

**The Paintings of Kumud Śarma:
A Contemporary Expression of Indian Spirituality**

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Graduate Studies
The University of Manitoba

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by Brenda Cantelo
Department of Religion



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**THE PAINTINGS OF KUMUD SÁRMA:
A CONTEMPORARY EXPRESSION OF INDIAN SPIRITUALITY**

BY

BRENDA CANTELO

**A Thesis/Practicum submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of The University
of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree**

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Brenda Cantelo 1998 (c)

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To the memory of Kumud Śarma

The contemplation of beauty allows the soul
to grow wings.

- Plato



Pl. 1 Lovett: Portrait of Kumud Sharma (watercolour, 22 X 30 cm, 1996)

Abstract

The thesis examines selected paintings of a prominent female Indian artist and educator from the state of Bihar, in the context of "art and religion" problematics. Kumud Śarma (1926-1996) paints the lives of the most marginalized and under-privileged members of her society, including day-labourers, servants, tribal people and prostitutes. As a socially-engaged artist, Śarma uses her canvases to comment on problems of human relations, social justice and women's issues. Her active concern with social issues is a reflection of her philosophy that the creative process requires a spiritual foundation or, in her words, "purity of heart." In this sense, her paintings can be explored as a contemporary expression of Indian spirituality.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the following people for assisting in the research and preparation of this thesis. These include: our friends at the A.N. Sinha Institute in Patna, Bihar who welcomed us in 1995 and made our stay for the duration of this research project memorable; Kumud Śarma's relatives, especially Raj and Shanta Dubey of Kitchener, Ontario and Meenu Bauri of Ottawa, who went out of their way to provide information, photographs and anecdotes about her life; Shelley Coveney who patiently typed the many revisions of the text; Elaine Dunn and Gary Lovett who read and re-read the manuscript and offered helpful suggestions for improvement; the Canada Council Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Shastri Indo-Canadian Institute who provided financial support and finally, my advisor, Dr. Klaus Klostermaier who directed my studies and gave encouragement throughout.

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List of Abbreviations

ACS *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*. Ed. D. Apostolos-
Cappadona

Introduction

We must see that whereas words in a literary work communicate direct or oblique meaning, pictures, even when illustrative, only suggest meaning and lead us into inner worlds, releasing us, consciously or unconsciously and enlarging the dimensions of experience.

During a research trip to India in 1995 I had the good fortune of meeting Kumud Śarma, a prominent female painter in Patna, Bihar. As I came to know her better, I began to have more insight into her painting and developed an appreciation for what she was trying to do. Time and again, I was struck by the spirituality which emanated from her canvases. Even though their subject matter was secular rather than "religious," that is, the focus was on the lives of ordinary, contemporary people rather than with the deities traditionally associated with Hindu religion, the message was clearly spiritual. Her work provided an ideal opportunity to examine the spiritual dimensions of contemporary Indian art from a Religious Studies perspective. Furthermore, although individual exhibitions of Śarma's work had been reviewed by Indian critics, no in depth study of her work and its relation to her philosophy of art existed. Consequently, this study provides the first major account of one of Bihar's most prominent female artists and a systematic analysis of key works produced by Śarma between 1989 and 1996 from a spiritual viewpoint.

The present work is divided into three major sections, which are sub-divided into chapters. The first part looks at theoretical issues surrounding the role of art in the study of Religion. The second section contains a biographical portrait of Śarma's life and work and an analysis of paintings (1989-

1996) selected by Śarma as her most important works. These paintings are grouped and discussed thematically. The final section on evaluation includes a chapter on interpretative models for understanding the artist's work as well as an examination of Śarma's philosophy of art as "purity of spirit" and its relation to the broader Indian context.

Presenting and interpreting this type of material was not without difficulties. In a discipline where textual studies are prominent, a case first has to be made for the inclusion of visually-formatted material. Part One: Art and Religion begins with this consideration, and is divided into two chapters. The first examines the need for greater cooperation and exchange between visual and textual studies in Religion. It includes a review of some attempts made by scholars in the last forty years to integrate art more fully into the study. Following the theory outlined by Diana Eck, the argument is made that art should be considered a complimentary kind of religious document and should be studied, like text, hermeneutically. A special plea is made for the study of Indian art. With its long, and rich association with religious values, it is particularly responsive to this type of approach.

The second chapter of Part One looks specifically at the Indian situation over the last one hundred and fifty years. It maps the most influential theories of Indian art from the middle of the nineteenth century until the present, showing

how Indian critics and artists have grappled with the problems of Western influence, style, content and formal analysis. The main models are the Anglo-Indian school, the Revivalists and the Bengal School, Sarkar and "International Modernism," Mulk Raj Anand's Aesthetic Humanism and the rise of Socially Conscious art, to which Śarma's paintings belong.

The second major section begins with a look at Śarma's life and its impact on her art. It notes her family background, her interest in social welfare, especially children's education and health, and her evolution as a self-taught artist. This section also contains a detailed analysis of Śarma's paintings, which are classed into three major divisions: images set in a rural environment, works depicting the shift from rural to urban setting and paintings focusing on her domestic situation. In these chapters the intention is to demonstrate the depth dimension Śarma is able to communicate through a visual, rather than verbal, vocabulary.

The third section looks at interpretive models for understanding Śarma's paintings. It begins with Anand's theory of Aesthetic Humanism, which suggests that the ultimate goal of art is to deepen human compassion and understanding. A discussion considering the connections of socially conscious art, figurative style and the human body, which is considered the most appropriate vehicle for relaying social concerns, follows. The role of Expressionist style, which Śarma uses, is also examined. Finally, it looks at Śarma's philosophy of

art as Purity of Heart and its relationship to a broader Indian religious context.

Regarding the words, "religion" and "spirituality," the following broad characterization is adopted as a working definition for this study. Religion can be said to be a humanly-constructed symbol system and a social and psychic reality, which is informed by spirituality. Spirituality concerns itself with the transcendent or depth dimension of human experience and may manifest itself through healing and creativity, but also through a strong sense of social justice.

In comparison to other studies, this work owes much to pioneers such as Havell, Coomaraswamy, Kramrisch, Boner and Zimmer. It accepts the same basic principle that religion may express itself visually as well as verbally. In terms of more contemporary writers, it bears the imprint of Anand and the socially conscious writers who identify the spiritual in terms of self-fulfilment and genuine concern for others.

Since no other major document has been devoted to recent works of Kumud Śarma, the present work contributes to a broader understanding of contemporary Indian painters in the West. The style of analysis also sets the work apart, for it is written, not from an Art History perspective, but from a Religious Studies one. While it was tempting to rely on descriptions of Śarma's paintings by Indian authors, such writings were purposefully set aside until the end, so that they would not prejudice the analysis. Although the study

integrates analytical tools native to Art History, the whole work rests on the premise that a spiritual reading of these paintings is valuable and authentic. As well, just as there is no such thing as one, true reading of a piece literature, and the reader remains present in the reading of the text, the examination of Śarma's paintings is also coloured by the presence of the interpreter.²

PART ONE

Chapter One

The Underlying Problem:

Integrating Art into the Study of Religion

As with any religious tradition, it is in part a vast historical enterprise of trying to find, realize and express the values and meanings of human life. The study of texts alone is insufficient for an adequate understanding of that enterprise. To the extent that human life is by its very nature embodied, physical and material, the study of religion therefore must involve itself with the study of the material expressions of religion.³

No special insight is required, given the context of modern scholarship, to recognize that specific languages shape our thought. What is much less commonly asserted is that systematic thought can occur in languages other than the verbal.⁴

This chapter will examine the issues surrounding the integration of art into the study of Religion. First, it considers the predominance of textual studies in the field and offers some possible reasons why non-textual explorations have received less attention. Secondly, it looks at some of the ideas and approaches that have been introduced by Religion scholars over the last forty years to bring art into the study of Religion. Finally, it identifies the Indian situation as being particularly amenable to the inclusion of non-textual materials.

Textual predominance in the study of Religion

To date, the academic study of Religion has considered the textual aspects of tradition to a greater extent. This includes such things as the study of sacred scriptures, commentaries, systematic theologies, philosophies and history. In comparison, the study of the non-textual, including the visual expressions of the world's religions has not been explored as completely.

There are a number of reasons why the study of Religion has been and continues to be led by text. These include: the success of past linguistic approaches, lack of appropriate skills on the part of Religion scholars, prevailing cultural

tendencies which neglect art education and absorption of religious art into the domain of Art History.

From its beginning as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century, *Religionswissenschaft* has placed great emphasis on the central role of text and the Word. The first European centres developed out of schools of theology and divinity whose primary emphasis was on the exegesis of Biblical literature and Judeo-Christian theology. When scholars turned to non-Western traditions, the emphasis was originally on the collection, editing and translating of Eastern classics. The first generation of European Religionists, including Max Müller, the founding father of the discipline and editor of the fifty volume series, *The Sacred Books of the East*, saw scripture and comparative linguistics as the key to understanding the world's great religions. From the beginning, there has been a tendency towards "logocentric" interpretations in *Religionswissenschaft*. The wealth of material explaining, commenting on and comparing religious literature since then is a testament to that success.

That is not to say that text was the only interest to the pioneers of the discipline. Many first generation Indologists had a genuine interest in exploring the visual dimensions of Indian culture and illustrated their works appropriately. For example, in W. J. Wilkin's's *Hindu Mythology* of the 1880s, the text is amply illustrated with images of Hindu deities drawn

by Indian artists. Also, by 1926 Rudolf Otto had established his Religionskundliche Sammlung (Museum of Religion) at Marburg where scholars, including scholars of Indian religions, could gain first hand knowledge of Asian cultic and aesthetic objects. Nevertheless, historically, the emphasis on text outweighed the emphasis on the visual elements.

A second factor in understanding the balance between word and image involves visual skills. Learning to read visual languages is a specialized skill and one in which most scholars of Religion are not trained. Faced with images instead of words, many Religionists fall silent. For example, Roger O'Toole, in his Paul Hanly Furfey Address in 1995 explains the general bewilderment among sociologists of Religion when it comes to considering anything non-textual:

Throughout human history, the inextricable ties which bind the True, the Good and the Beautiful have been a common and recurrent premise of religious thought. Undaunted by an infinite array of interpreters, legislators, and custodians of truth and goodness, sociologists of religion have proven to be intrepid explorers of the cognitive and moral dimensions of religious phenomena. Confronted by beauty, however, they have been reduced to almost total silence, perhaps less from any sense of awe or rapture than from that vague discomfort which afflicts many sociologists of religion in the presence of aesthetic claims.⁵

Thirdly, the predominance of the textual in Religious Studies can be seen as part of a wider trend. In his 1969 publication, *Visual Thinking*, Rudolf Arnheim shows that verbal preference is not a phenomenon isolated only to Religious Studies, but rather, it is part of a "widespread neglect of

art at all levels of our education system." Indicative of a general "cultural divide" between intuition and intellect, feeling and reasoning, art and science, the visual is seen in opposition to verbal and scientific analysis. In almost every field, Arnheim suggests, there is little or no effort towards collaboration."

Finally, visual imagery, including the study of Religious imagery, has been the domain of Art History for the last one hundred years. With the exception of Iconography, which remains a part of Theology, Art History has subsumed the area of religious art as part of its general field. Naturally, Art Historians, define issues, develop priorities, apply methodologies and provide interpretations based on their specialized training. Their concerns of "art as art" do not necessarily answer all the questions that someone with a background in Religion may raise.

Integrative Approaches: The Quest for Complimentarity

Much can be gained by incorporating art more fully into the study of Religion. By showing the complimentarity of textual and visual studies fresh light may be spread on the subject and new insights discovered. But how and where does one begin? If the academic study of Religion wishes to integrate the visual arts into mainstream study, Religion scholars must approach the material with a different set of questions than their Art Historian counterparts. Besides considering the work from a strictly aesthetic point of view,

they should raise concerns which are important from a Religion perspective. These include such fundamental considerations as: What is religious or spiritual art? What is the relation between the spiritual and the aesthetic? Can there be objective criteria for a critique of spiritual art? What makes a work sacred? What is the relationship of colour or line to spiritual understanding? Additional questions which have to do with the socio-religious background of the artists, the religious ideas/ideals the artist may be wishing to portray, the use of colour, gesture, composition to evoke religious sentiments, the artist's own religious, spiritual and philosophical belief system and the relationship of creativity to that underlying belief system are also important.

Over the last forty years, select scholars from Religion have begun to grapple with these questions and to develop appropriate strategies. From the beginning, the study has been characterized by diversification, and no single methodology has emerged as dominant. Just as no one would expect a single model, method to dominate textual studies, so too are there a number of competing approaches to visual materials. Each person begins with a different set of assumptions and has a different set of questions, criteria and definitions. An examination of some major contributions to the field in the last four decades will give the reader some idea of the latitude of approaches.³ Paul Tillich offers a

theological approach to modern art, tying different types of religious experience to different styles of painting. One significant contribution Tillich makes is the differentiation between art which is religious in style and that which is simply religious in terms of subject matter alone. By defining religion in the widest possible terms, as "concern with Ultimate Reality," he shows that some forms of modern art, particularly Expressionism, transmit feelings of the transcendent more fully than those using traditional religious imagery.⁹ Charles Moore suggests that opening oneself up to the depth dimension in a spiritual work of art allows one to participate in alternative worlds of sacred space and time.¹⁰ Langdon Gilkey, who considers art and religion fundamental expressions of a common human experience, examines points of commonality in the roles of art and religion in the modern world.¹¹ John Martland sees the possibility of developing a universal religious aesthetic.¹² Dixon voices his concern for maintaining the integrity among the artwork, the artist and philosophical and theological foundations.¹³ Melinda Wortz looks for a non-ecclesial and contemporary context for understanding the religious in art.¹⁴ George Chryssides and Linda Moss argue that religious symbolism, which is in and of itself "verbally inexpressible," can convey meaning that is above and beyond the textual.¹⁵ Nicholas Wolterstorff considers the possibility of modern art taking the place of institutionalized religion for today's elites.¹⁶

Religion and Indian Art

Although there is a need to find some way of integrating art into the general study of Religion, a special case can be made for Indian art and Religion. Almost without exception, the greatest achievements in the history of Indian art, whether visual, plastic or performing arts, have all been linked to some expression of religion.

The inherent connections between visual form and Hindu spirituality, in particular, can be seen in many ways. Even the language itself relates seeing to the comprehension of the depth dimension of spiritual life. " For example, the word *darśan* or "auspicious sight" is related to the root, *drs* , "to see." All over India, millions of devotees daily seek the *darśan* of deities, sacred persons and sacred places. Besides meaning "auspicious sight," *darśan* also refers to the "six systems of philosophy." In this sense, *darśan* as "theoria" is linked with the ability to see (and to understand) a particular world view or philosophy.

Seeing and being seen are also charged with religious meaning. Beholding the image is itself an act of worship and it is through visual contact that one obtains the blessings of the divine. Furthermore, Indian traditions accept the position that the *mūrti* or sacred image, whether in the form of a statue, painting or aniconic symbol, is an embodiment of the divine. For the duration of *pūjā* or worship, the deity

temporarily dwells within the image and literally becomes the object of worship.¹³

A key contribution to the discussion of the importance of the visual arts to the study of Indian religions is made by the Indologist Diana Eck. She argues for the equality of art, insisting that visual data be treated as a religious document in its own right, and not simply as an adjunct or ancillary to text, where the Word remains dominant. Furthermore, she contends that art, as a religious document, should be able to bear close scrutiny. Like text, its form, function, content and exposition must be rigorously examined. To do this, Eck suggests the creation of *visual hermeneutics*:

We should see them as "visual texts" which, like books on our syllabus, require discussion, interpretation and perhaps re-reading ... such visual texts present their own perspective on the Hindu tradition and one that is not simply an illustration of what can already be learned from the rich textual tradition of Sanskrit. ... What is "written" in India's images certainly demands the same kind of careful attention to content and interpretation as might be devoted to what is written in India's scriptural tradition¹⁴.

Although Eck speaks specifically of the Indian traditions, if hermeneutics can be described as the attempt to understand and interpret ideas and the written word, then a "visual hermeneutic" must also be developed to aid all scholars of religion in "reading" imagery pertinent to their discipline. The one thing which Eck and other writers on art and religion have in common is that they offer an interdisciplinary approach. All are trying to formulate a

method that would treat the depth dimension of art as a distinctively religious phenomenon, but which is still informed by dialogue with art history.

Chapter Two

Art and Religion in the Indian Context

With the extinction of the artist as a unit in tradition (in India), there was no longer any question of using an accredited style. The artist must express his innermost feelings. The style must be the man.

W.G. Archer

This chapter will examine some of the major forces which have shaped the creation of contemporary Indian art over the last one hundred and fifty years. Since the middle of the last century, Indian artists and critics have struggled with questions such as: What constitutes Indian art? What is its relation to Western styles and theories? Can religion play a role in modern art? These are difficult questions which have created and continue to create much discussion. Each generation has its own emphasis and offers its own perspective on these issues. In chronological order, the interpretations under discussion in this chapter are: the British academic approach to Indian art and the Anglo-Indian style, the Revivalists and the Bengal School; Sarkar and the rise of International Modernism; Mulk Raj Anand's theory of Aesthetic Humanism; and, the development of Socially Conscious art. A brief survey of the social content of some important Indian religious reform movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is also included. This will provide the reader with a context for understanding the relationship between the socially-conscious art movement and the social values of the Hindu renaissance movements, such as neo-Vedānta.

As is the case of many societal trends, these "schools" appear in reaction to previous movements and in response to the current status quo. The review integrates material from two different perspectives. On the one hand, it includes a description of the developing movements from the artist's

perspective (i.e. what changes occur in the production of art) and secondly, it considers societal reactions to those changes in the form of critical and scholarly analyses. Both shape the development of art and both perspectives are necessary to understand this development as a dialogue between artists and art critics. Furthermore, besides addressing the major movements on the Indian sub-continent, the discussion will provide an international perspective, and explore reciprocal and cross-cultural influences.

History of the Study of Indian Art

During the 19th century one sees the fitful beginning of the study of Indian art, at least in the sense of modern scholarship. Although the West was, to some extent, familiar with art from the sub-continent, there was a certain ambivalence to Indian art. First of all, there was a heavy demand for picturesque paintings of the orient produced by Western travellers. These included such works as: *Oriental Scenery* (1795-1808), *A Picturesque Voyage to India* (1810), *The Oriental Annual* (1834-40), *Views of Calcutta, Berhampore, Monghar and Benares* (1805), *Sketches Illustrating the Manners and Customs of the Indians and Anglo-Indians* (1842). Secondly, some 19th century Europeans had a genuine interest in collecting ancient Indian art including: Richard Johnson, John Baillie, John Bardoe Elliott, Jonathan Scott, Robert Clive, Sir Gore and Sir William Auseley, Warren Hastings, William Kirk-Patrich and Sir Elijah Impey.

But the general trend was to believe that India had been a great and glorious culture in the past but had since deteriorated. As in the case of text, ancient, classical forms represented a golden age while contemporary literature, art and religious practices were believed to be but a diluted and adulterated form of the original. In 1822 Frederic Shoberg wrote: "We find nothing in Hindoo works to enable us to judge of the state of painting at the time when Hindustan was in the zenith of its glory." In 1844 Stocqueler seconded the opinion that the arts of India "are now confessedly at a very low ebb."²⁰

In addition, artifacts were often difficult for Western audiences to appreciate. Indian deities were exotic, ethnological curiosities or at worst "heathen monstrosities" whose religiosity was "ungodliness."²¹ In spite of the work of early Indologists, mainstream audiences viewed Indian gods as hideous and macabre, Indian paintings as crude and childish and considered the absence of mimesis, perspective and chiaroscuro as irreparable faults. Indian art was not Art. Speaking from London, Sir George Birdwood pronounced categorically that "painting and sculpture as fine arts did not exist in India." Joseph Crowe, a Paris-trained painter who became the head of the JJ School of Art in Bombay commented in 1857 from India that "the grotesque images which libel the shapes of men and animals in all parts of a Hindu temple, are irredeemably bad."²² On the other hand, although the term

"fine art" remained the monopoly of the West, the design, skill and dexterity of the Indian craftsman in the areas of textile, pottery, mosaic, wood and metal work was highly esteemed. At the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, Indian decorative arts made such an impression that a group known as the Arts and Crafts Idealists championed the cause of the Indian artisan.²³

Western audiences in general were curious and perhaps perplexed about the relationship between religion and aesthetics. In 1857 an Indian scholar, Ram Raz, tried to demonstrate the importance of this relationship in his *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus*. This manuscript analyzed South Indian architecture by references to the *Mānasāra*, a Sanskrit text, and through collaboration with Indian architects trained in the *śilpa śāstra* tradition. By showing how the design, proportions, internal and external decoration accorded with traditional Indian canons and by proving the religious basis and nature of those texts, Raz introduced a methodology which relied on indigenous standards of religion and beauty. However, his vision of the unity of art and religion in the Indian traditions was overshadowed by the work of the British orientalist Fergusson, Burgess and Cunningham of the Archaeological Survey of India who tried to understand and classify Indian art using classical European categories.²⁴

Under the colonial policy of the Raj, the British set out to Westernize artistic tastes in India, deliberately

cultivating, in Lord Macaulay's words, a new class who would be "Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect."³⁵ Even before the middle of the 19th century art schools were established throughout the country to educate Indian "gentleman" painters from the English-speaking classes in Victorian style and to train artisans who became draughtsmen, modellers, and printers for the government.³⁶

Working with the hypothesis that "Art" could only be equated with Western forms, a new purely Westernized syllabus, in keeping with the curriculum devised by Richard Redgrave for art schools in Britain, was introduced as a uniform art policy for fledgling schools in India.³⁷ Technical skills such as single-point perspective, volume and shading were based on classical European approaches to drawing and painting. In the schools, where scientific accuracy was highly valued, students were introduced to new ways of painting and drawing based on direct observation of nature and the desire to be as precise and true to the physical as possible. Portraits, landscapes, Western myth and history were some of the favourite themes.

With the transformation in traditional subject matter, techniques and media, the system of patronage and promotion also changed. Besides privately funded art schools, new avenues for promising Indian artists were offered through art societies such as the Fine Art Society (1860) and the Bombay Art Society (1888), exhibitions and wide press coverage.

Exhibitions with separate prizes for "native artists" were held in all the major urban centres. Annual exhibitions at Bombay, Simla, Calcutta, Poona and Madras, which were well attended by mixed audiences, became one of the primary ways for Indian artists to promote their work.

The success of a local artist in 19th century India depended on one's ability to assimilate Western techniques and Victorian style and to reproduce the orient in a picturesque manner. When Indian imagery, including religious imagery, was presented in an appealing and understandable (eg. Western) format, European and European-educated audiences found this new art quite appealing. This style, which marks the first attempt of Indian artists to adapt Indian themes, including Indian religious themes, to prevailing Western treatments, is sometimes referred to as Anglo-Indian or Indian colonial art¹¹. By the latter part of the century the new Anglo-Indian art was extraordinarily popular. Some of the Indian painters associated with this school include Pestonji Bomanji (1851-1938), Manchershaw Pithawalla (1872-1937), Abalal Rahiman (1860-1931), M.V. Dhurandhar (1867-1944), A.X. Trindade (1870-1935), but the name which is virtually synonymous with Anglo-Indian art is Ravi Varma (1848-1906).

Ravi Varma and Anglo-Indian Art

Born into an aristocratic family in the southern state of Kerala, Ravi Varma became the first major Indian artist to successfully integrate Indian religious concerns with the new

artistic sensibilities. Although he may have had brief personal contact with an itinerant British artist, Theodore Jensen, who visited Travancore in 1868 and may have learned something about Western painting from him, in popular imagination Varma remains a self-taught artist with a genius for imitation and invention. In his works, Epic and Purānic heroes are often placed in Victorian inspired landscapes and modelled on European imagery. Varma's fusion of European elements of anatomical correctness, naturalism and composition with Indian mythological and historical themes proved immensely popular to rich and poor, educated and uneducated, Indian and European. Furthermore, the emotion or *bhava*, with which he portrayed his subjects, appealed directly to the Indian imagination. This success suggests the existence of a great hunger among the citizens of India for an art which they could relate to and call their own. It also demonstrates the supposition that "high art" must relate in some significant way to Western standards. It is significant that after his death, when the Swadeshi or Home Rule movement was growing in India and anti-colonial sentiments were running high, his art fell from grace, rejected for its vulgarity and reviled as an extension of Raj mentality.¹³



Pl. 2 Ravi Varma "Kamsa Mâyā" (oil, 1888)



Pl. 3 Ravi Varma "Krsna Dristta" (oil, 1888)

The Revivalists and the Bengal School (1905-1922)

It is against the backdrop of Anglo-Indian art that we see a new approach to Indian art develop among the intelligentsia. From the turn of the century until the early part of the 1920s, a new movement called "Revivalism" gained precedence. This new school of thought stressed the importance of the relationship of art to Indian religio-philosophical concepts - the "idea-image" concept. The principal proponents who sought to "revive" the ancient ideals of the past as the basis of the contemporary art were a select group of Indian artists (the Bengal School) and mostly European art historians, Theosophists and members of the Ramakrishna movement. Chief among them were Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose who came to personify Revivalist painters, E.B. Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, J. Cousins, Annie Besant and Aurobindo Ghose who encouraged the movement and provided it with a religio-philosophical foundation. In general, the movement was a reaction to the negative appraisals of traditional Indian art in the West and to the British academic style promoted by the Raj through Anglo-Indian art.¹⁰

Proponents such as Havell and Coomaraswamy believed that European art could not possibly satisfy Indian sensibilities since it failed to take Indian emotional needs and temperament into consideration. In defence of India's religious and artistic heritage, the Revivalists propounded a new way of

perceiving and appreciating Indian art. For Revivalists and Revivalist inspired artists, the aim was not slavish imitation of nature but the translation of inner feelings. They did not abandon the idea of *bhāva* or feeling in the work, a feature which had made Ravi Varma's work so popular, but they infused it with a deeper sentiment and a kind of vague nostalgic longing for the past. In contrast to the "excessively healthy" figures of Varma and the Anglo-Indian school, the elongated, emaciated figures which filled their canvases, were meant to convey sensitivity and spiritual refinement. As well, artists abandoned European linear perspective and re-instituted the aerial perspective found in Mughal and Rajput art. Instead of using European modes of applying colour, they opted for the Chinese and Japanese wash techniques which gave the work an atmospheric, hazy and subdued effect.

The Revivalists were convinced of the importance of the lost language of Indian art and believed that art was inextricably linked with India's spiritual and national regeneration. But even though the Revivalists valued ancient ideals, they did not believe Indian art must live in the past. A re-discovery implied a re-formulation of tradition - a new edifice must be erected on the foundations of the past.¹¹ Otherwise, as Havell (1912) warned, India would remain simply a colonial and cultural suburb of the West.¹²



Pl. 4. A. Tagore "Ganesh Janani"(watercolour, c. 1910)

By stressing the interior over the exterior, the spiritual element above the material and by recalling India's glorious spiritual past, the Revivalists tied modern Indian art with antiquity, mystical philosophy and contemporary politics.¹³ In this regard, their ideology was consistent with the nationalist movement of *Swadeshi*:

The work of the modern school of Indian painters in Calcutta is a phase of the national re-awakening. Whereas the ambition of the nineteenth century reformers has been to make India like England, that of the later workers has been to bring back or to create a state of society in which the ideals expressed and implied in Indian culture shall be more nearly realized.¹⁴

The Revivalists not only affected the art scene within India, but their influence also extended to the Western avant garde. Exhibitions of Bengal School art in Paris (1914), Berlin (1923) and London (1914 and 1924) were part of the "Indian artists' mission to the world."¹⁵ Around the same time that Revivalists were promoting the importance of Indian spiritual values to new Indian forms, early modern Western artists such as Kandinsky, Malevich and Mondrian were looking towards Indian spirituality for inspiration. Kandinsky who was inspired by the spiritual texts and ideas of Theosophy, the writings of Helena Blavatsky and Rudolf Steiner as well as the illustrations found in Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater's, *Thought Forms* (1905) and Leadbeater's *Man Visible and Invisible* (1903), became one of the leading artists of our century to connect Indian-inspired spirituality with abstract forms. His work, *On the Spiritual in Art*,

(1912) has been hailed as one of the most influential statements by an artist of the twentieth century.

Maurice Tuchman comments on the close historical association between spirituality inspired by Indian systems and the development of contemporary art in the West:

An astonishingly high proportion of visual artists working in the past one hundred years have been involved with these ideas and belief systems, and their art reflects a desire to express spiritual, utopian or metaphysical ideas that cannot be expressed in traditional pictorial terms.¹⁴

In a twist of fate, at the same time as Western avant-garde artists were turning to the East for inspiration, a reactive "pure art" movement was developing within India. Revivalism, which made deliberate efforts to see connections between the visual arts and Indian forms of spirituality, became suspect. Revivalists were charged with overstepping the bounds of common sense and seeing the spiritual in all things even when it was not justified. The vilification of Revivalism was loud, vocal and persistent. Criticism of this kind continues to echo through the world of Indian art appreciation decades later.¹⁵

B.K. Sarkar and the Rise of International Modernism (1922-1947)

With the decline of Revivalism and the Bengal School, a vacuum was created and there was a virtual explosion of experimentation in the Indian art world. In 1922, when Calcutta hosted an exhibition of important European painters such as Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky and the German

Expressionists, Indian artists came face to face with new international movements in art.³² Artists began to experiment with such styles as Fauvism, Cubism, Impressionism and Expressionism. Indian art critic, B.K. Sarkar, emerged as the champion of a new Indian "modernist" movement, which sought to detach Indian art from a distinctively Indian context and to move it into the international arena. In Sarkar's early and influential article, "The Aesthetics of Young India," (1922) he insists that the whole way of looking at Indian art must be re-evaluated. Sarkar sees the notion of analyzing themes, story, subject matter and religio-philosophical implication at the expense of the art itself as a case of not seeing the forest for the trees. He suggests that art should be examined on its own grounds, as a separate mode of thought and an autonomous discipline with its own inherent logic and rhythms. A painting or a piece of art should not be judged on the basis of whether it illustrates an Indian myth or transcendental truth, but solely on the basis of composition, proportion, line and colour.³³ His concern is with the problem of "pure art" independent of its Indian context. Bhuvanendran concludes that, "Sarkar was the first to articulate the seminal principles of a new aesthetic based on formalist notions against historical, philosophical, religious and other ideas which dominated Indian art criticism."³⁴

Sarkar was an early protagonist against a religious reading of modern Indian art. His idea of "pure art" divorced

from religion proved to be highly influential and set the tone for much criticism from then on. Just thirty years ago, Charles Fabri echoed this sentiment:

As long as students of art remain convinced that the subject of art appreciation is identical with the subject of the representation, no advance can be made at all in art appreciation. The first step to awaken a genuine passion for art is to turn away attention totally, entirely and completely from the subject matter and concentrate on form. It is, for this purpose essential to disabuse one's mind wholly from all religious and "spiritual" contents; and to convince the spectator that it is totally, completely and fully irrelevant whether a sculpture represents say Śiva, Vishnu, Krishna or the Buddha.... It must mean a total turning away from literary matters, from the subject, from all spiritual and iconographic interpretations: matters that cloud and hamper art appreciation and stand between the spectator and the work of art like a curtain.⁴²

Such writers reject outright the importance of subject matter and the role that spiritual insights may play. Furthermore, Fabri's idea of "pure art" eliminates all references that make a work specifically Indian and makes no distinction between contemporary art from India or elsewhere. It is art, first and foremost, and the question of its origins, subject matter or cultural context are of minimal importance.

Parallels in the West: Rejection of spiritual values

A similar trend developed in the West in the 1930s and 1940s. Although Theosophy initially influenced many of the pioneers of modern art in the early part of our century, mystical and occult beliefs associated with Theosophy came under suspicion because of their political associations with

the Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy. As the perception of a link between alternative systems of belief and fascism arose, critics and art historians moved toward a strictly formalist critique.⁴² Even to acknowledge an allegiance to the spiritual perspective could endanger a Western artist's chances of success:

To use the word *spiritual* in the late 1930s and 1940s, as Richard Pousette-Dart recently acknowledged, was near-heresy and dangerous to an artist's career. Intellectuals interested in modernist issues became more concerned with purely aesthetic issues.⁴³

Post-Independence Movements: (1947 - Present)

By Independence (1947), groups of self-styled "Progressive" artists, who believed wholeheartedly in Internationalism, were established in India. These include: the Calcutta Group (1942)⁴⁴, the Bombay Progressive Group (1947)⁴⁵, the Progressive Painters Association of Madras (1950)⁴⁶, the Delhi Silpi Chakra (1949).⁴⁷ By the 1950s Indian artists were becoming increasingly interested in trying to adapt and modify Western modes to suit Indian needs. Anis Farooqi explains how many artists sought to re-claim the Indian context:

We went beyond our limits and tried to adopt international creative values blindfold without any in-depth study and unmindful of the fact if it all suited our native genius and the demands of the Indian situation.⁴⁸

The search for "Indianness," as awareness of the contemporary Indian ethos, was then transformed into a potential source of creativity.

Sir Herbert Read describes how the synthesis between an openness to outside influences and an awareness of one's own roots benefits artistic development:

The history of art shows that the art of any particular region always tends to revert to a regional norm - to a mode of sensibility and style of expression determined, we must assume, by ethnic and geographic factors. There is no need to base a philosophy, much less a religion on such simple materialistic premises. Art cannot be confined within frontiers - it lives only if continually subjected to foreign invasions, to migrations and transplantations. But if art's vitality comes from the cross-breeding of styles, its strength comes from stability, from roots that grow deep into a native soil.⁴⁹

Today, Indians are finding a balance between past and present, tradition and modernity, individual and collective vision, and between an Indian and a global perspective.⁵⁰ Keshav Malik explains that analogous to the situation in other developing nations, artists are still moving through a period of transition. Only after an engaging struggle to find their own voice can a "real Indian image in the realm of international art" be established.⁵¹

Two significant post-Independence forces have developed which deal specifically with the need to address, in concrete terms, the Indian situation, and more specifically the Indian human situation - Aesthetic Humanism and Socially Conscious Art. The first is a theoretical approach, the second is a genre of art.

