CHAPTER - IV
IN SEARCH OF AN IDENTITY: WOMEN ARTISTS IN THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF ORIENTAL ART (1907 - 1947)
During the period 1907 - 1947, quite a large body of women artists searched for an autonomous identity and earned public recognition through the Indian Society of Oriental Art. The present chapter attempts an indepth analysis of the search for an autonomous cultural idiom by some remarkable women who gradually came out of the seclusion of the inner domain of their household and carved out an identity for themselves in a world subjected to domination not only by men but also by the colonial government. In this respect the space offered by the Indian Society of Oriental Art proved to be valuable in bringing to the fore the art form upheld by the women artists who were either directly associated with the Society or utilized the Society's platform in independent capacity. It was thus through the Society that women artists earned a public entity beyond the familial during the colonial period.

The efforts on the part of these women artists were indeed praiseworthy in view of the fact that life was not comfortable for women in those days. The dual restraint of Manu's Law on the one hand and the Muslim purdah system on the other confined the women to the interior, while the men enjoyed full freedom. "Women educated in the vernacular were expected to look after the household and uphold Hindu values". Thus the

women of the household remained in the background, confined to the inner apartments, occupied by household and devotional activities.4

There is no recorded evidence of women artists making a mark for themselves in ancient and medieval India. Available sources do not indicate the existence of any system of formal art education for women in those times. Since the days of Asoka it was a mark of aristocracy that women should not step out of their home. Yet, confined to the 'antapur' or the inner domain, women including princesses and courtesans gained proficiency in drawing and painting, as well as in singing and dancing. Contemporary literature also occasionally refers to professional women painters. However as Partha Mitter has pointed out "..... since the names of even male painters are seldom recorded it is difficult to recover any useful information about women artists".5

During the medieval period, female seclusion became stricter. Confined to their life of domesticity, women however carved out a separate world for themselves. Muslim aristocratic women and even some of their maids, developed an interest in painting to spend their leisurely hours. There are stray references to a few women artists during the Mughal period

4. See Amina Kar, Sunayani Devi, Lalit Kala Contemporary No. 4 (New Delhi, 1966), p.4
5. Partha Mitter, Indian Art (O.U.P., 2001) p.159
namely Sahifa Banu and Nadra Banu. But they were no master painters who could leave an imprint on Indian art.6

There also existed a separate world of domestic art involving women. In Bengal, domestic rituals (Brata) performed by women (Stree Achar) constituted a separate cultural world altogether.7 'Alpana' decoration, an essential mark of many social and religious rituals, involved participation of women. Similarly, 'Rangoli' in Maharashtra, 'Kolam' in South India involved the participation of women artists. Certain forms of folk art like the Madhubani paintings of the Mithila region of Bihar and the Kalighat 'patas' of Bengal required the assistance of women. Confined to the domestic world, women also practised embroidery producing specialized crafts like the 'Kantha' of Bengal. Doll making was a favourite hobby for many women. Making earthen moulds for preparing sweets was also an occupation of some women.

Thus, in the privacy of their home, women indulged in creative pursuits. However such artistic expressions of women's life remained more or less a private affair. There was as yet no determined attempt on the part of the woman to assert her identity by upholding her artistic proficiency.

7. See Renuka Devi Chaudhurani, Stree-Achar (Calcutta, 2006)
However, for the Indian women times changed, although very gradually. With the introduction and spread of Western education under colonial rule in the nineteenth century, momentous changes took place in the different facets of Indian life and society. The social reform movement took up the cause of the oppressed Indian women. "The 'women's question' was a central issue in the most controversial debate over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal ......."8 "By assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire colonial tradition of the country".9

What is perplexing is the sudden disappearance of issues relating to women from the agenda of public debate towards the end of the nineteenth century. Probably the issues taken up were more related to the politics of nationalism. Yet the spread of female education, the project of cultural reform "which nationalist ideology placed on the agenda in the second half of the nineteenth century did however, provide the resources for women to turn personal misfortune into a new social identity".10

