The ART India
NEWS MAGAZINE OF

The Legacy of Anti-Tradition

It was a time of impending liberation in the country and the air was thick with nationalism. But artists were fighting for the right to produce art that defied the label 'Indian', explains Sundaram Tagore in this overview of modernism in India.

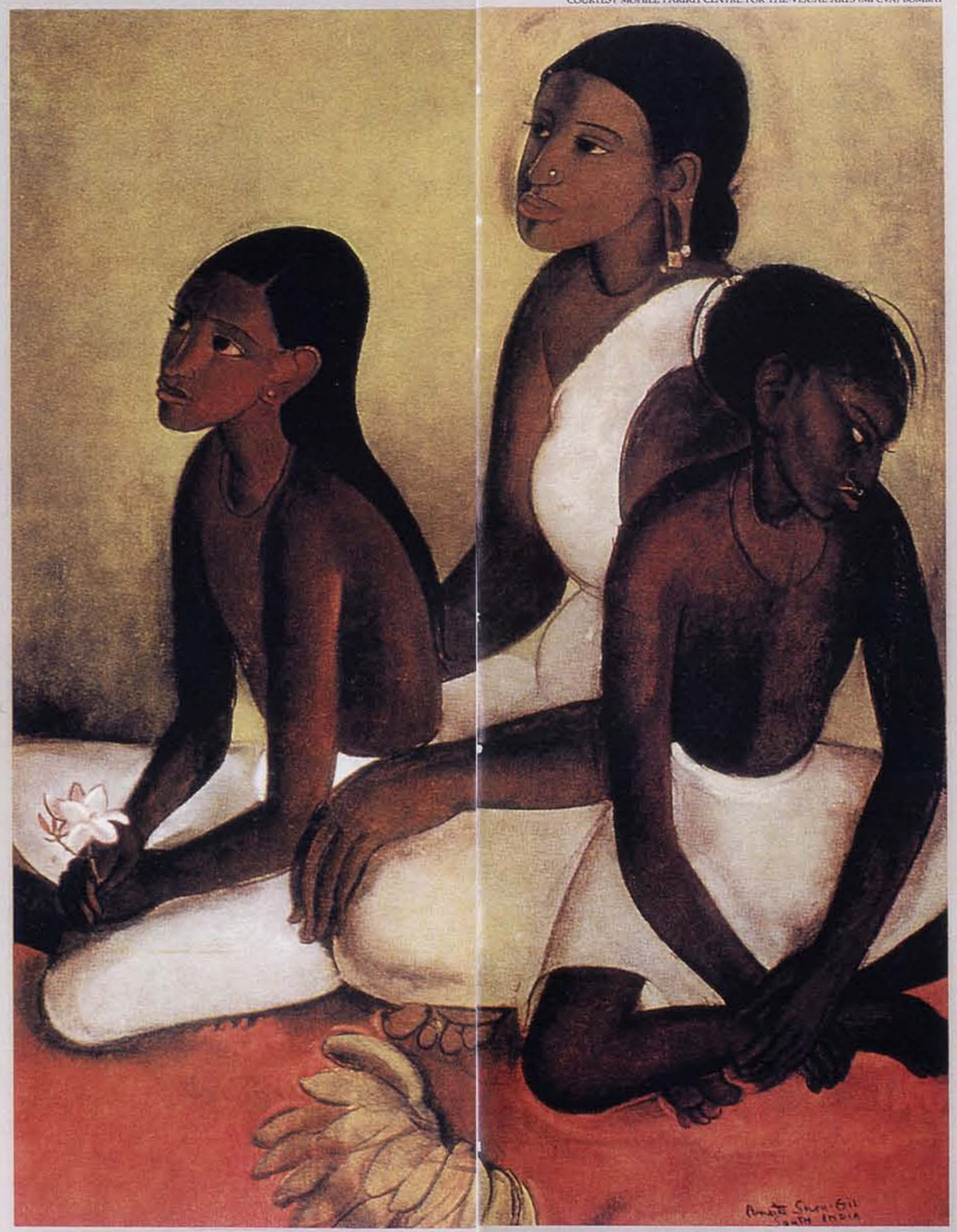
In 1922, when the works of Vassily Kandinsky, Lyonel Feninger and Paul Klee arrived to grace the walls of Samavaya Mansion in Calcutta, the eyes of the Indian cognoscenti were suddenly opened to the developments in Western avant-garde art. The landmark Bauhaus exhibition, which included the works of over a dozen German Expressionist artists, changed the course of modern Indian art.