Mulk Raj Anand and The Aesthetic of Humanism

Dr. Mulk Raj Anand, (b. 1905) internationally renowned writer, founding member and editor of India's most famous art magazine, *Marg*, from 1945-1981, was one of the century's most influential figures on the contemporary art scene. He believed that the primary role of art was to help people of all ages to become sensitive human beings. In his opinion, aesthetics cannot be value-free; art must play a role in human and social development. Besides aiding the emotional and spiritual development of the artist, it sensitizes people to the conditions of others, strengthens the bonds between citizens and fosters the ultimate transformation of human existence.

Reflecting on a lifelong involvement in art and with aesthetic theories and art criticism in particular, Anand had this to say at his acceptance speech as first Chair of the Tagore Professorship of Art and Literature at the University of Punjab (1962):

The important problem of our age of mounting fear, hatred, violence, disruption and war, is to "build the defences of peace in the minds of men," to integrate man with himself and other men, to initiate the process of the "whole man," who aspires to more and more completeness, in his inner and outer life, by coordinating his experiences of factual life with sensibility, insight and vision.⁵²

Anand introduced the term "aesthetic humanism" to explain his new understanding of art:

The aesthetic of humanism as sketched here must remain tentative, with no final dicta in our society, where the creative arts have passed from yogic concentration of incarnations of the Supreme Deity, to areas of freedom in which man may seek to

be the whole man, actualizing himself into a self with the potential for the most intense insights and insights....Such an aesthetic may involve shifting the emphasis from personal salvation by fusion with the deity to human relations in the here and now, in this world, through the activity of the individual in the group as the immediate ideal, but going on to intensify human relations. Also, a humanist aesthetic suggests an ethics without God, in so far as human concern is a moral concept which implies compassion in action and reverence for all life. If it can uplift each man to an awareness of the inexhaustible concretion of being in participation with other human beings, to face the human predicament of existence, it would show itself forth as absolutely good. Herein lies the promise of the aesthetic of humanism.⁵³

According to this theory, spirituality and artistic vision are best expressed in concrete terms of the here and now. He writes, "... we are groping towards a view of man *qua* man, (*sic*) in the belief that he will become truly human through development of his consciousness in ever new situations."⁵⁴ The modern age requires new and innovative responses to the human condition, but those responses must still be informed by an underlying attitude of compassion and concern.

His appreciation goes far beyond the "value-free" interest in dates and styles. Above formal values, content and the ability to relate something important to the viewer, are the significant aspects of the work. One author summarizes Dr. Anand's priorities in the following words: "All aesthetics, all metaphysics, and philosophies, all experiments in form are subordinated to the effervescent surging love of man."⁵⁵

Mulk Raj Anand looks at art as a meaningful creation of the human spirit, which, in the best instances, has something important and even universal and timeless to say to us. Such a humanistic model validates the artist's concern with immediate, local conditions and yet leaves the door open for trans-personal, trans-cultural, trans-historical and trans-technological communication. The artist is perceived as both a product of his/her own society and as a member of the global community. What the artist has to say is of equal importance to members of the artist's own culture and to the world at large. In this sense, an Indian context is not a limiting factor, but a way of putting a name and a face to the perennial, world-wide concerns of the human condition.

The Emergence of Socially Conscious Art (1947- present)

One of the ways in which this "Indian voice" is expressed today is through a type of art which is known as "socially conscious" or "socially engaged" art. This movement, which developed parallel to the Progressives, looks towards the contemporary socio-political milieu for inspiration. Although artists paint in a variety of styles, they have certain features in common. Their canvases deal with important issues such as poverty, corruption, de-humanisation, the displacement of the poor, urban sprawl, ecological decline and injustice. For these artists, their art is more than just aesthetics. It reaches far beyond the concerns of line and colour and confronts the viewer with genuine and sometimes uncomfortable

truths. Socially conscious art plays a role in the moral and spiritual elevation of society. Even prior to Independence, Mahatma Gandhi recognized the vital role that art could play in sensitizing the public to religious concerns and in raising the level of socio-religious awareness. He wrote,

Religion is the proper and eternal ally of art. What religion teaches people the artist brings near to them in form on the plastic plane. I hate 'art for art's sake', which I think is a lamentable aberration of the human mind. Art has a profound similarity with religion inasmuch as the fundamental experience in both of them belongs to the domain of man's relationship with God. ... I believe firmly that both religion and art have to serve the identical aims of moral and spiritual elevation. ⁵⁶

It is hardly surprising that after Independence many of India's senior artists would devote themselves to addressing concrete problems of existence. Given the displacement of millions of people, the communal tensions and riots which followed Partition, the challenges faced by the creation of a new and independent country, the reality of enormous regional diversity among the population and the host of social, economic and political issues which called for resolution, sensitive artists felt compelled to respond in a meaningful way.

The list of prominent artists in the Social Consciousness movement is long and the scope of their work broad. The following are representative of post-Independence artists and their themes: Abani Sen's works are critical of the Indian social order; Zainul Abedin paints a series on the

Bengal Famine; Satish Gujral shows concern with human oppression in its myriad forms; Veena Bhargava depicts the lives of pavement dwellers; Ram Kumar evokes tragedy lurking in desolate streets; self-taught artist K.H. Ara's canvases often feature the poor of the Bombay streets. Krishen Khanna's work underlines the vices and weaknesses of modern society; Prem Singh's paintings depict the tragedy of the Punjab during the heights of militant terrorism; Rameshwar Broota speaks of the regression of human beings to sub-human levels in his "Man" series; Dhiraj Choudhury and Neelima Sheikh portray the horrors of the dowry deaths; Jaya Ganguly looks at women, including prostitutes, in Indian society; K.K. Hebbar's works engage the viewer with serious issues such as war and peace; D. Doraiswamy deals with oppression and communal violence; M.F. Hussain looks at a number of socially-relevant themes including poverty. Others such as Ram Kumar, Tyeb Mehta, Ganesh Pyne, P.T. Reddy, Bijan Chowdhury, A. Ramachandran, Gieve Patel, K.G. Subramanian deliberately use art to draw attention to various social problems of poverty, injustice, displacement and alienation.⁵⁷

After Independence, there is once again a return, through Aesthetic Humanism and Socially Conscious art, to Indian content, and specifically Indian socio-religious subject matter. In this case, it is not the traditional images of the deities that make the work religious; neither is it the evocation of tender feelings of *rasa*. The images are

religious in the Gandhian sense, where religious responsibility is shown through caring for others in direct and concrete ways such as social service, dedication against injustice and renewed social consciousness.

The Social Content of Indian Religious Reform Movements

The socially-conscious art movement may also be seen in the context of the social content of Indian religious reform movements which developed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a group, reformers such as Ram Mohan Roy, Dāyānanda, Vivekānanda, Gāndhī and Rādhākṛishnan, responded to the socio-economic, as well as the spiritual needs of the people of their day. They aimed at improving society, not only by changing spiritual ideals, but also by changing socio-economic structures, particularly through the uplift of the underprivileged, the oppressed and exploited of society.

Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) was one of the earliest reformers. His familiarity with languages such as Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, English, Greek and Hebrew, as well as with other religions, like Islam and Christianity, had a profound effect on the way he came to view his own tradition and the efforts he made to create a reformed Hinduism. When Roy established the Brahmo Samāj in 1828, which aimed to bring the best of Hinduism and Christianity together, he stressed ethics, individual responsibility, egalitarianism and social reform. Within his "human brotherhood," no prohibitions were allowed on the basis of caste, religious affiliation or

nationality.⁵⁴ Roy also campaigned against *satī*, condemning the burning of widows on their husband's funeral pyre as an inhuman practice, which contravened Hindu *dharma*. He placed great emphasis on modern education, including education for women, and was instrumental in the creation of English schools in Calcutta. His ideas directly influenced later reformers such as Vivekānanda, and contributed generally to the issues of social reform in modern India. After his death, there was a gradual decline of the Brahmo Samāj and today, there are sizable groups in major cities.

Another early reform movement was the Arya Samāj, founded by Swāmi Dāyānanda Sarasvatī (1824-1883) in 1875. In *The Principles of the Ārya Samāj* (1877), Dāyānanda rejected many of the practices of contemporary Hinduism including image veneration, caste prohibitions and child marriage. Instead, he based his entire programme of protest and action on the Vedas and Manusmṛti. Dāyānanda refused to believe that the search for individual salvation could relieve a person of social responsibility to the afflicted or those in want, *Dharma*, in his eyes, must be actively associated with the alleviation of suffering in all its forms. Therefore, one of his ten principles seeks to improve the physical and spiritual conditions of human. Another prescribes actions in line with love and justice; one encourages followers to dispel ignorance and to diffuse knowledge, and the last subordinates individuality to the well being of the whole.⁵⁵

In practical terms, the Ārya Samāj created a trust fund in 1883 for public service. In times of natural disaster it assisted with relief work, and worked towards raising the status of women in society, campaigning against *satī* and child marriage. It also encouraged widow-remarriage rights and established educational institutes especially for girls. The Ārya Samāj crusaded against the notion of caste, even refusing at one time to declare caste for census purposes. Long before Gāndhī stepped into the field, they tried to raise the status of Harijans. By Independence, the association managed and maintained schools, orphanages, student hostels, widows' homes, reading rooms, libraries, tract societies, newspapers, journals, missionary societies and various organizations dedicated to social reform among scheduled castes.

The Ramakrishna Movement is also dedicated to religious and social reform. After the death of his guru, Sri Rāmakrishnan Paramahansa (1836-1886), Swāmi Vivekānanda (1863-1902) began to organize the movement around the liberal ideas of the Brahmo Samāj, the notion of social service and the philosophy of Vedānta. As a neo-Vedāntin, Vivekānanda accepted other religions as valid, but taught that Vedānta was the highest expression of universal religion (*sanātana dharma*), and the non-dual experience of Brahman the ultimate understanding of the Absolute. He also believed that neo-Vedānta could play a world-affirming role. Through understanding and applying the principles of Vedānta to the

modern situation, the whole tendency of the world would change. In this sense, Vivekānanda's interpretation of Advaita was a departure from Śankara's. Vivekānanda believed that Vedānta could be applied in the world, and that selfless activity in the material world was beneficial to one's spiritual development and to others. This practical Vedānta, which emphasized service and education, had the potential for radical social transformation, liberating people from superstition, alleviating suffering and instilling true knowledge of the Self.⁶⁰ Individual liberation and service were not mutually exclusive, but, rather, complementary. Consequently, the movement has developed two sides: a monastic element (the *math*) and the more strictly philanthropic side (the mission). The former emphasises spiritual development and the latter gives priority to welfare work.⁶¹

For Vivekānanda, it was not sufficient that the monks concentrate on the individual goal of salvation. He called them to active service, encouraging them to be "in-the-world ascetics" who must practice *sevadharma* to the poor and underprivileged. Service to the suffering equals service to God. He explains:

If you want any good to come, just throw your ceremonials overboard and worship the Living God, the Man-God --- every being that wears a human form - God in His universal as well as individual aspect. The universal aspect of God means this world, and worshipping it means serving it - this indeed is work - not indulging in ceremonials.⁶²

With an emphasis on universalism and non-sectarianism, the Ramakrishna Mission continues to be dedicated to helping all people regardless of their gender, caste, nationality or religious affiliation. In the 1950s Swāmi Tejasānanda cited the top ten concerns of the movements as: the liquidation of illiteracy, rural reconstruction, work among labouring and backward classes, economic and social uplift, removal of untouchability, female education, relief work in times of natural calamities, preservation of indigenous culture, dissemination of the accumulated spiritual wisdom the race and evolution of cultural synthesis.⁶³ The movement is alive today, having around 700 monks and supporting a variety of schools, hostels, hospitals, maternity hospitals and publishing institutions.⁶⁴

Among Westerners, the name Mahātmā Gāndhī is almost synonymous with the struggles of pre-Independence India. Mohandas K. Gāndhī (1869-1948) was a politician, a social reformer and a religious leader. By some, he is recognized as a virtual saint who tried to bring moral regeneration to India and the world. Although Gāndhī remained an unapologetic follower of Hinduism, his Hinduism was a modern variety which rejected untouchability, superstition and sacrifice. Instead, he focused on the ethics of the Gītā and the Upanisads, seeing in them the two pearls of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *satyagrāha* (holding onto Truth) which guided his thought and practice.

In his opinion, social inequalities, prejudice and injustice were forms of violence (*himsā*) in society, which must be remedied through peaceful and truthful means only. *Ahimsā* and *satya* are two sides of the same coin, for only through non-violence is Truth known in the world. To this end, Gāndhī promoted social harmony through Hindu-Muslim unity, the removal of untouchability and the more equitable distribution of wealth, *sarvodaya*. Harmony did not mean erasing religious differences but learning respect for others and accepting them as equals. Neither did Gāndhī ask for the abolition of caste, but only for the abolition of untouchability which he considered a heinous crime against humanity. Believing that God really is a friend to the friendless and the protector of the weak, Gāndhī called the untouchables Harijan or Children of God. By this name he wished to instill feelings of dignity and worth to a group who had been despised. Thirdly, Gāndhī tried to bridge the gap between rich and poor through *sarvodaya*, encouraging the rich to look upon their wealth as a trust to be used for the welfare of the less fortunate. All people in society, regardless of religion, economic or social standing should be regarded as brothers and sisters.

By voluntarily identifying with the lowly and the forgotten in society, Gāndhī identified with their problems. But his solution came from his search for Truth. He writes:

The bearing of this religion on social life, is, or has to be, seen in one's daily contact. To be true

to such religion one has to lose oneself in continuous and continuing service of all life. Realization of Truth is impossible without a complete merging of oneself in, and identification with, this limitless ocean of life. Hence, for me there is no escape from social serve, there is no happiness on earth, beyond, or apart from it.⁵⁵

In Gāndhī's search for Truth there is no separation of goals that may be characterized as "religious" or those that are "this worldly."

Sarvepalli Rādhākṛishnan (1888-1975), a former president of India, was an international statesman and a key figure in the defence and promulgation of Vedānta for modern times. In his view, the ultimate goal of Hinduism, which he also called the "religion of the Spirit," was the non-dual experience of the Absolute in the world. That is, both the individual and society could participate in the attainment of perfection. Radhakrishnan rejected any attempt for individual realization which sacrificed concern for the phenomenal world. For him, the world was not *māyā* in the sense of being illusory, but rather in the sense of having no independent reality apart from Brahman. The world, then, is an expression of the Absolute and action in the world, therefore, must be in accordance with the highest principles of Vedānta. He explains:

Thus we see that the function of religion is not merely to pacify the troubled soul, but to make it enter with faith and hope into the work of God, which is to make the earth the visible symbol of God's law.⁵⁶

Vedānta can not be divorced from concern for the world. Social life must allow each person to develop his/her true nature and potential and, therefore, should be regarded as a means for human spiritual fulfilment. Unjust social structures are obstacles which must be removed. It is one's religious and social obligation, according to Radhakrishnan, to work actively for the promotion of life-fulfilling structures and for the destruction of inequitable social practices. He writes:

It is our duty to create and maintain forms of social organization which offer the fewest possible impediments to the development of the truly human life. By improving the conditions of social life we remove powerful temptations to ignorance and irresponsibility and encourage individual enlightenment. Every man, whatever may be his racial or social origin is potentially the son of God, made in his image. Human personality is sacred.²⁷

The legacy of Rādhākṛishnan as statesman and spokesman for neo-Vedānta is tremendous. One author assesses his contribution in these words:

More than any other representative of the Indian intelligentsia, Rādhākṛishnan has taken up the concrete problems of India, attempting to contribute a religious dimension to their solution.²⁸

All of the reform movements mentioned above stressed the value of human life and addressed real problems of their society. In particular, they looked at disparities caused by the caste system and gender difference; they opposed "meaningless" religious practices; they appealed to the masses

in language that was easily understood by the common person; they attempted to democratise religious structures more fully and worked with a spirit of tolerance and even synthesis towards other religions. For them, the solutions to social problems were grounded in religious values. The impact of reforms on Indian society has been direct and indirect. Such movements have proved inspirational for generations of Indians who have devoted themselves to living these ideals, and they have also awakened the Indian intelligentsia to the concerns of their fellow citizens. Socially conscious art is one example of this.

Part II

Life and Work of Kumud Śarma

Part II

Chapter One

The Life and Values of Kumud Śarma

In the last analysis, there is nothing but love,
whatever form it takes.

Pablo Picasso



Pl. 5. Photo: K. Śarma, Patna, 1995

The following chapter explores three different aspects of Śarma's life. The first section, Biographical Portrait, looks at Śarma's family background, her upbringing, her marriage and her work with children. The next part considers the development of her artistic style. It notes her evolution as a self-taught artist, her exhibitions and awards and raises questions regarding artistic influences and her relation to existing art movements in India. Thirdly, this chapter examines factors instrumental to the development of Śarma's social consciousness.

Biographical Portrait of Kumud Śarma (1926-1996)

The key points of Śarma's personal life are outlined below to give the reader a working knowledge of her background as it reflects in her art. Important factors include the domestic situation in which she was raised, her lifelong interest in the arts, her marriage to a literary figure, and her strong commitment to caring for children. Source material for the following analysis is based on photographic documentation and personal communication with Kumud Śarma. This includes a series of interviews conducted in Patna, Bihar between January and May 1995, selected diary entries she sent me and correspondence until her death in July, 1996. Additional information has been collected through the kind cooperation of family members including her sister and brother-in-law, Shanta and Raj Dubey, of Kitchener, Ontario,



Pl. 6. Photo: Kumud, Kanta and Shanta Śarma, n.d.

and two nieces who were raised by her in India, Meenu Bauria of Ottawa, Ontario and Shubhika Lal of Delhi, India.

Kumud Śarma was born in 1926 to a liberal-minded and prestigious Bihar family. The eldest of five daughters, Kumud was given a boy's name by her father, Amarnath Śarma, and, according to relatives, absorbed his progressive views.⁴³ Her father, who was President of the Rotary Club of Patna, a member of the Patna chapter of the Theosophical Society and an associate of Dr. Annie Besant⁴⁴ in the early years of our century, had a strong influence on Kumud with his liberal ideas concerning the importance of direct religious experience, art, education and the advancement of women.

At age sixteen (June 29, 1941), Kumud was wed to Professor Nalina Vilochana Śarma, who taught modern Hindi literature at Patna University. While he was alive, she shared his passion for experimental writing and poetry, acting as his private secretary and providing illustrations for the literary journal he edited. When her husband died and left her a widow at the age of thirty-two, she became an important bread-winner in the family. Domestic responsibilities were a central part of her life and when hardship struck within her extended family, it was Kumud they turned to. Over the years, she raised not only her own son, Rajiv, but eight other children including her younger sister, Shanta Dubey, and two nieces, Meenu Bauri and Shubhika Lal.

Artistic Development

From an early age Śarma showed an interest in painting and drawing. Indulged by her father as a child with gifts of watercolours, brushes and art books of European masters, Kumud's desire to paint grew. At the age of fourteen, she and her father went to Śantiniketan, the Bengali co-educational campus established by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), to look into the possibility of advanced art training. The artist Nandalal Bose, personally examined her work and encouraged her to attend the art college Kalā Bhavan at Śantiniketan. Her mother's objections over the co-educational nature of the college prevented her from enrolling.

Still, she never gave up her dream. After her initial visit to Śantiniketan, twice more Kumud attempted to enrol in art schools and twice more her plans were thwarted. At the beginning of her marriage when she had given birth to her only natural child, Rajiv, she prepared once again to obtain a place at Kalā Bhavan. This time it was not her own family who objected but that of her in-laws. If it seemed shocking that an unmarried girl would want to attend a co-educational art school, it was even worse that a young mother would leave her husband and family and take their only child to Bengal to indulge her fantasies of becoming an artist. Years later she tried to gain admittance to the Fine Arts Program at Patna University where her husband was a well-known professor. Although her work was praised, she claims she was refused

solely on the basis that she was a woman and therefore ineligible to enrol.

While circumstances blocked her chances for academic training, they also forced her to find her own way artistically. Throughout her life, she never lost interest in painting and drawing and spent whatever spare time she could manage testing different media, exploring innovative techniques and experimenting with new styles. While her husband was alive she illustrated some of his work, but it was the shock of his death which drove her inward and forced her to find solace and self-expression in painting.

In spite of her lack of strict academic training and heavy family and social demands throughout her life, Śarma became a self-taught artist with a body of work encompassing dozens of drawings and paintings in oils, acrylics, watercolours and pastels composed over five decades. Over the last thirty years (1967-1996) she had solo exhibitions in prestigious galleries in major Indian centres⁷⁷ and has garnered critical acclaim from some of the most noteworthy critics of contemporary art.⁷⁸ Śarma has been awarded the highest honours by organizations such as the All Women's Artists Exhibition (Calcutta, 1966), the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (Delhi, January 1988) and the All India Women's Artists Conference (1976). She was honoured by the Rotary Club of Patna in 1978 for her artistic contributions.

In the 1990s Śarma was recognized as Bihar's first contemporary female artist of national stature.

When discussing influences on her art, Śarma was quick to display her affection for the paintings of Sher-Gil, Matisse, Gauguin and Van Gogh, but she pointed out that it was not simply a case of borrowing ideas or techniques from another painter. Rather, it was a matter of sharing a particular outlook with these artists and having a certain affinity for the way they perceive the world. Like a given species of bird, they recognize one another by their innate similarities of voice. Interestingly enough, a dominant theme in the work of all her artistic heroes was the lives of ordinary working people.

In terms of her formal relationship to the prevailing discussions on the development of a new Indian art, it is difficult to speculate on the impact they made on Śarma and her work. The fact that she was a self-taught painter moving outside the usual intellectual circles makes it hard to propose any definite alliances. Certainly, the fact that her father was a member of the Theosophical Society in Patna, was acquainted with Annie Besant and had even arranged for Kumud to meet Krishnamurti at Adyar in Madras, suggests that she was at least familiar, and probably sympathetic towards Theosophy and the Revivalists. As well, with her father's help, she visited the campus at Śantiniketan and was encouraged by Bose to enrol in their art program, so she was probably aware of



P1.7. Photo of Śarma's Studio, Patna, 1995

the major artists associated with this school. There is insufficient material to speculate on how she would have responded to the "pure art" movement. There is sufficient evidence, however, to suggest she was influenced by Gandhian ideals of social justice.

The Development of Śarma's Social Consciousness

One of the strongest inspirations for Śarma's understanding of social consciousness comes from Mahātmā Gāndhī, a key socio-religious figure in pre-Independence India. His views on truth (*satya*), non-violence (*ahimsā*), and social justice including the removal of untouchability and the uplift of the poor (*sarvodaya*) were revolutionary. In the 1930s and 40s Kumud Śarma was living in Patna when Gāndhī made a number of trips to the state to promote his cause. The impact of his personal presence must have been tremendous.⁷³ According to a relative who was raised by Śarma, the ideals of truth, non-violence and uplift of the poor were highly regarded in Śarma's household and the whole family was caught up in Gandhianism.

A second influence was neo-Vedānta. The exact degree of influence of Neo-Vedānta on Śarma's upbringing and its role in the development of her social consciousness is difficult to assess, but there is reason to believe she would have been familiar with its ideas and social applications. Since the neo-Vedāntic ideas, especially of Vivekānanda, were so pervasive among educated Indians of Śarma's generation, and

given her father's interest in spirituality, one could expect that she would have had at least a passing familiarity with neo-Vedānta. Perhaps a stronger piece of evidence to support her familiarity with Vedāntic ideas can be found through her connection with her father-in-law, Rāmāvātar Śarma, (1877-1929). Although she never met him, no doubt she would have been familiar with his works such as *Vedāntism*, and his accomplishments as a Sanskrit scholar. In the early 1890s he was principal of the Oriental College at Benares Hindu University, and in 1919 the Government of India conferred on him the title, Mahāmahopādhyāya, the highest official honour in the field of Sanskrit learning. He taught Sanskrit at Benares and Patna and was the Head of the Sanskrit Department until his death on April 3, 1929. Śarma's sister and brother-in-law, Raj and Shanta Dubey, gave me a copy of his book *Vedāntism* in 1995. I regard this as indicating the esteem of which he and his ideas are still regarded in her family today.

Śarma's social consciousness developed in the context of Gandhianism and neo-Vedānta, and by the late 1940s she began to take an active role in promoting programs in education and health, and assisting in social outreach for the alleviation of poverty and suffering. One of the key areas she identified was the need for education of the young, and especially young girls. Her own experience, in which she was denied advanced artistic training on the basis of her gender, was critical in the development of this idea. Even forty-five years after the

event, Kumud spoke of gender biases in education as a form of injustice.

As time went on, she became increasingly active in the education and welfare of children at the local and national level. From 1948 to 1989 she organized the Patna Air India Radio programming for children, and hosted such radio shows as "Narijagat," (1948-1955), "Balmandali" and "Shishumahal" (1955 to 1989). She published two books of childrens' stories, *Varna Dipika* and *Varna Vikas*, and edited a children's magazine, *Munna-Munni*. During 1953-54 she edited the Women's and Children's column in the local Patna paper. Śarma organized cultural programs for children and became a pioneer for children's theatre in Patna, founding a theatre group for young people, *Bal Rang Manch*, in 1979. Over the years, fifteen of her plays were staged and received coverage in local papers and national children's magazines.

Later, she became an active member of the Council of Child Welfare, researching various socio-psychological aspects of children's behaviour in educational institutes. Śarma became a national authority of children's education and was invited to lecture at numerous institutions such as the Lalit Kalā Akademi, Lucknow where she spoke on "Children's Theatre." Eventually, she was elected the Vice-President of the Indian Association for Pre-School Education. In 1960 she opened her own private school, *Ratnavati Vidya Mandir*, which was designed

to provide a warm and nurturing environment for children and to instill a love of learning and the arts.

Śarma was a firm believer in the importance of the arts to child development. Education, in her opinion, must not only include instruction in the basic elements of reading, writing and mathematics, but it must encompass the visual, literary and performing arts in order to be well-rounded. To this end, her work with the children's theatre group she founded in Patna, the *Bal Rang Manch* (1979), eventually won her national recognition. As well, while a member of the Council of Child Welfare she was instrumental in organizing several exhibitions of children's art in Bihar. At her own school, painting, drawing and theatre were integral parts of the curriculum. Her desire to instill a love of creativity and the arts in the young continued to her death. In 1995 she had sketched murals on the inside walls of her courtyard in order that the neighbourhood children could paint with her when they visited. Finally, it is a fitting end to such a life that her last moments on earth were spent teaching children to paint.

Her work as host on the children's program All India Radio, Patna for almost fifty years, her writing for children and about children for the Council of Child Welfare and the Indian Association for Pre-school Education, as well as her work with children in her own school *Ratnavati Vidya Mandi*, show her lifelong commitment to the intellectual welfare of

all children regardless of gender. As Secretary and later Vice-president of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), (Patna Branch) and eventually Secretary of the Bihar branch of the AIWC, Śarma actively championed the rights of women to equal education and opportunity. Her organization of seminars on cottage industries such as knitting and fabric painting for women won her wide recognition and in 1976 the All India Women's Conference honoured her for her contributions.

Not only did Śarma believe that women should have equal access to education and that the arts played an important role in their education, but she was also deeply influenced by Gandhian ideals of social equality and service in action. No poor, lower caste or Scheduled Caste students were ever turned away from her school. Instead, they were admitted free of charge and treated with respect. She established an organization, *Mohalla*, to distribute milk biscuits, rice, clothes, and medicine to needy children across Bihar. In times of disaster she also volunteered. She explained in an interview of February, 1995 that she worked actively during famine and visited remote areas affected by floods. Furthermore, she took a genuine interest in the lives of many of the poor she came to know. On more than one occasion she found domestic employment for uneducated young women from the rural areas who had moved to the city in hope of better things. She helped to arrange marriages for some of these young women and contributed to their dowries out of her own

funds. She also spoke out on behalf of rape victims and prostitutes, and sympathized with women, who through no fault of their own, became the sexual victims of society.

Śarma's humanitarian works took many forms, from raising eight needy children, to organizing relief projects in drought and famine areas, to sustaining a lifelong commitment to education and to finding suitable employment and marriage alliances for the poor, young women that she came to know. Ultimately, it was her sensitivity to the suffering of others and the desire to help which became sources of inspiration for her paintings. It was those who had no resources and who lived at the mercy of society - the poor, the hungry, the rejected and the despised, that seemed to affect her the most and whose images are the most compelling. Śarma's socially conscious work comes from a genuine engagement with the people she paints.

Part II

Chapter Two

A: Nature and the Rural Environment

Cut off from access to the high realm of History Painting, with its rigorous demands of anatomy and perspective, its idealised classical or religious subjects, its grand scale and its man sized rewards, of prestige and money, women turned to more accessible fields of endeavour, to portraits, still life and genre painting, the depiction of everyday life.⁷⁴

The following three chapters discuss selected paintings (1989-1996) which Śarma personally identified as being her most important works. The collection consists mostly of large scale paintings on canvas and a few smaller watercolour pieces done on handmade paper. No attempt has been made to present the works in chronological order since many of the pieces are undated, and were only identified by the artist as part of a general body of work created in those years. In order to analyze the paintings, they have been grouped, with Śarma's approval, into themes based on the context of the works: nature and the rural environment, rural to urban transition and domestic setting.⁷⁵ In the process of reproduction, a red shift has occurred in some of the works. Consequently, yellows, oranges and reds are intensified and the whites, in some cases, have a pink undertone which does not appear in the original.

Personal Style

Before turning directly to Śarma's paintings, the question of her personal style must be addressed. Even though Śarma's painting can be generally categorized as Expressionistic there is no sense of enforced uniformity in her work. She does not deliberately try to produce a "style," but lets each painting speak for itself. Each subject is portrayed with ruthless candour, force and clarity and each scene is individualized in terms of form and colour. Śarma

abstains from producing any conscious, outward unity in her paintings and instead, focuses on the unique characteristics of each image. On the one hand, her acrylics on handmade Nepali paper (eg. *Untitled Landscape 1995*) are soft, luminescent and dewy, but her best works in oil on canvas have a fast, almost unfinished look to them with characters isolated and suspended in amorphous space. Generally, backgrounds are reduced to the minimum. Not only are the backgrounds often treated as extraneous, but Śarma does not waste energy on depicting anything but the most essential and characteristic elements of her subject - deliberately minimizing embellishments in favour of core ingredients. Her treatment of the essentials is critical, for example, hands, feet, ears, and mouths of her subjects are often too exaggerated and too contorted to be anatomically correct, yet they portray the hard work and the grinding poverty of the lives of the poor in a way which would be hard to replicate. These features are typical of Expressionism, where the magnification of the emotive essentials exaggerate gestures and distort natural appearances to the point of the grotesque. Since the whole point is to establish an emotive link between the subject, the painting and the viewer or as Śarma puts it, trying to capture that "oneness with the vision," the psychological or emotional impact takes precedent over the decorative elements. Her works are strong, alive and sometimes difficult, but not necessarily pretty. ⁷⁵ One

reviewer for an Indian publication sums her work up in the following way:

She paints with evident feeling; there is a strange lurid passion about her work, her bold colours, her preference for raw reds and yellows. Nothing appears on the canvas unless directly experienced with emotion.⁷⁷

The single most striking feature of Śarma's paintings is the profound sense of vitality. This is accomplished in a number of ways. Besides her bold use of colour, lines are thick, strong and unwavering. Every stroke of the brush exudes confidence and directness. This effect is then naturally carried into the bodies of the men and women she paints so that they exude a kind of raw, peasant energy. Everything speaks of directness: compositions are usually balanced and simple, postures are open, drapery is reduced to uncomplicated blocks of colour, emotive elements, whether positive or negative, are clearly communicated.

I. Nature and the Rural Environment

The first set of images depict the lives of the indigenous Santal tribal people. The Santals, who are Indo-Melanese by race and who speak a non-Aryan language, Santali, are believed to antedate both the Aryans and the Dravidians. While the Santals maintain an oral history which speaks of a long sojourn across India, their original habitat cannot be identified with any degree of certainty, and today they are located in central India.⁷⁸ They number over three million and live primarily in the Santal Parganas (where they form a

majority of the population), the Chota Nagpur Plateau in the state of Bihar, West Bengal and Northern Orissa as settled agriculturists.

The largest, most integrated and possibly the most resilient tribe in Eastern India, the Santals are a spirited group. They fought fiercely against perceived exploitation by Hindus and the British in the Santal Rebellion of 1855-57. Today they are an important factor in the Jharkhand movement in Bihar which seeks the creation of a new, mineral-rich state of Jharkhand as a separate homeland for tribals.⁷⁹

According to William Archer, who spent four years from 1942-1946 studying and recording their practices and beliefs, the Santals have retained their own culture to a high degree and remain, to a great extent, unaffected by Hindu and Muslim practices. According to him, the Santal are characterized by a number of positive features: splendid physiques, a love of dancing and singing, a deep sense of freedom enjoyed by men and women alike, a reverence for the natural environment, a love of poetry and a simple, sensuous and passionate attitude towards human sexuality. Many of these same qualities may be identified in Sarma's paintings.

