Artist extraordinaire

Santha Sudhakar Ramakinkar Baij's revolutionary art has won global acclaim, laments Anindya Kanti Biswas

ART

WAVES have a high and low point, so does most phenomena in the world. The world of science, arts and humanities follow this order of a rise and fall.

Ramkinkar has come to the Indian art scene when a particular type of innovation was taking place. Logical reasoning and scientific thought were brought in India in large part by the British occupation. Thinkers like Raja Ramkinkar Roy and his contemporaries brought about a huge change which resulted in radical thinking among individuals and young thoughts. This period can be termed as the renaissance of the Bengalis and advancing artist.

However, in the last three or four decades of the 20th century Ramkinkar's revolutionary compositions were marked into oblivion.

The principal aspects of his art were:

- Rediscovering Indian techniques and methods as practiced by the ancient Indian masters.
- An understanding of older works from a newer perspective.
- Attempting a healthy fusion or chemical synthesis of the old Oriental techniques with modern methods.
- Searching out newer idioms and semantics in contemporary art practices.

Since the 1930's numerous special artists from different fields found their own methods and modes of expression. The hard visual arts enthusiasts are aware that Ramkinkar was one who equally inclined towards painting and sculpture. A wannabe visual artist is usually pursued by learning how to draw. It is one of the most essential things needed to get started. Once walk down the road he/she starts to have special preferences and the urge to specialise.

Ramkinkar was basically an experimentalist and hence endeavored in trying out almost everything that he could for his hands upon. This force on became his major advantage. He tried his hand at almost everything, from accompanying folk artistes in and around his area, copying calendars at the outstanding of artists (Narayan, Hari and Raghunath Goda and Goldewar), painting backdrops for local theatrical performances, contributing small illustrations and paintings for the school magazine and periodicals.

All these experiences have helped him experiment with all the mediums he worked with.

When he reached Santiniketan, he was at the mouth of his success. Both Nandalal Bose and Rabindranath Tagore realised that Ramkinkar needed no training at all. The Santhals, the poor Khoas, the open sky composed with overwhelming freedom that the institution Kala Bhavan offered him to Ramkinkar as a teacher and student brought to the fore his creative flow. Ramkinkar in his lifetime seem to develop a modern language in painting and sculpture involved representation, realism and dynamism which are unique all-like.

Modernism which valorises personal style and asserts unique individuality focusing on the self-private creative mind-set Ramkinkar to develop a personal vision about the reality that

he was familiar with. His works talk about people, places and things in the forests the rural structures and the special life pattern Nature.

The artist had a limited exposure to the world outside which might seem odd in this age of globalisation. And whatever little he had, he learned through books. He was familiar with Picasso, Braque and others. Having knowledge of western modernism, he organised with the Indian classical style and formulated an art language that wasn't mentioned academically.

To realise the immense significance of Baij as a modernist in the Indian context, or rather in the first modern Indian sculptor and painter a brief review of the essence of modernism in the western sense of the term, will justify his niche in art history. The first Indian material or environmental sculpture "Santal", was commenced at Sangini.

Khoas by Ramkinkar in 1939 commanded by sculptures were, in keeping with the clothes of the tribes that plastered the sculpture as a perpendicular column to match the circumstances.

Western artists were thinking about the environmental sculpture around 1937 towards Ramkinkar did his first abstract sculpture in the Indian art scenario in 1938 named "Landscape".

Ramkinkar's environmental sculpture are unique. There really exceptional relationship Tagore's remembrance, what something creative for anticipation of work to art.

Even though there is a controversy regarding the birth year of Ramkinkar Baij (either 1906 or 1910), his centenary celebrations are long overdue. It is regrettable that the National Gallery of Modern Art (NGMA) has not taken any initiative in this direction. It is high time for western art recognition in the form of a high-class research institution being established in his name.

THE HINDU
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Baij, the unsung hero

COMMENT Amongst the foremost Indian sculptors with a modern vision, Ramkinkar Baij has not got the recognition he deserved.

ANINDYA KANTI BISWAS

While the National Gallery of Modern Art deserves all praise for hosting the works of the famous Indian sculptor Anish Kapoor, sadly another famous artist, Ramkinkar Baij, considered by many as the pioneer of modern Indian sculpture, has not received the recognition due to him from this Government body. In fact the centenary celebrations of Baij are long overdue, but no one seems to care.

Baij came to the Indian art scenario at a time when a particular category of revivalism was taking a definitive shape. Unfortunately though in the last three or four decades of the 20th Century, Baij's revolutionary compositions have been continuously pushed into oblivion. Baij was basically an experimentalist and that explains why he was interested in trying out almost everything he could lay his hand upon. This later on became his major advantage. He was equally inclined towards the medium of painting and sculpture.