Prior to this exhibition, Indians had been exposed primarily to British academic art, and were generally unaware of epoch-making aesthetic movements in continental Europe. All things high and great were thought to be of English origin — this was a part of India's colonial legacy. But the avant-garde exhibition of 1922 challenged at least one notion of British supremacy.

The beginnings of the modern movement in India are tangled and complex, but can ultimately be traced to pioneers like the uncle and nephew team of Rabindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore, Jamini Roy and Amrita Sher-Gil. The modern movement in India did not develop gradually, as in the West, but resulted from a complete overthrow of the traditional artistic system by the introduction of Western representational art. Traditional Indian art is the art of the figure, of highly idealised forms that shun naturalism. In fact, traditional Indian art possessed the very same abstract qualities that Western artists were exulting in and borrowing to create their modernist vocabulary. In a circuitous process, modern Indian artists had to relearn the abstract lessons of flat planes, hot colors, and idealised forms, which they had lost after the British introduced academic realism during the colonial period.

As the vibrations of modernism spread after the Bauhaus exhibition, the importance of Rabindranath and Gaganendranth Tagore's artistic explorations was confirmed. Subsequently, Indian

COURTESY MOHILE PARIKH CENTRE FOR THE VISUAL ARTS (MPCVA) BOMBAY



Amrita Sher-Gil.
Banana Sellers. *1937.*
Oil on canvas

critics recognised their own isolationism and thus Benoy Kumar Sarkar, more alert than his colleagues, battered Abanindranath Tagore's nationalist art in his potent pro-avant-garde manifesto, *The Futurism of Young Asia*. He contested the Bengal School's revivalist-nationalist forms, underscoring the importance of assimilating European modern art as a natural step towards a viable modern art movement in India.

Modern European art suddenly endorsed the place of Rabindranath Tagore and Gaganendranath Tagore, who had begun to chart a new direction in the 1920s, sidestepping the issues of nationalism by creating hauntingly cogent forms in Cubist and Expressionist language. Rabindranath Tagore had already said: "...I strongly urge our artists to deny vehemently the obligation to produce something

COURTESY NATIONAL GALLERY OF MODERN ART (NGMA) NEW DELHI

Abanindranath Tagore.
Stormy Night. *n.d.*
Wash and tempera.
21 x 30.5 cms.

that can be labeled Indian art, according to some old-world mannerism." Gaganendranath Tagore, on the other hand, without much vocal protest, began to create a private dream world in Cubist idiom, with an interplay of light and prismatic shadow, a mystical, spiritual realm.

Rabindranath Tagore's visionary doodling evolved into radical images of silhouetted women, ghostly landscapes and primitive birds belonging to the realm of the subconscious. With a single stroke, he thrust modern Indian art into the avant-garde. At ease with modern sensibilities, Tagore, with his simplifications of forms — very much a part of modernist expression — had aesthetic links with Emile Nolde and Paul Klee.

Jamini Roy, who began as an academic painter and later explored Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, invented a folk-art inspired form that had an incremental effect on modern Indian art. It enabled the next generation of artists, from

the Calcutta Group and the Progressive Artists' Group of Bombay, to forge new ideas about art and aesthetics.

By the early '30s, Amrita Sher-Gil had emerged in the midst of the Indian art world after experiencing the bohemian life-style of Paris. She initiated Gaugin-esque colour patterns combined with Indian subject matter that had an explicit social significance. "I want to be an interpreter of the atrocious physiological misery which abounds in our country," she said in a letter to her sister, and her work subsumed the souls of the people through its modernist verve.

The modern movement in India achieved full bloom during World War II, when global industrialisation and increases in trade and commerce affected India at an accelerated pace. These changes prepared Indians to view modernism on an inescapable force, and they were drawn to the international spirit of the movement, which was primarily associated with the School of Paris. The Calcutta Group, formed in 1943, abandoned the revivalist and academic-realist precepts of an art which served nationalism. Instead, this new generation of artists wanted to create "art for art's sake," which they thought would bring progress.

COURTESY NGMA, NEW DELHI

COURTESY MPCVA

(left): Nandalal Bose. Shiva. *n.d.* *Wash and tempera on paper. 44.5 x 37 cms.*

(right): Rabindranath Tagore. Untitled. *n.d.* *Watercolour.*

Because they worked in a period of cataclysmic upheaval, however, they could not pursue a totally ivory-tower aesthetic. The devastating famine of Bengal, the horror stories of the world war, and the communal tension leading to Partition demanded that art be produced for cultural regeneration to effect meaningful social change.