The first thing one notices in these works is the sense of expansiveness and an almost idyllic atmosphere. Sarma once commented that she felt a sense of absolute freedom and release of tension when she ventured to the tribal villages to the east. Relieved from her normal responsibilities, she felt

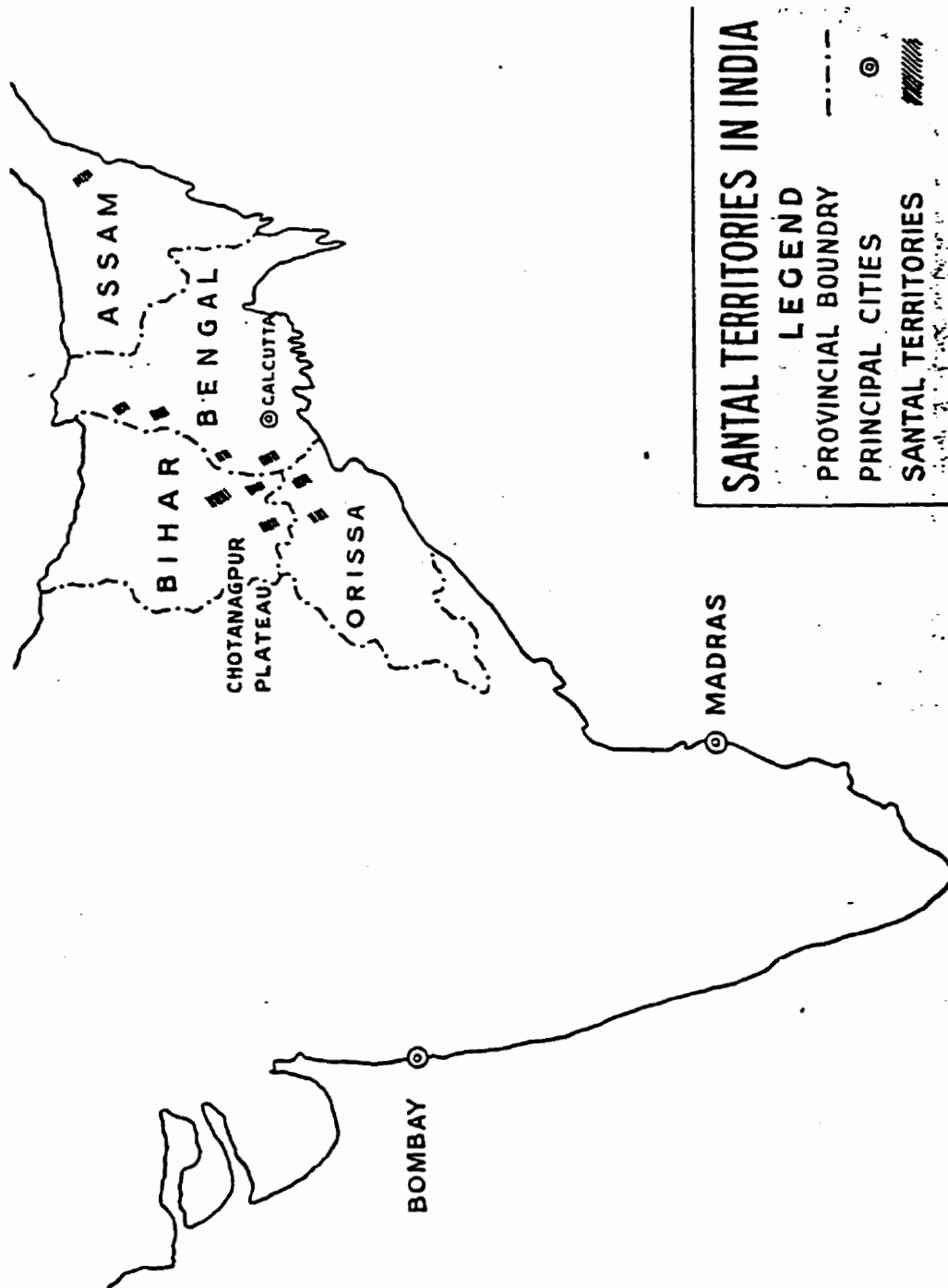


Plate 8. Map of Santal Settlements

an overwhelming sense of closeness to the land and the people of these areas. During one of our discussions she confided that it was the only place where she felt she could lie down in a field, look up at the sky and listen to the sounds of nature without being considered eccentric. Her paintings, with their vivid greens, reds and yellows echo the sense of vitality found amidst a sun-drenched landscape of flowering tropical trees. Here, she celebrates life in an unspoilt environment with all the enthusiasm of a child. This feeling of light-heartedness, which is carried through most of the images of rural life, is all the more striking when considered against the backdrop of some of her darker themes.

Śarma believed it was possible for people to live in harmony with the environment - fitting into the scheme of nature rather than trying to dominate it. The first six paintings from this section (*Untitled Landscape-1995, Tribal Village in Central Bihar, Village Scene, Santal Dancers, Girls with Flowers and Yogal Jodi*) all convey this sense of harmony between humans and their environs.

Untitled Landscape - 1995

The first image, *Untitled Landscape* (Watercolour on handmade Nepali paper, 45 X 60 cm, 1995) (Plate 9) which is technically not set in a tribal setting, is included here since it fits with the overall theme of appreciation of the natural world. Unlike most of the other works under examination, this work is produced on handmade Nepali paper



Pl. 9. Sarma: "Untitled Landscape" (Watercolour, 45 X 60 cm, 1995)

with watercolours. Here, there is a complete absence of people or any signs of human habitation. It leaves the viewer completely alone to contemplate the fundamentals of trees, earth and sky. In this piece, there are no mediating factors between us and the environment - no small, cosy home to which we could retreat, no winding footpaths to lead us back to "civilization." All these have been removed from the scene and we are left, not necessarily stranded, but certainly alone in the forest. Her work shows the richness, depth and character which can be seen in nature, but which is routinely ignored in our day-to-day activities. For the moment, she stops and forces us to be still, to listen to nature--an act which is akin to listening to ourselves. Because nature neither judges, nor asks anything, it allows the viewer also to "return to one's original nature," to borrow a phrase from Zen Buddhism. The stillness of the landscape allows the viewer to temporarily participate in that state which Śarma calls "purity of heart". Śarma uses this landscape as both a means and an end. That sense of quiet, truth and purity of heart is the starting point from which all rightful action must begin; it is also the fulfilment of all human striving and the sense of absolute peace which cannot be surpassed.

Instead of the bright, primary colours seen in many of her other works, Śarma mixes secondary and tertiary colours for a more subtle and mysterious effect. In the sky, vandyke browns are muted with yellow ochre and burnt sienna; pine-

green forests bleed into a foreground of viridian mixed with dove-grey. Here and there, blocks of bright colour such as the two rectangles of pure vermilion seen in the upper and lower left quadrants, patches of pure white and a single stroke of lemon yellow, add elements of depth and dynamism to the image. Collectively, it produces a collage effect. Furthermore, watercolours give the image transparency and luminescence which helps to preserve the freshness of the scene. Soft, modulating areas of colour, which blur into the next, create a lyrical effect, which put one in mind of Revivalist landscapes modelled upon Ajanta masterpieces. Using a combination of intense, dark areas of colour (seen primarily in the background) and soft hints of pigment, Śarma generates a kind of poetry of light and shadows.

In this example, realism has been softened towards abstraction. Barren trunks and branches lift skyward, providing the picture with structure and a sense of stability, but elsewhere bushes, flowers and hilly slopes are all reduced to simple colour and the barest of shapes. This creates a suggestive mood which evokes, rather than dictates. It pushes us towards reflection and an intuitive understanding of the natural world and ourselves. It speaks of the unconscious peace of nature and our ability to be a part of that peace, and yet to step back and contemplate it at a distance.

One of the most striking parts of this image is the tall tree stretching out its branches like long, slim tendrils into

the sky. It is the only object in the picture which Śarma deliberately shadows. A slip of silver delicately covers almost the entire length of the central trunk. Of what significance is this tree, bereft of foliage and standing alone and barren in the forest? At the most basic level, it is simply part of the natural progression of forest life, part of the eternal cycle of growth, maturation and death. But on a more psychological level, it may represent the painter and, by extrapolation, the viewer as well. By the time Śarma had painted this she was nearing the end of her life and had already narrowly escaped three heart attacks. Her health was frail and she had lived to see her children and her children's children grow to maturity. Like Śarma, the tree holds itself with dignified carriage and delicate, if brittle, grace. Even though it may lack the potency of the surrounding verdure and be close to the end of its time, it is nonetheless an important part of the landscape. The presence of death makes life all the sweeter. The tree stands above and apart from the surrounding foliage, "in" but not "of the world."

In this painting, Śarma discloses her ability not only to describe nature from a distance, but also to commune with it. Nature is not looked upon as an object for exploitation, or as a commodity. Instead, there is a sympathetic bond between humans and the natural world. The intense appreciation of nature has a long history in the Indian tradition. From the songs and poetry of the tribal people, to the hymns of the

early Aryan poets, to the renewed awareness of the natural world in modern times, there is a shared regard for the natural world. Today, many Indian feminists turn to the earliest classical texts of the Vedas to support their case for the existence of a primal and religious response to nature with they call "geopiety."²⁰

Like the ancient Vedic seers, Śarma is moved by the beauty and splendor of the earth. As the following passage from the *Bhūmi Sūkta* (*Atharva Veda* 12.2ff) suggests, the earth as Mother, is responsible for all life, and therefore, worthy of the highest respect and praise.

Untrammelled in the midst of men, the Earth
adorned with heights and gentle slopes and plains,
bears plants and herbs of various healing powers.
May she spread wide for us, afford us joy!

On whom are ocean, river and all waters,
on whom have sprung up food and ploughman's crops,
on whom moves all that breathes and stirs abroad -
Earth, may she grant us the long first draught!

To Earth belong the four directions of space.
On her grows food; on her the ploughman toils.
She carries likewise all that breathes and stirs.
Earth, may she grant us cattle and food in plenty!²¹

Besides emphasizing the natural fertility of the earth, Śarma also hints at the sense of peace which accompanies communion with nature. As the *Yajur Veda* points out, inner peace and peace on earth form a continuum.

To the heavens be peace, to the sky and the earth,
To the waters be peace, to plants and all trees,
To the Gods be peace, to Brahman be peace
To all men be peace again and again -
peace also to me.²²

Tribal Village in Central Bihar

From the pristine silence of a forest at rest we turn to a scene of mid-day activity in "*Tribal Village in Central Bihar*" (Oil on canvas, 120 cm X 118 cm, 1994) (Plate 10). At first glance, the most prominent feature of the work is its tonal consistency. The entire painting, including labourers, vegetation and homes are all done in a soft palette consisting of three colours: white, vandyke brown and a yellow ochre tinged with chrome yellow. The colour scheme creates a sense of uniformity, tying the individual, society and the physical landscape together and shows the interaction and mutual dependency between the personal, the collective and the environment.

In her choice of colours, Śarma selects not the tender greens of spring and early summer but the colours of rich, ripe paddy ready for harvest. Therefore, by extension, she ties the scene to one of the most critical times of the year - the fall harvest which usually takes place in November. Like the time of harvest, which is a time of great potential and of great urgency, her choice of yellow as dominant colour has two different kinds of associations. On the one hand, it has positive associations of gold, warmth, reflectivity, cheerfulness and expansion. On the other hand it actually adds an element of tension. Yellow, in and of itself, is stimulative, pressing towards the future and never at rest. It represents the fleeting moment which cannot last for ever.

Śarma heightens the volatility of the situation by lacing the yellow with short, jagged, anxious lines of white from top to bottom. Together this creates a background of subliminal urgency against which the Santal toil.

Despite the underlying tension, the people of the hills appear unaffected by it all, moving calmly up and down the slopes, their bodies perfect replicas of the stalwart trees on the horizon. It is not so much that they are unaware of urgency of the hour, but more that they are untouched by the high anxieties of modern life. They do not carry the angst of super-sonic, post-modern existence in their bodies, but rather the slow, steady rhythms of the earth.

Śarma also uses bisecting and undulating lines to create a sense of localized security within the image. The hills, protecting the inhabitants from the outside world, create a figurative and visual equivalent of the breasts of Mother Earth. In fact, this maternal imagery is shown twice: once as the intersection of the hills and again in the domed roofs of the two huts at the tops. Near the centre of the picture, and nestled firmly in the bosom of the Earth, lies a single hut. By its solitude it represents the individual, by its function it shows the social element of human life and finally, by virtue of its substance (grass and thatch) it shows harmony and balance with the natural world.

The maternal imagery in this work not only points to the physical features of Mother Earth, but her unlimited



←

P1. 10. Śarma "Tribal Village in Central Bihar" (oil, 120 X 118 cm, 1994) .

graciousness towards all creation, as the following passage from the *Atharva Veda* proclaims:

Peaceful and fragrant, gracious to the touch,
May Earth, swollen with milk, her breasts
overflowing,
Grant me her blessing together with her milk.³³

Śarma recognizes the underlying feminine power of śakti which is inherent in all creation and is responsible for the germination, growth and maturation of living things. It is the potency of Mother Earth and life itself. These lines from an ancient hymn capture the power and importance of śakti to an agricultural community where the success of the crop is literally associated with well being:

Spring up, become fair, be distended, O barley with your
own increase
Burst all vessels designed to contain you.
May lightning not smite you
in that place where we make our appeal to you.

In response, divine barley, to our invocation,
rise up there tall as the sky, inexhaustible
as the boundless sea.³⁴

In "*Tribal Village*" Śarma shows us the antithesis of contemporary, urbanized life and lets us catch a glimpse into a type of existence long disappeared from most of the rest of the world. In this sense, the simplicity of life depicted here is an idealization. We can only look upon it with the eyes of an outsider and not a participant. Like most of her landscapes and tribal sketches, "*Tribal Village*" speaks of a longing for a psychological and ecological Lost Paradise. Instead of an angel with a flaming sword at the gate, it is



Pl. 11. Photo: Archer "Carrying Paddy Sheaves"

the complexity of our own modern mind which forbids us from entering Paradise.

Village Scene

In a third work, "Village Scene" (oil on canvas, 78 X 61 cm 1994) (Plate 12) the only evidence of human habitation is to be seen in the small, inconspicuous huts of the Santal which are nestled against large tracts of trees, hills and sky. Here, there are no signs of mechanization, technology or environmental degeneration no roads connect this place with the outside world, no crowds commute daily back and forth to meaningless jobs in inhuman conditions. Instead, there is an almost overwhelming "Garden-of Eden" sense of peace and contentment. It is as if this place, so far removed from the outside world of government and bureaucratic decision making, has survived simply because of its unimportance. Forgotten by all the world, it still lies in an undisturbed primordial peace. Furthermore, the earth itself seems to offer itself in abundance, asking nothing, giving everything.

The soil is saturated with a post-monsoon wetness which is almost palpable. Like the veins of Mother Earth itself, rivulets of moisture run horizontally and vertically in a network throughout the image, nourishing the long lines of dark green foliage and bringing it alive. As this hymn declares:



Pl. 12. Śarma, "Village Scene" (oil/canvas, 78 X 61 cm, 1994)

Moisture brings all earth to life,
the plants shoot up, the heavens stream,
the sap surges up in every stem,
when Parjanya (the rain) quickens the earth with his
seed.⁴⁵

This vitality is further enhanced by the sense of movement created by the abrupt intersections of gold, white and basil green across the central hill. In turn, this movement creates a sense of tension between the horizontal and vertical elements so that the picture has a kind of elasticity to it, or a dynamic polarity, in which the vertical and heliotropic propensities of the vegetation are nurtured and balanced by the grounding factors of the earth. The expanse of sky so pale it appears colourless, the perception of distance created by the intersection of the plain, the hill, the horizon, and the stillness of the environment allow the viewer to experience this place as a breath of fresh air. The image as a whole is a balance between the equanimity of spirit and vigour of life.

Santal Dancers

Santal Dancers (oil on canvas, 180 cm x 90 cm, 1994) (Plate 14), shows a long line of young women moving to the accompaniment of energetic drummers. Dance is one of the chief enjoyments of the Santals and a regular component of celebrations such as the Baha (Flower), Sohrae (Harvest) and Karam (Hook Swinging) festivals, as well as wedding feasts and other holidays. Given the prominence of the blossoms in their hair and the background foliage, the image is most likely



Pl. 13. Photo: Archer, "Santal women dancing at the sacred grove"

identified as part of the Baha or Flower festival, which is performed to propitiate the local deities and to guarantee fertility. Archer explains:

On the first day sheds are erected and the sacred grove is swept. On the second day, trees are shot at, the flowering forest is celebrated. Flowers are thrown into the aprons of women and a water-battle is waged in the village street.³⁵

It is at this time that the women perform a special dance, the *baha sid* or "putting flowers in their hair." Witnessing such a dance in the 1940s, Archer left this description:

... it has the dignity of a graceful march. The girls put out their hands as if they were picking flowers from a tree. They gather the blossom and drop it in the aprons. Then, as the line moves slowly on, each "picks a flower" from her lap and puts it in the hair of the girl in front of her. Sometimes they turn about and after picking flowers from a bush, they swing sharply round and put them in a dancer's hair.³⁷

In "*Santal Dancers*" one sees the repetition of Śarma's philosophy. Whereas in the previous work, *Tribal Village*, humans are noticeably absent from the environs and nature expresses its vitality in a subtle, non-verbal way, now dancers hold front and centre stage. Yet, these Santal villagers are not separate from the earth. In fact, their activities are reflective of the surrounding rhythms of the soil. Here, in a painting showing the natural extension between earth and humans, a row of enthusiastic young female dancers imitates the joy of the cotton trees which burst into full, red, passionate blossoms. These flowers, the emblems of



Pl. 14. Ásarma, "Santal Dancers" (oil/canvas, 180 X 90 cm, 1994)

a young maiden's fertility and beauty, figure prominently in Santal love poetry and songs:

At the end of the village
Is a cotton tree
And its flowers are red, my love
People say it is meat
It is not meat
It is a flower
It is a flower my love.²³

On the big mountain
The flower is red at noon
As you pick the flower
Do not break the branches
For the body sways like a red flower.²³

Separated between a foreground showing a row of immature saplings and a background of fully matured trees, the line of twelve young women indicates the potential and the promise of fruition. All attention is averted away from the viewer as the dancers and musicians are lost in the mutual intoxication of the music and rhythms of the life cycle. While the triad of male musicians, whose legs are bent with exertion and whose limbs move wildly to the music, form a semi-circle before the women, the dancers move in unison with every foot lifted at the same time and arms interlocked in a single, long line, indicating the strength, continuity and almost archetypal uniformity of female powers. Against a background of quiet, solid vegetation indicative of the earth which "endureth forever", the shapes, colours and vigour of the dancers create an emotional parallel with Śarma's earlier landscapes. Again, one sees the coincidence of opposites - the sense of absolute peace and absolute power.

In terms of composition, Śarma uses linear blocks of colour to break the image into three different planes. The foreground is a muted thalo green, the mid-ground contains a horizontal swiipe of white punctuated with red and ochre, and the background becomes a pulsating halo of mixed colour. The predominance of thalo green (covering the foreground and extending all the way up to the background) creates an almost physiological condition of elastic tension within the viewer. The psychological impact of so much green is twofold. Firstly, it speaks of tenacity and psychological self-perseverance. Green is deep-rooted, immutable, self-affirming and related to security and self-esteem.³⁰ On the positive side, it stands for growth, development and healthy self-image, but green's self-assertiveness and pride can also manifest as envy and a tension or resistance to change. In this regard, green is a colour burdened with psychological "control issues." By its very resistance to change it holds back external stimuli. When, however, this dammed up energy becomes overwhelming and intolerable, as in the case of the *Santal Dancers*, the focus shifts to the yearning for escape. Green articulates the imperative nature of biological desires and also acts as the motivating energy liberating one from physical, psychological and emotional constriction.

Śarma uses colour in conjunction with the dynamic poses of the dancers and musicians to illustrate the volcanic pressure of the dance. She further enhances these inherent



P1. 15. Photo: Majumder, "Santal Dancers"

tensions by introducing a block of brilliant white in the centre of the image. It is set apart by its intensity, vibrancy and purity. All of the figures are clothed in these white "robes of glory," and all partake of an essential and God-given innocence and even sacredness. Above the dancers lies a halo of undulating colours, picking up the sense of movement and urging the dancers on by the inherent power and joy of existence which red implies.

Here, Śarma allows us to catch a glimpse of unspoiled humanity celebrating the bliss of being alive. What was tension (green) in the foreground of the image, now surrounds the dancers and gives them energy. It is as if there is some kind of chemical reaction taking place - as if the relentless drive of green has reached the boiling point and is instantly sublimated into a new kind of energy. What has been tension before is transfigured into a white heat of ecstatic music and movement. The dance, the dancers, the music and the musicians become one. So primal, so pure, and so religious is this moment of unity that there can be no question of impropriety. They are simply in rhythm with nature. In India, where most relations between young men and women are closely regulated, these pictures of tribal youth lost in blissful revelry are the exception. The songs surrounding these dances are playful and unabashedly forward to those who can de-code the references to love.



P1. 16. Photo: Archer, "Santal Drummers"

There are ten drummers
There are twenty girls
The dancing ground is big and wide
Do not rouse me, drummer
Or I will "make you drink
A river-full of water."³¹

Santal Girls

The following painting, *Santal Girls* (oil on canvas, 180cm x 90cm, 1994) (Plate 18), depicts four young women standing in front of blossoming cotton trees, while one pins a flower in the hair of another. In Santal culture, the act of pinning flowers in another's hair is part of a special type of friendship known as *phul* or literally "flower." Boys as well as girls consolidate friendships through the exchange of flowers, sweets and gifts. In the case of young women, two girls become "flowers" by exchanging flowers, bangles and small gifts in the presence of their friends. This action binds the two in a bond of eternal friendship and effectively makes them sisters. As such, it alters the nature of relations with the new sister's family. A girl who is a "flower" of another must avoid intimacy with her friend's male relatives, just as she would with her own immediate family.

In "*Santal Girls*," Śarma begins by separating the canvas into three distinct horizontal bands: a mottled red and white foreground, a central band of white and a cotton-candy canopy of red flowering trees. Like the *Santal Dancers* above, the repetition of the horizontal orientation gives this landscape a sense of great expansiveness. Although Śarma uses colour blocking to emphasize the horizontal, she relies on a number



Pl. 17. Photo: Archer, "Flower Friend"

of compositional devices to integrate the vertical dimension. First she inserts triangles. The white midsection forms a rough triangular shape with a long baseline running the entire length of the image. A second, smaller triangle is created by the lines joining the women's heads with the natural horizon (which also coincides with the waistlines of the women) as the baseline. The apex of this triangle effectively creates an intersection between the horizontal and the vertical and becomes a visual point of rest for the eye, so that our attention gravitates to this single position. The entire focus of the picture is condensed to the placement of a single red flower in the hair of the maiden. The angles of the figures' heads all tend to reinforce the importance of this visual component.

The strictly vertical component, established by the brown tree trunks and imitated by the limbs of the women, generates a number of parallelograms, adding a further sense of cohesion. It is as if the picture is laced tightly together from left to right and from top to bottom by brown perpendicular strokes. Besides the use of straight lines, whether horizontal, vertical or diagonal, Śarma introduces curves to soften the focus. The trees above the women billow into cumulus cloud formations, as if the vegetation can barely withstand its own overabundance. The soft drapes of the women's saris, highlighted by the red trim of the garments,



Pl. 18. Śarma, "Santal Girls" (oil/canvas, 180 X 90 cm, 1994)

reinforce these notions of gracefulness, fruition and abundance.

Looking specifically at colour, the red blossoms have literally taken over the picture. Trees become fiery balls of radiance, vermilion petals litter the earth, crimson-trimmed saris move in playful upward arcs and all attention is focused on the single red flower about to be pinned to the central figure's hair. It is as if the earth and the women are so permeated with the *rasa* or juice of life that it oozes from every pore and coats everything. Here red is dense and opaque, glowing with an inner warmth and intensified in the trees and foreground to a fiery red-orange. Red stands for all forms of vitality and power: force of will, the desire for intensity of living, fullness of experience and the power of the present. Symbolically, it is an expression of vital force, (whether that be the blood of conquest or the flame of the human spirit), it is also related to a vitalized earth and a healing light which promotes vegetation and organic functioning. Although red may be associated with the planet Mars and with uncontrolled passions and violent, warlike behaviour, subdued by the presence of orange and in relation to the large block of white, red here, takes on the warm glow of physical love.⁹²

While a blistering orange-red is the dominant colour and is used for the flowers, trees and blossoms and decorative trim on the garments, two other combinations also appear: a

blackish-brown which is used for the trunks of trees and the limbs of the maidens and a white seen in the background and in the women's *saris*. By manipulating this triple combination of colours, Śarma once again reiterates the tree-woman, flower-fruitfulness analogy. Where trees stand on long, slender trunks of darkest brown, draped in a background of pure white and decorated with a headdress of the most delicate blooms, their human counterparts do the same. Limbs and trunks, decorated hair and foliage, *saris* and atmosphere show the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm.

There is a sense of continuity between the *Santal Dancers* (Plate 14) and the *Santal Girls* (Plate 18) both in terms of content and in presentation. In both images young women take centre stage. There is a strong emphasis on the expansiveness of the horizontal and a generous use of white, associated with physical, mental and spiritual purity and joy. Whereas Śarma presents us with the collective image of unspoilt happiness at a distance in the first instance, she offers us a more detailed, more intimate glimpse of the daily lives of women in the latter. In both cases, the effect is of un-selfconscious femininity. Unlike women outside the Santal world, they seem unaware of their place vis à vis society as a whole. Here, there are no cries against a patriarchal system of oppression, no apologies for decorating their person or no embarrassment over clothing deemed too revealing in other parts of the country. Instead, these women present a picture of

contentment, friendship and of being at peace with themselves and with their place in the world. Whether being idealistic or not, Śarma paints a picture of the whole and healing side of "primitive existence." In *Santal Girls*, as in *Santal Dancers*, there is no dark side, no haunting or threatening force at large, no sense of conflict, nothing to fear. The picture radiates a sense of exuberance, joyful self-expression and feeling at home in the world. It is reminiscent of Vedic prayers for happiness:

May the righteous Gods gladden our hearts
with the warmth of their love.
May the grace of the Gods encompass us:
their friendship we seek.
May the Gods grant us life that we may live!³³

Instill in us a wholesome, happy mind
with goodwill and understanding. Then shall we ever
delight in your friendship like cows who gladly rejoice in
meadows green. This is my joyful message.³⁴

May the wind blow us joy,
may the sun shine down joy on us
may our days pass with joy,
may the night be a gift
of joyful peace!
May the dawn bring us joy at its coming.³⁵

Yogal Jodi

In "*Yogal Jodi*" (Oil on canvas, 92 X 71 cm, n.d.) (Plate 20) or "Good Friends" Śarma shows two young Santal boys, with flutes tucked in the headbands, standing in the forest. Besides the Santal love of music in general, the flute and the flute player play an important role in poetry and courtship.



P1 19. Photo: Archer, "Santal flute players"



Pl. 20. Śarma, "Yogal Jodi". (oil/canvas 92 X 71 cm. n.d.)

The flute is a synonym for a boy, the image of male sexuality, and one of the most compelling aids to love. By the tenderness and playfulness of his flute playing, a young man charms and wins the heart of his beloved.

Under the sal tree by the river
A flute is sounding
To be whirled away is all my wish
"Chio chio," you naughty thing
"Chio chio," you little flirt
Your elder brother's flute is sounding.⁹⁶

In addition, the emphasis on courtship and fertility is heightened by foliage and the stylized bird, which Śarma identified as a parrot, the emblem of young lovers. The forest, the flute and the presence of birds, especially parrots, are unmistakable signs of Santal courtship. The forest, as the site of early romantic encounters, is celebrated through special songs known simply as forest love songs. The melodies, which are played on the flute, are said to have a wild, melancholy cadence which imitates the songs of birds in the wild. Children, the occasional offspring of these forest liaisons, are known as "little parrots."⁹⁷ The following lines from a song of a love-sick girl refer to the symbols of forest love:

The parrot has her young ones
Oh, aunt, when will you dandle my children?
When will you, my aunt?
The cock crows in the morning
The turtle-dove builds its nest in the garden
Oh, my mother, come and see it
From the steep sides of the mountain
I hear a pair of flutes
And below in the valley
The beating of drums.⁹⁸

Sensitivity to nature and particularly the appreciation of the forest milieu can be seen not only in the survival of folk traditions from ancient India, but also in literary works which recollect a similar experience. In the *Gitagovinda* there is a similar clustering of imagery (a lush natural world, the presence of birds and the music of the flute) surrounding Kṛṣṇa, and his lovers:

When the tender Malayan wind touches the lovely clove creeper, when the hut of the grove is filled with the songs of the cuckoo intermingled with the sounds of swarms of honey-making bees, Hari plays, now in the amorous springtime, endless for separated-lovers, he dances with the young girls, O friend! His infatuating flute resounded with honied tones like the nectar from his quivering lower lip.³⁷

Like two young *Kṛṣṇas* of the forest, *Prāna* or the breath of life bursts forth from the bodies of the young men swelling their limbs with life until their faces, chests and arms are rounded with its energy. The breath of life is allied to the *rasa*, (literally the "juice" or lifeblood) which flows throughout the rest of the picture. The parrot who bears the message of the beloved and the heat which forces itself up the tree causing the leaves and the flowers to spring forth in utter abandon are likewise filled with *prāna* and *rasa* - the breath and blood of existence.

In *Yogal Jodi* Śarma employs a bolder style that is more characteristic of her portraits. Here, lines are thicker, stronger and bolder with faces, limbs and drapery roughly drawn. Anatomical detail and mimetic representation are

sacrificed in favour of a strong sense of physical presence. Arms linking one another, the two are the image of boyhood friendship. There is a comfort, warmth and trust seen in the proximity of their bodies, their relaxed poses and the openness of their faces. Unlike many of her other portraits, this one has a positively cheerful countenance, perhaps due in part to the tribal context in which it was painted. This gaiety is reinforced throughout the image in a variety of ways: the softness of the postures, the random way in which dancing leaves frame the figures, the movement of leaves accelerated into blurred scribbles of colour on the lower right, and the repetition of the energetic, elasticized "V" shaped strokes outlining the men's shawls. All these features combine to give the impression of an almost child-like perception of joyful awareness. Śarma encourages the viewer to recall the intensity of childhood days long past, when the openness of the sky, the brightness of the sunlight, the freshness of the summer air produced a sense of complete peace and well-being. At times, humans have a natural hyper-awareness concerning the environment, and at such rare moments, the world is truly alive and we are alive to it.

The painter also uses colour symbolism to enforce these associations. In *Yogal Jodi* the background has neither the sultry wetness of her landscape of the *Santal Village*, nor the red blooms of maidenhood, but instead it is of the purest sunshine yellow. It is the colour of noon, of promise and the

height of masculine powers. In the West, yellow is considered to be energizing, conducive to well-being and conviviality, and in traditional Indian symbolism, yellow is taken one step further and associated with *adbhuta*, or that which is "marvellous." Blocks of affirming bright yellow are set off by areas of burnt sienna and browns which are dense and opaque, glowing as if filled with inner warmth. White and burnt sienna are the colours chosen for the clothing of the young men. This alternating use of colour in the headbands and shawls sets up a diagonal of dynamic tension and balance. The other is completed and balanced by its counterpart.

Card Players

Another of the tribal images and one that was a particular favourite of Śarma's is *The Card Players* (oil on canvas, 116 X 112 cm, 116 X 112 cm n.d) (Plate 21). It remains one of her strongest works. The composition, in which the three characters fit together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, is balanced and compact. Overall, the impression is of a tightly constructed, unified whole which exudes a considerable energy. By isolating the figures in darkness and by leaving no space between bodies, she effectively creates a single point of interest. Instead of the composition appearing as three separate individuals, it is as if the three are just different aspects of the same indivisible moment. This unity is further enhanced by the juxtaposition of colour



Pl. 21. Śarma, "The Card Players". (oil/canvas, 116 X 112 cm, n.d.)

blocks, the replication of parallel lines and curves and the creation of connecting triangles.

In terms of colour, Śarma frames the central figures with bands of almost homogenous pigment. An unadulterated upper horizon of pure black and a lower band of orange and cadmium red brace the composition top and bottom. Cohesion is also maintained horizontally through colour. Dark hair tinged with reflective bits of yellow and faces contoured in simple black and white create a horizontal line of interest across the top third of the image. The consistency of colour allows the eye to travel from left to right as if reading a line of text. Similarly, the warmer tones of orange, pale naples yellow and chrome yellow, used for the shirts, provide the eye with another parallel. As well, the warm colours, by adding light to the facial areas, intensify expression. Śarma also uses two large curved swaths of white for the *dhotis* in the lower part of the image. They form a soft, loose lower boundary which tucks in any loose ends and secures interest towards the centre. The strong red used for the earth provides the image with an undercurrent of suspense. Śarma chooses black and white for the colours of the playing cards and alternates them to add to the feelings of anticipation. The black of the back of the cards stands for the undisclosed, the potential, and the unknown, while the white of the discarded and revealed cards display the whim of fortune. This rotation of white and black, known and unknown heightens the suspense and tension

within the image. Even the moment of final resolution does not dissipate the tautness.

As well as the manipulation of colour, Śarma creates unity through line. Clustering the bodies physically and emotionally towards the centre, Śarma uses connecting triangles to keep attention focused. The most important triangle is formed between the eyes of the two peripheral figures and the trump card, but below that there is one large triangular area in which a number of smaller ones are contained. The upraised knees and heels of the outside figures create the external points of a triangle and it is within this area that the forces of chance, wealth and risk are contained and finally resolved. The tension held by the triangles is latent in the moment of extreme suspense when the winning card is produced at last and all bets are literally called. Like Cezanne's *Card Players*, Śarma accepts the notion that fundamental order and meaning are best expressed through geometrical forms of great solidity and simplicity arranged in organized space. The *Card Players* is structured by interlocking solid shapes, and it is the overall effect of the completed structure as a whole, which first impacts the viewer.

