

## **CHAPTER - V**

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**Journals, memoirs and the articulation of the self in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal: the writings on women and their art practice**

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### **Journals, memoirs and the articulation of the self in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal: the writings on women and their art practice**

'This last parable is the story of the woman artist who enters the cavern of her own mind and finds there the scattered leaves not only of her own power but of the tradition which might have generated that power. The body of her precursor's art, and thus the body of her own art lies in pieces around her, dismembered, dis-remembered, disintegrated. How can she remember it and become a member of it, join it and rejoin it, integrate it and in doing so achieve her own integrity, her own self-hood?'<sup>1</sup>

The very attempt to document the women artists was through the fragments in the memoirs, letters, reviews (written by them or the male writers), the references of their own art practices lay dismembered, dis-remembered and disintegrated. The fragments about their experiences in art practice become documents filling the lacuna of written materials on them. Their paintings would be rarely found in museums or important collections and were usually found in private collections of their descendants or the journals. The journals become an important source where both their paintings as well as writings by them and on them could be found. The other important sources are the "memoirs" i.e. "stories from memory". Partha Chatterjee points out that what held these stories together into a single narrative was not the life history of the narrator or the development of her- self but rather the social history of the "times"<sup>2</sup>

'There had been male writers speaking on behalf of the women, there had been' the ventriloquism of patriarchy: men have constantly spoken for women, or in the name of women'.<sup>3</sup> In the early 20th Century the women's

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1 Gilbert and Gubar, *Madwoman*, p.85

2 Partha Chatterjee, *Women and nation*, CHAPTER-7, *The Nation and it's fragments*, p.139

3 Toril Moi, *Women writing and writing about women*, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, p.67

writings intervene this structure. Though the reflections of patriarchy is visible in the male metaphors which appear in their writings sometime, there are also moments of self-articulation and critique of patriarchal formulations.

The three journals Prabasi, Jayshree and Sreyashi published articles written by women on various issues on women's emancipation and printed reproductions of their paintings. Thus for the first time an attempt was made to make the domain of women's art practice public. Their paintings were no more restricted to the private boundaries of home but were in larger circulation to the male intelligentsia as well as the women of upper and middle classes. These paintings by women painters which often came as reproductions, most of the time did not accompany any writings or illustrate any text. Other than participation in a group exhibition which was also very seldom this was the only platform of their visibility.

The ideas of reformations in relation to women had an important place in the reformations taken up by the Brahmos. Female education became an important part of it as had been already discussed in the first chapter. Ramananda Chatterjee, the publisher of Prabasi being a Brahmo was influenced by the idea of women's reformation movement. He asks—'How can a nation be great, whose homes are not the centres of enlightenment and pure spiritual influence? Woman, must, therefore, be raised from the present degraded condition; for man and woman must rise and fall together.'<sup>4</sup> Prabasi had a wide female readership and hence there was ample emphasis on writings on women's achievements in India and abroad. It is being mentioned in Jogesh Chandra Bagal's reminiscences that Ramananda jokingly said-'Most of my readers are those household goddesses (Ma Laxmi)'.<sup>5</sup> The male voice of the editor

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4 As quoted by Sharmishtha Dutta Gupta in Prabasi and the making of the enlightened Hindu women, Identities and histories, Women's writing and politics in Bengal, p.21

