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‘FAMILIAR TYPES, FAMILIAR GESTURES’: REVISITING REALISM THROUGH SATYAJIT RAY’S *THE INNER EYE*

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Abstract: This article attempts to rethink the realist mode adapted by Satyajit Ray in his cinematic works by trying to posit its chief features vis-à-vis the history of fine arts in Bengal. While Ray’s realism has been connected to diverse styles like Classical Hollywood Cinema, Jean Renoir’s realism and Italian Neorealism and has been associated with the literary realism of Bengal more readily, his aesthetic has been rarely studied in relation to the fine arts practiced at Santiniketan, where he stayed during his formative years since 1940s. This essay takes his 1972 documentary—*The Inner Eye*—portraying Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay (1904-80), his teacher at Santiniketan, as an exemplary text and claims that this short film collaterally presents the discursive terrain of Ray’s own aesthetics too, with the director situating himself in a well-defined trajectory of artistic engagement with proximate reality via his mentor’s art. Looking back from this vantage point, the essay tries to show how Mukhopadhyay’s aesthetic can be located as a conscious shift from the preceding nationalist-spiritual ethos of the ‘Bengal School’ of art which again defined itself as distanced from Raja Ravi Varma’s brand of ‘surrogate realism’. Modes of engaging with, or dissociating from, the phenomenal real have been the moot point at every point of these departures. The essay also tries to read Benodebehari’s writings on Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose to understand how he elaborates his own aesthetic ground via an appraisal of his predecessors’ practice and pedagogy, the method Satyajit Ray follows in his documentary.

The correspondence between Bengali literature and Satyajit Ray’s cinematic realism has been acknowledged and much commented upon, but the relationship with the prevalent visual culture in Bengal in general and fine arts in particular, is not explored as such. In this essay, I

will make a brief attempt to such an enquiry. It has also been a general—if not erroneous—tendency to overlook his documentaries when one is trying to probe his directorial pursuit. In this essay, I will take the less obvious routes to understanding Satyajit Ray's authorial realism: through one of his documentaries which throws into sharper relief how he placed himself vis-à-vis the visual culture of Bengal. In the early 1940s, Ray undertook a brief—and incomplete—stay at Kalabhavan, Santiniketan, as a student of fine arts under the tutelage of Nandalal Bose and Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay (1904 – 1980). The latter can be considered as the only figure who can be described with certain aptness as Ray's aesthetic mentor and the student paid a rich tribute to his teacher in a documentary profile — *The Inner Eye* — made in 1972. While Ray had a personality which was too urban to be drenched in the pastoral ethos of Santiniketan, the stay had its impact on him and should be considered as an important formative phase of the director. Unfortunately, a satisfactory account of this phase is neither presented by him nor by his biographers.

However, a discursive enquiry, taking *The Inner Eye* as a point of departure, can lead us to a path of aesthetic history. Contributed in 1972 within a series produced by the Films Division of India on modern Indian art and artists, during a phase of his career when Ray was once again polemically defining his notions of art and artishood in wake of the New Indian Cinema, the film can be considered as a validation of Ray's own realist vocation through an appraisal of his mentor. In other words, I find this work simultaneously a portrayal of Mukhopadhyay's artistic self—who has already lost his eyesight during the moment of filming but was still functional—and Ray's broadest delineation of his preferred mode of being an artist and his aesthetic lineage at the delineated coordinates of which he is willing to position himself.

The artist's uniqueness should be understood in the context of the nationalist art movement of the Bengal School and the ethos of Santiniketan. Reading Ray's film and Mukhopadhyay's writings in this context, an account of shifting artistic sensibilities of Bengal can be noticed, a particular model of vernacular modernism could be hinted at which Ray inherits. A unique aesthetic can be discerned which works out a modern Indian artist's response to proximate reality with degrees of formal awareness, stylistic eclecticism and humanist disposition shaped in the process, a legacy to which Satyajit Ray would be an heir from *Pather Panchali* (1955) onwards.

I

At the turn of the 19th century, an artistic revival took place in Bengal under the priesthood of Ernest Binfield Havell, Principal of the Government Art College in Calcutta from 1896. Working against the prevalent yardsticks of 'national-popular' art (exemplified by the works of Raja Ravi Varma) for their alleged mediocre imitation of the western styles, a modern art form which would simultaneously be Indian/Swadeshi was sought for. A fitting example was found in Abanindranath Tagore's works, who was appointed the vice-principal of the college in 1905. Hailed by ideologues like Havell, Anand Kentish Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), Abanindranath's works actually materialized the ideology of 'self-development' and 'self-expression' in fine arts, triggering an art movement which acquired nationalist dimensions during the Swadeshi period of 1905-12. Notable in this movement is the validation of an indigenous 'high art' against the bazaar art following Varma's, circulated in cheap prints for a burgeoning middle-class clientele. The validation of a new identity was both a matter of thematics (mythological subjects) and a mode of technique (Abanindranath's 'wash' technique instead of oil). Spiritualism, 'beauty', emotion (*bhava* and *rasa*), imagination (*kalpana*) defined the distinct 'Indianness'. A sharp ideological difference from the 'westernized' academic realism was drawn. As E.B. Havell declared: "Indian art is essentially idealistic, mystic, symbolic and transcendental"(Chattopadhyay, 1987, p,18). Thus a distinct and literary mode of aestheticism was practiced

