

# Trends of Indigenisation and Social Justice in Indian Christian Art

JYOTI SAHI\*

In 1981 my attention was drawn to a recent exhibition of the well known Indian artist Krishnan Khanna. In this exhibition I noted that every painting had a Christian theme. As Krishnan Khanna had his studio in Delhi, where I myself was doing a commission at the time, I took the opportunity of paying him a visit. I asked him why he was concentrating so much on Christian subjects, as I gathered he was not himself a believing Christian. Even on the day I visited him he was working on a painting of St Thomas putting his finger into the wounds of the Risen Christ. He explained to me that what interested him in this theme (which he has painted repeatedly) was in fact the doubting nature of Thomas. He claimed that he himself was a sort of agnostic, who had lost faith in all forms of traditional religion. But he saw in Christ a figure who opposed historically two terrible forces. One was the prevailing colonial empire of Rome, and the other was the narrow religiosity of his fellow Jews. Between these two opposed interests Christ had been pulled apart, and crucified. He felt, as a modern Indian, that we could find the same two power systems in India today. On the one hand are the colonial interests of multinationals, and so on. On the other hand there is the narrow, parochial religiosity of Hindu conservatism. In the figure of Christ he wanted to celebrate man's ultimate longing for freedom both from political and religious constraints and domination.

We have remarked before that Indian Christian art was initiated not by Christian artists, but by Hindu artists. The first Indian artist to paint Christian themes in any consistent way was the painter Jamini Roy, who was also to be important in the history of modern

\* Mr Jyoti Sahi, a Catholic layman, is an artist.

Indian art by advocating a return to folk art. The period when Jamini Roy was doing his most creative work was in the 1940s. At the age of 34 he reacted against the academic style of the Calcutta Art School. His most important pictures are a series of pictures of Jesus as a Santal. These pictures coincided with a rejection of city culture, and a strong belief in the aspirations of the peasantry and tribals. To understand this revolutionary move, we have to look at the wider cultural situation of Bengal at that time.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy began the Brahmo movement in a Unitarian Church in 1828. The grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore was an important follower of this faith which insisted on the reform of Hinduism, and in a more rational belief based on the Upanishads. Rabindranath Tagore's father was the second head of this movement. Raja Ram Mohan Roy himself was very interested in Jesus, writing a book called *The Precepts of Jesus* in which he stressed the social and ethical teachings of Christ. A close disciple of his, P. C. Mazoomdar, wrote a book called *The Oriental Christ* which was published in the 1880s. In this book P. C. Mazoomdar very much took up the line of argument that Christ was not after all a European; he was an Asiatic. And in fact to understand the Gospel we have to understand its basis in an Asian way of life, and an Asian approach to religion.

This approach was very appealing to many Hindus, who felt that by claiming Christ as their own, they could in a certain way remove the sting of Christianity as an instrument of colonial domination. It is clear that many educated Hindus of the nineteenth century were by no means blind to the wisdom of Christ's message. What they resented was the way in which the foreign missionaries used this message to give sanction to their own institutions, laying an implicit claim to Christ as the founder of a western spirituality.

About the end of the 1870s Ramakrishna also had an important vision of Christ. He had first been introduced to Jesus by a disciple, Sambhu Babu, who was himself influenced by the Brahmo movement. But it was in the house of Jadunath Mallick that one day he began to contemplate a picture of Jesus and Mary. In those days it was fashionable for certain members of the Bengali intelligentsia to keep in their homes western prints, depicting religious themes in the western style. We do not know which Madonna and Jesus was

reproduced in the home of Jadunath Mallick, but it made a deep impression on Ramakrishna. Suddenly the picture seemed to come to life, and Ramakrishna saw rays of light coming out of the picture, and entering into his heart and transforming his whole being.

Returning home Ramakrishna struggled with himself, praying, "Mother, what strange changes are you bringing in me?" For three days he did not visit the Kali Temple as was his custom. Near the end of the third day, as he was walking on the panchavati, he saw before him, with his waking eyes, the figure of a fair-complexioned holy man, who gazed at him in a penetrating way. Ramakrishna recognized him as a foreigner, and remarked on his beauty and the fact that "his nose was rather flat." Ramakrishna wondered who he was and the answer came in his heart in a way that he later described as "ringing": "Lord Jesus, the Christ, the Master—Yogi, eternally one with God, who shed His heart's blood for the deliverance of men! It is He." Then the figure embraced him, and passed into his body, becoming totally merged into his inner experience.