Great simplicity of expression is contained within Śarma's image. It speaks of the simple pleasures of everyday existence where a harmless and enjoyable game is shared in the



Pl. 22. Cézanne, "The Card Players," (oil/canvas, 60 X 80 cm, 1890-92)

company of friends. There is nothing complicated either about the game, the people or the setting. The "*Card Players*" are surrounded by intense darkness, broken only by the small halo of light circling their game. It is as if nothing else exists for the moment except the excitement of the cards. The players are not complex individuals and Śarma deliberately uses thick, coarse strokes to outline their faces, hands and feet. Broad flattened feet, which have never known the stricture of shoes and strong, sturdy, tubular limbs bespeak the rough life of the rural labourer. Instead of rupees, cowrie shells form the currency of betting. The players are set in a night resounding with the sounds of the nocturnal world, and lit with the brilliance of fireflies and a simple fire.

The Card Players provides another example of the sense of naive enjoyment which Śarma perceived in the lives of the tribal men and women she came to know in the countryside of Bihar and Orissa. It can be grouped with Śarma's earlier images of this type which express self-contained and unreflective contentment found among the tribal people, who because of their isolation do not yet feel the full weight of modernization and the traumas of dislocation. These images of naive enthusiasm, including *The Card Players*, are all the more potent since they are a counterpoint to the darker ones which follow.



Pl. 23. Photo: Majumder, "Santal women at work"

Thus far, Śarma's images have all celebrated a pristine environment peopled by humans who live in harmony with themselves and the natural world. Together they generate an image of original paradise. While Śarma would be the first to celebrate the inherent goodness of such a Shangri-la, she is not so naive as to believe that idyllic circumstances can last forever. For every Paradise, there is a Paradise Lost; for every Garden there is the story of the serpent and the expulsion. In her later paintings Śarma alludes not only to the loss of an original, harmonious relationship with the physical environment and fellow humans, but to a much more insidious thing - the loss of spiritual innocence.

The next selection of paintings of tribal men and women takes a decidedly different turn. It is not the joys of childhood, friendship nor the pleasures of youthful courtship in an unspoilt environment that she paints, but the dark side of the Expulsion: the seduction of trusting young women, the rapacity of the outside world, physical and psychological enslavement and the sphere of perpetual toil. Like Adam and Eve, whose innocence has been ruptured, a return to the Garden is prohibited and humans are confined to the outside world of unrelenting labour. Consequently, the blameless faces of the tribal people are replaced by the sons and daughters of Eve who bear the burden of the world. Yet, in spite of the way she portrays the tragedy of the human condition, she is not without hope. The crisis she produces in our awareness also

implies the possibility of resolution and the ultimate affirmation of human values.

Waiting for the truck

A key piece which marks the shift from life inside the Garden to the banishment of the world of struggle is called *Waiting for the Truck* (oil on canvas, 120 X 97 cm, n.d.) (Plate 24). This unsettling work, in my opinion, might easily be named, *Lambs to the Slaughter*. Here, young Santal women, widely recognized for their beauty and athletic bodies are shown wearing their characteristic abbreviated *saris* against a background of softly modulating tones of green. What is disturbing about the painting is the innocence with which these women await their transport to what they believe is the urban equivalent of the land of milk and honey. Their young, ripe bodies which have been nurtured with healthy home-grown food, fresh air and exercise are soon to be bought and sold in the most demeaning manner.

The central feature of the image are the four vertical figures grouped into two diads and separated by open space. In posture, dress and size, the women are all similar, and three of the four figures are identical in the sense that they do not visually engage the viewer. Only the woman wearing the blue sari is facing us, but even here her eyes do not directly look at the viewer but are averted towards the male who crouches nearby. It is in her face that we are able to read



Pl. 24. Sarma: "Waiting for the Truck" (oil/canvas, 120 X 97 cm.n.d.)

the full extent of the impending tragedy. Sadness and resignation register in her features.

It is also significant that the composition is divided into these two sections, with half of the energy directed to the left and half to the darkness of the right. By deliberately dividing our attention it generates polarity and instills a sense of tension between the two essentially static groups. This sense of movement is further heightened by the blue-clad central figure. Only she seems to be in motion with her right foot raised, her right arm slightly lifted and her left arm resting on that of her fellow traveller. By linking the two compositions she provides a connection between life as a young woman in a tribal setting and the questionable life which awaits them in the city.

Śarma gives us hints of their doom in subtle ways. First of all, the postures which the women strike, while they may seem natural and relaxed to tribal people, are similar to the provocative postures of the prostitutes which Śarma later paints. (See *Call Girls 1* and *Call Girls 2* discussed in the following chapter) Another feature that she utilizes is the shift in background colour and texture. The greater part of the painting contains different shades of green and yellow, while an ominous mass of dark green shot through with shards of red hovers to the right of the group, forcing the eye to the extreme right. This movement naturally draws the attention from the muted wall of indistinct green which

represents life in the Garden, across to an ominous black future.

Placed before a background of indistinct colour, these women are in a liminal state in the sense that they are not wholly in one time or another, neither are they in one place or another. Instead, they are in a state of transition which by its very nature is both dangerous and exciting. Although the viewer is able to perceive the danger of their predicament, the women cannot. The spell which the promise of a new life in the city holds for these girls will not and cannot be broken. While they may be physically on the boundaries of their childhood homes, their minds are already far ahead of them making plans. Already one can see the separation between them and their past and can catch a hint of disintegration among the cluster of figures. This energy, indicated by the turned backs and the distracted gaze of the subjects, is already directed towards the periphery and produces a sense of detachment and isolation in which each figure is enclosed within his/her own world.

As well, there is a physical and psychological separation between themselves and the men of their original home. Male presence has been reduced to the point of a single, squatting figure who waits at the side of the road looking in the direction of the warm, glowing fields and forests. In a way, these women have already left their own men and their own traditions behind. The move away from the network of friends,

family and heritage is reinforced by the substitution of a figural background in favour of a single dense green drop which removes the subjects from the realm of specific time and place and anchors them in an indeterminate space where the usual points of reference of family and tradition are suspended.

If the predominant background represents the positive nurturing features of their previous existence, then the darkness to the right refers to something completely different. Not only does it speak of an unknown and potentially dark future, but within the darkness, the rough section of red stands out as significant. Situated at eye level, it becomes the focus of the women's attention to the right. There is both a parallel and a contradiction in the way Śarma replicates this colour in other parts of the image. On the one hand, she uses the delicate red blossoms tucked neatly in the hair of the young women to represent the daintiness of feminine beauty, the promise of fertility, the ties to traditional life and love, and the naturalness of unspoilt loveliness. Here, the flowers both augment the women's beauty and are a symbol of the women themselves as "freshly plucked blossoms." On the other hand, the red that represents fertility and the promise of fruition in the flowers is transformed when placed in the presence of darkness. In this case it takes on the more perilous characteristics of animal passions and violence. Here, "red"

is not simply a colour which lends beauty to an object, but it is completely without form and in that case both seductive and dangerous. It is unleashed and uncontrolled vitality.

Tribal Woman

The last image "*Tribal Woman*" (oil on canvas, 92 X 61 cm, n.d.) (Plate 25), gives some indication of the prison-like life which awaits the young women in cities hundreds of miles away. With startled, open eyes the figure makes direct contact with the viewer from the other side of the fenced enclosure. Mutely she calls us to us and silently she makes us aware of her predicament. Yet, we can be of no assistance. She is caught between two worlds - the world of her rural past and the present from which there is no escape. The colours and shapes of the background indicate the extent to which she remains a product of her past - a simple village girl. Golden tones to the left reminiscent of ripe, harvest fields and rich, autumn moons speak of days gone by. A small, sliver of a blossom peeking out from behind her hair recalls the dances of her youth. But alongside the warmth and freedom of the past lie two other blocks of colour to the right: black and white. They show the polarities inherent in life: life/death, past/present, good/evil. In themselves the colours are neutral, they do not dictate action but merely indicate a fact of life and leave the viewer to make his/her own choices.

In spite of the intensity of colour inherent in the background, the image is lit not from the back but from the



P1 25 Śarma, "Tribal Woman" (oil/canvas, 92 X 61 cm, n.d.)

front. Hope, in the sense of light, comes from an unseen frontal source. In this sense it represents the potential of the future. Its rays brighten the foreground and illuminate the barrier of the present. It is not the past which holds the woman prisoner, but the present. If she could only scale the barrier a new life would await her, but she has neither the strength nor the wherewithal to escape her condition. Instead, she can only gaze plaintively at the viewer, with a look that speaks volumes. We cannot just walk away from someone in need and having seen her plight one cannot carry on as before. It is a call for social justice and it motions the viewer to take responsible action on behalf of those who are unable.

These last two images, *Waiting for the Truck* and *Tribal Woman* provide an entirely different perspective on Santal life. Rural existence, which Śarma has depicted in such a positive light, is being abandoned today by large numbers of Santals who see urban life and mainstream values as their hope for the future. As more and more people migrate to larger centres in search of better education and industrial employment, the web of traditional social relationships suffers. Education itself creates a cultural divide so that in conversation the Santal routinely differentiate one another on the basis of being educated/literate (*paraoc*) or uneducated/illiterate (*murukh*). While education may heighten social status in the larger centres, it also leads to

acculturation of non-Santal values and behaviour including prohibitions against eating beef, drinking rice beer and participating in singing and dancing.¹⁰⁰ Santals living in urban *bustees* find themselves between two worlds. Many feel embarrassed by their old traditional ways, and feel "like a black Santal" in the presence of their more educated and urbanized kin, who have abandoned the more carefree traditions of old.¹⁰¹

These last two images are transitional pieces between the idyllic rural environment and city life. In most of the paintings depicting country life, Śarma emphasizes the positive aspects of nature and a lifestyle tuned to the seasons. Through her art, she evokes age-old themes of the sanctity of nature, the fecundity of the earth, the peace of communion with the natural world and the joy of creation. However, in the last two pieces, she begins to shift her emphasis away from nature mysticism towards social issues surrounding urban life on the margins. Both are informed by a spiritual perspective of the world and the place of humans in it.

PART II

Chapter Two

B: Rural to Urban Transition: Social Commentary

**Where should you go to seek God? Are not all the
poor, the miserable, the weak, gods?**

-Swāmi Vivekānanda

Painting is born through an intimacy or strong relationship with the subject. You see, ours is an excessively conscious age, we know so much, we feel so little. I have mingled with highest society people, upper class, middle class, lower class, poor people, tribal ones. To know them is to understand them. Everywhere there is pain and sorrow. No one is happy it seems. It disturbs me and therein lies my subject. I am moved, touched emotionally, disturbed by it.¹⁹²

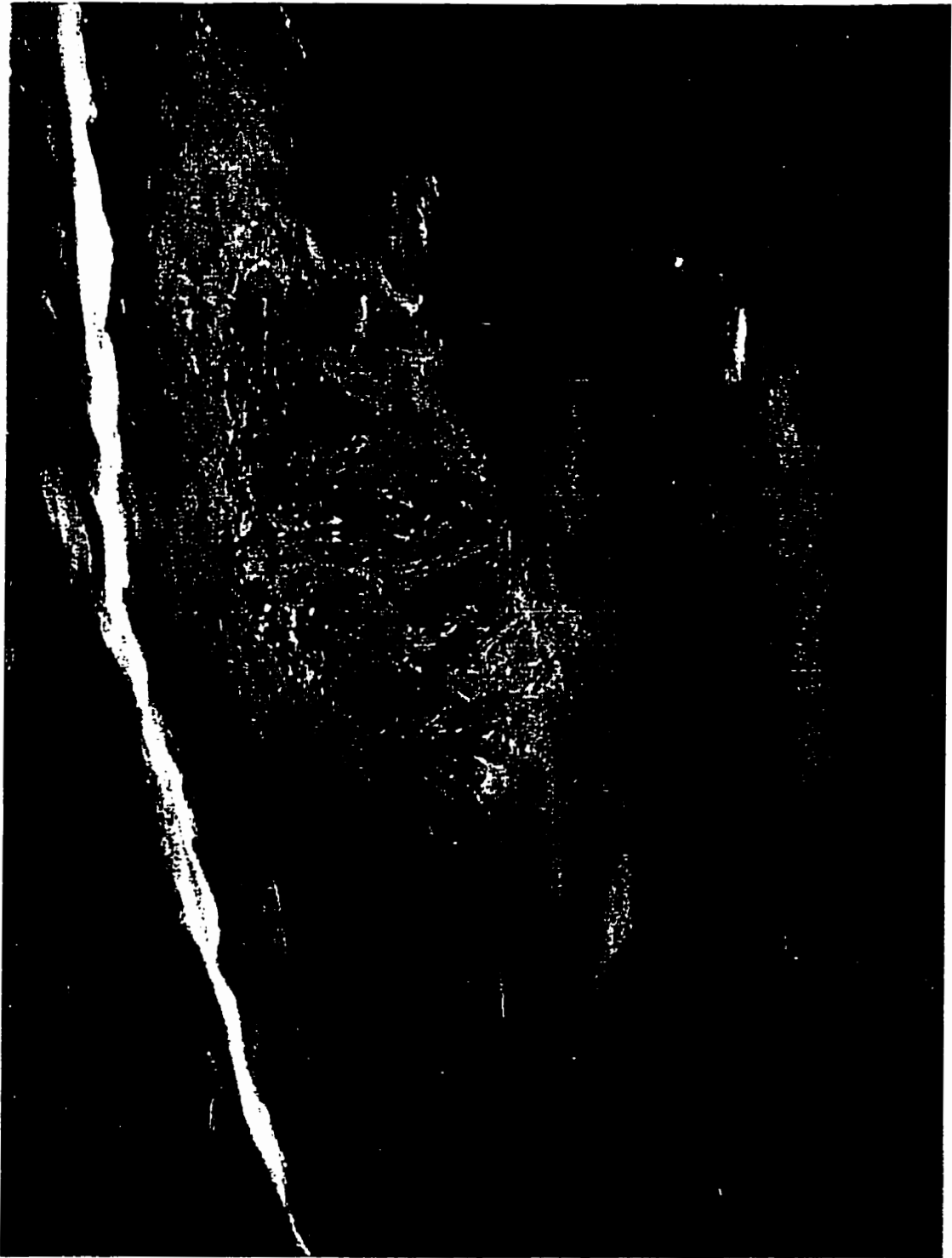
This chapter focuses on images of the contemporary urban situation. Śarma uses these pictures to provide a social commentary on issues she identifies as particularly relevant and urgent. In the following images of "*Chaos in Society*" (Plate 26), "*Mass Rape in the Punjab*" (Plate 27), "*Call Girls 1*" (Plate 28), "*Call Girls 2*" (Plate 29) "*Aghast*" (Plate 30), "*The Twig Sellers*" (Plate 31), and "*Untitled, 1996*" (Plate 32), Śarma examines the lives of society's victims, particularly women. She looks at issues such as politically sanctioned violence, inter-communal terror, prostitution, rape and the lives of the urban poor. These are the social realities as she sees them and she has a commitment both to understanding their causes and to alleviating their suffering. The last image, "*Uplift of Women in Nehru's Time*" (Plate 33) ends on a more positive note.

Chaos in Society

"*Chaos in Society*" (Oil on canvas. 128 X 84 cm. n.d.) (Plate 26) was painted in response the death of J.P. Narayan, a vocal critic of Indira Gandhi's government. For Śarma, Jayaprakash Narayan (d. 1979) was one of India's last great conscience keepers. Like Gandhi, he raised his voice against

tyranny and injustice wherever he saw it. In 1973 he suggested the country was heading towards autocracy, if not worse. "I would judge a social system by the kind of human beings it produced," he told a meeting in Bombay, hinting that the government was not worthy of running the country. In 1975 he was arrested with thousands of his followers.¹³³ In Śarma's eyes, the right to dissent and to criticise are the very foundation of democracy and freedom. "*Chaos in Society*" shows what happens when democratic freedoms are threatened. It is apocalyptic.

This image shows an agitated mass of naked people shuddering together near the centre of a hurricane of destruction. An acute sense of crisis permeates the piece since neither the centre nor the periphery offers any sense of peaceful resolution. In the middle one notes a jumbled crowd of cursing humanity, but the background figures are not even human. Indistinct and nameless, they are simply a mass of red, yellow and black. As the eye moves forward, the shadowy outlines of the human victims become more apparent. Some of the figures (especially on the right) are in panic mode and react desperately with hands, heads and outstretched arms, and run from the blood-drenched chaos of the centre towards the unknown. At the same time, there are characters who attempt to thwart any attempt at escape. Like sentries described in one of Solzhenitsyn's prison camps, they push and drag the unfortunates back into a world of intolerable suffering. The



Pl. 26. Sarma, "Chaos in Society" (oil/canvas, 128 X 84 cm, n.d.)

central and largest figure, with his back towards the viewer, tramples on the torso of a fallen victim and uses his powerful legs, shoulders and back to try to prevent escape. He represents the kind of state authority which is deaf to the pain of its citizens.

This image speaks of great, collective suffering, of severe oppression and of the fundamental desire for escape. But escape to where? The world they look upon is a shattered, broken one whose entire coherence has collapsed. Besides one another there is nothing else - no structure, no sense of stability, no clear sense of orientation. All around them is nothingness, an amorphous swirl of reds, yellows and blacks with no sense of foundation or direction. All the normal markers of society, the institutions, the principles etc. have been eliminated and people are left directionless and without a leader at a time of impending catastrophe.

Reds, yellow and black, like the flames of hell or the fire which engulfs creation at the end of time, surround the victims and spread out to the horizon in all directions. In the foreground the flames encircled by an eternal, cosmic darkness, while in the background a thin band of yellow, like the first fissure in a volcano, shows a blinding, white light. By using white light at the top and pure black at the bottom, in combination with swirling strokes of colour, Śarma introduces elements of compression and entropy. It is as if these figures have been sucked into the eye of a hurricane.

They cannot escape the pressure and are borne along with its destruction. Ultimately, they too will be destroyed in the holocaust. The imagery is reminiscent of the eleventh chapter of the Bhagavad Gītā where Kṛṣṇa displays his overwhelming cosmic form, his viśva rūpa:

As moths enter the blazing flame
for their destruction with great speed,
so do these worlds rush into
your mouths to their own destruction.

Swallowing from all sides,
you lick up all the worlds,
with your flaming mouths.

Filling the entire world,
your rays consume it with their splendor, O Visnu.¹⁰⁴

Śarma uses the image of apocalyptic chaos to draw attention to what she calls "institutional lawlessness," where governments not only collude with a mafia-style oppression, but actually sanction corruption, violence and lawlessness as state policy. She views the death of one of the state's critics, V.P.Narayan, as tragic. The danger, as she so strongly puts it, may be a total breakdown of the fabric of Indian society. However, despite the chaos that prevails, evil itself will be consumed in the conflagration:

From above and from below, from behind and before,
protect us, O Agni!
With their glowing coals your flames, ever blazing,
will wholly consume the untruthful man.¹⁰⁵

Giver of salvation, Lord of the people,
destroyer of the demon,
overpowerer of enemies,
O powerful Lord, enjoyer of Soma,
go before us,
calming our fear.

Scatter our foes, O Indra, subdue
those who attack us.
Send them down to nethermost darkness
who seek to destroy us.¹⁰⁶

Mass Rape in the Punjab

"*Mass Rape in the Punjab*" (Oil on canvas. 120 X 117 cm. n.d.) (Plate 27) which depicts the senseless violence of Pakistani terrorists towards rural women is almost too painful to look at. The violence it exudes is palpable, one can almost feel the blood running off the canvas. The savagery of the yellows and reds scream to us of the pain, horror and desecration of human life. Broken and bloodied bodies of women lie limp and scattered like debris. Others have their faces distorted in cries of agony as their arms and legs flail in a life and death struggle for escape. At the same time, turbaned and moustached heads move like spectres over a battlefield, their eyes and faces maddened by cruelty.

Śarma haunts the audience with these grim reflections of "man's inhumanity to man." By reducing victims and perpetrators to caricatures, Śarma shows how this is truly an inhuman act. People are not recognizable individuals anymore; men are no longer husbands, fathers, brothers, sons, nor can women be seen in terms of their relations with others. The victims are robbed of their identity, reduced to objects or the property of their enemy. As such, these are not real people, but vestiges, mere shadows of human beings. Neither are the rapists really human, they are distortions of human



P1. 27. Śarma, "Mass Rape in the Punjab" (oil/canvas, 120 X 117 cm, n.d.)

beings, since only individuals bereft of all compassion and understanding, qualities which make us human, could perform such a monstrous act.

The colours of yellow and red in *Mass Rape in the Punjab* carry an inverted sense. When compared to other works using the same colours such as *Yogal Jodi* (Plate 20), where yellow connotes a sense of well being and conviviality and gives the background a sense of lightness, the meaning is exactly opposite. In such a serious situation as *Mass Rape in the Punjab*, (Plate 27), the insubstantial quality of yellow is highly inappropriate and superficial. Here, yellow's light cheerfulness is reversed and the negative features of this colour are invoked. No longer is it the colour of light, knowledge and understanding, instead, it takes on the rejected qualities of yellow, connoting the negative attributes of sickness, (both mental as well as physical), envy, betrayal, falseness, doubt, distrust and finally, unreason.

Similarly, while red stands for life affirmation and the positive potential of male/female relations in works such as *Santal Dancers* (Plate 14) and *Santal Girls*(Plate 18) here, red is used in a much more uncontrolled and dangerous way. In *Mass Rape* the negative side of red is antagonistic and menacing. It depicts wrath, fever, uncontrolled sexual appetite and is associated with Mars, the spilling of blood and all forms of warlike behaviour. Blood, in particular, is a strong association. No longer is it equivalent to life

itself, but here it stands for death, the violent shedding of blood and literally, cold blooded murder.

Call Girls 1

Whereas *Mass Rape in the Punjab* portrays violence against women in sickening detail as an outburst of extreme and uncontrolled aggression, in *Call Girls 1* (Oil on canvas. 81 X 108 cm. n.d.) (Plate 28) Śarma shows how the same violence appears in its domesticated, but perhaps more insidious forms, as institutionalized prostitution. There is no doubt that she sees these women as victims. As for prisoners of war, rows and rows of barbed wire ensure that escape is impossible. Not only does the wire prevent escape, but it also creates a barrier "protecting" us against "them." Psychologically, because of the fear of contamination, it is important that dangerous elements as these be kept as securely and as far way from society as possible.

Their nakedness can be interpreted in a number of ways. First, it shows the female body strictly as a commodity and secondly it shows how extremely vulnerable these women are, in spite of the superficial bravado. They are stripped of respect, value and power. As well, their nakedness highlights the gap between sacred and profane nudity - nakedness as a symbol of purity and innocence, what in Renaissance times was called *nuditas virtualis* and nudity symbolic of lust, vanity and the absence of all virtues, *nuditas criminalis*.



Pl. 28. Sarma, "Call Girls 1" (oil/canvas, 120 X 117 cm, n.d.)

Like the previous image, "*Call Girls 1*" picks up the theme of violence against women. But whereas in the earlier work she portrays the horrors of decapitation and rape, here Śarma introduces the themes of victimization, sacrifice and possibly redemption. In a scene reminiscent of the Salem witch trials, or the Inquisition, young prostitutes stand bound and ready to be burned at the stake. As in former times, women have become the scapegoats. Like the original animal in ancient Jewish custom, which was forced into the wilderness after the high priest had symbolically laid the sins of the people upon it, these women are scapegoats - vilified, denounced and driven to the outer fringes of human society. They are branded and bear a permanent stigma which will never allow them to re-enter mainstream society. Their fate is sealed.

Another way in which Śarma uses the victimization theme is seen in the positions of the characters. It reminds the viewer of a typical presentation of Christ's Crucifixion in which Jesus is shown flanked by two criminals while women wait at the foot of the cross. Given that Śarma told me that another painting, *The Twig Sellers* (Plate 31) was deliberately reminiscent of the Crucifixion, this idea is not as improbable as would initially seem. These women stand on their own Golgotha, apart and slightly above us so as to be in full view. Escape is impossible and their sacrifice impending.

The victims' facial expressions also add to this theory. While the central figure could hardly be considered Christ-like, there is at least recognition and awareness of the real situation in her eyes. Something which cannot be said for the figure on the left. In her we see a laughing, lurid insolence and unrepentance. This woman, who is so blind to her own plight, deserves a double measure of compassion.

Overall, *Call Girls 1* is almost as disturbing as the previous image. As in *Mass Rape*, Śarma gives the cheeriness of yellow an inverted meaning. Yellow takes on a sinister hue, and when mixed with angry spikes of red and brown, creates a hell-like atmosphere. Furthermore, there is a sense of great dynamism, almost a sense of explosion as Śarma covers the canvas from top to bottom with sharp, pointed strokes full of pent-up energy. The strokes seem to become more and more erratic and unstable the closer they move to the central characters. At the bottom left of the image she uses a curious combination of lines, which together form a kind of mysterious and unintelligible script. A kind of equivalent of Pilate's "Jesus Christ King of the Jews" placed upon the cross.

If Śarma's *Call Girls 1* contains the themes of victim and sacrifice, by extension it also holds the potential of redemption. These women are victimized, and like the witch, the scapegoat or Christ, have all sins upon their heads. Reviled and punished for the sins of the world, these women

bear the inhumaneness and the brutality of the situation silently. Yet, their suffering may not be totally in vain, and one may wonder if it holds some greater and unknowable Redemptive value.

Call Girls 2

"*Call Girls 2*" (Oil on canvas. 77 X 110 cm. n.d.) (Plate 29) also looks at the predicament of the most marginalized women in society, but from a different angle. Instead of stressing the violence and victimization, Śarma portrays the sense of loneliness, weariness and utter loss. Here, two women, emerging from a dark, chaotic background, advance towards the viewer, churning the very atmosphere with their presence. As they come forth, the older leading the younger, they wear an aureole of darkness, for they are nocturnal creatures who belong to the world of night and secrecy. It is not the peace of darkness in which they move, but a night of unpredictability shown by the thick, staccato strokes which move around them erratically. Beyond their immediate surroundings the world appears even less stable. There are no firm boundaries as the foreground and background merge in a blizzard of random muddied yellow ochre and black tinged with vermilion. In the presence of earth browns and black, yellow again alters its expression. Here, it appears as sharp, uncompromising, abstract and almost aggressive. The black background and the yellow-red-orange scramble of colour intensify the tragic, melancholy expression of the work.



Pl. 29. Śarma, "Call Girls 2" (oil/canvas, 77 X 110 cm, n.d.)

Śarma deliberately paints these women nude for reasons beyond the obvious sexual connotation. Unclothed, stripped of all belongings, and ephemeral, these women move as if they are phantoms of the night. Ghost-like, they mysteriously appear and disappear almost into thin air. What we have is a fleeting look into their lives, as if a fog were momentarily to lift and show them standing exposed before our eyes. We are offered no more than a glimpse into an unknown world, and our contact with them is as brief and ephemeral as the figures themselves. As prostitutes, they move in the liminal zones of society, in another dimension which intersects mainstream society only tangentially.

Another feature which adds to the pathos of the whole situation is the tenderness with which the older supports the younger. The girl wears an expression of apprehension, and her frail, young body moves hesitantly. The support that the older gives her is kindly, understanding and perhaps maternal. There is solicitude in her gaze. Such features force the viewer to see these women not simply as the nameless, featureless phantoms which they seem at first glance, but as real people, who give and receive compassion and understanding.

There is no doubt that this image is ambivalent. On the one hand, it has the phantom quality which lets the viewer remain somewhat detached from the situation. On the other hand, one cannot fail to read and respond to the facial

features, expressions and body language of the two women which transforms them into living flesh. Śarma may use this ambivalence to allow the viewer a psychological way out. If the situation seems too real and too depressing to contemplate, the viewer has the option of distancing one's self. It is not a reassuring image, but neither is one completely without hope.

Aghast

Another work which fits into the theme of violence against women is one entitled "Aghast" (Oil on canvas. 92 X 92 cm. n.d.) (Plate 30). It was painted in response to a newspaper story about a young village woman who was violently beaten and forcibly raped. Although physically surviving the ordeal, the stigma of the attack hounded her and within the confines of the tight village social network, she could find no support or rest. Instead of people rallying around her and recognizing the attack as what it was, an act of violence, it became a case of "blaming the victim" and the woman was ostracized at every turn. It is as if that single act of violence had attracted all other sins to her, and she became a walking object of rejection - a scapegoat for all others. Finally, alone and without support, her self-esteem shattered by violence and unendurable social disgrace, she threw herself down a well in a final act of desperation. Śarma paints the scene in a narrative, episodic fashion. The actual brutality of the assault is shown as a series of black



Pl. 30. Śarma, "Aghast," (oil/canvas, 92 X 92 cm, n.d.)

swipes of paint highlighted with red in the lower right quadrant. Black is the only colour which could represent the absolute evil of the act or the unspeakable terror it held for the victim. Red, in the form of a raw, jagged and bloodied streak of colour portrays the violence and the horrible reality of the experience. In this regard, the colours correspond to the two *gunas*, the black *tamasic* darkness of spiritual ignorance, and the red, uncontrolled *rajasic* tendencies of violent action. Small, blurred lines of red move downward from the main black section looking like rivulets of blood, or from a distance, like two shadowy hands holding a knife. As if hurled by the brutality, the young woman lies crumpled and utterly distraught on the ground to the lower left. Curled in fetal position, broken and weeping, with her body and head turned away from us, she lies alone and inconsolable. Yet, she must endure a second torment of being utterly alone and bereft of consolation. Śarma moves us away from the act itself, which is concealed in opaque black to the right, and draws us into the shadowy lands of rumour and insinuation of the left, by using the contours of the woman's body to create a visual link between the act and its consequences. The victim's legs are positioned to the right, in the direction of the original violence, while her head (and her thoughts) point left towards the mental distress she will be forced to endure.

A chaotic mix of canary yellow, saffron, emerald green and flat sienna emerges from the body of the victim, as the painter simulates the psychological and emotional turmoil within. Out of this agitation, a snow white spectre, hazy and unformed at first, arises. It represents the first thoughts towards the final solution of suicide. Sarma duplicates this white presence, a second time and the two spectres move slowly across the canvas towards death. The final phantom stands directly behind the naked and upright figure of a woman on the brink of suicide. At this point, the body language is reversed. Instead of being the prostrate victim of an attack, the woman stands upright and walks with deliberate, although compulsive and somnambulant steps to her death. The curious and twisted angle of the head indicates inner torture. She stops and stands naked before us, overcome by the tragedy of the situation and teetering on the brink of emotional and physical extinction.

Her body, a disturbing mixture of orange and yellow, moves inexorably towards death, her left hand reaching out to grasp life at the last moment. But it is too late. Already the tendrils of death - long, insistent locks of hair reaching out from the corpse, have started to wrap themselves around her body, and she is drawn towards suicide as a moth towards the flame. The final figure, the looming, ghastly face of the dead woman stares out at us wide-eyed in horror and recrimination, the smudged mark on her forehead an indictment

to the protection of marriage. In the final analysis, it is the hair of the corpse which is the source of movement and power in the image. Her long black hair generates a sense of circular energy, drawing together all aspects of the woman's suffering - the pain and blackness of the attack, the living hell in which the victim, not the perpetrator, is to blame and her solitary march towards a sickening, downward vortex of death. In the end, because justice is not done, all are incriminated in her death. By making life unendurable, society silently condones the crime and co-opts in her death. In a twisted sense of logic, the attack itself is proof of her guilt and she too, becomes one of society's scapegoats.

Excluding "*Chaos in Society*" (Plate 26) the last six images including "*Waiting for the Truck*" (Plate 24), "*Tribal Woman*" (Plate 25), "*Mass Rape in the Punjab*" (Plate 27), "*Call Girls 1 and 2*" (Plate 28 and 29) as well as "*Aghast*" (Plate 30) have all shown, in disturbing detail, various forms of violence against women in Indian society. Here, the traditional role of woman in which she is venerated as wife and mother, has been swept aside and she becomes either a commodity to be bought, sold or tossed aside, or a target for soul-destroying violence. Not surprisingly, such works provoke strong reactions in the viewer. Śarma once mentioned that when she showed these images, the two common reactions were irritation, implying the inappropriateness of such themes for public viewing, or an embarrassed silence. Both reactions

are but two different ways of sweeping the matter under the rug, since they both are based on denial. Instead of deterring her, however, this response only strengthened Śarma's belief that she was pointing out a serious flaw in the system and one that needed immediate redress. Although the oppression of women in Indian society takes many forms such as child marriage, enforced seclusion, disproportionate opportunities for education, dowry burnings etc., and has been the subject for other Indian painters as well, Śarma deliberately deals with extreme cases in order to drive her point home.¹⁰⁷ These images are so strong, so violent and so emotionally charged that their impact cannot be denied.

Through these paintings Śarma shows us the ultimate dehumanizing way in which women are sometimes treated as objects rather than people. As a group, these women are outcastes - marginalized physically, sociologically and psychologically. Here, India is not alone, and a similar case could be made on a global scale. A booming world wide "industry" which systematically creates a market for and caters Third World women and children for the pleasures of hard-currency tourists, is a symptom of global social pathology.