POETRY IN STONE *The majestic sculpture 'Sujata' by Ramkinkar Baij.*

Earthy realities

When he arrived at Santiniketan, he was at the zenith of his career and both Nandalal Bose and Rabindranath Tagore realised that Ramkinkar perhaps needed no training. The Santhals, the arid Khosi, the open sky combined with the tremendous freedom that the institution Kala Bhavan offered him at Santiniketan as a teacher and student, brought to the fore his creative best. Baij, in his frenzied quest to develop a new modern language in painting and sculpture, invested spontaneity, vitality and dynamism in his works, which stand unique till date.

His works talk about people, places and things as he focuses on rural treasures and the stocky and robust Santhals, the original inhabitants of the land. He talks about a society free from technological invasion and one where Nature dominates the pulse of life. We get to see wallowing buffaloes in mud-pools, harvesters threshing corn with an easy charm, or a Santhal family relaxing on a cot, in his watercolours. Every nook and corner of Santiniketan provided him subjects of pastoral innocence, evoking in us a strong sense of belonging that the artist had.

The first Indian natural or environmental sculpture, "Sujata", was constructed at Sangeet Bhavan by Baij in 1935, surrounded by eucalyptus trees. In keeping with the rhythm of the trees the artist planned the sculpture as a perpendicular column to match the environment.

First abstract sculpture

Baij also created the first abstract sculpture in the Indian art scenario in the year 1938 named "Lamp stand". His environmental sculptures are unique. Rabindranath Tagore remarked that something created in anticipation of truth is art, and Baij's sculptures truly exemplify the above statement.

At a time when the so-called art historians and self-acclaimed art critics were actually unable to differentiate between doll-making and sculpture, or for that matter illustrations and paintings, and tried to introduce aesthetics of literature as aesthetics of art, they could not appreciate the true beauty of Baij's works. Even till date, many are very reluctant to acknowledge that it was Baij who made a real effort to produce sculptures infused with modern thinking and contemporary style, retaining the art's 'Indian-ness' – rather than socio-cultural identities.

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A DEVOTED SOUL OF ART

ANINDYA KANTI BISWAS

The centenary celebrations of a person's birthday becomes dizzy only when the concerned person's work enables us to perceive and foretell the future. Which means his work is always ahead of times. So centenary celebrations of that persons are not only occasions' but also worthy pride. Ramkinkar Baiz is such a person. His artwork (work) made us think, makes us think and will do till art exists. The country has forgotten that this year is his centenary. That is why instead of celebrating his centenary, two galleries in the Capital (Lalit Kala Akademi and National Gallery of Modern Art) are busy in exhibiting the works of some immature artists. Anyway, Ramkinkar Baiz is such an artist whose work reaches us to think in a renewed manner. He was born in a poor family in Bankura district of West Bengal in June 1906.

Ramkinkar's inborn talent was noticed early. During his school days he would draw dramatic scenes and persons. Observing such talent, Ramananda Chatterjee, editor of *Modern Review* took him to Santiniketan and placed him under Rabindranath and Nandalal in 1925.

Professor Nandalal Bose was the principal of Kalabhavan. Observing Ramkinkar's works he said, "You have done well. Stay here for two or three more years." He joined Kalabhavan at Santiniketan in 1925. Ramkinkar proved himself right. One of his friends, separated him to copy Raphael's *Madonna Imperial*, he painted *Lotus & Kaua* in his embrace. Sajanikanta Das submitted the picture to the magazine *Bharat Barsa* without his consent. The same was published in the Baisakh 1332 (1925) and he and his teacher Nandalal were awarded the golden medal in Lucknow fine arts exhibition.

Ramkinkar's initial teaching started in Kalabhavan that introduced him to functioning without syllabus and examination. It gave more importance to experimentation and art was considered a part of education. There was no scope for teaching of modelling and sculpture when Ramkinkar joined. Ramkinkar, Sudhir Ranjan Khastagir and Prabhat Mohan Banerjee were among the first students of Kalabhavan. To inspire the students, Nandalal Bose started to make sculptures. Apart from the superior work of Greco Roman sculpture, form and repertoire of conventionized work of European stylised and realistic portraits.

Ramkinkar's works were the only exception these days and probably he was named the first modern sculptor in India.

Initially no teacher could teach image preparations, so Ramkinkar was self made. With inspiration from Rabindranath and Nandalal he proceeded through the difficult researches.

In 1931 Ramkinkar joined Modern School of Delhi as a teacher for six months. Availability of time, sand and cement inspired him to make an image of Sarasvati within 6' x panel. The principal appreciated his effort and rewarded him with Rs 100. He managed his return fare from Delhi to Santiniketan. The next year he was employed as a sculpture teacher at Kalabhavan. He continued in the post for 30 years.