In the midst of this crisis, the artists of the Calcutta Group — Rathin Moitra, Gopal Ghose, Nirode Mazumdar, Paritosh Sen, Krishna Pal, Sunil Madhav Sen, Prodosh Dasgupta, Bansi Chandragupta, Subho Tagore and Pran Krishna Pal — found a means to organise themselves around common objectives. Their manifesto, "Art should be international and interdependent," although lacking the scepticism of the Bombay Progressives, displays a similar sense of excitement about the modern world. They claimed that "...the Paris of Sartre, Stravinsky and Picasso is the centre of our days..." Their exhibitions in Bombay were lauded by Rudy Von Leyden, Herman Goetz and Mulk Raj Anand — also strong supporters of the Progressive Artists' Group.

The poignancy of the famine in Bengal — children with swollen bellies and skeletal human figures with mask-like faces — were a powerful subject, but the members of the Calcutta Group shied away from such horrors to maintain their psychic well-being. However, a group of independent artists, including Chittraprasad, Somenath Hore, Ramkinkar Baij, Benode Behari Mukherjee and Zainul Abedin, picked up this very subject and produced powerful images in expressionist language dealing directly with issues of human agony and aspirations.

In the city of Bombay, modern art asserted its vehement presence with the formation of the Progressive Artists' group in 1947. Souza, one of the members of the group, has said that the formation of the PAG at the time of independence was symbolic but coincidental. The genesis of the group, which comprised six members including Souza — Syed Haider Raza, Krishnaji Ara, Maqbool Fida Husain, Hariambadas Gade and H. Bakre — had a dual historical significance, namely in political and artistic contexts.

The need to create nationalist art ended with the achievement of independence. The band of rebellious young artists believed that in the aftermath of World War II and the partition which had caused millions to flee, the veil of innocence

had been lifted. The Progressives, with their awakened sense of art's mission, proposed that it was imperative for their work to reflect the temperament of the time. They tried to assemble an aesthetic ideal that essentially belonged to modern life, with an emphasis on progress, and at the centre of which was a sense of iconoclasm. As Souza has stated, "the whole tendency of modern life was anti-traditional."

The brave world into which the Progressives were born displayed radical symptoms of its own. It was a complex world that rejected the models and the standards of the past and was bereft of social, political and artistic paradigms. The Progressives thought that by simply breaking with the past, they were being modern. Time would ultimately prove that this simple equation was not enough, but even at that period, matters were complicated by the movement's multiple impulses.

Indian artists found many impediments on the way to developing a modern visual idiom. Isolated from the movement's philosophical and psychological origins in Europe, they were unable to comprehend the depth of its intricate mechanism and purposes. Thus Indian artists in the '40s and '50s struggled to reckon with their own traditions,

The history of modern Indian art is essentially a history of the reconciliation of Western forms and India's past.

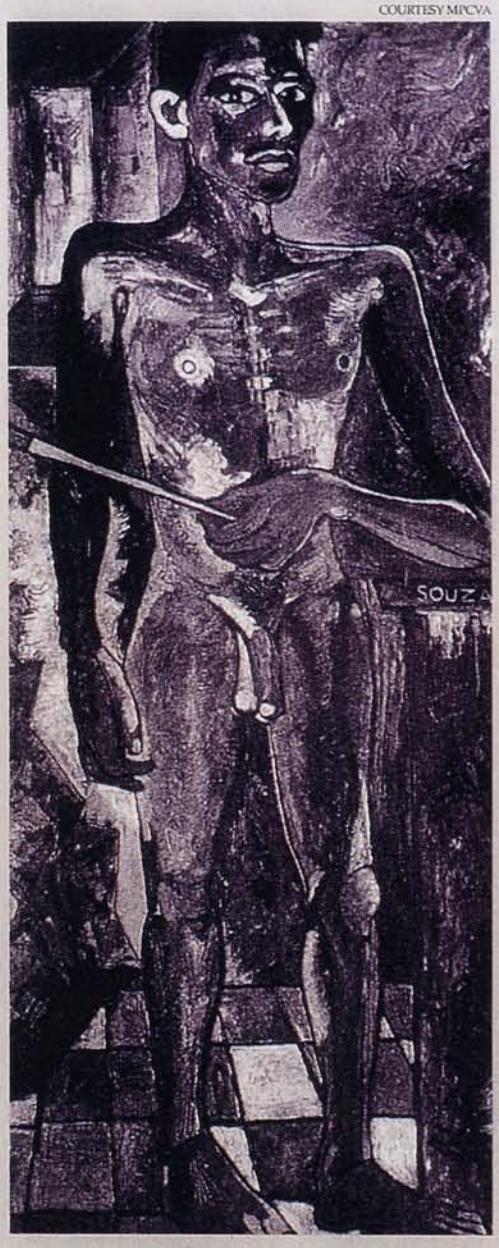
not only with respect to thematic content, but also in an attempt to place their modernity within a firm cultural context. Therefore, the history of modern Indian art is essentially a history of the reconciliation of Western forms and India's past.

