INTRODUCTION

Presentation of religious themes, motifs and observances has remained one of the primary motivating factors for the Indian painter during both the ancient and medieval period. From Ca. 2nd C. B.C to Ca. 7th C, in the caves of Ajanta the artist interpreted reverently and lovingly the doctrine of Buddhism, particularly the compassion and humanism so integral a part of it in a style which was easily and immediately intelligible and accessible, destined to make the paintings not separate from but one with the person for whom they were intended, in the process however universalizing the particular. In Ellora while the subject matter remains the same in so far as the myth is religious but the content changes significantly as “... the human interest... (yields) place to the overwhelming forces of religion with... consequent stress on iconography and Pauranic legends...”1.

Indian painting acquired a different dimension during the period of the Muslim invasions and their early rule in India when miniature painting replaced the magnificent murals. In these miniatures both in East and in West India, while the religious themes were retained a different scope and function of the arts began to be adumbrated even as the painted image itself became the equivalent of the deity2 emphasis being laid on the iconographic and hieratic aspects. It is in the 15th C that a perceptible process of the loosening of style begins to become visible as the austerity of the Western Indian miniatures became exposed to the Muslim influence, to a small extent in the beginning but to a more rapid one in the 16thC, possibly because of the approach of the Sultans towards Indian painting who conceived of a painted image not as an object of worship but of sensual delight.3 During the Akbari period4, the narrative content of the theme treating them in contemporary settings became the norm even as during that of Jahangir a more philosophical and a kind of mystical content was added to the few paintings executed then. With the disintegration of the Mughal rule and the consequent loss of Imperial patronage to the artist, the artists moved away from the Mughal court and found refuge at

1 Chandra, Moti. Studies in Indian Painting. pp. 35-36, Bombay, 1974
3 Kessar, Urmi, Social Content in Modern Indian Painting, p. 47 Thesis submitted for Ph. D. degree to the Panjab University, 1982
4 That Akbar was tremendously interested in painting and gave it every encouragement is proven by a statement of Abul Fazal, “It seems to me that the painter... has quite peculiar means to recognize God.” See Brown Percy, Indian Painting Under the Mughals, New York, 1975.
various centres like Rajasthan and the Punjab Hills, essentially Hindu states. It is here that an entirely new content was imparted to the religious themes. While the tendency towards a contemporisation of the subject retained its hold to some extent, an ideal almost a lyrical treatment lifted these works to a level where the narrative, the poetry the ideal content melded together in an effort less synthesis.5

A new type of painting, however began to gradually emerge in the late 18thC. due to the impact of the British. This type of painting known as the Company School was to become predominant in more and less the whole of British India in the 19thC and to give a new slant to all the themes including those of religious subject matter treated therein. The circumstances of this change were of far reaching consequence. The 19thC India spans the gulf between the forces of medievalism on one hand and modernism on the other. The introduction of a different pattern of education, a new administrative system based on a fundamental primacy of rules and laws, the establishment of the first newspaper all helped to bring the Indian mind into contact with the development abroad especially to the philosophy of enlightenment and rationalism that sought to reduce every aspect and attitude of life to a reasoned system in which emphasis was laid essentially on the quantifiable and qualifiable rather than imaginary and the ideal. Because of the needs and requirements of the British who required a work which was more descriptive and in a way naturalistic, a different world emerged in front of the Indian artist in which not only the subject matter changes but even more significantly a new artistic methodology also adapted itself to meet the new requirements and challenges. The introduction of the use of oils, a different treatment of water colours, pencils or sepia drawings directly on to paper, the use of modeled colours instead of flat patterns in bright colours, the understanding of the three dimensional perspective, and treatment of human figure in a naturalistic manner with emphasis on their anatomy and positions of movement and according to W.G.Archer, the cult of the picturesque were aspects of the new artistic vocabulary. In response to the European needs a new subject matter entered the repertoire of the artist like sets of native costumes, occupations, festivals, fairs, means of transport, flora and fauna, architectural views and local people. In this

5 The coming of the British was a cataclysmic event that gradually changed the entire complexion of the Indian society, the cultural assault being “more fundamental and total than any of the previous ones”. See Subramanyan, K.G. “Indian Art Tradition: its many faces” (R.K. Mukerjee Memorial Lecture), p. 28
scheme of things there was not much scope for religious content but some images of the gods and goddesses from South India, some records of religious observances and festivals are known a few of which have been discussed in subsequent chapters of this essay. O.C. Ganguly's couple of books on individual artists, B.K. Sarkar's evaluation of the Bengal School in Rupam, Manohar Kaul's Modern Indian Painting, P.R. Ramachandra Rao's Modern Indian Painting, and works of Venkatachalam, Geeta Kapur, K.G. Subramanyan, Ratan Parimoo, Neville Tuli, Yashodhra Dalmia all meticulously the stages of stylistic evolution of modern Indian painting. Apart from these scholarly works a large number of works especially of academic manner were oleographed. These works also gained popularity by their inclusion in publications of general religious interest in journals like Kalyan (Hindi) etc. This is particularly true in the case of Raja Ravi Varma and Banapada Bannerjee and a number of Sikh paintings. A large number of scholarly books on Modern Indian painting have been published during the last sixty years or so, although the first significant analysis appears to be that of A.K. Coomarswamy, followed closely by Sister Nivedita and O.C. Ganguly whose works by and large concentrate on single artists and B.K. Sarkar, where the emphasis is on a formal analysis rather than a philosophic one. These works essentially dealt with evaluation and analysis of the style and content of the Bengal School works. The works of later art historians like P.Ramachandra Rao, Manohar Kaul and G.Venkatachalam concentrated on documenting the biographical details of some important artists and the stylistic analysis of their works, art historians like W.G. Archer and Karl Khandalavala with the former dealing with a general survey but concentrating essentially on the development of certain artists like Abanindranath Tagore, Gagenendranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore and so on and Khandalavala on Amrita Shergil as later did Yashodhara Dalmia's "Amrita Sher Gil, a Life" dwelt on Amrita Shergil.

