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The 105th birth anniversary of Jamini Roy was observed recently. This article is a tribute to the late maestro on the occasion.

JAMINI ROY: FOLK-ART OF THE OTHER DIMENSIONS

A Star Special
by Samir Dasgupta

If Jamini Roy baffled many of us by his enigmatic personality, his paintings did so by their austere simplicity. And like the painter often used to unnervingly put him a question, by replying with his favourite paradox: "The answer lies in the question itself", his work baffled popular comprehension because much of it was so primitively thin. People understood young Jamini Roy as a portraitist thoroughly accomplished in the western tradition, but other artists of the time — among them the so-called revivalists — derided

him as being a copyist, a cultural slave. Yet, when on a couple of occasions between 1924 and 1929, Roy's paintings were put up in major exhibitions, his canvases had no dearth of buyers. And when about 1930, Alfred Watson, then editor of *The Statesman*, organised a one-man show of Roy's paintings, much of which smacked of French post-impressionism, fashionable art lovers of Calcutta once again talked about the artist.

Contrary to what a number of people have tried to suggest, Jamini Roy did not languish in near obscurity for some forty

years of his life; nor did he suffer pecuniary hardship for all those years. What is true, however, is that not until the late thirties, when Shahed Suhrawardy wrote systematically on the artist's work and its significance and persuaded Indian art lovers to take a good look at Jamini Roy did they stop talking about him as being basically an emulator of a foreign style. During the war years, foreigners fell for and bought Roy's work by the dozen while the general run of cultured Indians felt impelled to "keep up with the Joneses".

Jamini Roy is an interesting case of a major artist who achieved material success before he succeeded in discovering his own form. The much needed economic security therefore could not bring Roy immediate happiness for he was still groping uncomfortably for a "forward solution". In this, however, he was soon eminently successful, and the direction and manner in which he arrived at his solution had a lot to do with the fact that he had no regular or consistent formal schooling. He discovered his form by dint of creative introspection.

For Jamini Roy this discovery was an intuitive journey back into the still living, anonymous folk-art tradition of the Western districts of rural Bengal where the artist himself hailed from and was deeply rooted. Stella Kramrisch described the event as a "conscious and productive homecoming." Not that Jamini Roy was the first to discern the beauties and verve that had remained latent in the old art idiom "primitively" used by the original village *patuas* or (on a different plane) by the makers of *Nakshi Kanthas*. Yet it took no less an artist than him to impregnate that indigenous soil again and harvest a crop more consciously health-giving.

What did Jamini Roy accomplish, really? certainly his object was not to refurbish or

Plates used are a selection from Jamini Roy's works

simplify the traditional *patua* styles and techniques. Yet his work bore an unmistakable affinity with *patas*.

Was he trying to be an exponent of primitivism as it might be understood in the Bangali context? No, if by primitivism is meant naive, wrongly ascribed to his stark, toy-style simplification that retained only the very minimum of basic forms, shapes, colours, and patterns.

It remains true nonetheless that the rigorous formalism of Roy (even when shorn of the familiar signs of decorative sophistication or literary embel-

lated emotive responses in human beings. The primitives did this much in the manner children often say wise things, "unconsciously." Equally seminal was Roy's belief that the traditional *patua* art of Bengal, unlike the primitive arts in various other regions of the world, had a sustaining basis, fortified as it was by a pervasive system of living myths.

It is not my intention here to suggest that decorative sophistication did not occupy an important place in Roy's paintings. In fact it did, although its significance at the purely technical level may not have

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ishment which often characterised the artist), came directly from his conviction that the real purpose of painting as a visual art was to express in the barest possible manner the essential manifestations of the world of nature which stimu-

lated responses in human beings. I would only touch upon one particular development in the artist during his later years, a proper comprehension of which should once more explode the popular myth that Roy was an

"unconscious" artist in the sense of being primitive. It is generally said about his pictures that they were done on strictly flat (i.e., two-dimensional) surface. A look at the artist's canvases done between 1950 and 1970 would, however, convince the discerning observer that during this final phase Jamini Roy was largely concerned with transferring his linear (and curvilinear) designs on a surface intricately prepared to give a textural quality that rather tended to militate against the conventional concept of flat surface. This is true not only of the "woven" mat-like canvases he was so fond of working on, but more importantly, of plane surfaces studded with thick spots or large mosaic-like, irregular divisions resembling parched earth. Technically, such surfaces may still be called flat, but the textural effect so created seems to transport a kind of visual tension that is clearly suggestive of other dimensions.

