THE DISCOURSE OF RESISTANCE

IN HEMENDRANATH MAZUMDAR'S PAINTINGS, CRITICAL ESSAYS, AND POETRY

(1919-1948)

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BY

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Certified that the Thesis entitled

'The Discourse of Resistance in Hemendranath Mazumdar's Paintings, Critical Essays, and Poetry (1919-1948)' submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Sucheta Bhattacharya, Professor, Department of Comparative Literature, Jadavpur University, and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/ elsewhere.

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The images of his paintings were collected from the family members of Hemendranath, museums, galleries, private collectors, and in some instances, photographed from old magazines and periodicals, especially from *The Art of Mr H Mazumdar*, *Bharatvarsha*, *Masik Sachitra Basumati* and *Nirupama Barshasmriti*, and also from calenders published during the artist's lifetime. I thank the National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi and the Birla Academy of Art and Culture for providing me with images of the artist's paintings in their collection, the librarians and staff of the National Library, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Library, Rammohan Library, Bagbazar Reading Room, and also the library of the Centre for the Study of Social Sciences for allowing me access to their vast digitized resources. I am also grateful to Suman Sengupta and Sayam Bandyopadhyay of 'Desh', for allowing me to get valuable informations from the *Ananda Bazar Patrika* Archives. Ganesh Pratap Singh and Rakesh Sahni had also provided me with some images and documents that have proved extremely helpful to my research. Most of the images used here have been expertly photographed by Nepal Bhadra.

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Introduction

In my thesis I have attempted to examine, as a consistent discourse, Hemendranath Mazumdar's many-faceted resistance: the chief focus is on his oppositional stance against the dominant ideology of 'Indianness' propagated by Abanindranath Tagore and the other neo-Bengal School painters in the early decades of the twentieth century. I have explored in detail the framing of this discourse of resistance by closely studying his art, and also his writing— both his poetry and critical essays. Though this particular point of oppositionality is the principal focus of my thesis, I have also examined how resistance and nonconformity were essential underpinnings of his life and work, constituting a vital strand of his subjectivisation. In almost everything that he had ever written or painted, there had always been this underpinning of resistance against different kinds of insularities and impositions—be it the dictate of essentialising 'Indianness', non-negotiable social conventions, or even the insularity of social and artistic thought . He was especially scathingly critical against its inherent historicism that was out of touch with the *here* and *now*, and also objected against the way these painters privileged spirit over form, and denigrated naturalism in art, branding it as a 'Western' import. His choice of subjects can also be seen as a part of this resistance: at a time when virtuous womanhood had become almost a national icon (we will recall Abanindranath Tagore's *Bharat Mata*) he painted women in various states of undress in his wet-saree series. In a way his exploration of female sexuality was in itself an exercise in contrariness vis-à-vis the contemporary 'glorified feminine' in art imaged at the intersectional juncture of motherhood and nationalism. The choice of subjects, as also the technique used in his landscapes, brought about a certain sense of locatedness about their place-making that is in itself defiant of the atmospheric landscapes of the Bengal School painters.

In our own times we are equally distant from the stylized 'Indianness' of the Bengal school as well as the culture of verisimilitude that was the central focus of Academic naturalism. Not only have our ways of seeing changed, we have also been trained by our times to interrogate the very notion of 'correctness' of artistic taste. We cannot— and would not— separate strands that have Western origination within the space of contemporary Indian art. Thus it was essential for me to attempt to see Mazumdar (and also the circle of artists of his times) up close, like one would see a contemporary, without the judgmental intervention of artistic attitudes that we have inherited

today, evolved over the period of almost a century. But the clarity of distance is also important. It is perhaps essential that we preserve both our 'outsideness'[i], to borrow a term from Bakhtin, and also otherness, to assume an interpretative power which specifically flows from this temporal difference, and to ensure a dialogue between the separate slices of time. That I get to draw from the thoughts of Bakhtin, and from Suzanne Langer, and countless others who have collectively shaped our moment of thought, and also approach the commentaries of early twentieth century writers— little-known, yet rooted to their milieu, with cultural negotiations essentially distinct from ours— like Premesh Shome, Manmathanath Chakraborty and Vijayratna Majumdar— is the whole beauty of this separateness. Thus the researcher has to simultaneously adopt, and maintain, two temporal positions, which also involves a subtle interface between the personal and the impersonal[ii]. This methodology is adopted in most historical research, and it suited my line of work as well, since I was working with not only a period separated from me by almost a century, but also with cultural perceptions— and standards set by these— that have radically altered now. We must remember the momentous intervention of the event of India's independence, which, by apparently lifting the pressing need to resist or conform to colonial cultural patterns, did bring about profound changes in ways of seeing. I use 'apparently' here with consciousness and conviction, as this pattern was perpetuated, by other kinds of power, other brands of contingency, as we have noted in the narrative of post-independence Indian art. But that is another story.

Therefore I had to reach out and observe, as a keenly invested guest from another time, the continuing dialectic between academic realism in art and the 'Indian-style' painting that intensified at around the *Swadeshi* period in Bengal, and continued to gain momentum in the next few decades. What I primarily felt was that, I was in effect studying a counter-resistance, firming up thus, our already existing perception of the nature of resistance: "Every point where resistance is encountered reveals itself as already a counter-resistance, thus definitionally eluding any thought of a unitary and pure Resistance." (Caygill 2013, 7). I also had to contend with, and neutralize, another form of resistance— that of our own age, a perceptional posture almost, created by the artistic culture of our times that is suspect about illusionist, even narrative art. At a time when easel painting itself is becoming a minor category the world over— installation, performance, happening, video art and many other forms have led us to interrogate the *foreverness* of art , and have also instilled in us a celebratory attitude about the ephemerality of

the artistic moment— it is not easy to be able to shed that deep-seated reservation that we may not even be aware of consciously. There is a curious ambivalence about this, though: we do not feel the same way about the naturalistic paintings of the European masters— our sense of wonderment at these is still unceasing. And here lies another main problematic that I had to come to terms with. These works by the European masters are unquestionably *canonized*, and therefore preserves that *aura* (to borrow a term of Benjamin with a slightly altered sense).[iii] But Mazumdar's paintings, in his own times, had never really been glorified along these lines, in spite of having been immensely popular among the public, and sought-after by collectors. Contemporary attitudes about nudity was a potent reason— though, here also, we can identify the curious ambivalence of the viewers who had no qualms about Victorian nudes that frequently hung in the mansions of the rich, but were shocked at the revealed body of the familiar figure of the Bengali *bhadramahila*. Furthermore, he had always faced varied kinds of resistance from different ages: from the nationalist point of view he was criticized for not being 'Indian' enough, for his use of oils and adopting the technique of Academic realism. The succeeding ages had written him off variously, as a 'calender' artist, as one who painted 'pornographic' works, or maybe, as many of us today would feel, merely a painter of pretty, evocative, realistic paintings. Always excluded by the glorified canon, his work never got any kind of serious attention from posterity.

Art of the Bengal school was itself a form of resistance against the artistic culture of the colonizers, as I have pointed out before. But in effect the line of art that they were opposing came together as a curious category, as it included not only the illusionist art taught at the Academies of Kensington (and this is how the coinage 'academic' realism was derived), but also traditions of Western (not necessarily British) naturalist oil painting. At that particular juncture, 'Western art'— largely undefined and undifferentiated— was considered as quantifiable as a British 'product', 'boycotting' which became almost a national imperative. This served to give birth to a particular line of art— with overt underpinnings of cultural nationalism— which was instrumental in formulating and fixing the rather insular ideation of 'Indianness' within itself. Abanindranath Tagore and his circle (often loosely referred to as the 'Orientalists') attempted to connect the phenomenon of recovery and revival of national tradition to the need and possibility of regeneration of the nation: that re-inscribing the past would be instrumental to the figurations of a glorious future became the key idealist undernote of the emergent idiom. To begin with,

therefore, it was more of a strategic imperative than aesthetic. The insistence to create and perpetuate a singular national identity by working with 'Indian' subjects, forms and technique, drawing from Indian (predominantly Hindu) history, myth and tradition, invariably created, and operated upon, power structures of conformism and exclusion. A closer look would confirm that this adopted technique of creating images of an essentialised nation, exotic and idealized, as a tool to combat the colonialists had really been the product of what it was expressly opposing; the colonial construction of the Orient as the non-European 'other'. I have carefully examined the ways in which Mazumdar raised his voice against this, and other inherent inconsistencies, regularly and vehemently, all the way till this 'style' weakened, and died a natural death, years later.

The oppositional role of Hemendranath Mazumdar vis-à-vis the cultural politics of his times in the area of art had gone largely unnoticed by most critics and art historians. There are indeed a few mentions[iv], but such instances are few and sporadic, and the nature of his opposition had never been closely observed, nor had it been interpreted as a consistent discourse. That the Academic painters would oppose the Bengal school was a given—and justifiably so— as their focus on naturalism was frowned upon by the latter upon the assumption that in point of both technique and medium, this particular art practice had Western links. Though Mazumdar was a part of this general opposition (and one of the most vocal among those in the 'academic' camp) it would be historically incorrect if his particular brand of resistance remained undifferentiated from the rest. It is a matter of regret that Indian art history had been at best frugal in its attention towards Mazumdar's discursive role. In this thesis, I have attempted to map the passion and consistency with which he had continued to oppose, not only the discourse developed by the Bengal school artists, but also all impositions that intended to mediate with the freedom of artists, and artistic taste as well. In a sense, thus, he was opposed to all schools of thought that contradicted dialogism in art. And this brings me to my primary research question: Mazumdar's 'resistance'— the perseverance of which I have tried to locate, observe, and frame within a consistent discourse**— what was the nature (we could also call it the deep structure) of this resistance? Was it, under the garb of being directed at the shortcomings of the Bengal school, really against all kinds of impositions upon the free expression of art, and the artist's right, too, to choose his own way?** A question within the question would be: was he so far ahead of his times that he could nullify the whole idea of the inferiority of the borrower[v] (vis-

à-vis the practitioners of Western Academic naturalism) which lay at the very basis the power equations of colonial culture? Or, would it be practical to relate his oppositionality to a question of prudence: he was a professional artist, hugely famous mainly for his evocative, naturalistic oils, and it is justifiable that he would vindicate his stand, his choice of technique and medium. The course of my research convinced me, firsthand, about what had always been an ideational figuration— calibrated, I'd say, by the spirit of our times— that boundaries and boxed compartments are largely illusory, contingent upon the exigencies of social and cultural politics. Thus the need to vindicate and reassert a professional stand may actually connect to an impersonal space of idealism and ideology, and each may nurture the other symbiotically, without being self-limiting.

I have attempted to point out here how his resistance was layered and multilinear; a considerable part of this thesis does indeed deal with his discontent with the Indian-style painting of Abanindranath and the Bengal School artists, but, as I have pointed out, Mazumdar's main point of opposition was the near-legitimisation of a singular taste in art in his times, something that was supported and validated by extra-aesthetic concerns. He also refused to accept naturalistic paintings executed in oil as essentially connected to an overseas culture, the 'othering' of which was seen by many as unavoidable in order to underline and reassert an Indian identity. It is also vitally important for us to observe and understand that this quest for identity was common to almost all the artists of this particular time: what essentially differed was the *location* of identity that they latched on to. Abanindranath Tagore and his followers of the Bengal school sought for the shape of identity in the history, art, literature and mythology of ancient India; Jamini Roy connected with the timeless aesthetics of the folk arts of Bengal, while Mazumdar appropriated western academic realism to portray the *here* and *now* of Bengal, as also the women of Bengal, deeply rooted to the culture and customs of the region.

I have also located and discussed other spirals of resistance, most of which are obliquely connected to his almost utopian yearning for a space of freedom[vi] for the artist, as well as the social individual. His opposition to certain social conventions is often deeply submerged beneath an apparently conformist surface, which makes these difficult to disentangle and decode. This is often indicative of an anxiety which nestles in the schism that is opened up by the contrary pulls

of belonging and resistance: his poems often provide clarifying subtexts to such cues found in many of his paintings.

My timeline mentioned in the title— 1919 to 1948— needs some clarification. 1919 was the year when Mazumdar set up the organization called 'Indian Academy of Art' with a few like-minded artist friends, Atul Bose and Jamini Roy being the foremost of them, and this opened up a discursive space for the artists. The topic which regularly found its way in their discussions was what Partho Mitter identifies as 'the burning issue of the day'— that is, 'whether the pursuit of naturalism was tantamount to a betrayal of national ideals, and whether the historicism of the Bengal School was the sole path to India's artistic revival' (Mitter, 2007, 129). Even the reminiscences of Atul Bose (a close friend of Mazumdar, his erstwhile classmate, too, at Mymensingh City School) indicate that they were seriously invested in contemporary artistic discourses, and their debates were not directed at merely guarding the academic bastion. This, coupled with the fact that Mazumdar decided to publish an art journal of the same name the very next year (to engage more directly with the unfolding cultural politics, I'd say) convinced me that this was a key year in his life that saw not only the early stirrings of his conviction, but also his agency, and that is precisely why I decided to take up this date to mark the point from which I would begin. 1948 is the year of his death, which also saw the mounting of a significant show of Indian artists at Eden Gardens with Mazumdar as the key figure. By that time the divide between the two dissenting art camps had become all but irrelevant with all the sea changes that Indian art had gone through; but it is still interesting to note that the manuscript of Mazumdar's *Chhobir Chosma* was prepared as late as 1940[vii]. As this collection of essays contains his most unambiguous and vitriolic protests against the oriental camp, we are faced with two distinct possibilities. The first point would be: his deep personal dissatisfaction with the style and method of the Bengal School was never resolved, and continued till the final days of his life, in spite of the fact that this line of art had almost died out by then. Possibly the discontent continued because the style was anyway canonized as an important chapter of Indian art history in his lifetime, and its inconsistencies were explored only sporadically, and not systematically, until much later. Secondly, it is possible that the essays of this book were written much earlier, and the final compilation was done in 1940; it is possible that he decided not to publish it after realizing the datedness of his diatribes vis-à-vis the contemporary climate of art.

To understand the nature of his resistance I have looked closely at both his paintings and sketches, and also at the diverse opinions and active debates that these had generated during his times. I have also given equal importance to his critical writings—even apart from his posthumously-published *Chhobir Chosma*, there are a number of other critical essays written by him published in periodicals which I have looked into. Also, he used to publish at least four art journals, and some of these carry his opinions on the cultural politics of his times. Apart from these I have closely examined his yet unpublished manuscript of poems which he himself titled *Kalpanika*— certain poems in this manuscript provide valuable subtexts to his paintings, and also a glimpse of his inherent oppositional stance vis-à-vis most 'structures' that are unquestioned and unmoving. I have also looked into the way in which contemporary literature played a permeative role in his paintings, a usual cultural phenomenon then. The visual culture of the period was significantly influenced by the way most popular literary journals and periodicals carried plates of paintings. This aided not only in the fostering of a close-knit relation between literature and art, but also brought the common educated people in close contact with contemporary art, a practice that is almost wholly lost today. Hemendranath Mazumdar had often used lines from popular literary works, or names of characters from these, as his painting-titles; like *Rohini*, a character from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Krishnakanter Will*, also lines from from *Baishnab Padabali*, and his unique take on voyeurism as a cross between legitimacy and forbiddenness could be referenced to the character called Karkun (in *Mymensingh Geetika*) who was admonished for spying on bathing women, as well as the near-legitimisation of such sightings in the myths surrounding Krishna and the Gopis.

My thesis has four chapters and two appendices. In the first chapter, titled **Framing a Discourse of Resistance: Hemendranath Mazumdar and 'Nationalist' Art**, I have attempted to explore, and explain, the nature of Mazumdar's resistance vis-à-vis the contemporary cultural climate—his opposition to the insularity of the 'Indian-style' paintings of the Bengal School, and the exclusionary tactics that got inseparably connected to it. I have isolated two main points here: going through his diverse and often highly emotional texts, I found the arguments were clustered around his twin contentions that the whole premise of this 'Indian-style' painting was ahistorical and also illogical, and thus, he believed, it should be recognized as a false category. In his opinion this was a regional phenomenon at best: considering this to be authentic 'Indian' art would waylay people into the trap of disrespecting the artistic endeavours of the rest of India.

Moreover, Bengal school's focus on historicism completely disregarded the *presentness* of the nation's experience— the culminating moments of history— and overlooking the *here* and *now*, it addressed what can only be called an imagined community. The idealized and exotic images of the nation had a certain undernote of essentialisation which was not too different from how the West saw the East: thus, while purporting to create a counterpoint to Western culture, it, ironically, only served to echo Western fabulations. I have also examined in detail another related point: his protest against the segregational nature of the British educational policy related to art, to which, he believed, the powerfully propagated idiom of the 'Indian-style' painters served to add fuel. The attempt to keep Indians at a distance from Western art did, in fact, betray a strand of colonial anxiety. The excessive focus on Indianness also masked the slow process of the policymakers (this, he believed, was a carefully devised political move) of transforming the schools of art into institutions which trained students principally in crafts and draftsmanship, intending to produce skilled artisans who could be of some use to the colonizers. I have felt that Mazumdar's many-stranded fabric of resistance was, at a very basic level, against the use of art as a contemporary political strategy. There is indeed an element of artistic self-authentication involved in his discourse, but these instances have a fadedness about them when compared to the robust and full-blooded arguments relating to the need to calibrate aesthetic standards, unmediated by political contingency. The obvious problem that we would run into, at this point, is our ingrained concept that all art is political[viii], drawing from their temporal and spatial power structures and offering different meanings to different milieus— a 'floating signifier', as Murray Edelman would say (Edelman 1995, 9); but here the line of art in question (the Bengal school, that is) had been in explicit and declared usage, at least initially, to garner support for a particular political movement, almost as a *swadeshi* product. Also, while opposing a certain power structure, the Bengal School had brought about a different kind of power equation among artists of that particular period, and the 'nationalist'[ix] logic is itself subverted when we consider the different kinds of links that the movement had with the British Indian government[x]. This, coupled with the consideration of Western art as an undifferentiated category, limiting it as a 'British' product— and the resultant avoidance of both naturalism and oil paint— does indeed raise questions about its logical integrity vis-à-vis its nationalist political angle. I would say Mazumdar was totally aware of this infirmity of stance, and this constituted a significant strand of his opposition. It could not have been otherwise, as he had painted 'political' works himself:

we need to remember his *Bhagyalakshmi* (The Fortune Wheel) where the *charka* is used almost as a trope for achieving control over one's own destiny.

The second chapter is titled **A Story of her Own: Women in Hemendranath Mazumdar's Paintings**. As its title suggests, this chapter focuses on the way/s in which he saw and represented women, and the variables of thought that fill the space between these two interconnected yet distinct poles. I have attempted to look at his paintings against the cultural backdrop of his times, when the colonial female body, morphed into a site of resistance, was inscribed with markers of difference, a 'metonym' (Bhattacharya, 1998, 15), as it were, of Indian culture and tradition. The need to fabricate an opposed selfhood found the perfect trope in the domain of motherhood, with underpinnings of chastity and domestic confinement. This was accompanied by a further dimension, its obverse really: a clear and conscious avoidance of even the most cursory glance at female sexual subjectivisation[xi]. All of these were principally directed at 'othering' the Western cultural construction of femininity, as we see in the work of the Bengal school. At such a juncture Mazumdar's handling of female sexuality was noticeably variant, in fact oppositional— both to the Orientalists' representation of women, and the ambiguous taste of the public, who subscribed to the testament of feminine virtue in art, yet was not averse to Victorian nudes (which invariably hung in most drawing rooms of the rich), and also to Victorian and Edwardian pornography. We have to keep in mind that he was best known for his evocative oils of semi-nude women, especially his *Siktabasana* (the Wet-clothed Women) series, noted for his play of concealment and disclosure while handling the transparent folds of wet cloth against bare skin. I have argued that this drama of the seen and the unseen, the perceptible and the imagined, is the real pivot of these paintings, and have also attempted to explain how this goes beyond the merely physical. The problematic of illusion and ownership engendered by realistic oils cannot be avoided in this context: there is no way to circumvent the fact that the paintings offered the viewers(predominantly male) the imaginative indulgence to *own* the image of the woman, her body, her sexuality, and direct it towards one's own gratification. The woman is on display, physically, and so are her thoughts: but while her body can be visually accessed, her thoughts remain un-decoded, just beyond grasp, and un-owned. The deal of ownership thus remains unfinished, without closure, the woman constantly shifting— enigmatically— beyond the boundary of the viewer's reach, tied perpetually, as it were, to a story of her own rather than that of the viewer/s. I have also attempted to observe how he has tackled the question of female

entitlement to desire, a perilous area in his times: in other words, in his paintings women are seen as desiring subjects rather than objects of desire. And there is also this careful creation of a circle of privacy around the woman (in a silent dialogue with herself), with what may be called a guaranteed absence of any onlooker within the frame of reference. It is possible that he wished to unroot them from the order of the social performative and observe them closely once they were thus freed (though, one may correctly argue, they would still then inhabit a residually interpellative order of performance: the nature of this 'mediated' freedom I found fascinating to explore and uncover). It would also be interesting to note that the space of the home and the family seen as an area playing out the fable of fulfillment for a woman (the narrative common enough in his times) is rarely seen in Hemendranath's works; he is, instead, seen to subvert, in certain works, the fixity of domestic bliss[xii]. I have also argued that Mazumdar's women seem to be negotiating with a space that is not hers at all: the women in his works may not be aware of the spectator, but she is indeed aware of the pressing circle of normativity that she must conform to if she is to retain her value. These private and reflective moments constitute the only story that is her own; this is in consonance with the essence of Mazumdar's resistance that does, however, admit occasional counterpoints.

The third chapter is titled **Hemendranath Mazumdar's Landscapes: Framing Locality, Encoding Culture**. In this chapter, I have examined how, in contrast to the Bengal School landscapes, Mazumdar's intent of place-making is clear and unwavering: he roots his paintings— almost without exception— to his own land, Bengal, and all the features it is known by, both physical and emotional. This concern, which defined his very trajectory, could be seen as a tool of resistance against the rather ambiguous representation of time and place in most of the Bengal School paintings, their total repudiation of the *here* and *now*, and this variance is especially notable in his landscapes. These, to a considerable extent, engage in the art of 'place-making'— encoding markers relating to the identity of a particular region, both the topographically real and the perceived, a negotiation, as it were, between the text and context. In this connection I have tried to understand, and make sense of, the underpinning of ideology— both sociocultural and economic— in a number of his landscapes. I have also attempted to decode how, in most of his landscapes, the carefully-deployed apparatus of place-making is supplemented by variant cues that indicate the existence of a deeper, submerged layer of meaning. At times we find these in their titles, or in the way he arranges elements within the

pictorial space, or even in perspectival adjustments and shifts in points of view. And this is how, in his landscapes, the surface of the seen, the experienced, and the *real* is mediated by the alternate reality of the ideal and the ideological.

The fourth chapter is titled **The Oppositional Self: Hemendranath Mazumdar's poems.** This focus of this chapter is on the poems of Mazumdar. Most of these poems were found in a single, unpublished manuscript called *Kalpanika*, and another manuscript of a long narrative poem titled *Bikrito Bidhata*. Apart from a single poem, *Shilpir Dan* (Gift of the artist) none of these poems has ever appeared in public view, and for about eight decades were confined only within his family circles. In these poems as well, I could trace a clear opposition to the contemporary political and cultural climate— in both the patriotism-themed poems, and also those the main focus of which are women. There is, almost always, an oppositional selfhood that the poet erects within the space of poetry: be it the indignation at the state of a subjugated, bereft motherland, or mediation with the misconceptions of the public about the true value of art, or even scathing criticism directed at iniquity in social transactions, and social hypocrisy as well. His attitude is both critical and reformist, always passionate, and one also notes just that hint of sad resignation at times when he is forced to confront the fact that changing deep-seated, monolithic patterns of belief and behavior is really beyond him. It was particularly intriguing for me to unskein the embedded problematic of his ambivalence towards transgressing women. Even in the poems that have a specifically spiritual focus this predilection of opposing, and interrogating unmoving structures can be clearly noticed— in this case, the ritualistic necessities of organized religion as a means to attain salvation. For him, even devotion becomes conditional, as God must deserve the respect he claims by understanding, and conceding to, the needs of those he controls. I have also attempted to connect the poems to his paintings, and also looked at permeative influences from contemporary poetry which he must have read. All his poems were translated by me, as were all other passages from Bengali books, essays and articles cited in the thesis, unless mentioned otherwise.

I have noted with interest how certain extra-aesthetic events— like the Christie's auction in 2018, which saw an unprecedented GBP 413,750 bid for Mazumdar's *Abhiman*— had sparked new interest in his work. The flipside of this was not pretty. All kinds of fakes of his paintings,

ranging from adept to plain inept, flooded the art market, and various processes for legitimizing these were under way. The nature of this rebirthed interest needs to be addressed. The fact that most of us are not familiar with his originals even, prevented the isolated reactions from becoming a concerted one. Without seeing his originals— at least good prints of these, like the ones National Gallery of Modern Art comes up with— it would be difficult for anyone to understand the height of excellence he had reached in his own line of art. A basic knowledge of his painting techniques would also be necessary to tell an original from fakes. Mazumdar generally used the process of underpainting[xiii] in most of his famous oils. He also used the techniques of glazing[xiv] and scumbling[xv], often in the same canvas. In his essay, 'Misuse of Oil Colour' (Mazumdar 1920, 7) he had spoken about extremely unusual ways of using oil pigment; for example, he had explained in detail how, with the careful handling of turpentine, it is possible to bring about the 'tinted' effect of transparent watercolour even while working with oils. Some of his watercolors, as well, with the combined use of tempera and wash, bring about the sense of depth and volume of a perfectly-done oil; here his practice of academic realism is interesting in the sense that it leaves out the latter's most important element, oil paint. We only need to refer to some of his watercolours— *Saram* (Passing Cloud), for example— to understand his mastery of this technique. Revisiting his techniques (which he had written about in certain essays, as well as in a long section in *Chhobir Chosma*) would prove significant not only for the art practitioners and art students, but also for the art lovers with genuine interest in Mazumdar's paintings.

In a sense, most research projects, even when concluded, are works-in-progress; if they are significant enough, they would be taken up, commented on, their cues explored further and disproved even, by future researchers. This sense of anti-closure is particularly strong when one is working with a historical period— especially one which has received ample attention by art historians. In a way I had been trying to address an erasure, interrogating, too, the politics behind its residuality; likewise, there may actually be numerous other erasures which, once explored, would also reveal other overwritings of history. It would be fulfilling if my work helps to spark some such interest.

[i] For an enlightening discussion on Bakhtin's rather nebulous concept of outsideness, see Morson and Emerson 1990, 53-54

[ii] My methodology, largely following these lines, can be explained with more clarity with reference to Bakhtin's early formulations of 'live entering', which was mostly abandoned after his concept of dialogue was amplified: " Rather than empathy, we need what Bakhtin calls "live entering" or "living into" another. Empathy as a process , and in its singularity, is largely erroneous here as it involves the '"renouncing one's own outsideness and surplus of vision…to the extent that such empathy is possible, it is also sterile...rather than empathy, we need what Bakhtin calls "live entering" or "living into" another. In this process one simultaneously renounces and exploits one's surplus; one brings into interaction both perspectives simultaneously and creates an "architectonics" of vision reducible to neither. This architectonics produces new understanding." (Morson and Emerson 1990, 53-54)

[iii] See Benjamin 2007, 221

[iv] We have two books, both in Bangla, specifically on the painter: the first one, *Chhobir Chosma*, was published in 1991, by Ananda Publishers. This is the unpublished manuscript of Mazumdar in which his discontent with the Bengal School is scathingly and unsparingly expressed. This was ably edited by Ujjwal Kumar Majumdar, and his editorial preface is valuable. The other is titled *Chitrashilpi Hemen Mazumdar* by Barid Baran Ghosh, (Ananda Publishers, 1993) which is primarily biographical. It is approached anecdotally, with a clear eulogistic tone. The book has absolutely no reference to his unhappiness with contemporary artistic trends, though mention has been made, that too a number of times, of his uprightness and profound sense of dignity. Apart from these there is my book, *Hemendranath Mazumdar* (published by Rajya Charukala Parshad, in 2016) in which there are a large number of images of Mazumdar's paintings, and it is valued chiefly for the images than for its concise text. In 'The Triumph of Modernism', Partho Mitter has a section called *Hemendranath Mazumdar, Eros and the Nation* in his chapter titled *The Regional Expressions of Academic Naturalism*, in which he briefly describes how 'Mazumdar wedged a relentless war against the orientalists until the end of his life.' (Mitter 2007, 133). 'Hemen Mazumdar: The Last Romantic' (2019) is an exhibition catalogue published by Singapore Management University, edited by Caterina Corni and Nirmalya Kumar, which has only its text to recommend itself.

[v] Partho Mitter demonstrates how the values of imperialism permeate the way in which art history has always interpreted the colonized artist's Western connections— whether these be the adoption of Western techniques, or the imbibing of influences:

'The plain fact is, the tracing of influences vis-à-vis western and non-western art is not a 'value-free' exercise. Of course, there is no intrinsic reason why borrowing as such should be demeaning…Yet, however much one wishes that delineating influences were a neutral exercise, in the context of colonialism, it becomes difficult to ascribe influences in a way that does not automatically presume the inferiority of the borrower. This 'hidden assumption' remains the bedrock of colonial discourse.' (Mitter, 1994, 6)

[vi] It is important for us to remember that this 'freedom' that he envisaged is different from what it meant for the Western modernist painters, even for the Indian painters at around the mid-20th century or later. In his *Chhobir Chosma* he insists repeatedly on the need for the correctness of drawing, stylistic uniformity, the consonance of emotions with the visuals, and at times these pronouncements do carry a sense of non-negotiable dictums. It is as if he replaces one set of rules with another set, as per his choice and convenience. Upon close observance it may seem that his chosen artistic path did, indeed, mediate with his figurations of an ideal, liberated space for artists. But it is also essential that we keep in mind that he was not founding a 'school' with watertight rules and objectives, and apparently took no effort to publish *Chhobir Chosma*, the most significant compilation of his thoughts. Hence we need to consider these as his private opinions, not impositions.

[vii] 'These essays by Hemendranath Mazumdar on art and art education were found written in four half-foolscap sizes, one foolscap size and a few separate pages. He had plans to compile them in a book and dedicate it to his wife. He revised some of these essays more than once. In a copy he also drafted the title page of the book— he called it *Chhobir Chosma*. This page bore his signature at the bottom, and the date mentioned there is 'April 1940'. For some unknown reason, the book was never put to print.' (Mazumdar, 1991, 7)

[viii] Even apart from the general sense of art being inextricably connected to the web of power structures of its time, we have innumerable instances in which art has been used to carry explicit political views, usually as reactions to particular events or for opposing social or political structures. We will remember Jean-Michel Basquiat and his discourse on racism and poverty in *Defacement* and *Eroica*, Frida Kahlo's *Moses*, Picasso's *Guernica* and *The Charnel House*, Diego Rivera's *Man, Controller of the Universe*, Kathe Kollwitz and her *The Peasant War*—to name only a few.

[ix] In spite of its well-known nationalist angle, the 'new' discourse of Orientalism, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta points out, was more pan-Asian than Indian in its scope: it was 'in search not merely of antiquity and a lost civilization in

the East, but of a living wave of spirituality and a 'superior' wisdom that could resist the colonization of the West.' She also mentions how Okakura's book, 'The Ideals of the East' provided the discourse with a 'welcome picture of a single, integrated civilization of the Orient, where all of Asia stood unified by race and a common 'range of ideals' that ranged far above the material culture of modern Europe.' (Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 169)

[x] We may remember how Abanindranath Tagore's Society of Oriental Art, as well as its journal *Rupam* received handsome government grants, and also the fact that the Society focused on 'Indian-style' art— almost synonymous with nationalist art— enjoyed the close involvement of Englishmen in the highest government offices of British India, including the two successive Governors of Bengal, Lord Carmichael and Lord Ronaldshay (see Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 277)

[xi] A perfect example of this would be Abanindranath's *Bharat Mata* (1905) which invested motherhood with power and firmly fixed it within the nationalist discourse, as did Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's song, *Vande Mataram* (I sing thy praise, Mother).

[xii] He is often seen to seek out the other side of the picture, the discontent, the impatience and the tentativeness of that fabled domestic bliss, as in *Grihalakshmi* (His-iss)

[xiii] That is, creating a colour surface on a canvas and painting the proposed subject, traditionally done in certain specific shades of earth colours. This would take several days to dry. After this, oil paint would be applied.

[xiv] Glazing is the method of applying a thin transparent layer of oil paint at the final stages of a painting. This is one of the principal reasons why many of Mazumdar's paintings seem to be illuminated from within.

[xv] Scumbling is akin to glazing in the sense that there is a top layer involved; but scumbling involves an opaque layer, not a transparent one. If a brush, loaded with opaque pigment, is drawn horizontally on a canvas, in an almost supine angle, certain parts of the weave of the canvas catch the pigment, and an interesting harmony with the paint layer beneath comes about. We see Mazumdar's use of this technique mostly in case of painting skin/flesh as well as apparel.

Chapter 1

Framing a Discourse of Resistance: Hemendranath Mazumdar and 'Nationalist' Art

Ways of imaging the nation had indeed become a space for cultural contestation— especially in the area of visual arts— in the closing decades of the 19th century. The 'Indian' style of painting that came to establish itself in the succeeding decade marks the success of an already-dominant ideology which had worked in inseparable alliance with the nationalist principles of the *Swadeshi* movement. Intrinsic to the movement was the need to return to one's cultural roots. This constituted in itself a contested terrain which was interrogated by the counter-posture of a certain contemporary critical discourse which steadily burgeoned at the time. Hemendranath Mazumdar[i] played a key role in formulating and propagating this discourse, which he adhered to all through his creative life. In fact the entire career of Mazumdar can actually be revisited, and significantly reconsidered, in terms of a resistance to this dominant ideology which was put together on the basis of a selective historicism at best[ii], by ideologues who advocated— and almost legitimized— the lineaments of 'Indian-ness' in contemporary art. This chapter takes a close look at how Mazumdar's career— specifically as an art critic, commentator and editor— takes on the form of a discourse against the near-legitimisation of a singular artistic taste during his times, a phenomenon reinforced by complex power structures both sociocultural and political. His painting techniques- and the artworks themselves- do add significantly to the discourse, but as detailed discussions on his paintings would be taken up in the following chapters, these have been only nominally included here.

The initial talking point here, of course, would be the way art came to be conceived as a typically indigenous— almost a *Swadeshi*— product, aimed principally to stir up patriotic emotions[iii] by re-invoking the history, traditions and mythology of ancient India, with the express purpose of reminding people of the glory of India which was being compromised with by the cultural

invasion of the colonialists. This strategy of re-energising the future by presenting figurations of a glorious past— primarily associated with the Bengal School (or neo-Bengal School) of artists, consisting of Abanindranath Tagore[iv] and his circle[v]— operated not only upon the choice of mythological or religious subjects, but also of form and technique, which were also drawn from what was considered to be intrinsically 'Indian'. The West, already subject to an ongoing process of being constructed as the cultural other, came to be conceptually associated both with 'academic' naturalism[vi] and the medium and technique of oil painting, as a result of which both of these were assiduously avoided by the Bengal School artists. That Hemendranath Mazumdar stands as a rather unassimilated figure at this art historical juncture is only partly because of the fact that he has been primarily known for his sensuous, naturalistic oils[vii]; his unrelenting resistance against what he thought to be the rather illogical branding of 'Indianness' imposed upon the Bengal School paintings was primarily responsible for his unique situatedness in his own times. His views were underpinned by a suspicion that there had been a certain imperialist collusion operative in defining, privileging, and thereby segregating 'Indian' art, a politically devised strategy to keep Indians away from techniques and developments of Western art- '…they say 'Art connoisseurs of the West are absolutely enchanted with the flavor of Indian Style of Art. Devoid of intelligence, they can hardly understand that the intrinsic message underlying such seeming appreciation is "continue to stay as you are now."' (Mazumdar 1991, 42). He has also ironically pointed out the inconsistency inherent in the very process of utilizing this as an oppositional tool; 'Time to time these artists take recourse to the West solely for the purpose of self-advertisement— "accolades continued to arrive time and again from overseas"— if Western art is not developed enough, what is the value of the praise that comes from the West?'(Mazumdar 1991, 42). What seems to be especially ironic is the fact that, the ideals of the Bengal School— and the contemporary art criticism that upheld these— had been drawing heavily from Western aesthetic ideology, especially that of John Ruskin and the pre-Raphaelite brotherhood, related to locating the 'idealistic' in art, and 'the importance of literary imagery and symbolism in art'(Guha-Thakurta 2008, 190).

One of the surest ways to propagate, and to legitimize, a specific artistic ideal is to incorporate it within the existing art pedagogy, and this ongoing strategy was identified and protested against by Mazumdar early in his artistic life, during his years as a student in Government Art School in

Calcutta. In fact art pedagogy itself had been undergoing a most interesting revision at around this time: we are well aware of the much-debated reforms introduced by Ernest Binfield Havell, principal of Government Art School from 1896 to 1906, to the curriculum followed in the institution, with utmost importance given to the teaching of 'Indian' elements of design and decorative arts. One could say that the principles of the Bengal School finally came to be fixed within an authorized pedagogical category with the introduction of the department of 'Indian Art' in the art school, which enjoyed primal focus in the institution alongside the department of 'Fine Arts' which principally taught naturalist techniques[viii]. This division was in itself an absurdity: it seemingly implied that 'Indian Art' was not a part of Fine Arts, but clearly separated from it, and as such, was clearly undermining the former as an artistic category. Even after the introduction of this arbitrary and unreasonable division some students were still seen to favour the 'Fine Arts' department and were eager to learn Western painting techniques, in spite of the fact that the contemporary art scenario had a clear leaning towards the Orientalists.[ix] It would be interesting to note that much before Mazumdar joined Government Art School as a student (in 1911) there had been no dearth of dissenting voices to this particular policy of art education. Manmathanath Chakraborty, the editor of the journal *Shilpa O Sahitya*, was vitriolic at the reforms as early as 1905: 'We can well understand that Mr Havell is trying his best to bring down the higher art of our country, though we are not yet aware of any probable conspiracy in the offing; but his own efforts have achieved a lot by themselves, thus he would hardly need to collaborate with other conspirators. Having digested our own funds— under the guise of being a friend of our country, posing as a benefactor of our countrymen— it is now time for the authorities to identify and understand the extent of harm he is doing to the higher art of our country.'(Chakraborty 1905, 39). There is another point to be noted here: there was yet another clear policy that was looking at transforming the schools of art into institutions imparting training in crafts and even draftsmanship, with the intention of producing skilled artisans who could be of some use to the colonizers[x]. The way in which craft and draftsmanship are bracketed together, that too within the space of institutions meant for teaching art is indeed noteworthy, as is the way 'Indian' art is included as an addendum to this scheme of teaching. The entire schema does indeed seem like a special diet concocted for the colonized which would serve the overt— and covert— interests of only the colonizers by containing aspiring artists within a safe boundary fixed by the authorities, betraying what can be read as a certain strand of imperial anxiety.

Ranada Prasad Gupta, a dissenting student of Government Art School who set up Jubilee Art Academy[xi] to facilitate the teaching of academic realism, had observed, after the students of the Art school had gone on a strike protesting against the dropping of the Western art courses from the curriculum, that 'After this the Government will spare no means to force us to turn away from realism.'(Bose 1993, 21). His words proved prophetic, as soon afterwards— in 1904-05— Havell[xii] dismantled the art collection of the school, selling off Western paintings including those of the Daniel brothers; he is also known to have dumped Western sculptures into the pond within the school premises. This was meant to be a clean and irrevocable break from the past, and a clear strategy to distance the students from any possible Western influence. This further reinforced the establishment of the created lineaments of 'Indian Art' as a natural category. When Hemendranath Mazumdar joined the institution in 1911 Percy Brown was heading the school, and in spite of securing a direct promotion to second year almost upon arrival, Mazumdar was deeply dissatisfied at the way teaching was conducted in the school and also at the way none of the students 'paid attention to their work' and 'whiled away their time in inane conversation and criticism' (Majumdar 1924, 1436). It was only a year later that he joined Gupta's Jubilee Art Academy[xiii] after a student agitation at the Government Art School over the instruction of the authorities to decorate gates to mark the arrival of George V[xiv] .

Right from these early days, he had developed a deep indignation at the rather illogical manner in which Western techniques of painting— especially those directed towards capturing naturalism and verisimilitude— were treated with an attitude of insistent avoidance, with the same vehemence with which one would boycott British goods. In other words, he was disappointed with the counterpointing of Western art as oppositional to what was hailed as nationalist art, more strategic than aesthetic in its import. In fact a close engagement with the scope and meaning of what was marked out as 'Indian' art uncovers multiple problems and certain gaping inconsistencies. The distancing of Academic realism is itself a case in point: we must remember that at the turn of the century Ravi Varma's realist paintings- especially his oleographs- had become immensely popular in India and 'provided the Indian cultural elite with their independent variety of 'high art' and a new 'national' iconography[xv]…these paintings were projected as the epitome of a new 'artistic' and 'Indian' sensibility' (Guha-Thakurta 2008, 110). The component of mythology, history and tradition in Ravi Varma and some others, was indeed

carried over to the contemporary definition of 'Indianness' in art by the Bengal school artists, but in point of technique and form realism was exiled, oil paint as a medium was shunned, and what was typically a Bengal-based, regional movement was hailed as authentic 'Indian' art, without taking into account the prevailing taste of the rest of India. Therefore Mazumdar's ample diatribes against the celebration of the art of Bengal School as authentic 'Indian' art and his accusations against it as a false category do have a logical foundation.

In fact, considered closely, one indeed finds a deep ambivalence within the school itself, especially seen vis-à-vis the discourse of Orientalism. It could only work upon the technique of creating images of an essentialised nation which was both idealized and exotic[xvi]: as a tool to combat the colonialists, this was, ironically, a product of the very structure it was purporting to oppose. In a compelling analysis of the dynamics of this nation-construct, Debashish Banerji observes that 'the so-called anti-colonial resistance of the Bengal Renaissance(and its constituent parts, such as the Bengal School of Art) becomes, in reality, a compliance with colonial goals by a swallowing of the epistemological opium-bait of its most advanced disciplinary agents, the Orientalists'(Banerji 2010, xix). It is primarily this adoption of the Oriental nation-construct that was vehemently opposed and relentlessly criticized by Mazumdar throughout his artistic career, both through his art practice and recorded opinions. The fact that this concept both originated from, and referred back to, an imagined community— hyperreal in its import— had been intuitively felt and expressed by him in many instances[xvii]. There were certain tactics of resistance adopted by Mazumdar and his friends and associates[xviii] (among them the most prominent were Atul Bose and Jamini Roy) to counteract the growing pressure the dominant idiom was exerting on public taste, and the hierarchical power structures in contemporary culture that came to be because of this. For dominant it was, and not only because of the connections it had forged with nationalism. The Indian Society of Oriental Art, set up by Abanindranath Tagore in 1907, enjoyed considerable government subsidy and among the organizers, there were only two artists, Gaganendranath Tagore and Abanindranath himself. Though the Society focused on 'Indian-style' art, almost synonymous with nationalist art, closely involved with it were Englishmen in the highest government offices of British India, including the two successive Governors of Bengal, Lord Carmichael and Lord Ronaldshay. In fact the Western discovery of signs of a truly national art in Abanindranath's work was probably contingent on the fact that

'they located in such art the 'safest', most acceptable outlet of Indian nationalism.'(Guha-Thakurta 2008, 279). This was clearly a seat of cultural power then, deriving its sanction— paradoxically— from the nationalists and imperialists alike.

For Mazumdar, one tactic of resisting this pervasive pressure was to pull in collective intellectual resources and form a group of like-minded artists called the Indian Art Academy[xix]. An allied decision was to actively participate, and provide directionality to, the evolving discourse on art by publishing the journal *Indian Academy of Art*[xx], in 1920. The journal was conceived as a challenge to *Rupam*, which was run by the Society of Oriental Art and received sizeable government grants, while Mazumdar and his associates had to depend on the bounty of private benefactors[xxi]. The first issue of the journal mentions the patronage of 'the Maharaja of Natore and the Hon'ble Maharaja of Kasimbazar" in the very first page. The founding of the Society of Fine Arts by the Academic group to challenge the authority of Abanindranath's Indian Society of Oriental Art was as much an act of self-preservation as that of resistance, as they had to find alternate sites to showcase their artworks: the Society of Oriental Art operated under considerable influence of the Tagores and practitioners of Academic realism were usually kept at a distance from the activities and exhibitions of the society.[xxii] Though *Indian Academy of Art* clearly veered towards the championing of naturalism, the tone was still conciliatory[xxiii], with the agreed policy of printing any oriental art that had merit enough. In the introduction (called the *Academy Pen*) to the second issue of *Indian Academy of Art* published in April, 1920, the discourse of resistance to the dominant artistic trends— which had been instrumental to the very inception of the journal— was only covertly referred to: 'It is not our purpose to enter into any political or social controversy regarding the current topics of the day; we want to make it quite clear that our attention will be chiefly fixed on the enlargement of an artistic education of our countrymen, and afford an opportunity for the appreciation of Art for the sake of Art.' (Indian Academy of Art April 1920, 19) It does seem that at this point all that Mazumdar wanted was the opening up of a dialogic space— unencumbered by an ideologically prescriptive monolith— and the right to aesthetic freedom. There is, in this introductory note, a very serious note of inclusivity, rather than any underpinning of challenge.

But it was much later, in a 1940 manuscript of art-related articles called *Chhobir Chosma* (Spectacles for Art)[xxiv], that his attitude becomes much more unyielding, almost outright vitriolic. The deep indignation of the artist is very clear at the beginning of the text, where he clearly states his intention behind penning the book:

> The character of this book is unnaturally discourteous. There are no fond dialogues- no religious campaign- no dramatics either. The intention with which it is written is too significant to admit any manner of lightness, be it personal, linguistic or spiritual. Social nicety is needed in certain situations, and it is essential as well; but social acceptance and popularity becomes meaningless if it cancels out the very goal of the project. Extending unwarranted sympathy is only another name for weakness.
>
> It is obvious that these writings will be the cause of heartache to many people. But in these there has been no thought of personal gain, no projected march of victory, no augmenting of fame. The author believes that even if a small fragment of that truth which it sets out to establish comes to fruition, endless satisfaction will ensue even in the face of constant oppositional blows. (Mazumdar 1991, 24)

The 'out to establish' is clearly related to exposing 'Indian-style' art as what he calls a false category. The main body of the text is preceded by a quote where he says, 'The test of Art calls for extraordinary vision. Failing eyesight requires spectacles. That is why spectacles for art needed to be created.' (Mazumdar 1991, 6) Here he is addressing not only the would-be artists, but also the spectators, who are, again, of two distinct kinds: the subjectivised, if panoptic, spectator, privileged by the actual, close presence of artwork— the collector or the gallery-goer— as also the spectators produced by the communitarian proliferation of art. For the second kind, familiarly engaged with printed images of artworks in periodicals and printed plates, art had ceased to remain liminal and hegemonic. In fact contemporary periodicals, apart from regularly carrying images of artworks from both the contrarily-poised camps, had contributed significantly in the contemporary aesthetic debates. Apart from the frequent reproductions of the works of Abanindranath Tagore and his associates in *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review* (both of which had been quite popular in their times)[xxv] there had been a number of influential critics who wholeheartedly supported the ideals of the Bengal School, including (apart from Havell himself) A K Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Ramananda Chatterjee(editor and art critic of *The Modern*

Review), Charuchandra Bandopadhyay (art coloumnist of *Prabasi*) and O C Gangoly (editor of *Rupam*). Mazumdar's initial purpose in *Chhabir Choshma* can be identified as the disengaging of what is called the 'Indian-style' (and what, he insists, is neither a historical nor a logical branding) from the emergent tendencies to connect it to figurations of an essentialised nation. This is a strategy that intended to effect a perspectival adjustment by doing away with the extra-textual, idealistic aura that had come to be inextricably attached to such iconic visualizations. He severely criticizes the monologic stance intrinsic to the conception of a singular style that aspired to define the art practices of an entire nation, and insists on exposing the falseness of the category:

> The terms 'technique' or 'style' cannot be used in conjunction with the name of a nation or a race. Art around the world is without any such instance. There are 'schools', or 'classes', of course: we hear of the Italian School, the English School or the Dutch school of painting[xxvi]…Style or technique is the unique property of an individual, not a nation…The expression 'Indian style of painting' is premised on such ignorance. If the entire population of a country is legally forced to partake of the same diet, their health will gradually dwindle and death would follow. (Mazumdar 1991, 48-49)

This can be read as a typically modernist statement of the right of the artist to his/her individual style, to a certain aesthetic freedom that is not mediated by an overarching stylistic dictate. In fact he is raising pertinent questions relating to the authorship of the artist: when a certain style claims to be authentic enough to represent the nation itself, it is empowered to the extent of authoring its own products, while the artists within its fold are reduced to following a route of passive collaboration. In other words, he wishes to disentangle artistic practice of his times from the plight of being hostage to orientalist constructions which— as he believed— had little to do with the furtherance of art and was related more to contemporary cultural politics; he is also stressing upon the need to see, and to accept, contemporary art as an enriching assemblage of differences. Having said this, it is also important to point out that he is often unreasonably harsh on the 'Indian-style' painters, and several of his essays betray the fact that he himself is not ready to consider the products of the school as art that is worth the name. This in fact goes beyond the debate concerning their Indian identity: considering truth to nature to be the yardstick of true art, he finds these artworks severely lacking in this defining characteristic. The privileging of the

highly abstract '*bhava*' or spirit, allied with the negation of naturalism[xxvii], was found to be unacceptable by him to such an extent that he charged the Indian-style painters of plain ineptitude[xxviii]. But it is also important for us to remember that he is not negating the essentiality of the 'spirit' or *bhava* of a painting, but only its excess, which tends towards the denial of all other formal qualities. In fact, for him, *bhava* encompasses much more than just 'spirit'— within the semantic possibilities of this word he includes the point of the painter's originality of conception as well. I would say he conceived of art as a transforming force, which employs the artist's 'sublime' vision to transform the 'unwhole', observed elements of nature into an artwork that stands above and beyond the material world :

> In order to judge a painting it would be judicious to first judge its *bhava* (original conception). That is to say, one has to ascertain to what extent the artist has been able to develop the originality of his imagination. Secondly, whether there is a proper arrangement of elements conducive to the amplification of this conception (harmonizing composition). And, thirdly, the masterful use of this congregation of elements (technique). These states differ from artist to artist; in the works of some of them poetry is given the upper hand; some use too many elements; some earn fame through varied uses of colour and brush. Among them, the thoughtful artist attains the prime place. His sublime ideas reside far above the material world. He is an idealist; that is to say, he grabs the unwhole elements of manifested nature, and finishes and fulfils them through his inner vision. (Mazumdar 1923, 305-306)

When we see him answering to the contemporary ideal of excessively favouring the spiritual and imaginative nature of art[xxix] over the material, he draws on this belief of 'proper arrangement of elements.' He explains that "external appearance is the reflection of the interior spirit. Thus, unless the externals are arranged in a proper manner— that is, unless they are painted properly— no true feeling, be it spiritual or supernatural, can ever be generated…the spiritual is without shape. In order to be manifested, it needs a supporting receptacle, which is the human body, which represents the countenance of reality." (Mazumdar 1991, 73) This comment, a tad dated for our liking, can however be interpreted as chronotopic in its import, engaged in a dialogue, as it were, with another chronotope, with variant cultural answerabilities/addressivities. Through these, 'Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible' (Bakhtin 1981, 84). This becomes especially significant as we remind ourselves of the words on a similar topic by

Constantin Brancusi— timewise a senior contemporary of Mazumdar— but separated by a steeply variant visual culture and spatial environs: "What is real is not the external form, but the essence of a thing. It is impossible for anyone to express anything essentially real by imitating its exterior surface" (Gale 2004, 23).

