



SANYAL

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI

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ON

CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ART

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BHABESH CHANDRA SANYAL

LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI
INDIA

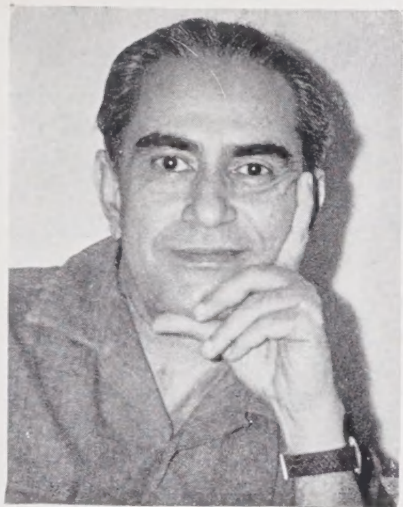


1967

Editor : JAYA APPASAMY

Assistant Editor : S. A. KRISHNAN

Published by B. C. Sanyal, Secretary, Lalit Kala Akademi,
New Delhi, and Printed at Sree Saraswaty Press Ltd, Calcutta-9



BHABESH CHANDRA
SANYAL

At the turn of the century Dibrugarh was a small district town in Assam. The horizons of the shy young lad Bhabesh, youngest of the family, were filled by tall arching branches of bamboo. The rain pattered endlessly on the green trellis of leaves and the sound lulled the boy to dreams. The words of his mother wove wisdom and phantasy in stories from the Mahabharata. In Bhabesh's mind the normal boundaries of reality and illusion would overlap filling him with a strange sense of wonder.

Bhabesh eagerly waited for the day when he could journey to fabulous Calcutta. There he had heard was a new world of railways, trams, mills and city lights. He was sure of one thing: that he would leave the land of his birth and drift away to new shores. He was tired of the closed feeling of a provincial town, his only reflex was to yawn at this tame existence. In those days Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were living inspirations. The boundaries of Assam and Bengal were not political but more for administrative tidiness. Bengali was spoken and understood without any barriers of prejudice. Assamese was considered a local variation while Bengali was

a language of sophisticated communication. The moving slogan of *Bande-Mataram*, and the emotional call of the *Swadeshi* movement had touched the core of youthful hearts. There was an overwhelming mood of self-sacrifice, our youth was eager to squander itself for a mystic ideal. Bankimchandra's '*Anandmath*' had stirred Bengal as never before, and Rabindranath's '*Swadeshi*' songs were wildly sung as a protest against alien rule. Bal, Pal and Lal were the torch-bearers of the *avant garde*. Against this background young Bhabesh moved to Calcutta for his higher education (1920). His relations had always desired that he should, after a University education, take up a lucrative white collar assignment in the British Government. But 1921 was a fateful year for many Indians, who later played a dominant role in shaping the destiny of our country. Gandhiji's non-cooperation movement attracted the idealistic in a wave of enthusiasm. Men vied with each other in suffering for the motherland. Bhabesh left Serampore College, Hooghly, not knowing what he would do next. He joined the movement and lent his support to the cause by boycotting college and foreign goods. At heart Bhabesh had always wanted to paint and sculpt, his plastic memory was extraordinary and even his handwriting revealed a flair for aesthetic flourish. Left to his own resources, he soon made up his mind not to return to Serampore College, instead he joined the Calcutta Art School (1923).

By temperament Bhabesh liked to do things elegantly. He had no attraction towards the austerity of Gandhianism though he wore *Khadi*. He had a withering contempt for British manners and political tactics but he secretly admired their efficiency, their discipline and their love for civilized standards of living. He admired early risers but preferred for himself a leisurely time-table. He felt that asceticism was an ideal for the few, gracious living was for him a normal attitude.