5 Quoted by Sharmistha Dutta Gupta Prabasi and the Making of the Enlightened Hindu Women, p.32

was resonant and the idea of reform was restricted to the idea of nurturing the feminine in women. It was selective about the ideas of reformation for women and did not encourage any ideas which disrupted the idea of the feminine. It spoke for the balancing of family and career. The editor mentions- 'Women are judged mainly by the role they play within the family...After fulfilling her duties towards her family, she too must serve the world; there is no doubt about that....Many might think, why call on women when there are men to take up the work of the outside world? A straight answer to that is this world is like a huge household...a woman's feelings and a woman's strength must be devoted to mothering its smallest unit as much as its largest one.'<sup>6</sup> This again brings back the concept of family/familial relations to one's mind which was also seen in the regular practice of the women artists. Sunayani cuts the vegetables and paints, Santa Devi solves puzzles, mathematical problems, and created designs after her domestic rituals were over. In Prabasi, the section known as 'Mahila Majlis' published this article titled 'Lalit kalai narir krititwa', it mentions- 'In 1920 the female students performed better than the male students'. They received many prizes. But along with this they were also reminded that they should not be very proud as the men were not in a proper state to perform due to the war. The 'Our Home' journal mentioned that both men and women had to participate in the war. It was an unfair distinction put forth by the Chairman. There is no distinction in art. Fourteen women and five men received prizes. Two women received for architecture, earlier very less women were awarded for this.'<sup>7</sup>

The other journal which was published by Ramananda a year after the publication of Prabasi was The Modern Review, an English journal. Modern review carried on the same ideas of Prabasi. It published images as well as reviews of the paintings by the women artists. A review of the illustrated book

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<sup>6</sup> Prabasi Asar 1329BS/1922;reprinted from Bharati(Jaistha 1329/1922 and first published in Nabyabharat(Baishakh1329/1922, Quoted by Sharmistha Dutta Gupta Prabasi and the Making of the Enlightened Hindu Women,p.28

<sup>7</sup> Prabasi,Mahila Majlish,Jaistha,1328



'Behula an Indian myth' by Sukhalata Rao appeared in the Modern Review. It mentions-'The subject matter of this book has been taken from Bengali books on Behula and the Snake Goddess Manasa. It is well written and very neatly printed on good thick paper. The pictures by the authoress have been finely reproduced.' As regards the story, Rabindranath Tagore writes in his introduction: "Mrs Sukhalata Rao has caught in the web of her story the spirit of the village epic of Bengal, Behula which has sprung from the heart of our people & has lived in oral traditions & folk-lore, sung & performed by the local operatic troupes of this province. It gives us the picture of the ideal wife, her heroic sacrifice & conjures the atmosphere of home life in its humble majesty, touching simple hearts with the beauty & depth of its sentiments".<sup>8</sup> Sister Nivedita wrote regularly in Modern Review. She wrote on Sukhalata Rao's painting 'Srimati, Martyr'. Critiquing the painting she wrote about the non-historical nature of the narration. She wrote 'In an old Nepalese book, called A century of Buddhist Legends, occurs the story of Srimati , Martyr. Historically it is worthless, for the events it narrates could not possibly have had to do with Ajatashatru, the contemporary and penitent of Buddha. If the tale is to be regarded as true at all, it must be placed a thousand years later, in the reign of Shashanka of Bengal ,the enemy of Buddhism ,in the middle of the seventh century A.D.'<sup>9</sup> Nivedita not only brings about the non-historical nature of the narrative but also criticizes the painting. Religious devotion is amiss, the worshipper gets importance. Her reactionary views on the authentic representation of a religious event is prominent in this review. She writes- 'In this picture by Mrs. Sukhalata Rao, we see Srimati, Martyr, kneeling before the stupa. In her hands is the light which she is dedicating. At the foot of the stupa lie the flowers of worship. We could wish that they had lain on the bare floor, for the Benares tray, with its associations of cheapness and modernity, sounds a jarring note, in a composition that has much promise.

<sup>8</sup> The Modern Review, Book review, January, 1933

<sup>9</sup> Sister Nivedita, Sukhalata Rao, Srimati, Martyr, The Complete works of Sister Nivedita. Vol.3, p.80

We wish, also, that the stupa had been in full view, and the worshipper subordinated to the thing worshipped. But there is a suggestion of silence and a great space, nevertheless.'<sup>10</sup> (Fig.1)

In the 'Modern Review for February, 1930, a review of 'The Government School of Art Exhibition at Calcutta' Suniti Kumar Chatterjee states 'There were also lady artists whose work was exhibited. Srimati Sunayani Devi's pictures, in the transformed folk style that is all her own, elicited the praise that they never fail to draw. Her picture of Laxmi the Goddess of beauty and wealth, with her casket of jewels, which is reproduced, is charming in its naiveté. Srimati Rani Devi and Srimati Prakriti Devi had a number of their pictures, and some of them show an astonishingly good quality. They are in the style of the new Indian School, and they rise above the commonplaces of that school by their individuality and freshness.'<sup>11</sup>

