; if one is to believe his statement then the brief passage quoted by him earlier in the book[52] from the same article, reads almost verbatim that of the 1953 catalogue. Therefore while on the one hand it may be claimed that the author of the anonymous note of the 1953 handbook is Prodosh Das Gupta himself, it will also be significant that we revise our notion of the *first articulation of the Group's aims and ideals*, whereby the 1953 note is in all probability a revised and expanded version of a 1949 statement.

K.G. Subramanyan approaching the issue from his concern with pictorial language, wrote in "The Living Tradition"[53]:

> "Academic realism never found proper roots in India, presumably from the absence of a strictly materialistic philosophy of life and

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[51] He even quoted Prankrishna Pal's later statement in the 24th January 1984 *Jugantar* daily, where Prankrishna Pal denied what Sovon Som claims to have learned from him in an earlier personal interview.

[52] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p. 46.

[53] K.G. Subramanyan, "The Living Tradition", Seagull Books, 1987

> a faith in the 'thereness' of things. So the kind of realism that came into India through the traditional sources had an engaging *naiveté* and what came through the art schools polished rigidity."[54]

Against this he observes in the works of Abanindranath, what he calls "romantic naturalism" with the suggestive as opposed to factual descriptive as the characteristic feature. "Even in the work of Amrita Sher-Gil and some of her early followers it is unmistakable", he wrote. As a consequence of this absence of any great realistic base, he finds none of its natural aftermaths in India.

> "So the impact of modern European art forms in India did not bring with it their basic rationale ..... But it was the romantic, evocative, anti-realistic aspects of certain areas of modern art that appealed to the Indian artist."[55]

Within such a context, K.G. Subramanyan considers the Calcutta Group and the Progressive Artists' Group (in Bombay) as a small minority who thought of a bolder leap from the "stylistic brinkmanship" of those who chose to speak a "midway language".

> "Such young artists formed progressive groups in Calcutta and Bombay. The Calcutta Group was formed in the years of the Great Bengal Famine, a few years before India's independence. In the face of a calamity of that dimension the staid conventions of the academic and indigenous styles seemed to them effete. They wanted a more dramatic or declamatory idiom. Whether they found such an idiom or not, they took hold of the occasion to declare that they would no more be tied down by nationalistic

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[54] K.G. Subramanyan, ibid, p. 34.

[55] K.G. Subramanyan, ibid, p. 34.

considerations. They belonged to the whole world, its language was their language; the Group opened itself out to the influence of the international idioms."[56]

But, he wrote:

"..... these groups never had any real ideological cohesion or a widely-shared purpose ..... The leaders of the so-called Bengal School had at least a large vision of the world including society, art, etc. These new artists were lone travellers, some travelling smoothly, some perilously, some silently, some flashily ....."[57]

The artists of the group and their works of the period

The eight participants of the very first exhibition of the Calcutta Group held in 1945 were Prodosh Das Gupta, Kamala Das Gupta (nee T.C. Kamala), Gopal Ghosh, Paritosh Sen, Nirode Majumder, Subho Tagore, Rathin Maitra, and Prankrishna Pal. There is no clear consensus regarding his membership, but Banshi Chandragupta's works were shown along with other members of the group in their second exhibition held in Bombay (1945, under the auspices of the I.P.T.A.) but since then neither he nor Subho Tagore exhibited with the group again. Abani Sen joined the group just before the fourth exhibition in 1947, and Rathin Mitra was nominated a member in 1949. Immediately before the joint exhibition with the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay (held in Calcutta, 1950) Rathin Maitra and Gopal Ghosh had withdrawn from the group and Govardhan Ash was invited to join in their place. This was also the solitary exhibition in which Ramkinkar Baij participated. Sunil Madhav Sen and Hemanta Misra joined the group in 1952 and 1953 respectively as the final recruits.

Beyond 1953, most of the artists of the Calcutta Group evolved into their individual trajectories. Familiarity, therefore, associates their identity with the

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[56] K.G. Subramanyan, ibid, p. 36.

[57] K.G. Subramanyan, ibid, p. 37.

works of the later period rather than what they produced as members of a collective attempt. Moreover, the lack of any kind of systematic documentation building up an inventory of the visual images, makes it impossible today to form a comprehensible idea of the range and dimension of creative expression during the ten years of the Group. Most of the originals are so dispersed or untraceable that what little remains in the form of a few illustrations accompanying the contemporary articles or reviews are the only source of our knowledge where the authenticity of the date of execution of the work of art remains beyond doubt. Two such sources would be the Calcutta Group handbook/catalogue and the article by Klaus Fischer in the journal "Marg" both published in 1953.

Prodosh Das Gupta was born in Dacca in 1912 and graduated from the Calcutta University in 1932. He received his initial training in sculpture from the Lucknow Arts and Crafts School from 1932 to 1934, and then from 1934 to 1937 at the Madras School of Art and Crafts before taking lessons at the Royal Academy, London and the Ecole des Grand Chaumiere, Paris between 1937 and 1939 through the award of the Guruprasanna Ghosh travelling Fellowship from the Calcutta University. In 1950 he was appointed Reader at the Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, followed by his appointment at the Government College of Art and Craft from 1951 to 1957. In 1953, his sculpture titled "In Bondage" was selected as the Indian entry at the International Sculpture Competition held in London. In 1957 he joined as the Director of the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi.

Among the artists of the group, not only is Prodosh Das Gupta the most vocal but perhaps also the most organised. This is evident from the fact, that early in his artistic career he put in the effort to bring out an album of photographs of his sculptures, titled "My Sculpture"[58]. Significant as an attempt to provide a documentation of his early works — an undoubtedly useful source of ready reference for later researchers — the publication also provides an insight into

[58] Prodosh Das Gupta, "My Sculpture", Oxford Book and Stationery, Calcutta/New Delhi, undated. (The album is generally referred to as a 1956 publication, which is acceptable since none of the sculptures reproduced in the book bear a date later than 1955.)

the artist's own analysis of his works, in the "Preface" and the "Explanatory notes" that accompany the text. Prodosh Das Gupta appears to be fairly well articulate as he laid down an extensive elaboration on the state of indigenous sculptural practice immediately prior to the advent of the British in India, leading to the gradual conditioning through the efforts of the colonizing forces such that the norms of European art practice increasingly assumed the sole authority of high aesthetic merit and achievement. Referring to his own practice, Prodosh Das Gupta began by acknowledging the fact that works of art lend themselves to multiple readings and that it was not his intention to close off or limit such a possibility through his own statements in the book. He was also of the opinion that "a work of art is self-explanatory, and does not require titles or explanations to supplement it".[59] Prodosh Das Gupta displayed clarity of perspective when he structured his artistic career into distinct phases of changes and shifts. He called the years between 1940 and 1942 a bleak period of academic realism — which one presumes is the natural result of his academic training at Madras and London. However, he mentioned his early admiration of 'Sicard' (Sickert ?), 'Despeau' (sic.) and 'Bourdelle' indicating the desire for growing out of the academic limitations. At this juncture, the turning point in his career came with a trip to Santiniketan in late 1940, when he had the opportunity to show photographs of his sculptures to Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Both of them, it appears, appreciated his craftsmanship and technical excellence, but laid greater stress on the necessity to concentrate on composition and design and to look beyond the body to the mind if he were to discover himself as an original artist. This advice initiated the second phase in his career, which consists of the sculptures done during the days of the Second World War and the 'famine' of 1943. But it did not take him long to discover in these works, "emotional excesses bordering on sentimentalism"[60] and he decided therefore to follow "a more restrained order of basic forms".[61] Thereafter, from 1946 to

[59] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p.19.

