Ancestress

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The Paper proposes to discuss forgotten female painters of Bengal, who thrived during the first five decades of the last century and seems to have simply been forgotten after that. Their names are not in the Art History Books, never discussed in erudite seminars, neither ever mentioned even in the passing in private discussions commonly. I believe visual art like all other branches of knowledge ought to be introduced to their respective mothers; they were all rendered motherless at birth, for they all only have fathers—as if they were born like Minerva from the head of Jupiter. It suits fine a society where the father's name is all that matters while we know that the womb is indispensable for life to continue. The womb however has received its due share—the possessor of the womb has been deified, has been exalted to a position from where it is impossible to desire pleasure and accomplishment, for the goddess desires nothing. It is time that they attain a normal human status with desire, lust, envy along with all positive human qualities.

For ten years, from 1997 to 2007, I have had the opportunity to talk with the numerous female painters of Bengal who created beauty, expressed concern over so many things artistically, taught others, exhibited their works and earned respect for a short while and then passed into oblivion later.

Before discussing why many female painters passed into oblivion it would be good to remember that until very recently Art offered a very restricted opportunity in India. Most art school graduates taught art along with may be, craft or physical exercises to junior school students. Only the exceptionally talented and focused graduates could make a career by painting or could earn the name, 'Artist'. Irrespective of sex, many who painted, exhibited, and earned some fame, were later forgotten or ended up working in ad agency houses. Hence, although memoirs of male Indian artists would tell us how their decisions to learn art displeased their families because art was synonymous with poverty and lack of social prestige. Nevertheless, enlightened families of bygone days did not mind if their daughters learned art because they would not have to earn; and on the other hand, art would give them the required refinement expected of a woman. This difference in attitude almost always became the first decisive factor in the lives of the budding artists. As Ms. Karuna Saha had

said that among the first batch of female students at the Government School of Art and craft she was the only one to have completed her course of study while the rest got married and stopped studying art. They were all from very elite families, she remembered to point out with a rueful smile.

A degree from an art institute cannot make an artist. However, coming to the problem at hand it would be important to show that we are not here to discuss the average women graduates of Art Colleges; the discussion would centre on women artists of considerable ability, to show how gender (and class of course) matters in the case.

I, however, agree with Griselda Pollock's opinion that it is not enough to add a few names of female artists to the already existing list of names of male artists; neither is it sufficient to show what art movements they contributed to and what influences they imbibed or created. Although all these are important by themselves when written art history has gender along with class and race biases these efforts are by no means enough to reinstate female artists in written art history. For this we need to ask why the women artists had been excluded from records so long but to say that this is the result of some male conspiracy, would really mean, doing less than nothing. We need really to see not only the conditions under which female artists produced their works but also conditions under which they were consumed/displayed/sold—in short, we need to probe into the conditions that produced the works and the artists along with the connoisseurs. It had once been fashionable to hold that woman worked under much social constraints and hence to compare their works with those of the male counterparts would be grossly unjust. This however would mean that women artists and those interested in their works are out there to fight a vain battle. Therefore, I would once more rely on Pollock to attempt a paradigm shift, a shift that considers things not considered by standard art history. The task is rather to question connoisseurship and the mode of writing art history, which have been set as norms. I am aware that the task can produce an entire volume and a small section can hardly do justice to it. Therefore, I would raise certain questions and place the three artists mentioned above in the context of those questions instead of evaluating their achievements, which of course was great.

The present discussion would try to understand what it is to be an artist with a capital 'A' and most obviously what great art (art also with a capital 'A') is. In short, it centres on the questions of identity and its production. There is always the danger of falling into the trap of pure objectivism while speaking of women or any other marginalized social group because