The sheer inspecificities of form in [Abanindranath's] paintings – the smoky wash of colours, the shadows which enveloped backgrounds, the hazy and wispy contours of figures – were seen to express best the 'inner' meanings of images. His new technique of the 'wash' appeared to deliberately negate the physical presence of forms, converting these into abstracted ideals... Abanindranath's stylistic experiments had set the stereotype of 'Indian-style' painting; simultaneously, in the language of art criticism, the artistic values he highlighted set out the main criteria of evaluation.(Guha-Thakurta, 1992, p,194)

The mode was literary, because the inspiration and imageries were largely culled from classical Sanskrit literature. The Bengal School, as this movement was subsequently named, didn't differ much from the mythological/*pauranic* content of Ravi Varma or Bamapada Banerjee. Only a suitable form and style was found, the academic realism of the former was deemed derivative and 'vulgar' and was replaced by a 'traditional' style culled from Ajanta and Ellora caves, Rajput

and Mughal miniatures, Pahari paintings etc. This style marked the ‘authenticity’ and therefore the identity posited by the new art, the bridging of the rediscovered tradition and a modernity aware of the past was accomplished. This art was considered modern because it was a conscious process of re-construction and excavation of an Indian past, ironically a past which was unsullied by colonial modernity.

That the Bengal School was supposed to be a desperate shift away from any sort of engagement with the real, can be understood if we briefly recall the tenets of Raja Ravi Varma’s art, previously hailed as the ‘modern’ Indian artist, endowing the vocation and the individual artist with a prestige and a project hitherto not associated with the medium. Critics rank Ravi Varma as one of the forerunners in the project “of materializing through western techniques the idea of a golden past and then inducting this into a national project”. (Kapur, 2000, p,146) Adapting western academic realism and oil-painting in general, he fashioned what Geeta Kapur describes as a “surrogate realism” where his medium guaranteed a greater simulation of substances, textures, tonalities, density, light and shades; fashioning a realism linked to bourgeois desire, ideology and ethics. “Flowing from such material possibilities of the oil paint is the lure of appropriating the world, of appeasing the acquisitive impulse, of saturating the consciousness with the profit of possession” (Kapur, 2000, p,150). Though he started as a commissioned portrait painter of the aristocrats, he set the perspective of the burgeoning middle-class and his fame grew in his depiction of the mythological scenes and characters, which were widely circulated in oleographs and lithographs. The canvas became optically analogous to the Marathi or Parsi proscenium, depicting a “frozen moment” of a known narrative, wherein a marked discontinuity of the figures from the ground is often observed. Often these ventures into the golden past were embodied by the sensuous female figures—the *nayika* of the classical literature — their sensuous demure, their iconic poise, erotic fullness following anatomical verisimilitude, using live models.

Varma’s repertoire stretched beyond the mythologicals. In 1892-93, an exhibition of ten of Varma’s paintings were held in Chicago (simultaneous with Swami Vivekananda’s famous tour) depicting women “from different parts of India, women of different physiognomy, class and dress, the idea being to present a compound of voluptuous, wistful, self-possessed Indian women for universal approbation”(Kapur, 2000, p,161). These portrayals—ethnographic and

therefore orientalist and nationalist simultaneously—sought the perennial through the approximation of real bodies. This attribution of the flesh to the idealized and the ethereal was pursued even in his mythological paintings, where plebeian models were used to portray goddesses and celestials. The paradox of the use of lofty and spiritual themes and their naturalist depiction was held in an unsteady equilibrium for a few decades, when for the new middle class, Varma was celebrated as the quintessentially Indian artist who had mastered modern methods.

This particular use of anatomical verisimilitude, the ‘recording’ of live models would later irritate the connoisseurs of the Bengal school (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, pp,186–89). Not only because the women became more sensual rather than becoming sensuous, the resultant regionalities of physiognomies and dresses were considered something to be transcended in order to reach the homogeneous nationalist ideal, not present in this world but immortalized in the realm of the past. Verisimilitude became an obstacle in the way to the attainment of the ideational, Varma’s art pointing too outwards to be interiorized. In other words, the notion of the material ‘referent’ should be erased from the nationalist/spiritual canvas. While Varma stressed on the ‘visual’, later the emphasis would be on the ‘visionary’.