In 1935, Surendranath Kar and Nandalal Bose constructed a mud house named *Shamali* for Rabindranath. The gate of the house had one male and female amorphic relief sculptures prepared with sand and tar. In these two statues Ramkinkar converted the human anatomy into geometrical devices.

The time when sculptors were running after work commissioned by the rich, aristocrat and royals and were decorating roads with statues, Ramkinkar devoted himself to creative sculpture. The students of Santiniketan had to work with various disadvantages. The main problem was purchasing equipments for creative arts. To help Radhappa Hanji, a student, Ramkinkar introduced a new type of sculpture material, mixing cement and sand with gravel. The material was used in construction of statues in open places as a substitute of stone. *Sujata* (1935), *Santhal Family* (1938), *Dhan Dance/Paddy Threshing/Reaper* (1943), *Kalar Bandhu/Mill Call* (1956), were done in concrete. *Of Horse Seat*, *Sujata* and *Santhal Family* have smooth base but the others have little pedestals. The materials used here are not traditional.

In portrait painting also he preferred his own choice of material rather than listening to the conventional dictates.

Like Bernard Buffet, Ramkinkar too belonged to the period of transition from traditional to modern art, creating a style of his own, rooted in his personality and environment. As an exceptional individual, he was saturated with intense love for life and immutable pursuits for work.

By 1935, his works showed an interest in structural quality, something that is characteristic of his mature works from the 40s and 50s, which are marked by abstract as well as Constructivistic features.

Ramkinkar consistently got his mentor, Nandalal Bose's support against vigorous protests and criticism in Santiniketan over his non-conventional sculptures.

Nandalal Bose trusted his student and often tried to defend Ramkinkar in the face of criticism.

According to Ramkinkar, "My works were influenced by Cubism. Acharyadev (Nandalal Bose) was persuaded but after a long discourse he started supporting my work. He defended me against art critics. Its living evidence stands in the sculpted figure at Santiniketan *mandir* — *Deepdan*".

As said by poet and artist Sanjib Pramanik, "Artists, poets and other creative persons are always affected by the social situations. Even if artists are geographically distant, have different experiences, but the impact of contemporary happenings can be clearly seen in their works." Ramkinkar never went abroad but he received training from foreign sculptors. He was acquainted with Western techniques. And this is reflected in his works that are 'bearers of connection between basic Indian traditional orientation and Western cultures. He kept doing sculptures both on relief and three-dimension simultaneously. He never shunned reality for the sake of it. His basic desire was to show the "inherent" quality of women. In order to show this he revealed the aesthetic reality. He always tried to create a metaphysical reality in his sculptures.

His works show influences of Constructivism.

In Analytic Cubism, concave and convex were postulated as equivalents. All volumes, whether positive or negative, were 'Dockets of Space'. The Constructivists, a group of Russian artists led by Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1956), applied this principle to relief sculpture and arrived at what might be called three-dimensional collage. Eventually, the final step was taken of making the works free-standing.

According to Tatlin and his followers, these "constructions" were actually four-dimensional, since they implied motion and time. Suprematism and Constructivism were therefore closely related, and in fact overlapped, for both had their origins in Cubo-Futurism.

Ramkinkar made the portrait of Rabindranath (in the year 1941 few days before Rabindranath's death) following the method of Constructivism and even his *Mishwar* sculpture was influenced by the Constructivistic theory or movement.

Tribute to Ramkinkar Baiz

At a time when sculptors ran after work commissioned by the rich and decorated public roads with statues, Ramkinkar devoted himself to creative sculpture making

Chiselling to perfection

Want to know something unusual about Ramkinkar Baij? Just ask ANINDYA KANTI BISWAS.

AFTER THE Muslim invasion, until the late 19th Century sculpture was not practiced in India due to obvious reasons. But the British brought the art back to have the statues of their heroes installed. To meet the demand, they taught the Greco-Roman styles through art schools.

Though the new generation of Indian sculptors followed the British norms, there were exceptions who made their own path. They were not guided by the prevailing art education policy and preferred creativity over codified norms. Ramkinkar Baij was one such artist.

An inborn talent could be noticed in Ramkinkar Baij from his boyhood. He was born in 1906 in Bankura in a poor family. During his school days, and when he was in search of a job, he used to draw dramatic scenes and posters of the Congress. Observing his talent, Ramanand Chattopadhyay, Editor of Modern Review, and a resident of Bankura, took him to Santinketan and placed him under Rabindranath and Nandalal Bose in 1925. Professor Bose was the principal of Kalabhavan, and after examining Ramkinkar's oil painting and his other works, was all praise for him. "Ah! You have done well. Stay here for two to three more years."