the stress is always on the adverse conditions that shape their psyche and hinder their work. This in other words, is to forget the existence of peculiar individual subjectivity, formed under similar objective conditions that might lead to positive 'action'. This, nevertheless, is not to put objective conditions out of sight; it is simply to remember that subjectivity is a creation of several interlacing social structures and discourses, converging and diverging in different ways for different persons living apparently under similar conditions. Hence, the resultant perceptions of different individuals are obviously at variance. Therefore, for example, since refinement and sensibility instead of career was expected Ms. Aparna Roy in spite of not being married took care of her natal family to the extent that she could find no time to paint at home; an ailing brother often brought Ms. Monoma Sen's work to a halt (she too was unmarried); her brother's health condition often interrupted Ms. Kamala Roychowdhury's work too and Ms. Santosh Rohatgi felt a female artist had to be selfish in order to accomplish anything—this *selfishness* in a male artist would be termed as selfless devotion though. Women painters were praised if they allowed familial matters to disturb them. 13.12.1983, Ananda Bazar Patrika while writing on Chitranibha Chowdhury said she excelled equally as an artist and a homemaker. No critic on the other hand, would ever bother to find out how good a father a particular male artist was. Despite growing up under the social conditions and even after bearing the brunt of similar social expectation Ms. Karuna Saha had been relentless in her struggle against the patriarchal social norms. She demanded that she rather be scathingly criticised for her lack (if there were any) of artistic skill than be praised for her culinary skill in an artist's gathering because that was unimportant in such a meet. Ira Roy too stood tall in her struggle against patriarchy and expressed the same through her graphic art works. This does not however mean that all hindrances can be circumvented through personal effort and will; neither should these examples deter one from questioning injustice—these are cited to show that the relation between the objective and the subjective are more complex than one might imagine it to be.

I propose to begin, with the questions regarding Art and Artist. A Great Artist is expected to have an individual style. It is worth remembering that the *common* understanding is however not old enough. Up to the Middle Ages, people were governed by accepted socio-religious norms and canons and were expected to adhere to these. Freedom of conscience and individuality are concepts linked to rationality and logic and are hence more modern. Rationality provided scope to interpret social norms and create scope for individual freedom to focus attention on certain aspects of these while ignoring others. Under such conditions,

there could neither be any standard subject of art nor any standard form of artistic expression. First, because different subject matters demand different style and second, because from individuality stems the possibility of expressing the same content in different forms. The absence of an authoritarian religious political structure in the modern era expanded the scope for such experiments in art. In Europe, however, the establishment of these rights involved protracted struggle. Since my context is Indian, I would take examples from there. One just needs to compare the sculpted figures of gods and goddesses in ancient temples and those painted by Raja Ravi Varma, to understand to what extent he had moved away from the injunctions of the standard norms of the past. It is also worth remembering that Abanindranath Tagore, in his 'Bharat Shilper Sadanga' firmly expressed that at no point of time did an Artist adhere to strict prescribed norms. An Artist, according to him, was one who gave a free hand to his atma. Nevertheless, it would be better to remember that both the artists belonged to the period ascribed to the birth of modern Indian art, and what Abanindrath said about the ancient artists might have been the wishful thought of an Artist who abhorred mimetic and stereotype art, as he has not cited any example in his text. Similarly, Nandalal Bose characterized an artisan as one whose style was repetitive while an Artist was one who could bring into being something that never was (exchange between Bose and Guru Saday Dutta). However, in India originality involved more than individual style. In this connection, Abanindranath's comment on the difference between Art and craft is notable too. He had cited the designs on a Persian carpet to say that despite being beautiful it could not be considered as Art because it was repetitive in nature (op.cit). In fact, modern Indian Art owes its origin to the challenge posed by Abanindranath to a strict naturalistic style taught in the Art academies instituted by the English colonial Government in India. He believed (op.cit) that one ought not to copy nature. One should keenly watch nature, let it settle in the mind and later paint the impression that it left behind. To this Ananda Kentish Coomarswamy added that an Indian artist did not see with the eyes wide open; he saw in his dhyana, which he then depicted artistically.

This definition of Artist and Art would obviously exclude certain things as embroidery, designing, alpana, etc. and those who practiced these from the category of Art and Artist, respectively. As Karuna Sha had pointed out during her interview that the exclusion of folk art, alpana, embroidery, and ritual wall paintings from the category of Art permanently foreclosed women experts in these arenas from being 'Artist'. According to her, had that not been the case, by the sheer strength of number the women artists would outdo the male

artists. For the time being this fact need not trouble us because one, here we are concerned with women who attained special training to become Artists as per the accepted definition; second this rule would exclude many male artisans too from the Artist category. However, to develop an individual style institutional training would not be enough; consistent and steadfast practice as well as knowledge about the works of other artists would be necessary. According to Karuna Saha, the artists' adda (informal meetings) is particularly important for the development of an artists and that is exactly what the young women artists missed because for a long period "in our history adda was a male reserve; we often did not get information about events to be held or scholarships about to be announced until much later." Besides, the women artists were interrupted by change of residence and milieu due to marriage, by other familial matters and motherhood. It was indeed difficult for female artists (and to some extent even now is) to develop an individual style without much extra struggle.

