Chapter – X
A different light: Ganesh Pyne and his works
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“The modernism is freedom of mind, not slavery of taste. It is independence of thought and action, not tutelage under European school masters. It is science but not its wrong application to life” – (Rabindranath Tagore).i

In the late nineteenth century, Indian art had a refinement with a set of inventive concepts. The approach to modernism was the trend during the mid-twentieth century with complex elements in formulating a visual language in art. Although it is subjective in character, the modernist movement in India is divided into different schools or phases. However, modern Indian art starts with the Bengal school of painting, in substance, preference and meaning. The essential characteristics of the modern or contemporary art in India emerged from innovation, the reception of a diverse approach which has positioned artistic expression in the global perspective beside the regional, a constructive altitude of technique which has become crucial and absolute, and the materialization of the artist as a separate individual. The end of the Second World War made available unrestricted and exceptional freedom of expression to artists. The period considerably corresponded with the independence of India. The artists, who had a general choice of innovation and conflict borrowed from the modernism of the west, were fascinated by the new experience and attempted to be in tune with the new global concept of art.

“Art is the most intense mode of individualism that the world has known” – (Oscar Wilde)ii

Through individuality and the subsequent segregation of the artist’s ideology, an appreciable, but a specific inter- relation between the artist and people
began to take shape. As a result, a different light in contemporary notion with a sociological urge was established with a novel condition in several major artists in India.

“Painting is just another way of keeping a diary” iii– (Pablo Picasso)

Ganesh Pyne is one of those who experimented with all types of mediums, principally tempera and gouache along with water colour, pastel and oil colour paintings and drawings. Ganesh’s paintings are repeatedly multi-layered; to be perceived from the lowest layer up to the top layer. He is possibly the most imaginative painter of our times who tells stories, and has portrayed demons and myth as well. All of these pictorial means are employed in his pursuit of a new concept of beauty in his paintings.

Largely ‘modernism’ contains modern thought, character, or a practice, and the term describes both a set of cultural tendencies and an array of associated cultural movements, originally arising from wide-scale and far-reaching changes in the Western society in the late nineteenth century. Modernism was a revolt against the conservative values of realism in painting. The term encompasses the activities and output of those who felt the traditional forms of art, architecture, literature, religious faith, social organization and daily life were becoming outdated in the new economic, social and political conditions of an emerging fully industrial world.

A salient characteristic of modernism is self-consciousness. This often led to experiments with form, and a work that draws attention to the processes and materials used.
“Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category. Just as it cannot be reduced to abstract form, with equal necessity it must turn its back on conventional surface coherence, the appearance of harmony, the order corroborated merely by replication.” 

(Theodor Adorno)

Literary scholar Peter Childs sums up the complexity:

“There were paradoxical if not opposed trends towards revolutionary and reactionary positions, fear of the new and delight at the disappearance of the old, nihilism and fanatical enthusiasm, creativity and despair.”

(Peter Childs)

These contradictions are inherent in modernism particularly in modern Indian art; it is in its broadest cultural sense, the assessment of the past concept of painting is different from the modern notion. Ganesh Pyne was one of the painters of modern inclination who accepted the new notions in Indian art.

Ganesh Pyne, born in 1937, received the thematic possessions of his paintings from the childhood reminiscences, the extremely momentous representation of life-sequence. Saga or myth and legend are an incredibly adaptable feature of all his paintings, and he was always fascinated from his religious ambience, grandmother’s tales and their mystic essentials.

“As a boy, I remember a very private play I used to play when everyone was asleep. I used to build a boat, a paper boat, very visually, with all details on sails. Now one fine noon I used to burn it, alone, just to see the beauty of the total thing burning”, (Ganesh Pyne.)

Countless of his memories, dreams and fairytales from his grandmother’s recitation, inside the sheltered ancestral home, there was an intended innate power
for blending the blissful with the mythic, evocative and the perpetual, the secluded
and its interloper. Possibly this conflicting consistency was persistent as his source
of inspiration.

“*Myth is a very regulating factor in my work, and the source of my myth
were basically my grandmother’s stories with their certain mystic elements*”… - Ganesh Pyne vii

He construes the reality, stipulations with fantasy and desire, of course, with
an enchanting experience. Ganesh Pyne’s influences and inspirations were from
Rembrandt, Paul Klee, Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore, Atul Bose, Jamini
Roy that suited his matchless contemplative disposition, highlights added freely to
remolding his visualization, an emaciated differentiation which ultimately desides
the extent of originality.

“*Nature is so beautiful, it makes you feel sad. It also makes you feel elevated
simultaneously. This is not a contradiction. It’s like the crest and trough of a wave.
The same wave, life and death, birth and rebirth…”* Ganesh Pyne viii

He became a member of the Society of Contemporary Artists in 1963, and
thereafter he often participated in the annual exhibitions of the society. The first
solo show of sketches ‘from his work book called ‘Jottings’ was held in the Village
Gallery in New Delhi. Consequently, he had many group shows- the Paris Biennale
in 1969, contemporary Indian Painting, West Germany in 1970, International
Festival of Paintings in France, 1975, Contemporary Art of Asia, Japan, 1980,
Modern Indian Paintings, U.S.A., Contemporary India Art, UK, Indische Kunst
Heute, West Germany, 1982, Visims, Calcutta, 1986 and Timeless Art, Bombay,
1989. Pyne has received many awards and his paintings are in many public and private collections.