The journey of the Indian woman to gain an identity of

9. Ibid, p.117
10. Ibid, Chapter VII, 'Women and the Nation', p.148
her own was never a smooth process. This was reflected in the writings of some women in the nineteenth century. Rashsundari Debi in her 'Amar Jiban' (1876) compared her position to that of a bird in the cage with no identity of its own. Another articulate woman, Rajbala Devi, directly accused men:

    Only men are to be blamed for the deplorable condition of women. They are the one who do not allow us to receive education and thereby enlighten our minds.11

Women were confined to the 'antapur' or the inner domain of their household with no access to the outer world. They were required to carry out their daily domestic routine, observe various bratas and vows. The Indian nationalists who aimed at modernizing the nation on Western terms while retaining an essential national identity were determined to ensure that the self-identity of the Indian national culture was not threatened. Thus "women as the guardians of the inner or spiritual sphere of the nation were now regarded as the embodiments of an essentialized Indianness".12

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The movement for the emancipation of the Bengali women was launched by the Western educated middle class as a part of modernizing their own world and as a means of enriching their lives. However, once women received some education they looked beyond their usual domestic chores for the realization of their aspirations. Women of progressive, affluent families started taking up art as a hobby, along with learning English, playing the piano, knitting delicate laces and horse riding.\textsuperscript{13} In the Tagore household at Jorasanko, Calcutta, a new culture was born through a synthesis of the East and the West and through the joint efforts of both the men and women of the family. In the Tagore family, women enjoyed a large measure of independence in comparison to the women elsewhere. "They rode horses, danced on stage, gave speeches, became graduates".\textsuperscript{14} Some of them took to painting. Hemendranath Tagore's wife Nipomoyee Devi and their daughters Pratibha Devi and Pragya Devi painted in the Western and Indian style although their works failed to attain professional standards. The daughters of the Brahmo Samaj leader, Keshab Chandra Sen, also learned to paint. But their works were characterized by a lack of an individualistic, imaginative style.\textsuperscript{15}

Outside Bengal, the noted artist Ravi Varma's sister

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{13} Chitra Deb, Op.Cit, p.149
\item \textsuperscript{14} Pratima Devi, Op.Cit, p.28
\item \textsuperscript{15} Chitra Deb, Op.Cit
\end{itemize}
Mangalabai Tampuratti, who helped her brother with his ambitious history paintings, attained 'professional standards'. But apart from her one portrait of her brother Mangalabai remains unknown.\textsuperscript{16} One also comes across the name of one Englishman, Lucy Sultan Ahmad, married to an Indian. She was the best known early Indian woman painter in the Bombay Art Society.\textsuperscript{17} In general only the Eurasian or the Parsi communities in Bombay sent their girls to the art schools. The affluent families hired private tutors to teach painting to girls at home as part of their accomplishments.

By the end of the nineteenth century, women of Bengali bhadralok families became educated and accomplished in varied creative pursuits to become 'modern' wives.\textsuperscript{18} Since the 1880s women amateurs even participated in the art exhibitions in Calcutta, some of them winning critical acclaim for their work. In the art exhibition held in Calcutta in 1879, 25 amateur women artists took part. "The most remarkable feature of the show was the presence of 25 women artists, most of them Bengali and married", records the Centenary of the Government College of Art and Craft, 1864 - 1964.

\textsuperscript{16} Partha Mitter, Op.Cit  
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid  
\textsuperscript{18} According to Meredith Boswick, "The presence of women played an important part in consolidating the social identity of the bhadralok". - Meredith Boswick, (The) Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849 - 1905 (Princeton, New Jersey, 1984), Chapter 1, p.5
At the beginning of the twentieth century women gradually came out of the inner domain of their household, although their number was insignificant. In 1905 Bengal was partitioned. The anti-Partition agitation culminating in the Swadeshi movement resulted in a cultural efflorescence in Bengal and a new art movement drawing inspiration from the rich cultural heritage of the country was born. However, although women participated in the anti-Partition agitation their involvement in the new art movement was of little importance. The Englishman noted:

> It is a matter of great regret that other Indian ladies have not thought fit to join the new movement of art in Bengal. The ladies of Bengal have contributed many gifted writers in modern vernacular literature and there is no reason why they should not take their place in other creative fields.¹⁹

