CHAPTER – III

JAMINI ROY

11 April 1887 – 24 April 1972

The picture is what it is: Man creates it. And whatever man creates reflects his character, his daily life, his inmost thoughts, indeed everything.
(translated from the original Bengali)
HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Jamini Roy was born in April 1887 in a family of small landowners at Beliatore village in the Bankura district of West Bengal – an area well known for various forms of folk art and craft especially pottery and clay work. His father Ramataran Roy was an idealistic person and an amateur artist who, after resignation from government service, spent the rest of his life in his village amidst the potters. This environment accrued to Jamini Roy’s artistic inclinations during his adolescence. From 1906 to 1914 he studied in European Academic Style at Calcutta Government Art School. There he learnt western art from the Italian artist-teacher Gilerdy and the oriental art techniques from its Principal Percy Brown.

A chronological evaluation of his time will lead to two divergent schools of thought in Indian Painting – both of them devoid of contemporary life styles. One was trying to revive ancient Indian glories, completely forgetting the present. The fragile works of Neo-Bengal school lacked the dynamism of life system. The subdued dreamy paintings, thin and weak forms were symbolical of the deteriorating state of art in India. On the other hand, the other group was using the Western clutches exhibiting European

Everyone who comes to my house brings God into it.
— Jamini Roy quoted in The Other Side of the Mountain by Thomas Merton
Ramtaran Roy, Jamini Roy's father

Nagendrabala, Jamini Roy's mother
dominance and total submission of the Indian artists. These artists however were being patronised by the Government and by the Maharajas. They were painting for the sake of earning. Nothing tangible came out of these schools of thought. It was imperative for the young intellectuals to have a change. The search for intrinsic values of Indian art was badly needed. Jamini Roy responded to the need of his time. He learnt and abandoned the knowledge imparted through a school curriculum. He was in search of his own soul and tried to free art from the bondage of prevailing ‘servocracy’.

After thirty years in the academic line, Jamini Roy returned to his native home, among the folk artists of Bankura district, a district which is soul-possessed. With the eye of an ancient man, for whom life is all embracing, he found in the patuas and potters a strength and form of their own, superb simplification, and colours in their purest, elementary state. With his urge for freedom and the desire to strike out his own path, he could never rest but continued his search till he could free himself from the academic clutches.

He came back to Kolkata and started to paint feverishly and passionately, “through work”, he says, “a man moves towards the reality within himself”.¹

¹ On a visit to Kolkata Mahatma Gandhi once sent word to Jamini Roy to bring some paintings around for a private showing. The artist politely refused. “As a man”, said Roy, “I will gladly go touch his feet with my hands. As an artist, never, it is his duty to come and visit me”. Time CNN (Monday September 07, 1953)
Four friends: (From L to R) standing Satish Sinha, Jogesh Seal, sitting Atul Bose and Jamini Roy, 1924
He abandoned the formal elements of European Academic Style and devoted himself in creating pictures from simple indigenous forms but rendered in a modern setting and style. For this he adopted forms of folk dolls, child art and ‘patas’ of rural Bengal. For his paintings, Jamini Roy selected themes from joys and sorrows of everyday life of rural Bengal, religious theme like-Ramayana, Sri Chaitanya, Radha-Krishna and Jesus Christ, but he depicted them without narratives. Besides, he painted scenes form the lives of the aboriginal Santhals, as for instance ‘Santhals engaged in drum-beating’ ‘Santhal Mother and Child’ ‘Dancing Santhals’ etc. He rendered them symbolically through colours and hilarious rhythmic lines. The symphony of colourful palette and rhythmic lines created a new language of painting.

Like the master-artist Picasso, Jamini Roy's artistic career may be divided into different phases. In the primary stage he worked in European Post-Impressionistic style; in the next phase his works reflect the form of folk-dolls of the potters; in another phase he embraced the pata-painter's plasticity of lives. While creating these forms he deliberately avoided three-dimensionality and rendered in flat colour unhesitatingly the forms of ‘Mother and Child’ ‘Radha-Krishna’ ‘Jesus Christ’ without their thematic context.
ARTIST AT WORK
During the Second World War when American Army and officers bought exquisite paintings of Jamini Roy in higher price, his paintings became very popular among the connoisseurs and middle class people. Like the rural folk-painters and potters of Bengal, Jamini Roy used cheap indigenous pigments for his art to make them within the reach of the affluent as well as the poor. Like the pata-painters of Bengal he proposed his own paintings from indigenous materials like lampblack, chawk-powder, leaves and creepers. Even today, modern paintings of Jamini Roy, executed in the ideal of folk-pata paintings and dolls, attract the connoisseur's eyes as well as the teeming multitude.

Constantly searching for inspiration, Jamini Roy regards his paintings not as reproductions but as living expressions of a reality brought forth by controlled emotional experience. And it was a child who helped him achieve this. When an object did not respond to his liking, he asked a child to paint it. "Then", as he says, "I saw how to break it down", discovering the way to release vital force without freezing structure.