Jamini Roy appeared at a juncture when the urban culture of Bengal was already falling away due to a profligate seduction from tradition. Unawareness about the necessity of a continuity (not to be confused in any manner with parochialism) was fast becoming a cultural vice. Jamini Roy, as a prophet, sought to retrieve what had already been existing for centuries not only in Bengali folk art but *ipso facto* in all primitive art. Evolving a purely formalistic, new, "forward art form" to give an enduring visual expression to that cultural objective was the achievement of the other half of him — Jamini Roy the artist. Under Indian conditions, the achievement was no less than revolutionary.

Perhaps Jamini Roy did not mind being called a *patua* himself. This may make honest sense if one comes to think of the extreme economy and restraint with which he used to make his pictures. To be sure, he was not only possessed by the singleminded vision of the *pat* draughtsman this primordial faculty was an inalienable trait in him. But that is about



as far as one can go in drawing the comparison. For, the village *patua* is no more than a craftsman who can neither have the magical genius nor the power of Jamini Roy to select abstract characteristics capable of transfixing the verve of simplicity in a picture. A doubt that has bugged many an admirer of Roy concerns the propriety of making copies of his own pictures which the artist did profusely and without compunction. Often the labour used to be shared by his artist son, Amiya, who learnt the craft from the father through years of conscientious exercise. Jamini Roy had his own way of justifying this, and the justification came again from the fact that he was rooted to a tradition in which works of art usually represented collective effort and were thus not necessarily unique. Also, he was insistent on keeping the prices of his pictures low enough so that more and more people could buy them for their homes. Why, one might argue, shouldn't copies of Jamini Roy reach ev-

ery home when graphics of famous European artists keep changing hands at fabulous prices? I think the trouble lies in that a sophisticated art collector here may not hesitate to spend fortunes on an anonymous *pat* which in turn may be a straight copy from another anonymous piece, while he would shrink away from a competent Jamini Roy copy. I also think that this phenomenon goes a long way to prove that for all his personal success Jamini Roy remains an artist little understood by his own countrymen. His message went over their heads.

Jamini Roy is looked upon by foreign art critics as the completest Indian painter and they adore him. At home, more and more people are buying his pictures, often for the wrong reasons or at least not knowing what it is that they like about his work. It is not difficult to imagine that the great master himself realised that he had failed to educate us, his own people.

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HOW does one nation look at another? This straightforward question obscures more intriguing issues, like the image of one country as projected in another or the perception that one develops, sometimes over a long period, about foreigners living in his midst. Again, would an Asian, say, a Thai, use the identical criterion. In judging an American, a Japanese, a Swiss and a German as a possible business partner?

Finally, to bring the subject to our homeland, what sort of an image do Bangladeshis have in our neighbouring region?

These questions are often asked, but seldom discussed in a rational comprehensive manner, except once, as far as I can recall, and that's precisely what prompts me to bring up the subject this Friday.

In the mid-sixties, an enterprising research team in Bangkok conducted a fairly de-

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tailed survey on the Thai's perceptions of different foreign nationalities which had entered the country through its relatively open-door entrance, some never to leave it at all. It was the height of the Vietnam War. So, with tens of thousands operating from the military bases and a substantial number roaming the streets of Bangkok, Americans clearly outnumbered other foreigners, perhaps by ten to one. But there were also scores of well-established British business-

FOR BANGLADESH, IT IS A LONG WAY TO BUILD A POSITIVE IMAGE ABROAD

men, in charge of century-old companies; a new breed of Japanese and German entrepreneurs looking for footholds in the war-rich and relatively free-for-all economy of the country; Swiss and Italian setting up restaurants and nightclubs; and, above all, Chinese and Indian traders bringing in their relatives, often by the backdoor, to meet the demand for increased manpower in their thriving wholesale and retail businesses.