In spite of the apparent datedness of Hemendranath Mazumdar's comment about naturalist art, it is important for the researcher to delve a little deeper in order to get close to the actual figurations of his faith. He is, as we have noted in the previous quote, not talking merely about representing external appearances, but— notwithstanding all his protestations against the 'spiritual' art of the Bengal school— he is also concerned about capturing the "essence of a thing" that Brancusi talks about, the 'spirit', really, of the subject one chooses to paint. But, for him, the 'spirit' is not only the essence of an artwork, but also a unifying force, to a certain extent akin to Coleridge's 'esemplastic' imagination. We get to see how his views on this question become almost prescriptive in one of his essays, *Charukala o Alokchitro* (Art and Photography):

> One point needs to be stressed upon— while painting, tackling a figure as a mere figure only can never be considered as art. Unless rare artistic qualities are manifested in such a painting, it would be relegated to the level of mere photographs. What is the difference between a painting and a photograph?...a photo may capture the natural appearance, undistorted facial features, and all particularities of the figure perfectly, but without expressions which are aesthetic, poetic, and imaginative it can only be considered as a debased reproduction at best. It lacks the initiation of life by the artist; it is not gold, merely gilded stuff. Beyond reflecting images of the mere exterior, photographs have no access to interior vision…in short, therefore, where photography ends, art begins. (Mazumdar 1991, 76)

It is clear, thus, in spite of advocating the value of realism in art, Mazumdar does not espouse the mere imitation of exterior reality. Paradoxically enough, he is also seeking for the inner essence— the 'spirit', really— in an artwork, and believes that this is the only way a painting can ascend to the level of art: a close consideration would reveal that his views are hardly different from the ideals of the Bengal school which he had vehemently opposed. Apart from his

insistence on realistic techniques, the sum of his expectations from successful art hinges on capturing *bhava*- the interior identity, the defining mood that had been identified as central to Indian aesthetic philosophy and adopted by the Bengal school in their fashioning of an Indian-style art. In fact when we turn to Shyama Charan Sreemani's[xxx] views of what constitutes art in his essay *Aryajatir Shilpa-chaturi*, the basics are strikingly similar. Sreemani, one of the earliest exponents of the view that India must look at its glorious artistic past in order to escape its present state of degradation, talks about the facileness of copying mere appearances: 'If our artists, keeping in mind the particularities of time, place and people, try to express interior beauty in their paintings, if they decide to reject the insidious pathway of imitation and move along the easy and uncomplicated route of natural disposition, and search for beauty befitting to their motherland, only then would their works be rewarded with the success that they wish for.' (Som and Acharya 1986, 55)

There is another point in Sreemani's prescriptions for successful art that will prove significant to Mazumdar's context: his insistence on artists being true to what he calls 'time, place and people' and the need for them to search for 'beauty befitting to their motherland.' This clearly leads to not only the requirement to localize and contextualize art, but also to the encoding of culture, to a certain essential rootedness of art within one's community. Interestingly, all these points had been adopted and followed by the Orientalists, as well by Mazumdar himself, in variant manners, but the essentialities remained the same. While Abanindranath and his circle focused on the history, tradition and mythology of ancient India, Hemendranath Mazumdar was mostly concerned with the *here* and *now*— contemporary Bengal as he saw it— the rural greenery that he grew up in, the seasons, common village people he had seen from close quarters, and especially the women of Bengal (his better-known paintings of the 'wet sari' series usually depict fair-skinned, high-brow women, unmistakably Bengali, caught musing within their private moments, often in various states of undress). Mazumdar's community is, likewise, real, recognizably local, and rooted in contemporaneity, while the Indian-style painters evoked the sense of community/s somewhat indeterminate in terms of time and space— *imagined* communities, in a sense, with no contemporary moorings whatsoever. One may refer to his painting *Pujarini* which was carried as the cover for one of the issues of *Sachitra Masik Basumati*, which, like Abanindranath's *Bharat Mata*, perpetuated the schema of interskeined

nationalism, motherhood and religion; the significant difference is that the woman who stands on the globe in Mazumdar's work is a recognizable Bengali housewife, caught in a familiar pious posture prior to offering worship to a deity. The worshipper who becomes the worshipped is not an anthropomorphic goddess representing the nation, but a familiar figure moored to observed reality: it is the system of signifiers that make up the landscape that invests the figure with a clearly discernible godliness.

Mazumdar's objections can be seen to boil down to two essential points: the complete lack of connection with contemporary realities— and the almost phobic attitude towards anything remotely connected to the West, be it Western Academic realism or the use of oil paint. It is interesting to note that for all his abhorrence of the stylistics of Western art, Abanindranath's paintings can actually be seen to incorporate multiple points of Western influence. Even apart from the English illuminated manuscript that had influenced him deeply early in his life[xxxi], the clear influence of the European Art Nouveau can also be traced in Abanindranath's paintings[xxxii].

The latter point was attacked viciously by Mazumdar on account of what he considered to be a deeply irrational streak in framing the ideals of 'nationalist' art[xxxiii]. He expresses his puzzlement at the way his naturalist techniques were branded as 'Western', though his art is rooted in regionality— the culture and topography of Bengal, even the female body that in most cases is recognizably localized:

> Where, exactly, do we get to find the flavor of the West in these artworks? The reason for the progress of art in the West can be attributed to the fact that the people there are the worshippers of nature…if one of our own artists paints *Rohini* by the lakeside carrying a vessel full of water, and if his proficient brush can produce the illusion of life in the painting, what are we to call the artwork- Eastern, or Western? Rohini in her black-bordered sari, the end of which covers her head, anklet on feet and water-vessel poised against her waist has hardly any knowledge about the West. Notwithstanding this, if the proponents of 'Indian Art' decide to transport her across the oceans, there is really no remedy. (Mazumdar 1991, 54-55)

The contest, therefore, was between past and present perceptions of locality, lived experience and imagined tradition. The '*Rohini*' whom he mentions in the excerpt is a character from Bankinchandra Chattopadhyay's 1878 Bangla novel *Krishnakanter Will*— Mazumdar here is

probably referring to his painting *Tonmoy* which clearly fits not only the artist's account in this excerpt, but also the way Bankimchandra himself describes Rohini in the novel. Mazumdar also has another painting based on the same novel, called *Rohini*, depicting the murder of Rohini by Gobindalal, with the revolver lying beside Rohini's lifeless body. This also indicates that he shared the contemporary tendency to draw his themes from literature, a trait that we find in the Bengal School as well: only the time frame that the latter drew from was significantly different from Mazumdar's contemporary sources. We must also remember that Mazumdar's objections were not so much against the revivalism and historicism of the Bengal school (he himself had worked with myths and legends, including a series of paintings featuring *Krishna* and *Radha*, *Shakuntala*, and *Meghdut* as well) as against the self-conscious, totalitarian attitude that fixed and insulated the area of 'correct' taste in art as an exercise in exclusion. We may also care to remember the instance of his '*Rati o Madan'* which looks more like a decorative motif and utilizes curvaceous lines, which, at the time, were most readily associated with the Indian-style paintings. In fact one of the catalogues of Indian Art Academy (1921) clearly states that it cannot be that the glorious past of the country has had no influence on the aesthetic sensibility of the present generation.

What, then, he had been impatient with, is this monologic stance which narrowed down the many-stranded, many-voiced identity of the Indian, and the concomitant configurations of power. Nor did he have much to say against the favoured technique and medium of the Orientalists: he had used the technique of wash himself, in many of his watercolours. His main attack was against the perceived ineptitude and weakness of drawing[xxxiv]- vis-à-vis naturalism, which, he felt that the artists got away with, by theoretically privileging '*bhava*', the spirit, over requirements of verisimilitude. In *Meki Shilpo* he insists: 'Rather like music without rhyme or meter, the artworks produced by them have no position, no ideal, and no standard of judgement, precisely because these are disconnected from nature; they hardly have the capability to capture the truth of nature.'(Mazumdar 1991, 38) In a sense, then, his opposition to the privileging of 'bhava' by undermining the strength of form can be read as a discourse moving towards an aesthetics of formalism. It would be interesting to note that almost the same sentiment is expressed in a fragment that he included in the 'Art and Artist' section of *The Indian Academy of*

Art way back in 1921, while reviewing the twelfth annual art exhibition of the Society of Oriental Art:

> But the large number of exhibits displayed a total disregard towards the very fundamentals which go to build up the sublime region of artistic beauty. The notion that the more incorrect the drawing the greater is the chance of rolling in the glories of pure orientalism is jeopardizing the very interest of Art and it is high time that the derogating influence exercised by such a wrong view of the whole thing should be checked once and for all; so that the new recruits to this line of painting may well realize that Art requires patient study and "can never be learnt in leisure hours."[xxxv] (Indian Academy of Art, January 1921, 14)

It is ironical to realize that the opposing camps engaged in the live, contemporary debate on aesthetics— the advocates of Orientalism and Academic Realism— were historically programmed with their own timeouts. After Abanindranath resigned from the post of vice-principal of the Government Art School in 1914- due to differences with Percy Brown- the department of Indian-style art ceased to enjoy the prestige of yesteryears.[xxxvi] By the late 1930s, Bengal art had already entered that phase that mediated with, and relegated to comparative irrelevance, the sharp opinional divide between the two camps that had been central to the art scenario of the recent past.[xxxvii] Though in the twenties the influence of the Indian-style painters became pervasive throughout India— Abanindranath's disciples were then heading most art institutions[xxxviii]— the style itself came to be 'reduced to a sterile stereotype of conventions and mannerisms' (Guha-Thakurta, 2005, 86). Gradually its relevance was replaced, in the following decades, by new directions that had been emerging in the Bengal art scenario, most of which had been considerably impacted by the contact with new waves of Western art[xxxix] which could, by now, be viewed without its encumbering colonial connections. One of the most undeniably significant events was the exhibition of the German Bauhaus group that was organized in Calcutta in 1922, for which the initiative was taken by Gaganendranath and Rabindranath Tagore[xl]. The evolving trend of cultural transmission can be clearly noted— early enough— in Gaganendranath Tagore's works which were frequently read as 'cubist', or in Rabindranath Tagore's expressionistic works that defy easy classification, or even Jamini Roy's engagement with pointillist techniques and his typically modernist quest for the essence of form. And then

there was the radically altered idiom of the Calcutta Group of the early forties, with its manifesto that art must be 'international and interdependent', and its formalist experiments.

Mazumdar's twin points of contention- the futility of avoiding Western contact, and the need to accept, and to encourage, a dialogic artistic climate- were to prove predictive in the later unfolding of Indian art history. His preference to the Western techniques of illusionism/naturalism would later give way to eagerness to imbibe the evolving visions of modernity in Western art movements. This change in focus from Western tradition to modernity involved a movement from the adoption of Western elements of craftsmanship to the assimilation of the patterns of thought of post-World War Western art, that enlivened yet newer forms and techniques. While it must be admitted that Mazumdar was, by no means, the first to advocate the need to retain artistic links with the West, his aspersions against the narrowly parochial insularity of his times reveal a distinct movement towards the privileging of the universality of art. One could say, therefore, that his *Spectacles for Art* did, indeed, encapsulate 'extraordinary vision'— prophetic almost, about the course which art in India was destined to take in the following years.

[i] The artist called himself Hemendranath Mazumdar in all his writings and editorial projects, signed as H. Mazumdar in his paintings, but he has remained as 'Hemen Mazumdar' in popular imagination. That is why, possibly, certain articles used this version of his name. We do have a closer-to-hand instance, of how a shortened name overtakes and relegates to oblivion the original one: no-one would know Jogendranath Chowdhury unless he is referred to as Jogen Chowdhury.

[ii] Both Havell and Coomaraswami fashioned their individually-favoured timeline for what they considered to be 'Indian' art. Havell, in his *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, bypasses Gandhara Art (and its Greek influence) and instead focuses on the early Buddhist art of Nasik, Bharhut, Sanchi and Sarnath. Coomaraswamy, in his *Rajput Painting*, differentiated Rajput painting from Mughal secular painting and fitted it into what he saw as an unbroken line of 'Indian' art tradition as the former was predominantly religious, and as such, was allied with, and belonged to, what he saw as the great art tradition of India. See Guha-Thakurta 2008, 166.

[iii] There had, however, been interrogations of this patriotic motive. We may refer to the vitriolic comments of Sureshchandra Samajpati, the editor of the influential magazine *Sahitya*, on a painting titled *Flight of Lakshman Sen* by Surendranath Ganguly, a prominent Bengal school artist: "Lakshman Sen's flight might be music to Muslim ears,

but it is poison to us. Of course, it may also taste sweet to those 'artist-ants', who are thrilled by the compliments of their British friends…such a shameless exploitation of national dishonor by hybrids stinks and must not be inflicted upon the public. Poor Bengal! Poor Bengalis!" Quoted in Mitter 1994, 358

[iv]It has been mentioned, however, that Abanindranath "was an individualist rather than a revivalist" (Mitter 1994, 352)

[v] The earliest students of Abanindranath- Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Ganguly, Sailendranath Dey, Kshitindranath Majumdar, Samarendranath Gupta, Surendranath Kar, K Venkatappa and Sarada Charan Ukil came to form the core of the new 'Indian-style' movement, popularly referred to as the 'Bengal School'. Other artists like Sunayani Devi, M A R Chughtai and Mukul Dey continued and extended it.

[vi] As usually practiced in the Academies of south Kensington.

[vii] It is somewhat unfortunate that Hemendranath Mazumdar is only vaguely remembered as the painter of sensuous wet-saree-clad women, a most pertinent Indian example of the vagaries of mainstream art history that is obsessed with assimilations. Even Tapati Guha-Thakurta's seminal volume, *The making of a new 'Indian' art*, one of the finest works of our times, mentions that Mazumdar's paintings of women 'clearly verged on the pornographic'(Guha-Thakurta 2008, 321)

[viii] Though Havell principally focused upon 'Indian' style in the curriculum, this formal division of curriculum came somewhat later, during the principalship of Percy Brown.

[ix] Percy Brown's restructuring of syllabi initially included departments devoted to Industrial Art, Drafting, and Fine Art (which was later split into Indian-style Art and Fine Art), apart from Elementary courses and Teachers' training courses. It would be interesting to note that techniques like lithography, wood engraving, modeling and wood carving were considered to be a part of Industrial art, and 'were not yet regarded as techniques fit enough for Fine Art'(Som 1998, 229). The aim of teaching modelling and sculpture was to produce skilled craftsmen who could produce models or copies for museums and archaeological institutions. Havell's alleged policy of turning the institution into a centre of industrial art had never been summarily rejected.

[x] After an inspection of Indian Art School and considering a plea of government grant for the institution, Havell had written a report in which he clearly mentions 'The intention of Indian Art School is indeed praiseworthy, but only if its authorities change their inclination towards higher art education and teach the children of artisans general free-hand drawing, general and mechanical drawing and work along the line of our instructions, government aid may be granted.'(Chakraborty 1905, 39)

[xi] Jubilee Art Academy was set up almost as a single-handed effort in 1897 by Ranada Prasad Gupta to cater to the popular demand of art students to learn Western Academic realism. It received a handsome grant from Maharaja Manindra Nandy apart from assistance from several art connoisseurs, and free land from Calcutta Municipality. The institution was operational until Gupta's death in 1927.

[xii] Though Havell may have been instrumental in implementing imperialist policies through revising the curriculum and turning 'the Calcutta School of Art from a Fine Art academy into a school of design and applied arts, with a special focus on the Indian tradition of decorative arts' (Guha-Thakurta 2008, 151), his deep interest and scholarship relating to ancient Indian painting and sculpture cannot be overlooked. He had written numerous books on Indian art including seminal ones like *Indian Sculpture and Painting* and *The Ideals of Indian Art*. He had also insisted that by practicing 'Indian' art 'the Indian artist was again capable of becoming an artist, which right, the Victorian British administrators responsible for art education, had denied him.'(Parimoo 1973, 61)

[xiii] The immense popularity of institutions like the Jubilee Art Academy and Manmathanath Chakraborty's Indian School of Art testify to the continuing appeal of Academic training, despite the contemporary hegemony of the nationalist camp over the discourse and practice of a new modern Indian art.

[xiv] Contrary to popular belief, Mazumdar did not leave the school on account of any idealist refusal to decorate gates for the British Monarch. The students were paid a paltry sum of three annas per day though the school was given a sizeable government grant for the decoration project, which resulted in a full-blown protest by the students, and Mazumdar left the institution along with most of the dissenters.

[xv] It is interesting to note that his seemingly unassailable position as a realist painter did not last long. Partho Mitter had offered an interesting angle which explains "the main cause of his ignominy": "His works were declared to be imcompatible with the spirit of Indian nationalism…he became the sacrificial victim of the period's uneasy blend of politics and aesthetics." (Mitter 1994, 221). As Tapati Guha-Thakurta clarifies: "The Indian-ness of Abanindranath's style was construed in polemical contrast to the allegedly 'debased' and 'Westernized' genre of mythological paintings of the likes of Ravi Varma." (Guha-Thakurta 2009, 7)

[xvi] It is indeed interesting to note that the 'wash' technique of Abanindranath— which was the very backbone of the 'Indian-style' painting— had evolved through watching Yokoyama Taikan and Hishida Shunso at work at Jorasanko. This had a close similarity with the *Nihonga* art movement in contemporary Japan, and also with *morotai* (a technique evolved by Taikan and Shunso). The philosophy of 'Indian-style' painting was deeply connected with the spiritual art of the East, othering thus, the Western Academic realist art; idealistically, thus, it was only nominally Indian, but to a large extent pan-Asian. See Guha-Thakurta 2009, 7-8, 10

[xvii] I have used the term 'hyperreal' here taking a cue from Dipesh Chakrabarty, who uses the expression 'hyperreal terms' to describe the way in which India and Europe 'refer to certain figures of imagination whose geographical referents remain somewhat indeterminate'(Chakrabarty 1992, 1)

[xviii] Apart from Atul Bose and Jamini Roy, the other prominent artists of the Academic group were B C Law, Jogesh Seal, Satish Sinha, Prohlad Karmakar and Pramatha Mallik.

[xix] Partha Mitter describes it as 'more of a convivial club, the highly temperamental and ambitious artists thiving on endless discussions on art…the burning issue of the day was whether the pursuit of naturalism was tantamount to the betrayal of national ideals, and whether the historicism of the Bengal School was the sole path to India's artistic revival.' (Mitter 2007, 129)

[xx] The journal was conceived primarily as 'An illustrated Journal of Fine Arts', containing 'high class specimens of fine craftsmanship in Painting, Sculpture, Photography and other Pictorial Designs- of the leading Artists of India- with notes, essays and criticism.' (Indian Academy of Art, January 1920, n.p)

[xxi] It is said that Mazumdar pawned five of his own paintings to gather funds for his publications.(Majumdar 1924, 1436)

[xxii] In spite of such blockade by the Orientalists, Hemendranath Mazumdar went on to become immensely successful in his professional field, had eager patrons all over India- not the least among them were the Maharajahs of Kashmir, Mayurbhanj and Patiala.

[xxiii] The Academic group, after having formed the "Society of Fine Art' for showcasing all-India exhibitions, also invited Abanindranath Tagore to be an honorary member of their Society, but 'was cold-shouldered by him.' (Mitter 2007, 130)

[xxiv] This manuscript of 1940, named by the author himself, was posthumously published in 1991. It has two rough sections: the first part, called 'Shilpakatha', contains essays on art, which is, in fact, the most significant record of the extent of his misgivings against the Bengal School. The second section, 'Chitrashiksha', has essays discussing various techniques of painting and drawing for art students.

[xxv] It must be remembered that Hemendranath Mazumdar enjoyed the patronage of some equally popular periodicals in which images of his paintings were regularly published. The most noted among these was *Bharatvarsha*, followed by *Masik Basumati*, *Sachitra Sisir* and *Nirupama Barshasmriti*.

[xxvi] Elsewhere in the book Mazumdar explains why 'Dutch school' is the correct label instead of 'Dutch style'- 'because the Flemish school of artists had developed along different lines, used variant methods, and the subjects they chose to tackle were distinct as well. They differed from each other in ample measures.' (Mazumdar 1991, 61). It is clear that Mazumdar is referring to an extensive period of Flemish art history, and is referring to its wide range of techniques and subjects, like religious and mythological painting, nudes, still life and landscapes.

[xxvii] There had already been a line of critical defence in favour of naturalism in art: apart from Upendrakishore Roychowdhury and Sukumar Roy, mention must be made of Benoy Sarkar and his path-breaking article in *Rupam, The Aesthetics of Young India*, in which he insists that one does not need to wander away from the form in order to

discover the ideal, which is innate to the form itself. (Sarkar 1922, 19) In a way, thus, he is moving beyond naturalism to insist on the need to discover 'significant form' in art. Stella Kramrisch, in a supposed rejoinder to Benoy Sarkar's article, clearly states, 'To know her own necessity of significant form should be the first endeavour of artistic young India.' (Kramrisch 1922, 67)

[xxviii] In an essay called 'Meki Shilpo' (False Art) Mazumdar unfalteringly states, '…the exponents of what is called "Indian Art"…have never undergone art education, nor have they practiced art in a serious manner. Therefore it is virtually impossible for them to produce artworks of quality or significance. Nevertheless, there is this lure of getting to be known as an artist.' (Mazumdar 1991, 38)

[xxix] Western and Indian art were oppositionally placed at these very poles: of 'material' and 'spiritual', or 'realist' and 'idealist'.

[xxx] It must be remembered that Shyama Charan Sreemani, thought to be the pioneer of art criticism in Bengali, had first encouraged artists to look back at the great art tradition of India and re-energise the contemporary artistic climate through its inspiration, much before Havell and Abanindranath did. His book '*Aryajatir Shilpa-chaturi'* was written in 1874, decades before Havell started his research on Indian art in 1897.

[xxxi] This was an album of hand-painted, illuminated manuscripts, illustrating two Irish ballads of Coleridge and Moore, which 'opened up for him new avenues in decorative design and literary illustration.'(Guha-Thakurta, 233)

[xxxii] Ratan Parimoo points out that Abanindranath's attitude was anti-European only in intention, but not in practice, as "he never gave up realism and also that in effect his paintings came close to the linear, shadow-less painting which is characteristic of the European Art Nouveau at the turn of the century." (Parimoo 1973, 75)

[xxxiii] It has been ironically observed that in spite of his assiduous avoidance of anything related to Western art, and the clear nationalist tendencies of his work, Abanindranath had in fact been very close to the British administration and basked in both their appreciation and financial assistance. Even apart from the ample subsidies he received from the Government for his Indian Society of Oriental Art, there had been several other counterpoints, as Sovon Som mentions in his book *Shilpi, Shilpo o Somaj*: 'He (Abanindranath) met the princess (Queen Mary) and gifted her his painting *Tissarakshita*. When Lord Curzon wanted to buy his painting called *Padmavati* but Havell refused to reduce its price, he said, "Give it away for free, I don't want money. Lord Curzon has wanted to buy the painting—that is price enough for me." But when Louvre wanted to acquire his painting *Sesh Bojha*(The last Burden) he refused to reduce its price, as a result of which he is absent in Louvre…Did he, then, consider Buckingham Palace a more attractive address for his painting than the Louvre?'(Som 1982, 33-34) The author also mentions how Abanindranath come over to the Congress office at College Street, Calcutta, and reprimanded the activists there severely in order to stop his grandson from joining the salt-making movement at Kanthi. (Som 1982, 34)

[xxxiv] 'Figure drawing remained a weak point of the artist (Abanindranath)…In his reaction against the Academic conventions of realism and life study, he appeared to rob his figures of all body and substance.' (Guha-Thakurta 2008, 238). It must be mentioned, though, that this statement, made in connection with the early paintings of Abanindranath, does not apply to much of his later works- the *Mask* series, and especially the *Arabian Nights* series done during the early 30's- which display 'the full range and versatility' of his art, and reveal 'the painter's wizardry over line, form and colour.' (Guha-Thakurta 2008, 267)

[xxxv] Though it may appear that in the essays of *Chhobir Chosma*(the manuscript is dated April, 1940) Mazumdar is actually looking back at the earlier, raging years of debate between the two camps which had settled down somewhat by the time when the book was penned down, it is clear that he had also written about these concerns decades earlier. Judging from the tone of passionate immediacy in the essays of *Chhobir Chosma*, I feel that these essays were written earlier, and 1940 was possibly the date of revision or compilation of the manuscript, especially as there are other instances of his writings along lines of similar concerns many years before the date mentioned in *Chhobir Chosma.*

[xxxvi] The 'Indian style', however, continued to thrive in alternate locations, such as the Bichitra Club, Jorasanko Salon and especially in the Society of Oriental Art.

[xxxvii] One of Hemendranath Mazumdar's notable exhibition participations was in the show that opened at 11, Chowringhee Road on 22 December 1940, inaugurated by Indira Devi, the Maharani of Cooch Bihar, in which his co-artists included Nandalal Bose, Gaganendranath Tagore and Sarada Ukil, apart from Jamini Prakash Gangooly, Jamini Roy and Atul Bose.

[xxxviii] Institutions like the Kala-Bhavan, Bharat Kala Bhavan in Benaras, Jaipur School of Arts, Lucknow School of Art, Mayo School of Art, Lahore and the Madras School of Arts were headed by Abanindranath's students and close associates in the twenties.

[xxxix] Atul B**ose** is of the opinion that the conservative British were not favourable to the new path-breaking art movements in Europe, starting right from impressionism. He also mentions that as art students, they never came to know about the revolutionary movements that created waves in Europe from 1860— till the adoption of the Futurist manifesto in Italy in 1909. (Bose 1993, 17)

[xl] For both Gaganendranath and Rabindranath, this exhibition probably provided them with the first direct exposure to the works of Expressionist and Futurist painters like Feininger, George Muche, Klee and Kandinsky, and 'Both artists, it is believed, were greatly inspired by this'. (Guha-Thakurta 2008, 318)

Chapter 2

A Story of her Own: Women in Hemendranath Mazumdar's Paintings

The female body, at the cross-roads between colliding systems of value and disparate representational ideals, had already emerged as an interesting site of contestation in Mazumdar's's time. The conceptual lineaments of the Victorian gentlewoman[i] had been inscribing the female body for quite some time now, as did the widely proliferated image of the nation as a mother who was also a goddess. The latter construction drew upon the diverse conceptual strands of purity and power and connected them in a symbiotic manner. The colonial female body, morphed into a site of resistance, was inscribed with markers of difference, a 'metonym' (Bhattacharya, 1998, 15), as it were, of Indian culture and tradition. The need to fabricate an opposed selfhood seized upon the domain of motherhood as a perfect trope, with underpinnings of chastity and domestic confinement, with a clear and conscious avoidance of even the most cursory glance at female sexual subjectivisation. Abanindranath's *Bharat Mata* (1905) invests motherhood with power and firmly fixes it within the nationalist discourse, as does Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's song, *Vande Mataram* (I sing thy praise, Mother) that appeared in his novel *Anandamath* which envisaged a Hindu nationalist regeneration. *Bharat Mata* (originally *Banga Mata*, meaning Mother Bengal, elevated later to signify Mother India by nationalists like Sister Nivedita) came to be firmly settled as an emblem within Swadeshi nationalist discourse: an enlarged copy of the painting made by a Japanese artist was also carried as a banner in Swadeshi processions[ii]. Even the academic painter Bhabani Charan Laha represented the nation as a mother-goddess, which the journal *Bharatavarsa* used as one of its covers, "in striking contrast to Abanindranath's rarified image of '*Bharat-mata'*, with its rarified identity as an 'aesthetic icon'…as a part of the popular religious iconography of *Ganesh Janani* and *Jagadhdhatri*" (Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 322). These images, to which the general public could relate to with ease, served to iconise and fix the idea of the nation-mother in the popular

imagination, aided by the fact that these then continued to become the staple of calendar art with a widespread reach.

The figure of Bharat Mata or Mother India was probably first mentioned in the *Samavidhana Brahmana*, a fifth/sixth century text that mentions her as the great Shakti, prayers to whom frees men from re-birth: who is flanked by the Himalayas in the north and Kanyakumari in the south. 'This ancient redeeming image of the *Bharat Mata* as the presiding deity *Shakti* is taken up in a big way in the nationalist phase of Bengal' (Bagchi 1990:Ws 69). It would be interesting to remember, while on the context of this trope of empowered femininity, the fact that the West had always considered the Orient as feminine: Said's perception of 'its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability' (Said, 2001, 206) served to set up a clear identity of the 'other'. Disempowerment and passivity was lodged at the very heart of this image-formation, and this entire process in fact speaks more about the white heterosexual male 'self', the creator of this identity, than it does about the created: an identity that comes together only to be 'othered'. With the figure of the nation-goddess decisively underwritten by power and volition, this Western construct is effectively turned on its head, and an entirely different strand of cultural 'othering' comes about. While the Western perception of difference in the Orient was posited in its perceived passivity and malleability, Bengal, in line with its continuing religious traditions, invested femininity— more specifically, motherhood— with empowerment and agency[iii]. Motherhood was seized upon as the sole area that could glorify (and indeed, justify) femininity, and the underpinning of power that idolized it clearly produced an artificial category largely unsynchronized with real-life social observances: the ramifications of this interesting paradox will be dealt with in some detail later in the chapter. The trope of motherhood itself can be seen as 'an unmistakable indigenous sign' (Bagchi, 1990: Ws 65) that specifically marked a colonial Bengali man as different from the rulers, as belonging to a different order of social culture: 'In the west, the woman is wife. The idea of womanhood is concentrated there as the wife. To the ordinary man in India the whole force of womanhood is concentrated on motherhood.'(Vivekananda, 1951, Vol 8, 57) This is inextricably related to the culture of goddess-worship— the adoration of *Shakti*, power, centred in the god-woman— customarily familiar especially to Bengal society through generations[iv]. For the Swadeshi activists, the land of birth itself became the mother- the *matribhumi*- and ultimately the goddess, who would have the authority to provide both courage and direction to a confused colonial society[v].

This trope of idealized motherhood, translated in terms of contemporary social organization, clearly downplayed the element of empowerment and naturalized the undernote of domestic confinement as well as subordination, reinforcing thus a territory of segregation, glorifying it only with the express purpose of strategic containment. The investiture of agency in the figure of the nation-mother was hardly echoed in the practical narrative of motherhood, as most women then were still emotionally circumscribed- self-defined, in fact- by that supreme feminine signpost of achievement, of producing a son and heir. In order to perpetuate the glorifying of the motherhood legend, it was imperative that her sexuality be suppressed, as that familiar binary of mother/mistress was already firmly in place. The mistress could also be the wife, therefore, the matter of female sexuality would include within its broad domain both the wife and the courtesan, both the permissible and the non-permissible, the domestic and the extra-domestic. The chief problematic here is the question of entitlement of desire: the admission of the possibility that the object of desire could be subjectively desirous as well would be perilous territory, as it would then bring about yet other questions of entitlement, interrogating, possibly, the easy and accepted boundaries of containment and subordination. And this is precisely the point which explains the contestedness of much of Hemen Mazumdar's works, as well as their ambiguous reception, in his own times. Posterity had been hardly kinder: till this time he is remembered chiefly for his 'erotic' paintings depicting partially-dressed, wet-clothed women, displaying their sensuous contours. His reception across generations seems to latch on to what is seen as moments of titillation, deliberately drawing the readers within a circle of erotic gratification: an experience that is voyeuristic, hence non-legitimised, morally and socially. The complex strands underpinning such receptions will be examined closely later in the chapter.

It would be incorrect to suppose that Hemendranath was unaffected by, or opposed to, the central space claimed by the iconisation of motherhood in the nationalist discourse, despite his avowed opposition to the singular notion of 'Indianness' propagated by the Bengal School. I am especially reminded of one of his paintings that was used as a cover for an issue of *Sachitra Masik Basumati* which presents a female figure poised on a globe, with golden clouds in the background and incense smoke swirling around her feet. Apparently she seems to be one of Hemendranath's many fair-skinned women who frequently people his canvases, with what appears to be a plate of worship offerings held in her hands, her divine status marked only by the halo surrounding her head and the evocation of the world under her feet. Abanindranath's *Bharat*

Mata (which was earlier called *Banga Mata*) is an obvious Hindu deity, with four hands laden with cultural signifiers: the Vedas, sheaves of paddy, a garland, and a swatch of white cloth[vi]. Her dress, similar to that of a Vaishnavite nun, is saffron, a colour that readily relates to Hindu asceticism. This mediation of religion in fashioning the relationship between nation and its constituent people was a key factor in contemporary cultural politics, and was destined to have a steady development in the historical imagination of India. Hemendranath, too, readily participates in perpetuating the schema of interskeined nationalism, motherhood and religion. But there are intentional differences as well. The woman who stands on the globe in Hemendranath's work is a recognizable Bengali housewife, caught in a familiar, pious posture prior to offering worship to a deity. In a sense, thus, the worshipper becomes the worshipped here: it is the system of signifiers that invests the figure with a clearly discernible godliness. It thus becomes a site where nationalism and idealized womanhood meet: each domain serves to define, and in effect iconize, the other. There is a similar pen-and-ink study of Mazumdar, titled *Arghya* (Offerings) circa 1920, which is built on a similar narrative. Published in the April 1920 issue of The Indian Academy of Art, it is described in the concluding editorial section, 'A Rift in the Lute' as "The standing figure is that of the 'Bharat-Mata' performing the holy 'homa' ceremony with offerings of prayer to the Almighty for the advancement of her Arts and Industries. The idea conceived by the artist has become more sublime by the graceful pose of the Mother- a fine creation of symbolical Art" (Indian Academy of Art, April 1921, 33). Here too, the figure of 'Bharat-Mata' is a familiar figure, made more contemporary especially by the patterned blouse worn by her. Looking back at this artwork after a century, we are instantly reminded of the contested nature of the dress codes of the colonized, of the debates concerning modesty, of the adoption of Western modes of covering the female body. I shall be looking at deeper patterns of appropriation and resistance connected to such adoptions later in this chapter.

The valorization of motherhood, notionally, is also closely related to idealization of the limited and limiting space of the home and domesticity, and to the stereotype of the good and chaste wife, whose religion 'lies in serving her husband' and whose life is defined by 'constant and happy subordination'(Nivedita, 1955, 67-68). This notion of perfect womanhood with firm underpinnings of self-effacement had become an emergent space for countering the western social norms: the Indian woman, perceived to be 'more deeply self-effacing and more effectively

altruistic than any Western', (Nivedita, 1955, 68) had come to represent, as it were, an inscription of difference, and distance, from the culture of the colonizers. A 1907 painting by Nandalal Bose, *Sati,* clearly builds upon this glorification of female self-immolation and sacrifice, which portrays Shiva's wife, Sati, choosing to embrace death by jumping into the sacrificial fire, not being able to tolerate insults to her husband. Even apart from the prescriptive narration hinging upon devotion-unto-death from a chaste goddess-wife, this painting also evokes associations with the custom of burning widows on the funeral pyre of their dead husbands, making us realize— rather uncomfortably— that the artist is actually valorizing the custom by essentialising the glory and sublimity in the act.[vii]Thus not only the mother, but the wife as well came to be defined by selflessness, sacrifice and even self-immolation, her identity thus defined by socially approved relationships. Translated into socially workable terms, womanhood found honorable meaning only within the space of marital devotion— and by extension, devotion also to familial duties and chores[viii].

The space of the home and the family seen as an area playing out the fable of fulfillment is not too common in Hemendranath's works, and he is also seen to subvert, in certain works, the fixity of domestic bliss. But he has indeed painted women with all the markers of marriage (the coral and the conch-shell bangle, and sindoor), settled in homes whose internal relationships of power were represented, as was customary, as purely emotional states. The 'happy subordination' that Nivedita had spoken of was one way of recasting the power structures within the home, 'the inner, hidden nation' (Sarkar, 2001, 39) with love as the organizing principle, as 'the exercise of power needed to be replaced with the notion of self-surrender and general self-fulfilment'(Sarkar, 2001, 39) : the pressing need was to distance it comfortably from that other kind of subordination to the colonizers which was definitely not a happy one. Looking closely, though, it would be clear that women well-settled, and satisfied within actual domesticity are comparatively rare to find in Mazumdar's works. A handful of these rarities are also underpinned by a contrary discourse— at times subversive— carrying the probable indication that a life transcribed by domestic duties and chores was not considered by him to be the single, uncontested habitat for women. He was more concerned about their own space, distinct from the habitual, repetitive chequerboard of customary domesticity: it is possible that he wished to unroot them from the order of the social performative and observe them closely once they were thus freed— though, they would still then inhabit a residually interpellative order of

performance. And it would be most interesting to note that Mazumdar almost never paints a couple— except in very few works all of which are referenced to mythological figures, mainly Krishna and Radha, in works such as *Ekti Kotha* (Only a Word) and *Murali Shiksha* (Divine Flute), as if the very physical presence of even a yearned-for man would transform— and *limit*— the essential personality of the observed woman. Most of his paintings are built on assumptions of heterosexual relationships and erotic desire, none of which he even attempts to subsume within a sanctioned, settled order. This framework would probably have compromised his observation and incorporation of the female entitlement to desire, which, for the artist, was an extremely significant component of the personality of the women he painted. I would argue that the numerous instances of self-absorbed, seemingly happy women, who appear to reflect upon a fulfilling relationship (possibly conjugal), even when they are seen within the confines of a home, are not specifically referred to any implied ideation of familial domesticity or the fixity of settlement. Instead, there is always a sense of tentativeness about the pattern of desire, preserving not only the open-endedness of the narrative, but also hinting at the essential unfulfilment that keeps desire alive by replicating its movements, as also to the fantasy that sustains desire.[ix] We see women as carefully decking themselves up, as in *Sojja-Somapon*(Toilet), or, in its variation-piece, *Kaner Dul*(Ear-ring), or deep in thought during the process of make-up as in *Dibaswopno*(Daydream), the title of the latter keying her thoughts to a reverie concerning her absent beloved. Undressing before a mirror (and admiring her body in the process) before going to bed, the woman's thoughts in *Shoyoner Purbe*(Before Retiring) are clearly erotic, but it is particularly interesting to note that the draped bed she is about to retire to is a single bed, with only one pillow. This is one of the most significant features relating to Mazumdar's portrayal of women— seeing her as inhabiting a solitary moment, *being herself* as it were, uninhibited and in control. Having said this, it is also essential, however, for us to understand that in most paintings the awareness of an absent male is often perceived to constitute the moments of narrative. The tale of an erotic relationship hovers just beyond pictorial exposition, but it is never allowed to settle within the predictable arena of domestic bliss.

In Mazumdar's painting *Sangsar-Bandhan* (Family bonds) the woman is caught between twin duties, that of attending to her child and offering worship; her child hangs on to her saree, thereby distracting her from her duties to god[x]. The word *bandhan* is interestingly used: it can be read simplistically as referring to the area of familial duties acting as a deterrent to one's

communion with god, or one can choose to pick on the subversive cue in the subtext introduced by the title. *Bandhan* may mean bond or bondage, a term widely used in Bengali in conjunction with the family, to signify how the individual— usually the male— is held back from other areas of fulfillment (generally spiritual) by the intervention of the family and its attendant duties. Using the term in connection with a housewife, well-settled in domesticity, is unusual: one wonders whether the title carries a covert hint at the reductive nature of familial containment even for women. A study in stark contrast to this would be a painting by Bamapada Banerjee, a senior contemporary of Mazumdar, called *Shishu-Shiksha*: in it the mother holds her child lovingly on her lap and encourages him to write on a slate. This is an idyllic frame of domesticity which seeks to present not only the fulfilling face of the duty of child-rearing, but weaves a sincerely contented fable of domesticity within the closed bounds of which the woman is happily and firmly settled. We may also care to consider the implied narration in a painting called *Tulasi-Pradeep* by Jogesh Chandra Seal— another academic painter— in which the woman is seen to light the evening lamp in front of the *Tulasi* plant in her courtyard, as evening falls. An understanding of the religious and cultural context is essential to decode that this in fact is a commentary— commendatory, really— on an essential domestic performance of a good and dutiful wife, who is required to light a *pradeep*(lamp) for the well-being of her entire family at the foot of the sacred *Tulasi* plant. Interestingly, this painting was reproduced in the second issue of Hemen Mazumdar's publication 'Indian Academy of Art', of April, 1920.[xi] Such a simplistic— and essentialised— representational mode had never been adopted by Mazumdar. Instead he is often seen to seek out the other side of the picture, the discontent, the impatience and the tentativeness of that fabled domestic bliss. For example, his painting, *Grihalakshmi* (Goddess of the Home) has an interesting space of incongruence between the title and the unfolding visual narrative. The woman here is busy slicing vegetables, and is anything but contented with her housework, which she appears to put up with only as a compulsory chore. Her body language, coupled with the noticeable frown, adequately define the moment of irritation. This painting also appeared under a different, straightforward title, *Dur Chhai* (His-iss) which focuses entirely on the bothersome face of domesticity, and somehow loses out on the interesting semantic play that the earlier title weaves within the visual text.

Bhagya Lakshmi (Fortune-Wheel) is a painting of a very different order; the woman here is a married Bengali lady, placed within a domestic setting (with a pet cat keeping her company), but

here she is engaged in a chore which is not familiarly domestic. This is a notable painting which opens up the limits of the home and observes how the woman willfully carries out an activity which at the time was clearly underwritten by a vein of nationalistic fervor: what we see here is an interesting interskeining of domestic femininity and nationalism. The woman here is busy making thread from a small pile of cotton on a *charka* (spinning-wheel). The *charka*, as a nationalist symbol of self-dependence (and a means of avoiding cloth produced in British mills) had secured such primacy in the communitarian imagination that it had even found a place in *Lakshmir Panchali*, a slim booklet praising goddess Lakshmi (the goddess of home and prosperity) the reading of which was obligatory for women in almost every Bengali home on occasion of the weekly *Lakshmi Puja*, usually performed every Thursday evening. The *Panchali* (having several versions, with the text undergoing subtle changes through the years) incorporates, along with praise of the goddess, advice on correct codes of conduct for the good and the chaste married woman. I have come across at least two versions of the *Lakshmir Panchali* which advises women to spin on *charka* for the nationalist cause: one compiled by Shyamlal Bhattacharya, published by *Saraswati Library* (undated and unpaginated) has 'Discard sloth, and spin on the wheel, o women/ Thinking of the state our country is in!' It is in a similar manner that Hemendranath forges his connections; the *bhagya*, or fortune, in his title relates to the fortune of the country, while the *Lakshmi* is the domesticated woman who participates in shaping the destiny of her country right from the space of her own home, opening up, thus, the conceptual confines of domesticity. She is neither passive, nor dependent; instead, she engages in a participatory mode with the wide impersonal world beyond her protected home, working towards the independence of her country. Viewed thus, she is empowered enough to fashion the *bhagya* (destiny) of her country only because she has shaped her own. One can differentiate the focus of the narrative of this painting from that of another with roughly the same theme, by Atul Bose, called 'A Golden Dream', which also features a married woman spinning on a charka, with a small child— in all probability, her son— but here the narrative is entirely hinged on the happy domesticity of the frame, with the smiling child and the downward tilt of the satisfied face of the central figure. The title of the painting may actually hint at a dream of a golden resurgence of the nation, but the nationalist underpinning is suppressed by the clear prioritization of the domestic. Not only the title of Mazumdar's painting, but also the posture and expression of the woman in it speaks of a willful disposition, an integral conviction of mind that overrides the trappings of

domesticity and clearly connects it to a space of self-determination. It is interesting to note that the painting '*Bhagyalakshmi*' appears as an inset to another famous painting of his- a portrait of Chitta Ranjan Das- as a picture hanging on the wall. This clearly cues it to the painter's intentions behind the framing of the narrative.

But it was nothing short of a revolution that was brought about by Hemendranath's treatment of female sexuality. His exploration of a space with an interplay between the female body and the tangled strands of anxiety, effulgence and even indifference that went on to subjectivise it brought about a decided rupture in the notional patterns of representing womanhood. This, together with the nationalist positing of power in the pure and virtuous woman, served to blur— even problematise— the identity of women as sexual beings. Problematise, because it was then commonplace to find academic nudes on the walls of the mansions of the rich. One also needs to keep in mind the influx of the 'art photographs' from Paris which were virtually indistinguishable from pornography (Mitter 2007, 138). This constituted a notable, if subsumed, strand in the otherwise proscriptive cultural climate. In the area of art, most of the female figures in the works of Academic painters like Ravi Varma or Bamapada Banerjee, on the other hand, have their sexuality marginalized, contained, as it were, by the clearly delineated social moorings.

It was this area of ambivalence that Hemendranath had to contend with, both within himself and outside, in spheres both public and private. It was not an easy task to achieve, given the cultural climate, considering, especially, the naturalistic oils of semi-clothed women he painted, the primary appeal of which can be traced to the features of palpability— and what can be called the *knownness*— of his painted female figures. Academic nudes that were seen frequently on the walls of the drawing rooms of the rich did not receive even a fraction of the shocked response that was directed at Mazumdar's women. This was possibly due to the fact that the Academic nudes— and also the semi-pornographic 'art photographs' from Paris as well as the Victorian and Edwardian pornography that were widely available then— did not share the same immediacy of appeal as Mazumdar's works due to the perception of their geographical and cultural distance. The latter were so intrinsically grounded to the *presentness* of experience— most of the women were fair-skinned, conceivably high-brow Bengali *bhadramahila*— a class recognized from real-life experience, who remained known yet unapproachable, hence

perpetually out-of-bounds for most of the male viewers. It was possibly "the frisson of spying on a 'respectable' housewife, the proverbial girl next door," (Mitter 2007, 138) that initiated such a response.[xii] Needless to say, the artist's mastery of verisimilitude- especially the ability of capturing it on the tactile surface that oil pigments could create- deepened and confused the response in which were combined elements of desire, guilt and shame. The medium of oil was already identified as a Western import— and was marginalized almost, in the contemporary cultural environment which thrived on products of the neo-Bengal school, with their almost exclusive insistence on watercolour and gouache. The use, and the mastery of, this medium is central to our understanding of the reception of Mazumdar's paintings in his own times. The problematic of illusion and ownership engendered by realistic oils possibly played a key part here, as this is a basic feature of the medium— unknown and unexplored in older Indian art which had, traditionally, never paid court to capturing the likeness of appearances:

> Oil as paint matter encourages the simulation of substances (flesh, cloth, jewels, gold, masonry, marble) and the capture of atmospheric sensations (the glossiness of light, the translucent depth of shadows). Realism flowing from such material possibilities of paint is a way of appropriating the world, saturating the consciousness with it. It is also a way of appeasing the acquisitive impulse. This realism is then inalienably related to bourgeois desire, bourgeois ideology and ethics. (Kapur, 1989, 60)

Geeta Kapur was speaking in the loose context of Ravi Varma here— the first uncontested Indian master of oils— but her observations work perfectly in case of Mazumdar as well. More so, I would say, as he far outshines Varma in his captures of the *presentness* of reality, palpable and tactile, features that often underlie formulations of desire and ownership.[xiii] Another point to remember here is the fact that most of Varma's women were mythological or puranic[xiv]— his most-remembered paintings include *Shakuntala* and *Hamsa-Damayanti*— and in the Indian collective imagination, these tales have always had their own emotional niche, inevitably and inextricably wound up with the familiar strands of narrative, and the embodied self of the central woman in the painting was to a certain extent subservient to the particularities of the tale her identity was cued to.[xv] In a way, the naturalistic possibilities of oil paint were utilized to create, chiefly, a surface that captured grandeur and spectacle, features readily associated with the artifice of theatre: heightened moments, out of tune with normal everyday reality- "Legends also took on a more compulsive narrative force, as paintings began to equate the thrill and drama of

stage performances, with the same theatrical gestures and expressions of figures and the use of special lighting"(Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 108). In fact, as far as subjects were concerned, the Ravi Varma/Bamapada Banerjee model fell neatly in line with the colonial prescriptions of infusing 'Indianness' to improve the standards of art: we may recall Lord Napier's[xvi] address in 1871 on 'The Fine Arts in India' in Madras, in which he urged Indian painters to return to their native sources.[xvii] Looking closely, we shall also see that he is advocating the Indian artist to use the European illusionist techniques to treat Indian subjects, which, apart from Ravi Varma himself, was taken up in Bengal by many artists trained in Western styles and techniques, notable among them being Jamini Prakash Gangooly and Bamapada Banerjee[xviii]- though, it must be noted, that much of their work extended beyond the mythological/religious circumscription. The point I am trying to make here is, the Indian-style content that agreed rather neatly with the colonial prescriptions, was almost wholly concerned with India's mythological/religious/historical/literary *past*, and had almost nothing to do with the *present* countenance of the country: this is the exact precise feature that was taken up by the neo-Bengal school artists, Abanindranath Tagore and his followers, and was recast in what they thought were indigenous techniques and mediums— shunning oil paint, and working solely with watercolour and gouache. Their works were also atmospheric and ethereal, removed from the settled substantiality of the mythological paintings of the Academic painters. So the 'revivalist' feature- so readily associated with the neo-Bengal school painters— was in fact nothing new, nor was it something they invented in order to urge the people to wake to a resurgent future of the nation by reminding them of the glorious history and tradition of bygone times. It was a cultural tactic of the empire which had ensnared the previous generations of Indian artists[xix], one that was readily accepted by them as well. In the connections that Indian-style painting forged with Indian spiritualism, and more importantly, nationalism and *Swadeshi*, there had indeed been subtle underlayers that would complicate this perception of simple linearity— such complexities have been, and will be, dealt in some detail in other parts of the thesis— but in spite of other intersecting discourses one cannot fail to observe the underlying fact that there was indeed a sense of compliance with imperialist goals somewhere deep within.