The celebration of the Bengal School was not unanimous. It ranged from the scathing sarcasms of Suresh Samajpati in *Sabujpatra* to the presentation of an international aestheticism by Benoy Sarkar. We can single out two essays by Sukumar Ray—the illustrious father of Satyajit—published in *Prabashi* in 1910 primarily as a response to O.C. Gangooly’s published views hailing the newfound nationalist conventions. Gangooly, responding to Samajpati’s diatribes, said that as long as Indian artists wear “anatomy, perspective, light-and-shade and other Grecian monocles”(cited in Ray, 1986, p. 86), the pursuit of the mysteries of Indian art is bound to be hampered. Ray understood this as the new art movement’s refusal to represent the real— “*facts of nature*” (in English in original)—and a denial of science in the sphere of fine arts. Then he continues—in his usual sarcastic vein—questioning the notions of beauty and spirituality associated with the school, its overdependence on literary allusions, the notion of Indianness and innerness of the new art. He points out that while literary language is nothing but a system of ‘signs’, a pictorial counterpoint should not be pursued in the project of forging an essentially Indian art. Being critical of the essentialist, exclusionist notions of Bengal school he quotes Havell’s observation of Abanindranath’s eclecticism of styles. While Ray considered

these artistic practices obvious in present political conditions, he vehemently opposed formulating a system of aesthetic judgment out of it. (Ray, 1986a)

In a following essay, Sukumar Ray also emphasized on the importance of science—“*systematized knowledge*”—in fine arts, something not to be reduced—as Gangooly refutes it to be—as a mere ‘convention’ of European art, nor to unimaginative mimesis. He opined that “the transcendental needs to be represented and imagined *in terms of known realities* ... (conventions are born out of) conceiving the ideal out of diverse maternal varieties, therefore artificially cannot substitute conventions.” (Ray, 1986, p. 93)

In retrospect, one can discern that the nationalist ethos of the Bengal School shaped itself in conjunction with a benevolent face of orientalism. James Mill had described Indian art as ‘monstrous’, though Owen Jones or William Morris were appreciative of Indian designs and ornamentations. If Lord Macaulay’s infamous minutes exemplified the attitude of ‘the white man’s burden’, William Jones, Max Mueller or Romain Rolland were putting forward the syncretist and subsequently monogenetic theory of all civilization springing from the oldest, located in Asia. The Indian ideologues and also influential far Eastern ones like Kakujo Okakura imbibed this stream of orientalism, one of the off-shoots being this new art movement. This new orientalism would assign the ‘essence’ of the Orient in its ‘transcendental spirituality’, located in a temporally distant ‘golden era’ of the past - homogeneous and imaginary - to be excavated and formed out of conscious efforts. One can say that thus the search for indigenous autonomy was sealed off from the present historical dynamics, though triggered as a response to it. Autonomy of an identity could only be attained through representations, locked away from historical changes or dynamism into a zone of (the) perennial or (the) eternal. Once excavated and acquired, a transcendental bliss is supposed to be attained which marks the frames of the artworks and suffuses almost all writings on these works, bearing the overflow of triggered emotions, expressed in ornate, efflorescent, often purple, sanskritised prose. Art is redefined as meditative, the artist as the modern mendicant, not an individual as such, but a state-of-being reached through a rigorous self-discipline.

II

Rabindranath Tagore—whose initial enthusiastic engagement with nationalist politics

during 1905-12 waned in later years—didn't directly intervene in the pedagogy of Kalabhavan. He founded Santiniketan in 1920-21, but certainly the new ethos guided by his thoughts influenced or created the conditions of the new pedagogy. Thus within the ambit of Kalabhavan a gradual but steady shift took place from the Bengal school ethos. This new ethos was modernist, but anti-urban, anti-market and anti-industrial (Kapur, 2000, p,203), stressing on a universal/international/global vein of thought and specifically local character of action. As Rabindranath became disillusioned with the begging-or-threatening nature of active politics vis-à-vis the colonial government, he tried to devise a process of self-development which would take place beyond the circuit of governance, on a smaller, local or rural scale. To move away from Calcutta to Birbhum was the first step, where subsequently he paved ways towards formulating an alternative education-system along with novel rural development programs, leading to the establishment of an autonomous university. A conscious interaction with the habitat and the environment, a dialogue between the aristocrat and the folk, an amalgam of the classic (Upanishadic) and the vernacular were the key features of this new ethos. As a result, the earlier nationalist paradigm, locked in an imagined, abstract, and homogeneous Hindu-ized past, was gradually discarded. Instead, the perennial was sought in the lived reality, the ideational gave way to the experiential and habitation; the temporal past gave way to the spatial present, albeit a spatiality which was simultaneously open to cosmopolitan interaction but insulated from the urban contemporaneity. How this new ethos shaped fine arts in Santiniketan will be evident in Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay's writings on these leading figures' artworks and pedagogy.