[60] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p.20

[61] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p.20

1950 the concern shifted to the aspects of mass and volume, resulting in sculptures with "simplified forms, mostly rounded, cylindrical or ovoid".[62] The fifties saw a more abstract approach, with a stress on the complementary relation between concave and convex, mass and void, angular planes and juxtaposed lines. Forms in nature either suggested evocative parallels with the human body or were left as they were, like "arranged temper of sounds in music or abstract solid forms in architecture".[63] Bishnu Dey was impressed by the artist's loyalty to the specific demands of the medium — mass, volume and solidity in sculpture.[64] Especially, solidity became a prime concern in the artist's search for expressive form.

As a sculptor Prodosh Das Gupta realized that drawing implied differently than what it meant to a painter. He had a personal preference for the unchecked sensuousness of a sure flowing line, which according to him made the forms in a drawing throb with life even if they were not in absolute accordance with strict anatomical rendering. However, when a drawing was to serve as a preparatory sketch, the sculptor required the intermediate stage of a small maquette to visualize the form in the round, before he could attempt the sculpture.

An early example from Prodosh Das Gupta's transitional phase, "Miss Barrel" (1943), suffers from an excessive literalness in formal comparison that renders the theme superficial and banal (even more by the introduction of the barrel itself in the composition, intended though to "give the sculpture a formal meaning"[65]), and thereby the possibility of humour or wit at the expense of a person's physical appearance turns out to be quite gross as a theme for

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[62] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p.20

[63] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p.21

[64] Bishnu Dey: "Prodosh Das Gupta", Contemporary Indian Art Series, Lalit Kala Akademy, New Delhi, 1961.

[65] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p.32

sculpture. Comparatively, "Food Queue" (1944) is a more successful essay in the rendering of a human group and is less literal in the defining of human forms, with the emphasis rather on the postural bends and inclinations that evoke the pathos of a waiting, starving community. Why Prodosh Das Gupta felt apologetic about this composition ("the pathos of human suffering has eclipsed here the true sculptural feeling"[66]) is not quite comprehensible, especially if one sees it against his apparent confidence regarding "Clamour" (variously also titled "Jai Hind") of 1948. Compared with the latter "Food Queue" is less differentiated into its individual component forms, less disrupted by the thrust of arms or projecting heads, and is a comparatively more unified and coherent sculptural integrity.

Gestural animated groups of human figures like "Clamour" are evidently exceptions in the sculptural oeuvre of Prodosh Das Gupta. He experimented mostly with the configurative possibilities of the human body as a significant sculptural form. He appears to have preferred instead the integration of two human bodies in a related activity, connecting them up in proximity of intimacy. This applies to sculptures like "Picking Lice" (1948), "Pounding Corn" (1949) and "Condolence" (1950), and in each of these the closeness within a domestic moment shared between two women has been transformed into sculptural expressions that are evocative despite the severe simplification of the bodies into basic units of convex mass. Within the same attempt of integrating two figures gesturally, would be the sculpture "Devil and Dame" (reproduced without date in the "Marg" issue of 1953), but here again thematic over-determination and symbolic implication distracts attention from the formal integrity of the previous examples. It is also interesting to follow the sculptor's treatment of the theme of affection beginning with the "First Born" (1946) through the "Mother and Child" (1949) and "Cradle" (1950) to the "Mother Earth" (1954). In his concern for pure sculptural forms, Prodosh Das Gupta removed all descriptive details, like the seat, in the second example — and thereby the verticality of posture in that composition — to arrive at the essential form of the body in the

[66] Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid, p.30

third. "Cradle" utilized the curve of the human figure, from the bent head down the line of the neck and spine terminating in the heavy bulk of the thigh and folded-in legs, to counter the diagonal upward pull arising from the curving sweep of the torso — implying by suggestion, the rocking motion of a mother cradling her child on her lap through the inherent formal tension in the sculpted mass. In the final example, the title is even more universal, invoking the earth as mother, as the theme is rendered in the enveloping gesture of the hug. The sculptor had terminated the figure at the region of the waist, maintaining the sculptural completeness of the terminated body in terms of expressive self-sufficiency of the resultant form.

The accentuation of solidity, of mass and volume, even their over-emphasis towards monumental bulk, is observable in the single figure compositions from Prodosh Das Gupta. What began as a thematically determined posture in the "Bathing Woman" (1945) became in stages the "Head and Torso" (1946), "Toilet" (1947), "Seated Woman" (1947) and "Toe Point" (1950) — heavy, voluminous, earth-bound, solid sculptural mass, whose organic swell retained the possibility of monumental enlargement. Already by 1948 the sculptor had reached a logical culmination of his search for unitary form in the ovoid shape of the "Remorse of an Egg", and variations on the egg-theme would recur in the sculptures of his later years.

The aspect of a partial human figure being considered as valid and complete sculptural form finds further expression towards the mid-fifties. "Symphony in Curves", "Volume in three Masses" and Lying Torso" (all 1954) are such examples where the forms derive no doubt from the human body but in treatment gain a wholly self-sufficient identity, independent of its reference. In these examples one finds the artist traversing closely parallel and comparable sensibilities ranging between the partial figures of Auguste Rodin to the monumental masses of Henry Moore.

Yet in the same period Prodosh Das Gupta was drawn to another distinctly

different formal arrangement of rhythmic disposition. Examples like the "Loop Holes" (1952), "Cactus Family" (1953), and "Twisted Form" (1953) consist of this sinuous, linear treatment of form where the mass-void inter-relation assumes greater importance than the bulk of solid mass in the previous category. While "Tree and Twig" (1951) plays with the simile between vegetal and human bodies, the Javanese Mother and Child" (another undated reproduction accompanying the "Marg" article) is obviously related to the same group by virtue of its sinuous vertical flowing rhythm.

