Chapter – VII
Human in art: Ramkinkar Baij and his works
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Indian paintings of post-independence period have indicated the impact of stimulating sensations from the west, end to end with the ideals of Indian sensation and eastern values in the philosophy of life and aesthetics of the arts. At this juncture to achieve the need of a makeover or a turn towards a ‘new’ approach, a good number of intellectuals opted for a ‘modern’ approach that would assimilate the indigenous art impulses and ethos in their art practices. This modernist vocabulary was to bring in a courageous efforts in the thirties by Ramkinkar Baij.

“Art is a human activity having for its purpose the transmission to others of the highest and best feelings to which men have risen” – Leo Tolstoy

Human forms in visual arts feature all through the history of art. From magical through spiritual towards to modern concepts, the figure representation becomes common for non-spiritual purposes and more secular contexts in art. Figures and faces have also continued to be incorporated into ritual art in almost all cultures around the world; the human figure remains central part to both spiritual and decorative art of the present day too.

As depictions of the human form were generally, physically and stylistically representative of the people who made them must have reinforced social and racial stereotypes. Current attitudes recognize the beauty and artistry which make the initial categories of classification absolute. The artists display forms in enormous diversity on materials, techniques, function, beliefs, and notions of beauty. Many cultures represent human figures in object form, giving rise to objects that have been made using a huge variety of materials and techniques either carved from
natural materials or produced on rocks, faces by painting using natural pigments such as red ochre and charcoal. Later, figurative art materials might have been chosen for many reasons including what best represented the attributes of the human body, the social rank of those creating the objects, or the importance of the person or the deity being represented. Some appear realistic in execution and others stylised or abstract. Comparing objects made by different artists of the same culture reveals how figurative art often reflects cultural influences. Non-realistic depictions do not necessarily are poor artistry but more likely to be shared styles and methods. The exchange of aesthetic ideas between cultures is evident in the styles, techniques, subjects of many examples of human form in art.

“Great art picks up where nature ends” – Marc Chagall

Religion, particularly in India, remains one of the most common reasons for the creation of the figurative art. It was an intense idea, the appearance of the deities or spiritual beings in human forms, making it easier for people to identify with divine individuals. Like different cultures, the human depiction is treated in varied ways, India had it also reflected with a means of cultural expression in addition to affirm social and cultural identity.

“A man paints with his brains and not with his hand” – Michelangelo

Ramkinkar Baij, an artist who discards the conformist two dimensional planes for a new aesthetic proposition with more subjective forms based on notions of essential factors and a new association with his content. The intention was that his experience went beyond the aesthetic attitude towards art by making it part of his everyday life. Through the image, essentially he becomes fully engaged with it
in a kind of sensational escalation, an indispensable part of the creative procedure. Besides placing his work of art in the public realm, he opened it up to new interpretations and impulsiveness. The working style of Ramkinkar is reflective of his individual perspectives and traditions, which result in new challenges to the modern Indian art. His spirit and courage of experimentation and his motivation were to go against the accepted practices in modernity, making his art into a kind of material and intellectual engagement, fine-tuned to certain social and political ideas that emerged during his time. He was also concerned with further new practices in order to revive the visual art in enormously beyond the principal philosophy, in a diverse way, a new parallel innovation in the modern Indian art set-up.

Ramkinkar Baij was born in 1910 in Bankura, West Bengal. He received his diploma from Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan and later became Head of the Sculpture Department there. Although he was known for his expressionistic sculpture, he was a talented painter whose achievements in painting have not been sufficiently recognized. Like his sculpture, his paintings are spontaneous and bold. His works have been included in several exhibitions such as the Asian Art Exhibition, Tokyo (1979), Man and Nature: Reflections of Six Artists, Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage and National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi (1995). A retrospective of his work was held at the National Gallery of Modern Art (1990).