Among other things, Mazumdar was at best impatient with the contemporary preoccupations of the neo-Bengal school to make temporally located culture/s, their *pastness* to bear upon the much-changed present: this is clear even in his handling of female subjects. It is not that he never

ventured into the area of the myths and legends, or the older literary classics— we do have a handful of his paintings that draw from ancient traditions, like *Murali-Shiksha*, *Shakuntala*, and *Birahini Yakshi*, among others— but this is really a niche that is largely unconnected to the major body of his paintings. For him Indianness lay not in abstracting the spiritual essence from ancient culture and tradition, but it was intrinsic to the *here* and *now*, to the presentness of the Indian experience, to the anxieties and negotiations of the colonial subject. We have already noted how this sense of recognisability and immediacy compounded the shocked public response to his paintings of partially-clad, sensuous women, and also how this essentially depended on his mastery of oil paint, bringing about a sense of substantial presence to his painted figures. It can be argued that he was not alone in portraying women as inhabiting the present moment; certain other Academic painters had been doing the same during his times, noted among them being Jogesh Chandra Seal and B C Law. But there had been significant features that separated Mazumdar's work from the others working in a similar genre. For one, the others mostly opted to capture women in their socially ascribed roles, which, frequently, carried undernotes of idealized morality. This is the point where Mazumdar radically differed from his milieu, in the way he situates his solitary women within moments of introspection, divested of social trappings and expectations, engaged, as it were, in interior dialogues with their own selves. In a way, their thoughts and musings— unworded and mysterious— are as much on display as their bodies are- problematising, thus, the boundaries of *knownness*, adding a further element of inscrutability to the narratives. We may remember, at this point, John Berger's observation that from the 17th century (he, of course, is referring to a European context) paintings of female nudes reflected the woman's submission to the owner of both woman and painting (Berger, 1990, 52). I have already mentioned the question of ownership in the present context; there is no way to circumvent the fact that the paintings offered the viewers(predominantly male) the imaginative indulgence to *own* the image of the woman, her body, her sexuality, and direct it towards one's own gratification. Such an image is passive and non-retaliatory, thus it is easy to be subsumed within the fable of male entitlement: in other words, even if it was impossible to own the woman— given her perceived station in life— it was absolutely possible and permissible to own her painted reproduction. And it is here that Mazumdar brings in complications by introducing the element of absorbed, almost meditative introspection. The woman is on display, physically, and so are her thoughts: but while her body can be visually accessed, her thoughts remain un-

decoded, just beyond grasp, and un-owned. The deal of ownership thus remains unfinished, without closure, the woman constantly shifting— enigmatically— beyond the boundary of the viewer's reach, tied perpetually, as it were, to a story of her own rather than that of the viewer/s.

The other reason that sharply differentiated his work from the contemporary Academic painters was the simple fact that he could create what I would call a significant moment, a moment saturated with the interpermeation of thought and action: at times it does admit artifice, but never to the extent of unreality. This moment, created within the artwork, almost always contained within itself the makings of a narrative, with cues logically in place. And his technique of naturalism told half the story, as did his creation of ambience within the space of the painting. What I am trying to say can possibly be made clearer if we refer to a painting by B C law, titled 'Study', of a semi-nude woman, clutching her slipping saree just under her breasts. The saree is similar to the one we had seen in Mazumdar's *Neelambari*, but the painting is completely devoid of locational ambience: we cannot make out whether the woman stands within a room, or outdoors, and the narrative springboard gets effectively locked at the very outset. She is clearly not undressing: nor is she concerned about her slipping saree, or about the possibility of outraging her modesty if it does slip, in spite of loosely holding it before the saree descends further to expose her breasts. There is no shyness about her, neither is there any discernible awareness of a presence which might have necessitated her to preserve a modicum of modesty. It is far from an open narrative with interesting possibilities of reconstruction: it is muddled and confusing, interspersed with unrelatable cues. There is a curious sense of unconnectedness in her demeanour and expression, a little pensiveness as well, as if she is playing a role, doing a job, planted in her surroundings rather than being rooted to them. After a while we arrive at the possible explanation: she is, in all probability, an artist's model and is holding a pose, a habitual performance for her, the possible reason for the lack of connect noted in her demeanor. This rather neatly connects to the title of the work, 'Study', as it does really feel like a study within a studio space: except that it is not really so. It is, actually, more of a full-scale painting. A study is generally supposed to be a preliminary sketch, usually without the intricacies of colour modulation, which is an exercise to come to terms with the problematic of perspective and composition prior to the tackling of a bigger canvas.[xx] So while the content does hinge on to the concept of a study, the technique and the manner of treatment negates it. It will be useful for us at this point to look at some specimens of Mazumdar's 'studies' to understand the differences. I

have looked at three preliminary studies for his painting '*Shilpi*', with a semi-clothed and two semi-clad woman respectively, each holding up a conch-shell close to her breast (possibly comparing the similar shapes), each moving progressively towards the final version which he would then tackle on a canvas. The line of narrative is already in place here, though the colour scheme and other accessories which we find in the final painting are absent. The same holds good for certain other studies like 'Study for *Manbhanjan* (Making Amends)' or study for 'Only a Word' and '*Arati*'. Mazumdar did use models for his paintings (more on this later in the thesis), but none of the women in his works holds a stilted pose, even in these preliminary studies. They are credibly subjectivised: they create, and are created by, simple strands of narratives which gather further substantiality by the illusion of reality, of actual *presence* of both the central figure and the carefully-created ambience. It will be easy to determine Mazumdar's position vis-à-vis his contemporaries if we take up the simple task of comparing plates of paintings by different Academic painters that appeared in periodicals in his own times. The policy of periodicals of carrying plates of paintings opened up the viewership considerably, beyond the category of privileged collectors, and reached the middle-class people, who— possibly because of the plates' association with periodicals that thrived primarily on the items of narrative literature— connected instantly to the tales told by the lifelike paintings. And that is precisely why I had been especially concerned about the point of narratives (in spite of the fact that the visual culture of our own times is persuasive about the diminishing relevance of narrative in art); it specifically relates to the reception and appreciation of artworks in their own times, a point that is clued in to the history of artistic taste, and thus cannot possibly be overlooked.

Thus Mazumdar's exploration of a space hinging on an interplay between the female body and the tangled strands of anxiety, effulgence and even indifference that went on to subjectivise it brought about a decided rupture in the notional patterns of representing womanhood, which was no less than a revolution, given the cultural climate of the times. Western conscriptions of modesty required covering the body, showing the minimum of flesh— a tactic of the Empire, among many similar, to physically inscribe European bodies with a certain hegemonic difference[xxi]. Skirts of gowns usually consisted of umpteen layers of fabric- Hon F H Eden, sister of Lord Auckland, speaks in a letter dated August 5, 1840, of the necessity to wear 'sixteen breadths in their gowns'(Eden, 1872, 186).[xxii] As the dress code was connected with the coveted

space of power and privilege, it soon came to represent, in popular imagination, patterns of enlightenment and evolved morality. It was welcomed into many urban homes in Bengal, replacing the earlier, much lax, dressing habits of the Bengali women.[xxiii] The saree, an unstitched drape, was usually worn without underclothes earlier. There were attempts to 'civilise' the dress by introducing more coverage, so that it could be more in line with the Western ideal of modesty[xxiv], and thereby— in certain cases— allow the women to go out of home and be seen by males who were non-relatives. At around 1870, however, Satyandranath Tagore's wife Jnanadanandini Devi popularized in Bengal "the combination of sari, blouse and petticoat worn by women today and known as *brahmika sari*"(Donner, 58, 2016). But at that particular time precisely this double connection— with the Western culture as also with the newly-burgeoned culture of the *Brahmos*— (the latter perceived as a separate religion that shunned the practices of Hinduism with what were thought to be enlightened, elitist pretensions) also introduced reservations regarding this modified way of donning a saree. In fact in certain cases some of the older female members of the household themselves scoffed at this Western infiltration.[xxv] Mazumdar usually portrays women without bodice/ blouse, but in a considerable number of paintings he does use this upper-body garment. Important paintings where we have 'bodiced' women are *Srestho Sobha* (The Best Beauty), *Sotero* (Seventeen), *Mugdha* (Charmed), *Borno Jhankar* (Harmony), *Dibaswopno* (The Daydream), *Neelambari* (In Blue Saree) and *Shoyoner Purbe* (Before Retiring). All these women are solitaries, wrapped within the space of their own thoughts, and most of them are placed indoors. This clearly indicates his familiarity with contemporary norms of feminine dressing, and his intention to capture the living aesthetics of prevailing fashion- complete with their politically directional pulls and hegemonic underpinnings— and this further roots his works to his observed surroundings, which are neither rarified nor essentialised. The petticoat is hardly noticeable, though: in the wet-saree paintings, usually placed outdoors, there is clearly no blouse and no petticoat on the woman, who has only a drape of thin white cloth turned transparent by its wetness, displaying thus the contours of her flesh. One of the paintings that I have mentioned before seems to be of special significance in this context: *Neelambari*(In Blue Saree). We see the woman from the back, fully dressed, placed outdoors in an enclosure-like dark and forested space. The back of her blouse is fashionably embroidered with a lotus; this, along with her tasteful gold ornaments mark her as belonging to an upper-class, somewhat enlightened background. Given her choice of dressing it is especially

interesting to note that she is clearly wearing no petticoat. The curve of her hips, with a hint of the flesh colour is discernible through the dark blue of her saree— which, we can make out, is made of *muslin* as this is not a wet-saree painting, and Mazumdar is making the most of this transparent, expensive material. This used to be manufactured chiefly in Dacca then, and muslin sarees were a rage with the rich households. One could see that in the company of others that fold of the saree that is a downward continuation of her *ghomta* would probably preserve her modesty by providing adequate concealment, but the moment of the painting has her disheveled and clearly unready for public company— this is a moment of intense privacy where she can be herself, without paying court to social modes of decency. In these paintings where the attire of the colonial female subject combines the twin contemporary trends of adopting the fashion of the colonial masters yet preserving traditional, indigenous modes of dressing, Mazumdar can possibly be addressing the *mimicry* underlying such adaptation, a strategy both of identification and resistance[xxvi], playing out in the society of his times. The part-resemblance of the colonized body to the 'enlightened' dress codes of modesty is underpinned by a contrary pull induced both by the body itself, and also by the ornaments and other items of dress. As such, colonial social attitudes towards dressing can actually be read as studies in appropriation and resistance— and the related anxiety— essential processes, really, in the narrative of subjectivisation.[xxvii] In fact the painter's entire creative life— his choice of technique and medium, and what he made out of it— can actually be read vis-a-vis such postcolonial theoretical positions.

In the popular imagination, even to this day, Hemendranath's name is associated most readily with his 'wet-saree' paintings, a series also called 'after bath'. It is not that this line of work was without antecedents. Ravi Varma had painted women in wet sarees (of which the most known is the partially nude figure of a Malayali woman called 'Fresh from bath' and 'After Bath') as did his brother Raja Raja Varma[xxviii]. S G Thakur Singh[xxix], a slightly junior contemporary of Hemendranath, was also known for his paintings of wet-saree-clad women. But these works do not completely succeed in capturing the sheer tactile drama that Hemendranath creates with transparent folds of wet cloth on skin. In his times he was considered the initiator of this particular genre: a catalogue of The Indian Art Academy (1922, n.p) categorically states (in connection with *Palli-pran*, one of his earliest wet-saree paintings) that "the wet-cloth style is his (Hemendranath's) sole creation, and no painter of the East or West has, to our knowledge, attempted before him to paint figures draped in wet raiment. It seems to have been left to Mr

Mazumdar to give the world a new romance in painting." Depicting women in wet sarees, and also in various states of undress, Hemendranath, quite the master of academic naturalism, succeeded in capturing the sheer palpability of flesh and the illusion of actual physical presence. Many of his paintings give the viewers a very real sense of closeness to the painted subject, which, in its turn, empowers the eye to usurp the sensation of touch. It is this tactile experience, of warmth, smoothness, modulations of flesh— communicated visually— that frequently gives his women the illusion of life.[xxx] In the European art tradition, the figure of the bathing woman is common, with many major artists including Delacroix, Degas and Renoir working with what can be identified as a recurrent trope. Bathing is an act which is premised on privacy, something that is not supposed to be legitimately visible. This opens up a space for a lot of embedded possibilities.[xxxi] The interesting point to note here is, almost all of Hemendranath's wet-saree paintings capture the subject *after* the completion of the actual activity of bathing, and also that most of them are placed out of doors. This mediates with the space of intense privacy conceptually associated with the bathing woman, especially so because in rural Bengal bathing was usually an outdoor activity, undertaken at nearby waterbodies. While it was customarily forbidden for men to spy on bathing women, it was a given that after bathing, the women might need to use semi-public paths to return home, often covering themselves with homespun towels. Thus, while retaining the aura of privacy, the artist also partially naturalizes the sightings.[xxxii] But there is this careful creation of a circle of privacy around the woman, with what may be called a guaranteed absence of any onlooker within the frame of reference. Privacy, in Hemendranath's works, frequently becomes the space for the unfolding of self, and this is the case not only for his wet saree-clad women. As I had mentioned before, most of his female subjects are solitaries, who both define and are defined by the unpeopled space, or context, that they inhabit.

For the viewers, Mazumdar's paintings often present an interesting journey. On the one hand, there is the point where one instantly recognizes the familiar and the known— the figure of the Bengali bhadramahila, usually beyond the scope of easy social interaction in real life— from this, one is made to move on to confront the altered countenance of the commonplace, the unfamiliarity of the familiar really, where the woman's dress becomes the signifier of all those socially correct manners, behavior, and codes of conduct: and she sheds these markers, de-identifies herself in a way and steps into an area of intensely preoccupied privacy, be it anxiety, ecstasy or even indifference. In a way, the familiar reality is rewritten, with hints of a deeper

dimension, privileging the viewers thus with a glance at not only what is hidden by clothes, but also by the veneer of social identity, mores of respectability and reserve.

The viewers' visual experience of these works can be seen as a certain kind of negotiation between aesthetic engagement and fleshing out of the narratival cues embedded in these. But it is also essential that we identify how such paintings have the curious power to 'voyeurise' the viewers, not only through the ample erotic elements, but also through the illusion of absolute privacy within which each of the women are placed. This allows them a peep into those intensely private human moments which are usually beyond the bounds of viewership. The fact that none of Mazumdar's women meet the gaze of the viewer cannot be ascribed to any sense of shame on their part vis-à-vis the viewers- the kind that has often been connected to the averted gazes of nude women in paintings[xxxiii]- for the simple fact that the entire effect of his paintings depends on the implied moment of solitariness and the subjects' complete belief in the absence of onlookers. Without this pre-assumption, the trope of revelation that works on several levels— including the less-than-legitimised guilt-ridden tenor of voyeurism— would not work at all. In case of Mazumdar, most of his women have averted gazes that do indicate turning away, not from perceived onlookers, but from the world outside, directed often towards a solipsistic internal dialogue: these indicate a deep self-absorption that brings about a pervasive sense of interiority, an enigmatic area the boundaries of which cannot be exploded by the voyeuristic gaze. Hence their *possession* by the viewer remains an unfinished process. This sense of impenetrability— hence inaccessibility— goes on to the *humanizing* of the subject, of the female *nude*, which "tells the spectators that she is not simply naked for him." (Exum, 1996, 33). And this is precisely why I cannot agree with Tapati Guha-Thakurta when she says that Mazumdar's images of women "in their varying moods of languor or states of undress clearly verged on the pornographic"(Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 321). Pornography depends for its effect on incomplete subjectivisation, and the label does not come anywhere close to Mazumdar's work in spite of the strands of titillation that these carry at times.

One must agree that there is indeed a clear intention of exploring the erotic in most of these paintings: it is often the first thing that a viewer is drawn to, rather than the narrative, which takes its time to get to the viewer and to mediate with the primacy of the initial impression. The implied narrative subsumes within itself the aggression of the paintings' erotic appeal, contains

and moderates it somewhat by settling these strands within the context of the tale told. Looking closely at some of his paintings will make this interface clearer. *Siktabasana*(The wet-clothed lady) uses the known schema of the village lady who has just finished her bath and is now rearranging her wet hair, while the brass water-pot(a *kalash*)— a familiar and recurrent item in this series— lies behind her, prior to being picked up by her as she returns home. She is clearly an upper-class Bengali married lady— she is wearing gold ornaments including a pair of *bajubandh*(armband) and clearly discernible *sankha* and *pola*(conch-shell and coral bangle, the must-wear of married women in Bengal at that time). The time of the day remains unclear: the background is dark(too dark, in fact, to simply allude to the shadow of the enclosure-like trees around her, as we have seen in certain other paintings). It could be either early dawn or evening, both hours being customarily ideal for Bengali women for visiting nearby rivers or ponds for their daily ablution, because of the relative privacy offered, as they had to take semi-private paths to the waterbodies that could be peopled at other hours of the day. These rational points do serve to naturalise the wet-clothed woman within the landscape as a normal sighting, but possibly not before her back and hips, palpably visible through her wet white saree, induce a frisson of erotic excitement in the viewer. This works more intensely because of the scheme of lighting: the figure seems to be lit up from the back from an unknown source— it cannot normally be considered as natural light (sunlight/moonlight)— for such light would have lit up the other elements in the painting equally. But at the same time we notice patches of yellow light on the right arm and the palm that is placed on her head (the treatment of the light patches remind us of the technique of the impressionists), something that seems to be sunlight broken into scattered patches while passing through the closely-knit leaves of surrounding trees. We get to understand that the artist intervenes with what should be the logical scheme of light here, by darkening the background considerably, so that the figure stands out in relief and gets to be the subject of close focus. The final sense is that of an ambient light (despite the light patches on the arms) that is soft, yet clear enough to make both the flesh and the folds of cloth discernible: the fact that it illogically escapes lighting up the other elements is intentionally instituted by the artist within the painting in order to evoke and intensify the sense of secretiveness that remains as the key factor for both the narrative logic and the erotic appeal to work. Almost the same play with light— the downlighting of the background in order to focus on, and dramatise, the presence of the central figure is also seen in the painting titled *Snanante*(After the Bath), and the

purpose remains the same: the artist wishes not only to present the figure in relief against the starkly dark background, bathed in what clearly seems to be strong, non-natural light, but he also wishes to create a dark enclosure of privacy that is crucial to the success of the narrative strand that he introduces in the painting— in this entire series, as it were. Darkness may also be read as not only a cover for the woman concerned about her modesty, but also for the viewers, for whom it works perfectly, as an agent of anonymity and non-recognition, both essential for the voyeuristic gaze which pre-warrants the stepping-out from focused social and moral roles: it supplies *hiddenness* to the spectators.

The same interventional approach with the light scheme— if a little less drastic— is seen in the painting called *Suryamukhi*(The Sunflower) where the woman, in an identical white saree and similar ornaments as the previous one, faces us with a full frontal view after having taken a bath, looking down at her feet(thus we do not get a chance to connect with her eye). Patches of sunlight fall on her body, on her wet saree-draped breasts, thigh and shoulders- patches worked in bold, precise strokes that reinforce the impressionist contention of light being the chief player in an artwork. The background is undifferentiated, though the presence of close-knit foliage can be discerned: the strong sunlight that falls on the woman's figure is not quite allowed to illuminate the almost flat, two-dimensional background that does not even aspire after creating any illusion of depth.[xxxiv] This allows the painting to weave a sense of an enclosure, something that we have seen frequently in many other works of Mazumdar: it is as if he manages to transpose the secretiveness and complete privacy of the home indoor on what is clearly an outdoor work. The title of the painting is justified by creating an alternate focus— the sunflower, with flecks of sunlight on its petals, seems to float in space beside the figure, though a closer look manages to find a stalk that connects it to the bush beneath. Here too the artist plays with, and alters, the naturalistic distribution of light in order to highlight his chief foci: the flower— a metaphor, really— and the woman bathed in sunlight who is the true sunflower of the painting. It is important to keep in mind that in all the wet-cloth paintings, Mazumdar paints women who are— without exception— extremely beautiful by the standards of his time. All of them are fair-skinned[xxxv] (the first essentality in a woman's bid to beauty then, and, perhaps, even now), full-figured, without being plump, and for those with unbraided hair, the hair is long and lush and flowing. In a way, then, the body in question is already pre-inscribed by a set of existing conventions- both of beauty and of art[xxxvi]. As far as the contemporary conventional ideal of

perfect beauty goes, the artist and his viewers are perceived to be in a collusive relationship: both are agents, both are consumers of the standard of beauty staring at them from the canvas, and both are instrumental to the perpetuation of this ingrained ideal. So in a sense the representation of the beautiful— and hence, the desired— depends on the taste of the artist which is already pre-decided, and at best his choice here is to interrogate/mediate with the received notions, which, as we see, remains as the road not taken. In fact it is the artist's subjectivity, the markers of his selfhood that are laid bare in these paintings: as with the embodied interiority of his women (so often empathetic), so also with the way they look, stand or behave. So it is in a way a politically invested web of contested attitudes that go on to create his female bodies and their appeal. In a way the artist is both active and passive, just as his painted figures are: they are the agents of their introspection (that is the most interesting area of the painting that remains partially unmediated and is allowed to construct its own meaning) but they passively flow into the gestures and poses— their *look* itself— as decided by the artist. I have often wondered at the way he handles the vulnerable moments that he creates— we may not be able to access the exact train of their thoughts, or the subject of their contemplation, but the moments of privacy are really soul-baring moments, divested of the armour of social veneer, and as such are spaces of vulnerability. And here is where the question of control comes in: representation is controlled by men, by the patriarchal order, and even when female sexuality is on display, it is mannered and controlled by discourses of containment and surveillance. Mazumdar's wet-clothed women— and indeed the other semi-nude women he frequently painted— are represented clearly as good, chaste women, usually married, who would be outraged to know that anyone other than her husband was allowed visual access to her uncovered body. This access is a privilege that the artist provides to his spectators (he is clearly painting on a prior assumption of a heterosexual, male, middle-class viewership), and this works especially because they are technically not available women— they are adequately moored to social and familial identities, and thus a glance at their bodies is doubly charged with privilege especially because they are inaccessible. This mooring is, looked at closely, an instrument of containment— limiting their sexuality by referencing it to a social order that controls it completely pays court to the very basic mores of contemporary social hegemony— and then, with the logistic essentials in place, the space for display is opened up, though not without strands of surveillance. The vulnerable moments of self-contemplation, with their guards down, as it were, are moments of intense privacy which

become public, possibly bringing about a deeper presumption of control. The only slippage in the otherwise perfect discourse of control and containment is the hiddenness of their thoughts, the only dent in the fable of possession that provides us with a most interesting counterpoint, and carries the artworks over from their simple apparentness of concern with morality and desire into a deeper awareness of their complex formulations as negotiable texts. In fact the unflinching chastity and wifely love of Bengali women had been the subject of many a novel in Mazumdar's times, and the steely defence and resistance that emerged if her virtue was as much as mildly threatened had already become an idealizing (and idealized) principle of femininity. I am reminded of Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1914 novel, *Biraj Bou*, which Mazumdar must have read— he admired Chattopadhyay and even painted an exceptional portrait of him— which describes the protagonist, Biraj, who is an exceedingly beautiful housewife, coming out of a pond after bathing. This was also the fateful moment when Rajendra, the local zamindar, spots her at a private, secretive leafy enclosure and is mesmerized. This reminds us of many paintings of Mazumdar where the enclosure-like privacy allows the onlooker/voyeur to slip from the dictates of social morality. Rajendra decides to follow up the intense desire Biraj stirred up in him:

> About six months ago, just before dusk, his eyes locked on Biraj, all lit up with the gold of twilight. This *ghat*, which Biraj used, was so ensconced within towering trees that it was practically invisible from any direction. Biraj, after a tranquil bath, hitched up the full *kalash* and looked up, staring straight into the eyes of someone entirely unknown. Rajendra had come here while searching for birds to hunt: standing on the nearby grave-mound, he saw Biraj. He could not believe at once that a human being can be bestowed with such abundance of beauty. Nor could he tear his eyes away from her. He continued to watch with unfaltering glance, besotted and frozen to the spot, the incomparable, seemingly endless immensity of beauty before him. Biraj rushed away on her fast feet, preserving the modesty of her wet-clothed body in whatever way she could. Rajendra stayed put, silent, for a while, and then moved away. His thoughts all the way dwelt on how this could come about. How could this small forested village— away from respectable society— be home to such spectacular beauty! (Chattopadhyay 1951, 41-42)

That this beautiful woman is also in possession of a steely resolve (to protect her virtue) is clearly indicated: "though she appeared to be sweet and soft from the outside, her inner nature

was high-strung and hard as a stone" (Chattopadhyay 1951, 43)". In a novel which is predominantly about the value of chastity and the tribulations destiny keeps in store for even the most minor deviants, beauty is a possession that must be kept under continuous self-surveillance, the appearance of softness must be off-set by a hard barrier within that keeps off anyone other than the husband from sexually appraising this beauty.[xxxvii] Mazumdar's female subjects, in many instances, bear this sense of the hard and the soft, strength and vulnerability, and are objects of surveillance as well of display. This interpellative self-surveillance as seen in *Biraj Bou* is clearly a social instrument of containment and control— ensuring conformism at the very basic level of moral faith— and the terrible events that are unleashed by the divine order at even a minor stray step that is taken are enough to freeze the standard of female conduct (Biraj loses her looks, sight in one eye, movement of a hand— lives the life of a stray woman on the roads before she finds her husband and dies at his feet— all because of an act of passion induced by her inebriated husband hitting her, something that did not actually culminate in any sexual transgression). This line of sexual morality is never crossed by Mazumdar's women; in the extremely few instances where he actually hints at a transgression, the punitive lashback is also seen to be around the corner. For example, in the work titled *Porityokta* (Cast out) we have this woman who is clearly in a situation of deep distress. We note with a bit of surprise that she still wears her ornaments in spite of being semi-nude. Here is a strong hint of an open-ended narrative— built on the cues of her ornaments and her semi-nude state— involving a just-departed man. We cannot help wondering whether the subject is a wife/lover/prostitute; and once we are convinced that the painting presents moments immediately post-desertion, we would fabricate other dimensions of the narrative by imagining what the circumstances of this desertion could possibly be. The Art of Mr. H Mazumdar (which carried the image of the work) offers a commentary which, while focusing entirely on her act of transgression, is equally unclear about her identity: 'One sad indiscretion and the unfortunate perpetrator is considered an exile to the community.'(Shome, 1920, n.p) This clearly hints at a socially unsanctioned liaison which has resulted in her estrangement. But above all, what we get to see here is a man defining a woman, even while being absent himself. The same issue of The Art of Mr H Mazumdar carries the plate of another interesting work of the artist, titled *Niyati* (Irony of Fate), in which the woman is lying on the bed with her face covered by her arm and hair, clearly in a situation of distress. The circumstances are equally bizarre, though an interesting commentary is provided in the 'pictorial

paragraphs' at the end which presented short descriptive notes on all the plates carried in that particular issue: "How sad is the lot of the woman whose husband loses the strength of character and wallows in the mire of sensuality! She spends sleepless nights brooding not so much on her own dreary situation as on the ways and means of reclaiming her delinquent consort."(Shome, 1920, n.p) In a sense, thus, many of his works presuppose the presence of an absent man who frames the narratives like a plot, without whom not only would the tale collapse, but with it the implied subjectivity of the woman as well. A similar point can be seen in his famous painting *Abhiman*(Wounded Vanity)[xxxviii] which also hinges on a narrative of a recently-departed man, though it is clear that the question of abandonment has to be discounted here. The elusive emotion indicated by the untranslatable Bangla word *abhiman* belongs somewhere in the range between soft anger and turning away from a loved one after real or imagined hurt. This could also be read as a tale of an unfruitful wait for a lover: his non-arrival has led to the tearing and scattering of the white flowers out of a perceived slight to her relevance. The word 'vanity' used in the title is worthy of note: 'vanity' also means, apart from its more common meaning, the quality of being worthless or futile, 'empty', really, and one wonders whether the title plays on this semantic variation and foregrounds the male departure as constitutive of the departure of meaning as well. Likewise, in a painting like *Pratiksha* (In Expectation) the context is defined more by what the waiting woman sees and we do not get to see: the world outside, that illuminates her as she leans out from behind the half-open casement to catch an early glimpse of the man in her life, returning home. In fact she is partially hidden by the shut wooden pane of the window and seems to belong, and is rooted, to the dim interior, cocooned, as it were, by the enclosure of the home. It is the title that completes the narrative; any sense of her animated wonder at the goings-on of the outside world (rather like the exploratory impulse of Charulata to catch the action of the world outside— through the slats in her windows— in Ray's eponymous film) is cancelled by the title itself. This clearly indicates that portraying such thrills was definitely not the chief concern of the artist: it is the theme of the wait that was meant to define the woman in terms of the absent man. Formulating subtexts of a collusive male viewership is entirely possible here:

> It would indeed be interesting to see the viewer (who is allowed to gaze at these private moments) as one who identifies with the extra-textual male presence and assumes a position of power in relation to the woman in the painting. We must also keep in mind that the gazer

> and the object of the gaze are locked together in a relationship of power, the former obviously privileged over the latter. These visual texts, therefore, seem to address the empowered voyeur, his power flowing not only from a sense of erotic gratification (in case of the partially-clothed sensual women), but also from a sense of control. (Ghosh 2012, 47)

In a sense, then, the voyeured viewer experiences both scopophilic and scoptophilic pleasures from the women whom his gaze seemingly controls. Even in case of clothed women, the element of control and containment— the mainstay of male desire— works in sinuous ways to keep the erotic thread alive and operative. The object of the viewer's gaze, the woman, is passive and non-confrontational only because she is unaware of being watched. And it is precisely this passivity that serves to invest him with agency.

Speaking in the context of a portrait commissioned by Charles the second (a nude of his mistress Nell Gwynne) Berger points out that the supine nudity of the subject, combined with her direct gaze to the viewers, "is a sign of her submission to the owner's feelings or demands. (the owner of both woman and painting.)" (Berger, 1990, 52). Though Mazumdar's women never exchange glance with the viewers, the question of ownership still assumes centrality here, and also creates a subsidiary problematic for the researcher. We know that plates of these paintings were widely circulated through the popular literary magazines of his times. Thus the man surveying the paintings, even if he is not the owner of the paintings, he is, in all probability, the owner of the print reproductions of the paintings. This leads us to a further complexity: what about the female viewers? The literary periodicals with their plates of paintings were favourites of the women of the household as well. Paul Messaris, speaking on women in advertisements (and the female viewers of these) unequivocally states that "when women look at the ads, they are actually seeing themselves as a man might see them." (Messaris, 1997, 41). Do the women viewers then identify first with the woman in the painting, and then with an imagined male viewer?[xxxix] Or can we see in it "a tale of colliding with the complex politics of collusion that implicitly exists between the male painter and the male spectator?" (Ghosh 2012, 48)

This can be observed in closer detail as we tackle Hemendranath's numerous paintings with the figure of the mirror-gazing woman, a frequently-occurring trope in his works. Many of his subjects frequently appear absorbed in the act of looking at themselves intently, in a mirror or other reflective surfaces like unmoving water. In fact the mirror-gazing woman has had a long

and abiding presence in the history of art, is common enough across cultures, and can be identified as more of a configuration, really, bearing the impress of politically vested attitudes of society and culture. Mirror-gazing, at the most basic level, involves turning oneself into a *sight*, an object of vision, which then is appraised— seemingly objectively, by the self, which has now become the *bearer of the look*. The tensile relation between the surveyor and the surveyed can possibly be observed and studied in extremely interesting ways in the figure of the mirror-gazer. In these paintings in question, the mirror-gazing women look intently at their own reflections, their expressions often betraying pensiveness and anxiety. The 'double' of the subject/object created by a mirror also brings about the possibility of an interior dialogue between these; also, a continuous and endless exchange of positions between the twinness of selves, the continuity between which is ruptured by the agency of the mirror. We find ourselves wondering whether the appraisal of this doubled self in the mirror gets mediated by a gaze that is appropriated at best: it is possible that women stare at their reflections to assess how she appears to her man.[xl] This also involves an oscillation between the twinness of her identities:

> This appropriation of the gaze of an absent male instills a sense of otherness in the reflected self within the mirror. Thus this solitary woman staring at herself is also defined by an absent man. This also relates to the dual identities of the *surveyor* and the *surveyed* in women, co-existent yet distinct, where she shifts from being herself to being an imaginary male who gazes at her (when she appraises herself critically and considers the probability of appreciation) back to the role of the passively 'surveyed', her selfhood now heavily mediated and thereby modified by the appreciative/critical gaze of the man whom she has imagined and inhabited. (Ghosh 2012, 48)

Berger makes compelling sense when he insists that 'To be born a woman has been to be born, within an allotted and confined space, into the keeping of men.'(Berger, 1990, 46) He also addresses the split this brings about in the woman's self, while acclimatizing to this limited and limiting space. "A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself." (Berger, 1990, 46). This is also, in a sense, a sharing of control with the male lawgiver, and this self-surveillance may thus be represented as empowering. Idealisations apart, that this process is both depressing and anxiety-inducing is clearly hinted at- multiple times- by Mazumdar in many of his paintings of mirror-gazing women. While well-known paintings like *Kaner Dul*(Ear-ring) or its variation-piece, *Sojja-*

Somapon(Toilet) are usually read along the lines of the narrative simplism introduced by the arrangement of elements within the pictorial space as the story of a married woman engrossed in her evening toilet— the woman in the process of dressing is seen from the back(her expression cannot be seen— even the mirror reflects a blank, in a most interesting state of non-reflection) there are certain other works that hint at a distinct ambivalence. In paintings like *Rup* (Image), *Chhaya* (Shadow) and *Tonmoy* (Engrossed) the women gazing at their reflections are clearly pensive: they are either unhappy with what they see reflected, or are wary of the web that imprisons them within the system of endless appraisals/self-appraisals. *Tonmoy* is an especially noteworthy watercolour which captures the anxious tension that binds the woman to her image in the mirror: she has her arms wrapped around her hunched body, in a perfectly legible posture of self-preservation. She is clearly resisting a less-than-acceptable possibility, be it the chance of being undervalued because of her less-than-perfect appearance, equating, thus, beauty and female value: or, possibly, rejection from her man on the basis of the same equation. She is, in the final count, defined by the way she relates to men and to the formulations of patriarchy.

Having said this, it is, however, important to understand that looking back at the work of an artist— one closely aligned with the customs and the ways of thought of his own times— after the space of almost a full century has its own interpretative loopholes. It is difficult to extricate oneself from one's cultural climate and habits of critical thought— thoroughly changed as they are now— and understand the temper of older times that justified and even legitimized certain habitual formulations which we consider dated today, after exposure to decades of evolved theoretical and critical positions that have shaped our ways of seeing. It often tempts us into overreading, and/or judgmentality, and leads us to miss the signs of the smaller spirals of defiance, of deviation, at times even subversion. We must care to remember that for all his portrayals of women who are perceptibly defined by an absent male, he had never been drawn into the trope of happy domesticity, so often the subject of idealization both in art and literature in his own times. Even when we engage in judgmental pronouncement on the subjectivisation of the waiting housewife in *Pratiksha,* we should not miss the language of her eyes or her demeanour. There is a pensive equanimity about her, something that does not comfortably belong to the description of a happy housewife eagerly waiting for a reunion with the husband. In *Tonmoy* as well, whatever irks the anxiety-ridden woman is related to a man and, generally, the world of men out there, and the non-negotiable system that they have set in place— one that

equates not only beauty, but also acceptance by the patriarchal order, with female value— and the underpinning of discontent and resistance in the mirror-gazing woman's demeanour is hard to miss. In fact most of her women have sombre, if worried, faces. I have felt at times that the women are portrayed as actually being aware of their position as a *role* they are required to be playing, something they are imprisoned within: we see them in these paintings at that precise moment when they shed the performative veneer of the correct and the sanctioned. These are, indeed, moments of disclosure at a far deeper level.

In a way, thus, Mazumdar was contending with not only the essentialist vision of femininity that the neo-Bengal school latched on to: his works open up a contested space vis-à-vis his contemporary Academic painters as well, a rich and complex space densely inscribed with the cultural politics of his age and his ways of negotiating with it. One of his painting titles in fact says it all- 'A Story of her Own'- this story is really about a space that is not hers at all: the women in his works may not be aware of the spectator, but she is indeed aware of the pressing circle of normativity that she must conform to if she is to retain her value. And this submerged sense is possibly what subjectivises her as strong and substantial. When Abanindranath Tagore illustrates *Chitrangada*, (for Rabindranath's poetic drama of the same name) he represents her with a bowed head, picking up gathered flowers from her *aanchal* and weaving them into a garland, in a recognizably ultra-feminine posture that is meek and demure: but this woman is (on that very particular page) speaking of her belief of there being no such thing as a home,[xli] an entirely non-feminine strand of thought (the subversive nature of which Abanindranath clearly decided to miss) clearly inconsistent with the image. The lines Rabindranath gives to Chitrangada about the vacuity of home and its limits works well as a trope, reaching out to the senselessness of all boundaries, even glorified and happy-seeming ones: Mazumdar's women submit to the limits, but with full awareness of their brittle fragility. This awareness is the real secret in the story of her own.

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[i] We must remember that there had been opposing, often intersecting currents of thought operating here as well: 'While the economic and political developments tended to create a general devaluation of women in the arena of production that was enhanced by a greater economic dependence on men, at the same time the rise of a woman's movement- the 'Woman Question' marked the beginnings of a resistance against this overwhelming, even if implicit, subordination'.(Sen 2002, 1)

[ii] R Siva Kumar tells us that the painting was possibly enlarged by Yoshio Katsuta(Siva Kumar 2008, 369)

[iii] There was also a parallel prevalence of the image of the nation-mother as frail, sad, without means and in need of protection by her children that provoked the duty of countrymen to free her from her servile state: Rajanikanta Sen's

famous song 'O brother, accept with joy mother's gift of coarse cloth/ Poor and wretched, she cannot afford anything better' amply illustrates this position.

[iv] . In fact, 'a strong belief in this shakti has brought about a popular synthesis among contrary philosophies like Samkhya, Vedanta, Vaishnavism and Tantrikism'(Madhavananda, 1953, 68)

[v] The image of the nation-mother continued to exert an enduring influence in the coming decades, especially in the arena of popular culture: she is often seen receiving gifts of severed heads from martyrs as a mark of their unflinching devotion for the motherland, as in P Shivshankar Tiwari's *Bhagat's Curious Present,* print by Ganganarain Beharilal, Cawnpore Press, circa 1931 where Bhagat Singh is seen to offer his decapitated head to Mother India. She is often cartographically represented as well, reigning, as it were, on her embodied territory, as in the middle panel of the triptych by Maqbool Fida Husain, published in the Bombay edition of The Times of India on occasion of 50 years of Indian independence. An engaging discussion on the popular imaging of the nation-mother closer to our own times can be found in Sumathi Ramaswamy's book *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India.*

[vi] The young and full-bodied, four-armed ascetic figure holding a sheaf, cloth, palm leaf manuscript and prayer beads in her hands was read as a nationalist mother-goddess bestowing the blessings of food, clothing, learning and spiritual strength on her children. Considering that the issues that stoked the Swadeshi movement included dissatisfaction with the agrarian, manufactural, educational and political policies of the colonial government, and that the segments of the society that the activists sought to bring together under the banner of Swadeshi included landowners, traders, students, and the intelligentsia, the iconography is self-explanatory. (Siva Kumar, R)

[vii] "To contemporary critics and aesthetes, the image became a symbol of a glorious 'Hindu ideal of womanhood', of its attributes of tranquility, selflessness and sacrifice. The painting provided the vital visual reinforcement to the Orientalist and nationalist discourse, which placed women at the centre of its construct of the spirituality and transcendence of the 'Indian' ethos… representing the most sacrosanct image of Indian womanhood. Reacting against the colonial reformist declamations that pointed to the barbarism and cruelty of the act, the projection of the 'real spiritual essence' of Sati became synonymous with the assertion of the 'Oriental' point of view."(Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 286-288)

[viii] *Manusmriti,* the much-discussed text dictating social codes of conducts, deems that 'By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases(the punishment of) her sin.' Manusmriti, 5/164

[ix] This would relate rather neatly to what Lacan would later identify as the key to keeping desire alive- by constantly deferring satisfaction- and also how fantasy preserves the evaporation of the object of desire by replacing actual satisfaction. See Copjec 2015, 55

[x] Premeshchandra Shome, in his 1921 essay on Mazumdar, categorizes "Sangsar-Bandhan' as allegorical: "Man tries to assert his spiritual freedom but the shackles of earthly bondage tie him down to the lower plane of his material existence. This, in short, is the main idea of the picture. But the real merit lies in the fact that it has been expressed in a forceful language with no faltering accent or ambiguity of speech. The relation between the mother and the child being the greatest of all the worldly fascinations, the artist has purposely put the figure of a worldly mother being interrupted by her child while she is proceeding with offerings in hand to worship the Deity in the temple. The spiritual fervor of the mother has melted away by the warmth of maternal affection and she stands gazing at her lovely child forgetting her divine mission.What a majestic truth— the illusion of Maya deterring all human activities towards the Divine— and how grand is the mode of expression! "(Shome, 1921, 54-55)

[xi] The journal also carried a commentary on the painting: " It deals with a sacred Hindu rite, performed every day by our village folk. The 'Tulasi' tree is regarded by the Hindus as holy from time immemorial, and it has been enjoined as a religious duty upon the female inmates of every household to place a light under this tree at the approach of evening. The artist has worked upon this holy theme in oil and has produced a lovely canvas. The evening shadow has been harmoniously contrasted with the light under the tree and the reflection upon the delicate features of the girl, characterized by a deep devotion, are really artistic to a degree."(Indian Academy of Art, April 1920, p. 34)

[xii] I am reminded of a similar shocked response to Manet's *Olympia,* though in a far-removed spatial and temporal context. Kenneth Clarke talks of the shift from the realm of the ideal and the distanced to that of the real and immediate as the source of the contemporary reaction to Olympia, one that I find relevant for the present context: "The true reason for the indignation was that for almost the first time since the Renaissance a painting of the nude represented a real woman in probable surroundings…Olympia is the portrait of an individual, whose interesting but sharply characteristic body is placed exactly where one would expect to find it. Amateurs were thus sharply

reminded of the circumstances under which actual nudity was familiar to them, and their embarrassment is understandable." (Clark 1984, 164-165)

[xiii] It has been observed that Ravi Varma was rather taken to the project of creating 'types' of Indian womanhood, for which he went twice on major tours of the country to record its physical types and landscapes, domesticating the variety within a single aesthetic frame. This was consistent with his goals of cultural nationalism: his project was to create a pan-Indian material representation of Indian womanhood through the creation of types that were both racially authentic yet universal, realistically individual yet typical and, more importantly, regional yet national. See Kapur, 1989, 62 and Uberoi, 1990, WS-44

[xiv] Varma did, very occasionally, paint semi-nude women, often with a coquettish look, as in 'After Bath': these will be looked at closely later in this chapter.

[xv] Though Damayanti is given a recognizable, regional identity in *Hamsa-Damayanti*- "An aristocratic, resplendently attired South Indian lady, she stands in a typical stately mansion with marble coloumns and stairs…her surface presence acquires a new dense underlayer of meanings through the literary affiliations of the painting, and its place within the contemporary revival of the Sanskrit *kavya* traditions"(Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 106), she is still imprisoned within the narrative, and the familiarizing resemblance provides— at best— a better access to the nuances of the narrative.

[xvi] Lord Napier was the Governor of Madras from 1866 to 1872.

[xvii] In it he pointed out the enormous possibilities that Indian mythology provided to the aspiring artists of India: "The form of Indra, with his attendant breezes hovering over the famished plains of Hindustan, might surely more than rival the triumphant flight of the Italian Aurora with her galaxy of Hours…All that is needed to promulgate their beauty and complete their fame is that in their purer and nobler passages and with the powers of European Art, they should engage the service of the national pencil as they have fastened on the national memory and animated the national voice."(Pal, 2011, 90)

[xviii] We remember Jamini Prakash Gangooly's illustrations of Banabhatta's Sanskrit play, Kadambari, modeled on European history paintings, and Bamapada Banerjee's mythological paintings such as 'Abhimanyu taking leave of Uttara' and 'Arjuna and Urvashi', both of these oleographed in Germany and mass-marketed.

[xix] One may also care to remember, in this connection, the Gallery of Fine Art that was introduced as an adjunct to the Government School of art, Calcutta, consisted entirely of specimens of European Art, which were supposed to refine the taste of the students; and, as mentioned in the Report of Public Instructions for the 1876-77, the object of the institution was to ensure that 'they might study European methods of imitation and apply them to the representation of natural scenery, architectural monuments, ethical varieties and national costumes, in their own country'. (Chakraborty, 2018, 30)

[xx] An 1854 dictionary of Art defines 'study' as "The practice necessary to artistic education; a research into the principles of Art… also (applied) to a finished sketch from nature, generally intended to aid in the composition of a larger and more important work, or as a memorial of some particular object for future use, or to facilitate drawing or composition. Thus, a single head or figure, afterwards introduced into a large work, would be termed a *study* for that work…Many such studies are…indicative of an artist's power of hand, and easy mental perception of the great and the beautiful, which are sometimes tamed down, or lost, in the course of finishing an elaborate work." (Fairholt1854, 418)

[xxi] The Western female body, in a sense, was intended to be perceived as encased and enclosed, her sexuality inaccessible; though dresses with layers of crinoline- especially the use of wire cage crinoline- had been highly fashionable in England during the Victorian times, the colonial context introduced a further, deeper element of differentiation to bear upon the code of dressing of Englishwomen in India.

[xxii] In fact "appropriate clothing was a central concern in the world the British created for themselves in India. At the periphery of this world were the undifferentiated masses, mostly naked, as suited their savage or childish natures."(Case 1985, 134)

[xxiii] "An upper-caste woman would habitually wear a sari of fine transparent muslin…a single piece of cloth, draped around the body. No undergarments were worn…This clothing seemed well suited to the hot climate of Bengal, yet the wearing of such a revealing form of dress, even if only in front of male relatives, appears incongruous…it may have served to reinforce purdah by exposing female sexuality and then demarcating sharply the boundaries within which it could be expressed." (Borthwick 1984, 244)

[xxiv] "The Empire had given rise to extreme ambivalences with regard to the body, as its representations became central to the construction and maintenance of British authority in IndiaThe rulers were responsible for a new concept of modesty , which provoked serious differences between them and the colonized as to how much body

could be exposed without outraging decency. ..Victorian evangelism discouraged Indian erotic art, and yet turned a blind eye to the Classical nude, which stood for moral purity and the height of art…in no culture was artistic nudity more ubiquitous than the Victorian." (Mitter 2007, 138)

[xxv] In "The Home and the World', the Tagore novel of 1916, we observe how Bimala's older sister-in-law surveyed her from "head to foot and with compressed lips smiled a meaning smile" at the way she dressed herself up to meet Sandip, in a gold-bordered white saree and a short-sleeved muslin jacket which was likewise gold-bordered, and especially her satiric suggestion to Bimala: " I was only thinking that one of those low-necked English bodices would have made it perfect". (Tagore, 15, 2018)

[xxvi] "colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal."(Bhabha 1997, 153,). Elsewhere, Bhabha describes colonial mimicry as an affect of hybridity— at once a mode of appropriation and of resistance, from the disciplined to the desiring. "Then, as discrimination turns into the assertion of the hybrid, the insignia of authority becomes a mask, a mockery." (Bhabha 1994, 120)

[xxvii] It would be interesting to note that even when Mazumdar is working on mythological/religious subjects, which would naturally present an aura of pastness, he takes care to root most of the characters to his observed present. In paintings like Murali Shiksha(Divine Flute) or Radha Krishna, Radha— in both cases— is seen to wear opulently-edged blouses.