It is in this context that we are to understand the emergence of an Indian image of Christ as developed by painters like Nandalal Bose and later Jamini Roy. This figure of Jesus very much stressed his social and ethical message of the brotherhood of all men, and his concern for the suffering and afflicted. It was this figure which also appealed to Gandhiji.

As we have seen, the early representations of an Indian Christ, addressing himself to Indian religious experience as a *Maha-yogi*, were closely linked with reformed Hinduism as it developed in Bengal towards the end of the nineteenth century. But they were also linked to emergent nationalism. However, after the independence of India, other forces were to manifest themselves. What at the beginning of this century was a unified effort at national identity, gradually began to polarize into conservative and radical movements. Even before Independence, Tagore was to criticize Gandhi for what he felt was his parochial nationalism in the instance of his call to burn all foreign-produced mill cloth. Rabindranath Tagore had stood for a universality, a *Visva-Bharati*, or universal culture. And he began to fear a narrow nationalism. Soon this narrow nationalism was to rear the ugly head of Communalism, and a conservative Hindu right. This was somehow to take by surprise many

Indian nationalist leaders—both Gandhi and Tagore had stood for a renaissance Hinduism, and now they both in different ways became implicated in a Hindu nationalism which in the end was against all they stood for.

From now on the two pulls of a liberal westernization, and a conservative nationalism were to begin to tear apart Indian culture. In the field of art too we see these contradictions taking shape. Whereas the Bengal School of Art, initiated by the Tagores at Shantiniketan, was very much a nationalist movement, an effort to create an Indian national style with its roots in the great Indian styles of the past, as we find at Ajanta, or in the miniature tradition of Rajput or Moghul art, this art tended to look only backwards, and to try and revitalize a past. But all art which is merely an attempt to bring back past glories is doomed to failure, because art has its historical context. We can no more paint in the style of the past Buddhist, Jain, or Rajput masters, than we can think like people in those past centuries thought. The processes of history are inexorable—we cannot go back on time. However much we might deplore historical events, for example colonialism, we cannot undo history. Colonialism brought with it science and modernization. World movements now impinged upon the Indian scene—not least the economic developments leading to a world monetary system. India had to take its place among the united nations, and commit itself to a form of government radically different from the type of society prevalent in the feudalistic Kingdoms of pre-colonial days. The art of India would have to reflect this new exposure to world wide developments, which in their turn had been radically affected by industrialization and urbanization.

After Independence modern Indian artists began to reject the Bengal School of Art style as outdated, and outmoded. How could such a style speak to a modern, alienated Indian?

Here social questions began to engage the thinking artist. The artist must always find his inspiration in the growing thrust of contemporary political thought on social realities. How could the artist devote himself to an idealized art celebrating the glories of nature, when he was surrounded by suffering, and the destruction of nature? Hindu canons of art have explicitly laid it down that the artist must



### **Face of Christ and fear of man**

**Detail of painting "Living in Christ with People" painted by me for the 7th assembly of the Asian Christian Council held in Bangalore in 1980.**

**This painting is now in the Ecumenical Centre, Whitefield.**



## **Your Kingdom Come**

The empty household pot  
cries out, dry lipped  
for the fullness that is not.  
Man, too, is a clay vessel  
and his empty heart craves  
for the eyes of heaven,  
and those creative hands  
of the potter who takes and saves,  
the earth, by remaking  
the discarded clod of soil,  
opening new spaces in its heart  
through ceaseless toil  
firing it in furnaces of new fire  
until, by creation's art,  
lowly matter is refashioned as a cup  
lifted – open like a chalice offered up  
ready to receive the fulness!

Come, Lord, Giver – come  
Once again into this cave  
of death! by born!  
Thy Kingdom come to save!



The lotus rising from the flood of the waters is a symbol of man being drawn up by the Light of Grace from the chaos of sin. So this image symbolises the redemption of man through the saving power of God.

only depict the eternal, and perfect, not the ephemeral, and accidental. Thus suffering never found a place in the great tradition of Indian art—suffering in the sense of the depiction of human misery, and the plight of modern historical man.