Ramkinkar Baij (1906–1980), a significant artist of twentieth-century India, is regarded as the first major figure in modern Indian sculpture. Born into a poor family in Bankura district, Bengal, he enrolled himself as a student at the university founded by Rabindranath Tagore. Having made it his home and found his
creative profession there – as a student first and a teacher later – he was one of the pioneering trio of artists, along with Nandalal Bose and Benod Behari Mukherjee, who made Santiniketan the most important centre for art in India between 1920 and 1947.

Ramkinkar, as he was popularly known, was a man who had, enormous talents but never aired them; an artist who was single-minded in his pursuit of work but treated the results with philosophic unconcern. Indifferent to success, fame and money, he lived an unworldly and saintly life. His works reflect a great zest for the gifts of nature and deep concern for the conditions of poor and working people. A book on Ramkinkar sculptures by Devi Prasad is published as a tribute, to mark the artist’s birth centenary year. The subject of this book is Ramkinkar sculptures as seen through the photographic lens of Devi Prasad, supplemented by discussions on the artist’s life and work in his own words and through the eyes of his students, friends and associates. Devi Prasad, who was a student at Kala Bhavan during 1938–44, went back to Santiniketan as a Visiting Professor in the year 1978. During his stay there, he undertook a photographic study of 60-odd sculptures of Ramkinkar. Towards the end of that year, during the seventh ‘Pous’ celebrations, he exhibited nearly 150 of these photographs in three halls of Kala Bhavan. Ramkinkar himself, though in poor health by then, inaugurated the exhibition; he was deeply moved to see such a large photographic representation of his works.

The example of rural craftsmen inspired him to paint curtains for village theatre and posters for the nationalist demonstrations before he was taken in 1925 to the art college at Santiniketan in West Bengal by the nationalist leader, publisher
and patron Ramananda Chatterjee (1865-1943). He was initially influenced by Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose but soon developed an individual perception and a keen interest in sculpture. His early outdoor sculptures, such as *Sujata* (1935), *Santhal Family* (1939) and the *Lamp Stand* (1940), were made *in situ* in Santiniketan in concrete and were environmental in scale and theme.

Ramkinkar was most prominently known for his central role in transforming Santiniketan into a seminal centre for modern Indian art.

Working along the same lines of Nandalal Bose and B.B.Mukherjee, Ramkinkar added to the romantic view of the world a deep sense of social commitment. He celebrated the strong presence of the Santhals, humans in tune with the dynamic environment. His landscapes had a life of their own. Celebrated as India’s first modernist sculptor, he also produced monumental public sculptures such as Santhals Family (1939) and Sujata (1935) which are of visual manifestations of his humanistic views. His water colors too contained in them a sense of immediacy, a moment captured through an economy of lines and translucent use of color. His composition also drew inspiration from diverse styles from Rodin, the Impressionists to Cezanne. K.G Subramanian, remembering Ramkinkar says:

“…I can safely say that Ramkinkar’s (and Benod Behari’s) understanding of the graphic conventions of Cezanne- and its aftermath- was much sounder than that of any other artist of that time. You can see proof of this in Ramkinkar’s pen sketches and studies, in the way he structures and uses colour in his Watercolour
landscapes. His general work-attitude also is similar to Cezanne’s- to extract a motif from nature. So all of his works arose from a tangible visual experience”.iv

Outside Santiniketan, the pioneering work of Ramkinkar Baij (1906-80) went largely unappreciated. During 1938 Ramkinkar created Santhal family, sand cast open air sculpture. It seems to be dug out from the bowls of the earth. Built with the logic of a poetic-engineer, its rhythmic eroticism reveals a profound unity with nature. Apart from his sculptures, his oil paintings, especially within the cubistic framework, reveal a rare experimenting nature, beyond its time, free from dogmas except the compulsion to be true to his creativity. However, it was with watercolours that Ramkinkar Baij’s sense of rhythm was most evident. The fluidity of this medium was ideal to express the spontaneous vibrancy which he felt amid nature. His sense of harmony with the earth provided the creative discipline to structure this fluidity, transforming erotic energy into its artistic pace. He believed in ‘speed’ which created a tension in work of art and most of the paintings of Kinkar are inspiring and terribly energetic. Ramkinkar started abstraction in paintings in the 1940 and trying to break away from the Bengal school mode and western kind of realism.