Because few Indian artists were able to travel to Europe even in post-colonial times, the movement appeared bewildering — it was far removed from its beginnings, unable to reveal its many strains clearly. Yet it was exciting for Indian artists of the '40s and '50s to be a part of the brave new modernism. Visiting Paris, with its international artistic atmosphere became the dream of most Indian artists. Nehru had already said, in *Discovery of India:* "We in India do not go abroad in search of the past... we go to foreign countries in search of the present. That search is necessary, for isolation from it means backwardness and decay..."

In fact, Nehru's own vision of modern India conformed very well to the aspirations of the artists. Nehru's government played a serious role in the development of art and culture during this period. Hence, M.F. Husain remarked: "there was a time when culture evolved, after independence. And Pandit Nehru sustained it. Politically, socially, culturally, we were on the right track, we thought it was the golden age."

Indian artists of the '50s were working without

COURTESY MPCVA



F. N. Souza.
Self-Portrait. *1947.*
Oil on canvas

the benefit of a strong tradition of innovation and change in the visual arts, and thus were unable to accept the doctrine of progress; the practical adoption of modernism was therefore both liberating and alienating, creating an ambivalence in their artistic output. The artists were relegated to a culturally peripheral role, and as they became cognisant of this fact — that they were the transmitters and interpreters of new artistic ideas, rather than the originators — they left for Europe. However, there were artists such as K.K. Hebbar, N.S. Bendre, Shiavax Chavda, S.B. Palsikar, V.S. Gaitonde and Jehangir Sabavala who continued to work independently in India, or forged their aesthetic quest alone abroad.

In New Delhi, a group of artists, in an attempt at social reconstruction, formed the Delhi Shilpi Chakra Group composed mainly of displaced

artists from the newly created Pakistan. After independence, New Delhi acquired a vibrant artistic texture that had not previously existed. It was only after 1947, with a vast infusion of government resources coupled with the migration of an artistic population from other cities, that New Delhi developed into the cultural metropolis that is today.

One artist who helped create the patina of New Delhi's artistic history was Sailoz Mukerjee, who once met Matisse in Nice and asked to be apprenticed to him. He was told by the French master: "You come from the land of the Nataraja and I have nothing to teach you." Taking that as a signal to continue on his own, Mukerjee fused Matissian forms with Mughal colors, bringing modern Indian art another step closer to negotiating Indian traditions and Western modernism.

Although World War II and the national struggle were over by '47, the looming clouds of Partition had sapped nearly all the creative strength which artists needed in order to portray their society in defined lines. Their world was in turmoil and they were unable to produce an aesthetic cohesiveness. One artist who tackled the issues of brutality and the mass genocide of partition head-on was the New Delhi artist Satish Gujral. "Before Partition, I was already cultivating a desire for social change," he said. "Partition formed the subject I took to painting seriously." In his works, one notices a collective sorrow and sense of looming pathos. He used the forced migration of Hindus and Muslims to create an art of social protest.

India's independence, while bringing the curtain down on the Raj, did not produce the immediate relief the nation yearned for as it attempted to rebuild the splintered society. Instead, independence unleashed a wave of violence that seemed to be the wrath of supernatural power. Indeed, in a metaphorical sense, the violence embodied the Indian philosophical tenets of creative and destructive forces — the cycle of chaos leading to order only to return to turmoil. Although modernity claims to decry chaos, its determination to oppose tradition breeds confusion.

Sailoz Mukerjee, who helped create the patina of New Delhi's artistic history, was once told by Matisse: "You come from the land of Nataraja and I have nothing to teach you."

