CHAPTER - IV
FOLK ART OF JAMINI ROY
THEMES AND THEIR TREATMENT

Jamini Roy hardly had any difficulty in his choice of themes. His subjects are taken from the people around him; the village folk in particular such as the Bauls, Bauris, Santhals or Mallas appear very often.

His choice of subjects was rich and exhaustive. In the early phase he painted many European subjects, landscapes and portraits. Later his subject matter was completely changed. He selected themes from joys and sorrows of everyday life of rural Bengal, the village cultivators, the carpenters, blacksmiths, Santhal men and women, fakirs and Vaishnava singers constituted the main subjects of his painting (See colour plates 10, 11, 12 and 13). Mythological characters are also usual – for instance, Krishna, Balaram, Shiva, Rama, and Gopinis (See colour plates 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18). His large panel like Krishna and Balaram was painted by the artist in his late 60s, a period of great creative activity. While the very dark - complexioned Krishna comes out blue in art, Balaram, the fairer of two brothers, may be depicted white, or a lighter colour. Usually one finds the two renowned brothers in the midst of adventure or
surrounded by symbolic references. They stand forth simply as presences, as if they had just been imagined for the first time.

Again from the world of animals, motifs such as cats, cows, horses and birds too make their frequent appearance (See colour plates 19, 20, 21 and 22). But, of all these, the artist has shown particular preference for the study of women, including mother and child, and Santhals.¹

Jamini Roy never depicted any shrewd woman and seldom depicted violent scenes. Women find important place in paintings of Jamini Roy. Probably no other artist in India has delineated this theme with so much affection and gracefully as Jamini Roy did. His study of woman depicted her in motherly aspect, as villager and as devotee or sophisticated women. But, of these, he has shown particular attention to the manifestation of women as mother. Innumerable paintings and drawings were done by him to represent the different moods of mother. In 1935 Jamini Roy was awarded Viceroy’s gold medal for his painting ‘mother helping the child to cross a pool’ (See colour plate 23). The seen is typically Bengali and the subject easily lends itself to sentimentality. But the ingenious use of clear-cut angular lines by the painters and his clean colours have given it a tenderness which expresses Bengal
more convincingly than the efforts at dim portraiture of the genre
life of the province by the follower of the Bengali school.

Roy’s rejection of the then modern style of painting and his foray
into the realm of Bengali folk paintings marked a new beginning in
the history of Indian modern art. His new style was both a reaction
against the Bengal School and the Western tradition. The mother
and child, Radha, and animals were painted in simple two-
dimensional forms, with flat colour application and an emphasis on
the lines. The main subjects were often enclosed within decorative
borders with motifs in the background. The figure of the Christ was
also a subject that Roy often painted.

He painted religious themes like – Ramayana, Sri Chatanya, Radha-
Krishna and Jesus Christ, but he depicted them without narratives
(See colour plates 24, 25, 26, 27, 28 and 29). The Santhals, tribal
people who live in the rural districts of Bengal, were an important
subject for Roy.

In between 1921 and 1924 began his first period of experimentation
with the Santhal dance as his starting point. He painted scenes from
the lives of Santhals, as for instance ‘Santhals engaged in drum
beating’ ‘Santhal Mother and Child’ ‘Dancing Santhals’ ‘Santhal
wedding' etc. His was a new language of painting combining the symphony of colourful palette and rhythmic lines (See colour plates 30 and 31).

According to some critics it is the Santhal theme, which undergoes a change and gets a fresh extension in the artist's works depicting Christian themes. Though the artist was not familiar with the Biblical stories, his depiction of Christ has undoubtedly acquired an altogether fresh meaning. At once sublime and tender, in these works one comes across an unusual combination of the human and the divine. He wanted to show that the human and divine could be made only by abstract, symbolic means. In particular, one can find a close parallel between Jamini Roy's Christ studies and the anonymous French folk-painters of the 12th century whom Gauguin copied (See colour plates 32, 33, 34 and 35).