Roy considered himself to be an artisan, like the craftsmen who sold their wares at village fairs. He sold his paintings ridiculously cheap, according to their size. In his view an artist should use the
simplest materials at hand to create their works and should not wait for sophisticated or imported ingredients. To him paintings (like the works of the patuas) should be easily available and plentiful and not necessarily very unique. Thus an artist’s home could be a workshop-studio producing paintings fairly inexpensively. Jamini Roy was convinced that this type of work was preferable to machine printed reproduction, because in the final analyses they were from the artist’s own hand. Further he was of view that the artist should have rapport with his audience directly just as musicians or dancers do. Jamini Roy lived a simple and ordinary life. His strong beliefs extended to his life. Not only did he not use an easel in his studio; there was not a stick of European style furniture in his home, where visitors (there was a constant stream of them, from many lands) were invited to sit on hand painted chowkies, or the polished red floor shiny as mirrors. He dressed in a white dhoti and a ‘Bengali’ all his life, condescending to put a chaddar on his shoulder when out visiting. He took a deep interest in the theatre world of Kolkata which helped him realize the links between the reality and illusion. He also practiced sculpture and drawing and the later are noticeable for
their verve, rhythm and movement and the lines are conspicuously different from those in his paintings.

Roy held several one-man exhibitions and numerous group shows. The first Jamini Roy exhibition was held in 1929 at the premises of the Government School of Art, Kolkata. This was sponsored by Mukul Dey. In the foreword to the 1929 Jamini Roy exhibition catalogue Dey wrote:

"The cultivation of fine arts has been a neglected subject and the artists are not usually given the prominence they deserve. Mr. Roy is an eminent artist in his own line. It must however, be said to his great credit that he succeeded in developing an indigenous line of art and preserving an outlook which is typically Bengali, from a state of decadence Mr. Roy's works shown at the present exhibition is an improvement upon the traditional art of Bengal and open up a new field of art altogether. He has established his place in the rank of artists as will be evident from the specimens of his works exhibited".²

Critical appreciation of his works were published in several issues of 'Parichaya', a quarterly Journal of Calcutta, which made his paintings known to the public. Till then his works have been exhibited at several venues including the Burlington Gallery, London in 1946, New York in 1953 and the National Gallery of
Modern Art, New Delhi (in an exhibition titled ‘Centenary Exposition of Contemporary Art’). His works are in collections of the Indian Museum, Kolkata, the Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, and the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, beside being in several other renowned private and public collections. The Government of India awarded him the Padma Bhushan, a prestigious civilian award, in 1955. In his honour the Government of India issued a postal stamp featuring his painting “Two Vaishnavas” on 23.3.1978. (See colour plate 1).

In the long fifty years of his career as an artist Jamini Roy earned fame by evolving his own language of painting which he termed as ‘Flat Technique’. But due to the popularity of Bengal school of painting his contemporary artists hardly accepted his new technique and style.

He continued to paint in his chosen style till the end of his life. In the 1960s and 70s the stream of art widened to include new trends and new tendencies. However one of the major directions in modern Indian art is that of a return to the Indian heritage. The past as a source has been chosen from or interpreted variously according to the temperament or ability of the artist. Jamini Roy’s oeuvre was
perhaps pioneering in this respect. In his lifetime, he made a significant contribution to the art of his times. Though other artists of his time also referred to folk sources they did so comparatively briefly, and in a limited way. His art started a trend not only in the fine arts but also in illustration, design and applied art.

Jamini Roy died at the ripe old age of 85, in April 1972. But the artist's works and the ideals he stood for will continue to guide and inspire many for a long time to come.
EARLY PHASE OF JAMINI'S ART

When Jamini Roy was sixteen he was sent to study at the Government School of Art in Calcutta. He was taught to paint in the prevailing academic tradition, drawing classical nudes and painting in oils and in 1908 he received his Diploma in Fine Art.

As a student, Roy used to survive by doing various jobs such as colouring wood block prints for broadsheets made by Battala print makers. He even had a stint in Allahabad as a stone re-toucher for a Litho-press. Finally after a few unsettled years he was back in Calcutta and free-lanced as a portrait painter.

His early paintings consist of the oil portraits, executed in the realistic manner imbibed from his art college days. At the start of his career, Jamini Roy adopted western style of painting and acquired much skill. During this period he became a professional painter and did experimental works in the manner of western Post-Impressionistic artists like Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin.

Jaminy Roy's early works include landscapes in an impressionistic manner with an interest in space, texture and light. There is a strange stillness in the compositions, for the pictures do not contain any figures at all, even in the street scenes. The composition itself
is the end of the picture though it is embellished with surface textures in areas flecked with colour and light. The western source of this style is obvious. Although the paintings are competent they cannot be considered great or moving works of art. (See colour plates 2, 3 and 4).

Due to his great respect towards Abanindranath Tagore and his earnestness for Neo- Bengal School of painting. The early works of Jamini Roy do show signs of these influences. Jamini Roy, through his oil paintings, gave expression to the scenes of every-day life of the people of eternal rural Bengal. In both his oriental and occidental style of works his compositions reflect flat treatment of colour, bold lines and candour of folk art. In fact, the early days saw Jamini Roy go in many different directions. However, attraction to the Tagore styles was minimal unlike other students of his time.