The writings by Ratan Parimoo apart from general survey deals also with the documentation, categorization and analysis of works by Abanindranath Tagore, Gagendranath Tagore, Rabindranath Tagore and many more contemporary ones. In her Abanindranath and the art of his Times, Jaya Appasamy, apart from the survey of the artists seeks to give a specific socio-cultural context to their work. The same approach, though in a more incisive and analytical form can be sensed from Gita Kapur's Contemporary Indian Artist. Works by scholars like Krishna Chaitanya and Yashodhara Dalmia deal with the situation of the Modern Indian Painting in a holistic way discussing in detail the influences on a particular artist, his/her place in the general development of art and the impact that his works had on other contemporary artists. Besides these works, only a few of which are mentioned here, there are also available a number of articles in important journals like Marg and Roop Lekha. The journal of Arts and Ideas, amongst many others.

In all these works except for those dealing with the Bengal School, the dominant emphasis has been on the analysis of their style content and the socio-political cultural context. References to religious themes, their style and subject matter are found in all the above cited works. But so far, in the state of my knowledge, not a single book or a set of articles has appeared that deals with a systematic analysis, critical evaluation and the context of religious works in a single format. This dissertation “Religious and Mythopoetic Content in Modern Indian Painting”, Circa 1875-2000, is an attempt to try to catalogue and analyse such works in a somewhat organized way. It strives also, if possible to seek a concordance of the style of each work and its inherent content.

To this end an effort was made to contact as many artists as possible, look at their works and have some kind of discussion revolving around those with them. I have also tried to access some written material of the available corpus of books and journals on the works relevant to this enquiry apart from visits to various government and private museums, art galleries, private collections and the studios of the artists. In addition to catalogues of their exhibitions, newspaper notices and articles which appeared periodically were also consulted.

This work has been divided into six chapters. While one chapter, the sixth concentrates on the mythopoetic works, the other five deal individually with various important religious systems of India viz Hinduism, Buddhist and Jaina, Islam, Christianity and finally Sikhism, corresponding loosely to their chronological presence in this country. It
has been my hope that the titles given to each of these chapters would provide an idea of my insight into the basic philosophy and thought content of these systems. Each of these chapters follows a scheme in which apart from the consideration of works, their style and content, a small section was also included on some observance, rituals etc. associated with them as also representations of some places of worship and some historical events associated with these. The works of the artists are arranged in a somewhat loose chronological order starting with those of the most senior artists and progressing to the works of the late 20th C. early 21st C: unless the demands of discussions necessitated a change this arrangement. Each chapter contains a very brief note of available biographical information on the artists in a footnote. Most of this information has been gleaned from Pratima Seth “Dictionary of Indian Art and Artists” unless otherwise stated. The first Chapter ‘A Search for the Divine’ deals with Hinduism, in all its major aspects like Vaishnavism, Shaivism and Shaktism, the second, ‘Humanism and Compassion’ discusses the works of pertaining to Buddhism and Jainism, the third ‘Manifestation of the Pure’ with Islamic themes, the fourth ‘Rising Above the Human’ with Christian subject matter and the fifth ‘Spirituality, Vitality and Energy’ with Sikhism. In the chapter on Mythopoetic content under the title Visualising Poetry, I encountered certain problems in particular in demarking the religious narrative and themes and its mythopoetic content, for as is well known a few of these works, particularly of Hinduism, are often considered of mythopoetic significance especially because no specifically historical records are available on them. To counter this difficulty, by and large such works were selected for consideration under this theme which have been usually categorized as belonging to, what is termed by scholars as Upakhyana. 18 Such works considered as upakhyana deal with legends associated with them and are a part of the extension to texts but do not have much role to play in the general development of the narrative an important instance being the legend of Nala Damyanti. Some presentations of important poets in whom religious content is of final importance have also been included. This chapter also includes a brief consideration of certain dominant motifs like Radha and Krishna as nayak and nayika in various situations including the Ragamala series it also deals with some important related texts like the Gita Govinda and others. Note has also been taken of the various ancient texts, particularly dramatic, which

18 I am indebted to Nirmal Mittal professor of Sanskrit for this information.
have been rendered by the Indian artist in a highly imaginative and sensitive way, along with significant works on poetry, love legends and so on for each of these works are usually considered to be containing a search for the divine in the garb of a recognisable narrative and imagery. It must also be mentioned that though this essay concentrates on paintings and drawings on canvas, cloth and wood. Some mention of collages and murals has also been made.

This work was begun on the premise that not much material would be available on it. As the search for material progressed it was found that a very large number of works on the general religious tenor were available painted by an equally large number of artists, both very well known and some not so. In order to facilitate the organization of the vast material available. I have restricted myself to the consideration of only some important artists and their works attempting in the process to mention and illustrate those works such as mark a new departure, in the interpretation of form, content and technique. Inevitably a number of works have had to be left out of this brief survey. For this serious lapse I am solely responsible as I am for the many errors, not only typological but also of analysis for all of which I crave indulgence.