Benodebehari's accounts of art and art-education offer the rare insights of a practitioner's perception of history (Mukhopadhyay, 1984). Interestingly, he does not consider the 19th century as the period of 'renaissance' in Bengal; rather the era is described as decadent, the blame entirely falling on the new ostentatious rich, English education, imitation of European culture and, of course, British colonialism. Appreciative of E.B. Havell's interventions, Mukhopadhyay also describes it as a failure, pointing out that Havell's agenda was to revitalize indigenous craftsmanship rather than the fine arts (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 343-47). The resurgence in fine arts appeared to be more of a displacement to him.

Benodebehari's analysis of Abanindranath's works mark subtle shifts, complicating standard profiles of the artist. He maintained that imitators often reduced the master's awareness

of form, subtle eclecticism of style, experiments with tonalities and even variations of his trendsetting ‘wash’ technique into dull mannerisms. He emphasized that Abanindranath’s style was too individualistic to be institutionalized, too personally expressive, ideational and irrational (*ahetuk*) to be systematized into a school. It was Havell’s inspirations and compulsions of 1905 which homogenized (and at least to the greater public, standardized) and transformed his artistic pursuits into an agenda. According to him, till 1916, two trends were evident in his works: the better known works which triggered the Bengal school, venturing in the literary and the imaginary past and a lesser known shaping of a ‘realist’ form, “aware of surroundings...inspired by reality” (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 237. Translation mine).

Thus his pedagogy, his writings and his works were never entirely identical. The anti-mimetic, interiorizing drive—according to Mukhopadhyay—was more personal than national, too eclectic to be prescriptive, to be explained exhaustively in nationalist/spiritual vocabulary. Mukhopadhyay did not consider Abanindranath’s initial forays, e.g. The Radhakrishna series, as oppositional to European naturalism. This conscious sense of opposition—under Havell’s influence—was a later development when, instead of observation, he stressed on *bhava*, turning his art more ideational.

According to Benodebehari, Abanindranath’s method was ‘realistic’ but his pedagogy did not elaborate it. In the process, the trainee’s artwork lost its connection with the material world: “the *quality* of materiality was lost” (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 355. Henceforth all italicized words in English in the original), but failing to apprehend the formal traditions of Indian art. This resulted in an overdependence on literature; in other words, the emphasis on content stultified the form: “...the luminosity of coloration was lost, the artists were more attentive to *natural effect* than to the *surface quality* (of compositions)” (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 357). Abanindranath never formulated a thorough guideline of art-education; instead he created an ambiance, a condition of possibilities, acting as a catalyst to the students’ inherent artistic zeal. He “did not render the exercise of tradition [*paramparar anushilon*] mandatory, therefore the pupil had to resort to experimentations...he never prescribed a rigid trajectory of formal exercises.” (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 124) This, simultaneously, was a liberation for the talented, but forced others to imitate the master, resulting in an ignorance of the plastic qualities of art and a belief in the “dangerous” notion that experienced reality has no place in Indian art.

According to Mukhopadhyay, Nandalal Bose formalized and systematized pedagogy. Mukhopadhyay elaborated three points of the master's pedagogy (probably derived from Kakujo Okakura): 'Nature Study', 'Tradition' and 'Originality' among which the first got maximum emphasis. Benodebehari mentions that a definitive trajectory of exercise in 'tradition' was not followed. Thus, a sense of choice and stylistic eclecticism developed, to be further enriched by visits of Stella Kramrich (in 1921), Andres Carpelles, R. La Montaigne etc. who introduced the students of Santiniketan to tenets of the European avant-garde. Stylistic heterogeneity sometimes even compelled Nandalal to discipline students further in their drills of Indian art.

The basic premise was, significantly, 'nature study', the most rigorously systematized module of the training. Nandalal specified how a sense of design, along with a sense of form and structure, are to be learned from observation. The formative exercises of rapid sketches became important: "the primary aim of nature study was to figure out motion and structure out of materiality" (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 159). After this thorough disciplining the students were absolutely free to pursue their original work, as they were in selection of the 'tradition' they wished to follow. The studies of nature comprised landscapes, studies of different seasonal flowers, local flora and fauna, beasts and birds, minute insects etc. In case of figurative drawings, local people were studied. Benodebehari observed how studies on dances by elaborately costumed students of the campus or laboring half-naked Santals rendered different emphases on human movements and anatomical details. Studies would be initiated with patient observations and "*identification* with the object" (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 192).

The stress on observation as a method, attention to form, volume, mass, movements of objects freed the students from Abanindra-styled pictoriality and of course, to a large extent, spirituality. Benodebehari observes how notions of color changed too: "natural and geographical factors rendered the coloration realistic and localised." He also noticed that Abanindranath's proverbial 'wash method' was "never" practiced in Santiniketan, rendering it obsolete by 1935 (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 174).

