Chapter – VI
Art Quest (Shilpa Jijnasa): Binodebehari Mukherjee and his works
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Binodebehari Mukherjee’s contribution is marked by an advanced level and it remained a mission of his life to make always a ‘new’ in the visual language culture in India. Unconditional evidence suggests that the subject matter or theme or a concept, was not a part of the working process of the making of a picture for some time in the art history of India. At this juncture Benodebehari’s interest of selecting the vocabulary of the language of expression is through the form and colour surfaced. His ability to choose the subject matter from the nature (Landscapes), for his paintings is a testimony to his creative urge. After seeing his landscape paintings, the objects he presented, one can understand his genius that shows his ability to the observer which moves for a transformation from the foreground to the background. The figure or forms and the ground merge and transform each other to hold the patchy surface as a movable relation between different interruptions that seeks to coordinate the two-dimensional surface of perspective and compositional theories. At the same time the paintings shape the possible for a three-dimensional depth as a dialogue between colour masses and linearity of the figures, providing a complex series of interacting illusions and depth. But while the illusion of distinct reliefs persists, the conventions of perspective sink on the problem of deciding whether the colour lines interrupt the colour masses in his nature paintings. These countryside paintings in this sense play with the ambiguity of lines as outlines and shadows, an effect more familiar in transparent media. These imageries draw a viewer into a problem of interpreting the appropriate field of vision cast by the picture, which involves both tracing the variety of three-dimensional bends and
environment, a virtual rather than an actual impact of the scene. The extremity of this variability can be specified further by attempting to apply generic considerations to these paintings and this specificity is a mark of Binodebehari.

Jaya Appaswamy says;

“In his art the interest in historic and romantic subject matter or even in subject matter at all is swept away by an interest in form and colour, in arrangement of balances and tensions for their own sake. There is no effort to consciously express an idea, for the painting itself is a reflection of the artist’s idea...Early compositions are from the landscape around Santiniketan, the surge of vegetation and the turgid dark leaves of bushes make a relentless pattern and seem to have a torrid organic life....”

Benodebehari’s work has also derived much of its inspiration from the landscape and everyday rural life and his spontaneity is tempered by a cerebral structure and also a sense of detachment. This was mostly reflected through an eclectic ability to share his vision with international influences and search out the conceptual roots of his creative impulses. When others were occupied with easel or miniature formats, he was experimenting with screen and scroll paintings, helping him grasp the space proportions for mural art.

“Later in his development the cumulative effects of his prolonged studies in Chinese and Japanese painting and the traditional craft forms of India began to be clearly felt. A visit of Japan in 1936 was particularly important in his mature stylistic orientation. An admirer of the Tosa school of painting, Binodebehari was impressed by the bold surface divisions, the unerring placement of abstract areas of
intense colour, the refinement of stylised shapes, and the precise economy of lines, all unified in acute confrontation and juxtaposition in the melancholy grandeur of the screens of Tawaraya Sotatsu...In considering George Seurat along with Sotatsu, Binodebehari reveals his affinities with the profoundly ornamental, which for all its analogies, metaphors and lucidities, betrays a deep romanticism at the core”. Pritish Neogy, (1965).ii

Binodebehari used to make a conscious choice of the narrative motifs and through his own style to represent the visible world- ‘nature’ into a genre which was exceptionally his own. A classifiable traditional idiom was improved into the mark of a modern master. Exclusively his paintings have also functioned to highlight ‘the difference’, distinctly greater breathtaking, larger inventive and strict choice of skills and the comfortable pictorial language. He was also one of the artists compelled by the charge of pursuing the new foundations of modernity in an eccentric account of Indian traditions.

“He chose his subjects from the Birbhum landscapes, from nearby communities, from the mural project itself as a theme, or again from Tagore’s dance- drama or even the Nativity of Sri Chaitanya. But so well were they interwoven and integrated that the time and space dimension was instantly dissolved. The dancing girl of the Buddhist world and the Santhal damsel, an everyday neighbor, merged together to leave behind the epic ecstasy common to them...The absorbing colour orchestra that these ‘Jaipuri’ murals with their characteristic forms and patterns poignantly placed fulfils a comparatively pictorial demand rather than the monumentality associated with murals...Benodebehari is
not merely the father of modern Indian murals, but remains also unsurpassed....”

Kanchan Chakrabarti. (1972)iii

Using traditional methods his pioneering experiments with the mural medium began in the early 1920, maturing by the 1940s. Benodebehari’s Hindi Bhavan fresco of the Medieval Saints, depicted a river-like swell of human movement, disciplined by a calligraphic approach, thus merging disparate influences through a stark unifying vision, like colours in the sea. R. Siva Kumar states that,iv

“The Hindi Bhavan mural established Benod Behari as a major figurative artist, somewhat overriding his earlier achievements as a landscapist. It is his largest and most ambitious work and the most complex narrative painting by a modern Indian artist. It spreads over three walls across which the figures move with a measured rhythm...The rhythmic flux leads us from one figure to the next and herds them into smaller and larger groups. Whilst the groups maintain the continuum, they also form discrete narrative and psychological units marked out by the topographical and spatial shifts that punctuate the progress. The narrative is neither strictly historical, nor based on episodic continuity. It grows out of the figures, their gestures, the way they stand in relation or juxtaposition to one another, and it unfolds in an imaginary space and time”.