In Bharatbarsha appears a review of the 'Annual exhibition of the Academy of Fine Arts'. Paintings of more than twenty women artists were displayed. There were sixty paintings. They received six prizes. Indira Devi Chowdhurani received the award for the best painting in Indian Style. 'The awarded painting was 'Buddher Grihatyag'. This watercolour is excellent from all aspects. She is the student of Kshitindranath Majumdar. The colour delineated is well balanced and in harmony. It is not known that any other student of Kshitindranath had achieved such talent in using colour. Prominent artists have praised her work. There were more five paintings by her in the exhibition. They are – 'Gayer bait-hak, Abhisarika, Karnabadh, Rabindranath and the Artist's son.'<sup>12</sup>

While Probasi proffered for the selected sphere of women's work Jayashree another journal published by Leela Roy rejected the idea of domestic duties as the primary focus of the women. Leela was also part of Deepali Sangha, a

<sup>10</sup> Sister Nivedita, Sukhalata Rao, Srimati, Martyr, The Complete works of Sister Nivedita. Vol.3, p.81

<sup>11</sup> The Modern Review for February, 1930

<sup>12</sup> Bharatbarsha, 1353BS/1946, vol.35, part.1, Asad-Agrahayan, p.352

woman's group in Dhaka which trained women to become the future workers of nation. Jayshree did'nt only become a space to make visible the writings by the women but it also circulated the paintings by them. 'The issues in the first phase (1931-35) published reproductions of the paintings by Nibhanani Devi, Indusudha Ghosh, Jamuna Bose, Gouri Bhanja, Chitranibha Chowdhury and Anukana Dasgupta. Most of them were watercolours ,though a few woodcuts are in evidence too. Mythological themes and landscapes of Santiniketan and its surroundings were the favoured subjects of these paintings'.<sup>13</sup>

Santa Devi an editor of the Mahila Majlis, a writer and artist wrote in Jayshree about the proper selection of jobs by women keeping in mind their domestic priorities. She wrote: 'I believe that women are capable of doing all that men are capable of; they are competent and they have a right to every kind of work. But they ought to keep in mind their own as well as their family's convenience in the long run while deciding on the nature of work.'

<sup>14</sup> She stresses on giving vocational training to women so that they could be economically independent. She wrote—'Now a days kurtir shilpa or handi-crafts is becoming prestigious, people have understood its importance in women's lives .But everybody cannot do it or doesn't like it. Many people have talent in specific things, some of them have brains of high order .They must be given their right work. These women can write different books, anthologies, do editing and proof checking, paint , design dresses ,design furniture ,make plans for home ,temple, draw pictures for advertisements and school text books, with the help of post office teach people different things and collect news and distribute it ,record songs for the gramophone ,make country instruments ,do photography ,draw portraits ,enlarge paintings and learn yoga. All the list cannot be provided here, there are more works to be done.'<sup>15</sup>

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13 Sharmishtha Dutta Gupta, Jayashree and the nationalist-Feminist Women, p.111

14 Jayshree Aswin, 1338BS/1931

15 Santa Devi, Meyeder Kaj in Jayshree, Aswin, 1338BS/1931 ,6th edition, 1st ,p.431

Views on handicrafts are also seen in the other essays published in Jayashree. Swarnalata Bose writes "that the present educational system is lacking is well understood. While discussing education I mention that to save the country one has to revive kutir- shilpa or handicrafts, this is our main concern."<sup>16</sup>

