



## Aspects of Modernity in Ramkinkar's Sculpture: A Study

**Dr Ganesh Nandi**

*Assistant Professor, Department of Visual Arts  
Assam University, Silchar, Assam, India*

### **Abstract**

*Although there has always been a rich tradition in sculpture in India, RamkinkarBaij has freed sculpture from the inertia of tradition. He created art by imbibing Eastern-Western art processes and drawing on his own life experiences. He has found a new way in every field of art-thought, subject, medium, technique, keeping in touch with the tradition. He created the first abstract sculpture in this country. He also created India's first environmental sculpture 'Sujata'. He paved the way for experimentation in sculpture by applying the readily available medium of cement-concrete and the throwing process. His work captures the extraordinary pace, rhythm, emotion, Indian way of life pulse and the magical play of light and shadow. He showed that sculptures were made without royal patronage. Showing deep compassion, made working people the subject matter of sculpture. Therefore, if judged as a whole, he is truly a modern sculptor in the Indian context. An attempt has been made in this study to analyze the nature of his modernism.*

**Key words:** Sculpture, Modernity, Experimentation, academic realism, Rhythm, Indian context, Environmental Sculpture.

### **Introduction**

India has always had a rich tradition in sculpture. However, hundreds of years of sculpture traditions were basically stuck in the religious fence. Only with the arrival of the British did a tide of change begin to be noticed. Got a little touch of modernity. But the complete emancipation of sculpture came in the 20th century with the rise of RamkinkarBaij. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, sculptors like HiranmoyRoychowdhury, V.P. Karmarkar or Deviprasad Roychowdhury had outstanding artistic skills, but their work could not cross the boundaries of British academic realism. A new trend in Indian sculpture began with RamkinkarBaij. By imbibing the art processes of the East and the West and mixing his own life experiences, he indulged in creating sculptures. A reckless artist broke all barriers and built a world of his own creation. He revealed his inner being hidden behind the form. He is truly a wonderful personality in Indian sculpture who found a new way in every field of art-thought, subject, medium, technique, while keeping in touch with the tradition.

### **Sources of inspiration:**

Ramkinkar is the father of modern Indian sculpture. He is the liberator of sculpture from the inertia of tradition. But several influences have worked behind the rise of the common barber's son of Bankura to this level. Firstly, the unity with nature and secondly the indulgence of Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Moreover, the art books of the country and abroad stored in Kalabhavan, Tagore Philosophy opened his eyes of knowledge and showed the direction of his creative path. Rabindranath influenced his life in many ways.

Rabinranath's paintings must have stirred Ramkinkar's impressionable mind to a great extent along with the western influence. Rabindranath's drawings and paintings must have helped him a lot in understanding the essence of modernity. Ramkinkar had an ever green and a ready mind, a zealous and



sensitive mind to grasp easily the essence of the poetics of art. He made no mistake in demarcating the Indian school from its western counterpart. He was always in the midway in the conflict between the eastern aesthetics and the western aesthetics. He knew his own art as he knew every throb and sound of his soil (Choudhury : 1991).

Another subject that fascinated Ramkinkar as a sculptor was the study of the human figure. For projects like the one he was engaged in, it was not only appropriate but indeed essential, to study the unclothed human figure.

Ravi Pal, a staff member at Kala Bhavan and Ramkinkar's close relative, quotes the sculptor in an article published in the Bengali journal *Desh* (Autumn, of 1990), as follows: -

A philosopher has said, *'I occasionally feel in my innermost being during some critical period, the touch of some unknown power that dwells within the depth of my soul.'*

When asked if he too felt the same, Ramkinkar said, *'Yes! I do'*.