Before joining Kalabhavan, a devoted friend requested Ramkinkar to copy the picture of Raphael's Madonna, but instead he painted 'Luv and Kush' in the embrace of Sita. The picture was submitted to the magazine Bharat Varsha without his consent and was published.

Initial teaching started in Kalabhavan-like studios. Kalabhavan was functioning without syllabus and examination. In its teaching system, importance was given to experimentation, which was considered as a part of education. There was no scope for teaching modelling and sculpture when Ramkinkar joined. Ramkinkar, Sudhir Ranjan Khastagir and Prabhat Moan Banerjee were the first students. To inspire the students, Nandalal Bose himself started preparing images. Among the futile exercise of sculpture, icon and repetitions of commissioned work of European stylised and realistic portraits, Ramkinkar's work was the only exception in those days, and he is deemed as the first modern sculptor in India.

Ramkinkar Baij's sculpture.

As at the initial stage, no teacher could fully teach image preparation, Ramkinkar is self-made. Inspired by Rabindranath and Nandalal he could proceed through the different kinds of research. In 1933 Ramkinkar joined the Modern School of Delhi as a teacher for six months when their new building was under construction. Availability of lime, sand and cement inspired him to do something special. He made the image of Saraswati in 6'4" panel and finished the job with aplomb. He was rewarded with Rs.100 by the principal for his work. He utilised this amount to return to Santiniketan. The following year he was employed as sculpture teacher at Kalabhavan and remained for the next 30 years.

In 1935 Surenderanath Kar and Nandalal Bose constructed a mud house named Shyamali for Rabindranath. A male and female Santhal relief sculpture were prepared on both sides of the gateway with the help of mud mixed with tar. In these he converted the human anatomy into geometrical devices. At a time when sculptors were running after commissioned works for rich patrons, Ramkinkar devoted himself to creative sculpture.

The Statesman

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Rebel with a cause

Ramkinkar Baiz was always unorthodox and unusual. Anindya Kanti Biswas reports

AS a child, Ramkinkar Baiz was interested in art: he would do sketches of freedom fighters. Very clearly, he had talent. Noticing his ability, Ramananda Chattopadhyay, editor of Modern-Review, brought him to Santiniketan. His new teacher was Nandalal Bose.

After graduating, Baiz taught art. His early works were *Somayashi*, *Swapnamayee* and other structured works. He made portraits of Benad Babu, Syad Mujtaba Ali Krishna Kripalini and Alauddin Khan (this particular work can be seen at the Sangeet Natak Academy in Delhi).

In 1931, Baiz joined the Modern School of Delhi as a teacher for six months. After going back to Santiniketan, he taught sculpture at Kala Bhavan for about 30 years.

The students of Santiniketan faced various problems, out of which the biggest was the purchase of equipment relating to creative arts. To help them Baiz introduced a new material -a mix of cement, sand and local gravel. This material was used in the construction of statues in open places as an substitute of stone.

Sujata (1985) *Santhal family*, (1936), *Dhan jhatai/paddy thrashing/reaper* (1943), *Kaler Bansha/mill call* (1956), were done on concrete. From these four statues *Sujata* and *Santhal family* have no smooth base but the

other two have a minute pedestal. Baiz had his own inimitable style in portrait painting.

Like Benod Behri, Baiz also belonged to the period of transition from traditional to modern art. By 1935, his works already showed an interest in structural quality. He consistently got his mentor, Nandalal base's support even though uproarious protests and criticism in Santiniketan, thanks to his non-conventional sculptures. According to Ramkinkar – "My work was influenced by Cubism. Acharyadev (Nandalal base) was perturbed but after a long discourse he never lost the conviction."

Ramkinkar never been went abroad but during his training had studied foreign sculptures. This way he became acquainted with western sculptural art in its techniques and formalistic challenges.

The first Indian natural or environmental sculpture *Sujata*, was constructed at Sangeet Bhavan and surrounded by Eucalyptus trees. In keeping with the rhythm of the trees Baiz planned the sculpture as a perpendicular column to match the environment.

Dhan Jhatai/Paddy thrashing/reaper, made of concrete in 1943, is a sculpture of a farmer thrashing paddy. The gap between the two legs go upwards like a triangle. The body has been merged with the neck like the merger of a triangle to the top point. But its head is absent.

The name "*Kaler Bansa*" or the *Call of the rice mill* depicts two female Santhal workers running to reach the mill in time. These two women are holding a wet cloth, fluttering in the air. In their movement, a rhythm can be seen. Baiz was once asked to make a sculpture in front of a ladies hostel. Called *Fountain*, the upper part of this sculpture showed a buffalo and the lower part is shaped as a fish.

Ramkinkar's environmental sculptures are unique. Rabindranath remarked that something created in anticipation of truth is art. Baiz's sculptures, truly exemplify the above statement.

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