Speaking in 1943, he told Mary Milford:

"This is my latest period. I am not a Christian. I do not read the New Testament or any other writing but I meditate on what I have heard or what I know. There have been few, if any, satisfactory paintings of Christ for expression of the significance of his life. This is a great theme and I shall continue to struggle to find a fitting expression in modern terms."
The style he adopted had, at first sight, certain affinities with Byzantine painting. Christ was obviously regarded by him not as divine but rather as a person whose indifference to suffering, courage in the face of torment, simplicity, honesty and poverty exemplified the same virtues as those of Santhals.³

Well-known are his paintings of ‘Christ and Disciples’, ‘The Last Supper’, ‘The Flight to Egypt’, ‘Annunciation’. There is no denying, however that the themes are in a way limited and the artist has often been found to repeat himself.⁴

He made copies of his own work as he followed the patua tradition where works of art were not necessarily unique and favoured the making of art the outcome of a collective effort.
STYLE AND TECHNIQUE

Jamini Roy was a versatile artist. He was no worshiper at any shrine of art, imitator of any school or style, he painted in any a manner he liked, in any style he wanted and in any medium. He handled oils and water colours as boldly and freely as he handled tempra. He was trained in the art school and was able to live by working in a currently accepted style, he felt compelled to change his style again and again. He was pursued by a restlessness until he reached a style which was his own, a style which was ‘new’ and versatile, which allowed him scope for innovation and at the same time was not untraditional.

In his search for form, colour and technique, he watched tirelessly for hours the potter on the wheel, a Patua painting a scroll or the village ladies painting a ritual motif with indigenous colours applied by the finger tips or at best by cotton covered reed brushes resolving figures to their basic elements – the head, torso and the limbs. Head became the most dominant feature, which was mobilised by a single element – THE EYE – the rest, i.e. the nose, lips, ears and even hair became secondary. This concept influenced him tremendously, so much so that in most of his works ‘the eye’ is
the key to his thought – sometimes extending beyond the head and
enveloping the entire canvas. At times he adopted folk toys as they
were; as is evident in now so famous ‘Bankura Horse’. The
Bankura is a common sight in many homes as a decoration piece. It
has a long straight giraffe like neck, a barrel shaped body and a
disproportionately short tail. It impressed him so much so that he
painted it as it was – practically like a drawing, needing no more
accentuation or improvisation.\textsuperscript{6} e.g. ‘Red Horse’ (See colour plate
36).

Jamini Roy’s early work shows his versatility and that in fact he
was an artist in search of a style. Besides portraiture, a genre at
which he was quite skilled, he did 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 can not
be considered great or moving works of art.

Another medium of expression which he practiced was paintings
reminiscent of the Bengal school, these paintings were very close to
the Bengal school in manner and painted sometimes in water colours and at others in oil, though in appearance they simulate paintings in 'wash'. The compositions which are large in size consists of a single figure of woman. The treatment and colour are lyrical and harmonious, reminiscent of the gentle romantic colour schemes of Abanindranath and his followers. (See colour plate 37). But the style failed to evoke any genuine interest in him. So the only course left open was to evolve something in his own way. It was only when he was about 34 years of age that the artist discovered his true inspiration and set about evolving his characteristic style.

Jaminy Roy chose his motifs from folk sources; it was from rural toys, pats and terracottas that he selected his rhythmic lines and decorations. Some of the characteristic that have been specifically identified as being part of a folk spectrum that influenced Jamini Roy like the use of microdots around the contour, or the springing of the picture surface with coloured dots are not only peculiar to this tradition but are a part of the world folk tradition. The space-filling units of dots and tiny flowers in white had been borrowed from the Ganaki type Lakshmi Sara, – the round shaped earthen platter painted with the images of the Goddess. The Patuas of the
Ganaki Sara use similar units in white to decorate the flat Indian Red background. In his scheme of decoration, Jamini Roy combined external elements from different traditions, which a traditional Patua would never do. He used a broader colour range for creating a colour orchestration as against the codified palette of the traditional Patua.

Jamini Roy chose these idioms as an artist and for picture making; he had found the elements of a language, which he proceeded to make his own by expressing himself through it. He did not wish to bridge a gulf and bring the fine arts and handicrafts closer together as some critics have suggested. Rather he went to a familiar source, which was at hand and from it originated a style. His early pictures owed much to Kalighat pats and his later work to hand-coloured dolls and toys and the story telling painted scrolls. His style in this form of expression goes through many changes.