Ravi Pal : *'What kind of critical period?'*

The artist tried to explain: *'In Kala Bhavan it is not possible to study the nude. None of you can imagine how essential it was for me to study the nude in the context of making the sculptures of Yaksha and Yakshi . . . During that period, I had gone one evening to Malancha, Mira Debi's house, for some personal reason, I saw that Radharani, their maidservant, was in the kitchen engaged in cooking. Our eyes met and I showed her the way to my house in Shripalli. I asked her to come there at night. And that was that ..... Even after we had become intimate acquaintances, she was not prepared to undress herself completely. I tried to make her understand my problem. I told her about my assignment to make the sculpture of Yakshi. Radharani was a worshipper of God. Taking the Yakshi to be a goddess, she accepted the argument in connection with Yakshi. She never again refused to be studied in the nude whenever I asked her to do so in the context of art. In that was she helped me tremendously in my vocation'* (Debi Prasad: 2007).

There is no end to the analysis of the abstract art in the modernist school. The more analysis and interpretations there are, the more puzzling the abstract art becomes. Ramkinkar had his own simple interpretation in this regard: *'the only musical counterpart of the abstract art is instrumental music whose medium is an instrument and whose grammar consist in the seven nodes. i.e., sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, ni. The instrument is tuned with a touch of feeling and our vocalist tunes his voice following the tuning of the read or the chord of an instrument. These are matters related to a properly tuned ear. In Europe the musician put more stress on the instrument itself. Some of them are crazy about it. Our visual arts to have these seven nodes. As for example, there are squares and spheres, rectangular and cylindrical shapes. According to the conscious efforts of the artist, these forms are attributed their natural dresses. Beauty is born. All normal creation has behind them these squares and rectangles and spheres which is usually not perceived by a layman. Then there is what we call perspective. It these things are played on with feeling and emotion, they reverberate like an instrumental recital. We can't proceed a single step without this abstraction. But even if abstract art in like music, do the musical notes themselves hang on the branch of a tree? It is purely man's creation and many a drive was needed to find it.*

*Again, think of this decorative art—this too has within itself those angles and cubes and circles. Let us take for example the design if an alpans—first you have to draw either a square or a rectangle. Then you are to bring in the natural shapes. When people see this, they feel entertained. The same is true for icons and statues too. First you find a square, then a triangle, sphere of cylinder. You must do these works with feeling. Then comes the question of perspective. This perspective has another quality—*



*though it looks like a flat surface, colouring makes a difference between the far and the near*’ (Das : 1991).

#### **Ramkinkar’s thought about abstraction:**

Ramkinkar was the first sculptor to make abstract sculptures in India. Many critics have admitted it. His creation the *Lampstand*’ has been the first abstract sculpture in India. The renowned sculptor Dinkar Kaushik, however found some traits, of similarity between Ramkinkar’s abstract work and Rabindranath’s painting. He said, *‘Many people have said many things about the abstract art. Whatever little I know, I think that Gurudev has a number of paintings which can be termed as abstract. In particular, I want to refer to a painting by Gurudev which is preserved with Rabindra Bhavan at Santiniketan. The work was rendered in water colour. The lines seem to have been drawn in the same ink as is used in a pen. The type, lines, flow and selection of colours bring to mind the idea that the work must have been made in 1934-35. If we compare this work with Ramkinkar’s first abstract work—which is installed beside the temple in front of the Santiniketan building—we find some similarity between the two. Kinkar da used to call this work as a ‘Lampstand’. Arrangements of electric wiring were made to illuminate its lower portion. Prabhas Sen informed me in writing that this work was done in 1938-39. During this period Sankho Choudhury, Prabhas Sen, Santosh Roy and Kamal Nain helped him in this work as student trainees.*