Did the Thais tend to lump all these foreigners together? The opinion survey clearly answered the question in the negative. Then, it went on to

If I may trust my memory after all these years, here are a few glimpses from the findings of the survey. In reliability, probably in business dealings, the British got a good rating, followed by a small minority of nationals from Switzerland and West Germany. The Japanese and South Koreans were secretive and seldom immediately trusted, while Indian and Chinese traders failed to shed their image of being crafty and clannish. The Thai's perception of Americans they met in Bangkok was a complex one. The US executives in business houses were regarded highly for their efficiency and respect for local customs, but a sizable section of their diplomats were criticised for their arrogance and the GIs, roaming the nightclub area restlessly even in broad daylight, were shunned, treated with indifference and a mild contempt. The survey produced a couple of interesting sidelights. For one thing whatever people thought of Italians back in Europe in the mid-sixties — not in particularly positive terms, we are told — the performance of the Ital-Thai Company, a pioneering joint venture, helped in raising the stock of Italian immigrants who, like so many other foreigners, had made their home in Thailand.

Few countries in Asia have benefited more than Thailand from immigration and that too from the West.

In analysing the findings of the survey, a leading Bangkok

newspaper drew certain conclusions which remain as valid today as they were more than two decades ago. Above all, quite a few of these conclusions apply to our own situation, at home and abroad. This is what today's column is all about. As the newspaper put it, no nationality in a foreign country should take its own image for granted. It takes time to build a positive one and a lot of work goes into the exercise. But it can be tarnished, sometimes almost destroyed, in a matter of days, sometimes over a single incident. A thriving foreign-owned business enterprise may do much good to the economy, but it is still regarded with envy by a section of the local community. However, it makes a lot of difference when the enterprise

turns itself into a genuine joint venture, like the Ital-Thai company, and gets involved in social activities. A foreign nationality or any business it runs should certainly have good relations with the local media, but it should never try to control it. Lord Thomson of Britain who owned and managed the Bangkok Post for decades eventually did the wise thing of turning the Post Publishing Company over to Thai shareholders.

Finally, no matter how much good work is done by a majority — or even by the diplomatic mission — to build the image of their country in a foreign land, it is usually a minority, perhaps no more than a handful of people, who can do something, deliberately or thoughtlessly, which will make someone somewhere say, in

loud whisper, "We always knew that these people were not to be trusted." This applies to the image of Bangladesh abroad as much as to that of any other country.

The steady decline of the image of Bangladesh in Southeast Asia, the region this writer knows well, remains a matter of concern to a cross section of our people, especially journalists, traders and well-placed executives of international organisations. This writer has never been able to figure out to what extent this concern is shared by the country's diplomatic missions or by concerned ministries at home.

Such visits serve some useful purpose, but they should not be regarded as substitutes for sustained people-to-contacts, cultural exchanges and media coverage. While we may not be doing particularly well with positive measures in improving the country's image abroad, our missions are obliged to contain the damage control of some negative activities indulged in by a handful of Bangladeshis visiting Southeast Asian capitals.

For instance, it is said that a number of hospitals and clinics in Bangkok now insist on ad-

A couple of years ago, an employment agency here sent in a group of Bangladeshis to Kuala Lumpur for jobs in Malaysia's rubber plantations. Some were graduates who were unused to hard manual work, but all were virtually without firm contracts. Eventually, they ended up at the Bangladesh High Commissions, sitting out in the lawn in scorching sun, moaning over their disaster and seeking some help from the mission for returning home.

These Bangladeshis Want Help," thus ran a headline in a local daily.

So, here's the lesson we

For a country like Bangladesh which suffers from resource constraints, there are no short-cuts in the image building exercise. It must be ready to take the long road that runs through art exhibitions, cultural shows, visits by trade delegations and even lecture tours by eminent Bangladeshi intellectuals.

At airports in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, the countries our nationals can enter without any visa, immigration now wants to see the return tickets

My one fear is, the number in the minority may well be on the increase and that "handful of people" is probably on the way of turning into a crowd.

of incoming Bangladeshis that they go back home at the end of their visits.

In Bangkok and Manila, airport authorities often want to see how much funds an incoming Bangladeshi is carrying with himself. In Tokyo, similar rules are in force.

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