Distinctly apart from his compositions, there is a different Prodosh Das Gupta when it comes to portraits, as the author of the 1953 handbook/"catalogue" also recognised. The genre of portrait busts or head-studies in sculpture conventionally carry an implied notion of correspondence and likeness with the person portrayed. However, such likeness has not been understood merely in terms of proportional exactitude of the modelled form as a replica of the head, but as a corollary it came to acquire the necessity of infusing the sculpted form with a sense of the person's personality and character. For an artist like Prodosh Das Gupta, this implied a freedom in treatment distinctly different from orthodox (academic) norms, with a corresponding handling of the medium such that an actively modelled surface held the expressive possibility of suggesting an implied correlation with personality. In his portrait studies he displayed a range of deviation from the norms of academic realism (most notable in the absence of a smooth-surface "finish"), and consequently opted for a formal modernist approach. This shift will also have to be considered in the light of his acquaintance with Deviprosad Roy Choudhury as his mentor at the Government School of Art in Madras, even before his training at the Royal Academy in London. While academic rigour instilled in him a firm foundation for the underlying anatomical skull-structure of a portrait head, (which is evident in all his portrait studies despite their surface modulation,) his contact with Deviprosad Roy Choudhury must have had a catalytic role, considering the latter's sculpture titled "My father" where one finds a comparable deviation from academic norms in the vigorously textured surface treatment aiming at an

essentially expressive purpose. As a body of work, Prodosh Das Gupta's portrait studies exhibit varying degrees of a negotiation between his academic foundation and the aspiration for a modernist language. In most instances, this turns out to be liberation not so much of structure but of an animated surface. The examples like "Rathin Maitra" (1940) and the "Head of Jesus" (1951; modelled after an actual person according to the sculptor's own statement) occupy one end of the range, where the basic features of the face have been treated in terms of gradually merging planes. At the other end would be such examples as "Martin Kirkman" (1944), "John Gawsworth" (1945), Nirode Majumder" (1945) and "Shantul Gupta" (1950). The approach towards the medium and hence the treatment of the material in these sculptures is reminiscent of the Rodinesque tradition of modelling; it retained a positive freshness and a spontaneity in the execution — almost an impressionistic moment especially in the 1950 example. The emphasis on retaining the characteristic marks of the work-in-process, with incident light breaking up on the resultant textured surface, also characterizes the examples "Sgt. Davies" (1945), "Paritosh Sen" (1947) and "Hans Glas" (1952). In these examples however, the surface animation is less pronounced than the portrait head of Shantul Gupta, and the soft, almost liquid or molten effect in the first and the fine textures of the second and third portraits effect a distinctly different expression, ranging from the dreamy and thoughtful to the composed and determined.

Although Prodosh Das Gupta appears to be articulate, systematic and carefully organized when it concerns his own work, a comparable supportive effort for the documentation of his wife Kamala Das Gupta's sculptural activity is entirely lacking. Not only is there a dearth of reproduced photographs of her sculptures, but also there is a tone of disapproval in the discussion of her works in his book on the Calcutta Group.[67] Prodosh Das Gupta regarded the genre of portraiture as a very constricting practice considering the limits it imposed through an implied responsibility of faithful correspondence to observation alone.

[67] Prodosh Das Gupta: "Smritikatha Silpakatha ...", op. cit., pp. 69-72.

For Prodosh Das Gupta, the narrow range of possibilities for formal arrangement in a portrait sculpture implied a limited scope for artistic self-expression. He even invented an imagined debate with his wife in the book arguing that a sculpture like the Kushana portrait of Kanishka was more successful as a form rather than a likeness and is therefore even more significant despite the loss of its head. However he did acknowledge Kamala Das Gupta's intuitively superior perception of the model in all collective portrait-sculpting sessions, and the fact that she could effortlessly and rapidly execute the basic structure maintaining all the characteristics of the model, much in advance of any of her peers, even during her student days.[68] Born in 1915, Kamala Das Gupta was educated at the Maharaja's College in Ernakulam, and followed it up with training in sculpture at the Madras School of Art and Crafts and then at Kala Bhavana Santiniketan from 1935 to 1940. According to Prodosh Das Gupta, she even took her final diploma from the Delhi College of Fine Arts.[69] As a sensitive portraitist, she was not concerned with radically innovative exploration of the head as a sculptural unit, but her attempt had been to recreate the personality of the sitter, in a calm and withdrawn manner reflecting her own personality. An example of such an effort is the "Head of Saumini" (exhibited in the Group's 1947 exhibition), which treated the face in terms of bold broad planes, and a sensitive surface modulation that once again recalls the shared interest in an impressionistic treatment found in the early phases of the modern in European sculpture. The portrait bust reproduced in the Group's 1953 handbook, is an attempt to coordinate the face with the two hands as support for the chin. Here, as in the earlier example, the freshness of modelling in the work-in-progress attitude maintained a sense of immediacy, besides the portrayal of a dreamy, evocative expression in the facial features. The sculptress was an author as well and wrote stories for children, which were regularly published in dailies like Junior Statesman, Hindustan Times, etc.

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[68] Prodosh Das Gupta mentioned in his account, that when he was working on the portrait of Paritosh Sen, Kamala Das Gupta simultaneously did another study, which was appreciated in contemporary reviews for a tactile sensitivity that distinguished it from his version. (Prodosh Das Gupta, ibid. p. 72)

[69] Prodosh Das Gupta: "Smritikatha Silpakatha .....", ibid, p. 172.

Govardhan Ash has been already mentioned in the context of the famine watercolours of 1943. Having left the Government School of Art in Calcutta where he was a favourite student of Percy Brown, he had briefly entered the School of Art in Madras, which he found equally inadequate. In the mid-forties he turned to the medium of gouache and this gave him a flexibility that was instrumental for the change in his pictorial style. Thematically, Govardhan Ash was rooted to his village surroundings, but in pictorial style and treatment he exhibited a leaning towards the post-Impressionistic palette combined with a brushwork rendered with expressionistic vigour. His paintings from the early forties ("Adolescence", "Fishing", etc.) as well as later examples like "Miss Jyostna" (1955) depict the skilled academic training that he had at his command. However in other works from the same period, his choice of pictorial style ranges from the pointillist rendering of the "Money lender" to the vigorous strokes in the portrait of an old mendicant ("Musafir", 1947); the painting titled "Rehearsal" is a comparable example in emotive gestural treatment. Human content was paramount for the artist, and the forms were made to correspond to psychological types, as in the "Merchant" and the "Priest" (both 1947), "Pleasant" (1948) or the "Advocate" (1951). The forms in his pictures now occupied a dominating portion of the pictorial space, commanding attention. The artist leaning towards a post-Impressionistic language was not merely determined by the brilliance of colours but also the allied possibility of going beyond simple visual sensations to the realm of visions, suggesting the importance of an inner psychological world in his creative endeavour. The visionary is made manifest in the haloed "Naga Sanyasi" (undated, but in all probability of the late forties) and the "Pilgrim" of 1947. This reaches a climax of frenzy in the "Mahakal" (undated) where the dance of the blue figure reverberates into the riot of colours that surround him like ripples, culminating in the lightning white body-halo that encircle this rhythmic array of colours. Govardhan Ash shared the common interest in folk arts and this is most evident in the way in which he integrated this with his own pictorial expression in paintings like "Next move" (1950; it clearly reveals his awareness of Jamini Roy's experiments) and the "Two sisters" (1950).