*I don’t know exactly why, but I find similarity between the two works, in fact, there is similarity of form and shape too. It may be that both of them materialized the same expression in their different languages. It may perhaps also be rather coincidence or just a matter of chance. Or kinkarda might have seen the work of Gurudev and might have translated it in his own language. Still we must keep in mind that no sculptor embarked on experimentation in abstract from during 1938-39. Kinkarda was the only exception. Sankho Choudhury, Prabhas Sen et al began learning sculpture under the supervision of Kinkarda. Prodosh Das Gupta was then practicing in London Royal college of Art portrait, life-study and similar realistic works. Hiranmoy Roy Choudhury and Debi Prasad Roy Choudhury too engaged themselves in visually realistic, trends of work. Karmarkar, Fadka, Kawat—everybody worked in this ‘see and imitate’-fashion. Keeping this in mind it seems that Ramkinkar was the pioneer to do abstract art in Indian sculpture. When money, raw material and guidance everything was scanty, Kinkarda’s abstract sculpture really draws our wonder. It is said that Okakura once told Nandalal (in 1912), ‘The artistic talent of India has expressed itself in icon making. I see now that here all are painters. You should go for sculpture work.’ Kinkarda felt that necessity in his inner soul’ (Kaushik : 2010).*

#### **Rhythm in Ramkinkar’s creation:**

As in music with the help of melody and rhythm a notation is created and expressed so too in the realm of painting the same creation takes place with the strokes of colour, lines and rhythm. Without rhythm, melody and colour are both futile. There is rhythm everywhere—in the water currents of the river, in the waves of the sea, in the change of seasons, in gales and storms. Rhythm enjoys a special position in poetry. The same is true of painting also. When the artist find the tradition too hackneyed in loving out his individual expression, he has to bring in new rhythm to the flow of the existing one. The modernists are always conscious of this iconoclasm. But some of them do not have a clear idea of what is going on in the world of art. Since they do not know shapes and forms and rhythm, they cannot break them. Ism-centrism comes to dominate their outlook. Ramkinkar was always free from such deviations. He never broke the rhythm, neither in his sculpture, nor in his painting.

The most pertinent reason behind is perhaps Ramkinkar’s meticulous knowledge of anatomy this knowledge was always associated with his keen passion. This is why, whenever he tried to break



the existing form, he attained a symmetry which was a new thing and did not exist before. Distortion of forms did not degenerate his art work, but re-vitalized it with new vigour and liveliness. The artist was particularly attracted by the symmetry he saw and found in every day human life.

As a classical singer spell bounds his/her audience with his appropriate selection of melody and rhythm, as a poet writes a poem with a perfect sense of rhyming and expression, Ramkinkar did the something in his sculpture; a poetry was written by him too through sculpture. Again, his drawings exhibit the same spirit; an indomitable and mysterious control over the depth of space and the rhyme of symmetry. Almost all of his works seem to have a vitality and strength. The same quality is also found in his sketches. He had a keen sense of drawing and knew the anatomy of almost every living object. And yet he was never an exhibitionist. He never hesitated to alter his works, so long as they did not match the picture of his imagination. He was always a perfectionist, if unsatisfied he would break his sculpture work in to pieces in order to reconstruct it. The same is true of his paintings also (Barman : 2006).

Dhirendrakrishna Barman commented about Ramkinkar's works saying, *'Though there are distortions and simplifications in Ramkinkar's work, he had no biasness for any particular ism and as such his works were never lifeless. He always created the ideal expression. While studying the Chinese arts, I came to know a very beautiful thing. The thing is the difference between the terms 'tiger like and like a tiger'. We often see picture of tiger on the pages of a calendar—just like a tiger—this is what we call 'tiger like'. Again if we go on subtly, analysing the art pieces of some Chinese artists, we may find some anatomical errors in them. But their drawings and picture of tiger often frighten us. The spirit of the tiger is truly present in these pictures. This is what may be called as 'like a tiger'. Ramkinkar's paintings and sculpture have this quality. He never seems to be lacking in this quality of expression'* (Das : 1991).