Śarma's women as sexual victims, are essentially at odds with the ideal of Indian womanhood perpetuated through literature, movies and Indian culture in general. Modern day prostitutes are excluded from the very structures which give meaning and fulfilment to being a woman in traditional

society. For her, there is no protection guaranteed by a husband or a son. Her sexuality, divorced from love, caring or for the desire for children, is reduced to engagement without commitment. Money, rather than love becomes the currency of exchange. Neither can a prostitute be said to be a liberated, independent woman with her own means. She is manipulated and owned by others. Śarma's women are objects of oppression whose lives and feelings are meaningless and irrelevant. Their sexuality cannot be tied to Indian models of erotics such as the idealized and illicit loves of Radhā and Kṛṣṇa or even to Vatsayana's book of erotics. Theirs is not the life of a cultured and pampered courtesan mentioned in classical literature. There is nothing remotely romantic about their lives.

These women are very different from the *devadāsis* (literally "female slaves of god") of old. In former times, *devadāsis* were a category of female servants dedicated to serving the deity of a particular temple and to performing the upkeep of the temple precincts. While this term is now used almost exclusively to refer to temple dancers, it has long been synonymous with courtesans, prostitutes, public women and harlots, since *devadāsis* devoted their services not only to the temple deity but to all those who visited the temple as well. In spite of these associations, some *devadāsis* were considered very accomplished and educated women who enjoyed a

privileged social position. Many received royal patronage and became an important adornment to the courts.

So, unlike Śarma's paintings of street prostitutes, *devadāsis* were often cultured women of independent means who owned their own houses and lands and who conversed with the cultured, the rich and the powerful. Patronized by kings, recognized as an integral part of powerful religious institutions, educated and accomplished, the *devadāsi*, like the geisha in Japan, once enjoyed a higher degree of power and autonomy than did her married counterpart. This prestige gradually diminished under British rule as laws were passed abolishing what the British saw as institutionalized prostitution.¹⁰⁸

Śarma is not describing an ancient, romantic category of women. In spite of the viewer's discomfort, she forces us to look at the situation directly and without any delusions, showing us images of human beings forced to live inhuman lives. In this way she rouses our concern for the social conditions which created the situation and our compassion for those who must endure it.

The Twig Sellers

Moving away from the most disturbing kinds of social commentary, the next two images, "*The Twig Sellers*" (Plate 31) and "*Untitled, 1996*" (Plate 32), look at marginalization in its more subtle forms. The story of those living at the fringe of society is the theme of the next reproduction, "*The*

Twig Sellers" (Oil on canvas. 95 X 48 cms. n.d.) (Plate 31). Before most of the city is awake, tribal people bring loads of twigs for firewood into Patna to sell. For the few paisa they get in return, the work is hard and the hours long.

Here, in a configuration, which Śarma claims is "deliberately reminiscent of a crucifixion scene," depersonalized faces, devoid of human expression or individual details, are huddled against the darkness. Śarma keeps the twig sellers vague and indistinguishable. Except for the figure in white at the far right, they are presented *en masse*, as a unit without individual characteristics. She paints them as a multitude, as quasi-abstract shapes or colour contours. Shrouded by their blankets, the twig sellers are stylized to the level of indistinct shapes, which together form a perceptible solid group in space. Yet, it is a space unlike our own, for it has an eerie mistiness about it.

The atmosphere surrounding them is amorphous and other-worldly. Therefore, they remain human beings in the abstract rather than the individual, sense. By extension, they represent all the poor and despised of the world who carry on valiantly in the face of great adversity, unknown and unremembered.

Like *Call Girls 1 and 2*, Śarma presents these people as archetypal sacrificial victims. In the centre of the composition she uses two bundles of twigs to create an inverted cross, around which the sellers huddle like devotees.



Pl. 31. Śarma, "The Twig Sellers" (oil/canvas, 95 X 48 cm, n.d.)

One has the impression that they bear this cross calmly and patiently. Their bodies are soft, curved and rounded with a kind of accepting resignation. The deep blues and purples symbolize not only the Passion, but rest, silence and acceptance. To the right, and outside the clustering of bodies, stands a second upright bundle of twigs. The replication of this feature gives the work a sense of movement from left to right and sets up a series of unresolved polarities: inside/outside, dark/light, physical existence/spiritual transcendence, toil/ liberation, earth/heaven.

By the skilled use of colour, Śarma generates a diagonal sense of movement across the picture from the lower right to the upper left. Beginning with the cloaked white figure to the right, Śarma transforms the lowly twig sellers into living expressions of loyalty, tranquillity, piety, trust, surrender, devotion, timelessness, quietness of spirit and divine love. From there, the energy rises upward along the vertical towards the standing figures, two of whom appear to have modified "crowns of thorns." These individuals wear haloes of a compassionate green which is also duplicated in a patch of vegetation lying directly diagonal from them in the lower right. The atmosphere surrounding their heads is suffused with a warm glow. By moving the eye from the white at the bottom upward to the green and whites of the heads and finally, at the top to white again, Śarma creates a visual

chord which resonates softly and delicately throughout the image, bringing the viewer closer and closer to transcendence. In the top portion of the work the atmosphere is a luminous almost colourless aura of white and pale pink, like a visual complement of Vaughan Williams' *A Lark Ascending*. Ultimately, *The Twig Sellers* reminds the viewer of the possibility of transfiguration and shows that one's spiritual development is independent of social position.

Untitled, 1996

In the following work, *Untitled, 1996* (acrylic on handmade Nepali paper, 24 X 36" 1996) (Plate 32) Śarma again gives us a glimpse of the lives of women on the margins of society. The main features of this work, which was one of the last samples she sent me before her death, are the sense of ambivalence and the high degree of contrast between the depths of the shadows and the bright sunshine of the town. It is as if the world has only two options: black and white, right and wrong. What is striking is the total absence of middle ground. Another unusual feature is the perspective, where Śarma places the viewer above and behind the central characters. By viewing the work from deep within the shadows she gives the impression that one is spying or seeing a secret side of events. The viewer sees the women, but they remain unaware of our presence.



Pl. 32. Sarma. "Untitled, 1996" (acrylic/paper, 60 X 90 cm,)

Two figures emerge from a great wall of darkness. To the right, a heavy, impenetrable black covers the entire side of the picture. One has the feeling that it extends far beyond what can be seen - it is permanent and immovable. The depth of its shadow encompasses the women, who appear small and timid in its presence. There is something ominous and sinister about it; it is almost like a prison from which the women can gaze but not escape.

With the women ringed in dark shadows, and a yellow block of warm colour at the centre, the focus of the work becomes narrow and precise. Attention is concentrated through them and the eye is carried along with their gaze. Both women focus intently on a simple hut which sits in full view in broad daylight. There is nothing remarkable or unusual about the building except that by its ordinariness it is the very antithesis of their situation which is full of mystery, darkness and perhaps intrigue. They look upon the hut and the prospects of ordinary life in the same way that the poor admire the homes of the wealthy, as a dream beyond their means. Standing at the edge of the shadows like children inside a magic circle, they dare not step into the world of light. Yet, this outside world has enormous appeal for them. It is sun, openness and all wholesome things. What holds them back, however, is something psychological rather than physical, the feeling that they dare not. Whether that feeling is self-inflicted or produced by others, nonetheless,

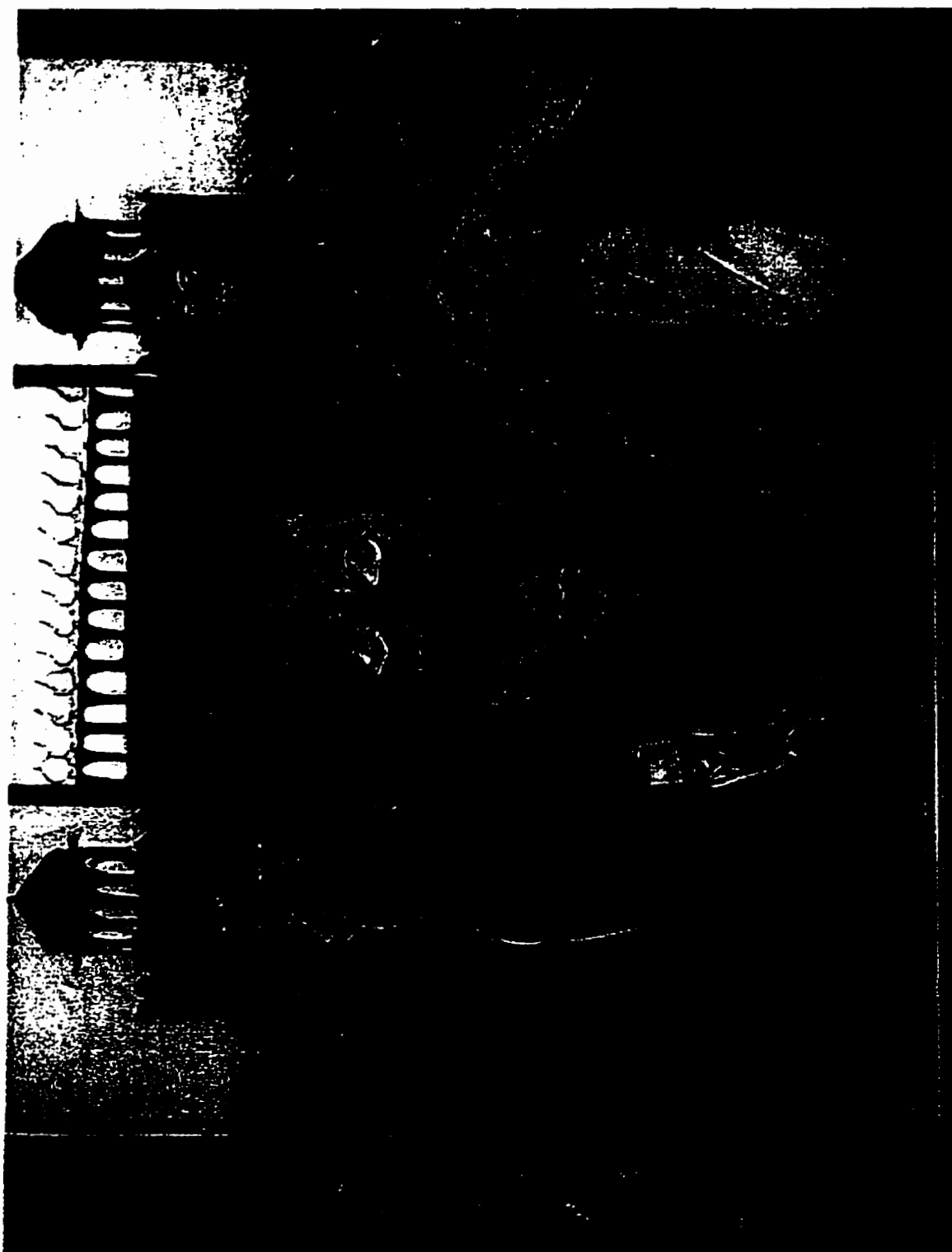
there is something sad about the way they stand tentatively at the border between shadow and light.

The importance of what Śarma is saying can be interpreted in different ways. It may speak of a personal situation in which one hovers between fear and desire. On the other hand, she may be suggesting that collectively, women throughout India stand poised at this same threshold, that they are emerging from the shadows of the past and look towards a brighter future. If so, they are at a critical juncture; they have reached the furthest point of the shadow and one single step will bring them fully into the light. But that step is the most overwhelming since it would mean challenging the structures of the past and walking bravely onward. It sounds easier than it is and Śarma's picture reminds us that change and empowerment can be both exhilarating and intimidating at the same time.

Uplift of Women in Nehru's Time

Although many of Śarma's images of women in Indian society carry a strong social message and speak out for those who have no voice, Śarma's comments are not always negative. In *The Uplift of Women in Nehru's Time* (Oil on canvas, 140 X 120 cm, 1990) (Plate 33), she looks at the positive advancement of women in contemporary society.

Śarma sets Nehru's intelligent and pensive face and her characters against the Red Fort of Delhi. As a symbol of central power, the Fort is virtually synonymous with India as



Pl. 33. Sarma, "The Uplift of Women in Nehru's Time"
(oil/canvas, 140 X120 cm, 1990)

a nation, and the will of the federal government. Visually and theoretically, Śarma understands the Red Fort as a unifying and consolidating image. Just as a single block of brick red stretches across the entire canvas, encompassing figures of housewives, goddesses of medicine and technology, modern women and India's first female Prime Minister, so does the Red Fort, as the symbol of India, include all people.

Besides using the overall shape and expansiveness of the fort to unify the work, Śarma also uses the architectural contours of the building to break the image into smaller vignettes. On the left, she shows three modest, rather shy housewives standing in the shadow of an alcove. As a group, they are tentative and unsure, as if waiting for instructions. Their gestures are soft, and demure; their stance is one of immobility as if they are rooted to the spot. Unlike the faces of the other women to the right, the features of the three women are clearly visible. Their eyes are wide, big and heavily lashed, the *bindi* on their forehead is prominent and round. Ornaments, as well, are an integral part of their person, as gold chains dangle from their necks, ample bracelets adorn their arms and tidy, precise *saris* wrap their bodies. These three represent the more traditional roles for women which emphasize modesty, beauty and acquiescence to social and family expectations. In contrast to the other women in the picture, they seem isolated, frozen and having few options.

Things change dramatically as the viewer shifts the focus right to the central figure of Nehru. It is no coincidence that Śarma portrays him as the power behind the Red Fort, since the super-human effort and will to change the status of women requires a larger than life individual. A modern day Moghul Emperor, Nehru sits like a strong, over-sized deity, bringing events into being by some kind of yogic concentration. Śarma sees Nehru as a benevolent "Founding Father" of women's rights, a man who conceptualized a stronger, more productive and more prominent role for women in India. Yet, she paints not the entire body of Nehru, but only the face of a man deeply engaged in reflection. In this sense, Nehru is not so much an image of action *per se*, but more an image of the will to action. What is important is that his eyes are lifted to the right to create an invisible but direct line to the small figure of his daughter Indira. While Nehru may have planted the seeds for change, it is Indira Gandhi, who symbolizes the change.

The trio of figures on the right, who Mrs. Gandhi presides over, represent the third major section of the work and are the antithesis to the women appearing in the alcove to the left. Unlike the other women, there is nothing tentative or unsure about them. The figure on the extreme right is such an adept of science and technology that silver and gold haloes of scientific reason emanate from her. If there was ever to be a new goddess of technology, such a form would be

appropriate. Ultimately, she represents the power of education which fuels women in society.

The two most dynamic figures of the composition are the animated figures striding confidently below the gaze of Mrs. Gandhi. As they step from the shadows of the alcove they move with strong, sure steps, shoulders square, heads and chests lifted. They march like soldiers with purpose and direction. Śarma shows the great energy of their movements by the way in which the end of one's *sari* flies over her shoulder and by the quick blur of colour at the feet of the other. Her steps are almost quicker than the eye and her momentum threatens to lift her from the earth.¹⁰⁹ This couple is not only an image of dynamic energy, but also of knowledge. Their faces show intense communication and conversation between equals. One has the impression of competent, dedicated and fearless female power. Following the sense of movement which these women initiate, one notices an odd figure seated at the foot of Nehru. Like the *vahana* or vehicle, of a great god, this small, composite figure with a television or a computer monitor for a head and a stethoscope around her neck, represents the role of women in contemporary sciences. Śarma creates a new deity - one who is technologically advanced, who heals sickness in all forms and who promotes health and life.

Uplift of Women adds another dimension to Śarma's understanding of women's issues in India. Besides all the injustice and inequality which may exist, the situation is not

beyond hope. What is required is the kind of vigorous action and level-headed thinking she portrays in her characters. Despite all the flaws in the system, which she points out in her images of destitute and abused women, Śarma is entirely aware of the great strides which Indian women have made during her lifetime. Doors which were closed to women earlier this century are now open and welcoming. Like her goddesses of technology and education, Śarma recognizes learning as the key to the creation of a more equitable society.

PART II

Chapter Two

C: Domestic Setting and Inner Reflections

**We know of no world except in relation to humans,
we want no art which is not a likeness of that relationship.
Paul Klee**

A good portrait in the humanistic sense may therefore be defined as the faithful portrayal of the character of an individual. The interest is psychological - that is to say, we make no moral judgments about the character of the individual portrayed. We are satisfied if the artist has realized the personality of the subject in its uniqueness, and by his dexterity and skill represented his knowledge and understanding in his plastic medium."¹¹⁰

In this section, the focus is on paintings which evolved out of Śarma's domestic environment. The first part of the chapter is dedicated to the portraits of men and women who worked in her home, either as full-time domestics or as occasional employees. She was able to spend time with them, explore their moods and observe them at times when they were completely at ease. Possibly because she had such a close working relationship with her subjects, and was able to capture their presence and the moment, some of her best works, including *Maid with Chair* (Plate 35), *Servant on the Balcony* (Plate 38), *Window Washer* (Plate 39) and *Nepali School Master* (Plate 40) are from this group.

The latter part of the chapter deals with Śarma's own inner life. It contains a series of three revealing portraits of women, which, it can be argued, may be read as self-portraits, and two dramatic images foreshadowing her death. These five are the only works in which Śarma uses herself, either directly or vicariously, as a subject.

Domestic setting

Maid with Children

In intimate settings such as "*Maid with Children*," (oil on canvas, 89 X 106 cm, n.d.) (Plate 34), Śarma finds a sympathy with her subject which transcends mawkish romanticism. One never gets the impression that she is idealizing their condition because the intentional use of strong shapes with heavy, dark, black outlines prohibits any false sentimentality. These stylized figures transmit real emotional energy. In this painting, the central character is literally a tower of strength - her relative size, the power of her features and limbs, and the sense of mass which surrounds her and sets her apart from a luminous background, all speak to us of wisdom and depth of character. She is calm, gracious strength. Furthermore, she is approachable, and a young girl who hangs on her every word and a boy with a protective expression, offer us a glimpse into the warmth of cross-generational relations.

The composition and colour scheme of *Maid With Children* are, like the image itself, simple but powerful. If one draws an imaginary horizontal line to represent the chair on which the main character sits, the picture is divided into two halves, top and bottom. Each half contains a triangular shape; the top (with the central character's face at the apex) makes an upward triangle; the bottom (by the shape of the legs and feet) creates a downward one. Symbolically, they are



Pl. 34. Sarma, "Maid with Children" (oil/canvas, 89 X 106 cmm, n.d.)

complements - one representing wisdom and the other closeness to the earth. When the viewer first confronts the image, like the young girl looking up, it is the top triangle and the face of the woman which grabs the attention. Śarma builds a point of interest by guiding the eye along the white line of the right arm upward to the face and secondly, by the gaze of the young girl. The main focus remains on the face of the central character. The lower triangle, which points downward to the feet, shows the importance of groundedness and the wisdom of the earth. It is a different form of intelligence, but one nevertheless, which transmits a poetry of existence.

Śarma uses a combination of white, yellow, orange-red, brown and black. Overall, it is the large, central mass of white which dominates the work and lends it solidity. All surrounding colours are subordinate. The white establishes a sense of "gravitas". Like a snow-capped Himalayan peak, the maid sits strong and immovable in her white sari. The yellow background creates a spotlight for this domestic scene with soft, diffuse and almost rayless light. Specks of yellow are also introduced on the faces and limbs of the characters for highlights. For the bodies and heads of her characters Śarma uses black and browns. In particular, the maid's body is a dark shade. In a society where a premium is placed on a woman's fairness and a "wheatish" complexion highly esteemed, the darkness emphasizes unselfconscious physicality, raw sensuality and vital power.

Śarma makes the viewer stop and appreciate this commonplace scene and the people, who by society's standards, are unremarkable. Suddenly, a barefoot servant becomes symbolic of the endurance of all hard-working, underpaid labourers. There is something extraordinarily noble about her. In spite of a lack of physical adornment, she is sure of herself and regal in bearing, dispensing advice and concern with largesse. The poverty of her lifestyle in no way diminishes the richness of her character. The children, smaller versions of herself, seem to wish to absorb her wisdom.

Wearing a plain white sari, perhaps indicating a widow's status, the maid not only represents a person of humble station, but also of purity and simple faith. Śarma takes pains to show that her main character has had a life of hard, physical work. The hands, which are so softly and peacefully crossed at the wrist, are nonetheless large and strong, her shoulders are broad, her chest, which is uncovered in the old fashioned way of dressing, is powerful, her jawline and facial features are prominent and resilient like the faces of Van Gogh's peasant characters. But the most noticeable feature, and the one that sets her clearly among the labouring class, are her large, almost gargantuan, feet. More than anything else, her feet speak of poverty, fortitude and endurance. At once, she becomes every woman who has ever worked in the fields, carried water or walked long distances in order to

save a few *paisa* that could go towards household expenses. Yet, these feet are unstoppable. As part of the vast majority of India's population who remain rural, she represents the power and persistence of traditional life. Hers is not only the strength of one person, but the vitality and stamina of generations. Like Van Gogh, Śarma sees beauty and delicacy behind the rough exterior. Van Gogh writes:

The figure of a labourer - some furrows in a ploughed field, a bit of sand, sea and sky - are serious subjects, so difficult, but at the same time so beautiful, that it is indeed worthwhile to devote one's life to expressing the poetry hidden in them.¹¹

Maid with a Chair

Often, as in "*Maid with a Chair*," (oil on canvas, 80 cm X 70 cm, n.d.) (Plate 35) Śarma's images are snapshots of solitary figures, withdrawn and contemplative. They give the impression that the subject has caught them in an unguarded moment, lost in reflection. Here, the woman's posture and expression are all indicative of a solitary melancholy. The soft languor of her limbs, the gentle curve of her back, the forward tilt of her head and the flatness of the background give the impression of inertia and helplessness. The weight of her despair seems to make her sink deeper and deeper into the floor.

The surrounding colours suggest the turmoil and agitation lurking below the surface. A dominating block of deep, disconsolate green spreads out in all directions around the



Pl 35. Śarma, "Maid with a Chair," (oil/canvas, 80 X 70 cm, n.d.)

woman. It is a sickly, bilious green with streaks of adulterated yellow surfacing here and there. In this situation, the yellow, which is mixed with brown, loses its cheerful character immediately, and adds a perception of illness and bitterness. Moreover, it affects surrounding colours as well and green becomes coarse and vulgar in its presence. A general sense of unease is also generated by the application of the yellow pigment in an irregular combination of strokes and swirls of colour.

If the work was limited only to a figure adrift on a sea of despondency there would be reason to accept the hopelessness of her situation, but instead, Śarma introduces sections of physical and psychological brightness throughout the work. First, she frames the work with two large chunks of colour - a horizontal strip of pure white and a wall of intense orange. To each major area she adds thin bands of colour for emphasis and demarcation. The white is edged with yellow and brown, while the orange wall appears with a sunny band of yellow. These colours balance the melancholic and downward pull of the green with warmth, light and a heliotropic sense of upwardness. They add elements of vibrancy, life and delicacy to counteract the crassness of the green.

The white, especially, appears as a bright, cloudless horizon. It is the pure energy of unbounded space, the primordial formlessness before creation. In this sense, it

represents all possibilities: the pure potential of the future, immaterial space, unlimited expansiveness and unmitigated power. As such, it refers to timelessness and eternity. Finally, it is also the backdrop against which all individual suffering is measured. After all, what are personal issues in the face of eternity? This radiant, almost colourless band of heavenly white puts the situation in a different perspective. It shows that despite the wretchedness (green) from the lower perspective of the individual, all is well with the world.

If white appears as the impersonal light of eternity and green as the depression and worry of day to day existence, then the patch of bright orange and yellow to the upper right is the inexhaustible power of nature for self-transformation. It is energy, but not in its unbounded form, but rather contained and directed energy of nature. Here, orange, as a product of red mixed with yellow, represents the vitality and intensity of living. Where white is free from all restraints of time, red-orange stands for the present. The painter tucks a small triangle of this colour discreetly into the chair (the psychological support of the woman) so that the stimulative character of red-orange is immediately available. Śarma positions the figure so that instinctively, like a flower to the sun, the maid turns her body and allows the wholesome warmth to permeate her defeated body and mind.

One sees that, at present, the maid has exhausted her personal resources and is awaiting some kind of renewal. Śarma reinforces that idea by providing something for her to fall back on, a sturdy chair. This chair, with its seat of bright orange and four strong uprights, is like her backbone. It reaches confidently above the horizon and into the air as the symbol of an indomitable spirit. Considering that shortly after Śarma finished the work, this tribal maid left domestic service and returned to her own village, the portrait is almost a premonition of spiritual exhaustion and renewal.

Śringar

"*Śringar*" (oil on canvas, 116 cm X 112 cm, 1993) (Plate 36) or what would be roughly equivalent to something like "Beauty Culture," has a more positive ring. Two young servants are pictured in a relaxed moment of feminine intimacy. Seated on an invisible couch, the women's bodies, robed in identical white dresses, give the impression of a single, central mass, while their limbs jut out at strong angles, with ankles, knees and elbows forming roughly parallel lines. The women seem to be so intuitively attuned to one another, both by virtue of their dress and posture, and by the very act of braiding the hair, that they appear to be an indivisible unit. Although one plaits the hair and the other sits passively by, it is the sense of the duo rather than the individual, that catches the eye.



Pl. 36. Śarma, "Śringar" (oil/canvas, 116 X 112 cm, 1993)



Pl. 37. Photo: Archer, "Santal girl with Mirror"

These women have a sense of beauty of their own, although it is not the kind usually associated with the ideal of Indian femininity. Their limbs are not petite and finely formed, their faces do not wear the refined elegance of Tanjore sculptures, expensive creams and perfumes do not adorn their bodies, yet they do have their own kind of loveliness. Their beauty is the type associated with strength of limb, and will. Their bodies resound with a kind of robust strength, their feet and legs tell of long distances travelled, their arms bespeak carrying water, holding children, hundreds of hours of kitchen work. Dignity shows in their bearing and delicacy in the manner in which one lifts and separates the hair while the other watches contentedly in the mirror. It is a kind of beauty which has nothing to do with modernity and the latest issue of *Femina* or the most recent *sari* fashions from Bombay. Instead, it is self-contained, domestic and intimate.

Servant on the Balcony

"*Servant on the Balcony*" (oil on canvas 170 cm X 108 cm, 1993) (Plate 38) was painted at Śarma's previous home on Exhibition Road in Patna. Looking into the blaze of sunrise, one feels swept away by a sense of expansiveness and freedom. These characteristics are enhanced by the long stretch of balcony, the distance of the horizon, an atmosphere flooded with sunshine and fresh air, a single, contrasting blue figure and a minimalist approach to decoration. Its virtue lies in



P1. 38. Sarmā "Servant on the Balcony," (oil/canvas, 170 X 108 cm, 1993)

its simplicity. In terms of colour and spatial division it is one of Śarma's best works.

Śarma's approach to structuring the work is quite straightforward. First, she divides the canvas into almost equal areas of background and foreground with a wide, horizontal band of critical red just slightly below the centre line. Even though the colours remain more or less similar in both the top and bottom of the picture, this red stripe signals a kind of division or barrier. Because of its presence, the yellow-orange of the top is interpreted differently than the same colour at the bottom. Effectively, the red band separates interior from exterior, the world of the other from the world of self, a sense of expansiveness from a sense of solidity.

In order to balance the emphasis on the horizontal, the painter introduces two stout, vertical pillars. Whereas the horizontal gives the work a sense of distance and breadth, the verticals speak of height and depth. Together, the combination of the horizontal with the vertical gives the work a three dimensional quality of area and space. The vertical pillars also create accents in the painting, effectively breaking the image into distinct frames. To the left, the pillar focuses the viewer's attention on a red door, enigmatically open; to the right, and directly at a main (horizontal/vertical) intersection, sits a solo figure.

It is a tribute to Śarma's abilities that she is able to say so much with such a restricted palette of colour. The whole work may be reduced to a handful of colours: vermilion, cadmium yellow, chrome yellow, a thin wash of cobalt blue and touches of white. It is, therefore, not the wide variety of colours which gives the image complexity, but rather the skilled and intuitive placement of pigment. Depending on the position and moderating effects of adjacent colours, a given colour may elicit significantly different responses. For example, Śarma uses almost identical colours for the foreground and background, but by the addition of a few streaks of white, the background becomes resplendent. Suddenly, there is a sense of illumination, of pure space, rising energy and infinity. The yellows take on an aura similar to the tribal pictures such as *Yogal Jodi* (Plate 20) and speak of an atmosphere charged with light, intensity and the quickening power of action. By contrast, the foreground, which is almost identical in colour, but contains an area of cobalt blue, projects solidity, substance, duration and time.

Śarma introduces the only cool block of colour in the form of the maid's blue sari to the lower right of the picture. Yet, this triangular section of colour has a dramatic effect on balancing the image and grounding it. The blue triangle, with its solid, broad base, is a necessary complement, since it is able to absorb some of the energizing effects of the dominant warm colours. Śarma integrates small

touches of vermilion and orange as decoration in the woman's dress and jewellery into the blue to dramatize this effect.

The eye naturally gravitates to this section because it differs in intensity from the rest of the image. Were it not for a contrasting section of blue piping framing the door to the left, the presence of the maid would overwhelm and destabilize the entire piece. A sense of equilibrium is introduced by the red and blue door to the left, which appears in almost direct, inverse proportion to the figure of the maid. On the door, a strong, vertical section of vermilion with blue accent balances the cool gravitation of the seated figure. Together, the upward tendency of the red door to the left and the grounding effect of the blue sari of the maid to the right create their own diagonal of interest.

By using a combination of warm and cool colours, by emphasizing first the horizontal then the vertical, and by playing with ideas of mass and space, Śarma shows not only the existence of opposites, but, more importantly, the coincidence of opposites. In *Maid on the Balcony* Śarma shows that state in which the Chinese elements of *yin* and *yang* are in dynamic tension, where expansion and relaxation, vitality and tranquillity, action and recuperation, stimulation and peace, time and timelessness are balanced and harmonious.

The Window Washer

In other places Śarma expresses the vigour of her subjects. "*The Window Washer*" (oil on canvas, 77 x 104 cm,

1989) (Plate 39) is a painting of an athletic young man who was temporarily employed by Śarma in her home. The yellows, reds and greens are so charged with physical energy that the painting almost vibrates. With premeditated coarseness she sketches the raw outlines of her subject exaggerating the contours of his muscles to the point of caricature. Bold red lightning bolts indicate the raw physical energy and stamina emanating from the figure. The protagonist looks straight at us with intelligence and calmness. Yet, in contrast to his muscular body and his psychological collectedness, something betrays a sense of incongruity. The dramatic foreshortening of the stool, which threatens to launch him towards the viewer, the tentative perch at the end of the stool and the way his head is angled forward with his hands resting on his knees demonstrate an underlying uncertainty or unease.

The figure combines physical strength and confidence with unusual sensitivity. The key appears to be the way Śarma portrays the body and the head of the figure. She paints the arms and legs by creating generous curves of muscles, pronouncing and even exaggerating their form to underline his sinewy strength. In contrast, she makes the head disproportionately small and refined with a slender neck. In doing so, Śarma looks past the externals of a simple, low-paid window washer and sees beyond into his inner beauty. In his face there is great intelligence, gentleness of spirit, and understanding. There is a dignity which borders on nobility.



Pl. 39 Sarma, "Window Washer," (oil/canvas, 104 X 77, 1989)

It is all the more lovely since it is also lit with an inner glow of compassion and a recognition of the pathos of the human condition. It is a face which has suffered and because of it looks upon others with a compassionate eye. There is no question of judging others, only a gaze of genuine awareness.

Despite the look of poise, tension is built into the work. His posture is a little too straight, a little too stiff and uncomfortable. It is as if he cannot relax or wishes to escape. The tension of his carriage speaks of an enforced immobility which is not his nature. It is through movement that he finds and expresses himself - black lines outlining his ribs stretch outward across the chest, sinuous pulses of energy ripple down his arms, the air vibrates with motion all around him. In contrast, the enforced stillness and tenseness in his body appear even more pronounced.

In terms of colour, Śarma overwhelms the viewer with almost an entire canvas of yellow. Like *Yogal Jodi* (Plate 20) and *Nepali School Master* (Plate 40), yellow appears in its most expansive mode. There is light, energy, and a sense of marvel surrounding the figure. Between his body and the background there is no distinction or separation. Both are infused with the same glowing brightness. The figure and background share the same power of yellow to sublimate matter into a higher more ethereal form of radiant energy. The introduction of scattered elements of red only serve to heighten the energizing, and vibrating effect.

Were it not for the coolness of the white dhoti and the square green stool at the bottom, the effect would be entirely ethereal and there would be no sense of groundedness in the piece. But by the addition of these two colours, Śarma balances warm and cool colours and checks the tendency for sublimation of yellow into the atmosphere by grounding the figure on a horizontal, opaque, cool green seat. The shape of the stool as well is important. Four-cornered, like the cosmological sign of the earth, it creates an unshakeable, grounded foundation. The window washer bends to take the shape of the stool, his thighs and knees conforming to its angles. He, too, is a simple man of the earth, unadorned, technically unsophisticated, yet carrying dignity and wisdom in his person.

Nepali School Master and Student

A favourite painting of Śarma's, and one that was prominently displayed in her home, is the "*Nepali School Master and Student*" (oil on canvas, 104 X 76 cm. n.d.) (Plate 40). Overall, there are few of Śarma's works that match the sense of openness, relaxation and well-being that she captures in this work. Although the setting is different, it has much in common with the mood of the series of paintings of tribal people in Orissa and Bihar. Unaware of our presence, a young student goes over his lesson in the backstreets of a Nepali town under the watchful eye of his tutor. Here, one sees the very simplicity of life: the sun soaked buildings and



Pl. 40 Sarma, "Nepali School Master and Student"
(oil/canvas, 104 X 76 cm, n.d.)

pavement, the absolute concentration on the task, and the natural presence of the hen and rooster. One notices no sense of conflict, and, instead, is struck at how unaffected it all seems - how the chickens form an integral part of the morning lessons. The animal world is just as essential to the scene as the master's shoes. The juxtaposition adds to the atmosphere of informality and relaxation.

