CHAPTER - VI
THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF ORIENTAL ART & THE TURBULENT TIMES
(1930 – 1947)
The anti-colonial nationalist movement during the first half of the twentieth century was markedly reinforced by the development of a nationalist cultural idiom directed towards the cultural regeneration of the country. In this respect the role played by the Indian Society of Oriental Art was of special significance and the preceding chapters have attempted to offer a detailed analysis of the efforts of the Society in this direction. However, this is not to deny the reality that since the 1930s signs of steady decline in the activities of the Society became increasingly visible signifying the end of its glorious days. The immediate pre-independence years constituted a period of great turmoil in the country's history and the political, socio-economic context of the time was bound to reflect on the contemporary art scenario. However, the Society operating within the bounds of several constraints, was hindered in its efforts to serve as a proper platform for the realization of aspirations of a large group of artists. The contemporary art scene underwent a considerable change but the Society and its artists failed to uphold the new art forms. Infact some of them even attempted to work outside the orbit of the Indian Society of Oriental Art.

The 1930s and 1940s were decades of momentous developments in the history of India's struggle for independence. In 1930, Mahatma Gandhi launched the Civil Disobedience Movement, a movement unsurpassed in the history of the
Indian nationalist struggle for the countrywide mass participation it unleashed. In 1939 the Second World War commenced in all its fury with Hitler's invasion of Poland. India, as a colony of Great Britain, became associated with the British war efforts. To the vast majority of the Indians the war seemed to be fought for causes alien to their interests and therefore meaningless for the country. They were resentful of being subjected to the immense sufferings that the war entailed. Rising prices and food shortages affected the common man and a severe man-made famine ravaged Bengal in 1943. At the same time the ugly wings of communalism encouraged by the sinister British policy of 'Divide and Rule' seemed to tear the country apart. Communalism, an integral part of the imperialist strategy ".....tragically proved that in the context of India the price of a negotiated 'transfer of power' was an encouragement of divisive forces culminating in Pakistan".1

Popular militancy was also on the rise. The Quit India movement inaugurated by Gandhi in 1942 "marked a new high in terms of popular participation in the national movement ..."2 The demand for independence became the immediate agenda of the national movement. During the 1940s three militant popular upsurges swept the country. The first two occurred in Calcutta

2. Bipan Chandra, India's Struggle for Independence (New Delhi, 1989) p.467
in 1945-46 over the I.N.A. trials and the sentence awarded to the I.N.A. officer Rashid Ali. The third upsurge was the Naval Revolt of 1946 in Bombay.

Thus the Forties, a decade that witnessed the last phase of India's anti-colonial nationalist movement, was indeed a turbulent period. War, famine, nationwide mass uprisings, fratricidal riots ravaged the country. The noted Bengali literateur Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay described the situation thus:

The War has arrived at the doorsteps of Bengal. Storms, floods, famines have devastated the country. ³

Paritosh Sen, the noted artist of the Calcutta Group also recollected the troubled times:

On the one hand the War had started. The Japanese had started to enter our country. It was around this time that the British ruling class created a terrible famine. Such an intense man-made famine is unparalleled in human history.⁵

The noted artist Somnath Hore gave a vivid description of the prevailing situation in Chittagong, a frontline area during the War:

Suddenly there was food scarcity. Mass starvation was widespread. The worse affected were the potters, barbers, washermen, fishermen and the landless. The womenfolk were riddled with venereal disease. Without food or medical care they were dying.6

In such circumstances the romanticism of the Bengal School style of art was on the wane. It was becoming increasingly evident that the Bengal School lacked the inherent strength and capability to adjust to the changed situation. The artists were now faced with the stark reality. As Somnath Hore has further noted in his memoirs:

Fine art was not a consideration. Rather it was Mao Tse Tung's dictum that held sway: "All artistic efforts must be directed towards resistance against the Japanese aggressors; let embroidery take a backseat for the present".7

Thus emerged a new group of artists who sought to

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6. Somnath Hore, Wounds (Scanned by Repro Scan India Private Limited, Printed by Sun Lithographing Company) p.8
7. Ibid
PL.47 - Chittaprosad’s sketch of a man, whose family was ostracised after he was suspected of having contracted syphilis at Halisahar, Chittagong
uphold the experience of the suffering humanity in their works. The Famine of 1943 especially moved such artists and their works served as the most valuable documentation of the contemporary reality. Infact the famine made such an impact on the creative expression of some of the artists of the time that it became the chief content of their work. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay wrote:

Today, the Bengali artist has selected as his model, human skeletons, decaying corpses surrounded by hungry dogs, jackals and vultures.\(^8\)

Individual artists like Chittaprasad, Surya Roy, Zainul Abedin, Somnath Hore were busy to record the human misery of the time. Chittaprasad moved from village to village to make sketches and report on the famine. Somnath Hore noted, "His empathy for the exploited was immense".\(^9\) He particularly dealt with the themes of hunger and oppression. He also made sketches of the war, the communal riots and the Naval Revolt of 1946 which awakened the Indian intelligentsia to the reality of the situation. Somnath Hore remarked that Chittaprasad's works seemed to create an awareness among the artists of their social responsibility.\(^{10}\) Another artist Zainul Abedin emerged as