It must also be remembered that the women who had acquired proficiency in the arts had not yet thought in terms of gaining an identity of their own. Yet, of significance is the fact that the political and social challenges of the early twentieth century forced the women to come out in the public, although their number was small.²⁰ It was in such an environment that

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¹⁹. The Englishman, January, 1921 (Specific date not obtained)
²⁰. Op.Cit
PL.41 - SUNAYANI DEVI (1875-1962)
the Indian Society of Oriental Art, established in 1907 when the 
Swadeshi movement was in full swing, played a crucial role in 
the evolution of a distinct identity among a number of women 
artists by offering them a respectable platform for the upholding 
of their art forms in their individualistic styles.

It was in this background that Sunayani Devi (1875 – 1972) 
emerged as a real artist in the modern sense of the term. The 
daughter of Gunendranath Tagore and the sister of Gaganendranath and Abanindranath, Sunayani Devi was 
amongst the first women artists of India to evolve a personal 
style and gain recognition on the Society's platform. In this 
respect she may be regarded as the pioneer among the women 
artists.

The environment in which Sunayani Devi grew up greatly 
influenced her. Born in the famed Tagore family of Calcutta, 
the artist "....... was witness to the cultural ferment that was the 
Bengal Renaissance". In her childhood she grew up by the 
side of two 'overpowering personalities', Abanindranath and 
Gaganendranath whose experiments in the Japanese wash 
technique greatly impressed her. She received art lessons as part 
of her personal grooming. She was attracted by the devotional 
pictures that adorned her aunt's room and was acquainted with

22. See Chitra Deb, Thakurbarir Andarmahal (Calcutta, Bangabda 1887),
the various forms of the indigenous art of Bengal - Kalighat pats, alpana, kantha embroidery. All this left a marked imprint on her stylized art. Ravi Varma's paintings also left a strong impression on her mind. At the age of eleven she was married to the great grandson of Raja Rammohan Roy.24 Immediately after her marriage she had little time to devote to art, being busy with household chores. It was only in her thirties that she took up painting seriously with her husband's encouragement. Sunayani Devi "...... was much less exposed to the social whirl where the famous, the great or the talented met".25 "...... yet it is precisely this sheltered 'hot-house' atmosphere that has contributed to the particular appeal her pictures make".26

There was every chance that Sunayani Devi would be influenced by the artistic styles of her celebrated brothers. But she chose to tread a different path. While Abanindranath adopted the Persian and the Mughal techniques and Gaganendranath, the Japanese and Cubist methods, Sunayani Devi worked in the truly indigenous style based on the 'patachitras' of Bengal.27 Sunayani Devi herself maintained that since she worked in an 'inner world' her pictures were entirely different from those of her brothers, being expression of a dream world. She herself maintained that most of her paintings

27. See Kamal Sarkar, Bharater Bhaskar O Chitrashilpi (Calcutta, 1984), p.221
i. 'RADHA - KRISHNA'

ii. 'MOTHER YASHODA'

PL.42 - SUNAYANI DEVI
she had seen in dreams. Sunayani Devi's pictures "do indeed have a transcendental otherworldly quality".28

Sunayani Devi was influenced by some sort of a rural ideology. The noted art critic Stella Kramrisch has referred to the artist drawing inspiration from the humble doll carver's craft and the village women's art like alpana and kantha art. Sunayani Devi herself spoke of her deep attachment to the folk and the popular arts. Yet, although her work upheld the 'simple' art of the Indian village, unaffected by the colonial culture, she did not consciously produce 'nationalist art'. However, her work was seen to epitomize Indian primitivism as an expression of anti-colonial resistance. The renowned art historian Partha Mitter labels Sunayani Devi as the first Indian woman 'primitivist'.29

It was through the platform and space offered by the Indian Society of Oriental Art that Sunayani Devi's 'primitivist' art came to public attention, revealing an artist in search of an autonomous identity. The Statesman, December 24, 1930 noted:

For the last few years the contributions of the lady artists of Bengal have more and more

28. Jaya Appasamy, Abanindranath Tagore and the Art of His Times (New Delhi, 1968), p.66
come to the front and one is happy in recording his tribute to the many famous wielders of the brush who have added strength and support to the lead ably given by Srijukta Sunayani Devi, whose numerous exhibits fully maintain their quality of originality and vision.