This illustration is not a social critique in the negative sense, where the artist forces us to confront some unpleasant truth and to right long-neglected wrongs. Instead, it is a call for the appreciation of the simple pleasures of human life. It shows us how naturally, how peacefully and how pleasantly humans are able to fit into the world. There is a spontaneous communion between the environment, human endeavour and the animal kingdom. All the world is aglow with this feeling.

As in the preceding image, Śarma uses yellow extensively throughout the piece. But here, unlike the former, there is little relief as the foreground, mid-ground and background are all entirely permeated with strong colour. Such an extensive use of yellow creates the impression that the central characters are encircled by light from every direction. Visually, light floods the image bringing warmth, good cheer, happiness and a hopeful regard for the future. Beyond the obvious connections with sunshine, yellow relates directly to the light of knowledge. Like the golden haloes seen on the

portraits of saints throughout the world, yellow and gold are traditional colours indicating higher understanding, and in the most extreme cases, complete transfiguration. Here too, the schoolmaster is painted with a head covered in a golden cap, and his clothing is a combination of white and gold. He is a repository of wisdom, and his young companion's clothes reflect that light of learning. Yellow, and with it the idea of light, is routinely associated with intelligence: one "sees the light," people speak of a person being "bright," geniuses who revolutionize a particular field are "luminaries," or "stars." Yellow, as the emblem of the sun is the most expansive and celestial of colours and the colour of revealed truth.

Śarma also sets up a diagonal line of interest in the work, from lower left to upper right. First, toward the bottom of the image to the left, she uses cool green and dark blue for the child's clothing. Diagonally above, is the roughly triangular silhouette of the master, who as carrier of the tradition, is depicted in tones of yellow and gold with brown and red accents. Finally, in the upper left corner she introduces the hen and rooster in triangles of red and reddish-brown surrounded by a halo of white. From the cool tones at the bottom of the work, to the gold in the centre, to the white heat at the top, the eye is drawn automatically across and upward by the shifts of colour.

Similarly, shapes are laid out along the diagonal. The youngster's diminutive body is replicated on a larger scale by the master diagonally above. The duplication and enlargement of form moves the line upward and to the right. Where this ends, two parallel lines along the pavement guide the eye onward towards the triangular shapes of the hen and rooster. The rooster, in particular, is striking as he lifts his head towards the sky in the glorification of the day. In some regards, it is the rooster, with its sturdy legs and fearless cry, that is the real focal point of the picture. The diagonal across the picture culminates in his small but dauntless form, and all around him the air glows white with the raw energy of awakened life. Śarma paints him a deep, rich red to indicate the quickening of life.

In addition to the diagonal, Śarma uses vertical colour accents to add to the impression of height and depth. The highlights of gold on the wall, the block of midnight blue near the centre, the red shadow of the rooster on the wall and the rooster's body emphasize the vertical, so that the picture has a sensation of expanded space in all directions.

These last six paintings depict Śarma's view of the dignity of human life and the nobility of human labour. In Śarma's portraits of domestic servants and day labourers, the viewer is able to see these people through the artist's eyes. Although she could have chosen more prosperous and more influential subjects, Śarma paints the lives of ordinary men

and women who distinguish themselves, not through learning or high position, but through the dignified way in which they deport themselves. In doing so, Śarma honours the spark of divinity in each person, which the Gītā proclaims, is the same in all beings.¹¹² Or, as Kabir once put it, "All men and women are His living forms."¹¹³ Not only does Śarma recognize the divine in each person, but growing up in a Gandhian ethos, she learned to respect the value of others' labour, no matter how inconsequential it may appear in society's eyes. And since, according to the Gītā, works of all varieties are needed to maintain the world, and if it is true that actions do not pollute the Self, then all occupations may lead to fulfilment.¹¹⁴ Śarma's works reveal the inner man or woman whose worth cannot be measured or defined in terms of dollars or cents or job descriptions. Every life has the potential for fulfilment and transcendence.

INNER REFLECTIONS

Self-portrait

The following three works: "*Self-portrait*" (watercolour on paper, 30 cm X 35 cm, c.1957) (Plate 41), "*At the Window*" (oil on canvas, 92 cm X 92 cm, n.d., c.1970) (Plate 42) and "*Woman at the Window*" (oil on canvas, 92 cm X 92 cm, n.d.) (Plate 43) form a triad even though were produced at different periods in Śarma's life, and are not, strictly speaking, all images of herself. Only the first is technically a self-

portrait, but the remaining two reveal so much about Śarma and show such a strong sense of identification, that even though she paints another, she displays her own inner feelings. In this sense, each image is a cameo of Śarma's own life at a particular time and place, and reflective of her own inner journey.

In the first work, *Self-portrait* (damaged negative), which was created before her husband's untimely death and before she began to experiment with an Expressionistic style, the treatment is more constrained and very delicate. Śarma shows none of the vigorous line of her later works, and the colour scheme is entirely subdued. There are no vibrant reds or yellows, no cobalt blues or emerald greens, only the subdued browns, heavy reds and the muted background of violet and blue. In contrast to her later works, the whole tone is repressed.

The most striking aspect of the work, in terms of colour, is the central block of white. Against the deep, dark, background, the white appears in stark contrast. The background, with its dark, mysterious, womb-like effect, recedes from the viewer at the same time as the white advances. Consequently, the central character stands out dramatically as if she were in a spotlight, or a character modelled in relief carving. By the dominance of white, light and emphasis are focused on the character, but the surrounding colours, lit by reflection, still provide ambience. Śarma



Pl. 41. Sarmā, "Self-portrait" (watercolour, 30 X 35 cm, c.1957)

frames and balances the strong central block with a thin vertical section of intense, deep red along the right and with two small areas at the upper corners. The background contains deeper tones of red combined with violet. Collectively, these elements add contrast and warmth to the work, so that the final effect is of a cool, centre surrounded by a warm background. (Note: red shift appears in reproduction).

The white sari models her torso and waist closely, moving gracefully along the curves of the body up to her left where it cascades over her shoulder in a long vertical sheath. Highlights following the folds of the garment create a series of gentle, undulating wave patterns across the diagonal and over the right arm. The overall effect of the sari is transparent and diaphanous - one almost detects the bare midriff and the curve of the hip below. This gives the figure a sensuous, slightly mysterious character. Finally, Śarma portrays herself in a plain white sari. Symbolically, as in other pieces, the whiteness and the lack of decoration speak of simplicity and purity of emotion.

Śarma uses the upper edge of the sari, where it moves across the bodice and along the upraised arm, to focus attention towards the face and the lifted curtain to the right. First, the facial features are framed by the position of the left arm draped across the head and the curled palm which unfolds gently at the temple. Secondly, the right hand,

which draws the curtain aside at the top, creates a diagonal line.

The heavy red curtains frame the figure as a whole in a dramatic and almost theatrical way. The curtains separate the space and create boundaries. In contrast to the delicate wistfulness of the white sari, they are thick, heavy and somewhat oppressive. The strong, deep red colour indicates the presence of passion and unresolved yearning. The same colour appears blended with violet in the background. As it appears in the Christian tradition as the colour for the penitent Mary Magdalene, violet symbolizes love, truth, passion and suffering. It is also a colour of intense psychic and emotional identification. Violet expresses itself in a number of ways, from a genuine, and intuitive understanding between individuals to mystic or erotic union. Here, it indicates the close physical and emotional background linking husband and wife.

Even without knowing that the self-portrait was painted while Śarma was awaiting her husband at the end of the day, it is easy to read the longing, suffering and purity of emotion in the figure. The face, so unlike the portraits of later years, is delicately and sensitively drawn. The eyes point to a sadness which is deep and unspeakable; the full lips describe a sensuous nature, unable, perhaps, to articulate its needs. There is a mute sadness about her which her husband, a kindred creative spirit, may have understood. Her facial

expression, her virginal appearance as if she has stepped fresh from a bath, her long, loose hair and her body language speak of a vulnerable woman who allows only those closest to her to see her true sensitivity. Certainly, the impression of longing and loving are clear as she draws aside the curtains and peers into the evening.

The tone of this work is very different from her later works. In *Self-portrait*, the style is controlled and realistic. It is executed by the hand of a practical, contained woman, whose role is to be a wife and mother. She is beautiful, passive, and because she lives only through others, unfulfilled. Only her husband understands her and she remains alienated from the rest of the world. Later, when she comes into her own as a woman and as an artist, she finds her own style and a strength she may never have realized she possessed.

At the Window

The second portrait, "*At the Window*" (Oil on canvas, 65 X 100 cm. c. 1970) (Plate 42) fits thematically, but can be dated circa 1970.¹¹⁵ It shows a beautiful woman pensively sipping tea out of a china cup with a matching saucer on her lap. By the contrast of the darkness in the room and the blaze of sunlight outside the window, it appears to be morning. The dark room acts as a kind of cocoon around the figure and her thoughts, enveloping her and giving her a sense

of security and belonging. From within the security of her own home, she looks out onto the promise of the day. She is positioned strategically at the transitional point between inside/outside, night/day, home/external world, reflection and action. All options seem to be within her reach. She seems to contemplate the outside world with measured consideration, appearing neither rash nor unduly depressed. As much as it is a portrait of another, it shows so much of Śarma's character that it seems a self-portrait done when she was a woman of similar age.

Again, as in the previous work, Śarma uses a simple format of a woman at the window. But the window is symbolic and one that is flooded with sunshine is different than one shrouded with heavy curtains. In this portrait, Śarma takes a much more sanguine approach to the future and the outer world. The window radiates with such an intense light of potential that it is almost a blinding white. It is so bright that the shape of the curtain can barely be distinguished from the window itself. The light entering the room however is transformed for domestic consumption. Instead of a blinding light of the outside world, the interior light becomes mellow and diffuse, warming the figure and creating a soft orange glow like coals on a bonfire. It simmers rather than flames.

The structure of the work also brings the light/dark, inside/outside themes clearly into focus. Śarma breaks the back and mid-ground into two distinct sections: a blue-black



Pl. 42. Sarma, "At the Window," (oil/canvas, 65 X 100 cm, c. 1970

to the left and a block of strong white to the right. Since both of these large sections of pigment are strong colours, the effect is one of acute contrast. The eye naturally shifts from dark to light so that a sense of movement is created by the progression from a dark, weighty presence on the left to the more ethereal one on the right. Besides these two areas, a diagonal of orange, running almost the entire length of the image, generates energy and draws the viewer into the depth of the work. Curves introduced along the diagonal such as the slope of the shoulder, the roundedness of the knee, the soft angle of the drapery reaching the floor, all add fluidity and motion. So strong is the sensation of motility, that the character appears sinuous and mermaid-like.

Śarma paints the figure as if she is emerging from the darkness. The bottom of the chair sits in deep shadow, her sari moving from dark orange-red and burnt sienna to a brighter chrome-yellow near the window. It is as if the woman is being drawn to life by the outside sun. She rises to the light and her vermilion *bindi*, the beauty mark in the centre of her forehead, tells of an interior light and fire, the equal of the exterior one. The figure responds to the light with raised head and eyes, a confident expression and a tea cup raised as if in a toast to the day. There is no hint of suppression or lassitude. This is a posture of calm and confident repose. The soft, loose treatment of the clothing, gently wrapping the body further enforces the idea of domestic

security. In the final analysis, it is the image of a woman in full control of her powers, secure in her own sense of herself and able to meet life's challenges head on.

Woman at the Window

In contrast, "*Woman at the Window*," (oil on canvas, 76 cm X 103 cm, n.d.) (Plate 43) which is almost identical in terms of organization to the previous, shows none of that quiet confidence of the former. It is a particularly poignant work, which according to Śarma, is of a middle-aged woman who helped others her whole life and yet has been abandoned by friends and family at a time of great need. The depth of the surrounding blue is the visible expression of the Dark Night of the Soul, but the emotion is also expressed through the entire body. Curled up almost in fetal position, hair limp and head angled towards the window, an incredible sadness surrounds and emanates from the figure. The blueness is only broken by the white of a bandage-like sari streaked with painful trails of red. Her whole person seems to cry out. Furthermore, her isolation is enhanced by the fact that the window shows not daylight, as in the previous work, but only a paler shade of night. Even if dawn will arise, it is still a long way off. Yet, in spite of all the reasons for one to be overwhelmed by sadness, she still shows great strength of character. The position of the head, which is so awkwardly stretched to the right so as to appear detached from the body, speaks poignantly. The power of her jawline, the intent look



Pl. 43. Sarma, "Woman at the Window"
(oil/canvas 76 X 103 cm, n.d.)

that she casts at the window are all indicative of one who refuses to give up hope. In spite of all odds, a new day will rise. Again, we can see traces of an older, more disillusioned, but still strong, Śarma in this work.

One of the compositional techniques which Śarma uses here is the replication of the square and the rectangle. This includes the rectangular window, the faint, square shadow above the figure's head, rectangular pillows and an oblong bed. The square, as opposed to the circle of heaven and eternity, represents the earth and earthly existence. The positioning and colour of each of these squares then reflects some aspect of human existence which Śarma wishes to reveal. The square to the right, which one may assume is towards the east, represents the direction of the future. It is quite clear by the angle of the head, which appears distorted and detached, that this direction holds great interest and perhaps even liberation. Beyond the window the viewer is only able to glimpse an amorphous swirl of navy highlighted with prussian blue. It is left deliberately vague, ambiguous and unresolved. Although there is no impression that the external world is especially sinister, neither does it offer any resolution.

If the window represents the future, then the square, shadowy frame, barely visible, above her head may represent her past, personal experiences. Like a memory from long ago, it recedes into the depths and although one remains aware of

its presence, nothing is distinct. Details are impossible to read. These images and associations of the past stand behind her like a silent sentry, their presence is subtle yet palpable. As well, the square, unspoken power of the past is connected to the future in a kind of geometrical relation. The two shapes share the same plane and are related to each other as sides of a three-dimensional cube. In this sense, it shows that the past and the present are distinct, but nonetheless, continuous elements of human existence. What connects both of them is the present, which takes the form of a roughly rectangular white bed which merges with the figure.

It is the present situation, in the form of the bed and the woman, which occupies the main section of the canvas. The rectangular bed, as a slice of time, contains the suffering and hopes of the present. It alone is contoured and brought alive by a living presence. The past is dark, the future hazy, but the present, a living moment of bitter-sweet existence, is the eternal now. Śarma blurs the separation between the woman and the bed covering both with a soft, white blanket of colour lightly tinged with reflected, melancholic moonlight. This creates a certain ambiguity of a white figure on a white ground where the points of separation and contact are difficult to distinguish. The lack of clear separation has implications for her sense of independence and raises the question of her ability to act.

The colours themselves would seem to indicate as much. For the most part, the dark, cool, passive blue of the background establishes an atmosphere of introspection and lack of action. The white, tinged with blue, is similarly cool and inactive. The yellow ochre skin tones have a flat neutralizing effect of one who has renounced the world. It is the red, however, which adds a completely different dimension. Śarma uses a brilliant, pure vermilion to border to the sari and blouse. As the colour of passion, blood and fire, it demonstrates the presence of life and the will to live. It is difficult to say whether the red accents represent a draining away of life energy or a life which remains and refuses to be overcome. A third option is that it may be a combination of the two: a simultaneous decrease in physical and emotional resources, but a profound and enduring will to survive.

The way in which Śarma adds the red is also important. Beginning with the edging along the lower left, she creates a series of arcs moving up and across the image in a diagonal line towards the window. The eye moves unerringly upward until it stops at the face. From here, Śarma angles the face and adds a final drop of red at the lips. At this point, the eye is suspended for a moment while it takes in the expression of the face and then, following her gaze, it too is drawn automatically to the window and the question of the future.

THE FORESHADOWING OF DEATH

After the Heart Attack

The last two pictures, "*After the Heart Attack*" (Oil on canvas, 80 x 105 cm 1990) (Plate 44) and "*Untitled, 1996*" (Watercolour on handmade Nepali paper, 40 x 50 cm. 1996) (Plate 45) were done near the end of Śarma's life when her health was frail. The first work is based on the near-death memories she had after one of her heart attacks. In the hospital, she had the distinct impression of having to travel alone down an unknown road to an unknown destination. Along the way shapes began to transform themselves before her eyes and she vividly recalled watching "the temples melt." It was, she described, both frightening and exhilarating at the same time.

In this image, the viewer is faced with an enigmatic situation. On the one hand, the hallway is brightly lit and contains no obvious obstacles or threatening objects, but it is deserted and already like a catacomb. The colours are stark, almost harsh, and extensive use of white for the floor, walls and ceiling creates a cold, sterile atmosphere. It is bright, but not necessarily inviting. Against the overabundance of white, the shadows appear in greater contrast and the angular buttress of red at the top stands out dramatically. The black door on the floor and the darkened doorways create a sense of vagueness. In contrast to the



Pl. 44. Śarma, "After the Heart Attack,"
(oil/canvas, 80 X 105 cm, 1990)

other areas which are clearly formed and visible, the darkened spaces give no hints as to what lies on the other side. They stand silent and mute, awaiting the viewer's decision. From the viewer's perspective, there are three choices corresponding to the three darkened areas: the opening on the floor, the side door or the door at the end of the hall. At each point, Śarma confronts the viewer with loaded symbols and mysterious choices. Given the unusual circumstances of the piece, it may speak of a rare moment when the soul hovers between life and death and the possibilities of choosing the unknown or a return to known existence are real questions.

Śarma also introduces an unusual combination of shapes into the composition: square and rectangular doorways, a long, curved hallway, which from a distance looks roughly like a triangle, large sections of vertical wall, a mushroom-shape at the end of the hall and a curious angular section of red at the top of the piece. In this painting, objects are pared down to elemental geometric forms.

The crisis point in the work is at the end of the hallway, at the small, narrow and darkened doorway. Other shapes point to it. The black square in the forefront aims the eye in its direction, and the angular red shape hangs above it. As well, it is the nucleus of the odd, mushroom shape. Visually, Śarma leads the viewer to reflect on the unknowable which lies at the end of the corridor.

More than any other aspect of the work, the "A" shaped section of red at the top seems the most perplexing. Its colour, shape and position dramatically alter the entire work. Without it the piece would not generate such a strong reaction in the viewer. This area draws our attention because of the odd jumble of horizontal and vertical lines at the top and the acute angle at which it hangs from the ceiling and intersects the wall. Not only does its angularity stand out in a work that is characterized by softened shapes, but its bright colour attracts the eye like a magnet. It adds a further dimension of ambiguity. At times it appears as a wholesome support which bears the weight of the entire structure, not unlike the human heart. At other times, it is the clogged arteries and the last stabbing pain of life before the soul enters the spirit world.

This enigmatic work of Śarma's can be connected with Indian religious imagery in two ways. The first thing it suggests is the well-known imagery of the "cave of the heart." According to passages in the *Upaniṣads* and the *Bhagavad Gītā*, the Self or *ātman* dwells within the deepest part of consciousness, which is poetically described as the cave of the heart (*guhā hr̥dyam*), the space of the heart (*ākāśa hr̥dyam*), the abode or city of Brahman (*brahma pura*), the lotus of the heart (*hr̥t puskara*), or the hidden place (*nihitam guhayam*).¹¹⁶ Such imagery suggests an interior, space which is

not only the spiritual centre of a human being, but also the chief seat of the Supreme.¹¹⁷

As well as suggesting that the cave of the heart is the point where one achieves identity with Brahman, some Upanisads indicate that this is the place to which consciousness withdraws at the point of death. Some passages suggest that within the cave of the heart, there are coloured "endless rays for the Self" to choose at the approach of death. They are described as white, black, brown, blue, tawny and reddish. Although only one of them, the *susumnā*, pierces the solar orb and leads to ultimate liberation, all have implications for some kind of continued experience beyond this existence.¹¹⁸

Even though it is impossible to speculate on whether Śarma had this imagery in mind when she painted this work, or whether it was simply her own impressions of the event, there are intriguing points of intersection between imagery of the cave of the heart, the paths leading away from the cave at the end of life and Śarma's painting of a brush with death.

Untitled, 1996

In "*Untitled, 1996*," (watercolour on handmade Nepali paper, 40 X 50 cm, 1996) (Plate 45) one of the last pictures produced before her fatal heart attack, the viewer is faced with broken and deserted buildings. It is a barren and lifeless place with no living things - no people, no animals, no birds, no plants, no signs of movement. Yet, there are traces of previous inhabitants, like a ghost town where the

voices and faces of the past still hang in the air but cannot be seen. As when walking the streets of the deserted city of Fatehpur Sikri, or moving through the lanes of Pompei, there are vague and indefinable presences. Such is the case here, where life has departed and only echoes remain.

Structurally, the image is divided roughly in half horizontally, with an unusual sky, which is neither day nor night, in the top half, and buildings covering the bottom section. Like life itself, it shows the existence of opposites: form and formlessness, time and timelessness, spirit and matter. Both the band of the sky and the row of buildings stretch unhindered across the entire width from left to right, giving the impression of great expanse. There is no sense of outer boundaries, or any kind of closure of space. Despite the strong horizontal emphasis, the floating black disk in the sky and the black vertical strokes of emphasis on the walls add height, balancing the image and creating a three dimensional atmosphere.

Śarma links the upper and lower dimensions through the use of a circle in the sky and curved spaces on earth. Diagonally below the black "moon" to the left lies a blackened "U" shape in the broken profile of the building against the skyline. To the right and inside the tallest and most



Pl. 45. Sarma, "Untitled, 1996"
(watercolour/paper, 40 X 50 cm.)

prominent structure, Śarma paints a pale round circle in pale pink and ochre. Together, these three curved spaces create a triangle linking the horizontal plane with the vertical and creating a sense of relation between the heavy, dense material world and the atmosphere - or between the human world and the hereafter.

In her use of colour, black is the key, especially when it occurs in unusual circumstances. In the buildings, it gives a sense of weight and stability. When black, horizontal brush strokes appear along the bottom it creates groundedness and density, but when the same colour is introduced in the sky, it produces dislocation. To see the sun or the moon, the very archetype of light and resplendence, painted black seems contradictory, heavy and out of place. It adds an important element of tension to the work.

Her technical application of colour is also intriguing. It appears as if she began with a dark violet-blue sky and then sponged some of the pigment off. The remaining blue is not a wash in the strict sense but has a mottled, uneven appearance which appears to have been erased in places. It gives the image a texture and is almost the exact opposite to the way she applies colour to the rest of the work. For the buildings she uses a mixture of straight horizontal and vertical brush strokes. Here and there, she allows colours to bleed into one another, but on the whole she uses raw, unmixed pigment. Where she wants more complex tones she layers the

colours one on top of the other instead of mixing a new shade. The colours which stand out the most are the golden yellows and the bits of red scattered through the work, which save it from being much darker and more depressing, and give it texture and depth. Even small amounts of red and gold add positive energy to the piece. It is as if some unseen light source from above is illuminating the tops of some of the walls and glinting off the streets.

Since this was one of the last works before her death, it is best understood as a visual exploration or preparation for death. The crumbling buildings are like the shell of a tired human body worn down by decades of hard work. Similarly, the deserted city is a symbol for a body when the spirit has departed. It seems ancient and abandoned, like a graveyard already. Nevertheless, optimistic elements shine through and the sky is not totally black, but remains a transparent blue, with bits of light filtering down to light the foreground with golden tones.

The contradictions of light/dark, day/night, life/death contained within the black disk are the most insistent and in need of resolution. Psychologically, a black "sun" makes sense only in terms of an eclipse, when light is temporarily veiled by the passing of the moon. Around the world, myths explain that an eclipse is a highly charged, cosmically significant event related to the death and re-birth of the sun. Looked at in this way, an eclipse is a time when

darkness and death are temporarily victorious. The potential for re-birth is, nevertheless, latent in that process and the ultimate victory of light and life assured. This may be the final message of Śarma's piece.

The following poem, *The End, The Beginning*, by D.H. Lawrence, also uses the paradoxical image of dark and light contained within the sun to speak of the mystery of death and life.

If there were not an utter and absolute dark
of silence and sheer oblivion
at the core of everything,
how terrible the sun would be,
how ghastly it would be to strike a match, and make a
light.

But the very sun himself is pivoted
upon the core of pure oblivion,
so is a candle, even as a match.

And if there were not an absolute, utter forgetting
and a ceasing to know, a perfect ceasing to know
and a silent, sheer cessation of all awareness
how terrible life would be!
how terrible it would be to think and know, to have
consciousness!

But dipped, once dipped in dark oblivion
the soul has peace, inward and lovely peace.¹¹³

Part III: Evaluation

PART III

Chapter One

Interpretive Models for Evaluating Śarma's Art

Pictures aren't made out of doctrines.

- Monet

Art is, in present jargon, a hermeneutic of human existence. But it is a hermeneutic, an interpretation, only as it participates in the act of structuring. Criticism is a hermeneutic of art; but it, too, must be an act of structuring. Criticism is finally, an act of love.¹²⁰

The discussion thus far has focused on my own individual analysis and interpretation of some of Śarma's most important paintings. At all times, however, there were a number of factors below the surface which informed my decisions and coloured my interpretations. It is the purpose of the following section to bring those interpretive models more clearly into conscious focus.

The evaluation of any work of art is a synthetic process, which involves a complex refinement of intuition and linear analysis. Initially, the response to a work of art is direct and unmediated awareness without any kind of calculated evaluation. Only later, is this intuitive awareness informed by a conscious exploration of relevant philosophies and the application of the principles of painting and construction. In the process, the original, instinctive reaction is enriched, authenticated or corrected. Eventually, these two mechanisms are harmonized and a more accurate understanding, one which involves intuition and rationality, results.

In Śarma's case, three background factors underlie an appreciation of her work: Anand's theory of Aesthetic

Humanism, the connections between figurative art and the social-conscious movement, and Expressionist style.

Mulk Raj Anand's Aesthetic of Humanism

For Anand, the emphasis of Aesthetic Humanism is on the personal capacities of the individual artist to express and communicate some meaningful aspect of life in the contemporary world. The discovery of what it means to be "truly human" and the struggle to communicate at a profound, human to human level are the forces which drive the artist to create and the viewer to respond. According to this theory, if a work of art speaks to us, in a significant way, about some aspect of the human condition and forces us to reflect or raises our consciousness of the human spirit and the need for compassion and understanding then the artist has been successful.

The response, which is necessarily subjective and individual, may be interpreted differently by each viewer. Since each person has his/her own individual way of responding to a piece of art, the number of ways in which a work may be interpreted is almost unlimited. In each individual an artistic response is generated and commentary becomes an act of aesthetic dialogue between artist and viewer. A given work may evoke similar sentiments in different viewers, but the actual statement and the precise way in which each person speaks is always unmistakably his or her own. Each viewer creates his/her own particular response.

In general, the type of language used in describing a piece of art naturally leans towards a more evocative style suggestive of the vision itself. The assumption underlying this idea is that the critic shares the insights of the artist, and is even able to go beyond what the artist was consciously aware of. The job of the critic is to transpose a visual statement into a verbal one. The process itself allows maximum freedom for the critic and for the work. Just as a hundred different responses to a sunset by musicians, poets, dancers and painters are all equally valid, so are multiple responses to a given painting. What distinguishes good from bad is the degree of resonance the piece produces. The spirituality of the work is seen in its effects on the viewer.

What Anand seems to be hinting at is something analogous to the creation of a harmonic vibration within the viewer, so that the artist, his/her creation and the viewer are all on the same frequency.¹²¹ In his view, the most important aspect of a painting is its depth dimension, its "intense humanism," that quality which stirs an "emotional alliance with inner life." A painting which is a successful example of Aesthetic Humanism reveals another life like his/her own.

In addition to establishing a sense of correspondence between artist and viewer, Anand's theory emphasizes the need for the artist to address concrete problems of existence. In this way, Śarma's art does reflect Anand's principles of

aesthetic humanism. As extensions of her own personal metaphysics, Śarma's paintings deal with such issues as suffering, compassion, charity, and love for the Absolute through service to all.¹²² She brings the viewer into close contact with lives of her subjects and in doing so, introduces moral and political overtones. Although aesthetic form may be indispensable, it is the humanist component of Śarma's work that speaks to us at the deepest level.

Art forces one to respond in a direct and personal way which, according to Anand, is able to "make humans whole again by putting humanity rather than an abstract ideal at the centre of existence."¹²³ When we are aware that each and every individual we encounter, independent of his or her social or economic status, is a "concretion of being," we are able to see the spark of the divine in each person. In Śarma's words we "see the divine in all things" and understand the real significance of being human in the most profound sense of the word.¹²⁴ Unfortunately, in the struggle for survival, social mobility and success, people often forget this and it becomes the artist's task to remind us that we have a familial relationship with each individual in society. Their suffering is ultimately our suffering.

Sometimes this sense of what it means to be human is most poignantly displayed against a backdrop of inhumanity. Art which disturbs our equilibrium forces us to address the issues of injustice and inhumanity. As Satyajit Chaudhury explains:

We experience in such works presentations of a social tension that destroys human values. These are the product of artistic genius requiring a profound social consciousness and consummate technique. The strife-ridden social reality impels our artists to create such grim, haunting images. This has been a dominant trend in our art and most of our powerful artists are committed to it.¹²⁵

The images Śarma chooses, the themes she explores and her method of painting all reflect her belief in the oneness of humanity. In this sense, her art is an extension of her belief system. By depicting the suffering and inequality in the lives of her subjects she forces us to look at fundamental issues concerning the meaning of being human. This is aesthetic humanism in action:

If religion is supposed to stand for something universal and sublime the present-day religion can only be a neo-humanism which takes into its large family of living things all kinds of animal and plant life... art may not preach or sermonize but it can certainly express concern and love for man and nature, awakening those in the street as well as those in mansions to their beauty and concern.¹²⁶

Socially Conscious Art and Figurative Style

As part of a larger movement of "socially conscious" painters, Śarma focuses her attention on the underlying issues of suffering and inequality in contemporary Indian society. In terms of style, the one thing which socially conscious painters, including Śarma, have in common, is that they generally avoid abstraction as being an inappropriate vehicle to relay their concerns. Instead, it is through representational art, and more specifically figurative painting, which focuses on the human form, that art is able to

transmit this "intense humanism."¹²⁷ The human body remains one of the most powerful vehicles for translating human issues in a visually direct manner.

The representation of the human figure in recognizable form is so powerful that it says something of a society's awareness of the human situation. One well-known writer goes as far as to suggest that periods in which there is a lack of interest in the human form in art point to underlying "disquieting symptoms" of social pathology. In his view, the human figure, being the "visible sign and natural sacrament of human personality," and the way in which the "immortal soul shows through," is the ideal means in which to express spirituality.¹²⁸ Similarly, an Indian art critic concludes that the human form, the human condition and social predicament are the real "perennial and prime themes" of serious painters of all ages.¹²⁹ A third sees the human form as indispensable to any humanist-inspired philosophy. Badri Narayan explains:

I would not be too rash to maintain that a true resurgence of the human figure and the figurative in modern Indian art is difficult to achieve unless artists themselves turn manward (*sic*) and are inspired by the presence of the human personality to strike a balance between individual and social living, between the needs of the artistic identity and the workings of social emotions like fellow-feeling and communication in their particular situation. Until then, their art can be seen as the admirable exercises of gifted individuals.¹³⁰

For Jaya Appasamy, the "re-discovery" of the human figure in art since Independence is indicative of the artists' re-

awakening to the human condition and the human environment. She suggests that this concern can be "once again a primary source of art - captured with a modern and unsentimental sensitivity."¹³¹ Similarly, one of the greatest commentators on Indian culture in recent memory, Krishnapillai Krishnan Nair, who writes under the pen name Krishna Chaityanya, sees it as a way to focus attention on the immediate concerns of humanity - the saga quality of ordinary existence. He explains:

And when, in the contemporary scene, where academics and professional philosophising has become even more sterile in significance, ideas and values, I see the perceptions returning in painting and in expressing such (ultimate) concerns, art keeps God in the background and only the problems of man in focus.¹³²

A figurative painter, A. Ramachandran, who has developed his own style to record scenes of human tragedy such as refugees at railway platforms, torn and dishevelled men and women asleep or at labour, also accepts the fundamental importance of the human figure in addressing matters of social concern. For him, as for Śarma, the human figure is an important tool for artists who may not have a "political commitment", "but at least have a social commitment based on humanism."¹³³

Figurative style also ties back to the theory of Aesthetic Humanism promoted by Dr. Anand. For Anand, whose aesthetic humanism spans both the visual and the literary arts,¹³⁴ the human figure is the most touching and vital way to

express human concerns. As in his modern classic, *Coolie*, Anand believes that the best way to show the frailties inherent in contemporary society is not to speak in generalizations, not to plague the reader with elaborate theories of social dominance and repression etc., but to bring the reader to an intimate relationship with one who has suffered and lived under repression. Whether in literature or in painting, the human figure who bears the scars of his or her own existence speaks more genuinely to the heart than does any form of abstraction.