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8. Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Op.Cit, p.3
the most famous artist of the Bengal famine, depicting the victims of the famine with powerful emotion. Unlike Chittaprasad and Zainul Abedin who sought to offer a kind of illustrative and documentary picture of famine, Somnath Hore tried to uphold a pictorial image of a shattered social situation, doing a lot of sketches on the Tebhaga movement.\textsuperscript{11} However, these artists did not attempt to utilize the platform offered by the Indian Society of Oriental Art to uphold their art. Neither did the Society attempt to give space to such artists.\textsuperscript{12}

It was around this time that an alternate platform was offered by the Calcutta Group, founded in 1943, the year of the Famine. Among its founder members were artists like Prodosh Dasgupta, Gopal Ghosh, Nirode Mazumdar, Paritosh Sen, Rathin Maitra, Subho Tagore, Kamala Dasgupta, Prankrishna Paul. The Group showed a greater concern for man and society and was determined to produce an art that would reflect the contemporary reality and values which the traditional schools had failed to do. The artists of the group sought "a deeper role for socio-political comment". As Prodosh Dasgupta, one of the members of the Group noted, "All we want is to understand life and interpret it in terms of creative art".\textsuperscript{13} Gopal Ghosh, one of

\begin{itemize}
\item[11.] Tebhaga Movement was peasant unrest centred on the demands of sharecroppers
\item[12.] In the records of the I.S.O.A. of the pre-independence period, there is absence of mention of the Society's attempts at upholding the contemporary art forms
\item[13.] Prodosh Dasgupta, quoted by Dipak Bhattacharya, 'Bengal Famine and its Response in Art : A Brief Introduction', Nandan, Vol.XXVII
\end{itemize}
i - GOPAL GHOSH, 'BAMBOO GROVE'
ii - PRANKRISHNA PAUL, 'THE KISS'
iii - NIRODE MAZUMDAR, 'GARUDA'

PL.48 - THE CALCUTTA GROUP
the promising artists of the Group was inspired by the contemporary environment. His depiction of the miseries associated with the war, of the starving population as well as the post-war upsurges like the Naval Revolt were blatant portrayals of the troubled times. Works by other artists like 'Orphan' by Nirode Mazumdar, 'Food Queue', by Prodosh Dasgupta, 'Mother and Child' and 'Family' by Prankrishna Paul reflected the acute economic crisis that had affected the common man.

It must be noted here that artists like Gopal Ghosh and Prankrishna Paul who had been originally associated with the Indian Society of Oriental Art now searched for an alternate platform that was offered by the Calcutta Group. This was indicative of the failure of the Society to uphold contemporary art forms.

At the same time experimentations in art were being undertaken by artists outside the Indian Society of Oriental Art, involving a greater interaction with modern European art. For instance, the Calcutta Group believed that art should aim at being international and interdependent. They thus viewed art in its international context and were determined to break with the past, to be modern and to explore experimental processes undertaken in the West. Prodosh Dasgupta, one of the Group's founder members, thus recollects in his memoirs:
At a time when the glorious days of the Bengal School were on the wane, the artists of the Calcutta Group attempted to liberate themselves from the trammels of the Bengal School by imbibing new ideals inspired by a greater interdependence between the Eastern and Western art forms.14

The Statesman, March 17, 1945 noted, "The sources from which the Calcutta Group .... derives its inspiration are Gaugain, Modigliani, Matisse ...."15 The Statesman took special note of Chirico's influence on Rathin Maitra's 'The Couple at Tea' and of French influence on Nirode Mazumdar's works. Gopal Ghosh followed the Chinese or Japanese calligraphic style in many of his works whereas Paritosh Sen, Subho Tagore attempted to incorporate elements of Western Cubism in their art. Prodosh Dasgupta was 'bold and inventive', whereas Prankrishna Paul too attempted to evolve a distinct style of his own.16

However, we have no records of such experimental works being undertaken by artists on the platform offered by the Indian Society of Oriental Art, indicating the Society's failure to promote such art during the immediate pre-independence years.

15. See 'Calcutta Group - Promising Work by Young Artists', The Statesman, March 17, 1945
Further, around this time, other centres of art too operated outside the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan was one such centre. Established as early as 1919, it operated as the creative centre of the Bengal School which had shifted to Santiniketan from Calcutta. Nandalal Bose acted as the head of the Kala Bhavan from 1921 - 1951. He, along with his first batch of students such as Benodebehari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij, Ramendranath Chakravarty and others attempted experimentations in content and style, executing creative works in modern Indian sculpture, fresco and graphics.

Another centre of art, the 'Karu Sangha was established in 1930 in Santiniketan, sponsored by the Kala Bhavan. It was to serve as an artists' cooperative with the object of encouraging creativity and of providing for the necessary funds. The Sangha ran well for sometime but it failed to last long.

