Chapter - 5
Basil Gray the noted author observes in his 'The Art of India' that "Modern Indian art is an outgrowth of European colonization and by the same circumstance it is hybrid, split at the root. Personal and cultural identity are always reciprocally determined. In India the need for a national identity arose even as the intelligentsia assimilated the modern concept of a unique individuality."1 It may be noted that Indian painting reached almost a dead end towards the close of the nineteenth century as the antient Mughal and Pahari schools had both exhausted their vitality so that an arid lack of spirit and mere formalism pervaded Indian art at that time.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the major indigenous movements of Indian art, such as the Mughal and the Rajput had been petered out through the impact of European naturalistic art, which was becoming the order of the day in the country. The various folk and Bazar styles of course continued, but even they were affected, to some extent, by the foreign invasion. In the schools of art, attached to the various

teaching institutions of India, Greek and Roman models were being copied by the students according to the curriculum of education which the British had introduced earlier. After the British conquest there was no serious art form that could attract an all Indian audience. Around the beginning of the twentieth century, however, a movement for national awareness was also beginning to take shape wherein some important liberal Indians did do a certain amount of heart searching. As a result thereof Indian creativity began to stir again in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It started an interpretation of Indian life and vision through Indian eyes. The champion of this first renaissance was the noted artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906) who is famous for his mythological and epic works such as Ravana and Jatya and who reintroduced Indian subjects and cherished national ideals and visions. It was a first step. The next step forward, from national themes to a national style, proved to be more difficult.

This was the time when government aided schools of art were established in the presidency towns of Madras, Calcutta, Bombay and Lahore, and several artists of repute were recruited

to practice, teach and experiment with art. When the noted British teacher and accomplished artist E.B. Havell came to India and became the principal of the Calcutta School of Arts an important vital element got infused into Indian painting. Havell was the first Englishman to appreciate Indian art for its own values and he and his colleague, Abanindranath Tagore, self consciously put themselves against the idea of copying the Greek and Roman models, and such other imitative efforts as were in practice in the Calcutta school. Havell was a theosophist by inclination and had a deep regard and reverence for India's past. Abanindranath Tagore was sympathetic to the Brahmo faith, which was a kind of synthesis of the Sanatan Dharma with modern European developments, and was current in the middle class society of Bengal in those days. The two teachers put emphasis on recapturing the great spiritual past of India which resulted in inspiring their Indian students to look back in their origin. All these efforts resulted in what came to be identified as the Bengal school. The Bengal school thus represents the first important art trends of modern time after what was comparatively a dark age.

Bengal school originated with the devoted creative activity

and concerted efforts of Abanindranath Tagore, and readily this school got national status in the field of art. The name Bengal school applies to a style rather than a regional development or period of time. When Abanindranath Tagore who was also a cousin of the great Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore became the principal of the school of art at Calcutta after Havell he continued with the Havell doctrine to inspire Indian artists to look back in to their origin, so that he was later recognised as the father of the Bengal School.

Abanindranath Tagore was born in 1871 at Jarasanke, the Tagore residence in Calcutta. The presence of Rabindranath Tagore probably exercised the greatest influence and his encouragement meant a great deal to Abanindranath. When Shantiniketan the dream of Rabindranath Tagore was well established the teaching of art was introduced as a separate department in what was called Kala Bhavan.

Abanindranath's formal education consisted of some years, spent at the Calcutta Sanskrit College (1881-1890) which groomed his understanding and love of Indian classics. At this stage he also came across a few Irish illustrations and an album of Mughal miniatures, and between these two trends of art, one foreign and the other inland, Abanindranath's discerning eye
found some strange affinity, and a new gate to the world of art opened wide before him and he created a new series of Radha-Krishna paintings. Though the subjects matter remained traditional, he adopted some features of folk style also. In 'Krishna Slaying the Horse Kesu', the dynamic quality is notable and the animals, birds and people stand out in straightforward simplicity. His teaching methods were widely appreciated in Bengal school. Though he was tolerant yet he insisted that the students should have sound knowledge of their own historic culture. His pioneering efforts gave a new direction to Indian art, ably carried on by his students. He served the art of painting as a promulgator and teacher of art. He created a batch of brilliant students such as Kshitindra Nath Majumdar, Sarada Charan Ukil and Asit Kumar Haldar followed by a host of later practitioners. This trend was thought to be more truly Indian. Each of them derived different techniques and a highly personal style. Several were appointed as principals of the various art schools spread over the country and they influenced art throughout India for several years. They favoured the wash technique, developed and mastered by their influential teacher, Abanindranath Tagore.