Under Nandalal's pedagogy thus, there was a marked shift in the fine arts of Santiniketan: from the ideational and conceptual ruminations of the past to the experiential, sensual, nature-culture continuum. While it might be misleading to label this turn a 'realist' one,

one may say that the turn was towards a discipline of cognition of the proximate real via direct perception. In Benodebehari's own works the process of gradual secularization would be complete.

III

The way Benodebehari's writings on Abanindranath and Nandalal help us to understand his own aesthetic paradigm and artistic drives, his vocation can be studied through Satyajit Ray's camera, which might throw into sharper relief the latter's tenets of realism.

Ray's film and an article written by him (in the same year) on Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay can be considered complementary. The article (Ray, 1976, pp. 118-23) — quite short in length — is a compendium of conversations Ray had with his mentor during the making of the film. Thus it is more of an interview which could not be accommodated within the film (the soundtrack retains the artist's voice on two significant occasions, never in sync-sound): the entire length of the article consisted of a select transcript, with six short questions and comments by Ray added in apart from six initial paragraphs where Ray records his initial impressions of the artist's works. Ray avoids any appraisal and commentary in the essay; his words and voice are kept in the soundtrack of the film instead.

The essay presented two views—one of Ray's and another of Mukhopadhyay's—on the Bengal school and what it meant to a section of contemporary civil society. Interestingly, opinions about Santiniketan are also provided alongwith; a sort of likemindedness is struck. Ray starts the essay:

I was not aware of Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay — by his name or his works — before 1940. Probably the reason was that his works were never featured in *Prabashi*.

After finishing my days in the college, it was my mother's wish that I spend some days in Santiniketan. I also intended to to engage in arts - commercial arts. In Santiniketan, commercial arts were not pursued, it was the place of Oriental art, which I knew through the colored frontpages of *Prabashi*. In these three-colored halftone artplates I never found anything interesting except Nandalal Bose's paintings. I found wash-paintings to be a diluted affair; the themes and style had a langour and wistfulness which were revolting. (Ray, 1976, p. 118)

And Benodebehari talks about his initial days in Santiniketan:

‘...I had a sketchbook — a favorite of mine — with sketches of Calcutta done by my elder brother. I intended to carry it with me to Santiniketan, but everyone warned me: these sketches are done in a Western style, one should not take it there. As people say, one can’t do Indian art wearing a twill shirt — something like that’ (Ray, 1976, p. 120).

...

[Ray:] ‘In those days Indian art meant drawing mythologicals primarily. Did you paint such things?’

‘Never. I had no interest in mythologies. One should consider my upbringing responsible for that. No one bothered with those things in my family. In my childhood — I can recall people reading aloud *Gora*. That explains.’ (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 121)

In the film, Ray shows a still of Nandalal Bose, surrounded by his pupils. A portion of the frame gets masked, singling out Benodebehari as Ray narrates:

Nandalal allowed his pupils to explore freely within the broadly defined ambits of Oriental art. Benode decided from the very outset, that he had no use for mythology, the stock in trade of most of the new painters. He was more interested in his immediate surroundings.

Then, as the framings, compositions and tonalities of Ray’s camera try to approximate sketches and paintings to one of which the montage arrives: “The starkly beautiful countryside around Santiniketan, its flora and fauna, and the sturdy life of the Santals in the villages, all these found expression in the sketches and paintings of Benodebehari’s early period.”

The film is structured in three broad sections: a framing section with which the film starts and ends shows the artist working, work-in-progress is documented; a middle section — comprising still photos of the artist, some archival footage of Santiniketan and footage of complete works and sketches — documenting his career in Santiniketan (after a brief account of his childhood) and his tours till the year he completely lost his eyesight. The years between 1952 and 1971 are not documented; neither do we see works of any other artist (except a few Japanese sketches and an early Egyptian painting). Rabindranath is never mentioned. The voice-over narration by Ray is similarly reticent, ending with the middle section. The rest of the soundtrack consists of a sitar recital in Raga Asavari (which Ray described as the more optimistic and less wistful of all ragas of dawn) complementing the images and works of a fully functional but blind visual artist.

Obviously this remarkable fruitfulness of paradox was something which the documentary

wanted to capture: the conjunction of blindness and visual art. The film tries to comprehend how one sense organ replaces the other: how the optical is taken over by the tactile. The artist, somehow jubilantly says: “for the first time (in plastic arts) space is a blind man’s space”. As the artist claims that this newly mobilized perception is far more powerful than the former, the camera records how forms, shapes, structures, volumes, contours, textures, lines acquire a new meaning for the artist. The depiction also underlines how collages, murals, sculptures, sketches give birth to a modernist awareness of materiality in plastic arts. But a continuity is also underlined in spite of this break: an aesthetic based on a response to the proximate real. Thus, a uniqueness of authorship (of the director) is discerned while a profile of the mentor serves—by default—as the vehicle through which the illustrious student also elaborates his own realist theses on art.

Ray records juvenile landscapes by Benodebehari and more mature landscapes done in Santiniketan. Sketches of flowers, insects, birds, animals follow; he also shows us studies of musculature and skeletal structures of animals often resembling zoological diagrams, bearing marks of a scientific curiosity, seriousness and patient observations on subjects which probably had no place in indigenous art in the century. To elaborate the break, Ray moves from a canvas of brilliantly colored nature study to an equally serious study of a rotund figure, which to any other contemporary artist would appear fit only for caricatures, to a depiction of an unmanned bridge finding structural centrality in a canvas.

But human beings of mundane origins, commonplace professions in all their ordinary vitality are something that interested both the mentor and the student. The initial lines of narration introduce certain keywords as Benodebehari’s paintings and collages respectively before and after his blindness are shown; “familiar types, familiar gestures, strong subtle silhouettes with the validity of timeless symbols...” The quotidian, ordinary, familiar, human and natural world remain the consistent and inexhaustible thematic in the artist’s oeuvre, even when literal observations of the phenomenal world has become an impossibility. But the aesthetic is not static or unidimensional, the dynamic quality lies in a process of perception and depiction. The zenith is succinctly summed up by Ray’s words during an intercut between footage of the ghats of Benaras and Mukhopadhyay’s sketches of the same; “once again, he succeeded in stripping his subject of all its superficial trappings and catching the essence beneath

the surface.” The boldness, accuracy and economy of brush strokes are particularly noticeable in these sketches done when the artist was rapidly losing his eyesight.

Ray's film spends more screen-time on the murals and frescoes done by Mukhopadhyay when he was at the height of his artistic career. The first one is the ceiling-painting which was the first work by his teacher which Ray came across when he arrived at Santiniketan in 1940. Ray recalls his impressions in his essay (here translated by Andrew Robinson):

The entire ceiling was a painting, showing a gentle village scene in glowing colors, full of trees, fields, ponds, people, birds and beasts. A village in Birbhum. One could call it a *tapestry*, or an *encyclopaedia*. Such painting did not seem to bear any relation to Oriental art as I knew it. (Robinson, 2004, p. 51)

Robinson left a key epithet untranslated: Ray described Oriental art as “mindnumbing” (Ray, 1976, p. 118). In the film, he says: “He packed all of his twenty years of loving and meticulous observation of rural life around Santiniketan and all his effortless mastery of technique.”

The term ‘encyclopedia’ needs to be drawn attention to, along with the emphasis that the scenes are culled from a village in Birbhum. Popular urban culture in Bengal has developed imageries of the rural, many a times signifying a lost plenitude, in a generalized way, where differences arising out of topographies are lost. Sometimes a portrayal of the riverine East Bengal would stand metonymically for the entire Bengal. Ray's emphasis marks that this depiction is much more specific, local and faithful to the experience of the habitat of the artist, typical characters, scenes and imageries being absent.

The second fresco is on the life on campus itself. Ray comments:

Instead of the free flowing lyricism of the ceiling-frescoe we have a more austere composition in vertical segments. But the touches of humor and the marvelous observation of types and gestures still there.

These qualities are considered as hallmarks of Ray too. The third fresco is the ‘Medieval Saints’ composed in 1947, thus a response to the ongoing communal riots and simultaneous birth of the nation is a probability. The theme is religious—“for the first time”, as Ray notes—but focuses on the historical instead of the mythological. Instead of depicting imageries from institutional religions like Hinduism (as in *Bengal School*) or Islam, the composition depicts more plebeian, decentralized, alternative (if not oppositional) religious figures, minstrels, followers of the Bhakti

movements, who preached and practiced through the oral and vernacular medium a tolerant, humanist and pacific religion unassociated with power. Thus the work recalls with forcefulness and grandeur a radical consciousness of civilizational memory hitherto unregistered in earlier nationalist arts.

Ray's cinematic response zooms out from the saints' faces, embedding them within the multitude of common people (whereas a zoom-in would have singled out the faces into close-ups), underlining the democratic nature of the movements. Subsequently the editing presents a montage of "familiar types, familiar gestures", hands, feet, faces, professions in an almost Eisensteinian vibrancy. The artist's voice in the soundtrack talks about the radical simultaneity, eclecticism and quotations of different styles and registers in the painting with a logic behind it: he has assembled everything which is "pre-renaissance". As the montage culminates in an ensemble of mother-and-child images, including a Madonna, we can also notice a documentation of types and gestures across phases of history of painting both from the east and the west. Ray observes:

The only example of a truly epic conception in twentieth century Indian art... The whole composition shows a remarkable cohesiveness. Saints and devotees, cities and mountains, rivers and trees and people, all fused into an organic whole and make it a profoundly original and valid conception of the theme. There are resonances of other styles and other periods, but all the influences have been assimilated into a synthesis that bears the unmistakable hallmark of Benodebehari Mukherjee.