Yet, both Kala Bhavan and Karu Sangha are indicative of the presence of active centres of art outside the orbit of the Indian Society of Oriental Art.

A notable event in the sphere of art during the 'Forties' was the publication of an album of paintings and sketches entitled 'Visions of Bengal' by the All India Students' Federation.

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17. See Pulak Dutta, 'Karu Sangha : Santiniketan Shilpi Samabay' (Santiniketan, Bangabda 1408) p.49
in December 1944. The collection contained works of about twenty-eight artists and sculptors including Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij, Deviprosad Roychowdhury, Asit Haldar, Indra Dugar, Zainul Abedin, Chittaprasad, Nirode Mazumdar, Subho Tagore and others. Most of the works reflected the miseries of the common man during the famine and the war years. Although Abanindranath, Benode Behari did not contribute paintings on famine, Nandalal contributed one work 'Annapurna and Rudra' related to the famine. The aim of the publication was commendable – to create a Famine Relief Fund! The Federation sold this album containing thirty pictures for rupees five and the whole sale proceeding was given to the Famine Relief Fund.18 At a moment of great socio-economic crisis such an attempt to unite the artists for the service of the disaffected was indeed praiseworthy! Unfortunately during the same period the Indian Society of Oriental Art failed to organize its artists for a similar role which would create an awareness of the artists' social responsibility and the role the artists had to play.

Further, in March 1945, an exhibition of anti-Fascist artists was organized in Calcutta. Among the artists who came forward with their works were Atul Basu, Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay, Sudhir Khastagir, Zainul Abedin, Rathin Maitra,

Govardhan Ash and others. The response of the artists irrespective of their political leanings was a definite sign of positive effort during a period of social crisis and decadence.\textsuperscript{19} However, the Indian Society of Oriental Art, it seems, proved to be incapable for undertaking similar endeavours as we have no records of such exhibitions being organized on its platform.

It also seemed that the nationalistic spirit that had motivated the Society's activities gradually became subdued or had been sidetracked. The renowned artist Shanu Lahiri recollects in her memoirs that when her mother went to see an exhibition of paintings by Jamini Roy in 1935, she did not find a single spectator!\textsuperscript{20}

A decline in the activities of the Indian Society of Oriental Art was much in evidence during the late thirties and forties. Records of the Society's activities became increasingly scanty. With inadequate data it becomes difficult to obtain a clear picture as to whether the Society adopted any clear cut policy to support the artists in their search for an identity during the immediate pre-independence years.

It seems that Society's financial crisis had much to do with the process:

\textsuperscript{19} Op.Cit
\textsuperscript{20} Shanu Lahiri, 'Smritir Collage' (Kolkata, 2001) p.44
The immediate cause of the crisis was no doubt financial, which was very much precipitated by the discontinuation of the considerable amount of monetary grant that it was receiving from the State Government for years together. The organizers failed to mobilize funds from other sources and as a consequence many of its activities had to be curtailed.21

Moreover, there was a 'crisis in leadership'. Gaganendranath Tagore, 'the organizational pivot of the Society', passed away after a prolonged illness and Abanindranath in the absence of capable assistants, failed to maintain his legendary dynamism in his old age. The organizational mantle fell on the shoulders of the next generation of Tagore brothers, who in spite of their best efforts, failed to check the downhill slide of the Society.

In order to encourage and support artistic endeavours, the Society brought about a change in the curriculum of its training studio somewhat acknowledging the changes sweeping the contemporary art scene. A regular course in the technique of Western painting was introduced. Chaitanyadeb Chatterjee was

Infact due to severe financial constraints the I.S.O.A. was compelled to shift its office from the Samabay Mansions to a humble residence at Wellington Square
appointed the Principal and eminent artists like Gopal Ghosh were appointed art teachers of the studio. However, it had to be closed in 1946 due to inadequate number of students.

From 1930 the Society's art journal 'Rupam' was discontinued. In 1933 'The Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art' commenced publication under the joint editorship of Abanindranath Tagore and Stella Kramrisch. Although this was the only notable work of the Society during the period, it did not contain any report of the activities of the Society. This was either due to the Society not functioning regularly or due to the editor's indifference to the art trend promoted by the Society. The successive Annual Reports of the Society during the period did not yield specific data and merely recorded that the Society "passed through another difficult year of routine existence". The journal of the Society continued to be published, annual exhibitions were also regularly held and prizes awarded to the meritorious students. What was noticeable was "the increasing lack of warmth and support in the community for the kind of purity and exclusiveness of the original ideals which the Society stood for very many years".

Thus, during the immediate pre-independence years, which were indeed the turbulent times, the Indian Society of Oriental Art passed through a difficult phase. This was indicated by the emergence of a new group of artists who attempted to replace
in their works the romantic nationalism of the earlier years by
the disturbing reality of the times. Further new groups, new
centres of art emerged, carrying on experimentations in the
realm of art. The Indian Society of Oriental Art riddled with
internal problems perhaps failed to adjust to the changed
situation.

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