#### **Creator of own World:**

In his world, Ramkinkar was an in born artist. He was primitive, genuine, absorbed and overwhelmed. He had a wildness to jump upon his target with the exactness of a hunter. He cherished in his works the dancing rapture of life. He was a new diction, a part of which, as he himself admitted, was influenced by Rabindranath Tagore. Where Nandalal Bose tried to tame this free flow of life in the form of literary symmetry, Ramkinkar had his own style to keep intact in his works the rhythm of life, sometimes in the fashion of a cubist language which reflected in the works of Ramkinkar's and later on his successors have had the same language.

But during his later years of life, Ramkinkar's works were not merely limited to a cubist's space, he superseded it, broke it, gave birth to new shapes and new designs. The reflection of Picasso's concepts was always traced in his work; with his essential sense of harmony and symmetry, with his idea of structural iconoclasm. Ramkinkar was very much aware of the works of this renowned cubist artist. But he never becomes a cubist himself. He based some of his creative works on cubism, he assimilated it, gave birth to a purely individual language (Subramanyan : 2006)

Ramkinkar's paintings displays a variety, his sculptures too are more distinctive. It makes him, without controversy, the first major figure in modern Indian sculpture. Sculptors before his time were largely professionals tied to the strings of patronage; however original competent some of them were, they were too constrained by the patron's taste and specifications. So, Ramkinkar was probably the first sculptor in the Indian art scene whom we can designate a 'creative sculptor'; he sculpted for his own pleasure and did not cater to a patron's whims. In fact, his few attempts at doing commissioned works brought him close to disaster; he had to leave them to be completed by his assistants. He could not



suffer the reins of patronage. His brilliant portraits-head and bust; some most dynamic in recent times, were not commissioned works, he did them because he liked the subject for one reason for the other.

Exposed, as he was, to the works of Rodin and Epstein, he showed a greater range of formal invention and when he painted portraits, he transformed each sitter in to a special icon with a distinct emotional aura. One has only to compare his portrait heads of Ganguly Moshai, Preeti Pande, Meera Chatterjee, Madhura Singh, Ira Vakil and Rabindranath Tagore. The head of Allauddin Khan has the lineaments of a saint; his masterly bust of Rabindranath, which has of late become a target of controversy, is a veritable 'tours de force'. It depicts the poet with great dignity, bringing together his sensitivity and strength in an image that keeps the popular false guise at bay. (Debi Prasad: 2007).

### **Conclusion:**

Indian modernism is considered by art critics when these three characteristics meet in art - the control of individuality in art, the pulse of tradition and the underlying emotion of reality. In that context these three features are reflected with brilliance in Ramkinkar's work. He has broken the tradition in terms of subject matter and concept. But he did not avoid tradition. For example, he has created *Yaksha-Yakshi* sculptures by mixing tradition and reality. He created the first abstract sculpture of Indian sculpture in a completely abstract way. He also built India's first environmental sculpture *Sujata*. He made the first-time working people as the subject of sculpture. He paved the way for experimentation in the application of new mediums of cement-concrete. The sculpture produced by the throwing process had an impressionist touch. His work has the vibrancy of Indian lifestyle as well as the essence of European modernism. The immense speed, rhythm, emotion and play of light in his work easily transports the viewer to the abyss of creation. For which he can be identified as a pioneer of Indian sculpture and a completely modern sculptor.

Art Historian Shivaji Panikkar says in an interview during his visit in Assam University in 2012, '*Ramkinkar's thought was different. He had a capacity to react to his surroundings, nature and people and to the history. He was not confined in revivalist mould or any other art movement. He mixed up all the isms and gave it to a powerful language of expression. We can call him as romantic also, because he had a great love for nature, people and life. In all the way it can be considered Ramkinkar as modernist in Indian context.*'

