CHAPTER – 4

AVANT GARDES OF MODERN ART IN
JAMMU & KASHMIR

S.N. Bhat,

Somnath Bhatt was born in Jan 1925, in Srinagar Kashmir. He was very young when he lost both his parents. His elder brother took charge of his care and initiated him into his own profession of hotels and catering business. Under the guidance of various drawing masters, he did painting in his school days. He came into contact with visiting painters, who stayed in the hotels, where he worked. In 1942 Butt went to his first regular teacher, the Bombay artist G.M.Solegaonkar, who taught him landscape painting. Butt was absorbed only in landscape painting but his attitude was academic. He held several small exhibitions in Srinagar and sold most of the paintings to European visitors, who stayed in guest houses looked after by him or his brother.

After the upheaval of 1947, there was the upsurge of the cultural movement and the visit of the Bombay artist S.H.Raza, were the main influences which enabled him to pursue his work. The impressionistic and modern trends were taught into him by Raza.
Since then, Bhat took to painting in a serious manner as a full time artist. But a brief period, in 1949, was a sort of distraction, when he unwillingly took the job of a drawing teacher in a private school, and that too on meagre salary. Bhat was one of the founder members of Progressive Artists’ Association, which was established in 1948. All his works did find a way in many of the exhibitions of the Progressive Artists’ Association, within and outside the state. In 1949, in Bombay, a two man show accompanied by Triloke Kaul, proved a boost to furthering his contacts with artists of Bombay, where he stayed for more than six months. At that time Bhat won a gold medal in an exhibition held in Sholapur.

After 1958, he mostly stayed in Srinagar Kashmir, his home town. He had a small sincere group of patrons and he kept on experimenting with techniques. Till late he has been teaching landscape painting through mainly to army officers and their children, and this is a sort of second profession for him. For over a year, Butt has been working on a research project sponsored by Govt. of India, it is a project on the Kashmir shawl industry on a one year scholarship for ‘Research in Indigenous Arts’. After the completion of this research work, Butt would again return to painting seriously.
When the valley was attacked by Pakistani tribal’s, he along with his political activists, became one of the pioneers of the cultural movement.

Bhat has had no thorough full-fledged technical training in the field of art but has a natural aptitude for painting since his childhood. After getting training from the local private institute, he struggled a lot to achieve some integrity as a painter. The growing local cultural movement which began with the political struggle of the people of Kashmir, was pivotal in finally determining the career of this artist.

S.N.Bhat about whom the Daily Telegraph, London, commented thus in late fifties “Rising Star of the Eastern horizon”.
TRILOKE KAUL

Born in Nov 1925, Triloke Kaul belongs to a respectable family of Srinagar, Kashmir. At the age of 18, he graduated from Punjab University (Lahore). His ambitious parents wanted him to be an Engineer, while he aspired to be a lawyer, but finally landed to at Lucknow University for an M.A. Degree in Maths, though without adequate means.

The painter spent eight odd years, the period between 1943 to 1952, replete with odd happenings and diverse engagements. Beginning with work for an Insurance Company, then private tuitions to students. After that he proceeded to Calcutta, where the riots of 1946 put him in a refugee camp in utter penury. After that he worked as a traveling salesman in Bombay, a sub editor at Lahore, a restaurant manager at Srinagar. After Punjab partition riots, he ran a small cigarette shop in Srinagar and gave coaching to students against the venerable tradition of the Indian family. His life though full of adventures was not through a bed of roses. Pakistani raids on Kashmir in 1947 saw him in the militia, with gun on his shoulder, in defence of the valley.

Since 1939, Triloke Kaul had been painting by himself without taking it seriously. The year 1948 gave a big positive turn to his work when Bombay artist S.H.Raza inspired him and appraised him of
preliminary artistic strategies. Also, contact with many Indian writers, poets and artists (on a proselytizing missions in the valley) brought him closer to cultural activity. The Progressive Artists’ Association which was founded mainly responsible for bringing about an art consciousness in the state, Kaul, a founder member, remained its secretary for first four consecutive years.

In 1949, for a brief period he worked as Superintendent in Chief Administration of Muzaffarabad (Uri Front) after liberation. Later, his resigning from this post and choosing painting again as full time engagement the further disgusted his now poor parents the little.

The artist had exhibitions in various parts of India, including solo shows in Delhi, Baroda, Bombay and Srinagar etc..

He joined Baroda University as a student for a four years Degree course in painting in 1952 under the guidance of N.S.Bendre. The reason of joining Baroda was that he found himself lacking in proper and systematic art schooling and this was recommended by Dr.Mulkh Raj Anand. But after two years he had to break off for a year due to some family requirements, but he passed out in 1957. Among the last influences on his work, was that of Mr.Nikoya Abe, a Japanese artist, who was in India in 1953 with the International Exhibition.
The ancient Egyptian paintings and reliefs and the Jain miniatures of western India, had also left a lasting impression on his work. Also as he how hoped to be a muralist, the Mexican murals attracted him a lot.
P.N. KACHRU

P.N.Kachru, born in March 1925, belongs to a middle class family of Kashmir. He was lucky enough to have proper education in his home town up to graduate level in 1944. After which he went to Lahore to have his Masters degree in English Literature. The communal riots in Punjab obliged him to leave his studies half way, that is, after spending only two years in the University, Hence he came back to Kashmir.

Since 1948, Kachru has had various exhibitions in the State and also did a group show in New Delhi. This show was sponsored by The Progressive artists’ Association of Kashmir, he being one among its three founder members.

At that time writers and thinkers of Kashmir, as elsewhere in the country, were bent on establish trio the status of art in the region. On Nov.1947, an organization namely ‘The National Cultural Front’ was founded on the idea and principle of democracy. Kachru, being budding young artist, was one of its founder members, along with a galaxy of poets, writers, dramatists and musicians of repute. The front became pivotal organization for propagating freedom and democracy in Kashmir. 1948 was the year when the first group of artists ‘The Trio’ came into existence. In this year only, two more young educated artists and social
activist S.N.Bhat and Triloke Kaul came into contact with Kachru and the activists of the National cultural Front. This “Trio” met everyday without any venue or place of their own; they would walk together, discuss and sketch. Their meetings were called ‘walk meetings’. In June 1948, they met Percy Brown, the ex-principal of Government School of Art and Craft, Calcutta. He was a source of real inspiration to the ‘Trio’. In August 1948 S.H.Raza of Bombay progressive Artists group, also became a close associate.

In Oct 1948, the artists renamed themselves as the “Progressive Artists Association”. In Oct 1949 this Association held its first Exhibition outside the state in New Delhi. Inaugurated by Prof. Humayan Kabir. This exhibition was described by the media, as the “most colourful exhibition of the year” Kachru, the painter of life and people, was described as ‘possessing the “Rembrandesque qualities”’. 