A visitor to a modern exhibition of art in India might be surprised by what seems to him to be the un-Indian character of works displayed. He exclaims in dismay, "I did not come to India to see the pale reflections of our western alienated art! What is the meaning here of all this apparent slavish imitation of modern western schools of art, like Abstraction, Surrealism, or Conceptual art?" The casual observer may be struck by the apparent westernization of modern Indian art in the last thirty years which seems to run absolutely contrary to India's aspirations for Independence and national identity. It seems that never before has Indian culture been so completely colonised!

Here also Indian Christian art has a curious role to play. Whereas Christian art in India began as an expression of Indian nationalism and reformed Hinduism, modern Indian artists like Krishnan Khanna, Hebbal, Hussain, Souza and K. C. S. Panikkar, to name but a few, have treated Christian themes, precisely because these themes seem to speak out *against* India's past. Hebbal has painted themes like sacrifice, and the crucified bird of peace, while Hussain has depicted the faceless acts of service of Mother Teresa. The social theme of Christ rejecting narrow religiosity, and appealing to a wider humanism, is basic to India's "acknowledged Christ of the Indian Renaissance." Christ becomes a liberation hero, who speaks out against human injustice in a way that no traditional icon seemed to do. K. C. S. Panikkar is reported to have said, "Scratch Buddha and you find a high born prince underneath; scratch Christ and you find a humble carpenter." The implications of Christ's humble origins are not lost on the Indian imagination—thus he becomes a champion of those who have suffered from the Hindu caste system, and have been marginalized. Christ is imaged not as a Prince or Brahmin, but as a Harijan.

In this respect it is interesting to note the difference between the modern non-Christian Indian artist's rendering of Christ, and that of those Indian artists who have much more consciously produced

images of Jesus in the Indian context, as part of the movement in the Church towards indigenization. Here, artists like Angelo da Fonseca, Alfred Thomas, Trinitade, Genevieve, Clair, and even Frank Wesley, all of whom have been much influenced by the Bengal School of Art, have depicted Christ as a *Sanyasi*, even a high-born, high caste Indian, whereas non-Christian artists have tended to stress that he was low-born, because this was what they found distinctive about Christ—where He is different from Buddha or Krishna. In the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary in Madurai we see a Tamil Christ envisaged by T. K. Chelladurai. He is depicted like a Pandian king. In the same way Byzantine art stressed the image of Christ as an emperor, and Mary was depicted as a queen. But surely, this was precisely what Christ was not, and in this respect I will take issue with those who say that Indian non-Christian artists have never properly understood Christ. For them, Christ is not the official Christ of the established Church triumphant. For them Christ is the out-caste, like the inspired Bengali Baul mystic, who utters his message outside the walled structures of official religion.

The two movements which I am trying to outline in this paper are, on the one hand, the struggle against colonialism—which is characterised in Indian art by a search for authentic Indian roots, and an Indian identity expressed in an Indian style of painting. On the other hand, there is a search for a more just society, one which is democratic, rather than theocratic, humanistic rather than bound by religious hierarchical orders such as we find in the Hindu caste system. In the context of the Indian Church of today we have the indigenizing movement, which has stressed the importance of the Church being *Indian*, and has therefore tried to conceive of Christ in terms of known Indian symbols, which alas are too often inter-linked with traditional social systems, such as we find in the caste system. How to separate what is *good* in Hindu culture from what is bad? How to espouse the great tradition of the high caste philosophical Hinduism, without oppressing the little traditions of the tribals and peasants?

On the other hand in the Church there is the liberation movement, which is often very negative towards past Indian culture, insofar as it has been the preserve of a dominating high-caste group. Those who are concerned with social justice are often very alienated

from past culture precisely because they identify themselves with those who have been alienated by traditional society. This "liberation movement" in Indian society tends to be a modernizing movement, which, while hoping for a new India, is often all too neglectful of India's great cultural heritage.

Can these two currents be brought together in any way? Can Indian Christian art bridge the gap between a search for national identity, deeply rooted in Indian culture, and a search for a new society which will not reject whole sectors of humanity and which will be committed to social justice and freedom? This is, I feel, the great question which modern Indian Christian art poses.