



## Works of Ramkinkar in the Context of Conventionalism and Modernity

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### Abstract

*Modernism in Indian sculpture started with RamkinkarBaij. A strange combination of tradition and modernity can be observed in his work. His creative journey started from the inspiration of tradition. He has also absorbed all the 'isms' of art history. But, applied in his own way. His working style-technique is completely modern. Although his modernism is distinct from western modernism. Sometimes his work has crossed the boundaries of modernity. Analysts are always in trouble to think whether he is a traditionalist or a modernist. In this context, an attempt has been made in this study to judge Ramkinkar's work and discuss his true position in art history.*

**Key words:** Sculpture, Traditionalism, Modernism, Indianness, Euro-centric Academic style, Avant-Garde.

### Introduction

RamkinkarBaij is truly a wonder in Indian sculpture. A rich tradition of Indian sculpture can be seen from the period of the Indus Civilization. But he showed the way of freedom of sculpture from tradition. He created the first environmental sculptures in the country, created abstract sculptures, and opened up new avenues of experimentation. In a word Ramkinkar's contribution to Indian sculpture is beyond comparison. It was he who ushered modernity in to the threshold of Indian sculpture. To gauge his multifaceted talent, art critics and art historians face innumerable problems. It is difficult to classify Ramkinkar as a creative genius. Was he a traditionalist? Was he modern? or a Modernist? It is, however, very much obvious that Ramkinkar began his journey as a traditionalist. Gradually he expanded his realm and a time came when he even surpassed modernity. This is why he cannot be categorized in any particular trend or school of thought. Though his style and technique were modern, this was not an echo of western modernity. He was deeply rooted in his own tradition. It becomes, therefore, imperative to analyze some of the aspects of traditionalism and modernism that was traced in Ramkinkar's works.

### Impact of Tradition and Modernity in Ramkinkar's Work

Traditionalism is an accepted criterion in the areas of fine arts, but traditionalism, at the same time, is a hidden trap. At the low of some turning point, traditionalism takes the shape of conservatism. Then a new generation of talented artists has to come up with the dream to re-discover the core inside the outer layer, to create a break from the convention. Older techniques and contents are usually rejected during such traditional periods—creativity takes on a new turn through some unusual and untrodden path. Again, when the upheaval dies down, when deconstruction begins, it is often found that traditionalism has been expanded through this widening of space done by those talented artists (Bhattacharjee: 2010).

Till 1930's there was no trace of Indianness in Indian sculpture. G. K. Mahtre, V P Karmarkar, Hiranmoy Roy Choudhury, Debi Prasad Roy Choudhury were really genius. Some of their works no doubt merges with the neo-Indian stylistic but they were mostly confined to the Euro-centric academic's style. The sculptor whose individual talent paved the way for modern Indian sculpture was Ramkinkar. It has already been said that his rise as a sculptor was greatly influenced by Rabindranath and the Santiniketan School of painting. In this sense, Santiniketan can be said to be the womb that gave birth to modern Indian sculpture. But a question that often strikes us is whether Indianness had anything to do with Ramkinkar's diction as a sculptor. The Ramkinkar who never wholeheartedly accepted the



canons of the Santiniketan schooling, who – in spite of his deep regard for Nandalal Bose–had the courage to refute Nandalal’s instruction in order to paint in oil colour, who initiated the western diction in order to learn it and applied the expressionist and the cubist form for bringing in the element of movement and rhapsody in his own paintings. Who had no touch with the so called lyricism and symmetry of Indianness could go on following the classical Indian stylistics–doesn’t it seem a bit absurd?

He had no conventional schooling in the art of sculpture other than what he had gathered while making icons of gods and goddesses in his childhood. But he assimilated everything with his inborn talent and dexterity. He surveyed and went through a good number of books in the library at Santiniketan and came into contact with some western artists there. This made him acquainted with the western school of arts and also this was the foundation by which he made him a sculptor. Apart from this, Ramkinkar was both an observer and an insider of the incessant flow of life, of rural community. The *Santhal*’s who lived on the outskirts of Santiniketan, their tireless and free life style have always supplied Ramkinkar the theme for his sculpture and painting. This is where he was always an Indian. If we take into account his two monumental works the *Call of the Mill* and *The Santhal Family*, we will find an inner coarseness or roughness in their form which obviously descended from the western modernity. Along with these the specialties which made these works unique and unparallel are particularly traditional (Ghosh : 1995).

But, is this traditionalism that of classical Indian schools? Perhaps not, because a big power house of Indian sculpture lie in its folk-cum-primitive life force. The Dravid Tradition which renovated the Indus Valley civilization gradually explored newer avenues in various folk and non-Indian art forms and developed in to a full-fledged school. In Ramkinkar this school found a spontaneous reflection of itself. Some critics say that Ramkinkar borrowed him major strength from Bourdel, but this is only partial truth. Bourdel could have been a technical influence, but technique does not make a great sculpture.

Besides, a stream of folk and tribal art form always ran in India paralleled to the classical stream, and classical school often gathered a lot from it. As the modern European sculpture was largely inspired by the primitive men’s paintings, so too, the modern Indian sculpture was influenced by Indian tribal and folk art forms. Ramkinkar’s *Call of the mill* and *Santhal Family* are two brilliant examples of such influence. Ramkinkar himself was a true observer of Indian classical art works because in addition, the engravings on the temple walls of *Konark* inspired him which was a traditional form of art.

Tradition means the recycling of culture. This is where modernity is in conflicts with tradition. Traditional art school always imposes certain inhabitation upon the artist. As a matter of fact, the modern artist is always in favour of his freedom of expression; our reading of western art history teaches us so.