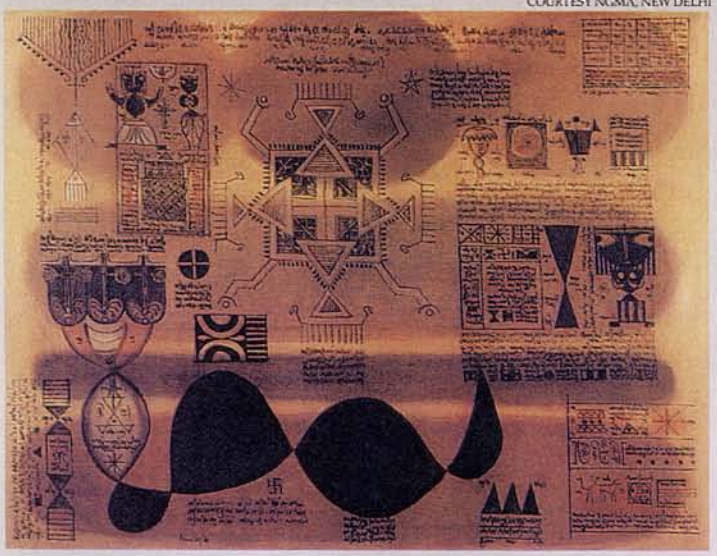
The late '40s in India embraced the view that history is driven by the actions and changing beliefs of the masses, and thus artists in India captured this idea in their works. In 1948, Krishen Khanna captured the reaction of the people to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi and the subsequent gloom that engulfed them, in the painting which marked his formal debut: *The News of Gandhiji's Death*. The painting has no figure of Gandhi in it; instead Khanna depicted a city scene where male and female, Hindu and Muslim heads peer in grave silence out of a cluster of newspapers under a street lamp. The lamp in the painting sheds no light, symbolising what Nehru was to state — "The light has gone out of our lives and there is darkness everywhere... the father of the nation is no more."

Nehru, in his attempt to resurrect the nation following the physical and psychological devastation of Partition and Gandhi's death, used art as a symbolic balm to heal the fragmented society, and as a way to commemorate India's

Krishen Khanna.
The News of Gandhiji's Death. *1948.*
Oil on canvas

K.C.S. Panniker
Words and Lines. *1968.*
Oil on canvas.
119.5 x 152 cms

COURTESY KRISHEN KHANNA



COURTESY NGMA, NEW DELHI

freedom. At the Presidential Palace, Nehru held an exhibition of ancient Indian art, conveying the message that the programme for a successful future resided in the time-tested receptacle of India's past. Many artists were moved by the grandeur of the ancient art they saw in the exhibition. They perceived a link between modern Indian art and ancient Indian aesthetics, especially in the way both extolled primitive values. Tyeb Mehta of Bombay, who went to see the show with Akbar Padamsee, stated: "It was very important for us to see all that art under one roof."

The need for artistic development was emphatically stressed by the government of India as an adjunct to the Five-Year Plan. Nehru, with his personal interest in culture, placed an added emphasis on modern art, which was demonstrated by his accepting the role of guest of honor at numerous exhibitions, despite his many official commitments. Also, Nehru realised that the capital

Nehru, in his attempt to resurrect the nation following the devastation of partition and Gandhi's death, used art as a symbolic balm to heal the fragmented society.

of the nation lacked artistic infrastructure — there were no museums, galleries or art centres — and initiated a series of steps to redress this by planning the creation of the National Gallery of Modern Art, the Lalit Kala Akademi and other institutions.

Bhabesh Sanyal, one among the displaced artists of New Delhi, became a founding member of the Shilpi Chakra Group, along with Kanwal Krishna, Dinkar Kowshik, Jaya Appaswamy, Prannath Mago, Har Krishan Lal, and Damianti Batra. All of these artists faced the central issue of how to pursue formal aesthetic exploration in a society beleaguered by mass hunger, class conflict, and thorough destitution. The group questioned the very meaning of art — to whom should it appeal? what kind of message could it carry? what response would it command?

Ram Kumar was one of the young artists trying to define themselves through their art during the Delhi Shilpi Chakra's reign. Kumar, having returned from Paris after studying under Andre L'hote and Fernand Leger, tackled the issues of alienation that beset many. Kumar's paintings of the '50s have an unmistakable social content. Third World concerns with economic deprivation and material shortages were the subject of his paintings.