The dark recesses of Ganesh Pyne’s imagery and refined draughtsmanship overwhelmed whatever path he has crossed. An aura of brooding sadness always underlies his work, served by a tranquil obsession with death. The legitimacies of Pyne’s dark disposition paintings were such, that they engaged the insight of several explicit, instructive but remained unexplained of his inventive revelation. He has exploited his sophisticated ability to give expression to his imagination, predominantly rooted in childhood recollections.

“...True darkness gives one a feeling of insecurity bordering on fear but it also has its own charms, mystery, profundity, a fairyland atmosphere. Darkness still gives me the same feelings not as it did when I was a child. The only difference is that I try consciously to analyze these feelings now. Mythology and fables also fascinate me. Probably for the same reasons, I now look at things with eyes that are, I think, more mature but I also have a sneaking suspicion that when one is confronted with primeval values, one has little to gain through maturity…” – Ganesh pyne.

As a medium of expression, Pyne exploits from water colour, to gouache and then tempera. Later on, his figuration and palette were also transformed into a modern inclination. A skeletal component was initiated into the figures even as animals illustrated their incisors and scrapes. They were represented as sufferers. Dark cloudiness subjugated his paintings to counteract with the exploit of golden umber intensity. Definite motifs were planed constantly, like boats, bones, wood
and other remains, shady doors and windows, Chaitanya, the head of the Bhakti movement, animals, daggers, and others. Largely his paintings reveal the conflicting haul of loss and existence. Pyne’s diverse dealing of the delineation of eyes is worth noting.

“I am only whole when I am painting,” eminent artist Ganesh once said, borrowing a quote from dancer Nijinsky.¹

His early paintings give the impression of death, and are rarely have radiance in negative space, and the positive space is packed by and large with dark and blue black colours, through the confrontation which forced him from the incidents, of communal riots in the 1940.

“I was shaken by the sight. Since then, I have been obsessed with the dark world”.- Ganesh.²

Different motifs, created by him in later period paintings, have an expression of devastating sensation. Pyne has predominantly worked in tempera and all are rich in metaphors and symbolic representation. The resentment and desolation of the early period paintings were stimulated and fascinated by the morals of communism. His first painting was ‘Winter’s Morning’. For a while in his expedition of art scene, he made small drawings in pen and ink for experimentation. Paintings like ‘Before the Chariot’ and ‘The Assassin’, were the richest phase in his life as an artist.

The progress in his paintings emanate from his understanding of segregation, rupture, pain, repulsion, and the temperament shaped through concern and tranquility, and the images are significant characteristics his inventiveness of expression. Valiant, stern and strained lines in the drawings and paintings are
convincing both in form and content. Bright colours, convey the architectonic prominence in the formation of the images. Pyne has also received inspiration for his paintings from movies by great film makers like Fellini and Ingmar Bergman.

The following paintings of Ganesh Pyne are selected for the study and assessed to know his contribution to the modern Indian art scene.

Plate number1 and 2 are the two important paintings of Ganesh Pyne namely ‘The Fisherman’ and ‘The Nest’. These figurative paintings are equally significant in their composition and content. In these two paintings Ganesh arranged effective expression with forms and colours. Both are having a dramatic impact with light and shade. In the first one, he represented a fisherman sitting with a fishing net on a boat. In the light of a lamp on the boat, the major entities of composition have creatively crafted a notion of satire for onlookers. Substantial expression is applied in the positive and negative spaces with reddish brown and its hues. In the second painting too Ganesh Pyne has created the dramatic expression in the objects and relaxed with its content. Here a yellow light is spreading through the entire exterior of the painting, which has created a superficial energy for the horse and the rider.

Plate number 3 and 4 of Ganesh Pyne’s paintings are named as ‘The Creeper’ and ‘The Throne’ respectively. In the first painting a woman is in profile looks depressed from outside and tenderly touches with her hands a pot of creeper placed on the top of a table. Yellow coloured body of the woman is covered with yellow blouse and a red sari; the pot is of copper colour, the table painted in green and the creeper in light green. Amazingly the source of light is coming from outside to the inner space of the canvas which creates a dramatic impression on all images.
In the other, Ganesh has portrayed a throne and a princely figure. In the middle of the painting a lamp is again providing light to the entire canvas. Yellow ochre, brown and white colours along with the shades, generate a fantasy of theatre and sluggish emotion.

Plate numbers 5 and 6 are two paintings of Ganesh Pyne namely, ‘Warrior’ and ‘Mother and Child’. The warrior is a profile portrait of a soldier with fabric crown and decorative ornaments in his cloths. Within the blue background, the figure is incised with brown, yellow and lighter tones in the body and drapery. An irony of emotions is reflected in the face of the warrior and a hint of depressed ruler. The other plate is a usual subject of a mother and child. Both female figures are depicted in frontal view in facade of a decorated hut with ornamentations. Nature is represented with motif of birds and trees. Yellow, brown and white colours are used and green is dominant in the composition.

There are contradiction in modern trends towards innovation and conservatism, anxiety of the new and pleasure at the desertion of the longstanding, scepticism and dedicated passion, creativeness and desolation. These conditions are intuitive in modern Indian art in its extensive general and social wisdom, the modern and the former concept of painting is different from the vocabulary of contemporary visual notion. Ganesh Pyne is a contemporary artist of first choice who ignited a lamp of lights in the pathway of constructing innovative notions in Indian art roughly against the Plato’s limitation of mimetic exemplification and the ancient Indian notion of representation as ‘Sadrisya’ in theory and practice.


v Childs Peter, Literary scholar, Wikimedita foundations.


Ganesh Pyne

The Fisherman

The Nest

Plate No. 1 and 2
Plate No. 3 and 4

The Creeper

The Throne
Plate No. 5 and 6

Warrior

Mother and Child

Plate No. 5 and 6