We have already seen how the conventional notion, that Gopal Ghosh was a painter of landscapes in which he combined a boldness of bright pure colours with the swift calligraphic lines for the forms to achieve the mark of a distinctly lyrical personal style, would require revision if one were to consider his paintings of the riot torn city. Gopal Ghosh was born in 1913, and received his initial training at the Maharana Art and Crafts School, Jaipur, under Sailendranath Dey, in the Bengal school norms (1931-35). Later he joined the Government School of Art and Craft, Madras, and was trained under Deviprosad Roy Choudhury from 1935 to 1938. Few works in his early style survive and a sole exception revealing his academic training is perhaps a conventional watercolour landscape showing a pillared architecture standing on a raised middle ground in the landscape, executed in transparent brown washes, presently in the artist's family collection. Otherwise, examples of the style of painting for which is popular would be "Picnic" (1948), "Bamboo Grove" (1949), even "Flowers" (1957) or "Trees" (1959). In these, the lyrical in colour and form combined with the gusto of a flourish in the calligraphic stroke of a brush or a fine textured maze of the pictorial surface. Often, the calligraphic in his paintings have drawn comparison with Far Eastern sensibilities, which although not entirely absent exists in a sufficiently modified manner. Spontaneity of execution brought about in Gopal Ghosh's pictures an impulsive rhythmic flow of lines and forms; such flowing rhythm reflected the impulsiveness of an artist impatient to inscribe the conceived image on to the pictorial surface, thereby retaining within it a sense of emotive urgency in the very execution. However, besides the exceptional instance of the 1946 riot pictures, there are other pictures from the same decade (also in the artist's family collection, which I had the opportunity to study in 1996), through which a different artistic search is revealed. Consider, for example, the picture of an apparently simple, even casually painted bare interior with its blue walls and the red floor, opening out on to a balcony where a woman stands with her back towards us, looking at the houses across and the full moon in the pale sky (1946). The primary impulse behind the painting was to formulate an opposing pull between the predominantly yellow-brown of the outside with the two primaries of the interior, but the image is also an expression of the modern

experience of urban spaces reflected in the immensely pronounced vastness of the empty interior and the lonely isolation of the single human figure. Less pronounced in the factor of isolation, but dealing essentially with urban motifs of architecture are two other paintings in the same collection, one showing a pair of birds on a roof, and the other a woman inside a sloping roofed room (both 1947). The lyrical and fanciful play with shapes as in these pictures could take on the look of the unreal stage-set or prop in a third painting where the red-yellow-white cut-out shapes frame the moon against a dark sky (1947) — in a fourth picture it even takes on the ambivalence of appearance verging on an abstract arrangement of colours and lines that look like a branching tree but has architectural structures framed in the curves of the foliage (also 1947). While the 1948 painting of the eye-like form, the presence of the single central form is iconic and denies any direct association with the organ of vision, a similar ambiguity in another painting takes on the appearance of a flaming tree in yellow and red suspended above the ground in the dark blue sky as large blobs of yellow descend like dry leaves on to the ground below (1948). In this, as well as other pictures that deal with the variation of the tree-like motif — notably the picture of a negative silhouette of a pale green tree with bleeding red running down its middle set against the dark background — the mysterious ambiguity takes on a surreal sensation. This fusion of the seemingly recognisable with the unreal manifests in another painting where the branch of the tree fuses with the three beings perched on it into a composite form, strange and imagined (1947). Or again, in a 1948 watercolour, the peeping heads from behind the trunk of a tree form a rhythmic whole, immersed in an almost subterranean, impenetrable black. "Poetry and Life", a 1947 painting that incorporates its title as script within the picture, is the ultimate example of such surreal imagery — what is apparently a female form in the centre of the painting, becomes dissociated from its primary identity through the fluid, tentacle-like elongation of the limbs; and then, at the top right of the picture a small silhouette of a man cloaked in a robe is seen proceeding up along the slope of the right limb, while the white space at the top left corner of the picture takes on the look of spread out wings of a flying form. The ambivalence of the images do not easily lend

themselves to a direct meaning or implication, but definitely open up the scope for interpretation, and the need felt for of such exercises by a painter who otherwise felt more at home with the brilliance of pure colours in the subject of lyrical and non-ambiguous landscapes.

Rathin Maitra, also born in 1913, took his art lessons from the Government School of Art and Craft, Calcutta, where he subsequently taught since 1950 till his retirement. With Gopal Ghosh he was the joint secretary of the Academy of Fine Arts after they relinquished their association with the Calcutta Group. For Rathin Maitra, his association with the Anti Fascist Writers and Artists Association had moulded his outlook and choice of pictorial style and themes. It was the same association, and his active role in organizing the 1945 Bombay exhibition of the Group under the auspices of the I.P.T.A. that led to the subsequently much-refuted identification of the Calcutta Group with the political ideals of the Communist party. However, in contrast to his academic training at the art school, Rathin Maitra's paintings from the forties reveal rather the lessons he learnt from the picture of Jamini Roy. The "Reapers" (exhibited in 1945; published in the 1947 Marg volume[70]) shows labourers in the field during harvest. The forms of the human figures have been simplified through lyrical elongation while the field of produce has been executed in gestural marks that stand for the crop. "Namaz" and "Sorrows of Kashmir" (both 1948), are equally marked by this simplicity of composition. The flowing lines of the contour and the elongation of the form of the body in the first effectively convey the meditative calm of a praying man, as the curve of the human figure echoes the opposite curve of the moon in the sky. The latter however suffers from an overtly affected gesture that is more melodramatic than evocative of the pains of suffering. In the "Santal dancers" (exhibited in 1947) and the "Brothers" (reproduced in the 1949 Marg issue[71]), Rathin Maitra reveals his admiration and understanding of the paintings of Jamini Roy. In the former, he effectively extends the possibility

[70] The picture accompanied the article, "Whither Indian Art?" By Dr. Hermann Goetz in the " Marg" issue, Vol. I No. 2, January 1947.

[71] R. Chatterji, "Rathin Maitra", "Marg", Vol. III, No.2, 1949.

of the evolved stylised human forms into a larger dimension of groups arranged in landscape. In the latter, the heavy forms of the two men embracing each other in a gesture of religious harmony stand in a landscape, which utilizes the decorative possibilities of colour and shapes. The "Boat Race" (also of 1947) is a further example, perhaps the most successful exercise from the artist, in extending the possibilities of a folk-derived formal characteristic into an active composition. The 1957 "Dancers" works from within the same convention of forms but effectively releases colour from its descriptive role to reveal green human bodies against the orange-red of the land.