Santa also wrote a novel, Udyanlata in Probasi and translated 'Hindustani upakatha' by Upendrakishore Raychowdhury under the pen name of Jagat durlabh Bhattacharya. This reminds of Virginia Woolf who points out how the women's anonymity was naturalized as may have been observed by some men—'Anonymity runs in their blood .The desire to be veiled still possess them'<sup>17</sup>. Santa Devi edited the monthly women's journal 'Sreyashi' from Santiniketan. It was a handwritten magazine and then it got its printed form. Later it was edited by Kironbala Sen an artist who had been discussed in the earlier chapter .She mentions in her memoir Purbasmriti -'The cover page was drawn by Pratima Devi and my mother (Manorama Devi)....Once Sreyashi was published it would be circulated in the cha- chakra of Dinu babu (Dinendranath Tagore). Nobody read it properly but tried to look for faults and joked about them.'<sup>18</sup> Santa's daughter Shyamasree Lal reminisced-'In between her domestic duties she would take out some time, lie on the bed arrange the books, copies and write.'<sup>19</sup>

There also existed manuals written for the women regulating their lives. Judith E. Walsh in 'How to be the Goddess of your home', an anthology of Bengali domestic manuals talks about one writer Dhirendranath Pal ---'Dhirendranath's own beliefs and sympathies, they were discreetly and moderately stated in conversations. This along with the practical nature of many chapters probably accounts for the manual's popularity. One chapter, for instance, il-

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16 Shilpa Siksha by Sri Swarnalata Bose. Jayasri Sravana1338BS/1931,4th edition ,p.284

17 Virginia Woolf, A room of one's own , .p.57

18 Santa Devi,Purbasmriti,p.75

19 Introduction to Ramananda Chattopadhyay O Ardashatabdir bangla,p.16



illustrated the proper form for letter writing; another contained specific instructions on keeping household accounts. Similarly in another manual-The duties of woman (Ramanir kartavya), 1890 by Giribala Mitra and Jayakrishna Mitra , A household compendia show a collaborated effort to write about the trivial details about household affairs like cooking, mending. Most of these writings were Brahmo endorsed practices which shows the new elite's urgency about liberating or reforming a woman.'<sup>20</sup> Discussion on handicrafts are also structured around the discourse of home and domestic duties. A manual states- 'Along with housework, women must learn handicrafts. The best time to learn or do handicrafts is after the rest that follows the midday meal. At that time, one is not preoccupied with rushing to finish domestic chores or with other matters. As a result at such time one can concentrate quite well on handicrafts.A woman should concentrate first of all on learning those handicrafts that will reduce household expenses. Many modern women know how to embroider woolen slippers and knit mufflers and socks, but they have to call a tailor if a button comes off the shirt of someone in their family or if their little boys need one or two ordinary tops.'<sup>21</sup>

Thus it can be observed that crafts was reduced to the daily practice of homemaking. The manuals are even continuance of the highly patriarchal past as they quoted from traditional texts like *Manusamhita*, *Mahabharata* and even *Laxmir panchali* (Bengali poems celebrating the glory of the Laxmi ) which exalts the dutiful housewives. Most of these manuals formulated certain moral regulations- every little detail ranging from how a mother should raise her children, even how kitchen spices should be arranged on a storeroom wall-all such trivial details were taken into account so that there was entirely a re-imagination of the domestic place along with the re-imagination of the concept of

<sup>20</sup> The duties of women,(Ramanir Kartavya) 1890 Giribala Mitra and Jaykrishna Mitra, Manual 9., From Talking of power early writings of Bengali women from mid-19th c to the beginning of early 20thc, p.116

<sup>21</sup> Judith E. Walsh, Handicrafts, The well ordered home ,p.210

nation.

There were journals like *Bamabodhini*, *Bharati*, *Bangalaxmi*, *Balaka*, *Sreyashi*, *Jayasri* which were edited mainly by the women and had women writers writing for them. These journals emerged as voices which tried to resist the ventroquism of patriarchy. *Bharati* published an article urging the women to participate in the *Mahila shilpa mela*, a fair organized by the *Sakhi samiti*, an organization founded by *Swarna Kumari Devi* for women empowerment. The article urges- 'All women in our country can embroider *kantha*, weave carpet and are trained in other foreign crafts. Who will help the women other than the women themselves? ...It will increase the wealth of *Sakhi samiti*...No men will be allowed in the fairground...The aim is to encourage art practice among women.'<sup>22</sup> The success of the fair and its criticisms were also reported in the subsequent volume of *Bharati*. It was successful but was criticized: it was accused that the works in the fair were not made by them. The article refutes it and states the list of works which included handicrafts as well as oil paintings made by women.<sup>23</sup>