The Empire, December 31, 1919 also takes special note of "...... a lady painter, Sreemati Sunayani Devi". The artist's highly individualized style came before public view through the exhibitions organized by the Society.\textsuperscript{30} The Englishman noted:

The pictures exhibited by Sunayani Devi ..... show ..... a bold and individualistic method of expression and seem to be utterly independent of the influence of Abanindranath and his group of pupils.\textsuperscript{31}

Sunayani Devi's individualistic style attracted the attention of the lovers and critics of art in the Society's exhibition of 1922 in which the Bauhaus artists took part. The Statesman, December 24, 1922 noted:

\textsuperscript{30} It was from 1915 onwards that Sunayani Devi participated in the exhibitions organized by the I.S.O.A.
\textsuperscript{31} Op.Cit
Of the women artists represented the work of Sunayani Devi claim attention for their original outlook.....

The Forward, January 6, 1924, noted:

While there are repetitions of well-worn themes and reflections of established techniques, there is a preponderance of independent personal vision and style. The work of the lady artist (Sunayani Devi).....is an example of this. Her method is most distinctive and impressive......

The Statesman, January 30, 1925 while reviewing the works of Sunayani Devi exhibited by the Indian Society of Oriental Art in 1925 noted:

Sunayani Devi, though a woman is responsible for the most vigorous and original pictures of this exhibition.

The Amrita Bazar Patrika, December 31, 1933 also noted, "Sunayani Devi has a marked individuality of her own".

The works of Sunayani Devi exhibited by the Indian Society of Oriental Art were "typically Indian in feeling", noted The Englishman, December 30, 1919. She appears to have gone
for her inspiration to the old Jaina illustrated manuscripts of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. The Indian Daily News, January 7, 1924, thus described her art:

She has the art of the folksong and the fresco painter. She represents Indian tradition as the pure form direct descendant of the masters of Ajanta.

The Statesman, January 30, 1925 also noted that Sunayani Devi succeeded in "continuing spontaneously .... that great epoch of Indian painting of which Ajanta is a lonely remnant...". Among the artist's works which earned critical acclaim in the Society's annual exhibitions were 'Draupadi', 'Bride', 'Ardhanarisvara', 'Satir Dehatyag', 'Sadhika', marked by a genuinely simple and contemplative spirit as well as by a natural simplicity. The simple spontaneity that marked her works was remarkable. The noted sculptor Mira Mukhopadhyay commented that Sunayani Devi opened our eyes to a world that was simple and innocent.32

In Sunayani Devi's art as made public through the Society's exhibitions, there seemed to be a determined attempt to explore new varieties of art traditions. The Forum, January 26, 1924, noted that Sunayani Devi's portraits and groups "...... have

all the characteristic expressiveness and open air breadth of the traditional folk art of the country". Indeed, "there was a strong 'folk' element in her art". The artist used folk motifs with immense charm and feeling.

Abanindranath had once commented that Sunayani Devi would be able to win popular recognition of her form of art. Recognition and praise she did earn, both at home and abroad and in this regard, the Indian Society of Oriental Art played a crucial role. It was at the Society's initiative that the paintings of Sunayani Devi were exhibited in Europe. In 1927 Stella Kramrisch, arranged an exhibition of the artist's works at the Women's International Art Club in London.

Unfortunately, with her husband's death in 1934, Sunayani Devi lost her mentor and her inspiration to paint. The pressures of family life ultimately led to her departure from the world of art. "Sunayani ultimately failed to serve two mistresses, art and family, especially in a society that discouraged self-expression".

Sunayani Devi's art form made public through the platform offered by the Indian Society of Oriental Art reveals an artist in search of a distinct identity in a colonial world. The artist herself did not consciously produce 'nationalist' art. Yet her

35. Ibid., p.40
art, unique in its own way, stood in contrast not only to the colonial art forms, but also seemed to be independent of the style of Abanindranath and his pupils. The Forward, January 6, 1924 also noted the independent vision and style in Sunayani Devi's art. Her works were looked upon as the most original paintings exhibited by the Indian Society of Oriental Art during the period.