Western influences however, did play a dominant part initially and Roy spent a lot of time on following the tenets of European 18th century art.
EVOLUTION OF FOLK MOTIFS IN HIS PAINTINGS

Jamini Roy was born in a small village in the Bankura district of West Bengal. His childhood surroundings rich in folk culture, folklore and folk imagery, had a monumental influence on his art. Jamini joined the Government School of Arts in Kolkata, which provided him the discipline of a well-grounded formal training in fine arts. His curriculum there included studies in western academic art including portraiture and landscapes, impressionism, a study of the new Indian eclectic style.

After the academic training in the Kolkata School of Art in the early 1920s, some of his works bore residues of the Bengal School mannerisms. He made some brilliant forays into a Post-Impressionist genre of landscapes and portraits, yet Roy’s early career was calamitous. He endured extreme poverty and his work was lack-lustre and banal. Disheartened, Roy began a wrenched journey to discover his own true style, undertaking odd jobs to survive. Finally after a few unsettled years he was back in Kolkata and free-lanced as a portrait painter.

It was not long before dissatisfaction set in and Roy also realized that portrait painting not only would set him apart from the hordes
of painters in Kolkata but also would not fulfil the creative urge in him. Also, during these years, Roy had been experimenting with gouache paintings in the line of Impressionist work. This too, left Roy feeling incomplete and dissatisfied and searching for an identity (See colour plate 5).

This yearning and denial of the European styles was perhaps the turning point in Jamini Roy’s career. Seeking a visual vocabulary of his own, Jamini Roy moved away from traditional academic art and turned towards his roots. Several events led to his decision to turn to the indigenous roots.

During the 19th century, Reverend James Long initiated the study of folklore by collecting native proverbs. Taraknath Mookherji made an ethnographic study of the Patua community and their vocation. By the turn of the century, Rabindranath Tagore published a collection of Bengali lullabies with his annotations. In the twenties, Abanindranath Tagore established the norms of research of folklore with his Magnum Opus Banglar Brata, the illustrated book on traditional Alpana.

Gurusaday Dutta, a member of the Indian Civil Service and a District Magistrate, traveled through Bengal in his attempt to revive
the rich folk traditions of Bengal. His collection formed the core of
the famous Gurusaday Museum of Folk Art. Above all, a general
nationalistic fervour prevailed over the country. It was at that time,
in the mid twenties, that Gagendranath Tagore commissioned
Jaminy Roy to copy a portrait of Devendranath Tagore, the father
of Rabindranath Tagore. Gaganendranath was an art collector.

Earlier, Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy had based his first two
books on Indian art on his collection. The rich collection included
specimen of Bengal folk art, – the Chauko Pat (square painting), the
Jadu Pat (scroll), the Kalighat Pat, toys, the Kantha (embroidered
quilt), besides Mughal and Rajput painting and other artifacts. In
this collection, Jaminy Roy found an enchanting storehouse from
which he could draw.3

His childhood memory of the doll-makers’ art with its make-believe
forms and patterns, its fancy designs and colours, was pursuing him
all through his carrier, like a deep undercurrent.4

He spent his early childhood at his native village Beliatore, situated
in the Bankura district and at the borders of Bengal and Bihar; the
village is consisting of many tribal people – like Santhal, Barui and
Mulla, who were living together. The district of Bankura is another
seat of traditional culture of Bengal. It not only occupies a prominent place in the socio-economic and political history of Bengal, but in respect of folk culture and hence in art, the district has special elements to offer. Apart from the rich terracotta art, the district seems to have inherited treasures of folk painting tradition as well. Jamini Roy grew up in the prevailing Folk-tribal art.

As we know the images don’t fade out so easily, which are being collected in the childhood. This psychological reality was true in case of the boy named Jamini Ranjan. In his early years he had the privilege to watch the works of black-smith, carpenter, brass-smith, potter, weaver, rangsaz and the other craftsmen, who work with pat (jute fiber) and idol- makers from very close quarters. It was not confined up to mere watching or witnessing – but he used to copy their artistic work and thus he developed an emotional relation with the craftsmen. This background and the later development became the source-spirit of his work, especially the ‘pat-chitra’ of Kalighat. (See colour plate 6) “Cat and Lobster”. It can be compared with Kalighat painting “Cat eating a Lobster”.

From about the mid 1920’s, when he was about 34 the artist started experimenting with folk art styles. Initially he drew a lot of inspiration from Kalighat Pat paintings as well as terracotta work
on temple walls of Bengal especially Bishnupur temple. His early pictures owed much to Kalighat pats (See colour plate 7) and his later work to hand-coloured dolls and toys and story telling painted scrolls. (See colour plates 8 and 9). He also showed his fascination for the paintings of peasant painters of Bengal who used to sell their work at the rural bazaars.

From these folk-art influences on the one hand, and from his own self-conscious researches into formal simplification on the other, Jamini Roy gradually evolved the highly individual idiom of expression. He approached folk-art not as an outsider but as one who had an intimate knowledge and understanding of the living experiences of the people where lay the roots of the folk culture itself.\(^5\)
REFERENCES:


