



# Sunayani Devi: The First Modern Indian Woman Artist

Dr.Pramit Parna Paul

Assistant Professor, Dept. of Art History, Govt.College of Art & Craft  
Agartala, Tripura

**Abstract :** In the early part of the twentieth century, when Abanindranath Tagore was acknowledged to be the major iconic figure of the Bengal School, his colossal presence as an artist and his influence as a teacher were far reaching. Such was his clout that his disciples were also looking for ways and possibilities through Bengal School of Art. Though they were small in numbers, this small group spread across the country; with some of them occupying influential positions in other provincial art schools. The nationalistic fervor of this school of art eventually made the nationalist movement and modern painting synonymous terms in Indian art. It was during this time that many scholars came forward to inform the common people about the folk art traditions.

Presence of an interesting artist figure which creates intrigue in the historical narrative of Indian art is Sunayani Devi. She was the younger sister of Abanindranath, and Gaganendranath Tagore and was the niece of Rabindranath Tagore. Born in such an illustrious family, she was naturally blessed to have all the support required to develop as an artist. She followed her two talented elder brothers closely. Moreover, she also practiced wash method and other drawing techniques in secret. Sunayani Devi was not only the first female artist of India, she was also known for her penchant in folk art. Interestingly, the classical sense of modernization of Abanindranath art was found in Sunayani Devi. At that time, no other artist dared to think of art the way she did.

**IndexTerms** - Abanindranath Tagore, Bengal School, Modern Indian art, Female artist, Folk art.



Pic-1, laksmi, wash tempera



Pic-2, lady holding a fan, water colour on paper.

## Introduction

The late nineteenth century in India emerged many social and cultural changes. The term Bengal school associated with a style rather than with a period of time or with regional development. Bengal is historically important and was one of the first seats of British power. The Indian nationalistic movement and modern art can be considered to be synonymous. It will be unfair to compare the beginning of the modern Indian art with that of the modern European art practice. Started by Abanindranath Tagore, the initial stage the modern Indian art had subjects of *Puranas* and Epics in them. Eventually it became fused with the concepts of jingoism and nationalism. Many thinkers came forward to make the general Indian mass aware of the folk heritage of the country. Swami Vivekananda spoke highly about the native *Patua* (pata painter) in the advance of Indian art and also about the *Chalchitra* (decor) of the Hindu Goddess *Durga*, both of which showcased the high artistry of native Indian artists. He has once told Sister Nivedita to modernize the old and nationalize the modern. E.B.Havell too has a great influence in the progress of Indian culture. Other thinkers who took leading role in doing this were Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, Ordhendra C. Gangoly, Heinrich Zimmer, Okakura, Stella Kramrisch, Sri Aurobindo, Rajendralal Mitra, Ramakrishna Gopal Bhandarkar, Haraprasad Shastri and Ganapati Shastri. (Appasamy, 1968) It is a common phenomenon of the renaissance that the change in thinking pervades the minds of both the common people and that of the genius. The typological importance of the Renaissance is that it marks the first cultural and social breach between the Middle Ages and modern times. It is typical early stage of modern age. So it can be said that to get the new in a renewed form there is no need for it to get disjointed from the old or the past. Rather the two can get merged seamlessly. This is why Abanindranath Tagore is called a Revivalist.

To be more precise one can say that the British formed the first art school in 1854 for their own advantage. The intension was to produce some Indian craftsmen from the School of Industrial Art. They never thought of showcasing the Indian art to the Indian nationals. The contemporary artists of that time having academic qualifications were Sashikumar Hesh, Rohinikanta Nag, Phanindranath Basu et al (Som, 1998). As the art school was the machinery producing local craftsmen there was no scope for creativity in it. Havell and Abanindranath brought in the desired change in this situation. Benode Behari Mukherjee has once said about Havell- ....yet as inspirer, as a guide and as a friend of Indian art and culture, his name should be cherished with gratitude by every Indian who loves the culture and tradition of the country. The beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was abuzz with the production of local craftsmen by the British, while the efforts of the thinkers were directed in making the people of colonized India aware of the art and culture of the country and also about the struggle to free India from the British rule. Intellectuals like Raja Ravi Varma, Bamaprasad Bandopadhyay on one hand and Abanindranath Tagore and his disciples on the other hand, were playing a vital role at this time to improve the situation of the country (Parimoo, 2009). In Europe this was the time of Post Impressionism and the practice of Cubism. The westerns were then thinking of Fauvism and Surrealism. In 1907 Picasso created his famous 'les Demoiselles d'Avignon'. Mondrian and Paul Klee were at this time busy in their diverse views on perspective. Kandinsky was rapt in the art of spiritual harmony, and Matisse was deeply involved in his thinking on colours and forms. There

was no scope for the Indians to be aware of these developments in the West at that time. This is why we find a priority of theme and subject in the paintings of pre Abanindranath Tagore era. The society acclaimed the paintings depicting the characters described in the *Puranas*. Eventually there was a shift and we see the characters of common people, animals, birds and other creatures in the paintings of Abanindranath. This was later manifested in the works of Nandalal Bose, Benode Behari Mukherjee, Ramkinkar Baij et al.

### **Advent of Modern Indian Art**

Without getting into a theoretical discourse on the definition of modern Indian art, it can be said that modernity in Indian art started with Abanindranath. The modern art was replete with efforts of building a nationalistic identity for Indian art, though establishing a mindset free from western influence was a tough job. Abanindranath concentrated on taking recourse to the tradition and heritage of the country in building an individual identity for Indian art. The modern Indian art language, as was shaped by Abanindranath, included elements like nationalistic feelings, progress of traditional and contemporary Indian art, quit India movement, ban of foreign clothes and all other existing political, economic, religious and philosophical discourses. The language strived to be free from that of the European and Western ideas. The local and prevailing language of the country emerged as the art language in the renaissance of Indian art. When this regeneration in art tradition created a new national identity, it was aptly called an art movement (Guhathakurata, 2005). Abanindranath's art form won recognition because it was based on sincere and honest aspirations of the times. Indian art for the first time created an expression which was at the same time insightful and based on Indian experiences and sensibilities. This marked the first and successful art movement of the twentieth century which immediately spread to the entire Indian subcontinent. The Bengal school influenced the whole nation. And even to this day influences contemporary artists across the country (Sarkar, 2000).

This became emergent in the works of the students of Abanindranath. It was at this time that Gaganendranath Tagore practiced a completely different school of art. So did Sunayani Devi (1875-1962), who practiced a unique form of art in complete seclusion. She was the second daughter of Gunendranath Thakur (youngest son of Girindranath Thakur) and Saudamini Devi and the youngest sister of Gaganendranath Tagore, Samarendranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore. Though she did not have any institutional training, she was the first woman art practitioner of India. She got married at the age of twelve and started painting at the age of thirty. She had meticulously studied the styles of her brothers, Gaganendranath and Abanindranath in her youth. Impressed by her painting, Gaganendranath requested Abanindranath to give her a certificate. At this Abanindranath said that her style of painting needs no certificate, and the people of the country will certify her style through their admiration. It is saddening that though a host of Indian male artists have got recognition and fame, the name of Sunayani Devi has remained rather obscured as the leading female artist of India (Srimani, 2012). The name of Amrita Sher Gil (1913-41) is quite popular in the art sphere. Amrita's contribution in presenting a practical perspective of Indian art in the western art arena is unquestionable. But so is Sunayani Devi's! Her contributions are in no way any less. She chose her style from Abanindranath's technique of creating 'Indianness' in Indian art. In the beginning

of the 20<sup>th</sup> century India, it was really startling to imagine a woman living indoors to paint and her husband (Sunayani Devi's husband was Rajanimohan Chattopadhyay- he was the son of Lalit Mohan Chattopadhyay, the grandson of Rammohan Roy's son Radhaprasad Roy ) to bring her colours and papers. Pratima Devi, daughter in law of Rabindranath Tagore has written in her book name *Smriti Chitra*, 'My aunt, Sunayani Devi, was born in a big house. However, she had to live a restricted live, as was the norm for all women of that time. Amidst the din and bustle of a big family with many members and a host of servants, my aunt was always a removed and distant person. Though she mixed well with the other women of the family and became a part of their gang, she never lost herself in the mundane and the banal. She created her space for art in a corner of the huge palace in which she lived. We the children of the household used to play and create huge commotion near her room, but that never distracted her dedication in art practice. She continued her pursuits behind the closed doors. We could also hear her strumming the *sitar* at times. She had an individualistic existence, removed from the general crowd. She created her elements of imagination on her own; hence her art was influenced on the common things of life. From practicing the *sitar* she gradually shifted towards painting. Her husband was a renowned man, a hugely successful attorney in the then Kolkata. In spite of being the mother of many children and the lady of a big house, she continued her art practice and was different in her style from that of her brothers, Gaganendranath and Abanindranath'(Sengupta,p.317). Her art language emerged from the folk culture of the country. The line pattern of her works makes her paintings a unique work of art. Art critic Ghosh writes in Bengali- 'At a time when Indian art practice was treading the path of an imposed finesse, its perspective was becoming close to mannerism, and Indian art in general was creating a set prototype, paths were also being created to move away from this clichéd world. This path remained closely associated with the folk art culture. Among the pioneers who followed this path, Sunayani Devi was a distinguished one. She started her career in art practice around 1890 which reached its zenith after 1920. Jamini Roy created his unique form through experimentations in folk art during 1930-31. Abanindranath reached a simplified form for painting the picture series on *Krishna Mangal* in 1938. In 1938 Nandalal Bose made his paintings that were used as a décor for the *Haripura Congress*. Hence, it can be said that in the tradition of manifesting the folk culture in modern art practice of India, Sunayani Devi holds a very prominent position' (Ghosh,2005). And those time and ambiance inspired her by the folk language of rural Bengal.

In that sense, it can be said that the influence of folk art in modern Indian art was seen earlier in the work of the Sunayani Devi compared to many other famous artists of that time. Her unique folk modernist style is a very intelligent synthesis of traditional Bengali imageries, motifs, icons and pictorial designs with modern abstract space configuration and colour composition. Sunayani Devi is just one of good many artists who merged tradition with modernity to make a vital statement about their world. There is also the possibility that she got inspired by Mahatma Gandhi, as Gandhi's Satyagraha movement established a new reality for the peasant and urban elite alike. It was to accept that Indian society was predominantly rural. Nationalism in Indian art had identified the nation with the past.1920s onwards it began equating the nation with the soil, when educated Bengalis discovered the *pat* painting. (Mitter, 2001)

### A glimpse into her inner world

It was clear that she was very thirsty for something new. She was very much associated with the great Tagores. She saw Rabindranath Tagore took up painting seriously only in the 1920s when he was sixty years of age. We know Tagore was very much associated with western art especially German Expressionism. Giddy with all the influence she soon realized that she needed a language rooted in her own experiences. Gradually she moved to explore indigenous ideas. She introduced modernist ideas and minimized the lines to create an exciting new visual language that was a brilliant fusion of tradition and modernity.

The first among the admirers of Sunayani Devi was the art critic Stella Kramrisch. A British lady name Coxeter, got interested in the artist after reading about her in Stella's analysis of her work. Sunayani had her first exhibition in Women's Art Club at London in 1927. Her works were much acclaimed by the foreign audience. There was a strange naiveté in her work that attracted the art admirers. The subjects of her paintings came from the daily Bengali life. The stories of *Puranas* got reflected in them thoroughly. The consciousness of general Bengali women as is depicted in the handiwork of the women folk of Bengal is also portrayed in Sunayani's works. She has called herself an 'indoor artist'. Gaganendranath and Abanindranath used to paint at the *veranda* of their house, where they were exposed to the outer world but Sunayani painted inside closed doors, silently. She painted all alone to glory. In her paintings the rituals and tradition of Bengali culture got expressed after being mixed with her vivid artistic nuances. It was a completely different world, something far removed from the one in which we live today: deserted and abandoned. In that sense her works can be categorised as 'primitive'(Ghosh,2005).

Amina Kar was the first to use the term 'primitive' in order to express the simplicity inherent in Sunayani's work in her essay named- 'Sunayani Devi- a Primitive of the Bengal School'. Though her works had a connotation to primitivism in the structures of her painted figures, in her themes she was very much limited to an Indian ambiance. Her subjects were *Radha-Krishna-Yashoda*, *Mahadev-Sati*, *Baul*, and images of homely ladies.

Again one can find in her paintings the classic sense of proportion which is the forte of Abanindranath's works. She was the first to think about giving a modern form to the traditional folk art. In case of folk art the artistic mark of the artists is often absent. Hence there is a sense of repetition and monotony in such works and there remains hardly any scope for distinguishing one work from another. But Sunayani's stylization makes her work distinctly unique. Her paintings get a unique character through the imageries. She painted amidst her daily routine life. However, after the death of her husband she stopped painting. It can be said that she never painted after that (LKC,1966).

In Purnima Tagore's memories, she says that Sunayani studied under painter Asit Halder for a short time. The influence of far eastern paintings is quite prominent in her works. Even Amina Kar, a painter and art historian of the 40's, mention that Sunayani Devi used to collect reproductions and prints from the *Prabasi* (famous magazine of early 20<sup>th</sup> century) which was the vernacular review of the period and would sometime copy them. This was the time she was in Jorasanko. She had a small family at that time. As soon as her husband and children left the house she would take out pencil and paper and start drawing. She would

hide her drawings before her husband returned. It is also mentioned that her elder son once destroyed all her paintings. She was highly apologetic and was under the constant fear of not performing well and may have had in her mind the comparative aspect of being only a significant other of her illustrious brothers. She would often destroy her paintings or hide them (Chatterjee).

Sunayani's paintings hardly portray a full human figure. The faces are always in profile or in a frontal view. In her most personal style, small rectangular two dimensional compositions have a single expressive female face in profile or in frontal view. Her colours are both primary and mixed nature. The faces are usually in flat treatment, at times in tonal variations of colour. The significant forms in her composition normally touch each other or overlap. Interestingly, despite such blank spaces, they are mostly linear and narrow. The overall composition appears to be full and complete. The parallel to this stylistic element of Sunayani Devi is to be found to some extent in Rabindranath Tagore's paintings. Manimala Chatterjee wrote-'I will narrate how Sunayani Devi was involved in art practice within the boundaries of domesticity. Amidst the daily chores in the morning, she would express her art experience with a free handling of brush. I had the luck to help her. She would dampen the paper with a flat brush. Then with a different brush she would draw the line and render colour, she would bring out the forms. Prior to that, she would hold the paper equally and see to that the paper doesn't become more moist. She would say that she found forms in the water. No painting was done in a similar manner! The theme of each painting would be expressed beautifully through the colours.'(Chatterjee)

## Conclusion

The art practice of a homely Bengali housewife creates a distinct style element. It would have made a different impact to Indian art if she could have painted more often and in greater numbers. Throughout her life, she tried to balance the domestic life of a married woman and the professional career of an artist, and her aesthetic expressions remained grounded in the formal iconography of Bengal art.

While, she could have been in the frontline among the pioneers of modern Indian art, but we only get the name of Amrita Sher Gil when it comes to the women Indian painters. The name of Sunayani Devi remains lost among the large numbers of male artists of that age. It is true that belonging to the Tagore family sowed the seed of artistic imagination in Sunayani's mind. The way Abanindranath's style was followed by his pupils so much so that it became a mannerism eventually; Sunayani's work, in comparison, remained rather obscure. But it was Sunayani who first thought of presenting folk art in the perspective of modern form and style. In Rabindranath's discourse about the uncertainty of the prospect of Bengal school of art, and in his desire to give the art practice a new dimension, the name of Sunayani never appears. Actually the socio-cultural environment of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century gives us a different message. In that dialogue a woman artist can paint inside close doors, but can never emerge as a pioneer of modern art tradition. This is why Sunayani remained an inside artist. Today, as we explore Sunayani's work on expressing the folk art in modern context, we find that her work had immense possibilities (Wikipedia,2019). Limitation of her paintings in terms of numbers restricts our understanding of her work. Jamini Roy started his experimentation with folk art at a much later period. Also in some cases Abanindranath and Nandalal too

used this perspective in their works. This shows that there is no scope to undermine the works of Sunayani. Finally it can be explicitly said that Sunayani's role in the expression of folk art in modern Indian art tradition is indisputable.

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