In the first phase he uses little colour, but creates simple forms related to those of Kalighat painting though more elegant and drawn with the same sweeping brush lines. The single figures of women continued to be the motif was stylised and filled the entire area of the picture (See colour plate 38). There was no space for any environment, details and accessories if any were very limited.
His new heroines were not realistic, they were forms, elegant and perhaps even modern, wrapped in the sweeping sheath of a saree whose borders and folds constituted the main lines. The features were also simplified and stylised especially the large eyes. The paintings of this type are motif-centered and this quality continued into his later art. Whether describing a woman, a cat or a fish the contours enclosed a clearly felt form; the form was a design, a flattened shape filling a frame. These pictures are decorative but pleasing because of the rhythm of the brush lines; the lines are rather even, there is no attempt at plasticity, again details and highlights like jewellery are quite minimal. However the figures are connected to reality in spite of their stark stylization.

In the second phase the style attains a certain maturity and the artist uses a bright palette. An increased influence of folk toys, painted scrolls, terracottas etc. is seen on his work. The colours are always opaque and flat and enclosed within strong black lines. Dots and decoration in black, vermilion or white finish the picture. The enclosure of the bright spaces in thick black lines gives the colour areas an added luminosity like that of stained glass. The compositions are more complex: often figures are only partially depicted, groups of heads, two sitting figures arranged
symmetrically on either side of a tree, the curved form of a dancer and other compositions are characteristic. There is frequent repetition of motifs and decorative elements. The subjects of these paintings may be from the myths and legends, Krishna Lila, Ramayana etc. (See colour plates 39 and 40) or from rural life, very often the life of the Santhals. The figures seem at once flattened and tightly pressed into the composition, there is no depth and little surface space, the whole arrangement is highly stylised and decorative, and its meaning is in its pattern. The artist assumes some of the primitive features of folk art such as the large head, large eyes, frontal aspect and so on. His sketches show that the basis of his art is in the creation of motifs – a principal element in decorative design. The stylisation and rhythm are related to those taken by the folk models.

In the third phase the artist is more free and spontaneous with his motifs. The compositions are less tightly organised. There is a fair amount of surrounding space, sometimes with borders. The colours of the pictures are more subtle and the decorative treatment more disciplined. Sometimes the artist returns to his linear treatment in coloured lines but the lines here are used rhythmically to create both forms and texture. A good example is his composition based
on a terracotta, bird mother. Other compositions of interest are those devoted to Christian themes, riders on animals, elephants, lobsters, cat, fish etc. (See colour plates 41 and 42). The animals are mostly used singly in a space, which is sometimes enclosed with borders. However, the artist is deeply indebted to the folk conception, the cat or horse is not concerned with the semblance of the real animal; it is an archaic convention, a symbol evolved by the folk imagination (See Colour plate 43).

As is only to be expected, the new phase was marked with changes in techniques and methods. The artist changed from oil to earth colours. In place of canvas he used clay or lime coated cloth or paper and wooden boards. He tried egg tempera as a binding medium but more often used tamarind seed glue. He reduced his palette to seven colours – Indian red, Yellow ochre, Cadmium green, Vermilion, Grey and Blue and white – mostly prepared out of easily available materials like hingul, harital, chalk khori, lamp black, girimati, chalk or lime-stone. But inspite of these limitations we find his pictures bright.

The inspiration for painting on woven mats was the textures he had seen in colour photographs. It occurred to him that painting on a
woven mat might make for an interesting mosaic-like surface (See colour plate 44).

Jamini Roy’s paintings are known for its simplicity as well as the symbolic quantity and purity. He fused the minimal brush strokes of the Kalighat style with elements of tribal art from Bengal (like that of the terracotta work found in the Bishnupur temple in Bengal, where terracotta was often composed into decorative units – some elaborate in design – over portals and across exterior walls of the temples).
WOMEN IN JAMIINI’S PAINTINGS

The rationale of thought and the sensuousness of feeling in man towards the other sex the world over and the known history of humanity have inspired him to portray her in various forms and moods, poses and postures. The media may be stone, metal, terracotta or any other form fit for human expression. The given history of mankind is replete with man’s creation of his own mother, beloved, sister, daughter and others.