Sunayani Devi was no experimenter. Nor did she establish a new school of painting. Amina Kar noted that Sunayani Devi's simple art was "..... the antithesis of the sophisticated and intellectual art of the period".36 Her paintings marked by the emotional intensity of expression and simple linear compositions, gained a distinct identity of their own. The noted art critic Benoy Sarkar pointed out, "In her conception she had all the techniques at her command".37 Yet the simple spontaneity of her works was remarkable and earned for her a distinct position among the artists in quest of an identity during the colonial period.

The Indian Society of Oriental Art rendered a commendable service in bringing to public view the art of Gouri Bhanja (Chaudhuri) (1907 - 1998), the daughter of Nandalal Bose. Here was an artist who sought to uphold a distinct Indian style

37. Benoy Sarkar, quoted in Forward, December 19, 1925
in her work. She received her training in fine arts and crafts under the able guidance of her father and Sukumari Devi, the head of the crafts section of Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan. After Sukumari Devi's departure from Santiniketan, Gouri Bhanja took charge of the department and remained in the position for thirty-five years. It was during this period that she received her real education in art.

Gouri Devi was a talented artist with a style of her own. She excelled in painting, sketching, Alpana decoration, batik art, leatherwork and needlework. It was mainly due to her efforts that the Santiniketan style of Alpana decoration developed. She deserves credit for her contribution to the transformation of batik art into a cottage industry. She also excelled in making ornaments out of thread and fruits. She was also associated with the Karu Sangha at Santiniketan.

In the annual exhibitions of the Indian Society of Oriental Art Gouri Devi's works reflected an artist's search for an autonomous idiom of art. The Forward, January 6, 1924 noted that Gouri Devi's paintings were "full of vivid life and a method that in other schools would be regarded as mature and distinctive". Her works were looked upon as being the products

40. Op.Cit
41. Karusangha was a cooperative in Santiniketan, where the housewives exhibited and sold their handicrafts.
of a gifted vision combined with considerable technical achievement. Notable among her works exhibited by the Society were 'Bibdia Hill', 'Strolling Home', 'Old Well', 'Asoka Flowers', 'Day When the Flowers Bloomed', 'Pujarini' and others executed in the Oriental style. The Englishman, December 28, 1922 noted that the works of Gouri Devi marked by a distinctive style of her own raised hopes which "the coming generation of Indian ladies should help to realise".

Yamuna Sen (1912 – 2001), the younger daughter of Nandalal Bose and the sister of Gouri Devi, was also a talented artist with an individualistic style of her own. Her paintings in the Oriental style were exhibited in the annual exhibitions organized by the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Especially her 'Nirvana' and 'Hara Parvati', attracted the attention of both the press and public. The Statesman, January 13, 1933 and December 31, 1935 drew attention to the artist's individualistic style.

In the colonial context, Yamuna Devi's search for an autonomous identity was expressed in her works executed in the Oriental style as opposed to Western academic art norms. She also received training in modelling, linocut under her father.

42. Gouri Devi's 'Pujarini' so impressed Abanindranath that he presented her with one of his own paintings.
43. The Englishman, December 24, 1926 noted, "Smt Yamuna Devi's 'Nirvana' is most promising" while The Statesman, December 27, 1927 found Yamuna Devi's 'Hara Parvati' "attractive"
Nandalal Bose's guidance and excelled in the decorative arts like Alpana, batik as well as needlework. She was also associated with Karusangha, the women's craft organization of Santiniketan. Yamuna Devi's search for an identity constituting of her upholding the traditional arts and crafts of the country brought to the fore an artist experimenting with Oriental art norms.44

The name of Sukhalata Rao (1886 – 1969), the eldest daughter of Upendra Kishore Roy Chowdhury, also stands out among the women artists whose works came before public view through the Society's platform. Her works drawing inspiration from the epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, reflected her quest for an identity in the art traditions of the country. Her works, especially 'Behula', 'Sachi and Oindrilla', 'Savitri', 'Dhruva', 'Srimati', 'Sita Entering the Fire' are notable for their indigenous style and treatment.