Prankrishna Pal (born 1915) was trained at the Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta from 1931 to 1936. Subsequently he worked as an artist for the Asuthosh Museum of the Calcutta University where he had a direct experience of the folk arts and crafts from the museum collection. Based on this experience, he has always been referred to as having assimilated the qualities of folk art in his paintings. Once again, as in the instance of Jamini Roy, such a statement necessarily arises from failing to recognize art essentially as a visual language. Superficial formal similitude with folk-art apart (including a similar deftness of the brush lines), Prankrishna Pal's language should be recognized as operating from a logic completely different from that of the folk-artist's norms and concerns. He was essentially an urban modern painter (like Jamini Roy), working towards the simplification of forms through a sophisticated controlled flow of contour lines and the use of flat areas of colour; the significance of this is specifically in the rejection of his training in the Bengal school norms. Early examples of such an attempt are the paintings "Mother and Child" and "Family"(both 1943-44). The first relates to the experience of the famine and intends to form a equation between the leanness of the stylised human forms with the implied condition of the current disaster. But taken as a whole, the absolutely unperturbed calmness of the composition, does not reflect the impact of the catastrophe; rather the occasion became an excuse for the evolution of a personal pictorial style, the effectiveness of which lies outside any direct social implications. Within the pattern thus established, paintings like "Kiss" and "On the way to the temple"

rise above the commonplace in the evocativeness of configuration that creates a mood. The simplified earthy bulk of the human forms in the first, and the restraint of details restricted to the delineation of the closed eyes of the man, lay complete emphasis on the gesture of affection. In the latter, the repeated forms of the women arranged in a procession-like continuity create a rhythmic constant that is punctuated and relieved by the differing gestures of their hands. Prankrishna Pal omitted the objects of worship implied by the gestures such that the whole took on the mimetic look of a dance rather than actual representation of an event proper.

Abani Sen finds no mention either in the 1953 handbook or in the essay by Klaus Fischer, which indicates that he did not participate with the Group in their final exhibition. He belonged to a relatively senior generation of artists, which included Govardhan Ash as well and was part of the 1933 enthusiasm of the Art Rebel Centre. Born in 1905, he acquired a diploma from the Government School of Art and Craft in Calcutta, and joined the Raisina School in Delhi in 1948. He exhibited with the Calcutta Group in their 1947 show, where his painting titled "Green Cow" was much acclaimed. A conventional pictorial composition of a gesture of affection in a cow feeding her calf has only been transformed, if at all, through the heightened colour of red in the calf and the dark green on the body of the cow. This liberation by itself does not lend the picture any thing of a radical appearance, save the novelty of a charged brilliance in the palette. However, in the 1948 examples like "Picnic" and "Animals" the paintings utilize a relatively more flexible handling to reach an expressionistic statement. While the first example hardly appears to be what the title indicates, for it rather depicts firmly built men in the field with apparently some kind of flags in their hands, the latter has an uncanny feeling in the odd shape of the animals and the queer expression of the look. The indebtedness to Van Gogh is evident in Abani Sen's "War Torn" — a pair of boots — which was exhibited in the Group's 1949 show.

Rathin Mitra was still a student when the Group was formed. Born in 1926, he

was trained in the Government School of Art and Crafts from 1945 to 1949. He taught at the Daly College, Indore (1949-1950), the Laurence School, Sanavar (1951-1953), St. Paul's School, Darjeeling (1954-1955) and finally at the Doon School, Dehra Doon (1956-1981). Inducted into the Calcutta Group in 1949, this relatively younger painter dealt with themes of collective labour on the one hand, like the rail-road labourers or the workers on their way to the factory, and subjects like card players and the nude on the other. The modern as an urban experience informs his thematic choice, and showed a tendency to align with the West in attitude and style ("Harvest" dated 1951 and "Verse of Nature", possibly 1953, ideally exemplify this). He sought to achieve a simplification of forms and a boldness of representation as is evident in the pictures "To the Mill" (1950) and its comparative companion piece titled "At Work".

Self-taught Sunil Madhav Sen appears to have painted in a number of styles. Born in 1910, he was a lawyer by profession before being nominated to the membership of the Group in 1951. However, he had already begun painting since 1934, concerned from the very beginning with the human figure as his prime subject. He received inspiring support from Atul Bose and Satish Singha, both painters renowned for their academic realist practice. His departure from the realism of his two mentors lead to the more successful of his works like "Ecstasy" "Nude", or "Woman with pitcher", which exhibit a spontaneous vitality in swift lines and/or rich impasto of the pigments that attempt to convey a sense of emotional urgency, bringing an energetic gestural quality to the way in which he built up his forms. On the other hand there are relatively less animated pictures overlaid with a decorative schema of colours as in the "Portrait" (reproduced in the Group's handbook/catalogue). The impact of folk art on Sunil Madhav Sen through the contact with Jamini Roy whom the painter visited for advice and guidance would be felt in the following decades, when the iconic frontality of the figures and the simplicity of the folk forms would find a more individual expression in his pictures. But the beginning in the mid-fifties is exemplified by "Dolly's Doll" and "Krishna and Radha". The first is a close approximation of Bengal folk-toys, while the latter removes all traditional

iconographic association and is simply a more secular image of a dark boy and a fair girl.

Hemanta Mishra (born in 1917) drew on his native Assam for themes but this self-trained painter traversed a wide range of styles from pointillist rendering (as in "Wood gatherers") to the expressionistic (as in "On the courtyard"). In the late fifties he shifted gradually towards an intuitive surreal imagery as in "Chaturanga" (1958) where intertwined arabesques and disjointed shapes co-mingle to create an image that draws its motifs from visually observed sources but transmutes them to imagined juxtaposition of disparate units.

Subho Tagore had been amongst the founding members of the Calcutta Group although he exhibited only once with them in 1945. Born in 1912 in the illustrious Tagore family, he had a bohemian spirit in contradistinction to his family background; apparently he even wished to relinquish his aristocratic background, evident from the title of his collection of short stories "*Nil Rakta Lal Hoye Geche*" (the blue blood has turned red). Subho Tagore had an acute sensitivity for design and his layouts had later adapted well when translated into textiles. But the same cannot be said of all his paintings. Especially in his portraits (Rabindranath Tagore, Subhash Chandra Bose, Jawaharlal Nehru, etc.) the geometric pattern recalling tapestry designs imposed on the faces cannot be said to be evocatively expressive, despite the close likeness to the person that the painting otherwise achieved.