### **References**

1. Aesthetics), Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 1980.
2. Appaswami Jaya, *Ramkinkar*, Lalit Kala Akademi, 1961.
3. Appaswami, Jaya, *Contemporary Indian Sculpture*, Lalit Kala Contemporary, No. 6, Delhi.
4. Appaswami, Jaya, *Trends in Recent Sculpture*, Lalit Kala Contemporary, No. 16, Delhi.
5. Bandoopathyay, Ramananda, *Ramkinkar o Rekha*, ed. By Prakash Das, A Mukharjee and Co. Private Limited, Calcutta, 1991.
6. Bandoopathyay, Somendranath, *Ramkinkar: Alapchari Shilpi*, Dey's Publishing, Calcutta, 1994.
7. Catalogue, Nandan, Kala Bhavan, 2006-07.
8. Choudhury, Shankha, *Kinkar-da's Firm Brush, Some Colours, Some Lines and Some Recollections*, RamkinkarBaij Centenary Exhibition Catalogue, Nandan, Kala Bhavan, 2006-07.



9. Das Gupta, Ansuman, *Visual Metaphors for the Modernist Moments*, RamkinkarBaij Centenary Exhibition Catalogue, Nandan, Kala Bhavan, 2006-07.
10. Daw, Prasanta, *Ramkinkar-Pioneer of Modern Sculpture*, M. C. Sarkar and Sons Pvt Ltd., Kolkata, 2011.
11. Debi Prasad, *RamkinkarBaij's Sculptures*, Tulika Publication, New Delhi, 2007.
12. Ghosh, Dr.Sisirkumar, *Tradition and Modernity: A Note*, (An Annual Art and
13. Ghosh, Mrinal, *Ramkinkar- ChallisherAdhunikata*, Pratikkhan, Kolkata, 2008.
14. Hore, Somenath, *Ramkinkar's Drawing*, RamkinkarBaij Centenary Exhibition
15. Kapur, Geeta, *When was Modernism: Essays on Contemporary Cultural Practice in India*, Tulika Publication, New Delhi, 2000
16. Kousik, Dinkar, *Ramkinkar*, RamkinkarBaij Centenary Exhibition Catalogue, Nandan, Kala Bhavan, Santiniketan, 2006-07.
17. Mago Pran Nath, *Contemporary Art in India- A perspective*, National Book Trust, India, 2001.
18. Mitter Partha, *Art and Nationalism Colonial India 1850-1922*, Cambridge University Press, Britain, 1994.
19. Mitter, Partha, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant Garde, 1922-47*, Reaktion Books, London, 2007.
20. Mukharjee, Binod Behari, *Sadhak Shilpi Ramkinkar*, Visva-Bharati News, sept-oct 1980.
21. Mukhopadhyay, Amit, *Shilpo, Shilpi, Samaj o Ramkinkar*, ed. By Prakash Das, A Mukharjee and Co. Private Limited, Calcutta, 1991.
22. Narzary Janak Jhankar, *Modern Indian Sculpture: A Brief History*, Lalit Kala Academy, New Delhi, 1995.
23. Narzary, Janak Jhankar, *A History of Environmental Sculpture and RamkinkarBaij*, (An Annual Art and Aesthetics), Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 1980.
24. Narzary, Janak Jhankar, *Some New Trends in Modern Indian Sculpture*, Marg Publication, Bombay, 1978.
25. Pal, Arun, *The Man and the Artist*, An Annual on Art and Aesthetics, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, 1980.
26. Sen Partitosh, *AdhunikBharatiyaBhaskaryer Janak Ramkinkar*, *Desh*, 2nd Feb. 2008.
27. Sivakumar, R. *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, Exhibition Catalogue, National Gallery of Modern Art, New Delhi, 1997.
28. Som, Sovon, *Shilpi, Shilpo o Samaj*, AnustupPrakashani, Calcutta-9, March 1982.
29. Som, Sovon, *Tin Shilpi*, Bani Shilpo, Calcutta-9, December 1985.
30. Subramaniyan, K. G. *Remembering Ramkinkar*, interviewed by R Sivakumar, *Art Heritage 9*, New Delhi, 1989-90
31. Visva-Bharati News, special issue, *RamkinkarSmaran*, September-October, 1980.