[xxviii] The wet-saree effect had in fact been first tried out by Raja Raja Varma, but "Mazumdar created an independent genre, spawning imitators, the best-known being Thakur Singh of Punjab" (Mitter 135, 2007)

[xxix] S G Thakur Singh's painting 'After the Bath' won the 2nd prize at the British Empire Exhibition in London in 1924.

[xxx] There had been a humorous anecdote in circulation then, exemplifying the lifelikeness of Mazumdar's painted women: in his Beadon Street studio, while the artist was busy working on a life-size painting of a wet-saree-clad belle, a 'sahib' came in unannounced, to commission some works to the artist. The painting on the easel was so lifelike that he had an unexpected shock, wondering whether it was the artist's wife who was draping herself in her husband's studio after having taken a bath. A moment's illusion, dispelled immediately by the genial laughter of the artist himself, is one that goes beyond its anecdotal value into the space of the many myths that surround the artist, in its celebration of his mastery of verisimilitude. (Ghosh 1993 , 37)

[xxxi] A landmark exhibition titled 'La Toilette: The Invention of Privacy' that ran from February 12th to July 5th 2015, at the Musee Marmottan Monet, Paris, brought together paintings premised on the rituals of cleaning and bathing, from the 15th century to the present: a close look at the artworks reveals that especially after the appearance of the bathroom, it is the private space that emerges around these activities that entices the artists most, noted especially in the works of artists such as Edgar Degas, Pierre Bonnard and Theophile Alexandre Steinlen. Mazumdar's space of privacy woven around the wet-saree figures is similar to these in spirit, but sharply different in their locational evocation. It is closer, in a sense, to Cezanne's *The Bathers* or *The Large Bathers* with the canopy-like feel of the trees, with the composition bringing about a sense of an enclosure in combination with the openness of outdoors. The notable difference would be the distance at which the artist places himself: Mazumdar observes his figures extremely closely, as a result of which the outdoor elements blend into the background, yet managing, however, the task of place-making.

[xxxii] Gazing on semi-nude bathing women was partially naturalized in Bengal through the mythological tales of Krishna, who was known for spying secretly on Radha and the Gopis, and often stole the garments that they discarded on the river bank before taking their dip so that it was difficult for them to come out of the water and still preserve their modesty. In Mymensingh Geetika(the collector of which, Chandra Kumar De, was a close friend of Mazumdar's eldest brother, Jatindranath Mazumdar) there is a character called Karkun who is in love with his master's daughter, Kamala, and spies secretly on her from atop a *kadamba* tree as she goes to take her bath at the nearby *ghat*. (Sen 1923, 108-10)

[xxxiii] J Cheryl Exum notes, in certain voyeuristic biblical-themed paintings, (like 'Bathsheba at her Bath' by Rembrandt) such an averted gaze, which is then connected with a sense of 'shame'- "Not looking back is what we tend to do when we are self-conscious about being observed, as if by ignoring the observer we can pretend we are not being observed. In addition, by averting their eyes from the viewers, the naked Bathshebas cannot accuse us of looking." Looking back at the viewers does not always entail an active, sexually complicit connection as a reverse

simplism, though: “Rembrandt’s Susannah and the Elders is good example. Looking back can have several meanings: accusation, appeal for help, acknowledgement of responsibility, etc.” (Exum 1996, 35). Rembrandt’s Bathsheba keeps reminding me of Mazumdar’s women, particularly because of that quality that Kenneth Clark describes as “the naked body permeated with thought” that “was never repeated.” (Clark 1984, 342)

[xxxiv] This painting also reminds us of Renoir’s painting “Nude in the Sunlight’, especially in the similar treatment of light, on the figure and in the background.

[xxxv] This irrational focus on fairness as a non-negotiable standard of beauty is clearly tied up with colonial perceptions, which still continues in India— traceable, especially, in the wide popularity of face-bleach creams, and the outright demands of ‘fair’ brides in matrimonial coloumns— and also in the way non-Western standards of beauty never gained ground here. This also indicated a break with pre-colonial Indian perceptions of beauty: we are reminded of Kalidas’s description of beauty in Meghdootam: “*Tanvi shyama shikharidashana pakkabimbadharosth*i”(slim, dark, teeth as small as that of rat’s, lips as full and and as red as the *bimba* fruit). One may also remember the amply endowed female figures in Khajuraho and Konarak.

[xxxvi] I have always felt that Mazumdar had been deeply influenced by the classical conventions of figuration, especially those of proportion and idealized form, and he had to negotiate with the same problems faced by the late 19th century Victorian painters: “how to maintain the elevated aim of high art without sacrificing the pleasurable suggestion of palpable flesh” (Smith 1996, 124). His classical, often statuesque, postures were tempered and enlivened by the “bodily warmth and feeling” connected more to the Romantics. Though his characters are always rooted to their located culture and environs, there is always an idealized feminine grace that the artist never loses sight of.

[xxxvii] There is a hint of this self-surveillance in Mazumdar’s painting Palli-Pran(which brought him his first major financial success after its reproduction rights were bought by Lalchand and Sons in 1926) in which the wet-clothed woman seems to look back probably after having heard something— the way she pulls the end of her wet saree over her hips clearly indicates that she is trying to cover her body from the eyes of any possible intruder.

[xxxviii] In the recent past this painting has attracted worldwide attention after it was sold in a 2018 Christie’s auction following an unexpected bid of GBP 413,750, though the estimated price was only GBP 25,000-GBP 35,000.

[xxxix] “The female spectator’s involvement is more complicated. Our position is that of both surveyor and surveyed, or, to use Mulvey’s terms, we are both the image and the bearer of the look. The male spectator is invited to identify with the male protagonist and to desire the female image. The female spectator is also invited to look at the female image with the phallic power of the gaze, yet we are identified with that image as well. Identification and desire, which for the male spectator remain separate operations, are collapsed for us.” (Exum, 1996, 29)

[xl] Berger points out this unconscious interior need in women to conform to male expectations, and thereby to stake a claim to appreciative treatment: “Men survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To acquire some control over the process, women must contain it and interiorize it. That part of a woman’s self that is a surveyor treats that part which is the surveyed so as to demonstrate to others how her whole self would like to be treated. And this exemplary treatment of herself by herself constitutes her presence.”(Berger, 1990, 46)

[xli] Chitra: Does this love have a home?

Arjun: No home?

Chitra: No.

You will take me home? Do not talk of home.

Home is for a year only. Take me to where things last forever. (Tagore 1892, 24)

Chapter 3

Hemendranath Mazumdar's Landscapes: Framing Locality, Encoding Culture

Agreeing beforehand that all landscapes are culturally nuanced, it is vitally important for us to look into the choices exercised by painters of this particular period to figure out, in their landscapes, their individual locations of culture. These varied substantially, yet referred back, through distinct routes, to that singular space of nationalism and the politics of identity. The insistence on the transcendental and the idealistic which was the very defining premise of the Bengal School artists was based on what was thought to be the very spirit of India's artistic tradition: we will do well to remember that this quality of 'Indianness' was adopted almost as an oppositional strategy to counter what was surmised as Western aesthetic imposition. The concept of 'bhava' aimed at the spiritual and the transcendental by moving beyond form and exploring emotional correlatives; evocation of mood/s became a prime concern as well. Thus when the Bengal School was trying to root their work to what they thought to be an unbroken line of Indian artistic tradition, they were also required to 'unroot' their pictorial images from recognizable reality, from the bounds of time and space. This becomes especially significant when we turn to the landscapes of the Bengal School artists, even those which are not independent landscapes but serve as mood-enhancing backgrounds— these are cultural landscapes indeed, with an entirely variant technique of *place-making*. Thus these incorporate within themselves a distinct cultural narrative, with the contingent factors clearly visible to the historically initiated— a necessity, that was almost political, to fabricate an alternate artistic space in order to focus on an insistent Indianness— and, conversely, to further mark the West as the cultural 'other'. Thus the 'profusion and subtlety of feeling (*bhava-vyanjana*)' (Guha-Thakurta, 1992, 193)— that was seen to be a special feature of the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore and his group— was deeply political in nature and intention; their landscapes, too, carry the clear impress of the contemporary politics of representation. Sister Nivedita records her positive perception towards this technique of articulating the narrative by invoking the inherent

mood, especially in the background and surrounding, rather than paying court to features of rooted reality: in a short 'note' on Abanindranath Tagore's painting 'Sita in Captivity in Lanka'[i], she compares the landscape against which Tagore places Sita with that seen in Ravi Varma's famous painting of the same theme, though without any overt reference. The latter places Sita within a forest environment— the *Asok-van*— with familiar place-making devices complete with the *Rakshasa cheri-s* guarding her, while the former utilizes a background which is ambiguous to say the least(Nivedita reads it as 'placed…behind bars, looking out, in the infinite longing of the dawn, over the water of Ocean'). She is moved by the way Tagore has been able to incorporate the 'spirit' of sorrow and captivity as well as the 'ideal' of 'strong and noble womanhood'— both 'spirit' and 'ideal' being familiar terms in the Bengal School trajectory— and unequivocally states that 'this visualizes her sadness and imprisonment, as the garden of Asoka trees, on the banks of the river, could never have done…the ideal lives for us at last.'(The Modern Review, 1908, 273). Bengal School's treatment of background landscape often reminds us of the formulation of pathetic fallacy[ii], though in the majority of cases the landscape features also continue to 'mean', distinctly, from the human emotions imputed onto them.

In a sense, therefore, the landscapes of the Bengal School— as also the other varieties of their 'Indian-style' art- were clear products of the conscious creation of an identity, which, to a significant extent, depended on an oppositional definition. Their 'place-making' essentially depended on certain cultural markers, which were politically contingent as well. When we turn to the landscapes of Hemendranath Mazumdar, we encounter a similar narrative of identity, though the elements and technique of execution are steeply varied. Though he does have a sizeable number of paintings which can be considered as landscapes in their own right, in most cases he uses landscape as a background for his solitary, female figures. But in both instances his intent of place-making is clear and unwavering: he roots his paintings— almost without exception— to his own land, Bengal, and all the features it is known by, both physical and emotional. His landscapes, to a considerable extent, engage in the art of 'place-making'— encoding markers relating to the identity of a particular region, both the topographically real and the perceived, a negotiation, as it were, between the text and context. We may look back at one of Shyamacharan Sreemany's prescriptions for successful art: that artists must be true to what he calls 'time, place and people'(Som and Acharya, 1986, 55)[iii]. Mazumdar's approach to landscapes agrees rather neatly with this formulation, especially with his concern with both realism and contemporaneity.

These concerns, which defined his very trajectory, could be seen as tools of resistance against the rather ambiguous representation of time and place in most of the Bengal School paintings, their total repudiation of the *here* and *now*, and this variance is especially notable in his landscapes.

In a sense, thus, most artists practicing during these extremely happening decades were concerned— some of them even obsessed— about setting up the lineaments of identity, about establishing visible parameters of their belonging. Abanindranath Tagore and his followers latched on to India's culture and heritage as a historical, unbroken line; and it is this intent of re-invoking a glorious past that necessitated their landscapes to go bereft of the *here* and *now*. For Hemendranath Mazumdar identity was more about achieving a visual approximation of his surroundings, his lifelong home. One must also remember that the Orientalists veered towards a pan-Indian identity, whereas for Mazumdar it was always rooted to his beloved Bengal and its visual culture. This essential difference becomes clear when we refer to the mountain-scapes painted by the artists of the period, a genre that had not been uncommon then. The difference is especially noticeable when we consider the works of Abanindranath Tagore; though his earlier attempts at landscape were largely documentary in character (especially those produced during his sketching tours to Monghyr), his best-remembered landscapes are almost wholly atmospheric, rooted more to the series of visual impressions rather than to the spatial and temporal (and cultural) actuality of the place[iv]. This is notable in his hillscapes as well, especially in his 1916 work 'Snowview: Mussorie', in which there are almost no details of place-making (apart from the descriptive title)— instead, we are left with a watercolour wash which gives only an impression of the lofty snowpeaks while the midground and the foreground merge into each other in a harmony of colour and light. The same overarching sense of atmosphere reigns in some of his other hillscapes like 'Towards the Valley' (c. 1919-20) and 'The Kanchanjungha'(c. 1919). The subject of the latter had been a recurrent subject for contemporary painters— Hemendranath Mazumdar has at least four paintings of this particular range, which have an entirely different character about them, even apart from the overt differences in technique and style. Darjeeling had been the summer capital of the Bengal Presidency after 1864, and British fascination with the region right from the mid-19th century is well-documented. The climate of the Darjeeling hills invoked, for the colonisers, the feel of a home left behind[v]—the Himalayas, in a way, were never fully accepted as foreign terrain— and as such, its distance from the hub of colonial activity was more of a psychological, comforting distance from the native colonized. A

number of memoirs, travelogues, in addition to artworks and photographs by Westerners, chiefly the British, were instrumental to the perceptual creation of what may be called the Himalayan picturesque; the naturalist Joseph Dalton Hooker mentions the particular attraction felt towards the forms and colours of snowy mountains in Darjeeling in his 1854 travel memoir *Himalayan Journals* (Hooker 1854, 123) Many artworks produced by European artists around this period, and later, have the Kanchanjungha range as the central motif. The frontispiece of Hooker's *Himalayan Journals* had a tinted lithograph by a Bengal Civil Servant William Tayler, which depicts the snow-capped range of Kanchanjungha towering over undulating valleys and copses of trees, as does the 1863 watercolour *Kinchinjunga Peaks from Jelapahar, Darjeeling District, Bengal* by the medical officer Frederick William Alexander de Fabeck[vi]. Edward Lear painted the same range for his patron Lord Northbrook, in his 1879 oil *Kinchinjunga from Darjeeling*[vii]. By Hemendranath's time this particular snow range had already become a familiar visual, especially in Bengal, underscored by associations of remoteness and wonderment related to both sight and site— a prefiguring, as it were, of all the evocations that the picture-postcard would build on many years later. This embedded image was painted again and again by many artists, including Jaminiprakash Gangooly, and Nicholas Roerich who painted multiple variations of the range. In fact I have also come across a painting of Kanchanjungha by U. Roy (Upendrakishore Roy Chowdhury) which was printed in Hemendranath's The Indian Academy of Art (the magazine thanks Sukumar Roy for the painting) which has the same snow range dominating over the lower ranges and valleys. There are also a number of paintings of the cloud-capped Himalayan mountain peaks by Gaganendranath Tagore, in most of which his characteristic treatment of mist and haze turns them atmospheric and ethereal[viii]. This iconic Picturesque, with an underpinning of the exotic, became a popular visual consumable of the times: that may be the reason why Hemendranath painted a number of variations on the same theme, with almost the same elements over the years. But most of these, as we shall see, are recognizably moored to the locale— as also, in certain cases, to its culture— and often has a covert narrativity which is almost political.

But it is also possible that there had been impulses quite distinct from merely a fascination for the grand picturesque. The artists could have been impelled by an un/conscious need to reclaim a space which was not only discovered[ix] and developed by the British, but came to be identified

with them as well. Darjeeling was considered to be comfortable and 'home'-like by the British, especially because of its climate and distance from the politically turbulent plains[x]. Thus it is possible that to conceptually annex this space to the common Bengali citizen's idea of the visual expanse of Bengal was also an indirect impulsion, as Darjeeling had then been carefully constructed as a separate socio-economic and cultural zone, almost the 'other' by the British[xi]. This helped to reiterate, with its evocation of the peaceful English village and customs, that they were bearers of a superior culture, 'charged with a responsibility to ensure that the fidelity and determination that had taken them to India did not deteriorate in this physically and morally corrupting land.'(Kennedy, 1996, 8). It does not seem unlikely that to many people this segregational posture was not a comfortable one, hence it did merit reactions which aimed at the reclamation of the Darjeeling Himalayas— in popular imagination[xii]— as one and continuous with the disturbingly happening plains.

I will, at first, refer to two paintings by Mazumdar- both watercolours— named *Premer Swargo* and *Premer Rajyo*, of which one is a reworking of the other, published eight years apart— both in Bengali periodicals. Considering these together would clarify how Mazumdar is concerned with other factors which are beyond the simplistically picturesque— he is combining layers of social, political, and economic history to the narrative of located culture in the manner of a palimpsest, and also exploring how the sublime ideal is uncomfortably juxtaposed alongside the real. The first of these— *Premer Rajyo: Darjeeling* (The Kingdom of Love: Darjeeling) was printed in *Masik Basumati* in 1932, and the second, almost similar painting, appeared in *Bharatvarsha* in 1940, and was named *Premer Swargo* (The Heaven of Love). The immediately noticeable difference between the two works is the presence of two figures, in local attire, at the right of *Premer Rajya*, who are absent in the other painting. The girl has a basket strapped to her back, as is customary with the leaf-picking female labourers working for the tea-gardens; she is seen to enjoy an engrossed moment with her lover. The cue inherent in the title fixes the glorious snow-capped mountain range as the representation of benevolent nature that nourishes and nurtures love. With the absence of the couple (the figures replaced by a bush in exactly the same position) the other painting, *Premer Swargo*, loses the title's immediate referent, the 'prem' (love) getting inscribed as an abstract quality on the atmospherics of what the painter calls 'heaven'. The colour palette is different too; there is more drama in the vibrant red hues used in painting the snow range, which also fixes the time as dawn or dusk. But there seems to be a

deeper and somewhat darker narration than what primarily meets the eye. The basket strapped to the back of the girl is a powerful referent that connects to a number of factors that relate not only to the transformation of the materiality of the landscape but also the identity of the people who worked as labourers in the tea plantations created and controlled by the British: in a way it is a submerged tale of captivity and control. We are reminded of the way forests were cut down to clear land for the lucrative tea plantations, and this implied thread of 'control' (underlined, especially, by the glorious and untamable Kanchenjungha in the background) spills over to the human figures as well. The very identity of the girl (leaf-plucking was primarily performed by women with their nimble hands and men were engaged in other menial activities) hinges on the basket: it is, as if, Mazumdar is laying bare the burden of the bond that these people have to carry, a relation of production that had transformed the relatively free life of the hill people (many of them practiced subsistence agriculture in the pre-plantation days) into a life of bonded servitude which was non-negotiably hierarchised (Besky 2014, 7) with strategies of exploitation. Thus this is more than a simple, picturesque moment; the painting is underpinned by a many-skeined narrative rooted to the movement of history, politics and culture of the region, and the figures do more than just root the visual to a fixed, defined locale. The other painting- *Premer Swargo* (The Heaven of Love), published eight years later- builds upon a shift in connotation between *rajyo* and *swargo,* kingdom and heaven, and journeys from the real to the ethereal. The trees and bushes are more lush, the movement of the fog more pronounced and tactile, and the red illumination on the peaks has an other-worldly feel about it. We actually sense that this other-worldliness was his principal objective in this particular painting— he was trying to capture a vision only nominally real, focusing rather on the love and bounty of nature which animates the unpeopled landscape. Here too, we can notice how it essentially differs from the Bengal school landscapes in spite of the atmospheric quality and the insistence on a certain mood that are common to both. In Hemendranath's hillscapes, we never lose sight of the actual locale, which is recognizable and provides a strong mooring to the narrative of the landscape. Looking closely, one may observe how a moment actually becomes a narrative: he is painting the famous range as both mighty and mellow, other-worldly, yet accommodative of human emotions. In these, there is a firm placement of the ideal, and one could perhaps also sense the ideological as well: in an environment beset with circumscribed hierarchies— in spheres both cultural and political— these can be seen to open up desired spaces of expanse and inclusion. These works

remind us of the small-format hillscapes of Bireswar Sen (who was tutored by both Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose), who clearly had a penchant for the Bengal School's insistence on the atmospherics, and tried to capture the timeless sublimity of the Himalayas. But in spite of the initial echoes— especially the commonality of both artists rooting their landscapes to the human world in one way or the other— the difference, too, is clearly notable: Sen's works remind us of elements of certain Oriental landscapes, especially Taoist landscapes, often found in Chinese scrolls which focus on the lofty spirituality of the towering mountains and the puny world of the humans. For Hemendranath, nature never seems to be beyond humanity, even when the landscape is bereft of human presence. Also, for him, what we call 'place-making'— in connection with landscape art— always comes first; the sense of sublimity or bountifulness qualitatively adds to the feel of the 'place' once it is identifiably established. This particular point links Hemendranath's hillscapes with those of Jamini Prakash Gangooli, who painted quite a few works featuring the Kanchanjungha, including one whose colour scheme comes close to *Premer Swargo*. Interesting, too, is the use of mist. We get to see the use of haze as a tool to make the reality of landscapes indistinct and unspecified in case of some Bengal school artists, almost as an attempt to explore that cusp between the real and the imagined, the spatial and the spiritual. Interestingly, mist was an important component of perception for white painters, photographers, and even travel writers[xiii], indicating notable sets of ambivalences that went on to construct the Himalayan Picturesque, which was both similar, yet variant to the configuration of the Indian Picturesque[xiv]. We do see some mist in both *Premer Swargo* and *Premer Rajyo*, but the mist does not obliterate the bearings of the landscape, nor does it mediate with the general factor of recognisability. We note the similar use of a light haze in his other painting of the range—*Kanchenjungha*—in which he looks at the peaks closely, with the effect that even the folds and crevices are seen clearly. This close-up view recalls Gaganendranath Tagore's painting of Kanchenjungha, though it does not have even a hint of foliage. In Mazumdar's painting the colour variation separates the receding ranges, introducing a sense not only of distance but of depth as well; it is against this darkened foreground—which also performs the purpose of framing— that the range appears as a substantial presence, glorious yet distant. The mist at the lower reaches of the range is evocative of more than only one kind of distance, namely, that of the range from the perceived position of the viewer, but also of that great distance of the landscape locale from the dweller of the plains, a *difference* really, from their composite lived

experience that is created by atmosphere, visual culture and many other factors. Fog and mist is used in a very different manner in Mazumdar's painting *Tushar-Giri* though; here it is hardly fog, more like a mass of dense cloud, and used almost as a player in an unfolding drama who claims central focus. There is a clear sense of movement in the blush-coloured mass of cloud, which is clearly contrasted to the unmoving landscape and the familiar snow range. Of special interest is the couple of vertical forms[xv] placed on the right of the painting: these could well be denuded trunks of trees, which balance the horizontal layout of the composition, but perform another function, distinct and notable. In many horizontally-composed landscapes such vertical forms are used almost as an anchor of the viewer's self, so that she can transpose her identity within the frame, and 'enter' the painting, as it were, thus shedding the passivity of a mere external observer. The vertical forms— mimicking, almost, standing human figures— serve this purpose adequately here, as details are eliminated almost completely: in the absence of clear recognisability, these act as perfect signposts to situate the self within the painting, and provide a possibility of the sensuous perception of the three-dimensional surround, not only of the panoramic vista, but also the atmosphere. Mist and clouds in a landscape play with both visual perception and the sense of situatedness in various ways. By obliterating known bearings, these serve to unroot the self from the dependence of the senses: what comes about is an unspecified space that is often accompanied by thoughts about one's own identity[xvi]. The moment that *Tushar-giri* holds does seem to be one that interrogates the infirmity of rooted existence: it does feel that within a matter of moments, the snow peaks, the lower mountain ranges, the trees and the valley will be obliterated from view by the moving, enveloping cloud, leaving the viewer without her bearings. It is a visual that fixes the moment of transition between the seen and the unseen, which subtly questions the rationale of visual evidence[xvii]. Such 'cusp' moments are not unusual in Mazumdar's landscapes; if we look back at *Premer Rajyo* and *Premer Swargo*, it is clear that the first painting depicts the hour of dawn, the second that of dusk. In such liminal moments one is keenly aware of a transitory, fleeting pattern; but since it is a *pattern* of nature, it is self-perpetuating and repetitive, and therefore indicative of a cyclical continuity. He is, in a sense, preserving the 'bhava' or spirit, so favoured by the Bengal school artists, without sacrificing realism or recognisability. If this 'bhava' is taken to mean the evocation of a mood (which was the idea of the Bengal school, in all probability), then it brings together elements of

both thought and emotion in varying degrees; Hemendranath adds to it social and cultural moorings as well, along with a hint of the metaphysical.

Another painting that captures a hilly landscape in those 'cusp' moments of twilight is *Sesh Rashmi: Kashmir* (The last Sunray: Kashmir), which is technically not a hillscape as the valley has the chief focus here: the landscape is seen from considerable elevation, thus the height and grandeur of the line of hills receive no additional visual assertion. The real subject of the painting is the fleeting moments of the dying sunlight and the drama these enact: the sky is vivid and dramatic, the line of hills silhouetted against the blush-coloured sky, while the ground is dotted by a herd of sheep who are apparently returning to their shelter after grazing during the sunlight hours. We can actually feel the approaching dusk, the obliteration of the colours, overtaken by the impending darkness— and the gradual ebbing away of all movement in the valley after the sheep go off to their shelter for their nightly repose. Thus it captures not only the transitional, but also the transient: the former is a correlative of the latter and effects the visual translation of what is essentially conceptual. The painting is composed along horizontal lines, though the diagonal of the road brings that crucial point of balance to the composition.

Another landscape that utilizes a similar format of horizontal composition as that of *Sesh Rashmi: Kashmir* is *Sunny Simli.* As is the case of most of Hemendranath's landscapes, this too has firm locational moorings. The focus of this sunlit landscape is the small stream, Simli, in Odisha. We can see hills in the distance, some grasslands, and a small stream flows through red earthen banks— that the river is not too deep is indicated by a figure which is standing midstream, fishing, possibly. This landscape was printed in Volume 3 of *The Art of Mr H Mazumdar,* and the picture description that appears in the album serves to fix its locale:

> A realistic study— and a bold one— of a landscape in the Mayurbhanj state, where the artist had recently been at the invitation of H. H. The Maharaja. Many know Mr Mazumdar as a painter of fascinating human figures. Portrayal of the feminine graces is his special *forte* no doubt; but his brush is no less facile in the open air. The back grounds to his famous pictures bespeak his versatile skill. The sunny hills lit up by the noon-tide sun, the green swards, the rollicking rill and the daughters of the sylvan soil— these have ensnared the portrayer of feminine forms to paint a beautiful landscape in 'Sunny Simli'.[xviii]

This painting uses a number of horizontal lines- the river, its two banks, grasslands, the interrupted line of trees, a faint sense of the horizon, and then the line of the undulating hills— these stretch right across the entire breadth of the painting. In a way the sky and land, and all the elements that fall midway between these, are joined almost like a series of rough steps. This brings about not only a feel of the undulating terrain, but also induces a sense of expansion. The technique of gradually reducing the size of elements depending upon their distance in order to bring about an illusion of depth is well-known, especially in Western landscape painting. But in Chinese vertical scrolls, the sense of distance does not usually depend on this technique of foreshortening, but on division of pictorial space. In this particular painting, it does appear that Hemendranath draws from both these lines. It cannot be said that there is no effort to create deep space through foreshortening— it is a naturalist canvas, after all— but it is indeed minimal, comparatively speaking. Perhaps this is because of the paintings inherent focus on the horizontal expanse of nature. There is also an underpinning of the Oriental worldview— of presenting the co-existence of the different elements of nature— in the way he arranges the landscape, as if along ascending spaces, from the plane of the land.

It is noteworthy that most of his landscape paintings— even those which do not have clear pictorial indication as to their exact lacale— are given titles which unequivocally fix them to specific locations. While the Kanchanjungha paintings are unmistakably rooted to a known and recognizable location, paintings like *Shesh Rashmi: Kashmir* and *Sunny Simli* are not. We shall examine an intriguing painting called *Gachihata: Mymensingh* later in this chapter, which is a painting of a wilderness without any localizing markers: it is the title which provides that directional nudge to the viewers, adding a further dimension to the painting— a clear extra-textual framework that imputes upon the painting not only the regional context, but also its history, culture, and even strands of nostalgia. We wonder whether it is actually possible to consider each of these as a visual tale with an endnote, as the narrative, though covertly developed, is not difficult to relate to. Though some of his landscapes do deal with subjects that are undistinguished and receive their regional reference only from their title, we shall also see how he is also concerned with painting the landmarks of Indian history and culture, rather like the way in which the Kanchanjangha appears numerous times in his works chiefly as a glorious presence. Two such paintings are *Jagannath Mandir* (Jagannath Temple) and *Chet Singh Ghat*. Primarily it does feel that in these he is attempting to connect to the strands of Hindu religious

culture, but a close look at these paintings makes us wonder whether he was at all concerned with organized religion. Both the paintings are watercolours, and in both the principal focus is on architecture. Of special interest is the use of perspective in *Jagannath Mandir*: there is a tree in the foreground and another a little behind, on the left— apart from these, there is no hint of nature in the painting. The work is built upon the characteristically-shaped domes of the temple, one after another— even the upper part of the external boundary wall appears in the painting (and this is possibly why it feels as if the work is abruptly cropped near the bottom). The flood of worshippers with which this temple is conceptually connected is completely absent here. If we compare it with Gaganendranath Tagore's famous nightscape of the Jagannath temple, the difference in the basic character of the two paintings can be clearly noted. Gaganendranath's painting focuses upon the religious emotion which is communitarian and even a little frenzied, a public emotion almost, the intensity of which is increased manifold by the drama of light and darkness. Hemendranath, however, has avoided not only the thronging crowds of the worshippers, but in doing so, has also kept out of the pictorial scheme the very *public* frenzied devotion of the pilgrims. His temple is unpeopled and solitary, and the entire visual is built upon a clear upward thrust with the domes rising impersonally against an open and expansive sky. It is eminently possible that the artist is attempting to portray the solemnity and sublimity of the divine, way beyond the scope of ritualist religious practice— cued in, in a sense, by the grace of the temple's architecture and the upward rise of the domes. We also need to notice that he fixes his point of view in such a manner that each dome can be seen separately— the sense of a compositional upthrust is induced by the collective rise of all the individual domes, and can be perceived as a correlative to the attainment of a heightened spirituality. I would say he is spelling out a spiritual space which is distinct from ritual-centrism, away from the *public* display of devotion. And this is why his Jagannath temple is solitary and unpeopled, ideally open to that intensely *private* moment of silent communion. Also, it is the close-up view of the temple that has a two-fold effect: it fixes the image of the temple as an unwavering cultural emblem, apart from encouraging a point of spiritual connection by bringing the viewer extremely close to the revered structure— making pilgrims out of them, as it were. This becomes adequately clear once we compare it with some of Abanindranath Tagore's 1911 'Puri' paintings in brush and ink, especially 'Jagannath Temple to Masir bari' and 'Swargadwar to Konarak', which treats the temple as a distant structure. Here the temple is seen merely as an element of nature,

unspectacular and undistinguished, merging with the line of distant and indistinct buildings (in the former) and the far-off horizon with just a hint of sand and rocks (in the latter). These 'landscapes as vast voids'[xix] also represent moments from an ongoing journey, and the temple performs as an important element of localization (as do the titles). It is only a landmark here, at times performing the function of an 'embedded scale' (Siva Kumar, 2008, 140) which serves to define the vastness of the empty space all around, very different in spirit, thus, from Hemendranath's portrayal of the temple as an emblem of India's spiritual culture.

Chet Singh Ghat is a classic example of place-making— the unique ambience of the ghats of Varanasi, including all the markers of location and activity has been carefully included. Several strands of narrative, apart from the merely locational, are interfused in this intriguing work. This particular ghat had been favoured by many artists as the subject of painting even before Hemendranath: William Hodges had a painting of the ghat[xx]; even William Daniell had painted Chet Singh Ghat at around the very end of the 18th century[xxi]. This painting utilizes the known gaze of the British as rulers, and this clearly mediates with the visual narrative of the work. It is quite possible that Hemendranath actually saw this particular painting, or at least its reproduction[xxii]. It is possible that this served as a faint nudge, impelling him to paint his own vision of this historic edifice. We need to keep in mind that Chet Singh was the last independent king of Varanasi; in 1781, the Governor General Warren Hastings imprisoned him in his own palace after having curbed the revolt initiated by him (it would be interesting to note that William Hodges had accompanied Hastings in this tour, and made his initial sketches of the ghat during this turbulent time, yet his final painting is calm and placid). The other painter of the Ghat, William Daniell, whose painting clearly incorporates the imperialist gaze, was unequivocal about the importance that the curbing of this insurrection had for the British, on the whole question of retaining the control of India[xxiii]. Thus there was already a historical connection of this ghat— along with the house of Chet Singh— with the twin perceptual strands of nationalism and patriotism, and that is possibly why Hemendranath chose this particular ghat(among 80-something ones along the river bank in Benaras) for painting. There is an almost unparalleled mastery of watercolour here: the historic building behind the steps of the ghat shines in the rays of the morning sun, below the steps men and women bathe in the river. The ghats of the Ganges, as well as the salvation-seeking pilgrims taking a holy dip, are images inextricably connected to the whole idea of Benaras ('Kashi', to most Bengalis), and these connect the painting to the

familiar circle of religious culture that this 'holy' city is known for. The round umbrellas that have been an omnipresent feature of the Benaras ghats appear here as well. But here the specifically religious 'feel' of the place, or even the identity of holiness that Benaras enjoys in common perception, is not explored at all. What claims central focus— in fact the *only* focus— is the almost royal presence of the grand historic building, along with all its details. Even for those who may not be aware of the historical background, the building, bathed in golden sunlight, does appear as a glorious presence with a pervasive enigma of pastness. For those who are more aware, the unmistakable underpinnings of patriotism would be easy to identify. In a way the artist is bringing together the past and the present within its pictorial space, embedding the selfsame daily activities and known landmarks within a matrix of the glorious past, to create a sense of identity that is continuous and unchanging, and a culture that has been able to subsume pastness within the contemporary. Unlike the Bengal School's use of history (in their works history did not *travel*, as it were, but was encapsulated within its own far-off moment, thus remaining distant and distinct from contemporary experience), Hemendranath has attempted here to revisit its abiding relevance more than a century after the incident, exploring thus the perpetuation of chosen moments of history across generations. This also holds within itself the emotional journey of objective history towards a space of inspirational myth. In fact this painting does have a submerged narrative of resistance, historically derived, which is then leavened by an imagination both idealistic and ideological. If we look at the painting of Chet Singh Ghat by William Daniell, the first thing that is noted is how the Indians moving about on the steps are painted in a single monochromatic whitish colour, undifferentiated, as if they have neither identity, nor personality. Looking closely, we also notice the Union jack flying on a boat. Hemendranath's *Chet Singh Ghat* can actually be considered as a subversive version of Daniell's view of the historical spot without stretching our imagination too much: considering that India was still under the British at the time when Hemendranath painted this makes our connection to the painting deeper and more poignant. There is indeed a sense of timelessness in the way the past sails into the present, and their interface is seamless and harmonious.

The timeless rhythms of nature find space in a number of his landscapes almost as a motif of continuity, especially those which have cultivation and cultivators as their principal subjects. These can actually be seen as quintessentially 'cultural' landscapes. For the cultural landscape has its tetherings to memory and ideology, among other things; the selection itself, of a particular

frame of nature, or land, can actually be unconsciously conditioned by the perceived notions of its history, customs, even practiced morality. It is redolent too, of associations with, and evocations aroused by, elements both personal and communitarian. This 'imputed meaning'[xxiv], as it were, mediates between the physical and the psychological. Most of Hemendranath's landscapes— even those which serve as backgrounds to his female figures— engage with rural Bengal, focusing with singularity on the near-quintessential quality of the Bengal landscape— *sujala, sufala, malayajasheetala, shashyashyamola*[xxv] (well-watered, fertile, breeze-cooled, green with crops), an image that had become inseparable from the visual perception of Bengal[xxvi], more so with the urban centres becoming activity hubs— the rural, in a sense, becoming synonymous therefore, with restfulness and peace. In a sense, thus, Mazumdar is almost always portraying the *culture* of Bengal— visual or otherwise— in his landscapes, and it is only in the manner and not in the point of intent that his works differ from the Bengal school paintings. The latter, with their insistence on the historicity of India's glorious past, was working on a pivot that presupposed the viewers' acquaintance with tradition. In the absence of actual visual familiarity, the connection may have encountered deferment. We must keep in mind that historical literature has never suffered from this drawback as it is not premised on actual *seenness*. In Mazumdar's paintings, the representation of the known landscape of Bengal with its unmissable visual familiarity, can be seen to combine the two factors indicated by Eric Hirsch that I had mentioned before: the objective framework of the locale, and the 'imputed' meaning that local inhabitants, with their history and customs, bring to this frame. In a sense it is a visual interface of two kinds of truth, layered yet composite. This is especially noticed in his paintings that focus on cultivation and cultivators. Wide-open tracts of agricultural land, and the act of cultivation itself, constitute familiar images of rural Bengal. Agriculture, in a sense, is an 'ordering' of nature for the purpose of community and is therefore related to negotiations between nature, individual, community and civilisation. It is also notionally related to the wider rhythms of life that are repetitive and cyclical, holding moments that are seemingly eternal and untouched by time. In many of Hemendranath's works that involve the rural landscape of Bengal it is the agricultural activity that shapes and defines the terrain, and animates it with a sense of community. In the painting titled *Palli Krishan* (The Village Farmer), we see three harvesters reaping the field, with differing headgears for protection from the intense sun, the middle figure of the perfectly balanced trio wielding his scythe to gather the crop of paddy. The field in the foreground is bare

and stubbly, evidencing the ongoing act of cutting down the sheaves. The difference in appearance between the bare land and the rest of the field stretching into the distance—yet to-be-harvested and rippling with crops—provide an interesting visual contrast. In fact this reminds me of something that Michael Rosenthal had once said about Brueghel's paintings: that his work emphasises upon not only the 'logic of the terrain', but also the 'logic of activity' (Rosenthal 1982, 12), an observation that can be contextually remembered in connection with this particular work. This is in fact similar to Hirsch's theory of the two layers of meaning which come together and coalesce in significant landscapes. Most landscapes have an underpinning of ideology[xxvii]— not only sociocultural, but also economic— and this is most clearly observed in paintings involving cultivation/cultivators, as these have a direct relation with the means of production, and refer back to the painter's class identity and personal/communitarian history, which, in its turn, mediate with the way/s in which the elements of the landscape is ordered. We need to remember that Mazumdar belonged to a family of erstwhile zamindars (who employed peasants to till their ample fields) and painted most of these landscapes when he came back to Gachihata for five years due to the war-related bomb scare in Calcutta, during 1941-46. He himself was immensely rich then. But his relation to the cultivators that this position immediately suggests was possibly mediated by a number of factors. Firstly, he was not an outsider, but had grown up amidst an essentially agrarian visual culture, and had known the farmers and cultivators closely within the fold of a close-knit village economy. Second, this visit was in a sense the seeking of a refuge from chaos and disorder, a return to familial ties within the tranquil and unhurried slow life of the village[xxviii]. This was also the time when he used to roam around the village on a daily basis with his maternal uncle Nishibhushan Dutta Roy, and is said to have taken several photographs of the countryside and the lifestyle of the villagers[xxix]. These were later turned into oil paintings in his studio, and were exhibited at a huge show in Eden Gardens in 1948, the very last exhibition of his life. The themes, in most cases, were connected to the simple, unremarkable, daily business of the village people— like peasant friends chatting over a hookah, fishermen casting their net, and of course the familiar sights of cultivation and reaping (Ghosh, 1999, 47). These works, thus, painted during a period when the artist was settled once more within the seemingly safe circle of domestic and familial bonds away from bomb-ravaged Calcutta, have the impress of that very same peace and tranquility that he had been seeking. Thus these can hardly be called essentialised representations of the rural face of Bengal, in the general

vein of the pastoral[xxx], though the ideology of the natural and the simple does permeate these works. Though the very choice of locale, and elements chosen and included within the frame of the landscape indicate that reality itself is hierarchical for the artist when it comes to representation, there does not seem to be any overt idealization. In fact in *Palli-Krishan* there is a focal insistence on the strenuous toil of the reapers, their head-gear hinting at the heat of the sun; there is hardly any romance connected with the activity of reaping. Another watercolour, *Sanjher Palli* (The Village in Evening) portrays the end of a hard day's labour and also the end of the day itself, building upon the sense of serenity and peace of bountiful nature as opposed to the emergent discordance of urban hubs. Primarily it does appear to fall neatly within the category of images of agriculture and agricultural activity, representing the productivity and fecundity of the land, as also the inherent peace and restfulness, which had always had a powerful hold in the visual culture of the region. The other Bangla word for evening— *godhuli*— is literally derived from the dust (*dhuli*) that is generated by the hooves of the moving oxen(*go*) while returning back from the day's labour in the fields at the hour of sunset. The rhythms of nature— especially the way the diurnal clock is followed for both work and repose— are evocative of the natural discipline that is still followed in the countryside, something that the cities have lost touch with. Considered this way, the artifice of civilization, its loss of natural harmony can indeed be imagined to exist as an unmentioned obverse here. It is indeed true that a village in tranquil twilight can actually be considered as a powerful trope to invoke the idyllic: both the evocations of dusk, and the theme of the end-of-day homecoming, are in tune with the overarching sense of restfulness associated with agricultural rurality as a cultural category[xxxi]. But we also need to remember that the figure of the cultivator with his oxen is the main focus of the painting, and not the beauty of the dusk descending upon the village— despite its suggestive title; and thus the unseen backdrop of labour, as also that of the long, hard, strenuous day of toil, remain as unavoidable imaginative preconditions for the viewers to connect to the painting. It is the activity that defines the time of day, connected by the implied and the actual sense of impending repose and restfulness. This also went behind the subjectivisation of the rural peasant as a hardworking figure of limited means, yet rooted to, as it were, the simple and placid lifestyle of the countryside. This simplified construct took on a significant dimension post-1921, with Gandhiji's *satyagraha* bringing about a renewed emphasis on the empowerment of the rural masses: the image of the docile and dutiful peasant came to be subjectivised with will and

conscious political agency. Such landscapes can be perceived to literally engage, therefore, 'the senses of place, region, country and land.' (DeLue and Elkins 2008, 167) Theorists writing about gender in landscape relate agricultural, especially harvest landscapes to gender stereotypes: 'the gendering of Nature as a female, a transcultural tradition that dates back to Antiquity' and the cultivators as agents of ordering and control, and refer to 'ways in which the subjugation of nature coincided with industrial and colonial expansion and the ways in which such processes of subjugation were refracted through discourses in geography' (Adams and Gruetzner Robins 2001, 5). It could therefore be worthwhile to examine whether the covert underpinnings of ordering, controlling and subjugation, derived from the context of gender, were subconsciously applied to his particular colonial context with the emergent, if diverse, ways of resisting imperialism and defining nationhood. . Considering that these landscapes were painted during his extended stay at Gachihata during 1941-46[xxxii] it is possible that there was already the looming shadow of the Bengal famine of 1943 in the offing[xxxiii]: this would then, change our very perception of the artist's strategies of representation and their intent, bringing in the strands of not only anxiety, but also longing for that rapidly-vanishing *placidity* of rural agrarian life, in the contained way it would affect one who had always been only an onlooker, however sympathetic, one whose means of life had not been substantially altered by such disruptions.

Many of his works use landscape as a background, usually to a solitary female figure, yet some of these cease to function as mere backdrops and become notably significant on their own, holding deep within those threads of narration without which the tale of the painting would unfold only halfway. For the landscape some measure of subservience still remains, though, in the scheme of the paintings where the chief focus is almost invariably claimed by the central figure. But in certain paintings like *Barsha* (The Monsoon) these become virtually inseparable. The title indicates that the artist is addressing the wholesomeness of a season, that most important season in Bengal which is responsible for that signature greenery which visually defines Bengal. With the title as the cue, what we see here is a landscape moored within a frame both temporal and spatial: a wet evening in rural Bengal with gathering clouds and blowing winds, with a woman on the steps of the *ghat* in the middle of the customary end-of-the-day ablutions. Interestingly enough, the gentle directional nudge provided by the title leads the viewers to consider the wet-clothed woman in the foreground (who is, clearly, the focus of the

painting) as one who embodies the season in a way that is tactile and palpable, and therefore gets to become a part of the schema of the landscape. She may have just finished her bath (she is seen to be towelling her feet) but she could just as well be rain-soaked at the same time. The tactility of wetness strikes the viewer, as do the bending trees at the distance signifying the force and direction of wind, to culminate in a singular, overwhelming moment of engagement with the season. A woman bathing in a ghat had been an extremely common, even unremarkable sight in the Bengal countryside; but the dark looming clouds and the rain seem to create an unseen enclosure within which she is absorbed in a solitary moment that seemingly unmoors her from the cues of her social identity (the gold ornaments— and the *sankha* and *pola*— tell us that she is married and belong to a rich household, and the bunch of keys indicate her rooted and responsible position in her family). It is as if she *becomes* the season, and this alter-identity is made all the more dramatic by these trappings which seem to belong to a distant context. In a sense there is a symbolic dimension in both the landscape and the figure which is, again, interdependent on both, and flow back and forth from one to the other. Another painting where the landscape is somewhat overtly symbolic is *Chatak*, which has both a watercolour and an oil version, with interesting variations in narrative. This is one clear example of how the features of the objective framework— that is the defined area within which the subject is placed— refer closely, at times allegorically, to the psychological, often ideological underpinnings that loosely constitute the scheme of narrative. *Chatak* has a woman seated on a piece of rock, surrounded by dense foliage and a waterbody, which seem to form a kind of enclosure, or possibly a private haunt. Here again the title provides a cue: the theme of a seemingly endless wait and eager anticipation is triggered off by the name, *Chatak*, which is the name of a familiar bird in Bengal which is supposed to be eternally thirsty for rainwater. The woman, clearly preoccupied, may be contemplating a long-awaited-for reunion with her beloved, and is already with him in her imagination. The watercolour version was published in the first issue of *The Art of Mr H Mazumdar*(1927), and the picture description goes like this; 'The steadfast eye of the fair maiden casts a vacant look. Her cherished hope is yet not realized: she is absorbed in thoughts—too dear!' We need to note how certain elements in the landscape appear in neat pairs: the swans, the hyacinth flowers, the lotuses, the twin stones, the two trees (and their duplicated reflection on the surface of the waterbody) and function as referential frames to the image of union that the subject is possibly pondering upon. In a way, then, the enclosure can be seen to refer to the

woman's hidden world of thoughts, and the paired images render visibility to her ponderings. This in fact reminds us of Millais' *Ophelia*, especially of the painting's dense symbolism inherent in the flowers and other referents: there is also a certain similarity with the recessed waterbody with sylvan surrounds that forms a haunt-like enclosure in Millais' work. It is worth noting that *Chatak* has a companion piece in watercolour (as is the case with many of Hemendranath's oils) with a few minor differences in detail. The woman in the watercolour is clearly married, with sindoor in her hair- parting and red *tip* on her forehead. The one in oil does away with the sindoor, and replaces the red dot on the forehead with a black one (we need to remember that for married women wearing a black dot on the forehead was not common in Bengal— it was generally considered inauspicious and unlucky). Taking note of this variation deepens the complexity of the narrative and the enclosure-like landscape takes on the overtones of secretiveness. In fact the variation between the oil and the watercolour version is a pointer to the way in which the politics of reception mediate with not only the choice of details, but also the manipulation of the narrative in a painting. The oil, which clearly portrays an unmarried woman waiting for a secret randezvous with her lover, was understandably intended for a rich collector, while the watercolour was printed in an album to which the middle-class households had easy access. That is possibly why in the latter version the woman is married, and it is somewhat implied that she is waiting for her husband. The narrative is subsumed within the sanctioned space of social morality, avoiding the very possibility of a complicated reading involving pre-marital intimacy, which may not have found favour within a conventional set. A collector's drawing room would possibly have very different conditions of viewership. That is why the narrative here is open-ended: the implication of secretiveness permeates the landscape as well, reasserting its enclosure-like feel. It is not only the *shapla* and the *shaluk* (the hyacinth flower and the lotus)— common flowers seen in ponds of Bengal— that fix the landscape to its intended locale, but also the hint to the structure of conventional morality, especially the stature of marriage as the only sanction to heterosexual intimacy.

Maya (Delusion/Earthly Ties), a painting that deals with an old, decrepit woman being led away from her life*'s* abode by *yamdut*, death's messenger, uses a background landscape that is barren and bare, famine-like almost, with waiting vultures on leafless branches. Reading this barrenness as an objective correlative of old age and death is somewhat dependant on the title, as the

messenger too looks nothing like the scary figure of the *yamdut* embedded in our cultural imagination. The loosely-threaded narrative is fleshed out considerably once we refer to Hemendranath's own words in *Chhobir Chosma*, where he talks about the privileging of the artist's mind over his eye, with a clear reference to this painting(Mazumdar, 1991, 35-36). This is a dialogue between the mind of the artist, on the one hand, and his eye and hand, on the other, and the talking point is the making of a proposed painting called *Mayar Khela* (The Play of Illusions). Detailed, step-by-step instructions are given by the mind to the eye and hand who then work in tandem to finish the painting, which, however, turns out to be a failure as *bhava* (feeling) had been absent throughout. The pattern of details of this fictional *Mayar Khela* matches, almost perfectly, the one that we are discussing, *Maya*: the old woman leaning on sticks, the messenger of Death pulling her away while she continues to stare longingly at her home, the carrions waiting patiently on the bare branches, the red sky in the background signifying the dusk of life. Reading this extremely interesting account, one realizes that the instructions relating to the stepwise build-up of the pictorial narrative contains a submerged pattern which is actually about the structuring of a cultural landscape. In fact there exists a rework of this painting— with major changes both in the structuring of elements and technique— which has a very different feel to it. There is a clear insistence on the atmospheric, which moves away from the easy-to-decode clarity of symbolic structuring seen in the earlier painting. The figures remain the same, as do the leafless branches and the waiting carrions, but they are seen through a haze— somewhat like an early-morning mist. This intentional lack of clarity itself becomes a diffused symbol, indicating the distance of the frame from lived, experienced, sharp-focus reality. One wonders whether the rework was necessary to capture the absent *bhava* the artist had been concerned about, an element without which, according to him, even the most meticulous symbolic structuring is bound to fail. Considered in this manner, there seems to be little difference between his views and the Bengal School's insistence on the 'spirit' (*bhava*) that animates a painting. The difference, perhaps, lies in the fact that the latter considered *bhava* to be the single, overarching factor, while Hemendranath believed in other concerns as well. It is important for us to remember that a thin, translucent covering of haze had been a characteristic feature of many Bengal School landscapes, especially those which used the wash technique; but in case of Hemendranath's realist landscapes, this is rare, almost unseen elsewhere. He uses the sense of haze in this specific work with a specific purpose, and not as a habitual technique. It is as if in

the second work Hemendranath graduates to an entirely different order of symbolism, engaging with the haze as the symbolic blurring of individual tales, with only an overarching consciousness of a half-understood and indifferent universe.