The nineteen-twenties in India, especially in Bengal, was a period of high idealism. The cultural dichotomy that originated

with British rule saw a phase of extreme divergence. In Art there was on one hand a sturdy reliance on reason. Work, method, techniques, material were all determined by the English principals of the art Schools. Percy Brown, who headed the Calcutta Art School, was open to suggestions and was eager to see and appreciate native traditions, and yet as a teacher he would not change his methods of teaching from plaster casts, of life study from posed models, and of attaining a photo-oriented realism. The graded study, first in black and white, then in monochrome, and finally in colour was the accepted training in art. Landscape was a week-end occupation and compositions based on daily life were luxuries to be indulged in only by final year students. Such was the officially accepted pattern. On the other hand, the school of Abanindranath Tagore had, by a process of experiment and study, struck a note of revivalism. The classicism of Ajanta and Bagh was assiduously copied, and held out as ideal. Mughal and Rajput miniatures were a part of the discipline, and the technique of 'wash painting' was a by-product of the desire for Indianisation. Young Bhabesh was enterprising in his search for self, he felt a restless urge to express and assert his personality through painting. In spite of a poetic and revolutionary idealism he undertook to perfect his tools of expression. Under the guidance of Percy Brown and Jamini Ganguli he mastered the grammar of form. He was an observer of the humanist mould, and this schooling gave him a sense of structure. The Bengal School too, had an indirect effect on his emotional character. Time and again one discovers in his early work an attempt at symbolism. He seems eager to draw attention to the misery of the unfortunate. His paintings of beggars and despairing women embody his sympathy for the poor and lowly.

Bhabesh's career in the art school was spectacular. His mastery in painting as well as in sculpture gave him a distinct advantage over others. He had also a taste for music which

made him a popular student figure. But the artist remained restless, ever longing for a new turn of events.

A strange accident was ahead. A newspaper advertisement for an up-country job took young and inexperienced Bhabesh to distant and sophisticated Lahore. Before long, he found himself in the chair of the Vice-Principal of the Mayo School of Art. In those days Lahore was a centre of cultural growth, a number of talented men and women gave it an atmosphere and character of its own. Sanyal's appointment as Vice Principal there was a real challenge. Teaching art was a serious vocation and he brought all his talents to his new work. Sanyal's Bengali origins however left a trail of suspicion in the Intelligence Department. The term Bengali was a synonym for fire-brand terrorist. Sanyal's detours to roadside bridges or at the old fort walls for sketching were often misunderstood as espionage. One event leading to another, Sanyal soon left his government job and set up his own studio in the most fashionable part of Lahore. Poets, actors, musicians, and professors thronged his studio and discussed the intellectual controversies of the day. At this time the painter Amrita Sher-Gil also worked in Lahore and Simla, and Sanyal came to know her. He admired her Bohemian life and her flamboyant postures. He saw in her work a break through from the pedestrian or sentimental art that crowded the walls of salons and annual art exhibitions. Amrita's work when seen in the context of contemporaneous art appeared like a revolutionary departure. She took delight in shocking the smug and the orthodox and would make caustic observations about the anaemic state of wash painting in the colonies of the Bengal School.

Sanyal in his years of artistic stabilisation steered clear of these contradictory tendencies and kept to his individual statement. He did profit by Sher-Gil's passion for rich colours. But he also kept his second weapon sculpture in trim, by constantly working on portrait commissions and compositions. He worked with equal facility both in painting and sculpture.

After the events of 1947 and the terrors of partition Sanyal reached Delhi to begin a new life. His refugee studio at Gole Market became the meeting point for young and promising painters of the capital. A group known as Delhi Silpi Chakra rallied under his leadership, and created a stir in art circles.

In 1952 Sanyal was appointed Head of the Fine Arts Department in the Delhi Polytechnic. From then on there was a sense of stability and depth in his life as well as in his work.

In 1960, as an artist of international standing and with an ample fund of experience behind him, he was invited to take over the responsibilities as Secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademi, the National Academy of Art.

Here I may refer to a few of his major works in painting and sculpture belonging to his post-partition oeuvre.

SRINGAR is one of his outstanding paintings and presents in a definitive manner his approach to formal composition. Brilliant red is the theme of the painting. The bolster, and napkin in the picture, establish the diagonal, while the wall hanging, nude figure and the red lota provide a vertical intersection. The white sheet of the divan lends a dramatic contrast. The yellow choli remains a teaser to the nude abandon of the red woman. She is of robust limbs, and is combing her hair, one hand holds a mirror. There is a continuation of the yellow tones from choli to bolster design. The eye moves around the theme of variations in red which are heightened by white, yellow and a sparing use of black.