The society that comes in to being in the western world right after the Industrial Revolution no longer believed the old and traditional values. Individual values become a determining factor. This is how the concept of progress was established. Progress brought in along with itself decadence. Aggression and war and the weapons that were used there in gave rise to a sense of insecurity which fed an individual’s feeling of depression and seclusion. Individualism and individual depression plus frustration, isolation– these mothered different modernist trends and school, different isms. Everything becomes fragmented, fractured. No concept of the ‘whole’ could emerge in these circumstances. Restlessness, self-contradiction and running after the new mark the history of modern European art (Paul : 1991).

Ramkinkar’s art should not be viewed in the light of this modernist trend. There is a definite character or interpretation in Ramkinkar’s sculpture works and paintings which clearly distinguish him as a different kind of modern artist. When we talk of Santiniketan Kala Bhavan, three names



immediately come to our mind; Nandalal Bose, Binod Behari Mukhopadhyay and Ramkinkar Baij. They had their individual style and yet there was a certain integrity that flows through their work and makes them three exponents of the same school. They had a clear notion of what art is or should be what language art should adopt theoretical conviction. Nandalal Bose tried to influence his students with three relevant ideas—to stick to the tradition, to have an open eye towards the existing surrounding and to develop an individual expression. He embraced the traditional but not to that extent to let it into anarchism by severing touch with the surrounding as, for example, the Bengal School did. Both Binod Behari Mukhopadhyay and Ramkinkar Baij truly realized the essence of Nandalal's philosophical concepts. They therefore, never ignored the tradition but indulged themselves in a discourse with it. They never suffered from any dilemma when they come in contact with western modernism. They, on the other hand never thought of alienating themselves from their Indian origin (Som : 1985).

During his first years Ramkinkar too, like his Master Nandalal Bose, practiced painting in the style of the Bengal school. But very soon he too, like his master found its lack of essence. While he was at Kala Bhavan, he could not forego the impulse to follow the western art aesthetics as he came in close contact with some guest artist from the West. He could never sever his tie with his surroundings and could very well understand its disharmony with the leisurely style of the Bengal school. Very soon he developed his own style. He was never moved or influenced by the dull and almost suffocating direction of the western modernism. Rather he learned the art of symmetry from the Indian classical school.

In the meanwhile, Ramkinkar left the miniature painting style and adopted, like the European masters, large canvases, and thick strokes of brush and oil colour. The soft and slender style of the Bengal school gave way to a harsh and rough form that became his own style. The cubist or geometrical proportion he attached to his arts objects in paintings obviously reminds us of a western touch. But this was only a touch, not an imitation. Ramkinkar never used the cubist form in the same way as cubism would have done. The aesthetics of cubism lies in its emotionless, powerful designs; they metamorphose a flat plain into almost a prism-like one. But Ramkinkar's figures are always muscular. The position of spine in a figure determines its bodily expression; this is reminiscent of classical Indian tradition. He was not at all hesitant to depict the abstract style. But his abstract art-works are not just lifeless designs because the element of dynamism which he portrays in his arts objects typically exemplifies this.

Expressionism is often a representation of social or psychological modernism because the expressionism that is found in Ramkinkar's works is always a representation of joy and happiness. As a matter of fact, this is the most striking achievement of Ramkinkar's art; his creations are never morbid, they are full of life and vigour and revelry. He discovered the archetypal man in different tribal or rural figures whom he always saw and whom he usually thematised in his work. This happiness which we see in Ramkinkar's work sprang from his direct contact with tribal community life. The same element of happiness is a remarkable feature of classical Indian art. We can, therefore assert that Ramkinkar's modernism was an Indian re-interpretation of the western modernism. (Paul : 1991)

But, Ramkinkar did not like to talk about art, as he stated in the interview he gave to Bela Bandyopadhyay : *"I never like to talk about art, particularly nowadays. I have worked as best as I can and only wish to go on working."* However, some people were able to gather from him, his thoughts and his opinions on the subject. When asked whether he was a modernist and whether he distorted form, he said: *"I don't know what they actually mean by 'modern'. They may refer to the time or to the form. Have you seen Ganesha? What is it? Modern? Ha! Ha! And Ravana's ten heads? Or the Picasso's painting in which there is a face pressed over another face. Is Ravana modern? I would not know. I bend or disfigure a form because it is necessary to do so. It depends on the theme and the ultimate objectives, whether to distort or not to distort form. I aimed at abstraction while making the 'Thresher' in order to catch the body in a certain posture. While making the Santhal Family, I tried to show them in motion exactly as they would appear when departing. Again, to depict Rabindranath's personality,*



in one of his portraits, I placed a ball in the place of one eye. In fact, everything (in art) is making and breaking' (Debi Prasad: 2007).

### Conclusion:

Indeed, RamkinkarBaij's work shows a strange amalgamation of tradition and modernity. He is inspired by traditional art practices, and has studied all the art trends of the country and abroad. But never accepted slavery to any medium or process. There is an unmistakable spontaneity in the development of Ramkinkar's talents and skills. Although it is refined through constant effort. This is the great aspect of his genius that he was able to remain free for life (Ghosh 1995). So, his work has the influence of tradition but no inertia. Again, in terms of style, technique and concept he is completely modern. But his modernity was constructed in an Indian context, not a Western one. He was the first to open the way for experimentation in Indian sculpture. Following his path, many sculptors of the next generation enriched the Indian sculptural genre. He created the concept of modern sculpture in India through his work, even if he did not say it verbally. All things considered, Ramkinkar is truly an 'Avant-Garde' artist in the Indian context.

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