CONCLUSIONS

This survey attempts at addressing the seminal question as to how, in what way and to which extent the Modern Indian Painting is derived from its traditional forbears and remains related to it and what are the dimensions in which it makes a departure and charts new directions for itself. That the connect is vital and essentially inviolable is evident.

In the early phase of modernism which is usually considered to fall within the late 19th and early 20th C, the artists began to define two vastly different trajectories for themselves both stylistic and in their perception of the themes. This is the period in which the academic naturalist manner of Raja Ravi Varma and the wash manner of Abanindranath Tagore gained ubiquitous following. Yet despite the fundamental attitudinal differences between the two, both of these remained ineluctably and intimately connected to the past. In both cases their themes were largely drawn from ancient texts like Pauranas, the epical and literature of the Hindus, Buddhist and Jain texts, the Quran, the Bible and the hagiographical and narrative works on Sikhism. Both of them considered the past as the epitome of glory with Raja Ravi Varma treating it with great verve while for Abanindranath Tagore it represented the sum of all philosophical thought and feelings. Both of them however selected different aspects of the religious genre which are clearly indicative of their differing approach. Both of them had inherited an immediate past in which the treatment of themes of religious significance, apart from the others, had become vastly different from their traditional and time honoured methodology. That they brought to bear almost divergent approaches to more or less similar themes is indicative of the fast changes being brought about in the art scene of India. While in the works in the academic naturalist manner the emphasis was on capturing a heightened dramatic content with an
attention on the climactic moment of story, the Bengal School artists treated of the same themes in a more meditative fashion concentrating more on the realization of their philosophic import rather than on drama inherent in them. This approach appears to be particularly true in the case of Abanindranath Tagore who sought consciously to penetrate their fabric of thought and then sought to recreate it in his own version of them. In another way also the artists of the Bengal School remained related to their rendering of the traditional styles which formed the basic stylistic planks out of which components of their style were structured. The differing approaches of both Ravi Varma and Abanindranath becomes clear when we examine a work like “Sita in Captivity” where the emphasis was on subtle emotional toning by the latter and “Subhadra and Arjuna” by the former, which depended for its impact dramatic setting often in a modernistic physical context which rendered it immediately accessible to the general public. It is perhaps significant that it was his treatment of such themes which depended essentially on the capturing of the physical context which was roundly criticized by scholars like A.K. Coomarswamy, E.B. Havell, Sister Nivedita, O.C. Ganguly etc. Conversely the use of the wash manner and even more importantly the artist’s perception and expression of them was not only considered appropriate but as also a clear understanding of these values by a modern mind. This style and approach, as is well documented was to have great impact on the artists of at least the next generation. The dissimilar approach is also clear from the rendition of the figures of Shiva and Parvati and other gods as well as Abnindranath Tagore paid a much greater attention to capturing the metaphysical and spiritual content. The Bengal School artists also usually paid a greater attention to the iconographic requirements of the theme while Ravi Varma, apart from using only some recognizable attributes like the rudraksha, the ochre robes and vahanas, did not lay much emphasis on them.
Event though the inadequacy of demarking clear stages in the evolution of style has been amply demonstrated. It appears that the process of a disconnect with the traditional manner and thought began from the 1940s. This was in no small measure due to the fast shifting socio-political-cultural realities of contemporary India and more importantly the artists growing awareness of their environment, as well as the influence of the European stylistic modernity. It is during this period that artists began to concentrate on finding an idiom, both stylistic and content wise, which they considered to be more relevant to the contemporary India. This led the artist towards an exploration of new mediums, materials and a new interpretation of the theme in which graphic and a philosophic interpretation did not have much role to play. Even though many artists, particularly belonging to the Bengal School retained their fidelity to the religious motif in the other artists the treatment became more veiled reflecting clearly their fast evolving artistic preoccupations. Religious themes were thus supplanted by more contemporary ones and even where these were painted by the artist a more contemporary vocabulary and a different ethic began to invest them. The case of M.F. Husain's Mullah and Maryam is very revealing in this context where a religious theme was shorn of its ideological base and given an entirely different context that was more immediate and accessible to the Indian mind. Such is the hold of religion however on the minds of the Indians that towards the late 1950's early 60's the religious subject matter began to reassert itself but in an entirely new, unrecognizable garb in which the sense of alienation from the iniquitous present, as ingrained in the psyche of the Indian mind became the driving force behind them.

The first difference immediately becomes clear when one realizes that the artist now no longer treats of it as sending out a clear didactic message in a style which was neither derived from the humanist body as adumbrated in Ajanta or the stylistic conventions of Western and
Eastern Indian painting or even the narrative, lyrical and ideational content of the Mughal, Pahari and Rajasthani styles as he considered himself sovereign to any fixed principles of either the style or the form. The religious theme in most cases became for him merely a prop to his self-expression and self awareness of the theme. He also now clearly intends his work to make a direct and unequivocal social comment and in a style which he felt was more suited for the conveyance of this comment. It must be noticed that despite the overt intention of the artist more often than not a kind of a spiritual quest was interwoven with a search for an expressive form in which Souza’s Crucified Christ apart from expressing his own sense of angst and personal anguish becomes symbolic of a tortured humanity. As a matter of fact the figure of Christ had began to be taken as a symbol of suffering from as early as the early 20th C. A.D. when in Nand Lal Bose’s rendition of the same theme the figure of Christ, burdened with the weight of his own cross that he has to carry himself, becomes emblematic of the entire suffering humanity particularly of an enslaved nation. This perception of the artist that a subject with the initial reference to a religious theme can be loaded with extra religious dimensions but with a pronounced social intent was soon to become an integral part of the creativity of the Indian artist. It is now that the content became some what fractured with only one aspect being given prominence, as available for instance in Satish Gujral. The integral relationship between form and content so important a feature of traditional painting began to be lost with one clearly perhaps dominating over the other. The best examples of this disassociation can be clearly seen in the treatment of Christian paintings of both Satish Gujral and F.N.Souza where Satish Gujral’s expressionist renderings sought to capture the agony of Christ and thus of the entire humanity while Souza added to it a personal dimension of angst and torture. All such works reveal a great deal of experimentation in
form, style, technique and a conscious choice of those aspects of content which were closest to the mind of the artist.