Gachihata: Mymensingh is a landscape which is as fascinating as it is intriguing, one that stands apart not only from Hemendranath's body of landscapes, but from his entire oeuvre. In spite of the marker of locality introduced by the title, the painting could really be of anywhere. When an artist, who had clearly favoured both narratival threads and localizing markers in his paintings all through his life, paints a landscape of an extremely unexceptional semi-barren tract of land with no specific focus, it does induce the sense of a sharp variance from the broad directionality of his career as we have known it. This is a painting of a wilderness, and it is clear that no human hand has attempted to alter its character by means of cultivation or any other activity. It does appear that the artist, at the very outset, distances his subject from our usual circle of experience, normal, known and somewhat controlled; there is a clear sense of detachment from civilization, society and even the way we perceive the flow of life. In spite of a century of being conditioned otherwise, we still subconsciously half-expect some kind of eye-pleasing 'picturesque-ness' (for want of another word) in natural landscapes, and Hemendranath himself, being a realist painter and a professional one, had never lost sight of this factor— we may remind ourselves of his Kanchanjangha paintings. But in this specific painting he totally does away with this concern, and, in a sense, reconstructs the structure of our usual expectations from a landscape. The wilderness stretches away in the distance into nothingness, within an area of atmospheric light. This builds on a phenomenological experience of the landscape that essentially includes the perception of the painter as an embodied observer. The sharp flakes of light (one can identify the source and direction of natural light here) that define the bushes and the bit of uneven land in the foreground dissolve into ambient light in the far midground, obscuring the shape of the trees at the line of the horizon and extending upward into a luminous sky. The line of horizon is faint, and is thus not able to induce any notable horizontal division; the colour of the sky is not differentiated either. Therefore what comes about is a sense of the continuity of sky and land which, in its turn, broadens further the sense of expanse— which at times seem to be other-worldly even, in tune with the painting's evocation of an experience beyond the known and the familiar. This is a painting that is meant to capture the artist's consciousness rather than the

elements of nature; this is the filter which transforms the seen reality, even the temporality of his birthplace. There is a suggestion of a mist-like haze that effaces details in the top half of the painting; this near-erasure of the perspectival markers of the terrain, along with the controlled luminosity goes on to create a strong sense of atmosphere. 'Strong' is perhaps not the right word here: the painting is about the muted, the undramatic, the insignificant, about the embeddedness of a participatory consciousness, establishing connections, producing significations which may well be construed as being, to use a phrase from Christopher Tilley, 'prior to the specificities of cultural meaning'(Tilley, 2004, 31).

It is clear that in this work Hemendranath has decidedly moved away from his lifelong concern with encoding locationality, as well as the creation of narrative frames (though there is a submerged, if deconstructible, narration about an intimate, absorbed moment of connection with the landscape). Like most of his works, this one too is undated. But both the subject and the technique, and, above all, the inherent meditative quality point at the possibility of it belonging to the last years of his life— possibly during his extended stay at Gachihata around 1941-46, when he was going through several kinds of changes. This painting makes us wonder whether his work would have taken an abstract turn had he lived beyond his fifty-four years. In most of his other landscapes, the carefully-deployed apparatus of place-making is supplemented by variant cues that indicate the existence of a deeper, submerged layer of meaning. At times we find these in the titles, or in the way he arranges elements within the pictorial space, or even in perspectival adjustments and shifts in points of view. And this is how, in his landscapes, the surface of the seen, the experienced, and the *real* is mediated by the alternate reality of the ideal and the ideological.

[i] This 'note', in Modern Review, March 1908(p. 273), is signed 'N'- as was somewhat customary for her.
[ii] It will be worthwhile to note that John Ruskin— who first used the term *pathetic fallacy* in his *Modern Painters*— was almost a model for Bengal School artists and like-minded aesthetes of that time. Ruskin, however, saw 'emotional falseness' in it, and did complain that 'Romantic-era artists who used the pathetic fallacy were self-indulgent and morally compromised.'(Treib 2011, 177)
[iii] Interestingly, Sreemany was also the first to encourage artists to look back at the great art tradition of India and re-energise the contemporary artistic climate through its inspiration, much before Havell and Abanindranath did, in his book *Aryajatir Shilpo-chaturi* published in 1874.

[iv] 'Clarity is not what he pursued; it was the incommunicable richness of ambivalence that he sought; and he placed the intriguing shadows and the whispering lights that stoked the mind more than the obviousness of the factual world.'(Siva Kumar 2008, 138)

[v] J.T. Pearson, an army surgeon who arrived in Darjeeling in 1839 commented: 'There is an elasticity of the air in these mountains, and a freshness, . . . exercise gives all the pleasant glow of an English walk on a frosty morning.' (Pinn 1986, 102)

[vi] *Kinchinjunga Peaks from Jelapahar, Darjeeling District, Bengal,* 1863. Pencil, pen and ink, and wash. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

[vii] . *Kinchinjunga from Darjeeling*, Edward Lear, 1879. Oil on canvas. Yale Centre of British Art, New Haven, Connecticut.

[viii] For a brilliant discussion on how misty Himalayan mountains 'unsettled' the notion of British selfhood and subjectivity, see 'Misty Mediations: Spectral Imaginings and the Himalayan Picturesque' by Romita Ray, 2012.

[ix] "In 1829 Captain George Lloyd and J W Grant were passing through Darjeeling en route to settle a border dispute between Sikkim and Nepal.The location was then known by local Lepcha peoples as *Dorje-ling*, or, Place of the Thunderbolt. The crescent shaped ridge of Dorje-ling struck Lloyd as an ideal location for a hill station sanatoriam where colonial officials could find respite from the swelter of the plains below. Lloyd conveyed his vision to the Governer General of India, Lord William Bentinck, who agreed that Dorje-ling would make an excellent sanatoriam and strategic military outpost for monitoring the Himalayan frontier." (Middleton and Shneiderman 2018, 5)

[x] In fact, the hill stations, especially Darjeeling, were considered to serve both as spaces of refuge and surveillance, (Kennedy 1996, 1), as it hosted military outposts for British India's Himalayan frontier, as well as sanatoriums for treatment and recuperation of British patients.

[xi] See Sarkar 2013,43-44

[xii] Many of these paintings were published in Bangla periodicals— especially Hemendranath Mazumdar's works— which were hugely popular then in middle-class Bengali households.

[xiii] By the early nineteenth century, aesthetic preoccupations with atmospheric forces like mist, rain, fog, clouds, wind, snow, and storm, advanced towards more subjective natural interpretations, freeing the viewer from the needs of geographical accuracy and recognizable reality to spontaneously engage with "natural phenomena."(Ray 2012, 116)

[xiv] Military officers, memsahibs, professional and amateur landscape painters, botanists, photographers, cartographers, zoologists, diarists, missionaries, and tourists all contributed to the making of the Indian picturesque.(Ray 2012, 117)

[xv] It would be interesting to note, in the context of the landscapes of one who is primarily a figure painter: 'Just as the vertical may be called the figure painter's line, the horizontal is the landscape painter's line.' (Poore 1976, 64)

[xvi] If the mist reduced visual clarity, it did intensify imagination by increasing the capacity to register sensations through touch. What was unseen could be conjured up through tactility and intuition.(Ray 2012, 115)

[xvii] Nina Elizabeth Mazuchelli, a nineteenth-century British traveler and travel writer, expressed a similar loss of bearings amidst thick fog in the Darjeeling Himalayas, and a resultant shift of identity: 'In the valley lay a white lake of transparent mist…it was altogether such a spectral and unearthly scene, that I realized in an instant how utterly hopeless it would be to attempt to portray it, and simply stood entranced, losing for awhile even my own individuality, feeling that I had almost entered some new world.'(Mazuchelli 1876, 279)

[xviii] In 'Pictorial Paragraphs' at the end of the album, n.p

[xix] 'Landscape as the desolate void to be filled by the mind, is also the burden of a small number of watercolours representing the seashore at Puri…colour and tone add an emotional timbre to the space in them and render them variously filled or empty and thus open to various levels of penetration…the Puri landscapes were about emptying, about landscapes as vast voids' (Siva Kumar 2008, 140)

[xx] Titled 'The Ghauts at Benaras'. Working on sketches made in India(during his tour of Benaras in 1781 when he was accompanying Governor General Warren Hastings), Hodges painted this in London in 1787, and is in the collection of the Royal Academy.

[xxi] The name of this painting was 'Shivala Ghaut and Cheyt Singh's House near Benares'. Chet Singh Ghat has four parts really— Chet Singh Ghat, Niranjani Ghat, Nirvani Ghat and Shivala Ghat. This painting was exhibited in the Royal Academy in 1802.

[xxii] This is more of a conviction than a conjecture because of the fact that Hemendranath's intimate friend Atul Bose was closely acquainted with the work of the Daniel Brothers— in fact his painting of Taj Mahal has a close similarity with Daniel Brothers' aquatint of the same edifice. Since the two of them were not only intimate friends,

but also close associates and co-organizers of groups, publications and activities— moreover, it is known that they had long theoretical conversations on art— it is unlikely that Hemendranath did not share Bose's interest in Daniel Brothers' works.

[xxiii] "Cheit Singh, who has become memorable in the annals of British India from the insurrection which he raised against the English government during the administration of Warren Hastings, when, but for the prompt and energetic measures of the governor, the possession of India might have been lost to his country." (The Oriental Annual 1834,141-2*)*

[xxiv] Eric Hirsch says, in his introduction to *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspective on Place and Space* that in an anthropological sense landscape can be deployed in two ways: first, as a framing convention, which is also the objective framework, which is the presence of 'people' within a defined area. The second framework is one that has meaning 'imputed' by local people to their cultural and physical surroundings, which is often 'structured by history'. He also insists that the first 'objective', 'outsider's perspective is soon left behind in order to capture the native's point of view.' (Hirsch 1995, 1-2) Though Hirsch is not speaking specifically of landscape painting, he does refer to the ways in which the meaning of a particular landscape is both created and perceived, and I have found his discussion on the two-way deployment of landscape as specially useful to our reading of landscape painting.

[xxv] A line from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's song *Vande Mataram,* now the national song of India.

[xxvi] Such an essentialised image of a region, replete with tactile and other sensory underpinnings other than the purely visual, is not uncommon in landscape painting. For example, certain qualities 'expected' in an English landscape would be, '*humidity*— Constable's greatcoat weather, misty mornings and gorgeous verdure in Victorian paintings, *rusticity*— thatched cottages, cornfields and hedgerows teeming with wildlife, *antiquity*— ruined abbeys, ivy-mantled towers, lichen and pleasing decay, *intricacy*— filigree patterns of branches and twigs..' Landscape through Painting, Hugh Prince, https://www.jstor.org/stable/40570767
Also see The English Landscape, David Lowenthal and Hugh C. Prince, https://www.jstor.org/stable/212656

[xxvii] Speaking about rustic landscapes, Ann Bermingham proposes that there is an underlying ideology of landscape; in the 18th and 19th century a class view of landscape actually incorporated a set of socially and economically determined values, culturally expressed by the painted image. Rustic landscape painting is ideological because it brings about an illusionary image of the real landscape while referring to its actual, existant conditions. (Bermingham 1986, 3)

[xxviii] This was also the time when Hemendranath became spiritually inclined, and got his *deeksha* (spiritual initiation) from Santisudha Devi, daughter of sage Bijay Krishna Goswami, and later painted two oils of Goswami and his wife which were displayed then at Goswami's ashram at Gendariya, Dhaka. (Ghosh 1999, 48)

[xxix] Apart from Barid Baran Ghosh's account in 'Chitrashilpi Hemen Mazumdar'(Ghosh 1999, 47-48), this point is discussed in detail in an unpublished manuscript of 2018 by Jogindranath Majumdar(titled *Amar dekha Gorakaka, Chitrashilpi Hemendranath Mazumdar: Gachihata Smriti o Kolkata Smriti*), the artist's nephew who had been especially close to him during his Gachihata days.

[xxx] Though I would agree with Terry Gifford when, while defining the three kinds of pastoral, he mentions the 'second' kind of pastoral being any literature which describes the countryside with implicit/explicit contrast to the city. But the third, 'sceptical' use of the term— the pastoral as pejorative—implying that the pastoral vision is in reality too simplified, and therefore idealizes the reality of country life (Gifford 1999, 2), does not fully work in our context, notwithstanding the fact that contrasting the country to the city is an act of privileging that is often underpinned by a subtly idealized point of view.

[xxxi] This is a close instance to 'how knowledge can be founded upon sight', and how things can fall into a category of 'codification into visual data' (Evans and Hall 2005, 6). Though this is mentioned in the context of Foucault's visual imagination of the panopticon while attempting to define visual culture, this is instrumental in indicating how geographical entities are perceptually 'sighted' in certain fixed manners, and continue as a perpetuating image not only for the people outside the region but also local dwellers.

[xxxii] Both Barid Baran Ghosh's and Jogindranath Majumdar's accounts point at this possibility. Since Mazumdar's paintings were usually not marked with dates, the researcher has no way but to seek evidence elsewhere.

[xxxiii] In fact Hemendranath is known to have painted artworks driven by by the ravages of the famine; his painting, 'More than Death', a watercolour almost monochromatic in scheme, depicts a mother wearing a tattered saree holding to her breast a child who may be ill or even dead.

Chapter 4

The Oppositional Self: Poems of Hemendranath Mazumdar

When we pass from Hemendranath Mazumdar's paintings to the consideration of his poetry, there are two broad areas that primarily engage us; the poems are not only full of discourse, but also abound in images, many of which can be directly related to his art. In most cases, both the discourse and the imagery connect with his innately oppositional self that we have observed in his paintings and also in his critical writings, and certain poems also offer explanatory cues to some of the narratives that are left open-ended in his paintings. When we work with the poetry of a painter, or the paintings of a poet, we subconsciously look for possible relationships that one set of signifiers may have forged with another distinct set, connected by the self of the artist-poet, as different recombinations of form and feeling— connections which are always a challenge for the researcher to unravel. Often the consonances are tangential, and to some extent disconcerting too, for those of us who expect the ease of a direct connection. This is especially notable in Rabindranath Tagore: there is a play with randomness in his paintings that is unforeseen in the well-wrought surface of his writing, and this process begins with his doodles where the ordered and the arbitrary exchange glances. The neatness, discipline and order that one relates to Tagore's work— even, to a certain extent, his doodled manuscripts(as he was primarily trying to mend the 'regrettable mischance'[i] of the erasures)— is done away with in his paintings, with a rare abandonment which is passionate and singular.[ii] Tagore's doodles— and later, his paintings— stood a considerable distance away from his usual methods of negotiating with words and text. It seems that it is the 'disinterested pleasure'[iii] that opened up for him that space of freedom which is somewhat unconditional, unfettered too, from the pressing need to be consistent with his own famed self. I found the instance of Tagore particularly significant in the present context; though Mazumdar's poetry and painting are connected in a far more direct manner than Tagore's— theme, image and discourse-wise—we need to remember that his poetry provided him that space where he got the opportunity of creative play, different and distinct from the area of his art and the fixity of his fame as a painter, which he had to live up to. Keeping this

in mind would sensitize us to the intrusions of his unfettered thoughts/emotions— which are both subtle and not-so-subtle— in his poems, though some of these are stylistically and thematically conventional. Almost all his dated poems were written in the late thirties and forties— that is, in the last decade of his 54-year old life— when he was at the peak of his fame as a painter, and had become an important figure in the fast-changing cultural landscape of his times. The fact that he never published his poems could be because he nurtured this as his private creative space, distant from the critical and judgmental public eye.

He wrote a large number of poems in his lifetime, though it is impossible to estimate now the approximate number of such compositions. We have two unpublished manuscripts, almost in an intact form: one is a long narrative poem called *Bikrito Bidhata* (The Sold Deity), and the other is a collection of individual poems, titled *Kalpanika* (Born of Fancy)[iv]. It is evident that both manuscripts had undergone extensive and careful revision. The first was written originally in a slim ruled exercise book, which was then turned into a second draft with minor revisions. *Kalpanika*, however, has come down to us as a single manuscript; it is not clear whether Mazumdar was preparing the manuscript for publication. The dates of composition of the poems range from 1939 to 1947. The manuscript is neatly prepared, in the artist's own handwriting; I was rather struck by the painterly fashion in which he signs at the end of each individual poem, with his characteristic flourish.

Kalpanika is, clearly, the more interesting text, as it is really a mixed bag of poems with not only differing subjects, but attitudes as well. But after a careful reading of the individual poems what emerges is a similar pattern of negotiation with whatever subject matter he chooses for poetic treatment. There is, almost always, an oppositional selfhood that the poet erects within the space of poetry: be it the indignation at the state of a subjugated, bereft motherland, or mediation with the misconceptions of the public about the true value of art, or even scathing criticism directed at iniquity in social transactions, and social hypocrisy as well. His attitude is both critical and reformist, always passionate, and one also notes just that hint of sad resignation at times when he is forced to confront the fact that changing deep-seated, monolithic patterns of belief and behavior is really beyond him.

In a sense, this oppositionality is also a submerged characteristic of didacticism. Hemendranath was not especially known as one driven by an overtly social reformist zeal, yet many of his poems appear to be formulaic towards what could make his community/country a better place. These, thus, come through as heavily didactic— at least most of them— especially because our seeing is closely aligned with the poetics of our own times, and we tend to forget that didactic poetry used to be an accepted genre in Hemendranath's time.

He has a sizeable number of poems on the state of his subjugated country— almost all of these were written before India's independence, and have the ring of that passionate intensity that we encounter in most of his critical writings. We need to remember that poems on the subjugated motherland were very common in his times, and have a long history, spanning several decades. Some of these reflected upon the dejection that had descended upon the country and affected the agency of its inhabitants, making both progress and happiness impossible[v]. Others directly addressed what may be seen as the abstracted essence of the country— a personified configuration of its history, geography and culture— and the most common personification was that of the mother[vi]. The mothered country was seen as both rich and bereft, powerful and trodden, the image taking shape through the interlacing of reality and an optimistic imagination. She was often deified, often visualized as one poor and distressed[vii], but almost always in a temporary state of eclipse which, the poets hoped, would pass soon with the active intervention of her children.

Quite a few poems of *Kalpanika* indirectly refer to the state of the country, and at least five of these are directly connected to the freedom struggle/ the deplorable situation of the 'mothered', subjugated country/odes to distinguished Indians, in remembrance of their great service to deliver the motherland from her woes/ the cultural degeneration of the country due to Western influence. He seems to prefer rhyme to open verse, and experiments with several kinds of meter, which, in most cases, are perfectly adopted. The language is fluent and racy, and there is a rare energy that animates his poems even when he deals with common and predictable themes. In *Kangalini* (The Bereft Mother) Hemendranath visualizes India as the country which first brought the ray of knowledge and wisdom to the world which was still slumbering in darkness; her gifts were not acknowledged by the rest of the world because of the deep blindness that ignorance

brings about. In the present the world, once dark, has gained enlightenment, but India is surrounded by gloom now— the flame, extinguished in the house of the donor, now burns bright in the home of the receiver:

O, glance at her,

India, our poor Mother,

This is what you look like, now!

A seeker of favour,

Receiving dole forever

In midst of this wide world, and how!

Earlier, all had seen you

In many forms, old and new

Saw too, your magic, unleashed—

Year passed after year

But at the end of your lengthy prayer

Finally you bowed down, vanquished!

When the first light of dawn's birth

Descended on our earth

And touched your forehead from afar

Rest of the world's face

In deepest darkness

Was still in profound slumber—

The day you brought the light

Of knowledge and wisdom, bright

Into wakefulness the soul of the world did shift

Half the world was still blind

Could not see thus, how very kind

Was your incomparable gift!

This day, darkness

Has left the earth's face,

But still surrounds you, Mother,

The lamp is doused

In the giver's house

Glows in the beggar's home, rather!

What is to be especially noted is the insistence on the *ancientness* of India and the reiteration of that familiar discourse of the country's glorious past, which had become a common trope in his times in both literature and art. This was utilized in connection with a specific purpose: invoking the memories of a glorious past was supposed to shake the stupor of a subjugated race and inspire them to reclaim their place in the world[viii]. Exactly the same sentiment— implying that India brought the light of knowledge to the world— appears not only in contemporary poems, but also in passionate patriotic songs like Dwijendralal Roy's *'Jedin sunil jolodhi hoite uthile jononee Bharatavarsha'* (the day on which you rose out of the blue ocean, o Mother India'), in which it is clearly indicated that the deep darkness of night prevailing upon the world culminated into dawn because of the halo surrounding Mother India after her glorious emergence[ix]. It is imperative, in this connection, that we revisit three similar paintings of Hemendranath (already

discussed earlier, though in a different context) — *Pujarini*, *Arghya*, *and Rajani*. The 'light' that is seen to be India's tribute to the world can be recognized in the halo that surrounds the head of the lady who purportedly stands on the globe, bringing about the glory of knowledge to the rest of the world. This 'glory' is objectivised not only in the halo (which fixes the godliness of the lady) but also in the golden clouds. These receive their tint not only from the breaking of dawn— which, itself, is a familiar and oft-used symbol of awakening and a positive beginning— but primarily from the resplendent presence of the nation-mother who is seen to offer her tributes to the rest of the world. Certain lines of his poem 'The Bereft Mother' can actually be read as an explanatory subtext to this particular painting— 'The day you brought the light/Of knowledge and wisdom, bright/Into wakefulness the soul of the world did shift'— and this does indeed deepen, and clarify, our understanding of the painting. In *Arghya* (The Offering) the theme is similar: here too, the woman is standing on a curved surface indicative of a globe, and is offering flowers with her right hand while holding an incense-pot in her left. The smoke from the burning incense (commonly believed to be purifying and evil-defying) spreads all around, and it does seem that the painting wishes to convey the dispersal of blessings by the nation-mother to the rest of the world, especially if we care to connect it to this specific poem. It is clear that Hemendranath is reasserting the once-upon-a-time superiority of India, which is now eclipsed. This ideal has its obverse in *Rajani*; but it would be interesting to observe that the woman/nation-mother is not dislodged from her former position. She is, rather, enveloped by a nocturnal darkness— indicating, perhaps, that what has changed in reality is merely the *perception* of her superiority. The darkness that she is placed in is as much the gloom of oblivion (of her past glory) as it is the benighting of misfortune. The talking point here is, thus, her alienation from her earlier, resplendent self, almost like a conceptual exile[x]. It would be easy to miss the deeper narrative in this painting— it can be seen simply as the representation of a woman who is both surrounded by darkness and partially lit up by the moon (the familiar halo behind her head has the possibility of being mistaken as the full moon) — but in that case the clear globe-like curve of the ground on which she is seen to stand continues to remain unjustified. We have seen elsewhere too that Hemendranath often intentionally left the narratives open-ended, without suggesting firm and closed interpretations[xi], and this often added a deep and mysterious dimension to the paintings. In this particular painting as well, it does seem that he leaves, for the viewers, a certain space for imaginative reconstruction. It is also possible that he intended to

keep the subject of his paintings easily accessible to his viewers, most of whom came from educated middle-class Bengali families, and related to his paintings mainly through contemporary periodicals in which these were printed regularly. That is possibly why many of his works can be interpreted on two distinct levels; the deeper, often metaphorical meaning is accessible to anyone who wishes to delve deeper, connect with the structure of thought that underpins the visual surface. We can see this clearly in a number of his paintings, including *Porityokta*, the complex narrative of which I have addressed before. He had repeatedly stressed upon the fact that an artist 'sees more', and 'goes deeper' within a visual than an ordinary person[xii]; it is possible to trace a similar differentiation in viewership and appreciation that he had kept in mind for the most part of his career, and his paintings, thus, could cater to all categories of viewers. For us, who are connecting with his art after almost a century, the finer symbolic nuances in his paintings often remain submerged and unreclaimed. In such cases, I have felt that his poems— coupled with his writings on art— often provide interpretive subtexts that facilitate the understanding of the initiated viewer.

In many of his poems— in fact in most of them— we can trace an oppositional stance, which does not quite culminate in correctional prescriptions. Even in the poems that have the state of the country as their principal subject, he is clearly disgruntled, and at times this is not only about the country's subjugation and the following injustice; he is also deeply unhappy at what his countrymen have become. His main focus is on what he considers to be a clear deviation from the cultural heritage that had developed in India over the space of many centuries, and at times he is unequivocally aggressive about the effects of Western culture which the Indians had adopted without thought or discrimination. It does seem a bit ironic to think that he was criticized for latching on to Western artistic culture by adopting western painting techniques and medium. It is important to note that for him—like many others of his time— culture is virtually inseparable from the spiritual and moral, and in many cases we can even identify a specifically Hindu undertone. In the poem titled *Rikto Bharat* ('Bereft India'), he connects the country's present state to its countrymen's unfortunate and willing dispossession of its long-standing religious tradition. Here we also come across a passionate eulogy of the power of women, where feminine strength is connected to both the understated power of chastity (in *Savitri*, *Sita* and *Sati*) and the violent power of a warlike *Dashabhuja* (*Durga*). It is interesting to note how the meekness and the idea of passive virtue that have been traditionally connected to the figures of

the first three women (all of whom are known, and remembered, only because of their husbands— more specifically, because of their commendable and impeccable wifely behavior, in perfect tune with the expectations of patriarchy) is connected by the poet to the active agency of Durga, to her ability to exterminate enemies and win a bloodied war. This takes us a little closer to understanding exactly how Hemendranath conceived of womanhood. We have noted in a previous chapter that in spite of the contemporary tendency of the valorization of motherhood (connected, oftentimes, to the nationalist motif of imagining the country as a mother) he had painted more wives than mothers[xiii], and most of them had been endowed with a personality steeped in volition and conviction. But in spite of his ambivalence about home and domesticity being the sole centre of feminine fulfillment, he does seem to hold chastity and marital devotion as non-negotiable, binding values[xiv]. *Rikto Bharat* subsumes this typically Indian narrative of feminine empowerment within a broader tale of the 'great' religious tradition of India, replete with the values of tolerance, forgiveness and sacrifice. A longish catalogue of exemplary religious myths serves to foreground the present oblivion of such past glory—coupled with Western influence— that has led people to question the very existence of God! This veering towards atheism seems to be the heart of the matter which deeply pains the poet, and passionately rings out in the couplet that reappears as a refrain at the end of each stanza:

Countless devotees shed their blood

And wet this country a million times

This gory river, like a red, red flood

On the floor of the alter, slimes—

The sword is not wiped as yet

Speed of arteries still unabated

Tears too, are yet to fade—

How can such a land dare to say

There is no God, be who he may!

Attacks and transgressions, one and all

Those of another religion did execute—

Insulted the God of our soul

Hurt all the devotees, mute

We tolerated all— in the spirit

Of sacrifice, we did bear it

In us love and forgiveness meet—

How can such a land dare to say

There is no God, be who he may!

…

Where the land is sustained by

The virtue of Savitri, Sita and Sati

Where even Gods, mighty and high

Seek blessings from the ten-handed deity—

She, whose power rules over creation

Seas of blood on her feet run,

Women in war-field can be stopped by none—

Time kisses her feet, still we say

There is no God, be who he may!

Alas, India! Had you ever been

Quite as fallen as you are now?

Did eons of meditation mean

To atheism you'd finally bow?

What gifts were these, from the West,

That turned you lower than the rest—

The sun of wisdom set, at your behest!

That is why, on this day

There is no God, be who he may!

It does seem that the misfortune of India is covertly attributed to what the poet considers to be the irresponsible conversion of the countrymen to a foreign culture and its attendant systems of thought. Though the subjugated state of the country is not directly referred to in this particular poem, the mention of 'gifts' from the 'West' that turned the country 'lower than the rest' serves to fix the context here. The poetic tendency to blame the conduct of the countrymen for the state of the country was not new, nor was it uncommon. This can be traced as far back as Ishwar Gupta, who, in his poem *Bharatbhumir Durdasha* (The Sorry State of India), laments about the altered conduct of his countrymen, and clearly states that this is what has brought about the downfall of India[xv]. Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay, too, in his long poem *Bharat Sangeet* [xvi]hints at how the might and bravery of the countrymen has altered from those of their ancestors, who

could conquer *Aryavarta, Dravida, Tailanga* and *Dakshinatya* in spite of being limited in number.

For Hemendranath, the misfortune of the country is like a veil of darkness which, primarily, is externally imposed—but the factors which feed the darkness are also deep-seated and intrinsic. This imaging is rather like an extended night which will see dawn only when the countrymen are ready and deserving. The suggestion of self-disciplining is supplemented by the advent of leader/s of action and vision who would initiate the true awakening of the nation: this is comprehensively seen in his short poem, 'Netaji'[xvii], in which his fascination for Subhaschandra Bose is clear and unequivocal:

Forsake blindness, and open your eyes wide

Let your glance on India's east horizon abide

The firmament of Bengal hearts, seven crores of them,

Was sunless, alas, in destiny's name

What had been mere fancy's hope, then on,

Like manifested truth is here now, that glorious dawn!

It is not known whether Hemendranath painted Bose's portrait[xviii] – even if he did, which is probable, I have not been able to trace it. But I have come across a number of paintings in which legendary nationalist figures feature prominently. Among these the most striking is Chittaranjan Das's portrait, which is titled *Bondhu* (The Friend)[xix]. He had also painted portraits of Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Aurobindo Ghosh[xx] among others, and a number of portraits of Rabindranath Tagore. He also has an effusive poem on Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar in which we see the same commiseration at the contrast between a truthful compassion— represented by Vidyasagar— with the present-day dissembling of the same. The poet is possibly trying to drive home the

singular point that the feeling of empathy which the state of the country is in dire need of, has all but evaporated from the present times and has been replaced by the mere 'play-acting' of mercy:

The memorial slab with your name

Is not yet a half-century old

Yet in Bengal's theatrical frame

On the play 'Mercy', the final curtain's rolled—

For the whole world you wept

Till tears became an endless sea

But a tempest of love suddenly swept

Your life's boat, oh, drowned it be!

Since then, in the heart of Bengal,

Mercy is play-acting, mere,

The actors and viewers weep— but it's the call

Of the play, they are only dissembling, here!

The date mentioned below the poem (Hemendranath was fastidious about mentioning the date and place of composition below many of his poems, an inclination that is almost never noted in case of his paintings[xxi]) is 1348 (1941), written in Gachihata. Vidyasagar had died in 1891, so it was about fifty years since his death when this poem was written. The poet is probably indicating that the memory of Vidyasagar is yet so fresh that it seems to have resisted the jadedness and/or

oblivion that the intervening five decades would be expected to bring about. What is most notable is the aura of theatricality that he introduces in the very first stanza, effortlessly indicating thus the difference between mercy in reality and mercy as a mere posture. Rabindranath Tagore's well-known poem on Vidyasagar focuses chiefly on the profound change he brought to Bengali literature[xxii], though the poet's use of the term 'poignant glory' (*sokoruno mahatmo*) does seem to connect to Vidyasagar's sensitive, empathetic nature. Michael Madhusudan Dutt's poem on Vidyasagar[xxiii] is closer in spirit to Hemendranath's poem: Dutt compares Vidyasagar to a golden mountain, which welcomes those who seek shelter, provides them with ample water, heavenly-tasting fruits (*amrito-phal*), shade during daytime and tranquil sleep at night. We need to remember, also, that Vidyasagar had helped Dutt considerably when he was in France, in dire financial conditions, for many years. It is for his compassion and generosity that Dutt christened him *karunasagara* [xxiv]in one of his letters. Writing many decades later, Hemendranath laments the passing away of the same true compassion personified by Vidyasagar, and expresses his distress at what the dissembling of mercifulness has done to the country within the space of just fifty years after his death. This sense of impatience with the undeserving people of the country— whose lack of awareness had effected a hiatus in the previously unbroken line of glorious inheritance— is a common element in most of Hemendranath's patriotism-flavoured poems.

His poem on Rabindranath Tagore— 'A Sunless World, Unnatural' (*Oniyom: Rabiheen Jagat*) —written after the poet's death in 1941, is one of his finest poems not only for its perfect metrical arrangement, sonorous verse and the consistently metaphorical frame of multiple images, but also for the truthful ring of deeply-felt emotion that comes through powerfully. Though this is not a strictly patriotism-themed poem, it does show a concern for the state of the country's culture after the passing away of its greatest poetic legend. Hinging on the meaning of a part of the poet's name (*Rabi* means the sun) Hemendranath imagines the world as a sunless and dark space after the departure of the poet, where even nature behaves uncharacteristically, breaking her own rules. Not once does he mention the poet by name: he is always the departed sun, the absence of whom not only disrupts the very discipline of nature, but also signifies the end of 'creation'— the word is skillfully used to indicate two clearly separate, yet metaphorically connected layers of consonance. Without the sun the world of creation would collapse, as would the world of literary creation without the presence of Rabindranath. He imagines that the poet

has finally passed out of temporality, into a world which is bright and joyful and everlasting—free from both the imperfections of transience and the lashing of adverse criticism (we are aware of the fact that Tagore did, indeed, face scathing criticism at many points of his life). The counterpointing of the two worlds in the poem is interesting: one is the mortal world which is languishing, withering too, and the other is the glory of the eternal realm to which the poet seems to rightfully belong. The last stanza is bright with the evocation of universal joy and endless light, which mediates with the note of sadness in the preceding stanzas and transforms departure into a sense of transition; the finality of absence is consolingly leavened by the assurance of an everlasting, if other-worldly, presence:

Why do I see today, a bereft sky

Veiled by a gloom profound

The sun has not risen, oh why

On this world shades abound?

The *kokil* has stopped singing, also the *salik* and *doel*

Figments of slumber not yet gone

Women still in their family beds dwell

Thinking it's not yet dawn

I see withered flowers on each tree

Not a single bud has bloomed

No fragrance in the spring winds, no bee

Has come today, to this land doomed—

Has nature forgotten her own rules, then?

Of creation— is this the end of its might?

Or has the Earth's own Sun left its glen

And passed into the land of everlasting light?

Fear of death there is none,

No such disgrace too, that life might bring

A million deathless Moons and Suns

Dwell out there, and eternally sing!

Hemendranath painted at least three portraits of Tagore, and his deep regard for the poet is known and recorded. Baridbaran Ghosh refers to a letter written to him by Santosh Kumar De (who headed the cultural group *Rabibasor*[xxv]), which amply illustrates the extent of his respect – and also, how passionately he mourned the passing of Tagore:

> Hemendranath once called me to his home, along with Narendranath Basu, Prafullakumar Sarkar of Anandabazar, and Basantakumar Chattopadhyay— the editor of *Deepali*. ..he called us to an inside room just a while after we arrived. There, on an easel, was mounted a just-finished canvas, covered with a Turkish towel. A bright light was pointed right at the easel. As soon as we entered, he removed the towel. We were transfixed at the door, all four of us at once. We saw, on the easel, the bust of Rabindranath looking at us, as if he were alive. We had already seen Atul Bose's portrait of Rabindranath, but Hemendranath's portrait was a totally novel creation. This incident took place right after Tagore's passing away— his death had hurt Hemendranath profoundly, and he painted this portrait to give vent to his deep distress. He had told us that he worked on it for three full days without respite, going without food, even sleep. His sigh of satisfaction came only after the painting was completely finished. (Ghosh, 1993, 33-34)

The influence of Tagore can be clearly traced in many of his poems, especially in his long narrative poems which have both stylistic and thematic similarities with Tagore's poetry; we will have occasion to examine these connections in greater detail later in this chapter.

The most vicious attack on his countrymen, the state they have reduced this country to, is found in his poem 'Bestial Man', dated 20 August 1946; this has as its immediate context the dark day of the Calcutta riots which took place on only four days back, on 16 August.

Men wear the hue of brethren's blood

Today, the streets witness a red, red flood

Crowds are angry, insane—

The deadly weapons sing of doomsday

Our earthly home goes the funeral's way

O, civilisation's bane!

On its mother's breast they kill the child

With fraternal fury each home's defiled

The brutal trumpet rings in glee—

Humans, the image of mercy, once,

Now like monsters, in self-love dance

The Gods are forced to flee!

Beasts are struck by this dreadful state

With shame and hatred they bow their heads

And to each other whisper

Let's take up politics, from this day

And social rule too, if we may

We are the best humans! Let's just say

Man's worse than a beast, by far!

There is a truthful ring— that goes beyond the artifice of poetry— in the immediacy of deep indignation that is recorded in this poem. It is clear that he experienced firsthand the trauma of his land of which the riots were only a part (the partition of the country was to profoundly affect his family, as all of them had to leave behind their vast landed property at Gachihata and relocate to West Bengal). The poem speaks about the gross outrage of the social and moral order of humanity— for that matter, any order at all— and therefore are seen to go beyond even the bestial. The beasts' proclamation of superiority over humans indicates not only the steepness of moral debasement of his fellow countrymen, but can also be seen to indicate covertly how the transgression of legal and moral codes can actually bring about unforeseen and anarchic overhauls in the very fabric of civilization, triggered by what Birendra Chattopadhyay calls 'the tortuous fire of 46'[xxvi]. The 'fraternal fury' that defiles homes in Mazumdar's poem is also reflected in Jibanananda Das's well-known poem '1946-47' (Das 1954, 121-125) which identifies that 'Hate lies at the very heart of creation' also refers to the killing between brothers that culminates in the deepest darkness, the result of which is sadness, slumber and inaction[xxvii]. But Mazumdar's poem is more indignant than sad, effecting a removal, thus, from the horrifying spectacle, initiated by debased humans who are more monster-like than beastly. It is this removal

which prevents his identification with the people engaged in senseless bloodshed, and thus prevents any explicit sharing of the collective responsibility as we see in Jibanananda's poem—in the latter, the poet is at once the killer, the killed, and the onlooker who resorts to slumber overcome by deep melancholy in a futile world devoid of light and meaningful action. But Mazumdar is present in his poem as that familiar oppositional self to the deeds of a section of his countrymen who have ensured that his 'earthly home goes the funeral's way'.

Kalpanika has a number of devotional poems as well; in most of these the poet insists on the intrinsic connection between God and human beings, and opposes the priest-centric rituals of organized religion. For him, God is a 'lifelong companion' (*chiro jeeboner sathi*) who does not care for formal worship but is eager to see people return to their ethical senses and be contrite about the moral slips they may have committed, as in his poem *Premomoy* (My Loving Lord), where, initially, the devotee is concerned about the fact that he had offered neither formal worship nor floral tributes, and worries that now there would possibly be no way of attaining salvation:

The one who is the giver, the God of my heart,

My companion for life— ashamed, now I see

On Him, not even once was conferred

A single flower-garland, made by me!

When flowers bloomed, I couldn't find the thread

They were the flowers of dawn

When I found time, by then they did fade

All their freshness gone—

For favours we keep asking Him

Sliding deep in debt is our lot

Though with gifts he fills us to the brim

We still complain, ‘You have given us nought’!

Give and take, profit or loss

The time for these is gone

Knock on my door, Doomsday does—

To save me now there is none!

God, though, does not care about these supposed slips from the accepted norms of adoring the divine: here Mazumdar is clearly negating the need for rituals, or even the praise for the benevolence of God, but stresses upon the need to identify one’s past sins and atone truthfully:

Whispering in my dream, He gently says—

The God of Love, all-forgiving—

‘It’s I, who created all your ways

Thus no misery shall your conduct bring’

Flowery garlands, tributes heaped

Calling me ‘O Merciful’— listen, dear,

Of these there’s no need

You’d still get your shelter here—

But only if you look back, contrite

At your life, each past sin remember

Atonement will make your burden light

With flowing tears your eyes would blur!

In most of these poems God is seen more as a keeper of moralities; he is never the God of scriptures who is enraged by the slightest slip in the ritualistic process of worship. In that sense these are not strictly religious poems, though Hinduism is almost always present as a loose backdrop, and he does mention *mandir* (temple) and very rarely, certain rituals of *puja* (worship). But his main focus remains the connect of the divine with an individual— at times, even a community— and how this comes about without the intervention of the conventional trappings of religion. The divinity, as he images it, is both indulgent and corrective to the devotees. He (and a 'he' it is, as he always considers God to be a man, unless there is a specific reference to *Durga* or *Lakshmi*) does not protect people from anguish when suffering is the only way to make them acknowledge their faults; this would, then, lead them to atonement and salvation. In fact Mazumdar has also related suffering to self-discovery and subsequent wisdom— in a poem named *Manab* (The Human) he glorifies this spiritual journey, without any overt reference to religion:

Meditating under the pitiless sun, going without food

To such a grueling way the pursuit of Truth is clued

And then, in the human heart, shine it surely would!

The right to humanity is earned this hard way

Not a moment before that enlightened day!

This fact to us lies in deep darkness

It's the cover of illusion— no less!

This pattern of suffering leading to wisdom is most clearly seen in his long narrative poem *Bikreeto Bidhata* (The Sold Deity) of about 300 lines, which I found in a standalone manuscript[xxviii] (this is not a part of *Kalpanika*). But here the path of spiritual enlightenment is also a devotional way, and it focuses on a true realization of the nature of the divinity. This is a poem which operates on a rather conventional pair of figures, contrarily placed in their stations in life— a king and a beggar, thus calling into play multiple shades of power and disempowerment, and bringing about their ultimate reversal as a dramatic counterpoint. Mazumdar's king is nothing akin to the 'king of kings' in Tagore's Gitanjali 50 (Tagore 1913, 42-43), nor does his beggar resemble Tagore's beggar. Mazumdar's representation of kingship carefully segregates the role of royalty from anything remotely divine, though the king is not portrayed as willfully cruel. But he is weak and almost wholly dependent on his cunning minister, and thus bears the mark of irresponsibility. We are slightly surprised to note that while the king— easily the central character of the poem, whose self-effacement and subsequent enlightenment is the mainstay of the narrative— goes unnamed, while the minister is given the name of Ganga Singh. This name is familiar— we instantly connect it to the Maharaja of Bikaner state, Ganga Singh, who was well-known to Mazumdar [xxix]and used to buy his paintings. Why the poet would give the exact same name to a scheming character would be a matter of conjecture, best avoided here for lack of concrete evidence.

An apt background is created at the very outset by hinting at how the cunning minister always gets his own way. He suggests making a bed of flowers for the royal couple to sleep on, and gets its sanction in spite of the king's protestation that taking the life of thousands of flowers created by God for momentary pleasure would be 'tantamount to being a sinner' (*Papi tare bole*). One could possibly trace here a covert intention to exonerate the king from the responsibility of the central sin that the poem focuses on; with that object the readers are persuaded, from the very beginning, that the cruel, senseless, unthought-out decisions of the king are only nominally his. This also portrays him as a basically kind-hearted but feeble man whose main culpability is his weakness and infirmity of purpose.

His beggar, also, is fundamentally different from Tagore's: he is completely unconcerned about material things, unlike Tagore's beggar who only looked for wealth from the King of kings, at least initially. It would be interesting to note that Mazumdar's beggar is also a Brahmin (a *daridra Brahman* who is also a *nirlobh bhikkhuk*) thus introducing an alternate dimension of social station that is actually used to mediate with his lowly social identity as a penniless beggar. Thus, while the king is disempowered, the figure of the beggar undergoes a reverse process, being invested with spiritual power. The narrative of the poem is simple and somewhat straightforward: a beggar who is totally unconcerned about worldly possessions quenches his thirst by taking a sip of water from the royal lake, *Rani Sarovar*, and is punished with ten lashes of whip for what is described by the minister as a momentous sin. Without paying any heed to the defense of the beggar (as also his protestations about the imperfect kingly conduct) the minister manages to ensure that he is exiled from the kingdom:

'I drank to quench my thirst— this puny thing

Makes me stand accused today before my king!

Him, who God had ordained to nurture,

His people— love them, too, like a father,

But even by mistake you never did

Dole out food, water, to your people in need!

By what morality would you punish me, this day?'

The king keeps still, has no words to say—

Seeing this, the minister decreed—'whiplashes, ten rounds,

And then throw the sinner beyond the city's bounds.'

The divine retribution is swift. Immediately, the sun's heat gets unbearable, all water in the kingdom dries up, including that in the royal lakes— *Rani Sarovar, Kheer Sagar and Chandi Deeghi*, fiery, boiling water flows down the spring *Shiv Dhara* – even the emergency procedure of boring a well in order to supply drinking water to the inhabitants does not work; the digging

produces only smoke, and deeper down, red and hot non-potable water. The idol of the deity *Gopinath* in the royal *Govinda-mandir* is seen to bear the mark of whiplashes, the eyes of the idol are awash with tears. The rational explanation provided by the minister (which is presented almost like an excuse) about why an idol's eyes may be seen to tear up connects to Mazumdar's interest in the chemistry of pigments and other elements connected to both art and craft:

'Incense, lac and oil, combined together

Will surely melt, in this high heat, Sir,

Will ruin the colours—so says the canons of Art

Let this incident not break your heart

A chemical reaction this, produces water

Which flows down the idol as the day gets hotter.'

The distraught king, not convinced, prays to God and ultimately receives divine communication in a dream, and is told that this is a punishment for having whipped the beggar for no reason. He is told that God has decided to leave the royal temple[xxx] and is now residing with the beggar (who, God reveals, is his best disciple Deenanath, prime among the *Vaishnavas*) under a bunyan tree, far away from the kingdom. He is reminded of his royal duties and is instructed to travel barefoot, with all others, to that particular spot and stay there for a year for atonement. What is most interesting here is the discourse regarding ideal kingship, as also God's revelation of the profound, almost physical connection that he shares with his true devotee:

His faultless, divine body was whipped

This conduct, yours, got my heart ripped—

The tears that he wept, o unkind,

See how these had made me blind!

Remember: you're still alive only because

Ignorant you are, of all your flaws

Otherwise, without ruining I wouldn't rest

Your kingdom, to avenge the wound on my breast!

Borne a hundred sins, by your minister provoked

Had forgiven you, thinking you're in naïveté soaked—

The moron who sits on the throne, with all his might

Calls himself 'king' too— to rule he has no right

One who keeps quiet, under his minister's thrall

While in constant misery suffer his subjects, all—

Who has forgotten his duties of charity, oh why

To bless him I would even try?

The king travels, with the queen and all his courtiers, to visit the beggar who is oblivious of the damage caused by his undeserved punishment and subsequent exile. Replying to the king's exuberant apology, the beggar protests that this incident has actually made him truly blessed— for, otherwise, he would not have had the fortune of receiving the divinity as his guest! Interestingly, at this point Mazumdar addresses the beggar as a 'sage' (*sadhu*), possibly to mark the transformation of a devotee into a seer through God's mediation— also, more significantly— through suffering. This is the king's way to wisdom and enlightenment as well; he and his entire kingdom goes through immense suffering before he gets a chance to realize not only the extent of his own faults, but also gets to understand God's true nature. After everything else settles

back to their usual rhythm, God tells the beggar-sage that he will forever remain 'sold' to the dedication of his devotees:

And thus spoke *Narayan*—

He who lives for me, my own true son

Who suffers with others' sufferings, calls out to me,

To him I'll forever be a 'sold deity'!

This sin-punishment-reward formula is not new in Bangla poetry. In Mazumdar's times spiritual/devotional themes were extremely popular in Bengali literature, especially poetry; I referred to a yearly collection of Masik Sachitra Basumati edited by Satish Chandra Mukhopadhyay, which was a compilation of the monthly magazines from *Kartik* to *Chaitra* of the year 1347(1940)[xxxi], and I found at least ten poems which were variations on this broad theme— though almost all the poets are unremembered now. A variation of the oppositional pair of king/sage (tackled differently from the discourse that we had seen in *Bikreeto Bidhata*) appears in one of these poems, titled 'The King and the Sage' (*Raja O Sadhu*) by Binoy Bhushan Sengupta[xxxii]:

In a funeral-ground, a sage his seat took

Deep in meditation, with a tranquil look

A King came over to seek his grace

His power of renunciation he did amply praise.

The Holy man said, 'But you have forsaken all, o king!'

The King replied, 'Your words to me would damnation bring!'

'Tell me, in what way have I let go of all?'

The sage said, 'O King, in whose thrall

I have disowned all— that ultimate treasure—

That very thing you've let go— a true forsaker you are!'

That true devotion to God can only blossom through the experience of penury and suffering[xxxiii], is also the theme of Abanimohan Chakraborty's short poem *Tomar Puja* (Thy Worship)[xxxiv], in the same volume:

Where the depth of pain gives birth

To a lake of tears— in that very place

Blooms the lotus meant for thy worship

Enchanting, beautiful, of endless grace.

It is thus indicated that the Divinity imposes suffering on man in order to bring him to his senses. But God is also seen to be the very boatman who is instrumental in ferrying people across the river of suffering— to what is imagined as the eternal light of deliverance, as in Mazumdar's poem 'Life's Capital' (*Muldhan*):

Helpless, I ask the boatman

'Ferry me please, across the river deep'—

'No such rule, unless you can

Afford provisions for the trip!'

'Go home now, gather your fare

Through good and honest means

Only then to that land of eternal light

I'll take you— where all earthly ties lose their might

You'll stay there, with the ocean of love in sight

Building a forever home, ever since!

In a poem by Asamanja Mukhopadhyay (published in the same abovementioned volume of *Sachitra Masik Basumati,* p 178) titled 'The Tune of Melancholy' (*Byathar Purabi*) we encounter the same trope of the boatman who is actually the agent of deliverance:

I have no luggage, no trouble I'll cause— just give me a place

In your boat— I won't weigh it down, nor take up space

If you take stock of my doings, o Lord,

That I'm truly bankrupt, you'll witness, God!