Rani Chanda's memoirs *Gharoa*, *Shilpiguru Abanindranath* and *Alapchari Rabindranath* are in a collaborative mode and the overlapping of the male female voices is prominent. References culled out from these memoirs had been of immense help to construct the idea of the women art practitioners, their art practices and the contexts. There are moments of intelligent intervention when Rani Chanda brings in the discussion of the status of the women artists and the question of genius and exclusion as discussed by *Abanindranath*, the pedagogic exclusion of women as landscape painters as they didn't have the physical strength to carry the easels. Even the way Rani Chanda narrates the life and art practices of the women in *Santiniketan* becomes important documents

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<sup>22</sup> *Bharati*, *Shilpa mela*, vol.12, 1295BS/1888, p.49

<sup>23</sup> *Bharati*, *Shilpa mela*, vol.13, 1295BS/1888, p.553

highlighting the conditions in which the women painted, their spaces of visibility and their moments of self-reflection. She in her memoir, Shob hote apon wrote, 'Bouthan was a born artist. She was the much adored niece of Abanindranath. Bouthan used to be in the artist's group which was part of Vichitra in Jorasanko. She used to paint along with them. There was an incomplete painting, one day I saw Bouthan taking out that painting in a corner room of Uttarayan and was applying colour to that painting with wide brushstrokes. It was a wash painting, the subject was Duryodhan. I remember, the figure of Duryodhan was painted as dark as Yama. May be the painting is lying somewhere in Uttarayana. That painting was never completed. Bouthan didn't have time of her own. Gurudev was there, her domestic obligations were there, ashram was there. She had so many responsibilities. She balanced everything with a smile.'<sup>24</sup> In Alapchari Rabindranath, Tagore says—'Women should earn. Craft practice shouldn't be taken as hobby but business. Why only craft but anything, so that she can be independent. It is very important for women.'<sup>25</sup> Thus crafts became an important discourse in the creative circuit as a form which opened up professional domain for women who became associated with Design centres or taught in schools and art colleges.

Rabindranath Tagore wrote on Rani Chanda in the catalogue of her exhibition- "Ranee Chanda is a most gifted painter. Born in an artist family—two of her brothers Sri Mukul Dey and Manishi being reputed all over India as first rate artists—painting came easy to her childhood. A typical Santiniketan girl she came to closest touch with my father whose artistic sensibilities she slowly imbibed as only a child could imbibe. Later she received guidance of Srijat Nandalal Bose himself. When father took painting late in life I have seen Ranee watching intently for hours as he worked with his brush and pigments. Another great influence in her life has been the great Abanindranath Whom she collaborated in

<sup>24</sup> Rani Chanda, Shob hote apon, p.226

<sup>25</sup> Alapchari Rabindranath by Rani Chanda p.19,

bringing out his autobiography.

Few artists of our day have had so rich and complete a training as Ranee has had. Now the harvest is here in the album- a whole world rich in colour, throbbing with life, full of aching joys and dizzy raptures. To put it briefly- here in nature's plenty to which I invite all those who care for beauty and art. The laurels she won at Delhi and Bombay are still afresh in our memory."<sup>26</sup>

The journals, the manuals and the memoirs highlighted the conditions in which the women engaged with art practice, their spaces of visibility and brought out the inherent pedagogies which influenced their imagination. These texts are not monuments of celebration of the great artists but documents illuminating 'What is at stake in the practices of self or agency and of narrative that emerge at the contested margins of patriarchy, empire, and nation'.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Rathindranath Tagore, The catalogue published by Dhoomimal Art Gallery, year unknown

<sup>27</sup> Preface, Women writing in India, Vol.1 600BC to the Early 20th century, edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita

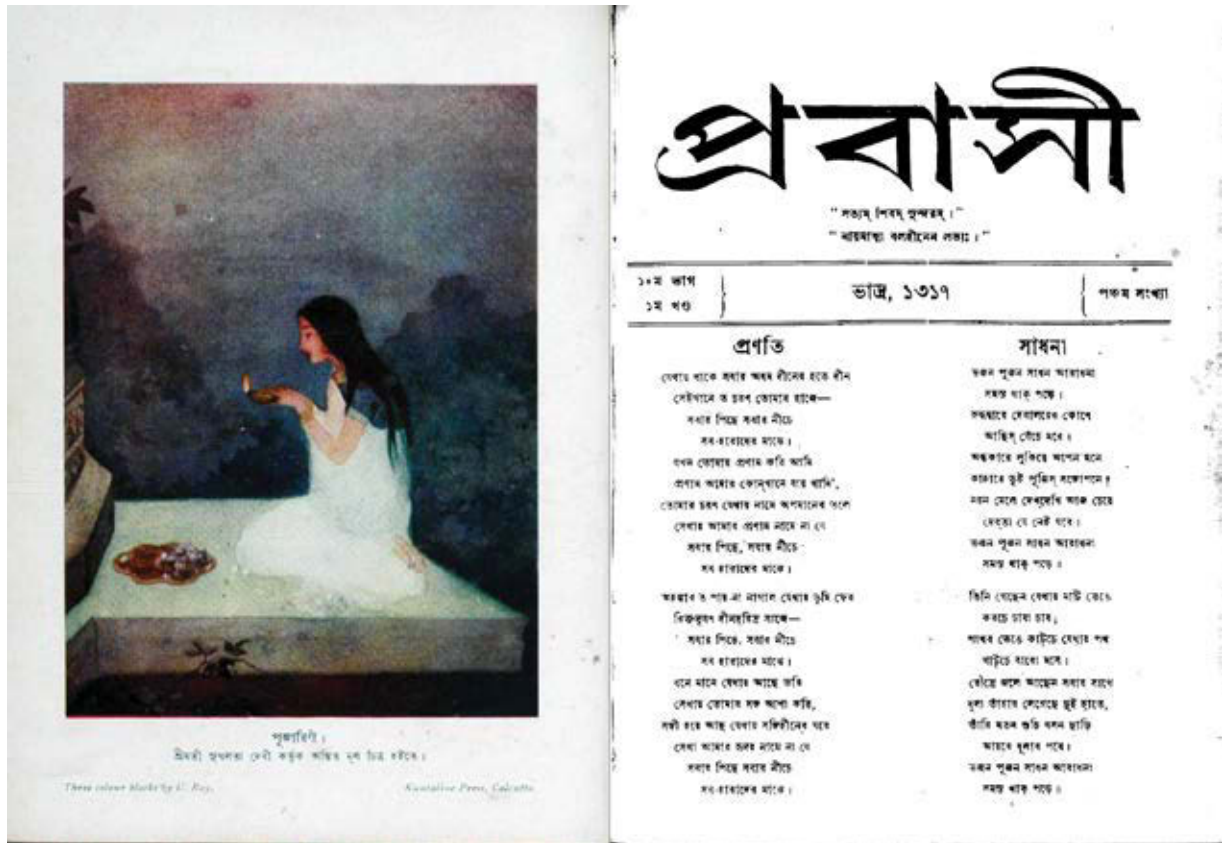


Figure 1. Pujarini, Prabasi, Jaistha, 1319 BS/1912



Figure 2 Sukhalata Rao, Savitri, Jamlay jatri swamir atmar anuragini, published in Prabasi, Kartik, 1318BS/1911





Figure 3 Indhusudha Ghosh, Byadh third issue, Asharh 1338BS/1931



Figure 4 Jamuna Devi, Kajari, Asharh, 1338/1931



Figure 5 Nibhanani Chowdhury, Woodcut,





Chitrani Bha Chowdhury, Goshthojatra,  
Shravan Jayashree, 1338/1931



Jamuna Devi, Samsar,  
Jaistha Jayashree, 1338/1931



Gouri devi, Aju ke go murali bajai, eto kabhu nahe shyamrai, Jayashree,  
Bhadra, 1338, Tempera