The divide between Art and craft meant additional complexities for the students of Kalabhavan—Kalabhavan curriculum included learning alpana and design creation along with several other indigenous crafts. Yet, Kalabhavan was not immune from outside influence and hence crosscurrents were obvious, to which I shall return shortly. Suffice to say that Nandalal wished to infuse even the stylistically repetitive craft with Beauty that emanated from 'ananta ananda'. With this aim, he wanted his student-artists to learn craft. Moreover, as a nationalist, he also wanted the educated middleclass to gain acquaintance of the various indigenous crafts that machine-made foreign goods had overshadowed. Despite differentiating between Art and craft both Abanindranath and Nandalal sensed spontaneity and creativity in indigenous craft. How far creativity and spontaneity could be there in useful art, facing a market is another question. Further, caste-based Indian crafts were exclusivist by nature in that they did not give scope to those outside the caste to adopt the occupation; nor would the upper-caste 'bhadrolok' feel inclined to become an artisan. Therefore, the divide between Artist and artisan would remain despite the Kalabhavan ideal. A Kalabhavan student might carve a bamboo or shape clay but that would never be his profession. He would aim to be an Artist with a stamp of originality. The same would be true for alpana or needlework, neither of which was produced for the market nor was caste-based. That there was a gender bias at Kalabhavan might be suspected from what Ira Roy had said in her interview— "I clearly told Bishuda (Bishwarup Bose, son of Nandalal Bose) that I might learn alpana etc. but I do not want to be restricted to those areas because I am a woman". Bishwarup Bose however, did not disregard her demand. Yet, Sudhir Khastagir wanted his daughter, Shyamoli

Khastagir to learn art at Kalabhavan because he thought a knowledge of craftwork could help women obtain economic independence—why Sudhir Khastagir did not think that a woman could make a living by being an Artist or why he did not think that with limited scope for Art, male artists should also learn craft to make a living are important questions. Ms. Khastagir too was not sure of the answer when I had asked her.

From here I would venture to fathom the meaning of woman, which otherwise seems obvious; A woman must become a woman by satisfying certain social norms. Certain duties are entrusted to women and certain modes of behaviour are expected of them; enlightened liberal families could make concessions, without changing the social structure. Although the number of women committed to their careers are increasing the rate is not appreciable even now for the same reason. In fact, women enter and exit the job market depending on their domestic conditions; they might resent while leaving the work of their choice but gradually accept it or even justify it because they too feel that to be involved in familial matters is ultimately inevitable for the women. Therefore, similar situations and values often have different implications for the male and the female; for example, Visva Bharati, of which Kalabhavan was a part, took a holistic view of life and meant to educate students in the true sense of the term. There, to become an artist meant imbibing the ability to appreciate and create beauty, not on canvas alone but everywhere around and to love nature. In this approach to art, there could naturally be no gender discrimination. Despite there being no gross gender discrimination at Santiniketan the whole structure of Visva Bharati had different consequences for the female and male students. Even if families or institutions, where they were trained (Kalabhavan, for example) expected them to only create beauty a man would not stop at that because social norm expected men to be successful professionally and earn for the family. Abanindranath pursued art as a hobby and took pride in the fact that all his family members pursued some hobby or other, which included collecting glass-wares or planning gardens—painting hence, was not held apart from all these. But for his students from middleclass families Art was a profession. Time had changed. Hence, they satisfied the conditions required of an Artist. On the other hand, Ms. Manorama Sen, well appreciated student of Benode Behari Mukherjee—even in Santiniketan very few can remember her now and no one ever collected her works though she ceaselessly painted and crafted beautiful objects; and hence, her works are discussed neither in connection to the Bengal School Movement nor in relation to Benode Behari Mukherjee. Very mildly she had complained that Kalabhavan invited her to take charge of their canteen but did not offer her a teaching

post. It is rather surprising to note, in this context, that at Santiniketan, where sex had never been a bar Kalabhavan had very few female teachers so far. The first two women Gurus of Kalabhavan, Gauri Devi and Yamuna Devi taught design and Alpana and not mentioned in Art History hence, as the 'mothers' of the Kalabhavan ideal though Yamuna Devi, according to Ms. Khastagir, had a distinct method of teaching. There of course are many other names too to establish my argument. There was Aparna Roy, the first female teacher at The Government School Art, who never found an opportunity to paint after her student days except while teaching in the class; art history does not mention her as the first female teacher of the Institution; there was Kamala Roy Chowdhury, trained in Kolkata and Paris, who exhibited her works regularly and had been fortunate enough because Birla Academy of Art and Culture has some of her works in their collection. Yet, even she is not discussed as a painter anymore and she had passed away silently in 2010.