Even then— if you find one paisa, one good deed,

Exchange it, o kind-hearted— for a place on your feet!

We are also reminded of Tagore's song 'O boatman, you who steer the boat of this human life of mine' (*Ore majhi/Ore amar manobjonmotoreer majhi*) where he is not speaking of total renunciation of all the yields of human life; he is, rather, advising the boatman to select and store those flowers of life which are still fresh, now that the music from the far bank of life is within audible distance. Here he is not too concerned about what lies beyond; his God of Life (*Jeeban-debota*) is thus very different from Mazumdar's God, who is seen to insist on spiritual perfection and afterlife, rather than allowing humans to enjoy this transient, bittersweet life[xxxv]. But we will also notice Mazumdar's intriguing oppositionality to the unquestioned belief in God, which goes as far as attempting to subvert the very need of God's existence, in the last stanza of *E Dhoronee Goro Punorbar* (Create this World Once Again):

One who says I embody morality

Immorality, too— I cause hate and anger

But the burden of sin is for humans— a pity!

What do we need such a God for?

Almost the same discourse is seen in *Prabhu-Bhakta* (The Master and the Devotee), though the aggressiveness in the previous poem is greatly toned down here:

The devotee says, o master,

Intriguing is your divine play!

Burden of sins you force us to bear

Then, us humans, you do slay!

You're the creator, us puppets mere

If this is really so

Such suffering do we need to bear?

To us our sins do show!

If the defects of the creator

An imperfect world made

What scripture would vouch for

The fault of the created?

The musician plays his instrument

Creates music, good or bad

The instrument is hardly meant

To be responsible for that!

Reward or punishment, by far

Creates this unjust maze

Musician's the real master

His tune the instrument plays!

His poems which have women as the central focus have varying attitudes, often opposing one another, something that we have noted (though to a much lesser extent) in some of his paintings as well. Most of his semi-nude paintings are of women whose visual attributes situate and fix them within a higher social class— they are, almost without exception, fair, ornamented, and *married*. Yet their sexual subjectivisation has almost nothing to do with marital sanction, be it social or familial. By settling them within a space of solitary reflection, he attempts to unmoor them from social expectations of respectability and propriety; their thoughts are as much on display as their bodies are, but while the latter is accessible, the former is not. Their solitariness, together with the privacy of space that surrounds them, also nullify any suspicion about their chastity as they are entirely unaware of any outsider spying on them. It does seem that Mazumdar, while trying to remove the restrictive trappings of society in order to glimpse the innermost self, does also carefully preserve the demands and expectations of the marital bond. In fact transgressions are not taken kindly— neither in his poetry nor in the intended narrative of his paintings[xxxvi]. We can trace his attitude to such transgressions in a longish narrative poem *Abidya*, the title of which I have loosely translated as 'The Tainted' (it needs to be mentioned here that in Bangla, *abidya* once carried a specific social connotation: it was used to loosely refer to prostitutes). The poem's narrative hinges on a woman who, as we can make out from the covert narrative, strays after starting a new chapter of her life in the big city[xxxvii]. After her death, the father-in-law is distraught with sadness, yet it is clear that her moral lapse is not condoned; rather, it is somewhat identified as the cause of her physical and spiritual death, as also the destruction of the honour of the family:

Wrong Learning has waylaid you

Done its job too, of destroying honour

And so, in my home, see how

Proudly blooming, the poison flowers are!

When, petulant, you went away

Proclaiming that you'd never return

See how, God on this day

Has brought you back— oh, destiny's turn!

Grief fills me to the brim today

No words I can find

In another life— hope if I may—

To your morals do be kind!

The narrative of the poem unfolds within a judgmental space where we do not get to hear the woman's voice at all, except for her exhortation that she is 'learned', and thus cannot be persuaded to stay back in the village. We may also identify a quip on her learning—*bidya*— and the title, *abidya*, which, apart from its colloquial connotation of fallen women, may also be seen as a criticism of women's learning that mediates with her chastity and moral reasoning. In another poem titled *Patita* (The Fallen Woman)[xxxviii] his strictness about transgression is, likewise, tempered by compassion[xxxix]. But it does, in no way, mitigate the sin committed by the woman in question[xl], by throwing herself into 'the fire of lust':

In pages of literature new, and in your heart's garden, green,

In what beauteous glory a lie have you seen!

What wine of infatuation drove you

A false god to submit to!

To quench your thirst you reached out

The prize was hell, its deep and gloomy shroud!

Into the fire of lust, unfazed, you threw your heart

The heaven of love called back many times— but

The ears were deafened, and here

Truth suffered reprimand, severe

Conscience suffered a fatal collapse

Dirt grew, around the truth's lapse!

Even so, love echoed back one last time, to tell,

With moist eyes, to you, 'farewell'!

A moment's lapse of control failed your life then

Drank deep in the wine of death, for nectar mistaken

Lost, too, that much-sought for jewel

Much-abused, too— chastity! In oblivion fell!

Drowned yourself, and let your family's honour too, drain!

Now that youth is gone, o ill-fated, sad woman, does it not seem

That night has dawned, dispelling each illusory dream?

You'd sown a wish-fulfilling plant, no less

Watch how it yields blooms of nothingness!

Will he ever deign to acknowledge

You? To whom your body you did pledge?

It is clear that 'a moment's lapse of control[xli]' plunged her in a non-negotiable pit of darkness, the loss of chastity— 'that much-longed-for jewel' nullifying all other aspects of her personality— much in the same line of argument that had been in vogue earlier, revived with some additional force during the Swadeshi period possibly to add some additional cultural alterity to the perceived image of Western women and their presumed ways of living. This is an undated poem, so we really have no way of knowing whether the poet was reacting to a particular person or event, but at certain points, there is indeed a sense of specificity. What makes the discourse especially interesting is the fact that in the very first line the poet uses quotation marks to demarcate the word '*sobujer*' (in the phrase *'sobujer' hridi-kunjobone*, which I have translated as 'your heart's garden, green') — thus it is clear that he is referring not merely to the conceptual greenness of the garden, or even to the youthful hue that may partially justify rash and ill-considered actions. I strongly suspect that Mazumdar here is referring to *Sabuj Patra*, the avant-garde periodical published by Pramatha Chaudhuri in 1914. The literary association is further strengthened in the first line itself—*nobeen sahitye* (translated as 'in pages of literature new'). This line can be simply read as one that holds contemporary literature responsible for supplying ideas of transgression to straying women, but then the quotation marks around the word would remain unsubstantiated. We are aware of the adverse criticisms faced by *Sabuj Patra* by certain traditionalists, for the new literary ideals propagated by the magazine,

advocating freshness and autonomy of thought for the literary artist[xlii], and the way spoken Bangla became the model for the written. We must also remember that Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire* (The Home and the World) was first serialized in *Sabuj Patra* from the *Baishakh* issue of 1322 (1915), and was then one of the most prominent novels dealing with the intricacies of an extramarital relationship[xliii]. It is eminently possible that Mazumdar is venting his discontent with contemporary literature, with its occasional concerns with straying women: *Sabuj Patra* serves here as only an instance. I will reiterate here that in spite of his rebellious attitude towards the consideration of the space of domesticity as the singular, uncontested habitat of women[xliv], he had never rejected the social bounds that fixed chastity as an unquestioned given for female marital commitment. We shall also care to remember that Mazumdar painted *Rohini*, the heroine of Bankinchandra Chattopadhyay's *Krishnakanter Will* in his eponymous painting: this portrays Rohini's dead body lying on the floor, after she was shot by Gobindalal. This can probably be seen as a retributive tale of misfortune overcoming the woman who dares to stray (though Rohini was a widow, contemporary social mores dictated that widows should lead a sparse life of restraint and relinquishment, living with only the memory of their late husbands; we may also remember *Kundanandini'*s fate in Chattopadhyay's *Bishabriksha*[xlv], who was a widow as well but dared to remarry, and finally committed suicide). And it is here that we are faced with a curious ambivalence in the painter-poet. Not only did he justify, but also actively celebrated female desire, transforming their identity, thus, from being objects of desire to desiring subjects; yet he was clearly reticent about fulfilling that desire, outside the marital circle. It is as if his female subjects are allowed to connect with their own desire, even indulge in fantasy— as we see in many of his women— but the fulfillment of this desire is endlessly deferred, as it falls within the space of the impermissible. We recall Lacan who identified this deferral as the key to keeping desire alive— by constantly deferring satisfaction— and also pointed out how fantasy preserves the evaporation of the object of desire by replacing actual satisfaction[xlvi].

But when we consider one of his other poems it does seem that he was indeed impatient about the restrictive sanctions on desire (and not only female desire) naturalized by a society anxious about preserving boundaries. *E Dhoronee Goro Punorbar* (Create this World Once Again) is an enigmatic poem which primarily seems to be a prayer to the Almighty to create this world anew: at the beginning he does refer to the social inequities, the plight of the poor, the sick and sad

people, and prays for the dissolution of the world which is for him *paper agar* (a house of sin), beset with ills (*amangal*). But if his first agenda is the removal of suffering and the hierarchical structure that partially causes it, the second agenda is extremely unusual, unique in fact. He calls out for a revision of the very moral structure to which our behavioral predilections are rooted; in fact he is interrogating the efficacy of *rules* of conduct, which serve, according to him, only to curtail the freedom of our mind:

Good -evil, sins and virtue are scriptures' dictates

All these till now we've followed– nay,

Now's the time to be liberal! In a rule-free state

Let the world awake, this day!

Let the body with endless youth overflow

And the fountain of desire run free

Pleasure, Renunciation both, hand-in-hand go

In delirious dreams drowned let this thrilled mind be—

Lift restrictions, let desire be the uppermost

Within seen bounds paint what seems endless

In ceaseless union let all separations be lost

With eternal beauty our beloved do bless!

If you are indeed Him who can grant all wishes

Whose creation no bound knows

With hell, heaven, and destiny's fearful maze

Why then, dress misery in wisdom's pose?

It is indeed difficult to reconcile the aggressive hedonism of the poem with the poet's persona that the other poems reveal. It does feel that the poet is exhausted with the efforts to keep up appearances, to pay court to propriety, and this one poetic moment allows him to vent his oppositional interiority. What is most interesting to note is that he seriously believes freedom from social dictates— and, more importantly, entitlement of desire— will actually be conducive to social happiness. We need to observe here that he is trying to fuse what is 'good' and what is happiness-inducing, in a way which is rather revolutionary; organized social structures have always propagated morality and pleasure as opposites, or, at best, allowed minimal mediation but never a total reconciliation. In this poem, the 'freedom' that Mazumdar envisages is clearly sexual freedom; but even then, if we look closely, this too is not unconditional. It does not seem that he is looking for a life of sexual extravaganza— we need to refer back to the line 'With eternal beauty our beloved do bless' and understand that his desire has a directionality. It is mediated, and tempered by love, thus there is an ingrained sense of balance. This 'love', though, may not be one that is socially acceptable, it may involve varied forms of transgression as well— these liaisons would possibly be rejected by the yardstick of marriagability. When he speaks of 'Good -evil, sins and virtue', which are 'scriptures' dictates', he is possibly expressing his impatience with the various processes that control and streamline the spontaneity of sexual love, or its object. It would also be judicious to assume that he wishes to do away with the mortality of desire, explode its limits too. Limits, however, may mean many things— limits imposed by time, by convention and social propriety, and he addresses each of these factors. When he prays that the body may 'with endless youth overflow', longs for 'ceaseless union' and 'eternal beauty', he actually wishes to delimit and indefinitely extend the biologically granted period of sexual activity and also set it beyond the temporal shadow of transience. When he considers pleasure and renunciation as non-binaries (*bhog-tyag ekakar*) he is covertly criticizing how his times had eulogized renunciation as the coveted spiritual destination, while sexual activity (not necessarily sexual *pleasure*) received modest sanction purely from a practical point of view. This unease—

which, we are sure, had been the very trigger of the poem— gets augmented into a full-blown accusation in the last stanza of the poem where he questions God about his intentions: why does he 'dress misery in wisdom's pose'? His intention here is to interrogate the tradition of thought that creates a natural connection between celibacy and wisdom; for him, celibacy is suffering. The penultimate line clearly indicates that the poet is critical— even suspicious— about how the structure of organized religion has connected sexual gratification with sin. The package comes with a covert yet clear warning that its consequences would surely overcome the perpetrator some day; it is this dreaded threat that suppresses sexuality and effectively alienates the concept of pleasure from sexual activity. Thus it does not appear that he is advocating for a life of lustful abandon. He is, rather, envisaging a recalibrated society where the entitlement to sexual pleasure is accepted unquestioningly— which, he believes, would result in a happier world and a welcome amalgamation of practical life and traditional 'wisdom'. Here he is closer to the visual discourse of his major paintings, where he is consistently defining sexual desire as a thing of beauty.

If we carefully look into his social subjectivisation— taking into account his sympathy-laced, yet unflinching diatribes against transgression as also the carelessness in preserving one's chastity— it would not be incorrect to surmise that he had to go through a conscious process of *becoming*, which included spaces where he had to suppress, and/or mediate with his own attitudes. We need to remember that he painted voluptuous semi-nude women, unquestionably erotic, even titillating; it was thus vitally important for him to create a difference/distance for himself as a social being, as a respected painter/writer/editor, as also a person who goes about his usual professional and familial duties normally, along accepted avenues. The discourse that unfolded within the space of his paintings had to be marked with a kind of otherness, kept separate from, and unsubsumed within, the narrative of his social life. It was also essential for him to indicate unequivocally that he was not propagating a vindication for free and unbridled sexuality, but his views were contained well within the permissible social norms, and these were, in effect, being reinforced by both his words and images. We have already noted his strictness towards sexual transgression, observed too, how in case of his solitary, semi-nude women, the deserted enclosure-like setting implicates the viewers within a voyeuristic space. What is significant here is, this effectively exonerates the woman from the blame of complicity with any onlooker, hence her chastity— and innocence— remains untouched. This particular poem, though, allows a

strong moment of resistance to come through, one that allows us a glimpse into that deepest self that seemed to harbor an instinctive oppositionality to anything pre-decided, unmoving and dictatorial[xlvii]. This can be seen, moving a bit beyond Bhaba's context[xlviii], as a *slippage* in a system of mimicry, which indicates resistance as a counterpoint within a matrix of contingent conformism.

The only poem of Mazumdar, which is somewhat known, is *Shilpir Daan* (Gift of the Artist) possibly because it directly refers to his own brand of realistic painting, and attempts to justify it. The subject is an age-old one— transient life vs. eternal art—but the theme is considerably rejuvenated through the passionate intensity of the neat contextualization. Here again, we note how he roots abstract formulations— which, here, is the oppositionality of time, and youth/beauty— to his immediate space of lived experience, also to his belief in the enduring value of realist art. In this poem we observe how he directly refers to his wet-saree paintings, and eulogises the process through which youth and beauty, fleeting in real life, are captured forever within the still, unchanging moment of art[xlix].

The narrative of the poem hinges on an imaginary dialogue between a painter and a collector who is considering whether to buy the paintings of the former. This form is important as it allows the incorporation of multiple logical arguments to vindicate the artist's claim of a high price—as he is not selling simply a *product*, but an invaluable *process* as well, one which transforms a transitory moment of beauty into an eternal one[l]. It is the value— translated in terms of price— of this intangible factor that is the talking point here. The collector is initially not convinced about the justifiability of the high price that the painter asks for:

The buyer asks: 'This painting
What a puny thing—
Such a price you're asking for this?

Oil, rag-scraps, colours of different hue
Brushes— that too, only a few
For these, too steep are your fees!

Your subject too, is slack—
With a plait hanging down her back
Your wet-clothed girl gets back home

A common sight, this— every day
Be it July, be it May
By the pond's side, we see her roam!

Tuni, Meena, Elokeshi,
My child, Charushashi,
Take dips at the Roys' lake-

Three hours in the water
Catches cold, does my daughter
I stay up the night for her sake!

This scrap of a painting
Hardly a classy thing!
Six Hundred? Only for this?
Don't deceive me, pray,
Or else I may
Decide to give it a miss!

The common man's tendency to take stock of the price of constituents in order to fix the value of a product is described at length for a specific reason: Mazumdar wanted to stress upon the unquantifiability of the value of art, which he elaborates on, by way of answering the indignant buyer:

The reply is the artist's smile:
'All of us have known awhile
A thousand girls bathe a day-

But this spirit, full of mirth
And their pretty, youthful girth
Hold on forever, oh, can they?

Let pass thirty years or so
This loosened body-creeper shall grow
No buds worth the name

Then look at my painted girl
Even though centuries unfurl
Holds her youth, oh, selfsame!

In this dress, for ever and ever
She'll stay with you, o sir,
Draped in her saree, wet,

The artist's fees are puny here
For the exchange is too dear
Youth and beauty, untouched by date!'

It is important for us to keep in mind that the central pivot on which the poem's argument operates is the value of realism in art; the feat of preserving beauty beyond its granted temporal limits can be achieved only when the reproduction is lifelike. Mazumdar is here speaking of illusionism, indeed— the characteristic especially found in realist oils— but he is also hinting at an aesthetic transformation through which much more than the perfection of the youthful body is frozen within the pictorial frame. He is capturing a moment of time here, which is vibrant with life, yet is resistant to all the processes of life that make this moment vulnerable to transience, and hence imperfect. It is interesting to note that Susanne K Langer, in her seminal book *Feeling and Form* preferred to connect art to virtual space[li], and music to virtual time[lii]. Mazumdar does

create a virtual space which is a visual approximation of an actual space existing in reality, but it is not 'real'. Within this illusive space he fixes, through the discourse developed in his poem, another illusory element— a permanent, fixed moment that does not lapse. And this is how he brings into the pictorial and narrative structure the added dimension of *virtual time* as well, which is, truthfully, extra-textual and wholly dependent on the description of the deeper intent supplied by the poem. We understand that each painted image produced with pigment on canvas/paper is actually an illusion— it is not what it refers to, materially, in real, lived life— but there is also a further layer of illusion which Langer calls 'quasi-illusions made by artistic emphasis'—, which, she says, 'among the husky substantial realities of the natural world, is a strange guest. Strangeness, separateness, otherness…is its obvious lot.'(Langer, 1953, 50). In the case of his wet-clothed paintings— especially with the additional dimension provided by the poem— we can locate the painter's musings on non-transient beauty and youth, eternal life even, which are *strange, separate,* and clearly an *other* to the experiential narrative of ageing and death that each of us are exposed to. Semblance (in the sense in which Langer uses the word)[liii] operates here in a far deeper manner than mere resemblance to reality. The poem, then, is an invaluable companion to this series of paintings, especially for understanding the underpinning of *unreality* of this series which had always received accolades for its palpable realism.

And this is why his poems will always remain significant, not merely for providing contextual narration for his famous paintings, but also for bringing about that added dimension of redefining the world of reality that his paintings open up for us; as also for allowing us a glimpse into that private, creative space— locked away from the public eye— that nurtured the deep structure of his oppositional self.

[i] See Tagore 1951, n.p

[ii] "The phenomenon was…an eruptive rebellion, contradistinguished from all the profound and serene values the poet had carefully tended and developed through continual creative activity extending over half a century." Neogy 1961, n p)

[iii] In the preface to *Chitralipi*, Tagore is unequivocal about the primacy of his writing: "I find disinterested pleasure in this work of reclamation, often giving to it more time and care than to my immediate duty in literature that has the sole claim upon my attention, often aspiring to a permanent recognition from the world." (Tagore 1951, n.p)

[iv] The title is difficult to translate in English: the word is a variation on *kalpana*, or imagination/fancy, and is actually a poetic coinage. 'Born of Fancy' is the closest equivalent I could find, as it indicates how the poet focuses on this particular element as being the source of the poems in the collection.

[v] It would be interesting to note that such attitudes, which combined thirst for independence and passionate assertion of identity, were often directed against non-British subjugators in the earlier years of British rule. Rangalal Bandyopadhyay's '*Swadhinota-heenotay ke bachite chay*' (Who would wish to continue surviving without independence) was a hugely famous patriotic poem and used to be a part of school texts of Bengal even in recent times. This is an interesting case of decontextualisation and appropriation, as the poem is a part of Rangalal Bandyopadhyay's long narrative poem 'Padmini-Upakhyan', in which this section functions as an exhortation of Bhim Singh to effect the arousal of his soldiers against Alauddin Khilji and his massive troops. The line *"Jodio jobone mari Chitor na pai he, Chitor na pai/Swargosukhe sukhee hobo, eso sobo bhai he, eso sobo bhai'*(Even if we do not secure Chitor after killing the infidels/We shall secure divine bliss, so come over, all my brothers) is usually edited out in such versions. Poems based on such localized rebellions have often been seen to get fused with the broad discourse of resistance against the British, at times covertly— as we notice in several poems of Tagore's '*Katha o Kahini'*—and also in Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's '*Bande Mataram'*.

[vi] One of the earliest personifications of the country as a mother, 'Bande Mataram', appeared in Chattopadhyay's *'Anandamath'*, in which for the first time "the Hindu concept of the Mother Goddess with its connotation of Shakti was linked with the idea of the country as a political unit" (Mukherjee, 1982, 903); but its immediate context was the 1772 Sanyasi rebellion of Bengal, when the rebels won a victory against united British and Muslim forces. The end of the novel indicates the need to temporarily submit to the British rule and abandon resistance, as advised by a prophet. Freedom and resistance, thus, remains a constant, facilitating the easeful passage of such poems into other contexts.

[vii] Rajanikanta Sen's song lyric, *'Mayer deoa mota kapor'* (the rough clothing gifted by mother) written during the Swadeshi movement is one such composition which visualizes the country as "*deen dukhinee"* (poor and bereft).

[viii] A similar sentiment was seen in some of Atulprasad Sen's patriotic songs, immensely popular during and after the Swadeshi period, especially in "*Bolo bolo bolo sobe…Bharat abar jogot sobhay sreshtho ason lobe"* (Call out together… India will reclaim the best seat in the congregation of the world, yet again). The use of 'reclaim' and 'yet again' indicates the reference to a past glory that has faded now.

[ix] The day on which you rose out of the blue ocean, O mother *Bharatavarsha*,
Such a stir came about on earth, was it devotion, was it delight?
As soon as your halo caused the deep night to dawn
All hailed, victory be yours, Mother, the savior and keeper of the world!

[x] A number of poets have represented the country's state of subjugation as even more unbearable by deploying a retrospective vein of imagination which contrasted the present with its glorious past, bringing about tropes of alienation, exile, and abduction from one's rightful space. We may remember Nabinchandra Sen's '*Ashokbone Sita'*, in which he visualises the country both as "*dukkhini Bharatlakshmi*" (India as a distressed goddess) and "*Sita*

bishadinee" (The Melancholy *Sita*). Here we get to find a rare recalibration of myth in which *Sita* identifies herself as "*Bharat-Lakshmi"* :

'I asked, who are you, Mother, this very image of sadness?
What has caused you such woe?
Wiping her tears, she replied,
I am *Bharat-Lakshmi*, sad and bereft,
In this Ashok-forest, I am *Sita* herself.' (Sen 1878, 125) One may also remember how Biharilal Chakraborty had also compared our 'stolen' freedom with the abduction of Sita in '*Nisarga-sandarshan'*(Viewing Nature):
No longer does *Raghuvir* live on, in this land
The *Lakshmi* of his might has departed with him
Unstoppable monsters, armed with treachery,
Has stolen the *Sita* of our freedom! (Chakraborty 1961, 12)

[xi] This can be seen in the case of *Pujarini* as well. In spite of the clear other-worldly cues induced through the halo and the golden clouds, the woman still remains familiar and is easily identifiable with the figure of a high-brow Bengali woman caught in the act of worship. The idea of the nation-mother, thus, appears to be a shifting proposition— moving between the deity on one hand, and the demure human on the other. Following him, one oscillates between seeing the country as a divine power and discovering its soul in its inhabitants. This extremely interesting ambivalence that surrounds the central figure— who appears to be both the worshipper and the worshipped here— allows the viewers to engage with multiple possibilities of the open-ended narrative.

[xii] Hemendranath, writing on the basics of art chiefly for aspiring artists, is unequivocal about this point: "The difference between the artist and other ordinary people is just this: while an ordinary person would see lightness or commonness in an incident or a visual, an artist delves deeper into it. What he sees, what he feels, is something which is beyond the access of common folks." (Mazumdar 1991, 96)

[xiii] Even in case of the mothers he had painted, there is a clear dissociation from domesticity and the traditional devotion to the offspring usually associated with a dutiful and doting Bengali mother. A most apt example would be his painting titled 'Sangsar-Bandhan' (The Ties of Home) in which we see a mother, all set for going to temple for offering worship, being pulled back by her little child. The *'bandhan'* of family (usually considered as the entire world of women) has a clearly pejorative undernote here, thus stressing upon the woman's willful preference towards another centre of fulfillment distinct from the circle of home and domesticity.

[xiv] It would be interesting to note that in effect, Hemendranath's ideas indicate a clear separation of home/domesticity and marital bonding, which is a little unusual, considering his times.

[xv] "The wine of hatred and envy has filled this land/Not much to choose between one and the other/The poison of pride has killed glory of true merit/Self is the only heaven, hell is what all others are/The six vices remain uncontrolled/And thus Golden India burns down into ashes." (Gupta 1919, 252). Another poem of Gupta— *Bharater Bhagyobiplob* (The Revolution of India's destiny) is closer in spirit to Hemendranath's 'Bereft India' in that, the former poem insinuates that it is the the rejection of religion, ideals and customs of an earlier era which is the root cause of India's present misfortune: "Not even the vestiges of past customs exist now/All are engaged in wrongdoing, always/Moral codes of conduct of yore, oh, where are they? / All prefer immorality, good words are waylaid." (Gupta 1919, 315 *)*

[xvi] This poem was first published in 'Education Gazette' in 12 Sravan, 1277, and we get to know that the publisher, Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay, was summoned by the Government to offer explanation for what was seen as its seditious content(Vidyabhushan and Bandyopadhyay 1943, 29) though the poem begins with a text that clearly indicates that its context is the Mughal invasion of the Maratha territories, and it is primarily based on the songs of the Maratha minstrel Madhavacharya who composed songs in order to arouse the vanquished Marathas. The poet omitted the poem in his second edition of *Kabitabolee*. A part of the poem goes like this:

When they came to Aryavarta
With their flaming bravery darkening all else
Our forefathers, drunk with battle-fervour!
When they fought mightily
And won the land of five rivers
How many of them were there, then?

And again, on the banks of the Ganges

They arrived, holding high victory's banner
On the banks of Yamuna, Kaveri and Narmada, too—
Also in the forests of *Dravida, Tailanga* and *Dakshinatya*
How many of them were there, then?

Now that you number a hundred crore
Freeing the country is no such matter—
You can rule with smiling ease
From the North Pole to the South
Put up victory's flag for the world to see
Awake, arise, and do take a pledge!

Why then, under the feet of enemies
Of another religion, do you yet languish?
Why not unbind the chains
And proclaim freedom, henceforth? (Bandyopadhyay 1881, 142-143)

[xvii] 'There is also reason to suppose that the family may have had serious sympathies, if not links, with the nationalist movement. It is said that Aurobindo Ghosh had been a friend of Jatindranath, and had visited his family home at Gachihata in 1908, just before he was arrested in connection with the Alipore bomb case in the month of May. Family sources indicate that the photograph of Jatindranath and Aurobindo Ghosh was clicked by the young Hemendranath who was then already adept at photography.' (Ghosh, 2016, 5). 'Jatindranath' is Hemendranath's eldest brother, and the revered head of the family after Durganath Mazumdar's death.

[xviii] Subhaschandra Bose visited the Tikatuli locality in Dhaka in 1939, on the insistence of his ardent followers Anil Ray and Leela Ray, to attend a conference organized by the Naree Shiksha Mandir of Dhaka. The Mazumdar family was in Dhaka then for an extended time, for a family wedding, and there is anecdotal evidence that the initial round of honours to Bose was left to Hemendranath's nephew Jogindranath, who was a young boy then (who later said in his unpublished reminiscences '*Amar dekha Gorakaka, Chitrashilpi Hemendranath Mazumdar: Gachihata Smriti o Kolkata Smriti*', "our entire household was obsessed about Subhaschandra"). It is clear that Hemendranath shared this strong familial sentiment, but we have no way of knowing whether he was present there himself, or even whether he had ever met Subhashchandra in person.

[xix] Abbreviating Das's bestowed title *Deshbondhu* (Friend of the Country) to *Bondhu* hints at a deeply-felt personal emotion, essentialising thus, the widespread public admiration into a moment of profound private devotion. We also have another painting of Das in which he is seen sitting on an armchair. This is a somewhat unusual portraiture, as Hemendranath paints him without his signature round-rimmed glasses, so he does seem a little unfamiliar. What is most notable is the painting that is seen to hang on the wall behind Das— it is Hemendranath's own painting, *Bhagyalakshmi* (The goddess of Destiny), in which a housewife is seen to spin on a *charka* (spinning-wheel), and the title hints that she is fashioning not only her own destiny but her country's as well through her action. We have no way of knowing whether this painting did actually hang in Das's room, or whether he possessed it— or, whether, Hemendranath, quoting from his own work, was silently advocating a merger of Gandhian *satyagraha* with the more extremist path trodden by Das and his many associates.

[xx] I have not been able to trace Hemendranath's portrait of Aurobindo Ghosh, but Kamal Sarkar refers to it in *Bharater Bhaskar O Chitrashilpi*, (Shyamali Ghosh, 1984, 241)

[xxi] Though this tendency of inscribing the time and place of composition is almost never seen in his paintings, his poems— each single one— have a full signature with his characteristic flourish, as we see in his paintings. It is unusual for a poet to sign each individual poem, especially so when he is compiling a manuscript. We can consider this as a spillover from the essential inscription of authorship that had always been common among painters for centuries.

[xxii] 'Bengal's literary night was silent, as if in slumber
Overcome by unsung stillness. What holy moment spread far
The splendor of talent at your great advent
Hope's first ray brought about dawn's glory, in wonderment! (Tagore 1961, 971)

[xxiii] Madhusudan Dutt's poem focuses on the limitlessness of both education and compassion of Vidyasagar:

'Sea of education you are, famed across India
Ocean of compassion, too, known only by the ones
Who are poor; O friend of the poor— in a glorious world
The splendor of thy glorious peak unsullied remains.' (Dutt 1942, 384)

[xxiv] See Murshid 2004, 208. By then, Vidyasagar had become 'My dear Vid' to Dutt, and he had proclaimed too, that 'He has the wisdom of an ancient sage, the energy of an Englishman, and the heart of a Bengali mother'. (ibid, p xii)

[xxv] Hemendranath was an active and enthusiastic member of *Rabibasor*, and also designed the monogram of the group. After Tagore's death in 1941, *Rabibasor* used to have sessions dedicated to his memory for one whole year. During this period its publications used a miniature portrait of Tagore painted by Hemendranath, with the name of the organization designed and inscribed by him as well. Later this became the base for a newer monogram. (Ghosh, 1993, 35)

[xxvi] In 'After Death; Twenty Years', in *Looking Back: The 1947 Partition of India, 70 Years On* (Jalil 2017, 297-298)

[xxvii] 'I have killed people— their blood
Has stained me all over; in the world's way
I am the sibling to my dead brother; he knew I was his younger one, yet
He killed me with a hardened heart—I , here,
Near the waves of a bloodied sea, slumber now
After slaying a confused man, almost my big brother—
Now when I rest my head on his un-broad chest
It does feel as if the one who follows the religion of affection
Desiring to deliver light to all, goes about it
Yet sleeps finally, as there is no light anywhere. (Das 1954, 121-125)

[xxviii] From the poet's nephew, Dr Jogindranath Majumder.

[xxix] I found a letter from 'The Comptroller of the Household, The Palace, Government of Bikaner', to 'H Mazumdar, Esq.', dated 20 September, 1935, requesting him on behalf of the Maharaja for a companion-piece to a painting of his, already in royal possession:

"You might remember having sold to His Highness the Maharajah of Bikaner, in Delhi in the month of March, 1930, a picture of an Indian lady in white clothes sitting on some steps at the edge of the water with a lota (pot) beside her just after she had had a bath; and the dress is beautifully done and part of it clings to the wet skin. The lady faces from left to right inwards…

His Highness now wants another picture to be painted, not, of course, of exactly the same type, or same colouring or dress and scenery, but something which will any how be a good match; and the figure of the lady should face from right to left inwards.

The price paid for this picture was Rs 200/- and I will be prepared for a good picture, if sent first for approval of His Highness and if approved by him, to pay the same price." (From the family papers of Hemendranath Mazumdar, accessed with the kind permission of the artist's nephew, Dr Jogindranath Majumder).

One wonders whether Mazumdar could have been slightly put off by the tone of the letter, by the specifications imposed on the proposed painting, the price, and also the clause of pre-approval. We know that at that particular time he was employed under the Maharajah of Patiala, Bhupindar Singh, with a monthly salary of Rs 2000, and all the princely states of Rajasthan had been collecting his works then. It is possible that he would not find the price of Rs 200 agreeable, though he had sold the earlier painting for the same sum five years back.

[xxx] Tagore had written *Debotar Biday* (The Departure of the Deity) on a similar theme as far back as 1896, two years after Mazumdar was born.

[xxxi] I referred to this particular volume especially because most of Mazumdar's dated poems were written around this period. Also, as most of the magazine's numbers carried prints of Mazumdar's paintings, it can be assumed that he possibly read these.

[xxxii] (Sengupta 1940, 378)

[xxxiii] We are reminded of Tagore's song *Aaro aaro Probhu aaro aaro*- 'Come again o Lord, come again/ Strike me with more and more pain' (1909)

[xxxiv] (Chakraborty 1940, 115)

[xxxv] And that is possibly why Mazumdar protests against moral conventions that preach 'purity' in preparation for the afterlife, and prays to God so that he may legitimize a life of fulfilled (as against repressed) desire in 'Create this World once Again'(*E Dhoronee Goro Punorbar),*discussed later in this chapter.

[xxxvi] His painting *Parityokta*(The Abandoned) would be a case in point. The woman here is seen in a moment of distress, justifying narrative of abandonment hinted at in the title. The narrative is further deepened by hinting at an act of transgression: *The Art of Mr. H Mazumdar* (which carried the image of the work) offers a commentary which, while focusing entirely on her act of transgression, is equally unclear about her identity: 'One sad indiscretion and the unfortunate perpetrator is considered an exile to the community.'(Shome, 1920, n.p) This clearly hints at a socially unsanctioned liaison which has resulted in her estrangement. It does seem that the painter has sympathies both for the distressed woman and the social boundary which she has overstepped; it is, as if, her 'indiscretion' is 'sad', but not condonable.

[xxxvii] The woman in question is bent on accompanying her husband to his workplace in Calcutta. Her father-in-law points out that the salary of her husband is insufficient to support a family, and the husband too requests her to stay back in the village for a few months till he manages to get a raise. But she is adamant, and refuses to stay back as she had had too much of the village. The details of her 'folly' in the big city are completely omitted in the poem: at the very end, we see her brought back to her in-law's village home, dead.

[xxxviii] We may remember, in this connection, Jibanananda Das's poem of the same name— *Patita*— published in *Jhora Palok* of 1927, in which the tone is decidedly vitriolic, without even any semblance of compassion:

Her home is nightmarish, life strewn with deadness
Curse on this society, a crumbling disease— no less
Destroying the gift of love, a jail bound by deceit
She's woven, closed doors on this day sunlit—
Daylight put out in a moment, nocturnal she turned
Her dance on men's breasts from a she-snake learnt
The eyes rain hemlock, her breath with poison laced
Illusion, her entire life, is on a farce based
Moon and the stars get dimmed by her touch
Gloom descends on the bank of light— she is one such
Brings forth the call of doom—disease, epidemic, death unfazed
A human still, a woman too! How'd she get this debased? (Das 1993, 51)

[xxxix] In this context we may recall Rabindranath Tagore's poem *Patita,* which is in sharp contrast to the irreversibility of 'fallenness'; here the poet transcends even the bounds of mere compassion in what can only be called a deep empathetic understanding of the violated femininity of the woman in question. The personality of the woman, proud of her essential femininity, shines through:

Remember those girls, O royal minister,
Whom you sent to the forest, to ensnare
Sage Rishyoshringo? Ornamented, bejeweled
I'm one of them, a prostitute, who went there—

God's slumber signals our day
When He awakens, for us it's night
At the gateway of hell on this earth
The evening lamp we light—

You, a minister of the royal court
Your business is worse by far
Behind the shadow of the throne
Using human snares to capture humans, sir!

Am I your secret weapon only?
Do I not have a heart?
Morals I cast away—morality, though,

Me, it did not ever desert.

No proper work I have, no shame as well
Had never known chastity's norm, sir,
Does that mean I'll forget the essence
Of womanhood? Not now, not ever! (Tagore 1899, 9-10)

[xl] The unrelenting judgementality that we find in Jibanananda Das's poem, and also in Mazumdar's (though considerably diluted) is replaced by compassion and sympathy in a poem of the same name (*Patita*) by Girindramohini Dasi who was a contemporary of Tagore, though here, too, there is a reference to the loss of 'jewels' which clearly refers to chastity:

Seeing the fake smile on these faded lips
The passers-by are entranced by your veneer
But your bereft look, behind the guise of *kajal*
Tries hard, to conceal its attire of tear!
Thinking of you, grief overcomes me
What fate, this, for an innocent girl!
What dream, what false hope's maze
On your good heart did hell unfurl?
Trusted sweet-talking sailors with your boat
O weak, naïve girl—deceivers, them all!
Stole your jewels, leaving you in midstream whirl
Chuckled on the bank, letting the sinking boat fall!
O woman, the image of mercy, what curse was it
That turned you nocturnal, your soul too, died
What insane desire, what empty temptation
The very commandments of God dared overwrite? (Dasi 1890, 88)

[xli] This, once again, reminds us of Mazumdar's painting *Parityokta* (The Cast Out), and especially the mention of 'One sad indiscretion' in the commentary that appeared in The Art of Mr H Mazumdar(see endnote [xli])

[xlii] In a number of *Sabuj Patra* (8th year, first issue, *Sravan*) the editor Pramatha Chaudhuri reiterates the ideals behind the publication— the magazine was revived at this point after a short hiatus: "This world wears a number of different faces— and the very significance of creation lies in bringing out is variedness. Be it the living world, or the world of feelings, the reason behind this variation is the free burst of the soul's autonomy. He who wishes to interrupt this freedom of expression is one who, in spite of contrary claims, is the true worshipper of inertness." (p.69). In the very first issue, he had already connected 'green' (sobuj) to the new and the vital— "A colour is both a visual and a symbol." Pramatha (Chaudhuri 1914, 6)

[xliii] It is interesting to note that Bimala in *Ghare Baire* too faces a hard fate in spite of being separated not only by timeline, but also in point of culture and education, from the transgressing heroines of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay like *Heera* (*Krishnakanter Will*) and *Shaibolini* (*Chandrashekhar*) — the latter was purified by penance and thus escaped death. Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's heroine *Kironmoyee* (*Charitraheen*) and *Biraj* (*Biraj Bou*), even though their acts are justifiable, can also be added to this endless list. This does seem to be a perpetuating, if covert, tale of retributive justice for women who dared even to think about men other than their husbands. It is thus not too surprising that Mazumdar would submit to the usual practice of replicating the fable of chastity with its inevitable culmination in the misfortune of the transgressor.

[xliv] We will remember his paintings like *Grihalakshmi*, *Bhagyalakshmi* and *Sangsar-bandhan* which amply illustrate this attitude.

[xlv] *Bishabriksha* literally means the poison plant, and in it Bankimchandra uses indicative phrases as chapter headings, like 'The poison plant is sown', or 'The fruit of the poison plant comes about'— all of these refer loosely to the beginning and growth of unsanctioned, extramarital love. We may choose to find a clear echo of this in Mazumdar's line in *Patita* 'you'd sown a wish-fulfilling plant, no less/ Watch how it yields fruits of nothingness!', or even in *Abidya*, where he says 'And so, in my home, see how/Proudly blooming, the poison flowers are!' and observe how the contexts, too, connect. Only, the fruit for Bankimchandra's 'straying' and 'unchaste' women is usually death, while Mazumdar imagines an empty and senseless life as their destiny.

[xlvi] "Let us say that, in its fundamental use, fantasy is the means by which the subject maintains himself at the level of his vanishing desire, vanishing inasmuch as the very satisfaction of demand deprives him of his object." (Lacan 2007, 637)

[xlvii] This can be connected to Mazumdar's lifelong opposition to the Bengal School's attempts to legitimize a singular, *correct* artistic taste, excluding all else.

[xlviii] "the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference...mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal."(Bhabha, 122, 2004)

[xlix] This instantly reminds us of Keats's search for that perfect, non-transient moment of beauty within an aesthetic space— especially in *Ode to a Nightingale* and *Ode on a Grecian Urn*. But Mazumdar here stops short of exploring further along the lines of the dilemma that Keats faced: the value of lived life, however imperfect or transient, vis-à-vis that of eternally unchanging moments frozen in art. He was locked thus within a space of ambivalence triggered by the realization that perfect moments in art are deathless only because they are lifeless. Mazumdar's celebratory exhortations about the eternalizing power of the artist has an unabashed self-reflexive— even self-congratulatory— tone, which is direct and does not admit any counterpoint.

[l] One finds a close parallel to Shakespeare's Sonnet 18, 'Shall I compare thee to a summer's day', in which the power of the poet to eternalize beauty transcends the 'perfect' beauty itself, and hints that perfection can only be found within the premise of aesthetics.

[li] See Chapter 5, 'Virtual space', pp 69-85, and Chapter 6, 'The Modes of Virtual Space', pp 86-103 in *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (Langer 1953).

[lii] Samuel Bufford simplifies her theory into what reads like an aphoristic dictum: 'Painting, then, presents virtual space, music virtual time, and literature virtual life.' (Bufford, 1972, 9-20)

[liii] "The function of "semblance" is to give forms a new embodiment in purely qualitative, unreal instances, setting them free from their normal embodiment in real things so that they may be recognized in their own right, and freely conceived and composed in the interest of the artist's ultimate aim" (Langer, 1953, 50)

Conclusion

It is always difficult to pen down a conclusion after years of intense research in an area which had been all but written off by mainstream art history: research opens up so many different pathways in differing directions that the whole process takes on the visual of a maze. But this also provides the researcher with a clear vision of that grand narrative shaped by the mainstreaming of history— the tale of erasure and overwriting— and its unquestioned, possibly uninvested replication decade after decade, and that continuing critical nonchalance that all but evaporated the very need of revisit and revision. It is also interesting to note how the projected outcome of research, envisaged at the very outset, varies substantially from what it actually turns out to be after the project is finished. Perhaps 'finished' is not an apt term here: what this journey of research has taught me primarily, among many other things, is that the past is negotiable, thus forever unfinished— not frozen in time, not unmoving, but open to multiple processes of refabrication. And it is also infirm. The schisms and ruptures within it preclude our imagining it as an edifice, apart from the fact that it is as constructed as an edifice is. Having worked with Indian art history for a considerable period, I have closely observed how the politics of the present adds or subtracts layers of meaning to/from even mainstream history; we construct our past much more than our future. In the introduction to this thesis, I had referred to Bakhtin's concept of "live entering" (that subsequently led to his theory of dialogue) as being inspirational to my choice of methodology: this is how I tried to keep intact the subjectivisation of myself as well as the people I was dealing with, those removed from my own cultural moment by almost a century. What I have principally gained in learning from this process is the understanding that I am as contained by my temporally located culture, the resultant choices, ways of seeing and of thought (even the markers I consciously looked for, which would be friendly to my discourse) as the people who are the subjects of my research. A totally impersonal and objective assessment was almost impossible, as I was not, principally, dealing with objectivity *per se*; my reliance on objective facts was much less, as compared to the extent to which I had to depend on accounts, opinions, reviews— *histories*— written by other people, with other kinds of commitments and contingencies[i]. Having said this, I must also underline that I did undertake a conscious and honest exercise in objectivity— as far as possible— in my journey of research, though it is hard

for me to determine whether the vigilance that I maintained against any possible slippage added to the value of my work, or deterred from it, as this estimate too would be forever infirm, and essentially depend on the shifting critical temper/s of changing times.

I have addressed these unexpected bends and turns that unfixed the previously envisaged route of inquiry; these are often significant counterpoints born out of the interface between the researcher and her research, which only serve to add additional significance, and dimension, to the final outcome. Having said this, it is also essential that I point out here my deep ambivalence about finality; I should perhaps call this *unfinalizability*. Hemendranath Mazumdar had never been taken seriously by mainstream art history; whatever puny mentions he had had, were invariably related to his regimented status as the artist who painted erotic figures of wet-clothed women. That he had a strong claim to discursivity, vis-à-vis the cultural politics of his times, had never been noted, let alone analyzed, by our times (except that one chapter in Partho Mitter's book *The Triumph of Nationalism*, which I have drawn from, extensively, in this thesis). There was, of course, the posthumously-published book by Mazumdar himself— *Chhobir Chosma*— which proved invaluable in understanding and theorizing the nature of his resistance. It is indeed regrettable that in spite of having been published (and widely sold, which the number of editions bear testimony to) more than thirty years ago, the discourse evident in the text had not been considered important enough for historians to be subsumed within textbooks of Indian art history.

Therefore, at the very outset, I was faced with a twin problem. The first was, of course, to look closely at Mazumdar's paintings other than the wet-clothed series, to ascertain without doubt whether he is only partially represented— in whatever puny space history had allotted him, and also within the already-fading space of our collective cultural memory— whether something was really amiss about his reputation, about which I had always had a strong conviction. After having mapped out the broad area of my research, it was then time to collect objective evidence, mostly plates of his other paintings, and proof of both his extraordinary competence and fame in subjects other than wet-clothed women. The second problem was understanding, and formulating, his discourse of resistance from his scattered writings in magazines, his journal editorials, commentary of contemporaries, and his book *Chhobir Chosma*. The way I went about the first problem was primarily exploratory in nature: my principal aim was not to rehabilitate

him and his severely limited reputation within mainstream art history, but to perceive and point out his consistent discursivity, something no-one has attempted before. But without getting familiarized with all aspects of his oeuvre, it would not have been possible to identify its ramifications, as I was primarily dealing with a discursive painter whose opinions and reflections were inextricably connected with his art. It is also essential to point out how a close look at his 'evocative' paintings of women opened up a whole new series of oppositional stands that could be clearly and significantly related to the unfolding of his position of resistance. That he was initiating no less than a revolution by representing women as desiring subjects rather than the usual objects of desire was accompanied by another observation no less important: that he was actually exploring the interiority of women within a private, solitary space, the hiddenness of their thought and feeling (in this drama of concealment and disclosure, the wet cloth that at once revealed and hid the body could also be seen as a trope). Thus his paintings served as primary texts, but these also yielded valuable, if covert, subtexts, which made the narrative of his resistance deeper and more meaningful.

His manuscripts of poems— *Kalpanika* and *Bikreeto Bidhata*— proved to be veritable goldmines as well, providing me with intimate glimpses into that extremely interesting intertwining of conformism and defiance in his personality, leading me further, thus, towards an attempt to unskein the complex process of social subjectivisation. There is indeed such a contention that it is in the minor/variant works of a creative person of fame that we can actually come closest to his/her personality, as these are free from the need to adapt to the established style and/or conform to the yardstick of public acceptability— a standard already set by his/her previously existing oeuvre. In a sense, therefore, such works open up a space of freedom, even of playfulness— uncircumscribed, really, by the demands of the artist's own fame. We have noticed this in Rabindranath Tagore's doodles before these flowered into full-blown paintings, and created a standard of their own. Mazumdar's poems are similar in the sense that there is an unabashedness about these; he does not overtly highlight his oppositionality, nor is he apologetic about conformism. The artifice of poetry weaves together realism and reality, idealism and ideology too— into a multidimensional fabric, without any overt agendum.

My initial focus, as I have mentioned before, was on the oppositionality of Mazumdar vis-à-vis the Bengal school's propagated doctrine of 'Indianness' in art, in point of technique, subject and

ideology. But as the research progressed, other directions opened up: I observed how his opposition had gone beyond this singularity of intent and provided space for unabashed interrogation of most unmoving structures, political or sociocultural, with their usual impositions on freedoms of all kinds. I have attempted to locate and discuss these spirals of resistance, most of which are obliquely connected to his almost utopian yearning for a space of freedom for the artist, as well as the social individual. This 'freedom', though, was not absolute and unmediated. Here I would borrow a term from ecology— from James J Gibson, in particular— by how Mazumdar was circumscribed by the *affordance* (Gibson, 1986, 127) of his cultural environment[ii]. The exigencies of his particular cultural and social climate (and not only the artistic debates) offered choices for complicity or contestability, and a number of possible in-between positions; while he unfailingly contested the 'Indian-style' idiom, his posture vis-à-vis the fixity of social conventions did indeed carry an undernote of ambivalence, with a hint of complicity mediating with his contestation. I have also felt that it is his lifelong preoccupation with these debates and discords that had fashioned his own figurations of freedom. For him, it came to mean freedom from the cultural dictates of the dominant, or even sometimes, the injustice of the social fabric, but it also possibly deterred him from questioning at a deeper level the value of naturalism, or the very utility of the social structures. The relative limitednessness of the opponent also resulted in a corresponding reaction which, now that we look back at it, seems to be somewhat contained in scope.