The following paintings of Binodebehari Mukherjee are selected for the study and assessed that his input is a major contribution in the modern Indian art scenery.
Plate number 1- Binodebehari Mukherjee’s ‘Untitled’ painting is a depiction of a farmer, who is working in the rural farming field to earn his livelihood along with his children. In this painting, he chooses a simple and reasonable subject matter that proves the social reality of peasant’s life in every village in post-independence India. The farmer has a plough with a big bull in the farm while both the children are enjoying a ride. In the background, a palm tree is also seen. The excellence of speedy and free drawing of the entire objects in this painting manifests a modern outlook with a traditional feel. Temperate muddy colour is deposited in the foreground and background of this painting with slightly dark line in the border. Dark brush patches are applied randomly in the body of the bull, tree and in the background. A speedy motion is also revealed here with linearity.

Plate number 2- ‘Santhal Boys with Bullock Cart’: The painting demonstrates Benodebehari’s capability to choose the subject matter for his paintings from the nature. Consider it as a landscape painting, ‘santhal’ boys, bullock cart, and tree with greenery, hills and meadow, the objects he has presented are of a devoted observation with determination. His paintings are characterized by extreme faith, touching linearity and stiffness permitted with juxtapositions and flattened perspectives. He has spent extensive time for presenting the vegetation and natural world. The change of colour application from the foreground to the background is a modulation of expertise. In this painting the figures, forms and the ground fuse together to hold an erratic plot that leaves a moving impression.
Plate number 3- ‘Nepal’: The painting represented an exceptional calligraphic character of the forms and it is placed in the pictorial space with a rhythmic motion. In miniature format the dynamically expressive forms are moving around the picture plane, architectural forms painted with horizontal and vertical untidy lines in the air, and very skinny layer of sober colours are applied to the entire picture plane to give togetherness to the subject matter. It is also very exciting that in these two miniature format paintings, Binodebehari has depicted the place of worship of Nepal abundant with devotees, of whom all are females. The moving figures, architectural forms and the land are blended as one in this composition with impressionistic style.

Plate number 4- ‘Santhals under the Tree’: This too is a painting of nature that depicts the life of village working class people. Benodebehari was always tempted for this sort of subject matter and its colour application, adopted from the manner of rational painters of the West, who were really motivated by the concept of impressionism. His creative life was a continuous effort in exploration of displaying the rural life, flora and fauna of Birbhum villages near to Santiniketan, with technical modulation and experimenting natural colours in the picture planes. Under the shadow of a flowering tree two men are chatting, one is looking away and the other is in a nap. Resting mood of the workers is created with muscular linearity and temperate colours in the figures.

Plate number 5- ‘Life of the Medieval Saints’: This gigantic mural painting executed in fresco-buono technique on the wall of Hindi Bhavan, Santiniketan by Binodebehari is by itself a seclusion from the entire paintings he made during his
life time, but it proves his ability to absorb and assimilate new traits in modern Indian art along with the nationalistic art movement, that rejected both oil painting and academic realism. It shows in a figurative manner the life of saints in a row of stages. The work is heavily packed with human figures with diverse characters observed from ancient paintings and literary descriptions. The painting initiates from the hills inhabited by *rishis* and spiritually representing the early religious traditional approach to the middle ages and losing to the streets with common sellers. Colouring pattern is also applied in the manner of traditional mural technique.

Binodebehari is placed as a great painter of modern period with compassion for human values and its enhancement. Simultaneously his paintings also gave evidences of formal judgment subjected to his visual experience and to the analysis of the value structure of the time. He had a sound perception of the Indian tradition and the contemporary grammar of painting. He had also experimented with each and every method of practice on all visual mediums and explored the possibilities and its limitations. He was interpreting successfully, the trees, fields, river, river-banks, flora and fauna delimited by people, their life or the temptation of nature, he was created a dramatic situation in his paintings with proficiency. Forms and figures are placed in the possible two dimensional spaces through spongy three-dimensional depth providing a multifaceted series of relative illusions and colour impacts. The landscape paintings are full of play with the haziness of outlines and shadows, in the paper surface with transparent result that creates the imageries rather than a real. His nature representation on local subject and issues of real
people also has definite value and relevance. His sensible innovation of the form and content was not a mere fabrication of the real subject he dealt with, but was a move ahead of the imitating reality of the nature into a principled representation. Therefore, he has initiated a notion away from the ancient perception of ‘imitation’ established by Plato and ‘Sadrisya’ of India on representation.

ii Neogy Pritish, Benodebehari Mukherjee, LKA, 1965.


Binodebehari Mukherjee

Untitled

Santhal boys with Bullock cart

Plate No. 1 and 2
Santhals under the Tree

Plate No. 4