Sukumari Devi, one of the most talented disciples of Nandalal Bose, was also among the women artists whose search for an identity was reflected in her works exhibited by the Indian Society of Oriental Art during the first half of the twentieth century. Originally from East Bengal Sukumari Devi came to Santiniketan at the initiative of Rabindranath Tagore. She excelled in the decorative arts of India as visualized by

44. See Amita Sen, Santiniketane Asramkanya (Calcutta, 1977), p.51
Nandalal Bose and took up the charge of teaching the same to the girls at Kala Bhavan. She particularly excelled in Alpana and embroidery.\textsuperscript{45} She created a new style of embroidery based on the needlework styles of Lucknow and Kathiawad, as well as the 'Kantha' embroidery of Bengal.\textsuperscript{46} Some of her watercolour paintings, deriving themes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, earned critical acclaim. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, December 31, 1933 took a special note of the artist's 'Mahisa Mardini' for its "feminine restraint". In 1925 a decorated panel entitled 'First Cloud' executed in the Oriental style by the artist was displayed by the Society.\textsuperscript{47}

One also comes across the name of Shanta Devi whose paintings in the Oriental style were exhibited by the Society in 1921, 1922. The Statesman, December 22, 1921 took special note of the artist's 'Cloud' executed in the Oriental style and exhibited by the Indian Society of Oriental Art. In the fourteenth annual exhibition of the Society held in 1922 Shanta Devi was represented by a series of characteristic studies of which her 'Salvation' was charming in its naivété and grace.

The search for an autonomous idiom of art in a colonial world was continued by Pratima Devi (1893-1969), the
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{45} See Shanta Devi, Purvasmriti (Calcutta, 1983), p.95
  \item Also see Mira Devi, Smritikatha (Calcutta, 1897), p.33
  \item \textsuperscript{46} Amita Sen, Op.Cit., p.51
  \item \textsuperscript{47} The Englishman, January 29, 1925 noted, "A decorated panel by Sm Sukumari Devi entitled First Could is most attractively executed".
\end{itemize}
PL.46 - PRATIMA THAKUR, 'CHILD WATCHING PIGEON'
daughter-in-law of Rabindranath Tagore and the first female student of Nandalal Bose. Around 1915 she started exhibiting her paintings at the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Although the number of her works was not numerous, they were able executions in the Oriental style and technique. Her 'Buddha' exhibited by the Society attracted attention for its typical Oriental style. Pratima Devi believed that women were basically individualistic and their search for an identity could be extended to the sphere of handicrafts as well. It was at her initiative that a crafts centre named 'Bichitra' was opened at Kalabhavan at Santiniketan to teach embroidery, doll making and book binding. Further, during a visit to Java she purchased a book on batik and introduced the art of batik in the curriculum of Kala Bhawan. Her contribution to the upholding of the art of the Orient in an era of colonial subjugation is indeed commendable.

Another woman artist Anukana Das Gupta, noted for her Alpana decoration and linocuts also utilized the platform offered by the Society to uphold her distinct art form. She helped Nandalal Bose in executing lino-cuts for 'Sahaj Path', of the tree plantation ceremony at Santiniketan and of Gandhiji's Dandi March. Her works exhibited by the Indian Society of Oriental Art during the pre-independence period were taken a special

note by the Forward, December 22, 1931. She also received the First Prize for her exhibit in the Society's exhibition.\(^{50}\)

Nivedita Ghosh, later to become the daughter-in-law of Nandalal Bose, was another artist who came out of the inner domain of the household and earned recognition through the Society's platform. Her search for an autonomous art idiom in a colonial world was reflected in her attempts to uphold the art of the village artisans. As Amita Sen has recollected in her memoirs, Nivedita mastered the art of day modelling from the village artisans.\(^{51}\) The Indian Society of Oriental Art's annual exhibitions of 1933 and 1935 displayed the artist's terracotta works in the style of the art form of rural India.