THE BLUE DOME is a painting with a different emphasis. Sanyal's aim here is not to create a significant pattern of colour values, his preoccupation is to imprison the evanescent grandeur of the blue dome against the blue sky in the midst of rural, subtropical vegetation. The ruins all around the landscape, present opposing chords and the arches in different spaces and in different sizes are tonal punctuations. Sanyal thus sets his stage carefully with an intuitive realisation of his finale. A few

deft touches of wild colour (suggesting village women) a sophisticated fauvism—suddenly make the painting meaningful. The infinity of the dome and the landscape that wraps the atmosphere attain a human scale of values. I think Sanyal excels in these interjections and spurts of imagination.

Sanyal's forte is colour, and this can well be exemplified by two of his more recent works: *IN BROODING MOOD* is one; *MOTHER* is another.

The former painting is heavy with a sense of tragic isolation. The pale moon makes a vain attempt to dispel the turgid flood of space. The leaning structures of Jantar Mantar await the unseen call of disintegration. In the midst of the dull fury of nature, the monumental figure of a woman stands creating a new horizon for the spectator. She too has wrapped herself with the turgid colour of the sky. But that is not all. Her lower garment is aglow, with earth red. She belongs to this earth, her aspirations still retain their latent vitality. She seems to symbolise the spirit of woman, who has suffered and sorrowed but still retains the will to live. It is a beautiful, sad painting giving form to the idea of Indian womanhood. *THE MOTHER* has a parallel mood touched with sadness. The painting is built out of a simple towering silhouette of a woman with a child. There is barely a suggestion of the child's head seen partially through the covering saree. The colours of deep grey, blue and brownreds express the drabness of existence. The background is sharply marked by a weathered wall. The sky at the left-hand corner, indicates a distant possibility, a lost hope. The whole work is an essay in understatement, simplicity and human values. Sanyal here gives voice to the dumb millions of India, who labour and die under an open but ruthlessly indifferent sky.

NIZAMUDDIN FAIR is one of his more important works, where he juxtaposes a festive atmosphere against the towering shape of a woman in a black burka. The woman with one breast bare, makes a touching contrast. The infinite patience

and affection of a muslim mother is set against the irreversible, and irrepressible turns of the merry-go-round of the fair. Tents and round-rides, whirl in the back ground, some groups of women cluster in places. The woman with her bare breast and child sits between two grave stones. There is a haunting charm about this painting. The symbolism, if any, is a coincidence, perhaps more intuitive than intentional.

His recent paintings, it appears, have grown out of his protest against the apparent lawlessness of modern art. He has seen the rise and fall of many junior reputations and wondered at their publicity oriented development. He has, therefore, set himself to paint, in the idiom of symbols, a style which was renounced in the waning years of the Indian Renaissance. He has wilfully turned his back on the changing fashions in style. The Pollocks and Poliakoffs of Indian manufacture evoke in him a sense of utter boredom. Why, he seems to ask, should we be indiscriminate, in pursuing scratch textures, slush impastoes or anthropological symbols, that fail to convey any aesthetic or emotional states. It is in such a mood that he goes back to the theme FACE OF SIVA. The matted hair of the God is in a state of tempest spelling destruction, one hand seems to hold the crescent, the red bull in the back ground is barely visible. The face strangely evokes the impression of a self portrait. In a state of empathy Sanyal seems to cleanse the air by Siva's thunderbolt.

His sculptures present a different phase of the same artist. The very medium of sculpture is earthbound and of clay. The immense volatility of colour and line in painting keep pace with the speed of imagination. But in sculpture the artist has to be dour in habits, sure in his design and perseverant in effort. Sanyal has turned out a few remarkable portraits.

His head study of SAILOZ MOOKHERJEA is a sensitive essay in characterisation. Sanyal here is able to imprison the nervous expression of the painter effectively. Sailoz was a

unique individual, he combined the simplicity of a child, and the shrewdness of a perpetual debtor.