India has a rich tradition of paintings, ranging from primitive cave paintings and tribal art work to the magnificent creations of master craftsmen who enjoyed royal patronage to paintings by contemporary artists. Over the centuries, the medium of painting, the material, style and themes have modified. What has remained consistent, however, is the Indian artist’s fascination with the female form.

Some of the earliest women paintings of India are the female forms that adorn the walls of the Ajanta caves. The women in these paintings are depicted as beautifully graceful, with perfectly proportionate figures. They are portrayed in various poses. The artists of the time were inclined to depict Indian women as
embodiments of fertility, and these figures too were painted accordingly. They were voluptuous and full-bodied.

In medieval times as well, women paintings of India depicted the female as well-endowed. This characteristic portrayal of women is apparent in the numerous styles of painting of that time, including Rajasthani Miniatures and Radha Krishna Paintings. Women were represented mainly as lovers and consorts. They were rarely, if not ever, seen as independent figures. An occasional depiction of Meera Bai (A Bhakti Cult Poetess) would deviate from this norm to a certain extent, but such depictions were not very common.

Raja Ravi Verma single handedly revolutionized the way artists portrayed women in India. His female figures are proportionate and life like. They are closer to the western realistic schools of art than the indigenous schools. It is not surprising then that he found admirers in the western art circles.

In all his portrayals of Indian women, irrespective of the social strata or occupational status they occupied, Verma depicts them as objects say that this was perhaps natural, considering his women were usually mythological figures. Critics have found his depictions problematic, nonetheless. They have ruthlessly criticized
his perennial preference for fair skin, and his stereotypical depiction of them as dependents. However it cannot be denied that he transformed the aristocratic upper class women of his times into his heroines by combining the sacred and the seductive:

Jamini Roy has shown particular preference for the study of women, including mother and child, and Santhals. Women find important place in paintings of Jamini Roy. Probably no other artist in India has delineated this theme with so much affection and gracefully as Jamini Roy did. He is celebrated for his quaint depiction of the women of Bengal. The women paintings of India by this artist are preoccupied with the peasant women in her simple yet colorful surroundings. Roy portrays her as an embodiment of Indian womanhood and strength.

His study of woman depicted her in motherly aspect, as villager and as devotee or sophisticated women. But, of these, he has shown particular attention to the manifestation of women as mother. Innumerable paintings and drawings were done by him to represent the different moods of mother (See colour plate 45). In 1935 Jamini Roy was awarded Viceroy’s gold medal for his painting ‘mother helping the child to cross a pool’.
Santhal woman was another favorite theme of Jamini Roy. As we have seen from the poems of Rabindranath, the Santhals were notable for their simple honesty, innocent bearing and courage in the face of hardship.

Another sensitive Bengali, Sudhin N. Ghose writing about Santals in his novel 'Cradle of the Clouds'

"I was genuinely fond of them. I was enamoured of their broad-hipped and ample-bosomed matrons clad in blue saris with vermilion and saffron hems. Those wearing red oleanders and yellow poppies in their jet-black hair were for me sylvan goddesses. Their movements were so graceful, their laughter so infectious and their glances so haunting. The dreams of my wakeful hours were peopled by them. I simply adored the Santhal women and all that went with them: the water jars shaped like amphora, their heavy bangles fitted with tiny berry-like bells, their coral necklets and floral necklaces, and in particular, their bouncing babies with big eyes filled with water. It was a pleasure to watch them carried astride their mother's backs or straddled across their father's shoulders."

All these things may have impressed him so deeply that he has done a number of paintings regarding Santhal women. As Santhal mother and child, Santhal women, head of Santhal etc. (See colour plates 46 and 47) In an early study painted in 1935, a Santhal girl is
shown arranging her hair, in this painting an air of simple grandeur is evoked by bounding lines reinforced by rich and sombre colours. There is a free surrender to the sweeping dip in her back and the springing curves of her large magnificent body (See colour plate 48).