After Abanindranath, Nandalal Bose is acknowledged as the major painter of Bengal school. He had great respect for the Indian tradition not only in art but also in life, and so he treated mythological themes more realistically. His constant reference to reality gave added vigour to his paintings. In 1910 he visited Ajanta and the Bagh caves. His best works are undoubtedly rooted in Indian art in spite of his many eclectic paintings. He was also the first exponent of tempra technique which was also adopted by some of his contemporaries.

Kshitindra Nath Majumdar, one of the early disciples of Abanindranath showed promise and acquired fame for the impressive simplicity in his pictures which reflect the joys and sorrows, the customs and gatherings, the religious leaders and the people of the rural Bengal, where he grew up. Employing the wash technique of Abanindranath Tagore, Kshitindranath's skill manifests itself in the emotive quality of his line. His artistic talent is cherished for its native realism and gentle Indian flavour.

Asit Kumar Haldar, another distinguished disciple of Abanindranath Tagore was different from his colleagues in his wealth of style and subject-matter. In early stage of his career he made so many copies of the paintings at Ajanta, Bagh and
Jogimara. For his medium he used tempura, oil or water colour whichever suited to the requirements of the subject. In the process he also discovered a special technique-lacquered painting on wood also known as lacsit.5

Sharada Charan Ukil, was also among the foremost artists of the renaissance movement. He painted in the traditional style but with a novelty. In beginning he would paint rural life in black and white only. Afterwards he painted religious, historical and general themes.

As the students of Havell and Abanindranath, who imbibed the Ajanta tradition themselves became teachers in the Art School at various places in India, they almost groomed and brought up two generations of students blindly to believe in the lifeless, over sentimentalised and spiritual, figures of their paintings, as the models of progress. And with the rise in the intensity of the British contempt for India's culture this so called 'national art of India, which was mainly revivalist, went on the defensive and pitted itself against Europe as a 'spiritual art' against the 'materialist naturalism' of the west. The alien British rulers did not offer too many opportunities for artists to

acquaint themselves with what was happening during the last three decades in Europe so that the Indian artists grew up in solitary isolation, hugging to themselves the illusions of India's mighty past, making romantic gestures to prove how deep and profound were the symbols of Hindu religion and how deep were the impulses behind Indian art. They even did not look at the formal aspects of the gigantic Indian tradition in painting and sculpture. It was pointed out that "The consequences of this revivalism, helped by the pioneer critics, have been tragic in the extreme though, perhaps, the tragedy has an air of inevitability about it."^6

The Bengal School would insist on form as one of the artist's main preoccupations, and would seek significance in story telling and a spiritual symbology, of the most abstruse kind. It was a movement in which few of the artists actually believed, except decoratively. Because of these and some other basic drawbacks this so called Bengal School could not remain alive for long and came to an end by the last days of its moving spirit - the maestro Abanindranath Tagore. However the contributions and efforts done by the artists of the Bengal School for the renaissance movement shall ever remain alive in

the history of Indian art. The new and younger generation revolted against orthodox sentimentalism and curiously, it happened in Bengal itself, with Jamini Roy attempting to synthesize his gift for colour and line with the realities of village life, and his Calcutta group of younger contemporaries, Rathin Moitra, Pradosh Das Gupta and Gopal Ghose etc. revolting against the revivalists began to question the premises of the older generation. It was then that Amrita Shergil registered her arrival and synthesized through her genius, a modern colour sense with a deep, almost harrowing sensitiveness to the sadness of India's people. She could discover the sorrow of Indian villages and their sufferings.

During first half of the twentieth century, of the number of painters who remained independent of Bengal School Gaganendra Nath Tagore, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil were prominent and outstanding. These four leading artists were great pioneers of Indian modernism, which they backed up with their exceptionally rich and creative imagination. First among them to be noticed was the celebrated, poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) whose style was all his own, even if it was said to have been inspired by that of

Paul Klee who too had an equally strong sense of rhythm. Rabindranath Tagore was thus the first man in India who painted in Modern style. His pictures have three common essential features: (i) they are unmistakably modern in style and feeling, (ii) they are entirely individual, and (iii) they are very Indian. Rabindranath Tagore did not lean on myth or legend for his inspiration. It may be remarked that as Rabindranath did not undergo any regular training, he was also free from preoccupation with technique which occasionally obscure rather than serve to express the inner vision. Designed with extreme simplicity, many of his compositions, especially the head studies, have a broading subjectivity, a charge of talent meaning carried up from, the depth of the subconscious. Expressionism today derives ample prestige from his example. He was a 'natural'.