Another study which carries the imprint of the artist's sensitive fingers, is of AMBA, his daughter. It catches the characteristic movement of the swan like neck, in its fragile adolescent movement. The lips and eyes in an impressionist manner superbly convey the essentials of the young girl. Sanyal executed several commissions in his long career. Portraits of Lala Lajpat Rai, Chotturam, and Gandhiji's bust at the Hague, are some of his well-known works in public collections.

All Sanyal's work emphasises the innate humanism of his sensibility; his heart is willing to reach out to ailing and suffering man. He also delights in the simple dignity of rural people. For his love of colour he is indebted to the Rajasthani working woman. After having said so much we find there is still a part of Sanyal which remains unexpressed in his art. He is a loyal friend, a happy companion, and a person who takes life with the proverbial pinch of salt. His nobility and generosity to students and friends is well known. He has by now learnt to accept success and its counterpart with equanimity. He takes pride in his profession, and has never allowed himself to be patronised or pitied even in the most distressing circumstances. Thus it is that Sanyal is honoured not only as a major artist but also as a gracious and warm-hearted man.

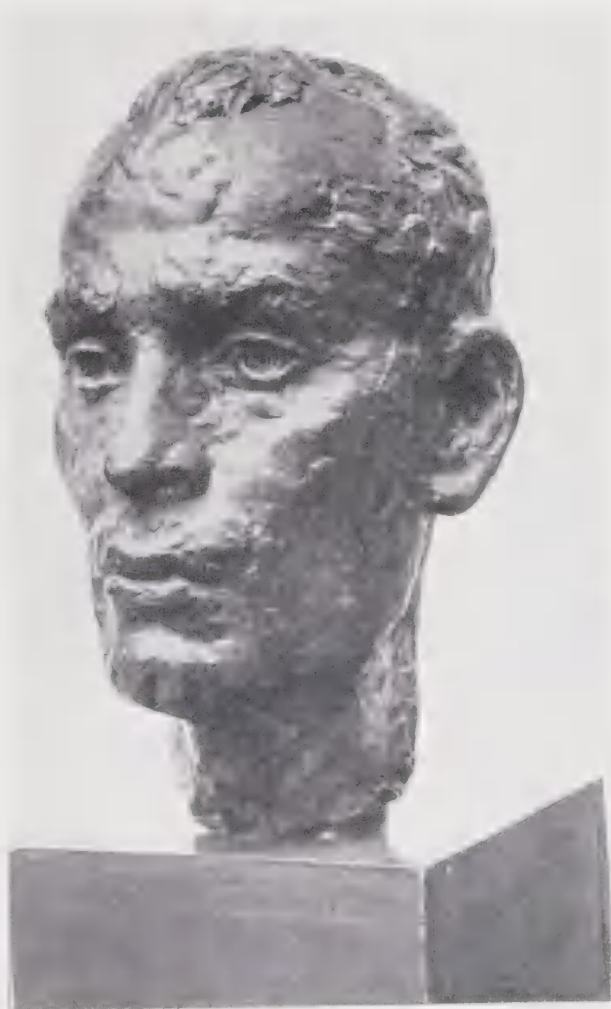
DINKAR KOWSHIK





B. Sanyal.
1980.



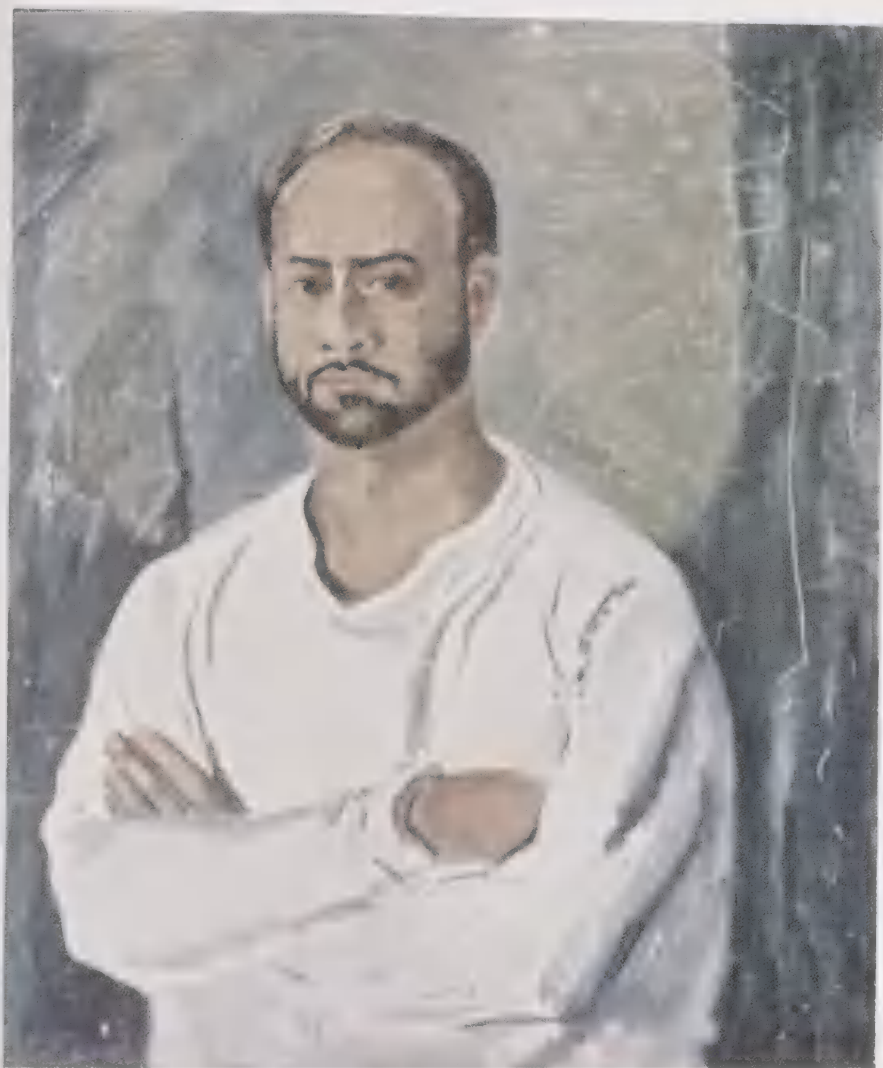








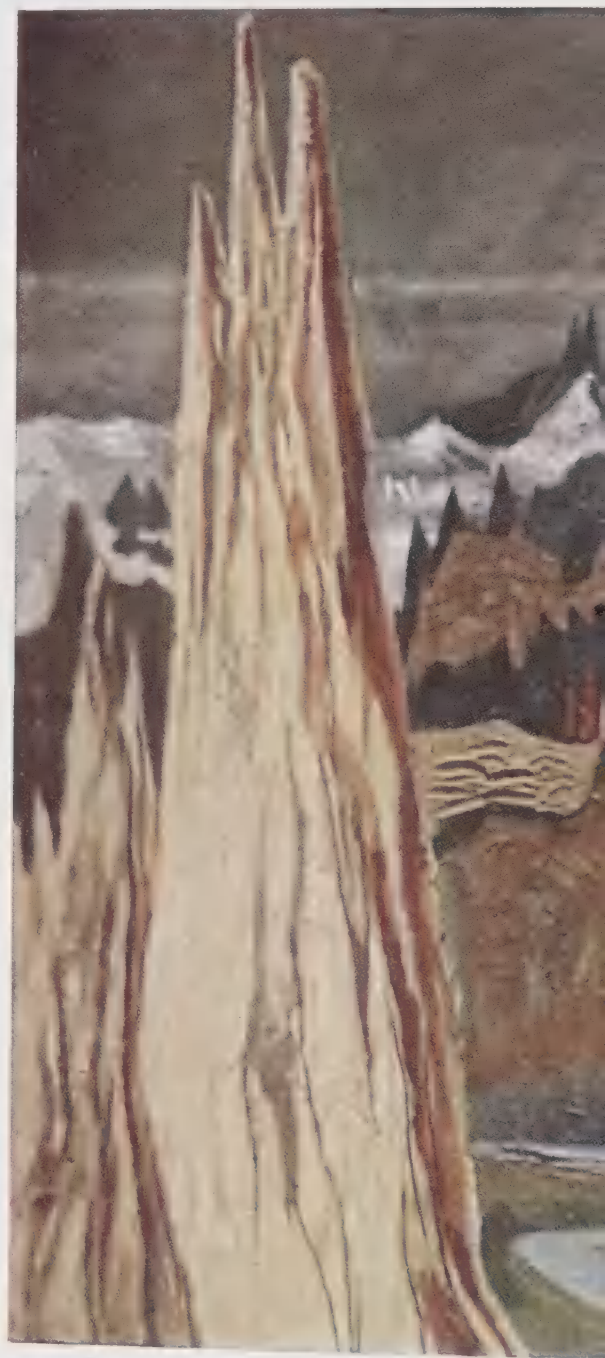






