Ray described his mentor as "a great intellect with a total lack of flamboyance". Even in the following remarks he describes artisthood in words which can easily mark tenets of Ray's own artistic personality too:

There was no doubt that a painter of striking originality had appeared on the Indian scene. A painter with a deeply introspective, analytic turn of mind, aware of tradition, responsive to environment and with sympathies extending beyond the limits of Oriental art.

He elaborated to Robinson:

Twentieth-century Indian painting is very derivative, with the exception of certain very gifted painters like Subramanyam... But Binodeda was very deeply rooted. He perfectly synthesised what he picked up in Japan and in the West and what is already there in Indian painting. The synthesis makes it a perfectly satisfying unity. You never feel that 'Oh, now he's copying so-and-so's composition or now he's doing this or that'. You feel he's being himself - very much so. It's a reflection of his own personality and his ability to get the best out of all elements and make it a whole. (Robinson, 2004, p. 282)

IV

What aligns Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay's works to a distinct modernism is his secular outlook. Albeit, it is an indigenous modernism because his was a secularization of an existing art ethos born out of distinct philosophical traditions. Whereas Western modernism presupposes a nature-culture discontinuity, for this modernism the continuum was still viable, bringing forth a naturalism beyond empiricism. An awareness of formal qualities without granting it a clear autonomy would be another feature. A possibility of being eclectic was conditioned because a wider range of codes and styles were more accessible to him than a western modernist. While being well-aware of forms and structure, the artist was not a formalist in the vein of western modernists as indigenous traditions gave him such an awareness in a distinct way. Mukhopadhyay endeavored a simultaneous sophistication, simplicity and spontaneity in technique (as Ray quotes him in the essay opining that while for a primitive artist technique was spontaneous, a modern artist has to labor to achieve it). What restrains his art — even after his blindness when he was discovering the 'tactile' dimensions of art — from being formalist is his humble and engaged depiction of the real.

The artworks are definitely humanist, with a faith in the "essence beneath the surface" of objects, people and the world, perceived through patient cognitive discipline, expressed through a sense of economy and discipline of skills. In the process — though the works bear a distinct authorship — the artist's consciousness is never projected. Keeping the consciousness in abeyance would be another feature of this modernism (obviously, Rabindranath's artwork doesn't share this). Thus his works are classical in the sense the Bengal school was romantic, where the projection of the essentialized spiritual consciousness of the artist-mendicant was crucial. The suspension of the artist's consciousness resisted the depiction of the commonplace, rural and the local from being objectified, essentialized or exoticized. As the issue of authenticity became irrelevant, binaries like tradition/modernity, western/indigenous were easily skirted.

Even the formal and structural qualities were born out of studying the phenomenal world. This study of the world created an inner archive from which themes and elements of an ordinary world would be culled even after the artist's blindness. As Ray concludes in the film: "...even for a visual artist the loss of sight need not mean the end of creation... there was an inner eye, an

inner vision born out of long experience and deep devotion which the artist can call upon to come to his aid, to guide his fingers”.

What was lacking in Benodebehari’s work was — as it will also be observed in the early works of Ray — a sense of contemporaneity as a historically dynamic phenomenon. While the impulse of the contemporary may be readable in his works — as in the ‘Medieval Saints’ — the codes, thematics and stylistics were culled from the archives of civilizational memories. Mukhopadhyay’s art presupposes a tranquil, static and quasi-perennialized reality on which the artist can contemplate upon without much haste. Santiniketan provided a sort of insulated sanctuary for that purpose. Such influences were considerable in Ray’s aesthetic as well, though his cinematic ideas and a changing social reality as the raw material would force him to respond to a reality-in-flux in the 1970s, pushing his authorial realism to a threshold.

Mukhopadhyay and Ray shared a sophisticated middle-class artist’s vision in all its classicism and humility. The mentor’s revered contemporary in Santiniketan was Ramkinkar Baij—an artist of subaltern origins—whose works radically reverses the modernist aristocratic-primitive dialog. Unlike Paul Gauguin’s sojourn to Tahiti or Picasso’s experiments with African masks, where the metropolitan artist takes recourse to the pre-modern after encountering the limits of modernity, in Baij the tribal is the subject of modernism. Baij’s unconventional choice of medium — often sculptures made of rubble, granules, concrete, cement — articulated the vitality of the labor of the lowly, stressing rhythm, movement, organicity of the working class and sheer material existence. This was a different sort of engagement with the experiential real.