The depictions of the human form or forms in Ramkinkar’s painting were stylistically representative of the people who breathed with him, his mind and body. He integrated the real life of the people from end to end in a human contemplation in all his visual creations, and it is identified as a ‘new’ in Indian art scene. Ramkinkar’s perceptiveness of beauty and artistry, constituted the ‘absolute’ development in modern Indian painting history.
The following paintings of Ramkinkar are selected for the study and deliberated on his role as a major advantage in the modern Indian art scene.

Plate number 1- ‘A Bengal Village’: This is one of the important landscape paintings in oil by Ramkinkar Baij. In the painting he has represented a realistic Bengal village with massive dark green trees and traditional houses. The entire picture has a play of light and shade with mastery of colours. A woman in white sari with a water-pot found in the centre is the core of the painting. He narrated the story with human and human considerations. The painting is characterising by bold skill, sensibly chosen for the compositional values, with broad brush-strokes and an incredible synchronization of the details of the subject matter.

Plate number 2-This is an ‘Untitled’ painting by Ramkinkar Baij with a lot of force in lines and packed with sober colours. Here the theme is the struggle of a farmer with buffalos in the field for his livelihood which depicted a notion of human and nature relationship. The entire composition is occupied with thick black colour and its hues in the animals and human form against the curly mud pattern of the field, giving a kind of impressionistic superiority, and a conception of modernity.

Plate number 3- ‘Harvesting’ and the plate number 4- ‘Untitled’ paintings of Ramkinkar Baij have also added images of representation on the rural harvesters and men in plough for his topic of paintings. He formally arranged the figures of mass against shallow background of extensive areas of watery colours, flanked by stylised trees, and restricted details of the greenery. Sturdy brush strokes on human figures and other forms in the painting without details, but with strong expression is
a strange character of Ramkinkar’s paintings. Blue, green, yellow and black colours compel the viewers to observe persistently the visual subject.

Plate number 5, and 6: These two paintings of Ramkinkar Baij also have the theme of men in action. In ‘The Summer Noon’, the painter has arranged a cubistic composition of five female figures and their ‘summer bath’ beneath the hilly shadows. As cubism rejects the realistic nature of the object, Baij also made the same procedure in monochromatic meaning. The women are all in different tempers of action of their own strive, a red flower is placed in their set of clothes, where all are resting, is a symbol or a motive of ‘still-life’ in modern tendency. The other painting is a roaring seascape with the least of lines and with the highest of colour patches in motion. The blue and light green colours with a strong white neutral are of vitality in the entire picture plane of the painting. Here in addition, one can see that the fishermen are striving for their income.

Ramkinkar Baij, a great Indian sculptor, turned out to be a sparkling painter of the time and created several pure landscapes, agricultural farms, farmers and their living, known for his peasant subjects, which arise from his own personal experiences. Having mastered the ‘mannerist style’ in the modern sense, all his paintings are distinguished by self-deliberation and sophistication of theme, repeatedly fixed or exaggerated complex in medium proficiency, sensitive or sharp colour blend, their complex and highly inventive compositions, and the technical boldness and the free-flowing line that favoured a current trend in the modern Indian art. An essentially monochromatic scheme of colour, strangely of luminous value and lucidity, irrational light were created to a degree to compensate for the
darkness of the compositions. This also reflects emotional intensity of the subject he has represented. Modernity in its broadest sense, is used to describe that the paintings of Ramkinkar Baij raises the subjective feelings beyond the objective observations. All his paintings reflect a reality of the peripheral compassion of his land and people rather than a mere representation, which is the elevation of mimetic notion of the west and ‘Sadrisya’, the ancient art theory of the East, principally India.


Plate No. 1 and 2

A Bengal village

Untitled
Plate No. 3 and 4

Harvesting

Untitled
Plate No. 5 and 6