Of the two members of the Group who actually visited France for a direct encounter with the French modernism, Nirode Majumder (born 1916, and trained at the Society of Oriental Art) took an early trip to Paris with a French scholarship in 1946 and worked in the studio of Andre Lohte. This had an immediate impact on his theme and treatment. A distinctly alien attenuation of the human form as well in certain cases even a distinctly distinguishable physiognomic type, gesture and posture characterizes his images (e.g. "Two Women", "Kiss"). In an undated publication the Calcutta Group issued eight monochrome reproductions of the

artist's paintings, which going by their style, appear to coincide with the painter's pre-Paris period. Of the eight pictures reproduced in the album two are definitely of an early date corresponding to the years 1943-44, namely the "Orphan" (which was also reproduced in the Bengal Painter's Testimony) and the picture of a seated man in a cross-legged posture with his hand supporting his face in a gesture of dejection or despair. There is a strong conformity in style among all the pictures of the album. Apart from the two pictures mentioned above, the rest exhibit a positive affirmation towards life in general and consist of images of couples seated together, mothers with their children, and young women — all the images are marked by sumptuous plenitude of voluptuous forms and an undisturbed/untrammelled attitude towards life. In their use of the thick bounding lines and the generally fluid flow of the forms, as well as in their space-filling manner of composing the central motif of the human forms, these pictures bear closeness with the simplicity, directness and compositional principles of folk art. On the other hand, the etching titled "Two Women" not only deal with physiognomic types who are distinguished by their features and appearances, the composition differs to a large extent in conception, in the placement of the nude female bodies against the backdrop of an interior of which the flower pot on the stool at the left becomes a signifier of a refined and cultivated sophisticated way of life. This is matched by the distinctly different quality of the sharp thin line of the etching and the crosshatched shading which replaced the continuous and uniform, two-dimensional colour spaces of the former phase. The "Woman with sitar" took yet another step away in the angularity of the defining lines.

Paritosh Sen (born 1918) was the second artist of the Calcutta Group to visit Paris. He joined the Madras Government School of Art and Craft in 1936 and gained a diploma in 1939. After ten years of service at the Daly College in Indore, he undertook his trip to France in 1949. However, in his case the blending of the French modernist attitude with his individual identity is slightly different than in Nirode Majumder. Two reproduced pictures are known, one from the 1953 handbook/catalogue and the other accompanying the Marg article

by Klaus Fishcer. The first, a picture showing six ducks on a green patch of land surrounded by flowing water, shares the boldness of form and colour common to most of the artists of the Calcutta Group. Bold, thick lines in black define the birds and hold them together against the throbbing spiral of the brush marks surrounding them. Through such a treatment this painting too approaches in its way the logic of folk directness and simplicity, and is surely a departure from the academic training that the artist had gone through at the beginning of his career. The "Banana grove" accompanying the "Marg" article shows an attempt to fuse an idyllic theme set against lush foliage background with a female figure drastically simplified to geometric essentials of form. Evidently, Paritosh Sen was inclined to forge a personal language out of his admiration of Cubism on the one hand and his erstwhile practice on the other. In a recent retrospective exhibition of the artist (Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Calcutta, February 2001) one had the opportunity to see works ranging from the late thirties till the present. A number of exhibits from the forties and fifties revealed an active creative endeavour on the part of the painter. From the forties are the pictures "Portrait of Prodosh Das Gupta" (1943-44), "Tea party in a mango grove" (1944), "Third class carriage" (1946), "Self-portrait with pipe", "Tribal mother" and "Sea side" (all three of 1948). In these, the artist's attempt had been to develop a colouristic mode where the linguistic rationale is strongly tied up with a sense of the early-modern, post-Impressionistic liberation of painting from an essentially visual conformity. In the "Tribal mother" Paritosh Sen had stated an equation of the tribal identity of his subject, not with a folkish idiom but with a notion of primitivism in the stocky and squat proportion of the human form. On the other hand "Tea party in a mango grove" is an aspiration for the sophisticated, urban, modern experience of open-air cafés. In the fifties, on the one hand there is a tendency towards rendering of forms in an emphasized geometry of angular lines and planes derived from the experience of the Cubist movement — more specifically, a post-Cubist figuration ("Boy eating watermelon", and "Girl with a sheaf of corn" both of 1951; "Man with Hooka", "The Baul singer" and "Still life with Mughal objects", all of 1956, etc.); on the other hand Paritosh Sen used the same linguistic device to arrive at a satirical and social comments.

Examples of such an attempt are "A man with hand fan", Politician on Promenade, "The Baboo" and "Polemics" (all of 1956).

From the few examples that can be thus traced to day, it is evident that despite a genuine intention to break new grounds and reach a modern expression the Calcutta Group had an overwhelming concern for form and style that overrode the basic necessity of consolidated evolution of a pictorial language, where style is not an end, but the means.

The issue of the "modern" in the context of the Calcutta Group

At the outset of their handbook/catalogue of 1953, the Calcutta Group declared that the socio-historical changes between 1910 and 1943 has been "of fundamental importance to the understanding of *modern Art* since it provides its new ideals". [emphasis added] The same paragraph ends with an emphasis on humanism, the replacement of God with Man as a necessary corollary of the same process. Towards the end of the same text, they also laid stress on the fact that "Art should be international and inter-dependent". Clearly then, the Group was thinking in terms of the modern in contemporary art practice, and defining their position not only in terms of internationalism of language but interdependence between cultures as well. The problem of such a hope for interdependence is that a colonizing force would not acknowledge a colonized nation's cultural expressions as being of equal merit, specifically as part of the political program of colonial domination where proclaimed superiority in a cultural hegemony becomes a tool for control. From a liberal and positive point-of-view, such a statement could perhaps be considered as the assertion of a will to transactional parity and equality, and thereby have the potential of a position of resistance to imperial colonial exploitation and structures of cultural hegemony. In practice, however, the Group does not appear to have worked out a proper plan-of-action leading to the actualisation of such a possibility, resulting in the fact that their modernist aspiration was specifically manifest in a one-sided adoption from (and adaptation of) evolved solutions in European

modernist art movements, rather than the avowed inter-dependence of both cultures.

On the other hand, in an essay titled "National/Modern: Preliminaries"[72], Geeta Kapur had specifically emphasized that,

> "The paradigm for debating cultural issues in India is *not* internationalism. Modernism, as seen culminating in an international style and turning on the logic of 'art for art's sake', has not been crucial to India. Moreover we have a modernism without an avantgarde ....."[73]

She continued,

> "Instead of vanguardism there is in India the double discourse of the national and the modern. It is a generative discourse and can yield multiple equations. Nationalism calls up the category of tradition, modernism catapults into internationalism. This then becomes a four part equation enabling one to confront the question of 'invented traditions' that erupts during nationalism with current globalism and its improvisatory techniques of cultural appropriation ....."[74]

and,

> "If what I propose in respect of India is true, that internationalism is not a paradigm for cultural discourse, then we have to come to terms with a more workable paradigm, one that straddles the two fully developed concepts of nationalism and modernization ....."[75]

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[72] Geeta Kapur, "National/Modern: Preliminaries", *When Was Modernism / Essays On Contemporary Cultural Practice In India*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 283-296.