In later years particularly from the decades of 1960s onwards forms become truly signifiers of social condition depending for their inspiration on the perennial social driving force behind them as also those that are immediately contextual. The artist no longer feels constrained by any injunctions on thematic choices, iconographic features or even any faithfulness to the textual narrative, and more important even the spirit of it and of style. To this end the story is freely interpreted iconographic features are often twisted on their heads and even when in some cases some of these were used, these are chosen carefully and utilized by the artist in any way he finds suitable to his purpose. He no longer appears to be much interested in the recapitulation of the story often reconstructing the myth according to his own unique responses to the situation. This progression in the evolution of content as also that of form can be clearly seen in the renditions of Mira Bai of Raval and an almost entirely allusive one by Husain.

In the more recent phase the religious painting seems to have lost its religious character even as more direct and overt concerns intruded upon the consciousness of the artist as religious motif began to be treated as a mere peg on to which any interpretation could be hung leading to an almost total rejection of any hieratic content. This phase is multidimensional and multilayered where nuances of meaning are orchestrated through seemingly simple forms. In these works the traditionally accepted associations of that motif are given an entire turn around to throw a signal entirely at variance, often in opposition to the original one. The works have reference to the many social evils such as corruption and venality as also the inhuman conduct usually towards the powerless and the down trodden the fairly recent one of the nexus between the underworld – filmstar-politician, as evident in Anjolie Ela Menon’s interpretation where the Devi hold a head with an uncanny
likeness to the portrait of the infamous Veerapan. The artist however is also always aware of not only the historical continuity of baser human instincts like passion and greed but also a continuous over layering of tradition with the weight of history. This is clearly brought out by a work like The Sour Grapes by Atul Dodiya where tradition, myth and history come to an almost effortless synthesis.

Along with considering the relationship between the traditional approach to such themes an evaluation of the relationship between the early 20th Century work to those of the present is also relevant. Instead of an emphasis on the narrative in Ravi Varma and on ideological one by Abanindranath Tagore now a lot of experimentation in forms, style, technique, is present along with a conscious choice of the artist to capture the content of the work which for him goes beyond both these and creates new paradigms for himself now all pervasive. To this end the forms are manipulated, pulled, pushed often in a style in which components of many idioms are intermixed, as the artist is not wary of any stylistic vocabulary or technique that he finds apt. In later years instead of the benign aspect of the gods where even a violent theme was handled in a subdued manner it is now the violent, the fearsome aspect that begins to become the motif of the work A comparison of Souza with Bengal School in this context is relevant reflecting a sort of concordance with his environment on the part of the former and an ingrained anger with it in the latter. For many artists these themes also become exercises in the creation of an innovative pattern or experiments with forms as in some works by K.G. Subramanyan and particularly the interpretations of Sohni Mahiwal by Satish Gujral.

Bengal School and Ravi Varma often concentrate only on one moment where as the contemporary artists often mix up various episodes, symbols and sometimes even gods and goddesses as particularly in Sakti Burman. In another interpretation where a unity of ideas and approach can be clearly perceptible, artists like Husain
juxtaposed two personalities as in ‘Buddha and Gandhi’ for both of whom the message of humanism was of paramount significance. All the element like colours, lines form ,composition become tools for the expression of this fundamental change. This an entirely new direction is also reflected in the choice of themes . Presentation of the such themes from Mahabharata, renditions of Shiva the destroyer and of Ganesha as a remover of all obstacles and Devi as the force that successfully fights the evil spirit appear to be preferred choices as also is the ;Last Supper . The choice of Last Supper over that of Crucified Christ,in recent years forcefully brings out the intention of the artist which not only does not submit to the inequities of his age but also has the courage to confront it, a feature that clearly comes through in a rendition of this theme by Krishen Khanna. The artist also goes beyond a literal rendering of the theme and gives it a contemporary reference by consciously using contemporary artefacts as for instance Husain and Arpana Caur and Ajay Kumar whose work clearly locates it in his own physical environment along with many others

This brief survey of the treatment of the religious motif by the modern Indian artist also reveals that instead of only concentrating on their own religion, the artist freely treats of themes of other religions as well as revealing a catholicity of approach in which any theme can become a vehicle for the conveyance of the immediate concern of the artist . Many artists of different faiths have chosen to represent themes from varied religions the most striking example being that of Husain who moves from one system of belief to another with equal ease and facility choosing with care the events from any system which he considers as adequate for the conveyance of his meaning. The treatment of any of these themes also does not remain confined to any one specific region social engagement stylistic characteristics and thematic consideration for he can now choose and interpret them in a way which is unique to him. However whatever be the interpretations of
the themes, their experimental forms and techniques and the individual perceptions of the artist, the religious motive remains an integral point of reference for and thus forges a firm bond between the past and the present. Thus is the myth invented and reinvented by him.