In 1945, the Progressive Artist’s Group was formed, whose radical visions — born out of close links with Marxist thought, Indian People’s Theatre Association and the Progressive Writer’s Association—were of a self-conscious modernism critical of every existing lineage of ‘tradition’. Here was a contemporary art movement which engaged with the historical dynamics, the reality-in-flux, with tumultuous and traumatic events like the 1943 famine in Bengal, refugee influx, leftist militant movements like those of Tebhaga. Zainul Abedin, Surya Ray, Debabrata Mukhopadhyay, Chittaprasad’s depiction of subaltern struggles and sufferings were tuned to global sociopolitical happenings and Leftist trends of thoughts and practices. Their drawings, sketches, etchings, wood-engravings sometimes substituted documentations. Somenath Hore later developed a distinct mode of sculpture out of metal sheets and rods. Acids or blowtorch on

metal created correlatives of 'wounds' in his works, creating bold, lacerated, distorted figurations of bodies in extreme situations. The materiality of the works became more pronounced; forms created out of immediate and urgent impulses from reality. These new arts of the '40s engaged with the topical instead of the perennial, flux instead of staticity and stability, political instead of the aesthetic, thus creating a new register. These registers would be taken up cinematically by a filmmaker like Ritwik Ghatak to respond to the historical with greater immediacy and reflexivity. The absence of this register and a sort of anachronistic approximation in his later films like *Ashani Sanket* (1973) and *Sadgati* (1981) marks the works of Ray. One can say, the differences between Ray and Ghatak in perceiving the same historical epoch from different perspectives, in different modes of engaging reality and different modes of articulation of their views of history stemmed from different legacies of visual art practices to which they aligned themselves.

One should immediately add that aligning Ray with Mukhopadhyay and Ghatak with Ramkinkar Baij, the Progressive artist's group might turn out to be a hasty and deterministic move. What I wish to hint at is a starting point from where we can inquire into the specificities (and overlaps and differences) of the directors' *method* of approaching the historical real and how they were related to the preceding visual arts discourses. I am trying to find correspondence between Ray's methods—acute and patient observation, his sense of filmic rhythm and duration culled from the observed reality, a minute collation of details along with the sketching of broader outlines of the observed, preferences of studying stable realities instead of realities in flux etc. - with those of Mukhopadhyay's. What remains to be researched further is how this paradigm of eclectic visual naturalism accommodated newer priorities and prerogatives in the context of the experiences of the 1940s and how the broader aesthetic can be understood in lieu of a change of medium, i.e. the cinematic. One should also think how far this trajectory of aesthetic enquiry can be pursued as far as the changes through which Ray's ethos was undergoing in the first two decades of his career are concerned. I am not only keeping in mind the moment of assimilating neo-realism in the global or local context which will lead to *The Apu Trilogy* after 1955, but also how Ray's cinema was engaging with the wave of cinematic modernism which happened worldwide in the 1960s. One should also recall that the concerned documentary on Ray's mentor was being filmed when Ray was turning relatively conservative regarding his views on New

Indian Cinema and was wary of formal experiments and ‘newness’ of any kind in alternative cinematic practices in India (though simultaneously he was grappling with newer devices and a changing historical reality in his urban films of 1970s). *The Inner Eye* might be read as a redefinition and assertion of his ethos by default in such a context. One might further study how the features of Ray’s aesthetic which had correspondences with those of Benodebehari Mukhopdhayay’s persist or change in these films, when Ray was definitely pursuing a changed or re-tuned (and in my opinion subsequently abandoned after *Jana Aranya*) aesthetic of realism, a re-newed approach of cognition and perception of the urban real.

A broader (and not teleological) drive towards realism in the cultural realm of Bengal in the 1940s and ‘50s can be discerned in Ray’s documentary on Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay. This essay tries to show that in such a Third-World situation, an author had a choice of ‘realisms’. Choosing a trajectory of realist pursuit in the arts would fashion a particular legacy of artistic subjectivity. Ray’s realism has been explained putting it in the context of other extant cinematic realisms. But if we try to study his aesthetics in the light of fine arts in Bengal, as *The Inner Eye* might provide us a lead to, we might have different trajectories of enquiry. The scenario was somehow different from Classical Hollywood Realism (to which Ray himself paid a passionate tribute in his Academy awards speech), where an author had to devise a unique style within a broader industrial aesthetic. It is neither comparable to the context regarding the Italian Neorealism (which also had its legacy in local literature, visual arts, opera, *comedia dell’arte* etc.), another much agreed upon ‘influence’ on Ray. In the aftermath of Neorealism differences of authorial personalities under an erstwhile umbrella aesthetic would branch out into different auteur practices from the initial movement or school. In case of Bengal, as is evident primarily in Ray and Ghatak, the choice of aesthetic was distinctively authorial; choosing among legacies which might overlap (the legacy of Tagore, for example) but among coordinates which differ.

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