The dizzying speed with which the modern world was encroaching on India during the '50s cannot be overstated. It brought with it new forms of economy, religion and technology, turning peasants into the urban dispossessed. In the words of the critic Richard Bartholomew, who helped

COURTESY MPCVA

COURTESY MPCVA

Jawaharlal Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi and Sanjay Gandhi at the opening of an art exhibition by Subho Tagore. 1954.

Subho Tagore. Jawahar, The Builder. 1947. Tempera.

define much of New Delhi's aesthetic life through his writings, "the perpetual martyrdom of man" became the theme for many artists of the era, including Tyeb Mehta's tumbling human forms and Akbar Padamsee's figures in the guise of prophets synechdochically representing Moses, Mohammed, Buddha, Brahma and Christ.

One artist who began to spend a great deal of time in New Delhi in the '50s and selectively responded to Western modernism, was Husain. He emerged as the foremost figure in the Indian art world, and was quick to respond to the artistic vitality of village India. He became, in many

COURTESY NGMA, BOMBAY

M. F. Husain.
Between the Spider and the Lamp. *1956.*
Oil on canvas.
122 x 244 cms.

respects, the epitome of the modern Indian artist, interpreting and reinterpreting India, and thus qualitatively expanding the modernist language in the Indian context.

By the late '50s and early '60s, K.C.S. Panniker, as the leader of Madras-based artists such as N. Vishwanadhan, A.P. Santharaj, Redeppa Naidu, Ramanujam, S. Dhanapal, L. Munuswamy, P.V. Janakiram, K. Haridasan, K.M. Adimoolam and others, began to search for a new notion of space in art. These artists struggled to demolish the standardised figure and Renaissance perspective-oriented space by scripting anecdotal passages onto the canvas, which allowed them the possibility of opening up new avenues for artistic exploration.

Later in the '60s, with the Neo-Tantra movement, Indian artists began grappling with some of the philosophical exploration that had given European masters the understanding of the principles behind their aesthetic creations. This also led to a period of effervescence in Indian art, and enabled artists to emphatically reject the idea of being a provincial adjunct to the West. The varied impulses of modernism which were made manifest in the art of the '60s began to project a unity toward the latter part of the decade.

The reassessment and introspection that characterised the Neo-Tantra movement, to which G.R. Santosh, Biren De, Panniker and others belonged, gave artists of the period insight into the universal principles behind their creations. They moved away from Abstract Expressionism and turned to Indian Tantra tradition, formalising their canvases through symbolic concepts of light, geometry and the notion of communion. Their attempt at meaningfully integrating geometric shapes such as circles, triangles and squares produced strong and mature forms.

Group 1890 was formed in the '60s partly in order to approach this quest for an evanescent quality of Indianness. In this endeavour, Group 1890 — consisting of Jeram Patel, Gulam mohammed Sheik, Himmat Shah, Eric Bowen, J. Swaminathan and others — was supported by Nehru and Octavio Paz, Mexican ambassador to India. These artists were inspired by tribal and Indian miniature traditions and relied on the subconscious world.

Jagdish Swaminathan, an important figure in the Indian art world, grasped the Indian artists' undue reliance on stylistic parallelisms with European modernism. He adhered to the conceptual base of surrealism and used Paul Klee's whimsicality as a stepping stone, but also attempted to deconstruct the folk, and especially Kangra, miniatures' stylistic features to produce a mytho-poeic art with an epiphany of colors.

Also during this phase, Ganesh Pyne began to identify consciously with the art of the Bengal School as a return to history. He tried to invoke the mysteries of his mental world — of the oneiric and subconscious realm. In this decade, a variety of styles emerged — some dealing with fantasy, others with geometric forms and a few with a return to figuration. The artist Bikash Bhattacharjee produced works that are unsettling in their uncanny power to present a world of deception and revelation.

K.G. Subramanyan, an artist who acquired an exalted status in the '60s in the Indian art world through his years of writing, teaching and painting, affected some of the most prominent of the new generation of artists in Baroda and Santiniketan. His glass paintings, appropriating Matisse in the context of popular Indian *pata* painting, revivified the modernist language with an unmistakable energy and imagination.

In the decade that followed, Indian artists began to create a whole new range of original works, confident artistic explorations gaining partial critical and commercial success with an emerging audience. Their strides, however, owe a great deal to the artists of the previous four decades whose trials and tribulations shaped the modernist tradition. It was the collective endeavour of these artists that forced art in India onto a new plane — one on which each individual has the right to create art that does not identify itself as Indian.