BHABESH CHANDRA SANYAL—LALIT KALĀ AKADEMI

No.	Title	Medium	Year	Collection
1.	The Outcast	Oil	1940	Artist
2.	Portrait of my Daughter	Oil	1950	Artist
3.	Child Bride	Oil	1938	Punjab Museum
4.	Sailoz Mookherjea	Bronze	1954	Artist
5.	Sringar	Oil	1948	..
6.	Rajasthani Woman	Oil	1950	Punjab Museum
7.	Despair	Oil	1953	National Museum, Prague
8.	Woman with Bird	Oil	1961	Punjab Museum
9.	Satish Gujral	Oil	1957	Artist
10.	Amba	Bronze	1958	..
11.	Seated Woman	Terracotta	1948	..
12.	Face of Siva	Oil	1962	..
13.	Spiti Landscape	Oil	1965	..
14.	Grief	Sandstone	1959	Punjab Museum
16.	Portrait of a Monument	Oil	1962	Lalit Kala Akademi
16.	Head Study	Plaster	1963	Artist
17.	Girl with Tanpura	Oil	1961	Academi of Fine Arts
18.	Mother and Child	Oil	1960	Lalit Kala Akademi
19.	Pedlar	Oil	1954	Museum of Art, Budapest
20.	In Brooding Mood	Oil	1960	Lalit Kala Akademi
21.	Self Portrait	Oil	1960	Artist

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

BHABESH SANYAL—Born 1904 in Dibrugarh, Assam. Studied there till his Matriculation. Joined Serampore College in 1920 and passed I.A. Examination of the Calcutta University. Discontinued further studies as a result of the Non-Cooperation Movement. Joined the Government School of Art, Calcutta in 1923 and was one of its outstanding students. Settled in Lahore in 1929, where he had gone to prepare a portrait-bust of Lala Lajpat Rai for the Lahore Congress Session. Later, became Vice-Principal, Mayo School of Art, Lahore. Established his own studio called "Lahore School of Fine Arts" in 1936. The Studio was a great success and became the centre of many cultural activities and produced some outstanding artists. Held numerous exhibitions and worked as a free lance artist. After the partition of India in 1947 he moved to Delhi and continued free lance work. Did a mural for the Congress Working Committee in 1951. Together with other artists he formed the Delhi Silpi Chakra in 1950, of which he was the first Chairman. Joined the Fine Arts Department, Delhi Polytechnic, as Professor and Head in 1952. Appointed to advise the Government of Nepal on Art Education in 1955. In 1955-56 he travelled as leader of the Delegation with an Exhibition of Indian Art to the countries of Eastern Europe, including Russia. In 1959 visited the United States under the Leaders Exchange Programme and also Canada and Europe. Has been a member of the Lalit Kala Akademi since its inception and in 1960 was appointed its Secretary. Visited New York in 1963 to attend the International Congress of Art and in 1964 travelled to several European countries on cultural visits. In 1966 visited Tokyo for the session of the International Congress of Art. Has participated in numerous collective exhibitions in India and abroad and held one-man shows at various times. His works were displayed at the Salon de Mai in 1949, Venice Biennale 1953 and Sao Paulo 1965. Appointed member of the Central Board of Higher Secondary Education. His sculptures and paintings are in well-known collections in many countries.

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