But we must also remember that he lived for only fifty-four years, and died about eleven months after India's independence. There is no way of ascertaining whether his trajectory would have taken a sharp turn in free India, with the removal of many power structures, along with the evaporation of attitudes of conformism/resistance directed at these. Interestingly, we have no documentation as to what he felt about this birth of a self-governed nation, though his poem *Bestial Man* bears testimony to his disbelief and hurt after witnessing the terrors of the Calcutta riots. It is unlikely that the sea change that completely transformed the narrative of Indian art in the fifties would have failed to touch him. Western modernist art, unfixed now from nationalist reservations (and having travelled far away from Academic realism, even British Art, for that matter), became a major influence for numerous Indian artists, like the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay (who also rejected the Bengal school rhetoric and aimed at creating international avant-garde art which would absorb and reflect the realities of a post-independence,

post-partition India)[iii]. We can only wonder how he would respond to this. Having witnessed his interest in design— for example, his clear incorporation of art nouveau features in the design and illustrations of the journals that he published— it would not perhaps be too far-fetched to imagine that the impetus on the interpermeation of art and design in free India (we will remember the work of K G Subramanyan, Haku Shah and some others) and the emergence of an intriguing intersectional space would have fascinated him. In fact one of his later paintings— *Gachihata, Mymensing*, which is a painting of a wilderness without any localizing markers— clearly indicates a deep, interior shift in his attitude. In this work what he paints is emptiness. When an artist, who had clearly favoured both narratival threads and localizing markers in his paintings all through his life, paints a landscape of an extremely unexceptional semi-barren tract of land with no specific focus, it does induce the sense of a sharp variance from the broad directionality of his career as we have known it. This is a painting of a wilderness, and it is clear that no human hand has attempted to alter its character by means of cultivation or any other activity. It does appear that the artist, at the very outset, distances his subject from our usual circle of experience, normal, known and somewhat controlled; there is a clear sense of detachment from civilization, society and even the way we perceive the flow of life. More than any of his other works it displays that particular quality which Nick Wilson would have called *emergence*[iv]. But if we look back at his trajectory as it has come down to us, it becomes clear that all through his creative life he had been closely connected to the located culture of his land. It is therefore possible that this painting is a signpost of a new journey of interiority that the painter embarked on in the last few years of his life, away from public eye, denuded of the need to live up to his fame as not only a painter, but also a prominent discursive personality. What Elder-Vass calls "the structuring set of relations" (Elder-Vass 2010, 17) had altered for him in the forties. We must remember that in this decade he had witnessed the great Bengal famine[v]— and later, the riots, and the partition of his homeland[vi] as well. We have seen, in many cases, artists engaging in surprisingly avant-garde work only in their advanced age. We will remember how Abanindranath emerged from the long shadow of the initiator of the 'Indian-style' painting in the last decades of his life: the multiframe narratives that he used in his 'Arabian Nights' Series, the postmodern mode of narration in *Khuddur Jatra*, and— most importantly— his *kutum-katam*, the wood-and-twig 'sculptures' that took off from pieces of found objects, parts of trees, pieces of wood, even stones, more usually, dead roots, twigs or branches. In this we can trace a journey

from form to significant form, playful and free, which we have difficulty subsuming within his oeuvre as we have known it. Nandalal Bose's collages have the whiff of the same indeterminate journey— from randomness to specificity— a movement that can be best described by Tagore's phrase, "the great journey of shapes"[vii]. In the manuscript doodles of Rabindranath Tagore we witness the same indeterminate journey, from 'found' shapes generated by manuscript erasures towards meaningful forms. Each of these art practices were variant vis-à-vis their better-known trajectories: in a way these can be seen as unique negotiations with the fixity of their own renown. We could be speculative about whether Hemendranath's trajectory would have taken a similar avant-garde turn; but we have seen how he had been in dialogue with his milieu all through his artistic career, and it is unlikely that he would refrain from reinventing himself and his work had he lived beyond his fifty-four years.

Now that we look back, it does feel that the artist was prophetic while envisaging specific ways in which art management/government patronage for fine arts should develop in India. Hemendranath was unequivocal about the need to have a permanent national gallery to showcase the works of talented artists of the country[viii]. He had also underlined that India cannot offer the honour that artists deserve, nor is love for art common here. Being a poor country, there is no awareness about the need for artistic practice as well. The art treasures of the country are not maintained properly— there is hardly any sense of responsibility among the public too. And that is precisely why the government must step in and extend serious patronage. According to him in our country, rich clients often buy paintings almost as a status symbol, without understanding or caring about the value of art— this needs to change. For him this is the point where good art exhibitions become exceedingly relevant: in order to instill understanding of art in both rich and ordinary people, the value of good shows cannot be overemphasized; in fact it is the singular way to educate viewers. Over and above, the only way to address the ignorance and indifference towards art would be to spruce up the scattered state of art education and disseminate proper and wholesome training to students, otherwise the number of inept artists and senseless art critics would abound. (Mazumdar 1991, 13-14) We will observe how, in the concluding essays of *Chhobir Chosma* (in the section which he names *Chitrasiksha*) he attempts to address issues like the language of art, the development of aesthetic taste, even ways of seeing, apart from valuable practical lessons in art. We will note how projects for developing the state of art in India, post-independence, have moved almost exactly along his envisaged routes. His dream of a permanent

national gallery was fulfilled with the establishment of the National Gallery of Modern Art at Jaipur House, New Delhi, in 1952 (but the proposal for the gallery came up much earlier, in 1949, just a year after Mazumdar's death). Most of the states of India now have State Government boards for the development of fine arts as well (like *Rajyo Charukala Parshad* in West Bengal). As for his wish for significant shows, we now have a number of good art galleries, both government and private, most of which put up meaningful and well-curated shows from time to time. Art pedagogy and training has received much serious and specialized attention in our own times, and needless to say, the profession of art has started to attract a certain measure of honourable interest in society (usually in proportion with financial success, but that's another story).

In spite of the fact that contemporary Indian art has moved far away from the practice of illusionist painting, the influence and impress of Mazumdar's style can indeed be traced in the line of realism which has still survived in our own times, albeit in a fundamentally changed character: in Bikash Bhattacharjee's work, for instance. More specifically, in the controlled yet fluid brushstrokes in his watercolours, and also in the way Bhattacharjee develops a dialogue between the landscape within which he places his figure, and the figure itself. He also explores, like Mazumdar, the interiority of women who we see all around us— and that hidden dimension about them, too, that usually eludes our vision. For both these artists the principal narrative defining their women oscillates between the secret and the unhidden, unfolding in varying manners. In fact I am reminded of an exhibition of Bhattacharjee— titled *Environs*— of October, 1987, which was shown successively at Birla Academy of Art and Culture, Kolkata and Jehangir Art Gallery, Mumbai. In the catalogue of this exhibition, Bhattacharjee unequivocally expresses his deep admiration for Mazumdar: "But as a student I was greatly inspired by Hemendranath Majumdar. His mastery over watercolour as well as other mediums still amazes me. Whenever I get the opportunity I carefully scrutinize this aspect of his work." (Bhattacharjee 1987, 7)

In our own times, it is heartening to see the culture of protest, with differing addressivities, permeating the works of most of our major painters. Such a situation is especially conducive to a sensitive understanding of Hemendranath's consistent interrogations of artistic and social ideologies, his active critical engagement with the world outside his studio. When he was at the height of his fame, he could easily have bypassed debates and dissentions, and withdrawn within

his own painterly concerns. But the lone, self-absorbed painter's journey was not for him. We are too steeped in apathy today to be able to appreciate his agency— and positivity too— that lay at the heart of his resistance.

[i] "the historian is always the prisoner of the world within which he thinks, and his thoughts and perceptions are conditioned by the categories of the language in which he operates." (Iggers 2005, 9). The mention of 'language' triggers us to remember Barthes's position that history and literature were not essentially different. His impatience with the 'real' in history is also noteworthy in the present context: "in objective history, the "real' is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent."(Barthes 1989,139)

[ii] In his book The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception, Gibson defines affordance as "The *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal, what it *provides*, or *furnishes*, either for good or ill…It implies the complementarity of the animal and the environment." (Gibson 1986, 127). I have considered the 'environment' as specifically the cultural climate, and have felt that the question of complementarity (and the related, if assumptive, point of limits) still holds well.

[iii] Having said this, it is also important to underline that the East-West confrontationality was far from over even in free India, and in a way its modified version still continues in our own times. K G Subramanyan's concept of 'cultural schizophrenia' sums up this post-independence interface of cultures: "When the British left India and the country became free one would have thought this confrontation would be liquidated since almost all Indians were agreed on the fact that in the modernization of India certain similarities with the West were inevitable. But this has not happened: on the other hand, this confrontation has ingrained itself in the mind of every Indian driving him into a sort of cultural schizophrenia." (Subramanyan 2006, 16)

[iv] While attempting to define 'emergence' as an ontological feature "that arises from the necessary and contingent relations that form between different things" (Wilson 2020, 5), the author draws on its meaning in the context of the power of social structures— which still remains perfectly explicatory— and quotes Dave Elder-Vass: "An emergent property is one that is not possessed by any of the parts individually and that would not be possessed by the full set of parts in the absence of a structuring set of relations between them." (Elder-Vass 2010, 17)

[v] Which inspired his painting *Sesh Pratisodh* (More Than Death).

[vi] It was also around this time that he, along with his wife, received their spiritual initiation (*diksha)* from Santisudha Devi, the daughter of the sage Bijoy Krishna Goswami. Family sources say that he also painted portraits of Bijoy Krishna Goswami and his wife, Jogamaya Devi at the request of Santisudha Devi, and these portraits were kept at the ashram at Gendariya, in Dhaka. They were said to have been brought to the ashram at Baruipur, in West Bengal, after the partition, but I found no trace of these in the said place. If one wishes to specifically search for it, a spiritual dimension can probably be identified in *Gachihata: Mymensing*, especially in the ambient glow of the land/sky in which the wilderness culminates.

[vii] '*Akarer mohajatra'*: Tagore first used this phrase in a letter to Rani Mahalanobish, dated 13 *Agrahayan*, 1335(28 November, 1928)

[viii] "It is a matter of immense regret that no permanent national gallery has been set up anywhere in India. It is a dishonor not only for the countrymen, but also for civilization itself; India is huge, there is no dearth of people-power, or even the power of education in comparison to other countries. Each free and civilized country in the world has one or more shrines devoted to fine arts, without which civilization remains incomplete." (Mazumdar 1991, 72)

Appendix-1

A Short Biography of Hemendranath Mazumdar

After a detailed discussion of the discourse of resistance that had consistently underpinned Hemendranath Mazumdar's work all through his creative life, I felt it would be judicious to append a short biography of the artist at the very end. This is not directly connected to the exploration of my research question, but it is quite possible that these details of his life might actually provide an additional dimension to the understanding of an artist whose trajectory we have surveyed largely in terms of his oppositionality. Research often fails to touch areas which do not answer to its direct context, which is justified; but in certain cases— like my work, which deals with a painter who is all but forgotten now— biographical details often open up lateral avenues of perception and assessment. For my research, I had to begin by putting together a skeletal biography and a workable timeline, without which the chronological backbone of my inquiry would have collapsed, though the absence of a substantial body of records and reflections had proved to be a sizeable impediment— especially so while attempting to systematically arrange biographical material.

Thus putting together a chronology of Mazumdar's life had, admittedly, not been an easy task. There are vacant time zones, inscribed only sparsely. Much of the information received from family sources, though valuable, is without chronologically documented evidence and hence not overtly helpful in putting together a workable timeline. The family papers— dated letters (and letterheads, bearing addresses), deeds, even court papers— had partially helped in filling out the timeline, as did the dates of publication of his paintings and essays in various magazines (including the ones he used to publish himself).

It is possible to look at Mazumdar's life as a series of key points that involved the collision of structure and agency, in differing contexts and with different ramifications. This relates to the

opening up of variant choices: the road not taken speaks to us in the same significant voice as the chosen way. Most sources firmly identify the year of Hemendranath Mazumdar's birth as 1894, though Partho Mitter places it in 1898(Mitter 2007, 128) which is totally unlikely, considering the available documentary evidence. The date of his birth was, likewise, the subject of much debate. Barid Baran Ghosh fixes his date of birth as 19 September 1894 (Ghosh 1993, 11), and this is corroborated by Mazumdar's nephew as well. But in the book Kishoreganj: Jeebonikosh, Sajal Kanti Dutta Roy claims that the artist was born on 14th April, 1894 (Dutta Roy 2018, 249). I, personally, would prefer to go with the date accepted by the family. He was born in Gachihata village of Mymensingh(a prosperous district of pre-partition Bengal, now in Bangladesh), the seventh child of Gangamoyee Devi and Durganath Mazumdar. Gachihata was a part of the Kishoreganj subdivision, a place which was known for having nurtured a number of notable talents. That his father was a 'zamindar' (Mitter 2007, 128) is only partially true. His distant ancestors may well have been zamindars, but his father Durganath Mazumdar worked as a *nayeb*, a rent-collector, for the Atharobari estate. He is said to have had a somewhat distant familial relation with the estate owners. The family had been prosperous once and their home was widely known in the region as Gachihata *Kalibari*, the name derived from the worship, for centuries, of the familial goddess Kali. According to family legends, the 8th generation of the Mazumdars, Rudranarayan(the original title of the the Mazumdars was Nandy, Mazumdar being a later, endowed title of decoration) invoked the goddess as *Shivkali* and erected a temple in her name. Family sources fix the date of the establishment of the temple as 5 *Baishakh*, 1173. It is also said that subsequent to this, Tilakram Mazumdar(brother of Rudranarayan) bequeathed, by a deed of grant, the taxes generated by the taluk no.2257 and of the entire *mouja* for the service and worship of the familial goddess[i]. This is incontrovertible evidence to the fact that the family had indeed had the right to exact taxes from the region, a right usually enjoyed by a *zamindar*. The entire property of the Mazumdars thus became *debatra*, that is, property endowed for the support of a divine idol. It can only be speculated when, and why, the administrative reins slipped away from the family and were relocated in another branch of the same bloodline. The matter of the economic status of Hemendranath's family seems to have remained a matter of speculation in his times: for example, in his obituary in Amrita Bazar Patrika, dated July 25, 1948, it is said that Hemendranath was 'born in a poor *Kayastha* family of Gachihata'. This immediately resulted in a rejoinder from a member of his family, Nilima Majumdar, in the 2

August issue of the same newspaper, which insists that the reporter who put together the obituary 'was not correct to say that Mr Majumdar was born in a poor family. Though he was not born of millionaire parents, he belonged to an old and aristocratic family, very well known in that part of Bengal, having unmistakable stamp of peace and plenty. At no stage of his life Mr Majumdar had to fight poverty.' Premeshchandra Shome (a relative and a close associate of Hemendranath, and the editor of the first three volumes of *The Art of H Mazumdar*), too, mentions unequivocally that 'Poverty has been called the maker of all creative geniuses; perhaps for this reason, some twenty seven years ago Mazumdar saw the light of day in a poor middle class family of a small village in the District of Mymensingh.' (Shome 1921, 53) Hemendranath's nephew, Jogindranath Majumdar(son of the artist's eldest brother Jatindranath Mazumdar) who spent most of his early life at their ancestral house at Gachihata, can well remember his close association with his uncle and insists on the Mazumdar family having been extremely prosperous and thriving then[ii]. Apart from the worship of the family goddess, *Shiv Kali*, the chariot festival of Lord *Jagannath*— *Rath*— used to be a huge occasion for the Mazumdar household then, as also for the entire village. The family had their own wooden chariot, the yearly decorations of which were occasions of great mirth for the entire household. A fair, on occasion of *Rath*, used to take place near the premises of the Mazumdars as an extension of the familial festivities. The family regularly hosted performances of *kirtan*, devotional songs and *palagan*, folk theatre, which provided high points of entertainment for the entire local community.

There is also reason to suppose that the family may have had serious sympathies, if not links, with the nationalist movement. It is said that Aurobindo Ghosh had been a friend of Jatindranath, and had visited his family home at Gachihata in 1908, just before he was arrested in connection with the Alipore bomb case in the month of May. Family sources indicate that the photograph of Jatindranath and Aurobindo Ghosh was clicked by the young Hemendranath who was already adept at photography. Chandra Kumar De, the compiler of the famed *Mymensingh Geetika* had also been close to Jatindranath and used to be a guest at the Gachihata home. It is probable that the prosperity that Jogindranath describes (in the thirties, as Jogindranath was born in 1932) might not have been seen by the family around the turn of the century, when Hemendranath was born. It may have been only later, after Durganath's sons settled in their careers (each one of them were successful in their chosen fields)[iii] that the family could reclaim prosperity.

Hemendranath's father, Durganath Mazumdar, is known to have helped to save the estate he worked for by taking on the reins of the zamindari at a time when it was facing dissolution. Jnanadasundari Devi, who headed the estate after her husband's demise, was childless and requested Durganath to give up his son Gopal— that is, Hemendranath— for adoption. But that was not to be. Both Gangamoyee and her eldest son Jatindranath vehemently opposed the proposal. Hemendranath grew up amid wide-open spaces offered by his Gachihata home, a house with stretches of farmland on all sides, a couple of deep and big ponds (one of which was known as *Kalidighi*) a granary for crops, and, to the west of the granary, rolling meadows which ended in a bamboo grove. He was surrounded by nature as well as the traditions and customs of a close-knit joint family. Hemendranath and his brothers— especially Satyendranath— were keenly interested in amateur theatre, and used to stage a play each year during the Pujas. The men of the family used to take active part in these productions, take up roles, and enthusiastic rehearsals went on for weeks in the huge *kachhari* hall belonging to the family. Family sources indicate that Hemendranath used to take care of the stage decorations even when he was at the height of his fame. Even after he shifted to Calcutta permanently, it was customary for him to return to Gachihata and spend time with his family during *Durga Puja* and *Rath*.

In spite of being nurtured by a typically Hindu religious culture, there was also a distinctly discernible Brahmo influence on this family. Upendrakishore Roy Chowdhury, Hemendranath's maternal uncle, was primarily responsible for this[iv]. Mymensing had a large Brahmo *mandir*, and t is known that the eldest brother, Jatindranath, used to be regularly invited to meetings and other programmes of the Brahmo Samaj, including *Maghotsav*, which used to be celebrated each year with much enthusiasm. This family played an important role in arranging felicitations for Rabindranath Tagore when he visited Mymensing in 1926. Though he put up in the residence of the Zamindars of Muktagachha, it is known that Tagore did visit the Mazumdar residence. Hemendranath had also visited Shantiniketan around the year 1939.

Having studied till class X at the Mymensingh City School, he decided not to appear for the final Entrance examination; it was time, finally, to pursue his growing ambition to train as an artist. It is not easy to trace accurately the reasons behind the early figurations of this desire. Periodicals frequently carried plates of paintings by then, and as Hemendranath's eldest brother, Jatindranath Mazumdar, a lawyer and a man of letters, used to contribute articles to some of these magazines,

especially *Masik Basumati* and *Pratibha*, there is enough reason to believe that such periodicals regularly found their way into the Mazumdar household. The plates may have held the attention of the young boy, thus initiating a visual experience of a different order altogether. Hemendranath's mother, Gangamoyee, had the artistic streak in her; she was well-known for her proficiency in decorating with designs objects for ceremonial use, like *ghot* (smallish earthen pots associated with events of worship) and *pirhis*(low wooden stools which used to be decorated for use in weddings). She was also known to have a favourite pastime of sculpting designs with a *narun* (a sharp scalpel-like tool generally used to snip nails) on hard clay or stone surfaces. Hemendranath's early leaning towards art could well be seen 'as an inheritance from his mother's side.' (Ghosh 1993, 14)

The decision to leave school— to quit formal studies altogether— was not received in good humour by his family. It was insisted that he did away with such 'fanciful' schemes, and try to train as a lawyer, a doctor or an accountant. This reaction was not unexpected in the circumstances: the very thought that painting could be an actual career, that too a lucrative one, was yet to form a credible shape then. A combination of outrage and concern resulted in what can only be called an explosive reaction, which may well have been the reason why young Hemendranath had to run away from his home to answer to his calling. It was with the express wish to study art that he decided on his destination: "Having studied till the Matriculation, I turned up at the home of my sister in Calcutta, towards the end of 1910. Such was the wave of opinion in our land then, that my sister as well implored me to abandon my ideas and, if I so wished, continue with my formal studies at her place instead. When she realized that I was not about to budge, she got me admitted to the Government School of Art with considerable reluctance." (Majumdar 1924, 1448) This sister who sheltered Hemendranath in these early days was Haimalata, living at Akhil Mistri Lane with her husband Ramesh Som who used to run a hosiery business. It was actually Ramesh Som, his brother-in-law (who had a spot of fondness for the driven adolescent) who had taken him to the Government Art School for the actual admission.

It can be understood that this watershed decision was hardly an arbitrary one; it was a conscious, firm choice, arrived at after some deliberation. Hemendranath would be facing such sharply forking pathways a number of times in his life, the crossroads helpful in sighting and settling the

shape of his desire. This particular choice, however, did not yield that ecstatic freedom which he was probably presupposing. Soon after his admission, his unusual proficiency in drawing helped Hemendranath to get promoted to the next higher class. A submerged streak of discontent was, however, growing steadily as he felt unhappy not only with his peers but also with the way the courses were taught. The conceptual larger-than-life image of the artist that had accompanied and inspired him all the while during his pre-art school days now felt vacuous and untrue; he even admits to having frequent moments of misgivings. There had been those odd moments when he felt almost compelled to leave, yet decided to give it some more time. We need to remember that there had been a major reorganization of the policies and the focus of the Government School of Art ever since the days of Ernest Binfield Havell, who had been the Superintendent of the School from 1896 till 1906. He had effected reorganization in the methods and the curriculum of the institution with the singular objective of making Indian Art the basis of all taught courses. The intention that underlay the scheme of reform was primarily to transform 'the Calcutta School of Art from a Fine Art Academy into a school of design and applied arts, with a special focus on the Indian tradition of decorative arts.' (Guha-Thakurta 2008, 149-151) It is not difficult to imagine, thus, how the environment of the institution failed to cater to the aspirations of the idealistic youngster who was perplexed and virtually clueless about the compromised conditions of instruction. It is clear that his desire was to train along the lines of Western Academism, which had indeed been the defining principle of instruction in the Government school of Art in the pre-Havell days. That was probably why Atul Bose, Hemendranath's classmate at Mymensing City School, suggested the name of the institution to his friend. But times had changed, and the change of policy of the School had the young boy unsatisfied and crestfallen. He was also saddened by the attitude of the other students; he saw that 'none of them paid attention to their work' and whiled away their time 'in inane conversation and criticism.' (Majumdar 1924, 1449)

This spark of discontent flared into a full-blown revolt against the authorities in 1912, when the younger students of the school were ordered to assist in a project to decorate the city streets to mark the arrival of King George V. What irked Hemendranath the most was that the authorities of the college were handing out a mere pittance to the students for doing the job, in spite of having been entrusted with the responsibility of the entire project in exchange for a sizeable sum of money. The students were only offered only three annas per day as allowance towards food

(an amount, as Hemendranath claims to have said to his Master, just sufficient for his daily tram fare). Some protesting students, led by him, went on strike. Percy Brown, who headed the school then, immediately struck the names of the protesting students off the roll. The strong sense of self-respect of young Hemendranath which prevented him from rejoining the college even after the authorities decided to take back the offending students.

Leaving the Government School of Art had been another conscious choice, one that removed him from the space he had once wished to belong to only a short time ago. He was already evolving into one who was fully-focused, able to clearly sight his preferences and priorities. His lack of gratification in the school's system and focus of education only helped to foreground, and therefore identify, the area he wished to be trained in. He subsequently joined Ranada Prasad Gupta's Jubilee Art Academy, and initially claimed to be fascinated by the works produced there. This shift to a private school raked up, afresh, the discontent at home. His eldest brother Jatindranath wrote a scathing letter to Hemendranath, where he is unequivocal about his disapproval: 'you would at least have secured a certificate, had you continued in the Government school— now that you have chosen a mean school, your very livelihood is at stake.' For Jatindranath, this choice was 'a jump from the sublime to the ludicrous.' (Majumdar 1924, 1449)

It would be interesting to note that Ranada Prasad Gupta himself had left The Government Art School while he was still a student, and the institution he set up was known to adhere in a committed fashion to the tenets of British Academism in its methods of instruction. Here he had for a classmate his childhood friend from the school at Mymensingh, Atul Bose, who, however, moved on later— in 1918— to complete his art education at the Government Art School. The new institution he enrolled in, in spite of its professed insistence on Academic naturalism, failed to deliver his desired kind of training; what he was looking for was possibly a capable and consistent system of instruction that could help him to master the art of painting the figure. During his Jubilee Art Academy days, Hemendranath would dabble in anatomical drawings halfway through the night, determined to self-learn. This was a practice that finally worked for him. This early initiation in self-learning was, in fact,the beginning of a process that was to continue till much later. He left Jubilee Art Academy after four years, and worked hard at home to perfect his skills, suffering episodes of misgivings for what he considered to be insignificant progress. It was at this point of time that he got some books brought over from England, books

by distinguished painters, which brought about the depressing realization that his education in art institutions had been glaringly incomplete. He decided to start anew— from scratch, as it were— and worked days and nights. After two years of hard work, he felt he was in a 'tolerable state of readiness'. (Majumdar 1924, 1449)

The years that followed were filled with odd and sundry art-related jobs, like painting scenery as the backdrop for theatres. There were also offers to paint portraits of the deceased, reconstructing their faces from blurry photographs taken at the burning *ghat*, prior to cremation (this weird practice was quite a common one then). During this particular phase, having left school and groping for ways to equip and sustain himself, Hemendranath admits to painting from photographs and earning a total of 20/25 rupees per month.

It was in the year 1919 that the Indian Academy of Art was established in the home and studio of Hemendranath , at 24, Beadon Street, with close association of the artist's close friends, Jamini Roy and Atul Bose. Partho Mitter calls it 'more of a convivial club, the highly temperamental and ambitious artists thriving on endless discussions on art… the burning issue of the day was whether the pursuit of nationalism was tantamount to a betrayal of national ideals, and whether the historicism of the Bengal School was the sole path to India's artistic revival.' Apart from Atul Bose and Jamini Roy, many other young artists— especially those specifically concerned with the contemporary cultural politics— were parts of this circle, like Bhabani Chandra Laha(better known as B C Law) and Jogesh Chandra Seal. The group decided to launch an art journal, also called the *Indian Art Academy* (the first issue was published in January, 1920), mainly to offset the influence of *Rupam*, which was almost wholly controlled by the Orientalists, and was also known to have been endowed with considerable government subsidy (it needs to be noted that in spite of all the differences, *Rupam* did publish Hemendranath's painting *Village Beauty* in its July edition of 1922). *The Indian Academy of Art* was conceived primarily as 'An illustrated Journal of Fine Arts', containing, as mentioned in the first page of the journal, 'high class specimens of fine craftsmanship in PAINTING, SCULPTURE, PHOTOGRAPHY & other PICTORIAL DESIGNS— of the leading Artists of India— with notes, essays and criticism.' An advertisement mentions that each issue of the journal would contain 16 reproductions of paintings by the leading artists of India, while the *Puja* number would contain not less than 20 pictures. The journal showcased works by almost all the members of the group— this possibility

of exposure underlay the logistics of the setting up of the journal— but it also included works of many other prominent painters from all over India. That the journal concerned itself with the refinement of artistic taste and sensibility is clearly stated in the introduction (called the 'Academy Pen') to the second issue of *Indian Academy of Art*, published in April 1920: "We have little hesitation to declare that we propose to make this foremost Journal of Fine Arts in India a sort of medium for the presentation of the beautiful specimens of Art which are executed by the famous artists of our country, which will again be interspersed with various articles relating to the Arts and the Art movements; so that the art-loving public might have an occasion to have the products of distinguished artists and literary men all in a nutshell." (Mazumdar 1920, April, 19)

The discourse of resistance to the dominant artistic trends, which worked behind the very inception of the journal, was only covertly referred to: "It is not our purpose to enter into any political or social controversy regarding the current topics of the day; we want to make it quite clear that our attention will be chiefly fixed on the enlargement of an artistic education of our countrymen, and afford an opportunity for the appreciation of Art for the sake of Art." There is, in the penning of the introductory text, a very serious note of inclusivity, rather than any underpinning of challenge. The journal drew a nationwide response, not only from artists all over India, who expressed interest in getting their works published in the journal; the wide variety of art-related topics included in the journal ensured its acceptance to the average, well-read public as well. The impressive get-up of the journal, coupled with its considerate pricing (at the outset, 2/4 rupee for a regular issue, 3/4 rupee for the Puja number) only added to its perceived value. Partho Mitter indicates that Sukumar Roy, a champion of academic art, who 'owned an advanced printing firm' (Mitter 2007, 130) helped in the printing of the journal. The early issues of the journal, however, mentions Upendra Nath Roy of Mohes Press, 10, Shyamacharan Dey Street as the printer and Ajit Kumar Sen of 24, Beadon Street as the publisher. The names of the Maharaja of Natore and the Maharaja of Kasimbazar had also been mentioned for their 'kind patronage' to the journal. Along with plates of paintings, a number of significant articles on ancient and contemporary art, including art theory, were included in the journal issues. Each issue ended with a humorous piece under a regular column called 'The Palette Wash', the name aptly reinforcing the sense of conclusion.

In the early days of his publishing venture, Hemendranath had still been a struggling artist, and there is enough proof to suggest that he had taken loans to back his publications. I have found a legal notice served by Hemendranath's lawyer to Tarit Kumar Ballav, the son of Rai Bahadur D N Ballav which demands the return of five oil paintings which Hemendranath had deposited as security with the Rai Bahadur against what appears to be a substantial loan of money 'In connection with the publication of an Art Magazine'. A hand-written note by Hemendranath accompanying the legal notice indicates that after the near-payment of the loan in 1933, it was decided upon that the artist would paint a portrait of the Rai Bahadur's wife in exchange for the waiver of the outstanding amount. The painting was finished and handed over, but even then the other paintings were not returned as the Rai Bahadur, a great patron of art, 'intended to retain a few of them on payment of the price.' This legal notice, dated 9 September 1947, is connected to this non-return of the paintings (titled *Sangsar Bandhan, Love Tune, Darpaney, Palli Bala, Sadyasnata*), and demands that the paintings, 'of great value', be returned to Hemendranath within seven days.

Another notable publication of the Indian Art Academy was *The Art of H Mazumdar*, which was mainly an album showcasing Hemendranath's paintings, published in five volumes. The first three issues were edited by Premeshchandra Shome(a close friend and associate of Hemendranath, and the brother of Ramesh Shome who had first taken the artist for enrolment in the Government School of Art). The purpose is clearly stated in Shome's preface to the first issue:

> THE ART OF MR H MAZUMDAR is intended to be completed in a set of volumes containing all those important works of the artist which have helped in establishing his reputation as an original and thoughtful painter…the power of imagination, the depth of vision and the mode of expression which characterize the genius of an artist can only be properly appraised by a thorough critical examination of all his works, big or small. Mainly prompted by this reason, which is being further accentuated by the pressing demand of our art-loving countrymen, the present publication has been undertaken to satisfy their aesthetic taste. (Shome 1927, n p)

After the untimely death of Shome, the remaining issues were edited by Chittaprakash Roy. By then, Indian Art Academy had changed address, having shifted from 24, Beadon Street to 57/6,

Mechhua Bazar Street. The modestly-priced album became so popular that each issue ran multiple editions. In 1929, Hemendranath launched a new illustrated journal, *Shilpi*, offering an arena for free discussion and exchange of thoughts relative to the fine arts – Oriental and Occidental, Ancient and Modern. Hemendranath's most opulent publication was, however, The *Indian Masters*, which contained high-quality plates of paintings, and was edited by the Gandhian nationalist A M T Acharya. The first volume (January, 1928) included a plate of *Palli Pran* (exhibited in the first show of the Society of Fine Art), one of his earliest experiments with the wet-sari effect, a style that had become hugely popular by then and had come to be known as the artist's signature style. This volume, apart from the works of Jamini Roy and Atul Bose, also included works from painters all over India, like G K Mahtre, M V Dhurandhar, T J Patel, Abdul Rahman Chaghtai, and even Ravi Varma.

By the first decade of the 1900s, art had already infiltrated the urban educated Bengali household through the reproductions published in various literary and art periodicals. Some of them, like *Shilpa-Pushpanjali* (first published in 1886), supposedly the first Bengali art journal, had a pervasive focus on the appreciation and education of art. It has been observed that the popularity of these periodicals- also taking into account the popular magazine *Bharati* (the first issue of which, published in 1878, had a Calcutta Art Studio print of the goddess Saraswati on its cover), was primarily because of their inclusion of attractive plates of paintings which were almost as good as European prints. The periodical *Sadhana* was the first to bring out a reproduction of a Ravi Varma painting, and *Pradip* utilized U.Roy (Upendra Kishore Roychowdhury)'s half-tone photo engraving for the reproductions of paintings. *Prabasi*(1901) and the Modern Review(1907) was especially partial to the 'Indian' style of painting of Abanindranath Tagore and his circle, but also published reproductions of a number of European paintings. Hemendranath's paintings were regularly published in *Bharatvarsha* and *Sachitra Masik Basumati*, as also in *Sachitra Sisir* and *Nirupama Barshasmriti* (published by Himani Snow Company). The latter featured many of Hemendranath's significant and known paintings like *Brajer Dheu*, *Arati*, and *Rajani*. 'Rose or Thorn' appeared on the cover of *Nirupama Barshasmriti* in an issue of 1925, while another issue the very next year carried *Upannyas* as its cover. Hemendranath's work, gradually yet invincibly, created its niche in the taste of Bengali households, the mixed viewership mesmerized, primarily, by his remarkable mastery of verisimilitude.

For quite a considerable time then, the art scenario in Bengal was being, in effect, dominated and even controlled by the Orientalists, especially with the government patronage shifting to Abanindranath's Society of Oriental Art. Effectively walled off by the powerful clique, Hemendranath and the other Academic painters had to find alternate avenues to showcase their artworks. Apart from the exhibitions organized by the newly-established Society of Fine Arts (its first exhibition was held in December 1921 with over a thousand paintings from academic artists from all over India, in which Hemendranath's painting *Rajani* (Night) and *Palli Pran* (The soul of the Village) demanded the second highest price), they sent their works to art exhibitions in different parts of India. This pressing need to diversify resulted in accolades for Hemendranath, as he won prizes in the annual exhibitions of Bombay Art Society for three successive years. He was awarded the gold medal by the Society for his painting *Smriti* (Recollection) in 1920. The general sense of astonishment— bordering on outrage, almost— generated by this repeated veneration is clear in an article by Kanhaiyalal Vakil carried by the *Bombay Chronicle*: "One Mr H. Mazumdar of Calcutta won three times the first prize of the Exhibition. It is a disgrace to the Bombay artists…Either the Judging Committee must be incompetent or Mr Mazumdar is too high for the exhibition." (Ghosh 1993, 20)

He had the same success in a Madras exhibition of 1920. His painting, *Village Love*, which had been exhibited in Shimla, won the substantial prize money that was on offer by the then-famous merchant firm, Lalchand and Sons. The firm offered the prize money for the reproduction rights of the painting that would be selected for their calendar. This financial success was, in fact, only the beginning of that phase of fame and prosperity that was to continue as Hemendranath's works came to be known, and reverently recognized, throughout India. There was a distinct contention that he was much more famous in Western India than in Bengal. This is also echoed by the effusive note of appreciation written by Ranjit Singh, the Maharaja of Jamnagar:

> I am so much pleased with the work done by him and I assure you that lovers of art on this side of Kattyawar appreciate his beautiful work. Hardly any painter in Bombay Presidency can compete with Mr Mazumdar as regards his vivid style and beautiful and pleasing combination of various colours. I have come in contact with many good painters in Bombay and seen their work but Mr Mazumdar stands first among each and all of them. (Ghosh 1993, 21)

The demand for Hemendranath's paintings steadily increased all over India, especially among the royalty and the heads of the princely states. In 1931 he went to Kashmir on invitation from the Maharaja of Kashmir and spent about a year at the royal court, where, apart from buying many thousands of rupees worth of paintings from him, the Maharaja also got him to paint a large oil of the Queen. It was later that he painted the Queen with the prince Karan Singh on her lap, from a photograph that he had taken himself during his stay at Kashmir. The Maharaja is also known to have gifted him an expensive violin, which the artist used to play on regularly and had become his special favourite. During his five-year stint at the Court Artist at the Patiala Royal Court, commencing from 1932, he produced an unusual partition screen, comprising of three paintings, for his patron Maharaja Bhupinder Singh. He was then being paid the astronomical amount of Rs 2000 per month as salary, and had enjoyed several perks as well. During his stay at Patiala, Hemendranath had come in contact with the royalty of several other neighbouring princely states of Rajputana like Bikaner, Jaipur, Jodhpur, and Dholpur. The King of Bikaner, Shri Ganga Singh, had secured one of Hemendranath's paintings as early as 1930. When the artist was stationed at Patiala, in 1935, he was requested to create a second painting for the Maharaja, a companion-piece in effect, to the first one. In a letter of September, 1935, the 'Comptroller of the Household, Bikaner Palace' requests the artist for a painting 'which will any how be a good match' to the earlier painting, acquired in March 1930, 'of an Indian lady in white clothes sitting on some steps at the edge of the water with a *lota* beside her just after she has had a bath….the lady faces from left to right inwards.' The second painting, it is specified, may not have 'the same colouring of dress and scenery' but 'the figure of the lady should face from right to left inwards.'

Among his patrons was also Purna Chandra Bhanjadeo, the Maharaja of Mayurbhanj, who bought paintings worth Rs 20,000 from him within the span of two years. The Maharaja continued to buy from him a few thousand rupees worth of paintings each year. After the death of Purnachandra Bhanjadeo he was commissioned to paint a life-size portrait of the Maharaja in *Durbar* dress. From a bill sent to 'H. H. The Maharaja Saheb Of Mayurbhanj' dated 21.5.41, in Baripada, we get to know that he was also entrusted with the work of restoring some of his own paintings which he had sold to the Maharaja much earlier, as he includes the cost of 'cleaning and varnishing' of eleven of his own paintings in the bill, as also the cost of 'one life size painting in oils of late Maharaja Purnachandra Bhanj Deo(Durbar Dress)' which he prices at Rs

2500. We can safely surmise that around this time he was physically present in Baripada to perform the twin tasks of painting and restoration.

Before this Mayurbhanj visit, Hemendranath had resettled in Calcutta in 1938(after the death of the Maharaja of Patiala) and set up his studio at Keshav Chandra Street. But he shifted soon enough to his old and well-loved premises at Beadon Street which were somewhat more spacious. It was here that Durganath, his father, visited his now-famous son (Durganath had come to Calcutta for a cataract surgery then and had put up at his son Nripendranath's place at Lansdowne Road). It is said that after having regained normal eyesight, he marvelled at his son's creations, the distant moments of disagreement having been resolved, happily, long ago.

One of his most significant exhibition participations was in the show that opened at 11, Chowringhee Road on 22 December 1940, inaugurated by Indira Devi, the Maharani of Cooch Behar. Interestingly, his co-artists in the show included Nandalal Basu and Gaganendranath Tagore, as also Atul Basu, Jamini Prakash Gangooly and Sarada Ukil. Bengal art had already entered that phase which saw the opening up of newer directions that mediated with, and relegated to comparative irrelevance, the sharp opinional divide between the two camps that had been central to the art scenario of yesteryears. I have come across a letter written by Hemendranath to Jamini Roy, inviting him to a meeting of *Shilpi Chakra* (a group of artists and art critics, formed by Harendranath Gupta and Purna Chandra Chakraborty, with Hemendranath as a prominent member) to be held at his place, 68, Jatin Das Road, in which the main agenda was the reading of 'Sarada Ukil's artistic life'. This does sound like a memorial meet for the deceased Sarada Ukil, and there is an underline of the courteous and the non-parochial in taking an active interest in the life and works, as well as deciding to pay homage, to an artist who was primarily known for his 'Indian-style' paintings. He was also an active member of *Rabibasar*, another similar group with a special interest in art, and the name of the group used in the monogram was specially drawn by Hemendranath.

I have come across at least three sketches of Rabindranath Tagore by the artist, who, according to family sources, was an ardent admirer of Tagore. He was rather well-known as a portrait painter in his times, but even apart from the portraits he painted on commission, there are a number of other works depicting prominent personalities whom he seems to have painted out of pure personal admiration. Apart from Tagore, he has painted Chittaranjan Das (the painting is

called '*Bandhu*', or 'Friend', and was published in *Sachitra Masik Basumati* in 1926. The same can be said about his portraits of Ramkrishna Paramhansa and Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay and Shri Aurobindo. He had also painted portraits of his father and mother, Durganath and Gangamoyee, which could be carried back from Mymensingh and is now the in the collection of the family of Neeladrinath Mazumdar, the nephew of Hemendranath.

After the onset of the Second World War (towards the end of 1941, in all likelihood), Hemendranath went back to his native village, Gachihata, and set up a studio there. It is said that many of his paintings had been packed off to Gachihata as well, safely away from the bomb-ravaged Calcutta. Some of his notable paintings were also worked on at Gachihata, during this particular period. The wide-open spaces and the yet-pristine greenery initiated a period of transformative praxis for the artist, underlined by a new note of meditative interiority. Emerging from the habituality of wealth and recognition, this lengthened period of stay offered him that much-needed respite to focus upon, and reconfigure, the various strands of his identity. A renewed perception of significance now underpinned his engagement with the community. Figures of local, usually poor people appeared with notable frequency in his works of this period. Many of the works he had produced at Gachihata were showcased at the All-India Exhibition which was held in the Eden Gardens in 1948 (and which was to be his last exhibition); some of these were radically different works focusing upon moments of rurality. He paints two peasants deep in conversation, smoking *hukka*, the harvesting of crops, or the activity of fishing at waterbodies: Purna Chandra Chakraborty writes about these paintings in detail in his essay 'Shilpi Hemendranath' published in *Bharatavarsa*. (Chakraborty 1948, 400)

This homecoming, with the promise of the rooted and the eternal, had, in a way, effected a shift from the dramatic to the non-sensational and the unremarkable. There is an assurance about the repetitive rhythms of life, of nature, and of life-in-nature, retaining their basic pattern of sameness generation after generation: life goes on, despite the rise and fall in the life of both the individual and the nation. This sameness, in opposition to the frantic change in the life of the individual and the community in bomb-ravaged Calcutta would get invested with an intense significance in view of the deeply disturbed times. Hemendranath's nephew, Jogindranath Majumdar, who was very close to his uncle whom he called *Gorakaka*, remembers hearing about

a huge exhibition that was being planned, and for which telegrams for the artist used to arrive at regular intervals. He recalls the intense concentration of the artist, working in his studio that he got built entirely with wood, his favourite snuffbox always close at hand. This was also the time when Hemendranath's engagement both with his family and the village community acquired a new, serious dimension. He had always been interested in the family festivities that spilled onto the entire village, the *Rath*, *Durga Puja*, the family plays that used to be performed on occasion of *Durga Puja*: he had always taken an active interest in the plans of decoration that used to be central to all these festivities, and this extended stay only served to deepen his interest in what may be called community art. Jogindranath recalls having seen his uncle paint the backdrop for the family plays, which were usually arranged by Hemendranath's brother Satyendranath. The family used to order about two thousand earthen lamps (*pradeeps*) from the local potter on occasion of *Deepavali*, following *Kali Puja*, and Hemendranath is known to have arranged them in a unique design. He used to arrange the *pradeep*s on flat metal plates (*thala*), of differing sizes, and placed them on metal pitchers of matching sizes. They were placed one above the other, large to small, and when the lamps were lit up, it would indeed be a spectacle of light. Another anecdote I found especially interesting relates to his active interest in, and engagement with, local handicrafts. The fair that accompanied the family's celebrations of *Rath* was extremely popular in the community then, and there was a huge demand for earthen dolls, *putuls* as they were called, which were used both as showpieces as well as playthings for children. There was a kind of doll which was especially popular: this was called the *ahladi putul* (the well-loved doll) and was the bestseller in the market. Hemendranath is known to have been overwhelmed by the fine craftsmanship of the doll, and had awarded its maker a handsome amount of money. What is more intriguing is the fact that he designed another doll himself, called the *nachuni* (the danseuse)and instructed it to be sold along with all the other dolls. The *nachuni* is known to have sold exceedingly well.

The famine of 1943 affected Mymensingh badly; a contemporary, chilling report from Netrakona says that girls were being sold for a price ranging from ten annas to one-and-a-half rupee. (Sripantha 1997, 13) In such a situation, it is unlikely that one as socially conscious as Hemendranath could have stayed unaffected. One of his paintings 'More than Death' (*Sesh Pratishodh*) bears testimony to his deep affliction. It was also around this time that he, along with his wife, received their spiritual initiation (*diksha)* from Santisudha Devi, the daughter of

the sage Bijoy Krishna Goswami. He is known to have painted portraits of Bijoy Krishna Goswami and his wife, Jogamaya Devi at the request of Santisudha, and these portraits were kept at the ashram at Gendariya, in Dhaka. They were brought to the ashram at Baruipur, in West Bengal, after the partition. Family sources confirm that many of his paintings left back in the family home at Gachihata were irretrievably lost after the partition. The artist and his wife were extremely respectful towards a *pagla sadhu* (mad ascetic), very well-known in the locality, whose image Hemendranath is said to have used in his painting *Ananter Sur* (The Tune of Eternity), for the figure of the unkempt man playing on a sarengee.

One of Hemendranath's favourite preoccupations was to move around the village— in the fields, along the banks of *Kalidighi*— with his favourite camera, and he captured random images of rural life, and developed the films himself in his homespun darkroom. In these expeditions with his camera, his usual companion was his maternal uncle (Gangamoyee's brother) Nishibhushan Duttaroy. Hemendranath would, later, make watercolour sketches from the photographs and then create large oils. In fact many of his paintings in his last show were either painted, or conceived as sketches at Gachihata. The artist had distinct opinions about using photographs, instead of life study, as the objective referential frame for paintings. In an unfinished essay titled 'Fine Arts and Photography', (Mazumdar 1991, 75-77) Hemendranath is clear about his stand that 'where photography ends, fine art begins', but, at the same time, he does not go against what he considers to be the controversial practice of using photographs for painting, for the simple reason that it is the artist's imagination and originality that gives life to a painting, and that is almost the whole substance of art. Working with a model is also an act of imitation, as is working with a photograph, and this has a comparatively small involvement in the final genesis of the painting: only that quality of a photograph that helps in the structuring of imagination is taken up, and used, by the artist.

There is an opinion that his health broke down because of the excessive strain and hard work that went behind developing large oil-on-canvases from these primary sketches, after he had returned to Calcutta to help with the arrangements of the All-India Exhibition (Chakraborty 1948, 400). This may well have been the cause of his untimely death. Hemendranath died at his residence at 1, Park Side Road on 22 July, 1948. For many years after his death, memorial meets were held at his residence on the anniversaries of his death, hosted by his wife Sudharani Mazumdar and son

Santosh Kumar Mazumdar. Newspaper reports on the commemorations on his first death anniversary mention that the main initiative for the memorial meet was taken by two cultural groups, *Rabibasar* and *Shilpichakra* (both of which had Hemendranath as an active member) and was presided over by the novelist Upendranath Gangopadhyay and was attended by the cultural glitterati of Bengal. The late artist's childhood friend, Atul Basu, speaking on the occasion insisted that for Hemendranath, there had been no generic division between eastern and western art, and also recalled that the artist used to say that his works alone would answer to the raging debate relating to the divide between these categories. (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 12.7.49, p 5) Bose also said, on occasion of Mazumdar's 4th death anniversary, that it was mainly because of Mazumdar's efforts that an all-India exhibition of artists could take place in Kolkata in 1921 (this organization later became the Academy of Fine Arts society); till then, Indian Society of Oriental Art's annual exhibitions were the only occasions when one could see the works of other Indian painters outside Bengal. (Ananda Bazar Patrika, 9. 7. 52, p 4) Hemendranath's long-cherished dream of a National Gallery— and the collective responsibility of the artists to make it happen— had also been a significant topic of discussion, a topic that would surface time and again in the subsequent memorial meets that continued to be held for many years after his death.

It was a few years after his death, in 1952, that his painting 'Rose or Thorn' earned special accolades abroad. In an international exhibition of 'portraits of great beauties of the world' held at Long Beach, California, this painting won a special award. In response to a request by the Indian Embassy in Washington, Lady Ranu Mukherjee, President of the Indian Academy of Fine Arts, in co-operation with artists and art critics, selected 'Rose or Thorn'. This painting was loaned by Sudharani Mazumdar, the widow of the artist, and was possibly flown to the USA on 2 June, 1952. In a letter to the artist's son Santosh Mazumdar dated 27 July 1951, Dr A Aiyappan, Superintendent of the Government Museum, Madras, requests him for the gift of some of his father's paintings for the proposed National Art Gallery in Madras (though he also indicates that 'we shall only be too ready and glad to compensate the artists for their works'). He says that these paintings would 'go to enhance the importance of the section' which was supposed to consist of 'copies of ancient murals, paintings representing the traditional schools and paintings by all the front rank Indian artists of to-day.' The Academy of Fine Arts had intended to hold a solo exhibition of Hemendranath's paintings, and, to this effect, letters seeking loan of his

artworks were written to various collectors by Rathin Maitra (the Joint Honorary Secretary of the Academy) as well as Santosh Mazumdar, the artist's son.

It is indeed a matter of regret that not much work on Hemendranath has been done by way of research, though his paintings have consistently continued to attract astronomical prices in the art market, including international auctions. Very recently the film director Bappaditya Bandyopadhyay was working on a docu-feature film on the artist and the project was nearly finished; the untimely death of the director has left the fate of the film uncertain. It can only be hoped serious research endeavours in the coming days would open up new perspectives, relating not only to Hemendranath's work, but to this very happening period of Indian art history.