The Importance of Expressionism in Śarma's Work

An important factor in approaching Śarma's painting is the use of the Expressionist style of painting. Expressionism is defined by Sir Herbert Read as follows:

Expressionism is art which tries to depict, not the objective facts of nature, nor any abstract notion based on those facts, but the *subjective feelings of the artist*

.... Expressionistic art is an art that gives outward release to some inner pressure, some internal necessity. That pressure is generated by emotion, feeling or sensation and the work of art becomes a vent or safety-valve through which the intolerable psychic distress is restored to equilibrium. Such a release of psychic energy is apt to lead to exaggerated gestures, to a distortion of natural appearances which borders on the grotesque.... expression is not the spontaneous utterance of feeling so much as the recognition of images or objects which embody feeling.¹³⁵

Read explains that the primary feature of Expressionism is the emotive quality of the work. Through the identification with the artist's own interpretation of an

object or person, the viewer is led back to the very source of feelings - to unmediated awareness. Like the paintings inspired by Zen and Taoism, Expressionism seeks to capture the uniqueness of the moment, not only in terms of its physical properties, but in terms of the emotional and spiritual qualities it evokes as well. By offering us a new perspective from which to view the world, the Expressionist painter draws us towards the subject in a sympathetic, direct and non-judgmental way so that we may temporarily contact that person or object at the most intimate and personal level. Instead of projecting personal views and opinions onto the work, the viewer needs to maintain an open and receptive attitude. Ultimately, one is forced to confront the work in silence. As Read puts it, "Feeling is contemplated, but not within a philosophical frame of reference which lays down what the world is, or what it should be."¹³⁶

So powerful is the ability of Expressionism to transmit the uniqueness and sacredness of all things and to disclose the translucence of Ultimate Reality, that Tillich believes this style to be the most effective for modern audiences to reach the divine. According to him, Expressionism offers a more authentic experience of the numinous than art which uses the traditional symbol systems of organized religion. In other words, "an apple by Cezanne has more presence of Reality than a picture of Jesus by Hoffman."¹³⁷ Among all

styles of painting Tillich sees Expressionism as having the
"strongest affinity to religious art." Expressionism is

marked by its dynamic character, both in disruption
and creation. It accepts the individual thing and
person but goes beyond it. It is realistic and at
the same time mystical. It criticizes and at the
same time anticipates. It is restless and yet
points to eternal rest.¹³⁸

Part III

Chapter II

Śarma's Theory of Art as "Purity of Spirit"

A philosophically minded artist, in his explorations and experiments of matter and in quest for meaning and understanding, takes himself beyond the given and the expected. Journeying to where things are actually happening, in the very process, he discovers himself. He builds an image out of intense living, intense love and total involvement. Such work breathes life - has no boundaries, no separation; the whole environment nurtures it.¹³⁹

At the foundation of Śarma's theory of art lies an experience which is fundamentally religious in nature. She identifies it with the phrase "purity of spirit."

It needs purity of spirit to be an artist of any sort. But by "pure in spirit" I mean pure in spirit. An artist may be a profligate and from the social point of view, a scoundrel, but if he can paint a nude woman or a couple of apples so that they are a living image, then he is pure in spirit, and for the time being, his is the Kingdom of Heaven. This is the beginning of all art, visual or literary or musical - be pure in spirit. It is not the same as goodness. It is much more difficult and nearer the divine. The divine is not only good - it is in all things.¹⁴⁰

For Śarma, the creative process itself is an exercise in Zen like immediate perception, and the artist can be judged as "pure in spirit" solely on the basis of whether or not he or she is able, to attain and to convey that sense of immediacy. Furthermore, this artistic and religious purity has nothing to do with membership in formal religious organizations or even with being a "upstanding citizen". Like the Taoists of ancient China who composed some of their best works of poetry and painting in states of inebriation, this experience may be genuine in spite of the artist's transgressions of normal social decorum. The last few lines of this diary entry where she clearly states the primacy of "purity of spirit" over "goodness" seem to underline this idea.

Although it may seem contradictory, Śarma's "purity of spirit" is not a theory in the usual sense. It is more like a state of being. For her, theory, in the sense of deliberate

imitation or conformation to any set of external ideas would be shallow and false. Her approach is just the opposite - to ignore any form of intellectualization:

How contradictory all the theories of modern art are, rammed down your throat! They make art impossible. Theorize all you like but when I start to paint I shut my theoretical eyes and go for it with instinct and intuition.¹⁴¹

When asked about the mechanism of the artistic process she shrugs and wonders aloud how other artists find words to explain something that is non-verbal and non-linear. She once wrote that painting is the language of the heart and mind and that it needs to be felt in order to be understood. In another place she says it is like finding yourself literally in un-charted waters and being forced to discover a way out:

It is to me the most exciting moment where you have the blank canvas and a big brush full of wet colour, and you plunge. It is just like diving in a pond - there you start practically to swim. So far as I am concerned, it is like swimming in a baffling current and being rather frightened and very thrilled, gasping and striking out for all you are worth. The knowing eye watches sharp as a needle; but the picture comes clear out of instinct, intuition and sheer physical action. Once instinct and intuition get into the brush tip, the picture happens, if it is to be a picture at all. It is entirely a personal experience.¹⁴²

The importance of instinct, intuition and a non-analytical/ non-judgmental frame of mind is expanded by a quote which the abstract expressionist Robert Motherwell wrote in 1950 concerning his approach to painting. Like Śarma, Motherwell sees the creative act as one of exploration and faithfulness to the process itself.

The process of painting then is conceived of as an adventure, without preconceived ideas, on the part of persons of intelligence, sensibility and passion. Fidelity to what occurs between oneself and the canvas, no matter how unexpected, becomes central..... The major decisions in the process of painting are on the grounds of truth not taste..... No artist ends up with the style he expected to have when he began.¹⁴³

Both speak of painting as an adventure into the unknown and explain the importance of approaching the experience with an open mind. Motherwell and Śarma stress the importance of faithfulness to the creative process wherein truthfulness is the central issue and style the accidental by-product. They allow the creative process, which is a complex interaction between subject, painter and canvas, full play and the result is not tampered with in order to conform to someone else's canons of acceptability. Style, in this sense, is accidental rather than deliberate. Each painting creates itself in a way, and the role of the artist is to allow that process to work through him or her.

At other times, Śarma claims that painting acts as some form of reflective mechanism in which the artist actually discovers himself/herself in the process of creation. Furthermore, this process is not a matter of passive acceptance, but one of intense and meaningful engagement with the subject, the process and our selves. At the most profound level, painting acts as a catalyst in spiritual development:

A crystallizing or catalytic experience describes the moments of intense and unexpected excitement in which a person is confronted in a meaningful way with an art form or with another artist. Such

"moments" lead the artist to self-recognition. ... Maybe it's an intimacy - a strong relationship with the object... At times I have been overpowered with the subject.¹⁴⁴

Time and again, Śarma stresses the individuality of the encounter, saying she has "learned by experience," and that it is a "personal" perception. When, however, the artist does succeed in reaching that level of interiority and intimacy with the visionary experience, it can lead to profound insights. She describes those moments when a person is confronted in a meaningful way with a work of art as being charged with intense and unexpected excitement which triggers some kind of "crystallization or catalytic insight." Ultimately, the process leads to self recognition. In this sense, Śarma's art is a support for contemplation, a vehicle to reach the inner dimensions of her being and an occasion for recollecting the Truth.

Elsewhere, Śarma speaks of the need to relate so intimately with the subject that the usual barriers of object and viewer, and the boundaries which divide the individual from the world, the I-Thou relationship, are eliminated. So close is her affinity with the subject that she actually speaks of "dwelling in the vision itself." In one place she writes, " I was not only a witness, I have become as much its subject as its object."¹⁴⁵ In another place in her diary she gives a fuller explanation:

Art is a form of supremely delicate awareness and at-one-ment meaning "at-oneness," the state of being at one with the object. But it is the great at-

one-ment in delight. The only thing in which one can look into and see only vision, is the vision itself. The visionary image. That is why I am glad I never had any training but the self-imposed training of copying other artists' pictures in my childhood. And I believe one can only develop one's visionary awareness by close contact with the vision itself; that is, by knowing pictures, real vision pictures, and by dwelling on them, and really dwelling in them. It is a great delight, to dwell in a picture. But it needs a purity of spirit.¹⁴⁶

These quotes highlight Śarma's fundamental belief that the creative process is a spiritual process. For her, religious experience is not sectarianism in any form, nor does it have anything to do with ritual observation. It begins as a deep and personal experience of the divine which may be then translated aesthetically as art and ethically as compassion and a willingness to help others. In this sense, painting takes the place of devotional exercises, meditation and even prayer, because for her it is all these things at once. Not only is painting a substitute for the more traditional religious practices, but for her it is the most appropriate, most specialized and most effective method of reaching the divine. Overall, Śarma felt that few people understood her approach to spirituality. It was often difficult for family and friends to recognize that her painting was not just a hobby or even worse "a complete waste of time and money," but that it was critical to her sense of well-being. So integral was painting to her she was able to equate it to life itself, saying, "I paint, so I am alive. This process of creation keeps me going."¹⁴⁷

There is no doubt that Śarma saw painting as a personally rewarding creative and spiritual experience, but that does not mean she was only concerned with her own inner development. Quite the contrary. Inner growth must be matched by a pronounced concern with the plight of others. Externally, Śarma's spirituality was expressed by a broad concern for her fellow human beings. In fact, in conversation, Śarma could be critical of what she saw as hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness in the lives of the "religious people" she knew. She once complained that while many acquaintances of her age currently spent a good deal of their time doing *pūjā* in order to acquire merit for future lives, they refused to help the poor when called upon. True religiosity in her eyes was seen in service.

In order to grasp fully the significance of Śarma's paintings, one has to see them in relation to important events in her life. For Śarma, art is not something completely separate and compartmentalized, it is instead an extension of herself. As she once put it, her philosophy of art is consistent with her philosophy of life. Ideally, there should be no contradiction between what one says, does and paints. Thoughts, actions and artistic expression all flow from the same set of experiences and for Śarma, social consciousness does not end with the canvas. The degree to which she was actively engaged in educational and charitable work throughout her life shows her intensity of commitment.

Her canvases are also testaments to her concern for her fellow human beings. By portraying human suffering and the forces which generate it in society with deliberate directness and compassion, she leads us to consider what lies behind the painting and invites us to share in that level of common human experience which lies below the level of verbal articulation. Like a Zen master she relies on immediate perception and detachment to portray her subjects, bringing us to the point of not just sympathy, but genuine understanding.

As such, Śarma's works are part of what Anand calls the "humanist aesthetic", a new current of humanitarianism and social idealism. This neo-humanism, with its emphasis on the reality of here and now, and the belief that each individual is a unique "concretization of being" forces us to be alive to the present situation and to the suffering contained in it. By giving us a glimpse into the lives of some of society's most marginalized people, Śarma forces us to reflect. Ultimately, however, reflection should result in action. The true test of one's religious convictions can be seen in how one reacts and what one does. Yet, this is left up to the audience - she does not sermonize, but simply faces the viewer silently with her canvas. The sense of unease her works sometimes generate, awakens our consciousness and induces us to seek resolution.

Śarma understands individual distress, but sees it as part of a wider problem of human existence. By depicting real

men, women and children, she sheds light on the human condition as a whole. Through the individual we are led to the divine, through time we are led to timelessness, through alienation, poverty, despair and displacement we see the universality of suffering. Jyoti Sahi comments on the translation of these issues:

But the humanism of Indian artists, and the existentialism of Indian philosophy has always had something qualitatively different about it: Let us call it a sense of the cosmic. Here, agony is almost delivered from the personal and is understood as being the groaning of all creation.¹⁴⁸

The historical situation is just a setting in which to reveal something that is essentially timeless. As another artist, Satyajit Chaudhury explains in "Our Art, Our Reality:"

Works of art that bear a deep and poignant realization of the reality of life move us, often torment us with their direct impact. Such works reveal the truth of our existence in a particular socio-historical situation and at the same time bring out the essential human values that are set in the timeless human context. The exposure sparks off an instant reaction in the viewer, who gradually becomes in tune with the essential message the artist had projected in the created images.¹⁴⁹

Purity of spirit leads to seeing oneself in all persons, spontaneous compassion for the plight of others, and also clearly seeing injustice for what it is. Sarma's compassion allowed her to get beneath the surface of things and to find and reveal the soul within. She could see the Kingdom of Heaven in a twig-seller, a day labourer, or a prostitute. All were equal in her eyes, and through her art she felt compelled

to show it to the world. If the pure in heart really do see God, it is only because they have removed the prejudicial blindness that conceals the Kingdom of God from the rest of us. For Śarma, the simple, original vision is true and whole. God is light and light is love. Without the compassionate vision, there is no real art for Śarma.

Śarma was a painter. As she says, "I paint in order to live." Without a definite school of thought or philosophical system in which to locate a religious temperament of her sort, we are left to search for evidence of artists/saints of the past. For some, a painter like Van Gogh, with his intense vision and concern for the common person, may come to mind. But since time immemorial, artists have carried within themselves visionary power.

The purity of spirit which underlies this deeper seeing is a major theme in Hinduism. Śarma's purity of spirit, although arising from her own personal experiences of life and her struggle to express it through her efforts as a self-taught artist, is a reflection of her Hindu upbringing. That Śarma stumbled upon similar ideas through her own, perhaps unconscious processes, does not take away from the fact that her experience of truth was witnessed in the world through acts of service and loving kindness to those she felt were being cheated by the system, but who she recognized as human beings, just like herself.

Purity of Heart and the Advaitin Context

Many of the phrases and ideas that Śarma uses have a distinctly Vedāntic, although not a scholastic, ring to them. Her expressions of purity of heart as the antecedent to "dwelling in the Kingdom of God" and as being the "beginning of all art," her references to "being at one with the vision", her descriptions of the "knowing eye" and her belief that a painting creates itself through "instinct and intuition" all create the impression that the creative process transforms consciousness. Intriguing possibilities open up when one looks at her ideas in light of specific images (in classical and modern Advaitin sources) which describe an inward spiritual journey to the cave of the heart, past the knots of the heart via a state of purity.

B. Salvation in Advaita as Journey to the Heart

1. Cave of the Heart

Scriptural sources for Advaita state clearly that the Self, who is also Brahman abides in the cave of the heart.¹⁵⁰ It is within the cave of the heart, that one recognizes the ultimate non-duality of *ātman* and *Brahman*. That is, one comes to the direct realization that the object being sought is none other than one's own Self. As the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*

declares, "This soul of mine within the heart, this is Brahman."¹⁵¹ Consequently, the search for Brahman requires one to withdraw from the world and to look inward, into one's Self. One must be willing to turn away from the world in order to discover one's true nature. Liberation or *mokṣa*, means being established in the cave of the heart and understanding the truth of what it means to say, "I am Brahman."

The spiritual heart, where the Absolute dwells, must be understood as distinct from the physical organ of the human body. It takes the form of consciousness and cannot be bound to any particular physical locale. As the twentieth century Advaitin, Ramana Maharshi says, "It is both within and without yet has no inside or outside."¹⁵² The *Maitrī Upaniṣad* 6.38 describes Brahman as being hidden in the highest space, which is pure being, immortal and indestructible. Like the mathematical point at the centre of a circle, Brahman has position but not magnitude. It is without dimensions, yet all pervading, encompassing the infinitesimally small and the infinitely large. Paradoxically, the inner space of the heart has the same dimensions as the outer space containing the cosmos.

As far as this (world) space extends, so far extends the space within the heart. Within it indeed, are contained both heaven and earth, both fire and air, both sun and moon, lightning and the stars. Whatever there is of him in this world, and whatever is not, all that is contained within it.¹⁵³

The cave of the heart is the ultimate image of the Divine as the beginning and end of all existence, yet is simultaneously accessible to each individual.

As the phrase "cave of the heart" suggests, there is a certain element of mystery surrounding this discovery. Concealed within the deepest regions of the heart, variously referred to as the "heart cavern," "lotus of the heart," "space of the heart," or "ether of the heart,"¹⁵⁴ resides Brahman.¹⁵⁵ All of these phrases imply that Brahman is concealed in the secret and darkened depths of consciousness. "Into blind darkness enter they that worship ignorance; into darkness greater than that, as it were, they that delight in knowledge" says the *Īśa Upaniṣad*.¹⁵⁶

Brahman, as ultimate Knowledge is said to be hidden, secret and mysterious - *guhyā ādeśā* (hidden teaching), *paramam guhyam* (supreme secret), *vedānte paramam guhyam* (the highest mystery in Vedanta), *tat veda guhyopaniṣatsu gudham* (that which is hidden in the Vedas and Upaniṣads and *guhyataman* (secret doctrine.)¹⁵⁷ In fact, the search for the Self is so different from other kinds of knowledge that it requires a separate category. Knowledge of the Self is supreme Knowledge (*parā vidyā*), while knowledge in the sense of information about nature, science or history is of a lower level (*aparā vidyā*). Furthermore, the search for the self is not gained like other information through the senses, logic and discursive thought - to these it remains dark, concealed and

impervious. It can only be found through integral insight. The recognition of one's identity with the Supreme alone can be said to be saving or redemptive truth.^{15a} *Vidyā* is immediate, not abstract, but vital, powerful and transforming.

In spite of the inability to know, in the usual sense of the term, the seeker is inexorably drawn deeper into the mystery of Brahman. In the end, the seeker's willingness to enter the unknown regions of consciousness generates an acceptance of the unknowable darkness. One must be willing to open up to a world beyond the seen in order to find out what lies beyond it. The fact that one is looking intently for something, but doesn't know what it is or where it is, is an act of faith. The faith experience requires trust in the process itself. One believes the goal exists, but the path is not easy to see. And the way of self-discovery seems to be different for each individual.

Such was the case with Śarma. It was art which turned her mind inward from the world and became a vehicle for her spiritual life. Painting was a process of self-discovery, which she claimed was "entirely personal." She describes the excitement of waiting to "plunge" into the vision; she speaks of "swimming in a baffling current," of being both frightened and thrilled; and finally, she explains the pleasure with which she watches instinct and intuition get into the tip of her paint brush. For Śarma, painting was something that was intensely meaningful, engaging and magnetic. She had no idea

where her art would take her, or how it would develop. Yet, she was willing to trust in the creative process, to simply be aware of it without wanting to analyze, criticize, control or judge. It was through her faith in the act of creation that she opened herself up beyond the everyday and the mundane and was drawn towards a deeper understanding of who she was. For Śarma, art was her way to self-discovery, and by following her path, she was gradually transformed by it. She speaks of "catalytic moments" which lead to self-recognition, and refers to a new intimacy developing and of being "overpowered by the subject."

2. Knots of the Heart

If the cave of the heart represents the locus of salvation, then the obstacles which block awareness of that Knowledge are known as "knots of the heart." Ramana Maharshi identifies the "knot" as being the root problem of the sense of ego.¹⁵³ Like the *Pañcadaśī*,¹⁶⁰ the *Mundaka Upaniṣad* classifies the knots as "ignorance,"¹⁶¹ and suggests that severing the final knot is synonymous with reaching liberation:

The knot of the heart is cut, all doubts are dispelled and his deeds terminate, when He is seen, the higher and the lower.¹⁶²

Knots of the heart also refer, in a more general way, to all the entanglements, moral flaws and misapprehensions that cloud our understanding of the real nature of existence. The antidote for a heart bound by knots is one illumined by the

clarity of "purity of spirit" or "purity of heart." One passage succinctly tells us that when nature is pure there is release from all knots of the heart.¹⁵³ Another reads:

He is not grasped by the eye nor even by speech, nor by other sense organs, nor by austerity nor by work, but when one's nature is purified by the light of knowledge, then alone, he, by meditation, sees Him who is without parts.¹⁵⁴

3. Purity of Heart

Except in rare cases, purity of spirit is not something one achieves all at once. Rather, it is a long, slow process of calming desires, eradicating false notions, silencing mental distractions and concentrating attention so that the mind is made pure, subtle and unmoving. As one *Upaniṣad* concludes, "the mirror must be pure."¹⁵⁵ Only a purified mind is capable of transformation, as Ramana Maharshi states:

But in a pure mind which has been rendered subtle and unmoving by meditation, the Self-bliss will become manifest.¹⁵⁶

a. Bālya: Child-like Innocence

There are many ways in which a heart may be said to be pure, but one key definition includes *bālya*, child-like innocence and an absence of egotism. Just as Christ in the Gospels counsels that one must become as a child to enter the Kingdom of God, so too, do the *Upaniṣads* recognize the virtues of a humble, receptive, earnest and teachable nature. The positive characteristics of a child are non-attachment, innocence, freedom from distinctions, simplicity, immediacy and tranquillity of heart.¹⁵⁷ They are the corrective to the

intellectual conceits of self-conscious adults. In one passage, a Brahmin is encouraged to complement his years of study with such child-like simplicity in order to fully prepare himself for transformation:

Therefore, let a Brāhmaṇa, after he has done with learning, desire to live as a child. When he has done both with the state of childhood and with learning, then he becomes a silent meditator.¹⁶²

Śarma, too, sees the importance of having child-like receptivity to the vision. She complains that theories of modern art "make art impossible," and if one wants to paint one must abandon all such artificial views. Only by shutting her theoretical eyes and relying totally on her spontaneous reaction to the subject, or as she says, by relying on instinct and intuition, is she able to capture the image. Any form of intellectual interference would only ruin the process. The thinking mind must step aside at certain times in order that the vision be received whole.

b. Absence of Ego

Lack of egotism is also a feature of purity of heart. In fact, the destruction of the sense of an individual, independent self is a mark of high spiritual development. In some Advaitin sources, liberation is defined as the "destruction of the sense of "I" and "mine".¹⁶³ Freedom from the sense that one is the doer (*kartr̥tva*, *ahamkāra*) is a characteristic of a pure and transparent heart, since "The Self, which is of the nature of Intelligence, has no sense of

I." ¹⁷⁰ According to Ramana Maharshi, if one traces the thought of "I" back to its source, one reaches the heart and at that point the I as ego spontaneously disappears and all that remains is Self as I-I. In other words, the dichotomy between Self and Other (as well as Self and God) vanishes. He explains, that "Only he who has seen himself has seen God, since he has lost his individuality and nothing remains but God." ¹⁷¹

Kumud Śarma also mentions that when she is in the midst of a doing a painting and all her energies are concentrated, there is absolutely no sense of individual ego. The vision itself takes precedent and erases all sense of boundaries. This is what she means when she speaks of "dwelling in the vision." She recalls her sense of separateness being replaced with one which overcomes all distinctions - being "as much its subject as its object." The experience must be so unusual that Śarma also introduces her own language to describe it. Just as the Maharshi uses the phrase "I-I" to demonstrate the lack of ego, so does Śarma speak of a delicate awareness of "at-one-ment." Only when the restriction of identifying with the ego is abandoned can one, according to Śarma, experience the delight of knowing or dwelling entirely in the image.

c. **Quieting the Mind**

One of the by-products of purifying oneself of ego-consciousness, is that the mind becomes calm, quiet and single

pointed: "The practice of merging the ego in that pure heart of the nature of consciousness leads to the stilling of the vital air and the latent impressions of the mind, the *vāsanās*." ¹⁷² The intellect is then peaceful and free from mental modifications or, the *vṛttis*. In this sense, purity of heart acts as a pre-condition for deeper spiritual development and Self knowledge. As a person becomes spiritually more pure, one's passions are gradually dissipated and mental defilements naturally drop away. In the end, great clarity is attained and the mind becomes transparent, free from all imperfections, desires and torpor. In other words, pure.

d. Witness Self

A serene and composed mind, free from all mental defilements, is said to dwell in solitude (*ekātavāsa*)¹⁷³ and to remain inactive in the midst of activity. That is, one becomes a witness to events, rather than believing that he/she is the cause of them. When the ego disappears the Self as witness remains. "As it shines thus in everyone, this very Self is referred to as the witness, *sāksi*," says Ramana.¹⁷⁴ The witness self is found by various means in Advaita, but they are all based on the ability to discriminate the real from the unreal. Sometimes the analysis of the four states of experience (waking, dreaming, deep sleep and the fourth known only as *turiya*) is recommended.¹⁷⁵ The same conclusion may be reached by an investigation into the elements of existence (earth, water, fire, air and ether)¹⁷⁶ or the five sheaths or

kośas, that cover the Self (the physical (*anna*), the vital (*prāṇa*), the mental (*manas*), the intellectual (*vijñāna*) and the blissful (*ānandamaya*).¹⁷⁷ It is the resplendent, immutable Self, as witness consciousness (also called *kūṭastha*), which is the only thing which cannot be negated. We read, " It is possible to know Brahman, which is hidden in the cave (the five sheaths) by differentiating It from them."¹⁷⁸

Similar to the way in which the sages remove successive layers of *avidyā* in order to isolate the Self from the various sheaths of embodied existence, so, too, does Śarma concentrate on and isolate her vision. For Śarma, the only thing that counts is the vision itself. All other things such as theories of composition and colour, personal viewpoint, the desire for admiration etc. are all distractions which cloud one's ability to see and dwell in the vision. Like the seers of old, Śarma's goal is the immediate, direct experience of the vision, - that which is *aparokṣa* or "not beyond observation." When one is able to abide or "dwell" in the vision, one experiences perfect intuition, *samyagdarsāna*, which Śarma explains as "instinct and intuition getting in the brush tip." This intuition is not passive, but a dynamic act of knowing, ("the knowing eye watches sharp as a needle") which eventually translates into transcendental insight, *paramārthika drṣṭi*, where one is lead to self-recognition.

In Advaita, a person who identifies, not with the transient, but with the eternal witness self, is said to be

"inactive" in the sense that he/she will acquire no new *karma* despite their activities in the world. Effectively, one acts like an actor on the stage, going through the motions of living but without having to suffer the consequences of action.¹⁷⁹ It is only at this level that a person can be said to be beyond good and evil. Since sages are firmly established in their original and true nature they remain untouched by the merits and demerits of normal existence:

...The sage shaking off good and evil, makes everything into oneness... For thus has it been said, "As beasts and birds do not resort to a burning mountain, so sins do not find shelter in those who know Brahman."¹⁸⁰

The law of *karma* only applies to those still in *samsāra*, a Knower is said to shake off good and evil, and "attain supreme equality with the Lord."¹⁸¹ Brahman is beyond the realm of dichotomies and the possibility of sin or the removal of sin is meaningless. In the end, the Supreme and one who identifies with the Supreme, the fully realized person or *jīvanmukta*, transcend the injunctions and prohibitions of good and evil. The *Pañcadaśī* goes as far as to say that:

He who has no notion of I-ness and whose mind is not tainted by desire for results of action is not really a killer even if he kills people, he is not bound by his actions.¹⁸²

For Śarma, the artist who has purity of spirit, who dwells in the vision and paints from that vision, is literally, in the Kingdom of God. Even though he or she may be a profligate or a scoundrel, from a social point of view, he/she has reached the goal and is identified with that which

is beyond good and evil. As she says, "The Divine is not only good, but in all things."

e. Bliss

There can be no higher human experience than identification with Brahman. The glimpses that one catches of the supreme bliss and goodness of the Lord from time to time become permanent for one who is established in Brahman. At the highest level, words fail:

The mind indeed is the fleeting world; therefore it should be purified with great effort. One becomes like that which is in one's mind - this is the everlasting secret.

Only by a tranquil mind does one destroy all action, good or bad. Once the Self is pacified, one abides in the Self and attains everlasting bliss.

The bliss that arises in the state of highest absorption, when the pure mind has come to rest in the Self, can never be expressed in words. One must experience it directly, one's own Self, in one's inner being.¹⁸³

The *Pañcadaśī* X1.118 also states:

The bliss arising from absorption in the contemplation of the Self, when all sins and taints are washed off through the practice of samadhi cannot be described in words. One must feel it in one's own heart.

4. Purity of Heart in the World

For a Realized person who has succeeded in purifying one's heart or mind from mental and spiritual impediments and who sees the world from a higher point of view, one's perspective changes as well. No longer does one suffer from misconceptions about one's self or the world, but for the

first time, one sees clearly and directly into the nature of existence. One's egocentric universe is replaced with a world view which sees the Self in all beings: As the *Gītā* (5.18) reminds us:

In a Brahman endowed with wisdom and cultivation,
In a cow, in an elephant,
And even in a dog, or in a dog-cooker,
The wise see the same (*ātman*).

As well, one's motivations for action naturally change from self-preservation and self-aggrandizement to concern for others.

Throughout the *Bhagavad Gītā* one reads time and again how the wise perceive the same *ātman* everywhere. As Lord Kṛṣṇa says " I am the *ātman* abiding in the heart of all."¹³⁴ And it is from the perspective of *samadarśana*, or "seeing the same" that the Brahmin, the dog and the dog-cooker are the embodiments of God and therefore worthy of respect and loving kindness. A similar case is seen in Nārada's *Bhakti Sūtras* where the hierarchical distinctions which formerly govern one's treatment of others dissolve when the mind is purified of egotism:

In them there is no distinction based on caste or culture, beauty or birth, wealth or profession or the like. Because they are his own.¹³⁵

In the end, purity of heart cannot help but to be tied to ethical behaviour for spiritually evolved people. When the strictures of egotism are dissolved one feels another's pain as one's own and there is complete identity between the individual and universal good. Spiritually mature people

spontaneously act in a kind and compassionate way, not because they seek merit or accolades, but because it is their nature. In this sense, their goodness is without ulterior motive. As Śankara says, a person who truly sees the Self in all becomes "a boundless reservoir of mercy that knows no reason and a friend to all people."¹⁸⁶

In modern times, Mahatma Gandhi also accepted purity of heart as the cornerstone of his own philosophy:

A pure heart enables one to find the truth. Every one of us, therefore, must aim after purity of heart. All else follows as a matter of course.¹⁸⁷

Like Śarma, Gandhi realized the inevitable links between Truth, human equality and the need for the translation of those insights into concrete social action. Today, this same message is taught by contemporary leaders of Advaita. The Śankarācāryas or "world teachers," *jagadgurus*, choose purity of mind, rather than a philosophical subject as their most prevalent theme for public speaking. In the talks of Śri Abhinava Vidyātirtha, it is the central message; for the Sringeri guru "the conquest of the mind is the conquest of the world;" the Swāmi of Kanchi teaches the devotee to pray for peace a mind, purity of mind and strength of mind. A pure mind, according these Śankarācāryas, is a prerequisite for the path of knowledge.¹⁸⁸

So essential is this purity of heart that all other virtues and external changes in behaviour are said to flow from it. Even purity, though has gradations. In fact,

according to the *Śankarācāryas*, the more exalted one's spiritual position, the more important the quality of purity since one's influence on one's fellow humans and the world is greater. The sage of Kanchi, upon completing a tour of Madras, explained the importance of the teacher's purity for a devotee's spiritual development:

I will be able to bring about a change in you only to the extent to which I am able to develop my inner power. If I desire to reform you more, I must purify myself to the extent necessary.¹³⁹

As living exemplars of the Advaita philosophy and centres of sacredness for their devotees in the modern world, the *Śankarācāryas*' influence spreads beyond the strict confines of sectarianism. Their vigorous activity in the areas of education, family life, community service and social awareness, shows how the fundamental message of purity of heart coalesces with the social *dharma* of public life. But the single requirement for all this activity is purity of heart.

The similarities between Advaita in action and Śarma's work with the poor shows that the realization and service aspects of Truth are similar. Śarma was a painter, Gandhi a politician, and the Swāmi of Kanchi a spiritual leader, but all see purity of heart as the *sine qua non* for spiritual and social transformation, and all realize that the marginalized are those most in need of help. Gandhi had a special place in his heart for the Children of God, the *Śankarācāryas* routinely encourage the faithful to care for the less fortunate, Śarma

displays their plight in her paintings. The object is not to portray Śarma as a saint, but rather to show how true vision expresses itself in compassionate action. One does not necessarily have to follow a specified religious path arrive at the Truth, but *seva* or service is always the fruit of purity of spirit.

Śarma was a modern Indian woman and freely mixed her metaphors in descriptions of her own artistic experience as a religious journey. When she painted, she believed she was in the Kingdom of Heaven and the conditions and situations of nature, and especially the lives of everyday human beings were fit subjects for the simple expression of this Kingdom.

There are obvious echoes to be found in traditional philosophies in the Hindu culture in which Śarma lived. Seeing the natural world as *saguna Brahman*, the Absolute as it appears with qualities, is a major theme in neo-Vedāntic philosophy. Through purity of heart, a ridding oneself of the impediments to seeing the world as the reality of Brahman, the sage becomes a witness of God or Reality, and is able to see the Self in every human being. The wisdom of the Vedāntic seers reveals not only the consciousness at the base of reality, but its lively condition of full expression.

In the final analysis, works of an intensely spiritual artist such as Śarma reveal the Truth in the same way as it is revealed by saintly figures in the textual tradition. Just as words are used to refer to something beyond words, so do

Śarma's paintings point to a deeper level of reality. Not only does a work of art demonstrate proportion and balance, which is in itself beautiful, but it taps into deeper structures of Beauty. An artist may use the material of this world, but transforms it through the imagination to reveal its inner significance. In this sense, the artist does not actually create beauty, but rather reveals an eternal and self-existent beauty. Using things of this world, he/she teaches us to see a beauty which is *alaukika*, "not of this world." By realizing it first in one's own self, the artist is able to make others see it as well, just as a sage must first realize the Truth before he/she can reveal it to others. The beauty one sees on earth is a pale reflection of that which is the source of all beauty and is Beauty itself. The fact that the contemplation of beauty naturally arouses feelings of joy and contentment is connected to the idea that the Beauty of Brahman is allied to the bliss, *ānanda* of Brahman. Like *sat* (being), and *cit* (awareness), *ānanda* is said to be the very nature and essence of the Absolute. Brahman is not said to have *saccidānanda*, but to BE those things.

The experience of a higher order of harmony and beauty found in a work of art produces inner peace and joy. In this way, the artist or viewer is drawn closer and closer to the Divine. Through Beauty (*saundarya*) one experiences the

subtle joy which is akin to the bliss of Brahman, "Thus Brahman as Beauty is no other than Brahman as Bliss."¹⁹⁰

Conclusion

Profound statements must be drawn by the artist from the most secret recesses of one's being; there no murmuring torrent, no bird song, no rustle of leaves can distract one.

- Giorgio de Chirico

Kumud Śarma's paintings are spiritual without having to be tied to a specific religious doctrine or formulation. The sacredness in her art comes from her own inner experience rather than a formal study of religion or religious art. As such, her spirituality is based on direct experience and intuition which enables her to see to the heart of the problem of existence. For Śarma, a purified spirit is necessary to see the world as it really is, and, in consequence, to see through the patterns of injustice and to realize that only through personal interjection can any form of change be made. Ultimately, her response to her spiritual vision was sensitivity to suffering.