Basanti Devi also made her mark felt in the Society's exhibitions. Her 'Harvest Time' executed in the Oriental style and exhibited by the Society in 1922 was described as the very best picture by a woman exhibitor. The Statesman, December 24, 1922, noted ".... the very best exhibitor is undoubtedly Basanti Devi whose daring colour scheme is worthy of emulation".

Women artists were thus coming out of the anonymity of the inner domain of their household in their increasing number,

50. Anukanta Das Gupta did not confine herself to the world of art. She wrote about fifteen books for children. She also served as the Principal of Lady Keane School, Shillong. She returned to Calcutta and joined Loreto.

seeking an identity in art independent of colonial norms. In this respect the Indian Society of Oriental Art rendered a valuable service by upholding their art in its annual exhibitions during the period 1907 - 1947. The Englishman, December 26, 1927 noted, "It is an encouraging sign of times to see that women are exhibiting more and more each year". The Statesman, December 27, 1927 also recorded, "Several women painters have sent in their exhibits". In the nineteenth annual exhibition of the Society held in 1927, the works of no less than seven women were exhibited.52

It is evident that women were increasingly seeking to carve out an identity for themselves in the public domain. The artists who attracted attention for their distinct Indian style were Indira Devi for her 'Siva' and Smt. Prakriti Devi for her 'Flower Gathering'.53 Further Sheeta Devi received critical appreciation for her two excellent designs for a book cover, 'Dancer' and 'Pardanashin'. The Statesman, December 24, 1930 noted that the exhibits of Miss S. B. Das, Smt. Anukana Das Gupta, Miss N. Das and Smt. Monika Gupta's scroll painting in the style of Ajanta were "full of promise". The 'Santal Girl' by Miss N. Das,54 'Meditation' and 'Evening' by Sheila Bonnerjee, a pupil of Debi Prosad Roy Chowdhury, the works of Smt. Sudha Das

52. The Englishman, December 26, 1927
53. The Statesman, December 27, 1927
54. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, December 25, 1930 noted, "The Santal Girl' by Miss N. Das displays the rustic abhorrence of artificiality to the extreme".
Gupta, Miss P. N. Banerjee, as well as two pictures entitled 'Krishna's Playmates' and 'Two Sketches', both by women artists, were able executions in the Oriental style that came before public view through the Society's exhibitions. The contemporary newspapers55 refer to a number of women artists like Smt. Sudha Dasgupta of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, Hashirashi Devi (1911 - 1933) of Calcutta, Anima Bose and others who sought to carve out an identity for themselves through the Society's platform. Santa Majumdar's 'Persian Princess' in the Oriental style exhibited by the Society was a "strikingly original study". "This little picture shows great promise and it has a rare attention to detail ...... We expect good things in the future from this talented young artist", noted Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee.56 The Statesman, December 31, 1935 made a special mention of a screen of six panels in tempera by Nilima Devi and 'Purva Raag' by Nirupama Devi.

Not only in the sphere of the visual arts but also in the sphere of the decorative arts did the women artists in the Indian Society of Oriental Art seek to establish a mark for themselves. The Englishman, December 26, 1927, noted "...... in Bengal ...... the ladies have been the inheritors of a great school of decorative design". In the Society's annual exhibition of 1927,

55. The Statesman, December 31, 1935; The Amrita Bazar Patrika, December 31, 1933
56. Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, 'An Exhibition of Contemporary Indian Paintings in Calcutta', (The) Modern Review, April, 1943
the 'Two Alpanas' by an unknown lady artist seemed to uphold the country's art tradition. The Forward, December 22, 1931 noted some special exhibits by the ladies – carving on slate by Sushila Devi, needlework by Hashi Devi, Ashima Devi, Purnima Devi. The Indian Society of Oriental Art encouraged the ladies to display their needlework embroideries recognizing that "The needle works add to the strength of the Home industries". The handmade quilt by Suniti Bhaduri of Faridpur exhibited by the Society in 1928 was taken note of as deserving special mention "as a rare specimen of the famous needlework of old Bengal". The terracotta works of Nivedita Ghosh brought into focus the craft of the Indian rural artisans.