The compartmentalized education system of the modern era, disregard for nature and war fear were some of the issues that troubled Shyamoli Khastagir and she believed that her training in Kalabhavan had instilled the sensitivity in her. Hence, throughout her life she struggled against the prevailing insensitivity, using her artworks as her tool. Until her health failed her, she held an annual exhibition, entitled, 'The Crisis of Civilization' at Santiniketan.

This had become her vocation, while she created beauty through her craft and art in several other ways too and in the process developed her own style of work as well, she did not, satisfy the criteria of an Artist—for one, she did not expressly stay in focus by holding exhibitions in big cities nor did she teach in institution of repute. Her students, during the latter part of her life were some of the local rikshaw pullers and earlier in Washington DC, she had taught the long-term prisoners—and the inherent class bias of Art History do not consider such people worthy of the intellectual world of Art. Similarly, from 1960, Chitranibha Chowdhury also, of Kalabhavan fame, taught craft to the destitute women at Banibhavan and to the rural women earlier at Lamchor village Dhaka, in the Swadeshi spirit. Kshama Gupta at Santiniketan, cannot remember well where she had kept all her paintings because she had been adversely affected by a cerebral stroke but still creates designs and encourages the village women to embroider things that they can sell. One needs to think of the large number students and connoisseurs they thus created. Had craft and Art not been sharply separated we would have them also as Gurus and would have had names of numerous artists they created. But destitute women who created beautiful objects for livelihood had no claim to the title of 'Artist' just as one who taught them could not be a Guru. On the other hand, her teaching career at Santiniketan, which could have gained recognition even within the existing frame, was cut short by personal familial reasons. While it is only humane to attend to familial matters the same empathy, is not expected of a male professional; on the other hand, the same quality and category of work is expected of women. The burden of double expectation does not only destroy the abilities of women but put them under severe psychological pressure and tension at the same time.

The aforesaid double-edged problem is well manifested in the art criticisms published in the renowned newspapers after the exhibitions of their artworks; for example, "To come upon the craft and paintings—and portraits in particular—of Chitranibha Chowdhury after the gap of a quarter of a century was an unusually thrilling experience. *One rediscovered a talent, who had left a deep impression on one in what now seems to be a distant past.* On those days, her works could be seen at Santiniketan Kalabhavan and not infrequently in the pages of Prabasi… (25.2.1982 Amrita Bazar Patrika pg. 6) (emphasis added) While the lines show that like most women, especially of the past, Chitranibha Chowdhury, while being determined to paint even under most arduous conditions was not as resolute to satisfy the conditions required to be considered an Artist, i.e., being in focus. The Patrika appreciates her by stating, "She always found time for painting and alpanas while *doing all her household chores to the*

last detail and thereby *sought to practise what Rabindranath and Nandalal set before Santiniketan as an ideal*." But does not spare her while saying "The artist would have done well to exclude a number of her recent portraits, which are indeed very weak and shoddy structurally and aesthetically." Indeed, there were some paintings that lacked the expected aesthetic quality. I cite two paintings to exemplify my point :

This painting of the artists was highly praised

The quality noticeable in the above painting is surely missing in this. From the deficiency of breathing space to the choice of colours, (the colours further constrict the subject of the painting) and the drawing and finish—the painting is no match to the above and to most of her paintings. However, remarking without taking into consideration that for 'quarter of a century' she could not exhibit her works and more, the flower study was done by her in the wide expanses of Santiniketan while the second was done when her movements were restricted by the birth of her daughter (this is her portrait) creates a lacuna that needs to be addressed—not to grant concession to the female artists but to do justice to art criticism. Surely, she could exclude this from her exhibition, but this also demonstrates, "She always

found time for painting and alpanas while *doing all her household chores to the last detail* and thereby sought to practise what Rabindranath and Nandalal set before Santiniketan as an ideal." Any remark on a product without the mention of the context of production becomes unwittingly biased. It is important to remember further, that the critics play a significant role in 'making' an Artist.

The purpose here, as pointed out earlier, is not to come to any conclusion but to indicate some of the problems that artists from the margins of society might face in securing a firm position in her/his professional field. There might be problems distinctive to the women or some typical to the socio-economically marginal but without questioning the social normative and the mainstream mode of art criticism and writing art history, without reconsidering the definition of art and artist both the creators and the lovers of art stand to lose. Globalisation and the typical market economy that ensues from it would make the situation more complex; however, space and time would not permit to embark on that now.