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[i] I am immensely grateful to Dr Jogindranath Majumdar, the artist's nephew, for allowing me access to these family documents. He had also indicated that Gnan Shankar Majumdar, a relative of the family, had compiled a detailed treatise on the earlier days of the familial estate(spread over Hajradi pargana and falling under Kathiadi police station in Kishoreganj sub-division), as well as a comprehensive family tree, and these were published in 1963. Unfortunately, I have not been able to trace this specific document. The family tree that Barid Baran Ghosh produces in his book (Ghosh 1993, 49) was drawn up by Dr Majumdar himself.

[ii] In his unpublished memoir of 2018, titled *Amar dekha Gorakaka, Chitrashilpi Hemendranath Mazumdar: Gachihata Smriti o Kolkata Smriti*.

[iii] All the brothers of Hemendranath were well-established in their own fields. The eldest brother Jatindranath was a lawyer who practiced at Mymensing Judges' Court. He was also a revered author, and was honoured with the title 'Bidyabinod' for his literary achievements. Nripendranath was the General Manager of Chittaranjan Locomotives, while Munindranath was a well-known veterinary doctor. His son, Rakhal Majumdar, was a famous footballer who had once been the captain of East Bengal Club. The youngest brother was Satyendranath, who was immensely interested in theatre. The artist's sisters were Bidyullata, Charulata, Haimalata and Ashalata.

[iv] Upendrakishore's mother Joytara Devi, and Hemendranath's grandmother Kalitara Devi were sisters. Joytara Devi was married to Shyamsundar Munshi (alias Kalinath Roy), and had five sons: Saradaranjan, Kamadaranjan, Muktidaranjan, Pramadaranjan and Kuladaranjan. The second son, Kamadaranjan, was adopted by Harikishore Roychowdhury of another branch of the family, and was renamed as Upendrakishore. (Dutta Roy 2018, 44)

Appendix-2

The Models of Hemendranath Mazumdar

There had always been a live interest regarding the identity of the model/s of Hemendranath's paintings. There is a distinct opinion that the artist's wife, Sudharani, had been the model of many of them: after Sudharani's death in 1973, a short news item written by Kamal Sarkar in *Desh* (dated 14 July, 1973) states, almost in a revelatory tone, that "After the death of Sudharani Devi, we have come to know today…that the artist's wife had been the inspiration behind the paintings of Hemendranath. His paintings of the Bengali lady's moments of engagement with domestic life were based on the looks and bodily gestures of Sudharani, who was endowed with unearthly grace and beauty." (Sarkar 1973, 1139) Samir Dasgupta holds on to precisely the same contention in *Shilpir Model Potni* (The artist's wife as his model) published in *Desh* (Dasgupta 1974, 1013-1014) in the following year[i]. This line of opinion, in all probability, is based only on partial truth. Sudharani may have been the model of some of his paintings, but there had also been other women whose likenesses were used by the artist for his paintings. In one of his letters[ii] to Sudharani (dated 31 July, 1926), Hemendranath writes, ' I have secured the first prize in oil painting for *Upannyas* (The Novel) as well as the first prize in water colour for *Earring*…the 100 rupees is yours, as it was fetched by *Earring*…Tepli[iii], you are constantly getting prizes!' This letter, while it clearly underlines Sudharani's involvement as a model, also indicates that she was, by no means, the *only* model of Hemendranath. Members of the Mazumdar family who had seen Sudharani say that she was exceedingly fair-complexioned, and that is probably why she was nicknamed 'sada billi'— a white cat— by her father, Kali Kanta Chaudhuri (Ghosh 1993, 39), and had a remarkable figure as well. It was also said that her face could not be considered traditionally beautiful, and her upper set of teeth was slightly protruding. (Majumder 2018, n p)Therefore it is highly possible that Sudharani was used as a body model while the faces of the subjects belonged to other women[iv]. In fact I was struck by an extremely interesting phrase that Samindranath Majumdar uses in his article titled *Chitrashilpi Hemendranath o tar Chhobir Nayika*, while discussing the enigmatic women in Hemendranath's

paintings (Majumdar 2013, 342); he sums up the tales embedded in his paintings of women as 'moralistic monogamous narrative(s)', where he idealizes woman's complete submission to one single man. It is this conceptual underpinning of a married woman's unquestioned monogamy, I have felt, that accompanies the exploration of her sexuality and legitimizes it within the space of marital identity; and that is one of the reasons why I would strongly disagree with Tapati Guha-Thakurta when she says 'These images of women, in their varying moods of languor or states of undress, clearly verged on the pornographic' (Guha-Thakurta, 2008, 321). It may have been the same thread of 'moralistic monogamy' that worked almost as a transferred epithet to define the artist himself. One notices the almost idealistic fervor with which a number of critics had been insistent on proving the point that it was no-one but his wife who 'had occupied his entire world of art' in spite of admitting that 'there may have been another model at some point of time.'(Ghosh 1993, 39) It has also been said that in the artist's studio at Keshav Chandra Sen Street, a model used to come and sit for the artist regularly[v]. These moralistic interventions to historiography are interesting areas of study that may serve in certain instances to re-inscribe spaces of erasure.

The artist's niece, Gauri (daughter of Jatindranath Mazumdar), who was known in her times for her striking beauty, remembers having been photographed by Hemendranath with a rose in her hand when she was only fourteen, and later, having been intimated by many people about her notable resemblance to some of the women her uncle had painted. Gauri Chaudhuri recalls the entire episode in a letter to her brother, Jogindranath, dated 16 September, 1981, a document that makes it clear that the likeness of Gauri Chaudhuri appeared in some of Hemendranath's paintings only after 1938:

> During the summer holidays of 1938, I had gone to Kolkata. Gorakaka[vi], then, used to stay at 68, Jatin Das Road. One day he suddenly asked me to get ready- I was to be photographed. That very morning a number of my photographs were taken, in various poses. Among them was one where I was standing, holding a rose in my hand. Many years after this, when Calcutta was bombed (during the Second World War) he had gone to Gachihata to stay for some time. Among some valuable paintings that he had carried with him, I spotted one featuring a woman with a rose, titled 'Rose or Thorn'. After this I got married and moved to

> Calcutta- there, at our Ashwini Dutta Road residence, I saw a calendar of G C Laha which had a painting by Gorakaka called 'Daydream'. Many of my husband's friends used to ask me whether the woman in it was painted after me, as the woman with bowed head had a striking resemblance to me. I was astonished as well, because I had never, ever, given any sitting. (Ghosh 1993, 42)

In a way, this letter raises more problems than it solves. For one, 'Rose or Thorn' was painted, in all probability, in 1936, so it could not have been painted from the photograph from 1938, though the face is almost certainly Gauri Chaudhury's (there is yet another painting, titled *Sunflower,* in which the face of the subject has a certain similarity to her). As she makes it clear that she never sat for the artist, Hemendranath must have relied on his visual memory while working on the painting. The second problem is that, Hemendranath, in 1938, was supposedly staying at Beadon Street and not Jatin Das Road(his nephew, Jogindranath Majumdar, clearly says that he had visited his uncle at his Beadon Street residence around this time; Barid Baran Ghosh in *Chitrashilpi Hemen Mazumdar* also puts in this address for 1938). It is possible that he had shifted to Jatin Das Road sometime soon after this, as one of his letters to Jamini Roy indicates that in 1940, he was living at Jatin Das Road. The date in Gauri Chaudhury's letter may also be inaccurate due to a simple problem of recollection, in which case, most of the problems resolve.

I had also come across a photograph of a woman (with the name 'Malati' written at the bottom of the photograph, in Jatindranath's handwriting) while going through the family album of the Mazumdars. The face seemed instantly familiar: it was only later that I realized that it has a recognizable similarity to the characters of some well-known paintings of Hemendranath, especially *Tonmoy* (The Lost Heart). Malati was a distant relative of Hemendranath, a cousin of one of his maternal uncles. Her wavy hair—especially the style in which she wears it, also the short forehead, and the structure of the face— seem to reappear, with minor variations, in many of Hemendranath's paintings. Notwithstanding the underline of speculation, I am strongly tempted to connect Malati to some of the artist's most known works, emboldened, I might add, by Samindranath Majumdar's conviction(in *Chitrashilpi Hemendranath o tar Chhobir Nayika*) that she had most definitely been one of Hemendranath's models. (Majumdar 2013, 342)

All said and done, the question of the identity of his models had been, and still is, an area that admits strands of speculation and conjecture. There is no written record about the model who is supposed to have sat for him in his studio, nor is there any conclusive evidence about the identity of yet other women whose likenesses Hemendranath may have used in his works. I have always felt that this interest in attempting to uncover the identity of the model may actually be linked to the voyeuristic underpinning of the viewers' response and also to the related, subconscious desire to connect the partially-nude, seen bodies to actual, recognizable women. But it is important that we keep in mind Mazumdar's familial rootedness, as also the importance he attached to moral values in his lived life. Therefore it seems unlikely that he would use faces of real, recognizable women with a social identity in his semi-nude paintings[vii]. I believe that even if he modeled their faces on real, known women, he must have changed the countenance subtly, so as to blur the marks of recognizability.

But the mystery surrounding the identity of his models had never dispersed. This is more so because the artist had never gone anywhere close to such disclosure. Partho Mitter, speaking of the probable reaction of the viewers of Mazumdar's semi-nude paintings, identifies their guilt-ridden attraction as "the frisson of spying on a 'respectable' housewife, the proverbial girl next door" (Mitter 2007,138). This *frisson* would get intensified if one got even the barest inkling about the identity of the subject, rather like a glimpse into a secret, forbidden space unpermitted by society. It was a complex web of desire, power and control which attempted to inhabit with identity the bodies of his models, and invest them with the suppressed and unsubsumed desire for unseen yet imagined bodies.

[i] Partho Mitter also corroborates this: "in the last years of her life, the artist's widow confirmed that she sat for him, which finds support in his intimate letters to her." (Mitter 2007, 247)
[ii] Found among the family papers of the Mazumdar family, courtesy Dr Jogindranath Majumder, the artist's nephew.
[iii] The pet-name of Sudharani.

[iv] This is Mitter's contention too; "from the evidence, one may conjecture that for the figures, the wife was the model, but the faces were often of different women." (Mitter 2007, 247)

[v] "I have heard of many secret tales involving the models of Hemendranath. Just a few days ago an ageing artist confided in me that he knew it for a fact that the artist did have a model who used to sit for him regularly at his Keshav Chandra Sen Street studio. I could have opposed him but didn't, considering it to be unnecessary. There may have been a model at a certain point of time, but it was his wife who had occupied his entire world of art, his physical self, his sexuality— in fact everything." (Ghosh 1993, 39) The moralist intervention to historiography is clear here. The author is clearly irked at the conviction of the 'ageing artist' that there was indeed a professional model who used to sit for the artist, yet in the very next line he accepts the possibility of existence of such a model—downplaying this, however, by a rapturous account of how important his wife was to his creative life. Clearly a woman who posed nude could not be seen as a professional: she appeared to be a threat to the narrative of monogamy which was essential to the construction of the painter's persona.

[vi] Gora and Gopal were both nicknames of Hemendranath.

[vii] 'Rose or Thorn', established as Gauri Chaudhury's portrait, has no nudity. The averted face in 'Sunflower' in spite of similarities with her is not unquestionably recognizable.

Plates of paintings

Saram (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

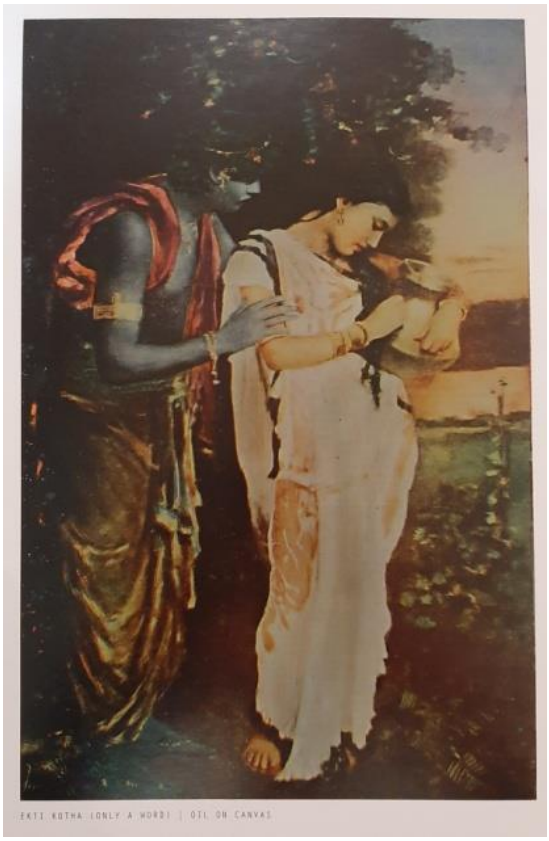
Bharat Mata (Abanindranath Tagore)

Pujarini (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Arghya (Hemendranath Majumdar)

Rajani (Hemendranath Majumdar)

Sati (Nandalal Bose)

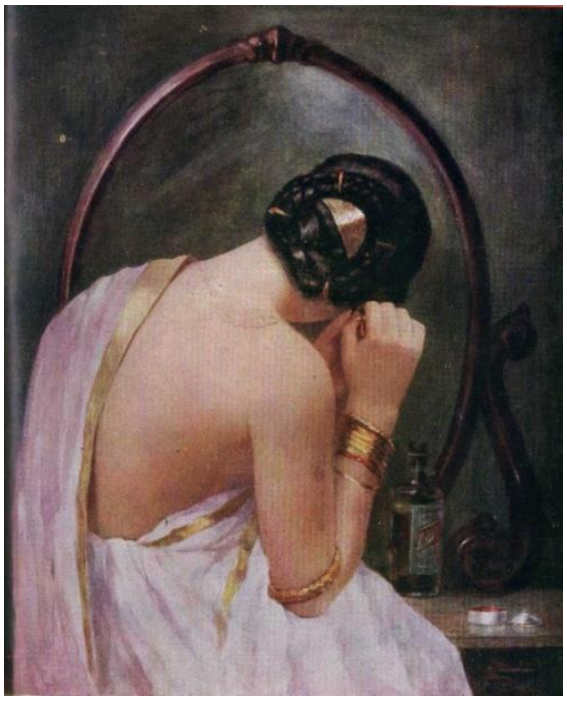


Ekti Kotha (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

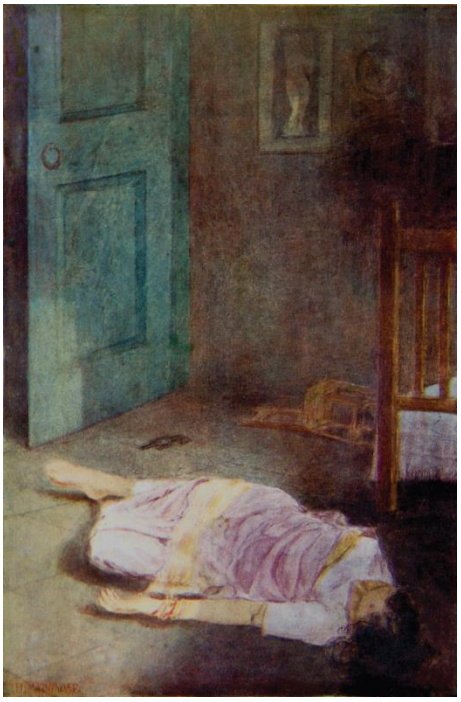
A Golden Dream (Atul Bose)

Murali-Shiksha (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

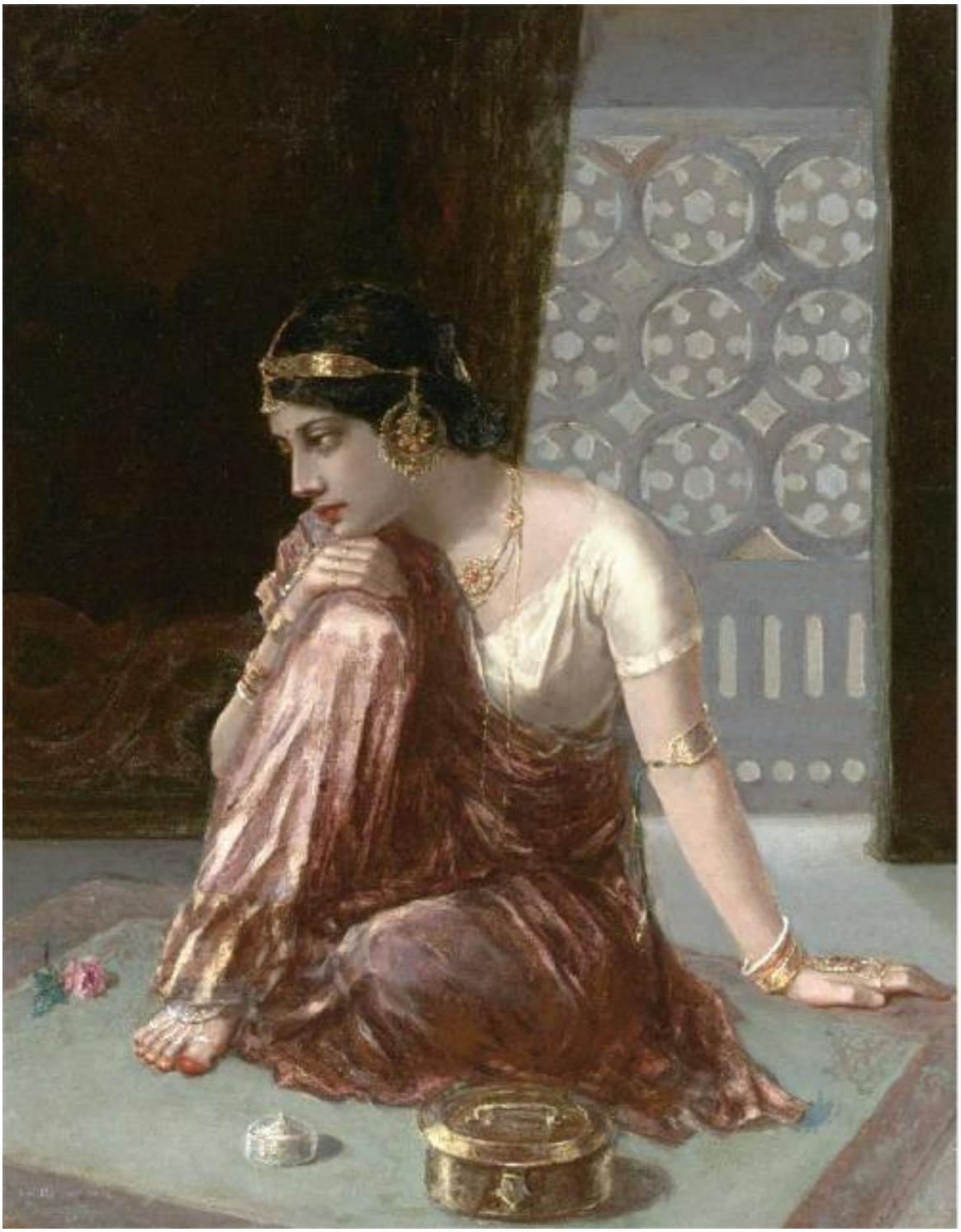
Shakuntala (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Kaner Dul (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

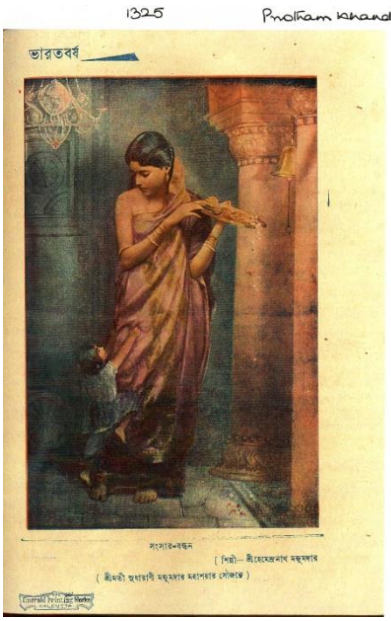


Rohini (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

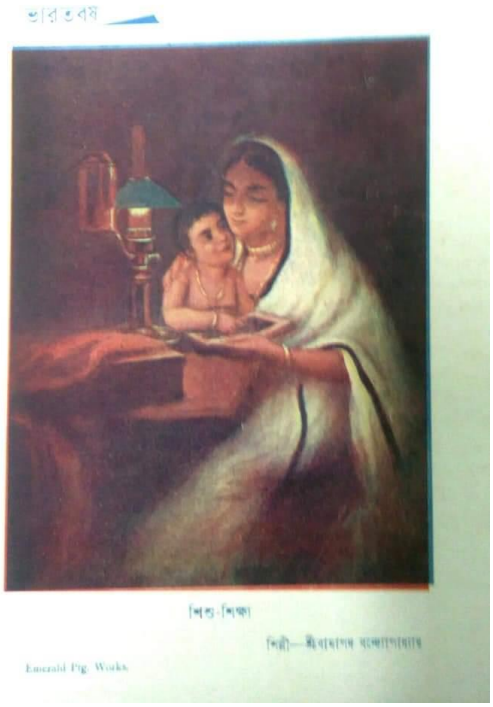


Dibaswopno (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Shoyoner Purbe (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Songsar-Bondhon (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Shishu-shiksha (Bamapada Banerjee)

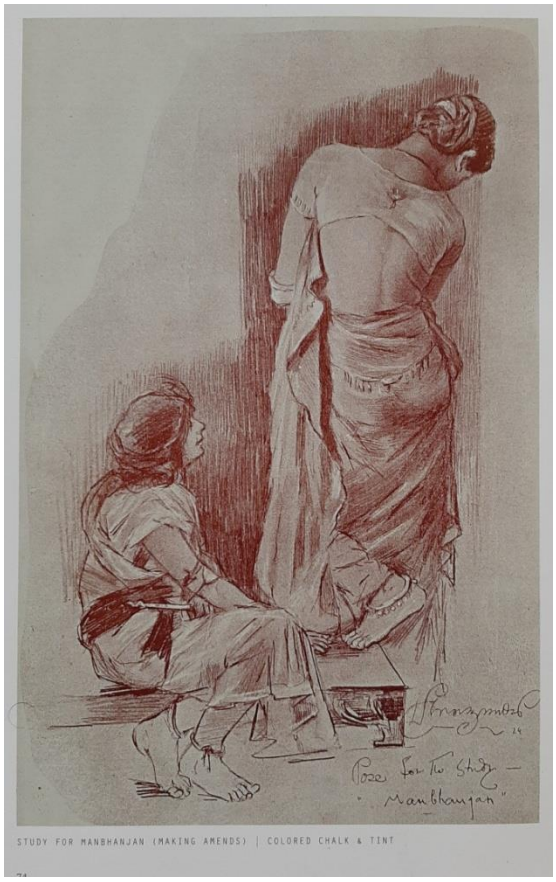
Tulasi-Pradeep(Jogesh Chandra Seal)

Grihalakshmi (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Bhagyalakshmi (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Neelambari (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

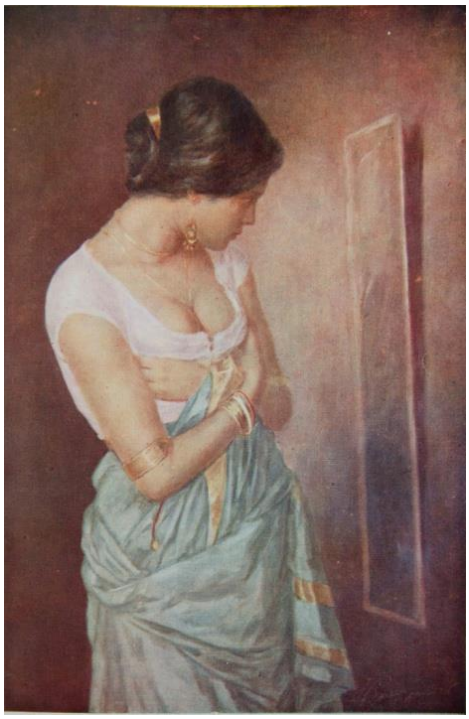
Study (B C Law)



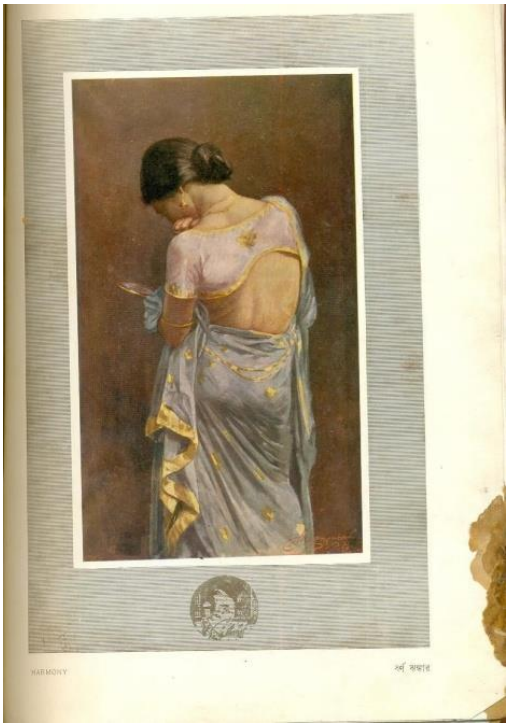
Study for *Manbhanjan* (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Study for *Shilpi* (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Study for *Shilpi*, Study for *Arati*, and *Sreshtho Sobha*(Hemendranath Mazumdar)

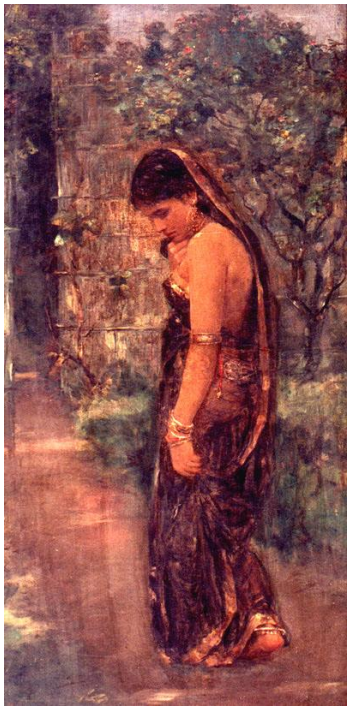


Sotero (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

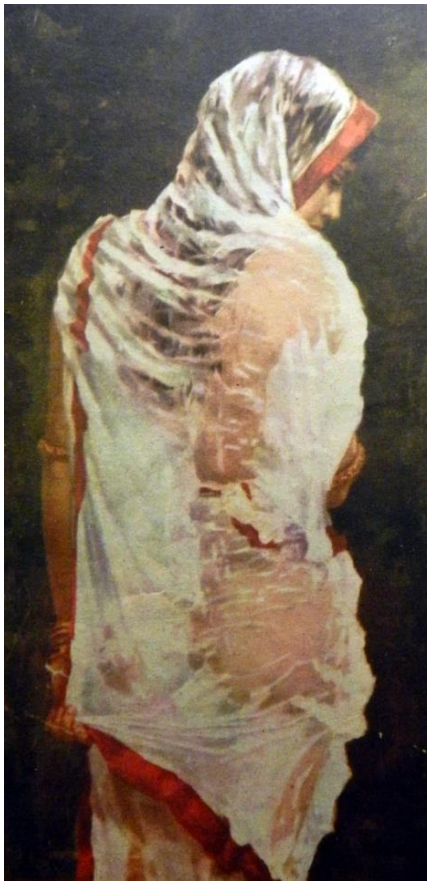


Borno-jhonkar(Hemendranath Mazumdar)

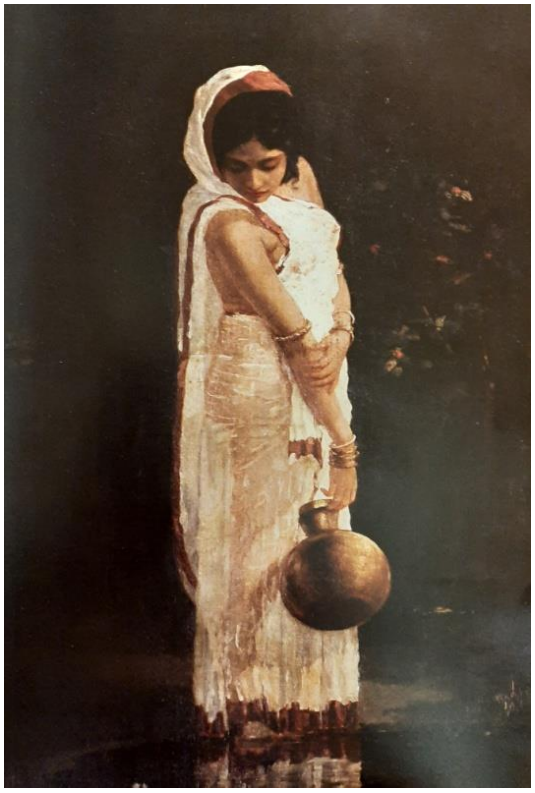
Rose or Thorn (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



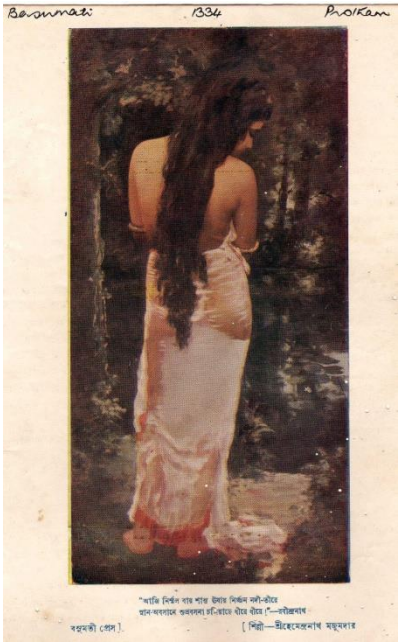
Siktabasana 1 (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Palli-Pran (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

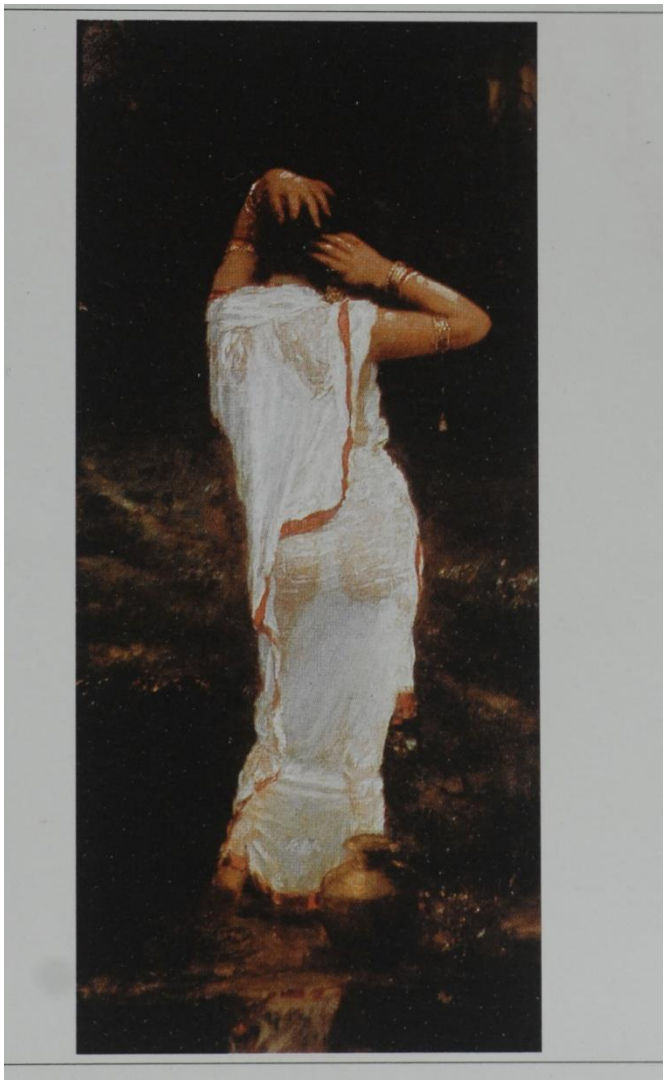


Snanante (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Siktabasana 2 (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

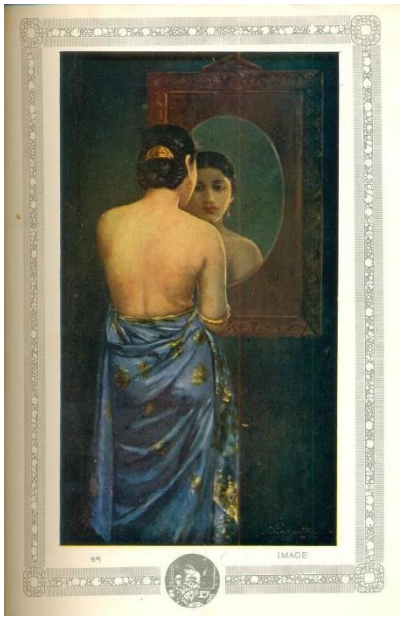
Suryamukhi (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Siktabasana 3 (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Siktabasana 4 (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Siktabasana 5 (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

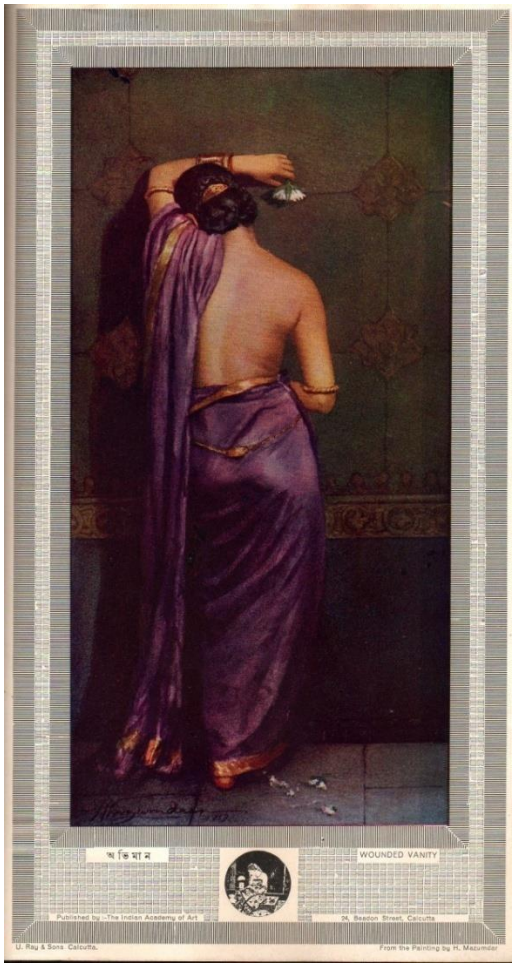


Rup (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

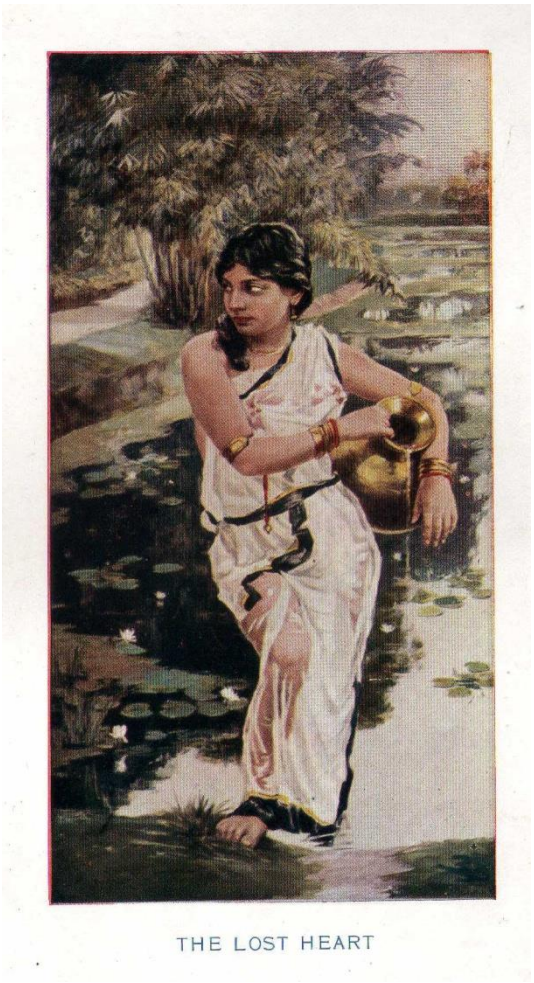
Chhaya (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Tonmoy (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Prateeksha (Hemendranath Majumdar)



Abhiman (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Tonmoy (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Porityokta (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Niyati (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

A Story of her Own (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

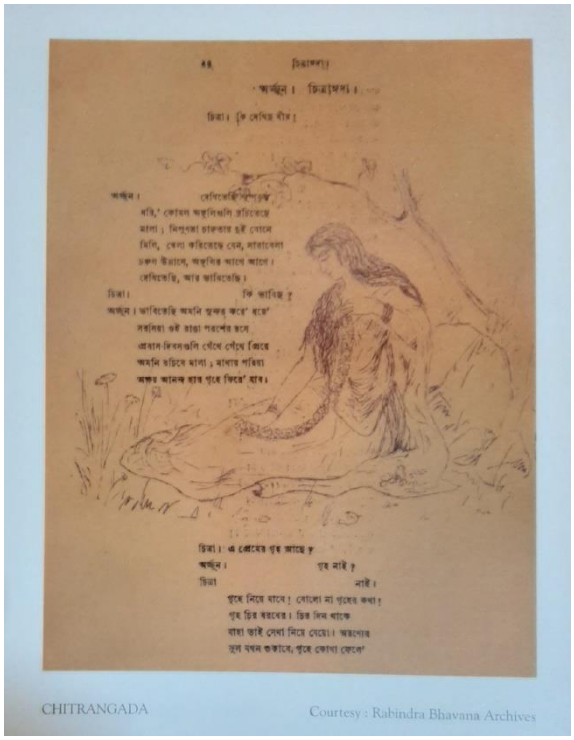
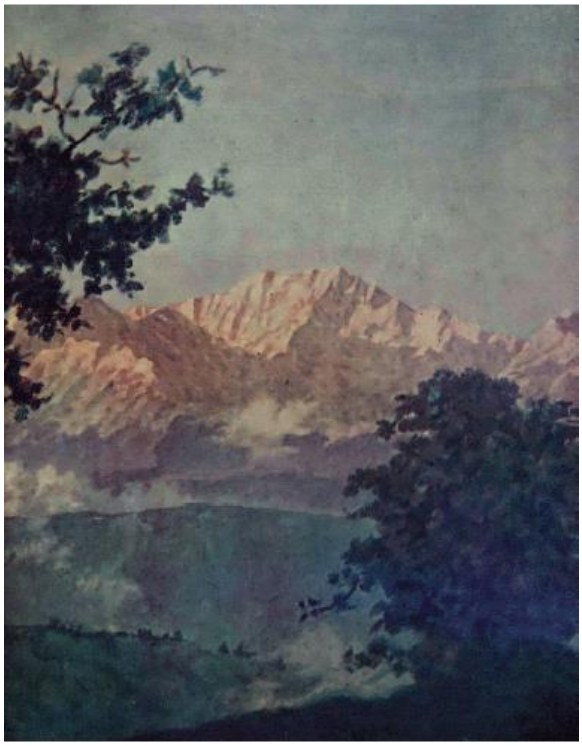


Illustration of *Chitrangada* by Abanindranath Tagore

Sita in Captivity in Lanka (Abanindranath Tagore)

Premer Rajyo: Darjeeling (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Premer Swargo: Darjeeling (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Kanchanjungha (Hemendranath Majumdar)

Tushar-giri (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Kanchanjungha (Abanindranath Tagore)

Himalayan landscape (Gaganendranath Tagore)

Himalayan Landscape (Jamini Prakash Gangooly)

Blinding Snows (Bireswar Sen)

Sesh Rashmi: Kashmir (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Sunny Simli (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Jagannath Mandir (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Puri Temple(Gaganendranath Tagore)

Swargadwar to Konarak (Abanindranath Tagore)

Chet Singh Ghat (Hemendranath Majumdar)

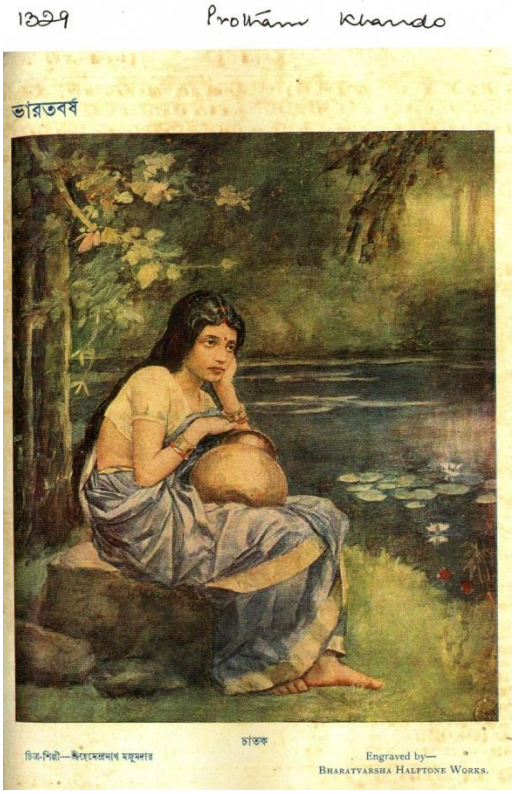
Shivala Ghaut and Cheyt Singh's House near Benares (William Daniell)

Sanjher Palli (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

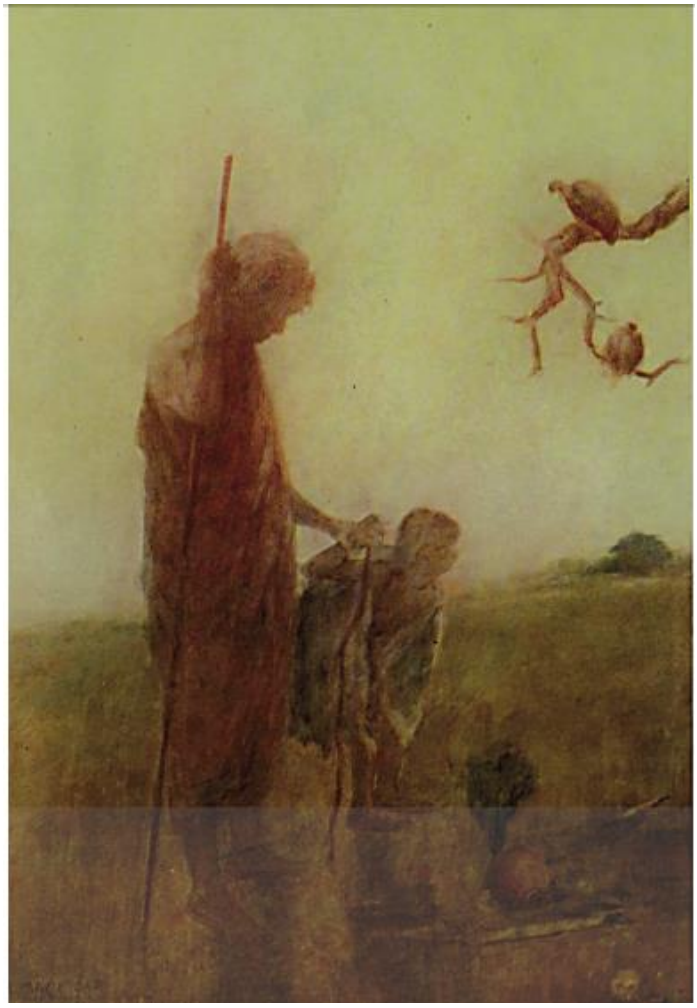
Palli-Krishan (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Barsha (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Chatak (oil), Hemendranath Mazumdar



Chatak (watercolour) ,Hemendranath Mazumdar

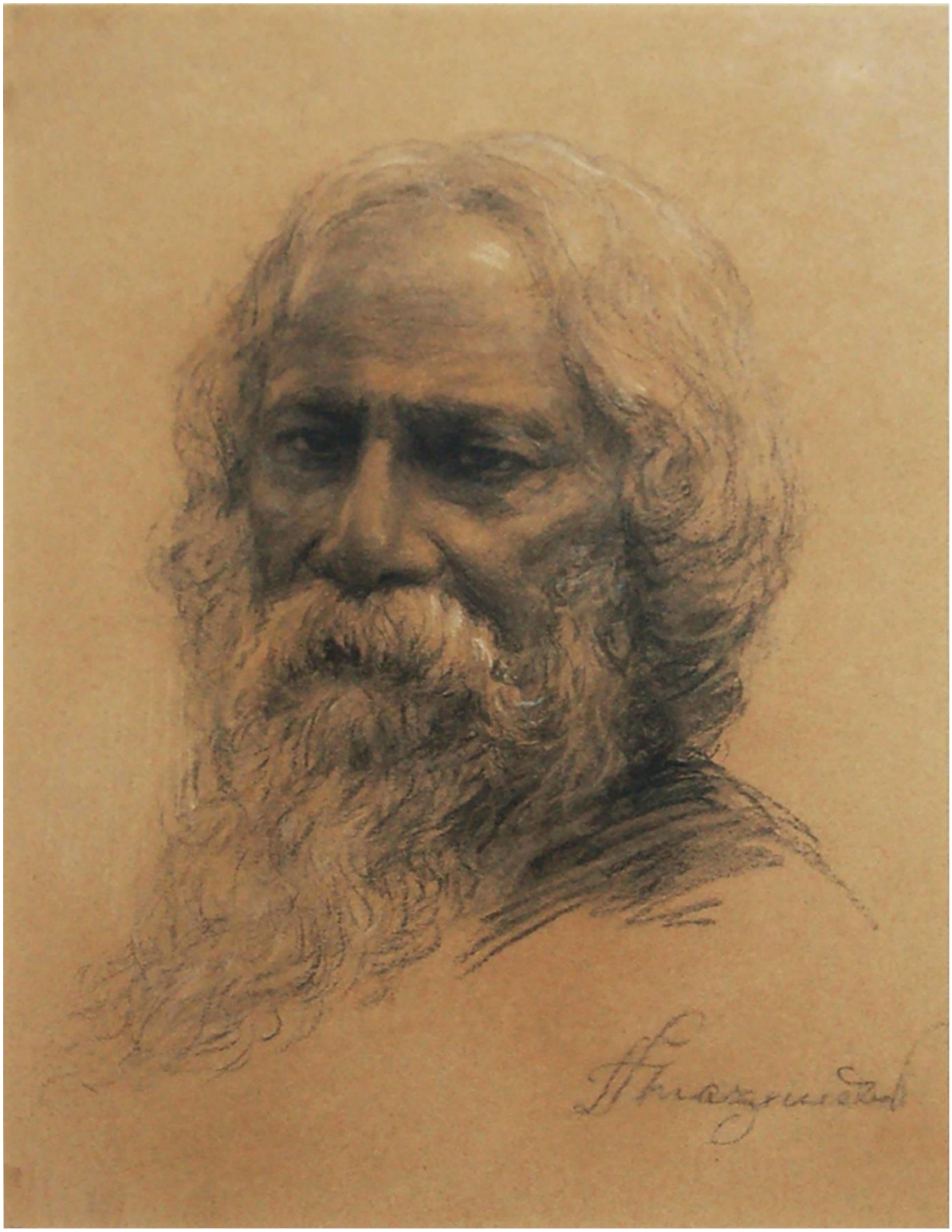


Maya (Watercolour) Hemendranath Mazumdar

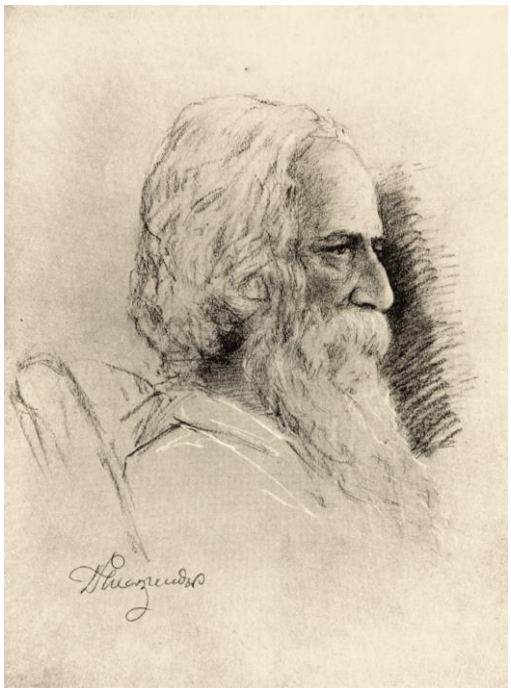
Maya (oil) Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Gachihata, Mymensingh (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Sesh Protishodh (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore (Hemendranath Mazumdar)



Portrait of Rabindranath Tagore 2 (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Portrait of Chittaranjan Das (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

Ananter Sur (Hemendranath Mazumdar)

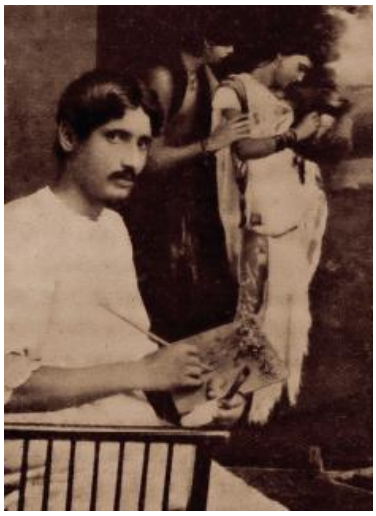
Family Photographs

Hemendranath Mazumdar

Mazumdar with his brothers

Mazumdar's studio at *Gachihata*

Mazumdar with his family



Mazumdar in his studio

Dudher Ghar at Gachihata

The artist's models

Gauri Chowdhury, the niece of Hemendranath

Sudharani Devi, Hemendranath's wife

Malati, a relative of Hemendranath

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