[73] Geeta Kapur, ibid, 287-288.

[74] Geeta Kapur, ibid, p. 288

[75] Geeta Kapur, ibid, p. 291

In the course of the essay "When was Modernism in Indian art"[76], Geeta Kapur recognised that there did exist a strictly leftwing intervention in the process of defining modernity, in the way in which the I.P.T.A. provided "a real alternative in political and cultural terms" in the 1940s, and gave "the emerging *tradition of the modern* in India the possibility of *not* being trapped in the citadel of high art".[77] She wrote,

> "If Indian artists have often appeared hamstrung over the progressivist as against the 'correctly' modernist definition of modernism, if they have seemed to be stuck at the crossing over, it is not so surprising. They are living out the actual material transition ....."[78]

She emphasised however, that while several artists' groups claiming modernism came into existence in the nineteen-forties and fifties in Calcutta Bombay and Madras, of these "the Bombay progressives were the most 'correctly' modernist: they worked with a mandatory set of transfer motifs of the dispossessed but they offered a formalist manifesto that was to help the first generation of artists in independent India to position themselves internationally".[79] Despite the admirable soundness of her theoretical proposition and critical position, such a statement as the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay being "*the most* 'correctly' modernist" among the artists' groups of the nineteen-forties validates the superiority of one collective privileging it over the rest and establishes a somewhat discomforting hegemony within a national framework.

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[76] Geeta Kapur, "When Was Modernism In Indian Art", *When Was Modernism / Essays On Contemporary Cultural Practice In India*, Tulika, New Delhi, 2000, pp. 297-324.

[77] Geeta Kapur, ibid, pp. 301-302.

[78] Geeta Kapur, ibid, p. 302.

[79] Geeta Kapur, ibid, p. 304.

A decisive criterion of the new 'modern' phase in Indian art has been seen to lie in its break with both the colonial and nationalist phases — in its rejection of both Western Academic/neo-classical art and the stereotype of 'Indian' painting of the 'Bengal school'. In the essay "Lineages of The Modern In Indian Art: A historical background to the exhibition" for an exhibition on the "art *from* modern India, 1947-1997"[80] [emphasis added], Tapati Guha-Thakurta has proposed that one could perhaps look at the three working categories of the 'colonial', the 'national' and the 'modern' from a point of view other than the teleology of chronological phases they had come to signify.

She wrote,

> "The 'colonial', then, can move out of its narrow confines of the British art schools and Academic art practices to feature as the decisive condition in the making of a modern Indian art history. And all the different artists who make up this early modern period can be positioned at the other end of a fundamental colonial watershed — where they can be seen inhabiting a common modernised space that the ideas and institutions of colonial rule had carved out for art in indigenous elite society. Similarly, the category of the 'national' can be separated out from the restricted phenomenon of the 'nationalist' art of Abanindranath and the Bengal School — and invoked as a central constitutive force in the shaping of new artistic identities in modern India all through this period. It can then encompass as powerfully the art of Ravi Varma as that of his antagonist Abanindranath Tagore, as well as all the new modernists of the 1930s and 40s, who had rebelled against the inherited canons of Academic or Oriental art. In fact, in these post-nationalist years, we see the power of a 'national' history freshly reasserting its presence in the constant attempts at dislodging 'modern art' from its Western context, in the

[80] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Lineages of The Modern In Indian Art: A historical background to the exhibition", *Tryst with destiny: Art from modern India 1947-1997*, co-organised by the Singapore Art Museum, C.I.M.A. Calcutta, in association with the N.G.M.A. New Delhi, 1997

> continuous assertion of cultural difference, and in the ceaseless search for Indian authenticity. *The 'national' remains then, the crucial mediating site where a distinctly 'modern' art history found its unique 'Indian' location".* [emphasis added][81]

Perceptively in her essay, Tapati Guha-Thakurta wrote, that the problem of tracing the history of the modern in the art of India was not simply in the matter of selection and coverage but "on the more vexed question of what we designate as the 'true'/most 'authentic' history of the evolution of modern art in India. 'Authenticity' (its assertion or the fear of its loss) is what has always been critically at stake. The contest has long been over what kind of art could qualify as both authentically 'modern' and 'national' ..... around these twin concerns of Indian-ness and modernity. Even as the definitions of the 'Indian' and the 'modern' continuously changed, what remained constant was the search for a way of collating both identities .....".[82] Given such a contention of position she identified the problem as one of being able "to recuperate a sense of the 'modern', on the one hand as a significant new art-historical period (whose beginnings can be located in the late 19th and 20th centuries, in the changed patterns of patronage, practice and professions that came up under the colonial rule), and on the other hand, as a powerful ideological and aesthetic category, whose changing contours have defined the form and structure of the period".[83]

> "Retrieved from colonial art-education, the idea of a modern artistic identity had, over the early years of this century, been fully assimilated within nationalist endeavours and an autonomous national history. By the time of Independence, the rejection of the colonial past was a part of a firmly-entrenched history, which itself

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[81] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ibid.

[82] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ibid.

[83] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ibid.

> was now an object of challenge. It is widely acknowledged that for Indian artists of the 1940s, the prime struggle was less against the colonial and more against the nationalist legacy: against the baggage of 'Indian-style' painting and the tyranny of a 'spiritual' Indian aesthetic. This critique of nationalism, which activated new modernist art trends since the 1930s, came to be deeply ingrained into the entire later history of modern Indian art."[84]

Given the consideration that the modern, in its inception applies specifically to the West, we might begin by recognizing that in the broadest historical connotation the term could apply to the "innovations of any period in which there exist both a strong sense of detachment from the past and an effort to replace the esthetic concepts, forms, media, and iconography of that past with an art expression that is more in tune with the attitudes and beliefs and the physical actualities in the contemporary world of the artist. The sense of detachment may spring from religious, intellectual, political, or technical differences with the past, or simply from a change in taste, and the period most rejected is that which has produced the entrenched ideas of the present." [85] In Europe, the modern mentality is considered to be contingent with the rise of rationalist philosophies from the early seventeenth century, which were dedicated to establishing a systematic, pragmatic knowledge of the world, to the revolutionary forms of philosophical enquiry as that of René Descartes and his knowledge of the self and subjectivity. In the eighteenth century tension between philosophical tradition and the social developments, this lead to a concept of social progress that relied on a notion of human perfectibility. However, one of the factors of the Enlightenment, which is intrinsically linked with the concept of the modern, was the proposition of a "universal form of reason together with an aspiration

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[84] Tapati Guha-Thakurta, ibid,.