Jamini Roy never depicted any shrewd woman and seldom depicted violent scenes. His women figures-Radhas, Gopinis, Pujarins and mothers and child-provide us with a new brand of reified feminine icons (See colour plate 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54 and 55). It lay in the logic of Jamini Roy's great success that his art came to suffer something of the same fate that had attended the art of his predecessors, Ravi Verma or Abanindranath Tagore.
CRITICAL APPRECIATION

Jamini Roy is categorised differently by different people – from folk artist to contemporary to rebel artist – was unique in himself and was one of the prime movers of the contemporary art movement in India. The exposition of Jamini Roy’s works was first held in British India Street, Kolkata, in 1938. Critical appreciation of his works were published in several issues of ‘Parichaya’, a quarterly Journal of Kolkata, which made his paintings known to the public. Till then many critics of India and abroad have given their views about his art. Some of them are given below:

According to Stella Kramrisch:

"His work is built on solid ground, open and without pretence; it is based on universals of form which are understood by all who know art, whether from the East or the West... Like the 'Pali', the wooden grain-measure used in this country, pure in form and perfect in subdued symbolic design, the art of Jamini Roy serves the living Bengal."

Rolf Italiaander remarked that, "Jamini Roy's art was deeply rooted to the folk art traditions of Bengal."

Beverly Nicholas in his verdict on India, remarked that, "Jamini Roy was the greatest living artist of India,"
Mulk Raj Anand subscribed to the view that, "Jamini Roy had suddenly decided to cut himself adrift from the urbane style of art and went back to the folk art of his village."

It was Benoy Kumar Sarkar, who had remarked in 1945 that, "Jamini Roy was not a folk painter; in his case, the primitivism came via Europe".

Ashok Mitra had observed that, "he had remodeled the folk elements within the framework of his knowledge in European art".

Shahid Suhrawardy, the then Rani Bageswari Professor of Indian Art at the Calcutta University, was the first to hail Jamini Roy as an artist of significance and to call attention to the quality of "timelessness" in his works. He remarked in "The Art of Jamini Roy" that,

"Jamini Roy's inspiration was wholly Indian; the indefinable Impressionism was not his cup of tea, and, that is why he abandoned the pseudo-Japanese Impressionism of Bengal school".

John Irwin in "Jamini Roy and the Indian tradition" suggests that this artist returned to the village style because he was "convinced of the failure of the Bengal School." And he felt within him the
urge to discover the formal values of painting and "close the rift between academic and indigenous art."

Irwin goes on to say, "From these folk art influences on one hand and from his own self-conscious researches into formal simplification, Jamini Roy gradually evolved the high individual idiom of expression that we find in his later paintings. In his case there was no question of revivalism. The important point to recognize is that 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 folk-culture itself".  

Another author, Bishnu Dey suggests that "Jamini Roy and Rabindra Nath Tagore 'liberated' the younger artists".  

A well known French art critic A. Herve Masson had observed that, "the art of Jamini Roy does not limit itself only to the face of India: it has sometimes searched inspiration on the side of the Occident. It results then in strange portraits of Christ whose resemblance with those painted in Byzantium is astonishing"

He further pointed that, "Outside India, Jamini Roy is certainly to be counted among the greatest contemporary masters".  

According to Jaya Appasamy:  

"The general effect of Jamini Roy's compositions is highly decorative and pleasing. In adopting such a stylised manner the artist tends to loose some of the qualities of high art, such as
suggestion and emotional quality. His pictures are no doubt handsome and easily intelligible since they do not seek any other aim than to be attractive visually. In this they are related to beautiful crafts as well as to abstract compositions.”

Bishnu Dey and John Irwin in their joint monograph on Jamini Roy, published by the Indian Society of Oriental Art, felt that the basic form of Bengal folk art helped Jamini Roy to evolve his personal idiom and to solve his problems as a painter.

From these viewpoints we can say that in his artistic sojourn he moved from the reality expressed by the quality of appearance to the beauty expressed by the quality of line and colour. The Bengal folk paradigm fitted in with his quest for evolving his personal style. In order to postulate his own view of art against the much practiced art trends of his times, he drew liberally from the Bengal folk traditions and from other traditions as well. As a painter, he showed the penchant for the harmony, formal balance and symmetry that are of utmost importance to an artist working in modern idiom. In his endeavour, we find him engrossed in purely formalistic problems which Jamini Roy, as a modern painter was actually exploring.
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