The response of women artists in search of an identity of their own was gradually increasing. Women were coming out of the inner domain of their familial lives in an increasing number to discover their identity in the sphere of the arts through a public platform. The contemporary newspapers commented that one should welcome the time when a society of women artists is founded "to represent the feminine contributions to modern Indian art".

The Indian Society of Oriental Art opened a ladies section in its art school as evident from an advertisement published in

57. The Amrita Bazar Patrika, December 31, 1933
58. Forward, December 25, 1928
The Statesman, August 5, 1928:

I. S. O. A.

OPENING OF A LADIES SECTION
TEACHING OF INDIAN WATER
COLOUR PAINTING UNDER A COMPETENT ARTIST
THE CLASS WILL BE STARTED AS SOON AS SUITABLE
NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS ARE RECEIVED

ADMISSION FEE - Rs.5
MONTHLY TUTION FEE - Rs.5
APPLY TO HONY. SECY.
HINDUSTAN BUILDING
CORPORATION STREET, 1ST FLOOR, CALCUTTA

The Englishman, February 9, 1931 carried a further advertisement:

THE INDIAN SOCIETY OF ORIENTAL ART

THE NEW SESSION BEGINS ON AND FROM 18TH JUNE, 1931.
CLASSES WILL BE HELD REGULARLY UNDER EFFICIENT
TEACHERS FOR BOTH LADIES AND BOYS

THIS IS THE ONLY INSTITUTION IN CALCUTTA WHERE
LADIES GET AN OPPORTUNITY FOR ART TRAINING

APPLY TO THE UNDERSIGNED:-
HONORARY SECRETARY
11, SAMAVAYA MANSION.
A number of ladies joined the Society's art school as students. At the same time many exhibited their works in the Society's exhibitions in independent capacity. Yet all of them derived their inspiration from the indigenous and Oriental art traditions which in turn reinforced the attempt to revive the country's art heritage as a means of retaliation against colonial domination.

The Indian Society of Oriental Art on its part encouraged talented women artists who exhibited their works through the Society, by means of prizes and scholarships. In the twenty-second annual exhibition of the Society held in 1930 Mr. O. C. Gangoly's prize of Rs.50 was presented to Miss S. B. Das, an art student of the Society.59 The Statesman also noted the event:

"A second prize of Rs.50 given by the Vice-President for the best exhibit by a woman artist was won by Miss S. B. Das, a student of the Society, for her picture 'Thirst' "...... which depicts a thirsty man just being satisfied with a cup of drink".60

In the twenty-second annual exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art held in 1931, "Miss Sheila Bonnerjea ..."

59. Advance, December 24, 1930
60. The Statesman, December 24, 1930
won the prize for the best exhibit by a lady with her picture 'Meditation'. Another of her pictures 'Evening' also came in for notice.61

During the period 1907-1947 the Indian Society of Oriental Art thus rendered a significant service to the cause of Indian art subjected to colonial domination, by bringing to the fore a number of unknown women artists who attempted to uphold an alternative Indian style of art in their quest for an identity under colonial rule. Their quest may be considered to have constituted an important aspect of the anti-colonial resistance movement during the first half of the twentieth century. The efforts made by the women artists were indeed challenging as their path was laden with obstacles in the form of not only colonial domination, but also domination by their male counterparts. In the absence of a pre-determined path women had to create a path of their own. So long confined to the interiors, women with artistic inclinations were conversant with the traditional arts of the country and this was reflected in their work. Fortunately, times were changing, although very gradually. Women slowly came out in the public gaining new experiences which were reflected in their work. In their search for an autonomous idiom for art, women received considerable aid from the Indian Society of Oriental Art which provided

61. The Statesman, December 22, 1931
them with the necessary public platform to uphold their form of art. However, it must be noted that it was mainly in the sphere of the visual arts that the women artists at the Indian Society of Oriental Art made a mark for themselves and a women organized crafts movement on the lines of that had evolved in Santiniketan was not much in evidence on the Society's platform. Yet, on the whole it was through the Indian Society of Oriental Art that a number of women artists earned recognition for their worth and talent and developed a distinct identity of their own during the pre-independence period.

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