[85] Encyclopaedia of World Art, McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., New York/Toronto/London, 1965, Vol. X, column 201

to universal rights"[86], which lead paradoxically to the absolutism and the self conscious definition of Europe as the most advanced region of the world with a related tendency to disparage other cultures as underdeveloped and therefore implicitly ripe for exploitation. In the nineteenth century the development of modernity became associated with the rise of mass urban culture and the individual's experience of urban life. It is thus that the poet Charles Baudelaire's formulated modernity as a "new, fragmented and distracted sense of time as it was experienced in the city"[87]. The analysis of modernity-as-metropolis concentrated on the fracturing of the sense of both time and space as experienced by the modern city-dweller. And increasingly, the optimism in the progress of modernity was being countered by the casting adrift of individual subjectivity from institutions and beliefs that had previously conferred feelings of solidarity and purposiveness, leading to isolation and intense anxiety.[88]

> "Modernity is also defined as the social condition brought about by the development of the Western world's characteristic economic formation, that of capitalism, and its incorporation to itself of other societies' modes of production."[89]

This economic process, driven by a "perpetual demand for new resources required to produce innovative commodities which can then be sold to new markets"[90], brings about social transformation and new modes of experience,

[86] "The Post modern Arts/an introductory reader", ed. By Nigel Wheale, Routledge, London/New York, 1995, p. 6.

[87] "The Post modern Arts/an introductory reader" ibid, p. 7.

[88] Finally in the twentieth century modernity became identified with the irresistible process of displacement of Europe by the United States as the most powerful region. With the subsequent triumph of the production-consumption values developed in the United States, began the adaptation of the American mass/popular culture that tended to replace the culture of localities. (cf. "The Post modern Arts/an introductory reader", ibid, p. 8.)

[89] "The Post modern Arts/an introductory reader" ibid, p. 10.

[90] "The Post modern Arts/an introductory reader" ibid, p. 10.

perception and cultural formation.

The two World Wars had decisive effect on the subsequent fate of modernism. On the one hand, certain pre-war art movements celebrating the potential for vigorous transformation offered by the new technologies valorised the dynamism of speed and power. Modernism's violence was welcomed, as was the accelerated rhythms and anonymity of mass-urban living. On the other hand, there was a more widespread pessimism and despair in response to the "New Age", with human essence threatened by the destructive capacity of new technologies.

> "Here then is a complete contradiction within the paradigm which is offered as modernism: one tendency within it can be described as a rationalist, modernising ambition which endorses technological progress and the renovation of the society through aggressive administration and directed change. Simultaneously, and supposedly within the same paradigm, there is a reaction against nearly everything that is to be understood as modernity — rejection of the metropolis, of technology, of the scientific administration of life, and the social sphere — though this rejection is articulated through modernist styles in writing, painting, or music".[91]

One of the factors that later evolved as a critique of the modernist artistic styles that evolved in the twentieth century, was that it made its artefacts both challenging as well as enigmatic, restricting the appeal for a wider audience; demanding interpretive ingenuity and a substantial range of cultural reference modernist art provoked the need for commentary and contextual information by way of research. This relationship between intellectually demanding cultural production, museums as institutions, which legitimise this difficulty, and a consequent industry of explanation, academic and otherwise, also became a part of critique of modernism as elitist art. On the other hand feminist

[91] "The Post modern Arts/an introductory reader" ibid, p. 24.

historiography has argued for a gender difference within the modern, where "the presence of the idea-of-woman in many male texts, paintings, and films is presented not as a liberation from repressive conventional attitudes, but often as a violent intensification of traditional misrepresentations. Modernist frankness and its exploitation of sexuality often only confirmed the figure of woman as an etherial [ethereal?] ideal or as erotic object to be plundered"[92].

However it is necessary that we return to an attempt at comprehending the category of the "modern" in the specific context of a country like India, and perhaps even more specifically to what it held for the artists of the Calcutta Group. Modernization has been recognised as an incomplete historical process for India dating from the British colonial experience onwards to the efforts of post-independence new nation, in the growth of the public sector, a planned economy and the industry.

> "Modernity is a way of relating the material and cultural worlds in a period of unprecedented change that we call modernization. It is also an ontological quest with its particular forms of reflexivity, its acts of struggle."[93]

That brings us to recognize the fact, that despite (and perhaps more so because of) the incompleteness of the historical process of modernization, for the artists constituting the Calcutta Group the experience of the modern condition of the metropolis must have been of a certain degree to prompt the possibility of forming a collective deciding to work towards a modern pictorial expression, however loose the formation may have been. On the one hand, the famine had the visible impact of the degradation of humanity, and the impending war maintained a continuous threatening tension in the city. This historical situation was sufficient to realize that academism of both the kinds, that of the art-school

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[92] "The Post modern Arts/an introductory reader" ibid, p. 20

[93] cf. Geeta Kapur, "When was modernism", ibid, p. 298

as well as the 'burden of tradition' of the so-called "Bengal school", would be incapacitous in providing the necessary vocabulary. Further, other than in the domain of the visual arts, there was already a strong debate for the defining of the modern especially in literature, and the artists of the Calcutta Group could not have missed the excitement and the vitality of the discorse of their contemporaries in other fields. However, the notion of 'progress' being equated with a political agenda, and identity of a political art being located in the propagandist efforts (taking cue from that of Soviet Russia) the artists of the Calcutta Group were determined to keep themselves out of the domain of social realism in pictorial practice, no matter how much it may prove to be an alternative in a breakthrough from the twin academic strictures. For the members constituting the group, the choices for a modernist breakthrough in art were thus zeroed down to the formal means that they finally adopted, each in his or her own individual ways as we have already observed.

Even if they had uttered the word "internationalism" so emphatically in their avowed statement — that too *only* once, never repeated — the artists of the Group were more concerned with a modern in which the sincerity of a response to the immediate surrounding, the experience of the urban splintered situation was of greater concern. In that endeavour, the take-off point could only be defined in the individual practices via a definition of the modern as a release from what appeared to be a confining limitation of one's institutional training. Instead of submitting to a complete fulfilment of the criteria of the languages of Western modernism that appealed to them — and we could perhaps look at this without qualitative judgement — the individual artists constituting the Group rather came up with certain visual correlates that were primarily and in their own way, contextual to the *local* urban experience. Even if they had not followed the exact trajectories of the languages of European modern art, they had come up with solutions in terms of form, colour, space, figuration, etc. which sufficiently had the appearance of a catapulting out from the "baggage of 'Indian-style' painting and the tyranny of a 'spiritual' Indian aesthetic". Rather than an overarching definition of an Indian modern, the Calcutta Group' efforts can be best realized from the point of a regional modern.