Technically more adept, Gaganendranath Tagore realised that wash was not the only technique with possibilities. He had drawn black and white sketches. His works reveal versatality. In choice of subjects, and their interpretation, he was first in India to caricature social facts and evils. He also did a large number

8. H. Goetz : Art of the World, Indian Art Through the Ages, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Old Secretariate, Delhi, 1959, p. 46.
of portraits with a brush drawing technique. His landscapes, in monochrome or soft dull shades, are the most naturalistic of his works. His later semi abstract works mostly portray the exterior of houses, silent and uninhabited, such as 'the desolate house'.

Abstraction dominates his cubist work. Where the elements cannot be recognised, small angular shapes are manipulated in such way as to create the impression of movement on the canvas.\(^9\) Gaganendranath gave confidence to many younger artists who felt that conformity to reviverist practice would not help them to express themselves freely.

Jamini Roy, the distinguished master artist from Bengal was painfully dissatisfied with the prevailing academic style and with city life and turned to the folk art of Bengal for his inspiration. At first the Bazar paintings of Kalighat, a suburb of Calcutta, drew his attention. He gave a modern accent to an old tradition after pioneer efforts in the western manner which completely failed to satisfy him. Jamini Roy emerged from a crisis of the spirit in 1921 with an intense desire to evolve a more vigorously expressive style. Revivalist doctrine and practice did not find favour with him because he noticed their tendency to lean heavily on literary associations and the anemia

which affected the vision of form in the case of the less gifted among their ranks. In Bankura, the folk tradition was still vigorous in spirit of the encroachments of industrialisation so that he went back for inspiration to the 'Pat' and 'scroll' the clay dolls and pottery decorations of humble village artisans. If his art was revitalised by refreshing itself at the fountains in which originate the streams of folk art traditions, these in turn underwent significant transformations in his hands.¹⁰ From about 1925 Jamini Roy started painting in the glowing colours and flowing curves of this style those subjects that really mattered to him. His manner was daringly simple. His compositions had all the subtlety of the mature artist.¹¹ His vigorous, coherent statement of form mediates today between the younger artists and the folk art tradition to which they turn for inspiration.

Jamini Roy continued to paint village subjects, studied and painted the magnificent physique of the Santhals to turn later to the theme of the life of Christ only to return to his earlier style, i.e. to the subject of Bengali village art.

The greatest among all these rising young artists who distanced themselves from the Bengal School was the

outstanding Amrita Sher-Gil. Because of her extraordinary drawing and painting abilities Amrita came to be known as the most remarkable personality in the field of modern Indian art. This talented lady painter made a revolutionary entry in the Indian art world so that a radical change emerged.

Even with their sustained and long directed efforts the British rulers were not able to introduce western technique in India. Amrita however introduced the western technique of oil painting in India very smoothly (easily). Her effort was highly successful. She lead from the front.

Trained in Paris, Amrita declared on her return to India that she was keenly interested in Indian traditions and culture. She made numerous masterpieces. Some of her marvellous paintings are 'Hill Men', 'Hill Women', 'Child Wife', 'Banana Seller', 'Women on the Charpai' and 'South Indian Villager Going to the Market' etc. Amrita was deeply curious for simplified naturalism, for fulfilment of her mission to project the India of her perception. She did new experiments not only in technique but also in her choice of subjects. She gave an entirely new touch to art with the assimilation of Indian tradition and western technique of oil, going for rural beauties and village life. As Gauguin searched Tahitian Women Amrita
discovered India's rich traditions.

Amrita died at Lahore in 1941, at a premature bare young age of twentynine after having lived out her life in a mood of intense dedication and having revealed that modernism can generate as religious and ardent a loyalty as revivalism.

Amrita was an ideal artist. Her creative, expressive and emotional imaginative power is clearly visible in her paintings. She was more than successful in expressing them in real sense, and her paintings justified her passion for India and the Indian people.

Her early death and subsequent political developments leading to partition and Independence of India in 1947 left indelible marks on the young contemporatries who followed in her footsteps to make some of her dreams come of age.