Śarma's themes were the world around her. Her trips to the countryside, where she saw people still living in harmony with nature, untouched by urbanization, were a constant source of inspiration and revitalization. To see these same people later in utter squalor, hopelessly out of step with modern society, unable to return to their previous lives, and subjected to lives of twig-selling and prostitution drew out her deepest sympathies.

Śarma was a feminist in a broad sense, and throughout her works there is a strong female presence. Many of the protagonists are ordinary women: young girls, servants, mothers and grandmothers. As a subject for art, these women supplant the forms of women as *devi* (goddess), *nayika* (heroine), and *ganika* (courtesan) of the classical tradition.

As well, her female figures are far removed from those of Abinndranath Tagore and the Bengal school who portrayed women as emaciated, mysterious, and unconscious maidens. In Śarma's work, we see strong-limbed, working women in the midst of their daily routines, servants during a moment of rest, prostitutes haunting the fringes of society and middle class housewives reflecting on their lives. Śarma sees ordinary working people as a fit subject for her art, because in the ordinary she sees the holy.

Both women and the poor could be symbols of vulnerability and exploitation. Perhaps in the poor she sees a more rarefied form of human nature where pretense is stripped away through circumstance. She views these people as part of the real world and not as abstractions living within it. Śarma questions things which others take for granted and she forces us to see the poor as real people who live lives of great dignity despite their impoverished conditions. In many ways, they are the true heroes.

In the more autobiographical paintings where Śarma considers herself as the subject, she appears removed and isolated - in a room alone looking out through a window or waiting by the door. Always a single woman confronting the world. In the canvases foreshadowing the approach of death, even her body disappears and the viewer is transported to a liminal region of inner space where only lifeless geometric

forms exist. Through these paintings one travels to the portals of death with Śarma.

In all of these works, Śarma uses the concrete and the particular to speak of universal problems of justice, dignity and human value. She deals with human themes in an authentic and humane way. Her acute awareness of the beauty and pain of human existence allows for the transformation of the personal into the universal. In this way, she is able to use the Indian context to reflect a global situation.

Appreciating the depth dimensions in Śarma's art is valuable for its own sake, but it may also contribute to a broader understanding of the role of the visual arts in the study of religion. Spiritual insights mediated through art use a different modality of cognition, but still transmit understanding, and open up new ways of understanding the divine. In addition, art like Śarma's expands our perceptions of what is meant by religious or spiritual painting. It is not only traditional art that may transmit Truth, contemporary and secular art may do so as well. In fact, secular art may be a very good indicator of changes appearing in the religious consciousness of a society. For example, during the last one hundred years, movements such as that inspired by Ram Mohan Roy, Vivekānanda and Mahātmā Gāndhī have used religious rationale to call for social reform and the uplift of the poor. Assisting those less fortunate has become a primary religious obligation. Correspondingly, for the first time in

Indian art history, the lives of the poorest and most marginalized have become a fit subject matter for sensitive men and women. Like Śarma, many artists, who are socially and spiritually aware, display their concerns on canvas, yet move outside the traditional boundaries of organized religion. Although their work is not necessarily religious in the narrow sense, it is in terms of style and spirit.

In an increasingly visually oriented world, art has become a key factor of communication, and therein lies its great redemptive and emancipatory potential. Truth can be revealed in a number of ways:

And yet, I do believe that modern Indian art is still concerned with deep spiritual issues, perhaps not in a way that is conventionally understood by the term, "religious art," yet in a way that is not just a complete break with Indian tradition. It could also be said that in art ... creative expression has been associated with spiritual expression.¹⁹¹

ENDNOTES

1. Mulk Raj Anand, *The Third Eye: A Lecture on the Appreciation of Art*, Research Bulletin (Arts) of the Punjab University. Fine Arts Series No. 1. (Chandigarh: Punjab University, 1963):33.
2. T. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Fawcett-Columbine Books, 1993):ix.
3. John Cort, "Art, Religion and Material Culture: Some Reflections on Method," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LXIV/3, (1996):632.
4. J. Dixon, "Painting as Theological Thought," *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, Ed. D. Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984):277.
5. Roger O'Toole, "The Paul Hanley Furfey Lecture - 1995: Salvation, Redemption and Community: Reflections on the Aesthetic Cosmos," *Sociology of Religion* 57.2(Summer, 1996):127.
6. Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969): 295.
7. Although the first steps towards systematic study of religious art as a discipline of Art History can be traced to the works of Achilles Staius (1516) and G.A. Canini (1669), it was not until the late 19th and early 20th centuries, under the influence of the historical sciences, that "precision, objectivity and scientific exactitude" became the watchwords in art history concerning the systematic analysis of the iconographical and iconological themes. See "Iconography and Iconology," in *Encyclopedia of World Art* (Toronto:McGraw Hill, 1963). According to this definition, Iconography is concerned with the exterior aspects of the piece - the formulation of clear description and the recording of facts without explanatory comment, while Iconology is concerned with interpretation and interior structures. Aby Warburg is credited with the introduction of the term "iconology" in 1912 but many of his seminal ideas were contained in the writings of his contemporaries such as Max Dvorak, Julius von Schlosser, Fritz Saxl and Erwin Panofsky. Erwin Panofsky (1939) refined the fundamental principles for the analysis of the religious dimensions of art in his famous work, *Studies in Iconology*. His triple classification of the Pre-Iconographical, Iconographical and Iconological levels of Religious Art, became if not normative for the study, at least highly influential.

8. Among the best-known contributors are: Paul Tillich, Charles Albert Moore, Langdon Gilkey, G. Chryssides, L. Moss, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Jane and John Dillenberger, John Dixon, Doug Adams, J. Cook, Melinda Wortz and Diane Apostolos-Cappadona. Overview articles are offered in: D. Adams "Recent Religion and Visual Art Scholarship," *Religious Studies Review*, 11.2 (April, 1985):159-165 and his "Theological Expression Through Visual Art Forms," in *Art, Creativity and the Sacred*, Ed. D. Apostolos-Cappadona (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1984):3-8 (hereafter abbreviated ACS); J. Cook, "Theology and the Arts: Sources and Resources," *Theology Today* 34 (April, 1977):45-51. John Dillenberger, "The Diversity of Disciplines as a Theological Question: The Visual Arts as a Paradigm," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* XLVIII.2 (June, 1980) :233-243 and his "Visual Arts and Religion: Modern and Contemporary Contours," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LV1.2:199-212. M. Eliade, "The Sacred and the Modern Artist," in ACS :179-186. H.G. Kippenberg, *Visible Religion* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1986).
9. See for example: Paul Tillich, "Art and Ultimate Reality." in ACS :219-235 as well as his "Existentialist Aspects of Modern Art," in *Christianity and the Existentialists*. ed Carl Michelson (New York: Scribners and Sons, 1956):132ff. See also R. Arnheim. "Art as Religion," in *To the Rescue of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992):227. He writes, "If, however, we speak of "cosmic religion" in the more philosophical sense, we have to look for different criteria. Traditional subject matter or purpose may not necessarily meet the conditions for which we are looking, while works not referring to religion in any traditional sense may impress us as profoundly religious."
10. C.A. Moore, "The Transforming Vision of God in Religion and Art," *Scottish Journal of Religious Studies* 4 (1983):107-120 and his "Windows to the Divine: A Theory of Religious Art, Traditional and Modern," *Dialogue and Alliance* 3.2 (1989):15-23.
11. Langdon Gilkey, "Can Art Fill the Vacuum?" in ACS :187-192.
12. Martland, T. "Question: When is Religion Art? Answer: When It is a Jar." in ACS :250-261.
13. J. Dixon, "Image as Insight," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LVII.2:267-276 and his "Art as the Making of the World: Outline of Method in the Criticism of Religion and Art," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* LI.1:15-36 and "Painting as Theological Thought" in ACS :277-298.

14. Melinda Wortz, " Theological Reflections on an Image of Woman: Picasso's *Girl Before a Mirror* ," in ACS: 297-303.
15. G. Chryssides and L. Moss, "Religious Symbolism and the Verbally Inexpressible," *Dialogue and Alliance* 3.2 (1989):4-12.
- 16 N. Wolterstorff, "Art, Religion and the Elite: Reflections on a Passage from André Malraux," in ACS :262-274.
17. The Sanskrit root *dr̥ś* "to see" also contains the ideas " to perceive, to learn, to know, to understand and to discover," V.S. Apte, *The Student's Sanskrit English Dictionary*, 1890 rpt. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass,1965).
18. See Diana Eck, *Darśan: Seeing the Divine Image in India* (Chambersburg, Pennsylvania: Anima Books, 1981) Chapter 1 "Seeing the Sacred" and Chapter 2 " The Nature of the Hindu Image." Other works which may shed light on this area include: Jan Gonda, *Eye and Gaze in the Veda* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1969); Jan Gonda, *The Vision of the Vedic Poets* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1963); Betty Heiman, *Facets of Indian Thought* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1964) especially Chapter 2 "Visible Thought"; J.N. Banerjee, *The Development of Hindu Iconography* 3rd ed. (Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1974), Chapter 2, "The Antiquity of Image Worship in India;" T.A.G. Rao, *Elements of Hindu Iconography* 1914 rpt. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1968).
19. Eck: 1-2.
20. Mildred and W.G. Archer, *Indian Painting for the British 1770-1880* (Oxford University Press, 1955):14-15.
21. See Partha Mitter's classic, *Much Maligned Monsters: The History of European Reactions to Indian Art* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977).
22. Mitter: 32, 39.
23. Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920* (Cambridge University Press, 1992):58-59.
24. See Fergusson's *The History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876), *On the Study of Indian Architecture* (1877) and *Archaeology in India* (1884). Under Cunningham, 23 volumes of archaeological reports and several monographs on chronology, numinastics and epigraphy were produced. He introduced new terms such as Indo-Grecian and Indo-Persian in an effort to emphasize the influence of foreign cultures on the Indian context.

25. See W.G. Archer, *India and Modern Art* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959):19.

26. Art schools were established in Calcutta - the Calcutta Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts (1839) and Society for the Promotion of Industrial Art (1854), in Madras in 1850, and in Bombay by Jamsethi Jijibhai in 1856.

27. An excerpt from the 1854 prospectus of the Calcutta School of Industrial Art specifically promotes the Westernization of taste and the creation of a new, Western-trained class of artists. It stresses:

- i. the development of new sources of industrial occupation for the more educated classes of the native population;
- ii. the supply of the great and increasing want which is felt in this country of skilled craftsmen, designers, stone and wood engravers; and,
- iii. the development of the faculties of taste and inventiveness

Attached to the prospectus was a note addressed to the English public of India calling for donations and decrying the dearth of native teachers of the arts. It proclaimed the colonial conclusion that "*the arts themselves may be said to unknown in India.*" As cited in Mahrukh Tarapor, "*Art Education in Imperial India: The Indian Schools of Art,*" in *Changing South Asia: Volume 3: City and Culture*, ed. by K. Ballhatchet and D. Taylor (London: SOAS, 1984):92. See also Mitter, "Art Education and Raj Patronage," in *27 Art and Nationalism* :27-54.

28. See "Oriental Modern Movements: India," in *Encyclopedia of World Art*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1972).

29. Ajit Mookerjee, *Modern Art in India* (New Delhi: Oxford Books, 1956):13. Krishnapillai Krishanan Nair (Krishna Chaitanya) points out that Havell accused Varma of a "most painful lack of poetic faculty," and Coomaraswamy bemoaned his "theatrical conceptions, want of imagination and lack of feeling." See Nair (Krishna Chaitanya) *Ravi Varma* (New Delhi: Lalit Kalā Akademi, 1960):5. Mulk Raj Anand, speaks of his work as "utter degeneration" in *The Third Eye: A Lecture on the Appreciation of Art*. Research Bulletin (Arts) of the Punjab University, Fine Arts Series I (Punjab University, 1963):15.

30. This tendency is perhaps best crystallized in the now-famous "boiled-suet" statement of Sir George Birdwood when he rejected outright the possibility of the existence of Fine Art in India and compared the equanimity of the Buddha to the

placidity of an English dish. Sir Birdwood is reported to have said, "A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol of passionless purity and serenity of soul," "No Fine Arts in India," *Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts* (February 4, 1910):287.

31. Ananda Coomaraswamy, "The Modern School of Indian Painting," in *Art and Swadeshi*, 1912 rpt (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1994):124. He writes, "Moreover, these painters care only for Indian subject matter and sentiment, and this is an essential preliminary for any true revival of Indian painting or sculpture, since no art which is insincere, can ever be great."

32. E.B. Havell, *The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India* 1912 rpt (New Delhi: Usha Books, 1986):95. He writes, "If India is now artistically a suburb of Paris and London, then Indian art is dead and all I have been writing about the living art of India is nonsense. If Indian art is dead, then Indian religion is dead; for Indian art has always been religious art, and when it is no longer so, it will cease to be Indian art. If Indian art is dead, then Indian civilisation is dead and India itself is a mere geographical expression."

33. Coomaraswamy explicitly states, "Indian art as the main vehicle of the higher wisdom and superior culture of Indian is the greatest embodiment of Idealism," in "The Aims and Methods of Indian Art." See *Essays in National Idealism* 1909 rpt (New Delhi, 1981):17. He also makes the distinction between seeing the religious values in a piece and being able to perceive the aesthetic ones. He writes, "It is only a change of viewpoint, psychologically equivalent to such a formal desecration, that the worshipper, who naturally regards the icon as a devotional utility, comes to regard it as a mere work of art to be sensationally regarded as such. Conversely, the modern aesthetician and *Kunsthistoriker*, who is interested only in aesthetic surfaces and sensations, fails to conceive of the work as the necessary product of a given determination, that is, as having purpose and utility. Of these two, the worshipper, for whom the object was made, is nearer to the root of the matter than the aesthetician who endeavours to isolate beauty from function. "The Origin and Use of Images in India" in *ACS* :136.

34. Coomaraswamy, *Art and Swadeshi*:116.

35. Partha Mitter, "Indian Artists, Western Art and Tradition," in *Changing South Asia* :81.

36. Maurice Tuchman, "Hidden Meanings in Abstract Art," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*. (Los

Angeles County Museum of Art, 1995):17. Other articles (in the same volume) dealing with the connections between abstract art and philosophies inspired by Eastern traditions include: Sixten Ringbom's "Transcending the Visible: The Generation of the Abstract Pioneers," :131-154; John E. Bowlit's "Esoteric Culture and Russian Society," :165-184; Charlotte Douglas, "Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matiushin and Their Circle":185-200; Rose-Carole Washton Long, "Expressionism, Abstraction and the Search for Utopia," :201-218; Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Mysticism, Romanticism and the Fourth Dimension," :219-238; John Moffitt, "Marcel Duchamp: Alchemist of the Avant Garde," :257-272; Donald Kuspit, "Concerning the Spiritual in Contemporary Art," :313-354; Judi Freeman, "Chronologies: Artists and the Spiritual," :393-419 offers a list of twentieth century Theosophy-inspired artists. Other works by Sixten Ringbom include: "Art in the 'Epoch of the Great Spiritual': Occult Elements in Early Theory of Abstract Painting," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966):368-418; and *The Sounding Cosmos: A Study in the Spiritualization of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting*, Acta Academiae Aboensis, ser. A, XXXVIII (Åbo, Finland: Åbo Akademi, 1970); See also Robert P. Welsch, "Mondrian and Theosophy," in *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944 A Centennial Exhibition*, exh. cat. (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1971):35-52.

37. So strong was the reaction against Revivalism that its effects still ripple through the art world today. More than fifty years later art critics go out of their way to distance themselves from it. In 1978, K.G. Subramanyan complained, "They had dramatized the relationship and tried to construe all manifestations of Indian art as iconic or diagrammatic representations of religious concepts." K.G. Subramanyan, *Moving Focus: Essays on Indian Art* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1978):97. Charles Louis Fabri wrote, "No one can ever understand fully, let alone feel fully appreciate Indian art who looks for nothing but spiritual and religious utterances everywhere." N. Bhuvandran, *Interpretation of Indian Art* (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1991):103. Other critics of the fundamentals of the Revivalist approach include: B.K. Sarkar, W. C. Archer, Mulk Raj Anand, J. Swaminathan and O.C. Gangoly.

38. There is also evidence, according to Ratan Parimoo, which indicates correspondence with members of the Bauhaus concerning the exhibition. See Ratan Parimoo, *The Paintings of the Three Tagores* (Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, n.d.):168ff.

39. Sarkar: 19.

40. Bhuvanendran :30.

41. Charles Fabri, "Art Appreciation for India," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 6 (n.d.):18.

42. A key development in this kind of formalist criticism was the work of Alfred Barr, then the director of the New York Museum of Modern Art. In his 1936 work, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (Exhibition Catalogue) (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936) he graphically charted artistic movements of the preceding forty-five years, showing how each new movement was logically related to the aesthetic concerns of its predecessors and relatives. Barr's scheme was highly influential for decades in shaping the way that specialists and the general public of East and West viewed modern art.

43. Tuchman:18.

44. This group included the sculptor Prodosh Das Gupta, Kamala Das Gupta, Sunil Madhav Sen, Paritosh Sen, P.K. Pal, Niorde Majumdar, Gopal Ghose, Rathin Maitra and others.

45. This group developed under the leadership of F.N. Souza, who signs his work as Francis Newton, the sculptor S.G. Bakra and K.H. Ara. They were joined by Sayed Haider Raza, H.A. Gade and M.F. Hussain.

46. The main organizer of this group was K.C.S. Paniker.

47. Its leaders include B.C. Sanyal and Dinkar Kowshik, sculptor Dhanraj Bhagat and others.

48. Anis Farooqi, "Contemporary Arts: Their Predicament for Continuity and Change in the Context of Indian Reality," *Kala Darshan* (April-June, 1988):11.

49. Cited in Archer :44. The surprising thing is that in the analysis of contemporary Indian art the contributions which the "native soil" has made have been largely overlooked. Even pioneering works such as Archer's *India and Modern Art* (1959) rely on the genealogical approach promoted by Barr from New York, and deliberately set out to show Western influence on Indian artists without taking local social, ideological and religious contexts into consideration. The questions important to this line of inquiry remain at the level of external considerations: to what degree do Indian Impressionist, Expressionist, Cubist, Abstract etc. painters successfully pattern Western prototypes? Archer uses phrases such as "a diluted Cezanne," and tells us that "Matisse is the clue" and "the vitalizing agent, the genius at bottom is Picasso" to describe Indian painters. Archer :121, 125.

50. See Nair (Krishna Chaitanya), "Evolving Trends on the Cultural Front," *Indian and Foreign Review* (August

15,1980):18. He writes, "Today, the most significant contribution in painting is being made by those artists who have given serious thought to the complex relation between tradition and contemporaneity, the formed vision of the racial psyche and the personal vision of the individual."

51. Keshav Malik, "Contemporary Art - Antecedents and Attitudes," in *Indian Art since the Early 40s*, (Madras: Artists' Handicrafts Association,1974):35.

52. Anand, *The Third Eye* :2.

53. Mulk Raj Anand, "An Aesthetic of Humanism," in *Art and Life in India: The Last Four Decades* James Joseph (ed) (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1989):99. See also Marle Fisher's *The Wisdom of the Heart: A study of the works of Mulk Raj Anand* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1985).

54. Anand, "An Approach," :95.

55. Bhuvanendran, *Interpretation* :101.

56. Raghavan Iyer, *The Essential Writings of Mahatma Gandhi* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press,1990):155.

57. See D.C. Ghose, *Bibliography of Modern Indian Art* (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Akademi, 1980) for a more complete listing. An article by Frank Thompson, "Feminist Focus in Indian Painting," *Atlantis* 8.1 (Fall/Autumn 1982):67-77 deals specifically with women's issues in contemporary art. See also Nair (Krishna Chaitanya), "The World of Men," in *A History of Indian Painting: The Modern Period* (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1994): 285-292.

58. Amitabha Mukherjee, "The Brahmo Samāj Movement and its Social Challenge," in *Social Content of Indian Religious Reform Movements* S.P. Sen (ed) (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1978):269-294

59. R.K. Saxena, "Arya Samāj Movement in Rajasthan," in *Social Contents of Indian Religious Reform Movements*, " S.P. Sen (ed) (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1978):345-347.

60. George Williams, "Swami Vivekananda: Archetypal Hero or Doubting Saint?" in *Religion in Modern India*,. R. Baird (Ed), 2nd revised ed. (Columbia, MO: South Asia Publications, 1991):337.

61. Ramakrishna Institute of Culture. *The Ramakrishna Movement*, (Calcutta: Ramakrishna Mission Institute of

Culture, 1993):20.

62. Williams, "Vivekananda:" 331.

63. Williams, "Ramakrishna Movement:'72

64. Pranab Ranjan Ghosh, "Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Movement," in *Social Contents of Indian Religious Reform Movements* S.P. Sen (ed) (Calcutta: Institute of Historical Studies, 1978):365-392.

65. Boyd Wilson, "Ultimacy as Unifier in Gandhi," in *Religion in Modern India*, R. Baird (ed), 2nd revised ed. (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1991):356.

66. Cited in Robert Minor, "Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and "Hinduism" Defined and Defended, " in *Religion in Modern India*, R. Baird (ed), 2nd revised ed, (Columbia, MO: South Asia Publications, 1991):423.

67. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, "The Religion of the Spirit and the World's Needs: Fragments of a Confession," in *The Philosophy of Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan*, Paul Schlipp (ed) (New York: Tudor, 1952):66.

68. Klostermaier, *Survey*:395.

69. Telephone conversation with Kumud Śarma's niece, Meenu Bauri, of Ottawa, September 26, 1996.

70. After Madame Blavatsky's death in 1891, Dr. Annie Besant became the leader of the Theosophical movement in India. Under her guidance, Theosophy became more and more involved in Indian politics and Dr. Besant became a prominent figure in the early Independence movement.

71. These exhibitions include: Patna: 1967, 1971, 1972, 1977, 1978 (twice), 1979, 1980, 1989, 1991, 1992 and 1995. New Delhi: 1966, 1968, 1971, 1974, 1979, 1986, 1993 and 1995 at the Shri-Dharani and AIFACS Gallery; Bombay: 1971 Jehangir Art Gallery; Calcutta: All India Women's Artists Exhibition 1968, 1970, 1971; Academy of Fine Arts 1991, 1993.

72. Including Charles Fabri, Bartholomew, Hiranand, Sachidanand, Vatsyayan, Agyeya and others. Reviews include those from *Dinmān* 1968, *The Statesman* September 29, 1971 and 1991. *The Hindustan Times*, Patna March 16, 1981, March 18, 1989 and 1991. *The Motherland* September 28, 1971, *The Indian Nation*, 1972, *Indian Express Daily (Delhi)*, 1968, *The Hindustan Times*, Sunday September 1, 1991, *The Telegraph (Calcutta)*, 1991, *The Indian Nation*, Sunday, Magazine July 23, 1972.

73. Even half a century later his message is still kept alive. Statues of Gandhi, commemorating his march through Bihar to Champaram on his first expedition of *satyagraha* (literally, "grasping the truth") remain central features of towns and cities as diverse as Muzaffapur and Patna. *Sarvodaya* groups dedicated to increasing wages among agrarian workers, to redistributing land to landless and poor peasants and to granting social dignity to *dalits* and "backward castes" are still active today. Having joined forces with the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist), *sarvodaya* groups have become part of the reality of the political landscape of Bihar. The *Gandhi Sangrahalaya*, an institute personally founded by Gandhi and headed today by Dr. Razi Ahmad in Patna, still promotes Gandhian ideals and social projects. Finally, Patna holds special distinction as being the last major centre Gandhi visited before his assassination. In the 1930s, 40s and 50s Patna was the focus in Bihar for Gandhian ideals.

74. Linda Nochilin, *Woman, Art and Power and Other Essays* (New York: Hudson, 1990).

75. When sent a draft of a survey article, "*Kumud Śarma: Images of the Dispossessed*," which was presented later the following spring (June, 1996) at the Learned Societies Conference in St. Catherine's Ontario, Śarma approved this grouping and mentioned that her works were "correctly understood." Correspondence from Śarma, December, 1995.

76. Concerning this type of expression, Anand writes, "Uncritical tolerance is prettiness and recoils from beauty that is difficult." See his "The Aesthetic Hypothesis" in *The Hindu View of Art* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1933):161.

77. *The Motherland* October, 28, 1971.

78. Nabendu Datta-Majumder, *The Santal: A Study in Culture Change* (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1956):22-23.

79. Arvind Das, "Jharkhand's Roots," in *The Republic of Bihar* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992):83-99.

69. Madhu Khanna, "Nature as Feminine: Ancient Vision of Geopietry and the Goddess Ecology," in *Man in Nature*, B. Saraswati (Ed), vol. 5 of *Prakrti: The Integral Vision*, K. Vatsayan (Gen ed.) (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts):103-115.

81. Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience: Mantamanjari* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997):123. All following Vedic translations are from this work.

82. *Yajur Veda* XXXV1.17. Panikkar:307.
83. *Atharva Veda* XI1.1.59. Panikkar:129.
84. *Atharva Veda* VI.142.1-2. Panikkar:274.
85. *Rg Veda* V.83.4. Panikkar:275.
86. Archer, *Hill* :240.
87. Archer, *Hill* :70.
88. Archer, *Hill* :141.
89. Archer, *Hill* :141-142.
78. According to Western theories, different colours have direct associations with psychological and physiological responses. See Max Luscher, *The Luscher Colour Test*, Ian Scott (ed and trans) (New York: Random House, 1969):58-59.
91. Archer, *Hill* :66.
80. Luscher:60-62.
93. *Rg Veda* I.89.2.5. Panikkar:301-302.
94. *Rg Veda* X.25.1. Panikkar:302.
95. *Atharva Veda* VII.69. Panikkar:302-303.
96. Archer, *Hill* :119.
97. Archer, *Hill* : 344.
98. Archer, *Hill* :344.
99. *Gitagovinda*, Canto I.28 and Canto 2.2. As translated by Lee Siegel, *Sacred and Profane Dimensions of Love in Indian Traditions: As Exemplified in the Gitagovinda of Jayadeva*, 1978 rpt (Delhi: Oxford University Press,1992):245-250.
100. Datta-Majumder:64.
101. Martin Orans, *The Santals: A Tribe in Search of a Great Tradition* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press,1965):53.
102. Śarma, Correspondence December 24, 1995.
103. Jay Dubashi, "Death of a Romantic," *India Today* IV, No. 20 (Oct. 16-31, 1979):6-7.

104. Bhagavad Gītā: XI:29-30.
105. *Rg Veda*, IX.73.8. Panikkar:626-627.
106. *Rg Veda* X.152.2,4. Panikkar:627.
95. Thompson, "Feminist Focus in Indian Painting," in *Atlantis* (Fall/Winter, 1982):67-77.
96. Anne-Marie Gaston, "The Place of Indian Classical Dance: A Short History of Temple Dancers in India," Unpublished pamphlet, 1978:3-18.
109. One suspects that Śarma would identify strongly with these wholesome and energetic models of women. It may be possible to see these figures as an unconscious self-portrait.
110. Read, *Meaning of Art*:34.
111. Van Gogh *Letters* V. 1:440.
97. *Bhagavad Gītā* 9.29.
113. As cited in William Theodore de Bary (gen ed) *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Vol.1 (New York: Columbia University Press,1958):357.
114. *Bhagavad Gītā* 4.14.
115. In fact, this is not one of the paintings which Śarma had in Patna in 1995. Her sister, Shanta Dubey, sent a photograph of this painting and the following analysis is done from the photo. No date appears on the work, but the family recalls it being produced in the 1970s.
116. See Müller's *The Upaniṣads* 2 vols. rpt.(New York: Dover Publications, 1962): *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.1-6 and 3.13.7; the *Maitrāyaṇa Upaniṣad* 6.38 and 6.1; *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 2.5.10, 5.6.1, 4.3.7; *Mundaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.5; *Bhagavad Gītā* 13.17.
117. Müller, *Maitrāyaṇi Upaniṣad* 6.38.
118. The *Maitrāyaṇi Upaniṣad* 6.30, 31 speaks of reaching "mansions belonging to different bodies of the gods." See also descriptions in the *Katha Upaniṣad* 2.6.16.
119. D.H. Lawrence, *Selected Poems* (New York: Viking Press, 1959):144.
120. J. Dixon, "Art as the Making,": 35.

121. "The *rasika* is free to say how far he sincerely believes that the experience conferred upon him by the artist has come through to him or not. No other consideration can enter into the inner equation between creator and onlooker... The thing is : Does the picture present a challenge and genuinely move your inner vitalities?" See Anand, *Third Eye*:31.

122. Josef James considers this one of the most important trends in contemporary Indian art. He writes, "Foundational to the aesthetics of modern art is the relation to the world, not of continuity as in traditional ritual, but one of critical consideration, sympathy and studied movement." Josef James, "Editorial," in *Art and Life in India* :x.

123. He writes, " The language of a vision of a new humanist aesthetic will certainly take over in its synthesis some of the hypothesis of Indian tradition and many of the vital elements of the new Western technique. Only, instead of putting God at the centre of the picture, as it were, it will place man as the object of worship, in the attempt to make man - the whole man." As cited in Bhuvanendran :101.

124. Gandhi once put it, " I am a part and parcel of the whole, and I cannot find Him apart from the rest of humanity." Cited in Raghavan N. Iyer, *The Moral and Political Thought of Mahatma Gandhi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973):93.

125. Chaudhury, "Our Art" :76.

126. Harish Chandra Rai, "Art in Present Day India," in *Art and Life in India* :131.

127. See Ratan Parimoo, "New Trends in Figurative Painting," in *Studies in Modern Indian Art* (New Delhi: Kanak Publications, 1975):87-104.

128. He writes, "The impotency of modern art to engender in beauty except at the expense of the beauty of the human figure is a disquieting symptom." From his *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* cited in Badri Narayan, "Contemporary Art and Image of Man as Inspiration," *Lalit Kalā Contemporary* 17 (1974):13.

129. Richard Bartholomew, "Attitudes on the Social Condition: Notes on Ram Kumar, Satish Gujaral, Krishen Khanna and A. Ramachandran," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 24-25 (September 1977-April 1978):31.

130. Narayan: 16.

131. Jaya Appasamy, "New Images in Indian Art: Man," *Lalit Kalā Contemporary* 17 (1974):6.

132. Chaitanya, *History* :318-319.
133. Ramachandran, M. "Nature of Conscience," *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 42 (March, 1996):51.
134. His masterpiece, *Coolie*, an international bestseller, has been translated into almost forty languages. It is a moving dramatization of a young boy's struggle for survival in the harsh climate of the uneducated Indian labourer. Anand uses this character to reach beyond the confines of a particular place and time and speaks to us in universal terms concerning the innate innocence of the human soul.
135. Read, *The Meaning of Art*:160-164.
136. Read, *Meaning* :165.
137. Tillich, "Art":225.
138. Tillich, "Art" :231-235.
128. N. Krishna Reddy, "This Fascinating Universe Within Us." *Lalit Kala Contemporary* 37 (March, 1991):67.
129. This is an undated diary entry which she sent to me in a letter of December 12, 1995.
141. Diary entry n.d.
142. Diary entry, n.d.
143. David Jasper, "Untitled: Theology and American Abstract Expression," in *Religious studies and Theology* 13/14 (April, 1995):28.
144. Diary entry, n.d. sent to me December 12, 1995.
145. Diary entry, n.d.
146. Diary entry, n.d.
147. Exhibition flyer, n.d.
148. Jyoti Sahi, " Indian Spiritual Art," *Art and Life in India* :60.
149. Satyajit Chaudhury, "Our Art, Our Reality," in *Art and Life in India*:71.
139. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.3.3.
140. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.14.1.

141. Ramana Maharshi, "Supplement to the Forty Verses," 21 in *The Collected works of Ramana Maharshi*, Arthur Osborne, ed., (Tiruvannamali: Sri Ramanasramam, 1979).
142. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.3.
143. Supplement 10; Supplement 20; *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 8.1.1; *Kātha Upaniṣad* 1.2.12.; *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* 1.6.1, *Maitri Upaniṣad* 2.2.7.
144. *Taittiriya Upaniṣad* 1.6.1.
145. *Īśa Upaniṣad* 9.
146. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 3.5.2; *Kātha Upaniṣad* 1.3.17; *Śvetāśvara Upaniṣad* 6.22 and 5.6; *Maitri Upaniṣad* 6.29.
147. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 6.8.7; *Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 1.4.10.
148. Ramana Maharshi, *Upadeśa Manjari* 2.12. in *Collected Works*.
149. *Pañcadaśi of Vidyāraṇya*, Swami Swahananda (ed. and trans) (Madras: Ramakrishna Math, 1967): X1.7.
150. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 2.1.10.
151. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 2.2.9.
152. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 2.26.2
153. *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.8.
154. *Śvetāśvara Upaniṣad* 2.14-15.
155. Ramana Maharshi, *Self-Enquiry* 11 in *Collected Works*.
156. *Subāla Upaniṣad* 13.
157. *Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad* 3.5.1.
158. Ramana Maharshi, *Upadeśa Manjari* 1.11.
159. Ramana Maharshi, *Upadeśa Manjari*, 1.12.
160. Ramana Maharshi, *Reality in Forty Verses* 20, in *Collected Works*.
161. Ramana Maharshi, *Supplement* 24.
162. Ramana Maharshi, *Upadeśa Manjari*, 2.19.

163. *Self-Enquiry* :9.
164. *Pañcadaśi*: Chapter 1.
165. *Pañcadaśi*: Chapter 2.
166. *Pañcadaśi*: Chapter 3.
167. *Pañcadaśi*: III.1.
168. Ramana Maharshi, *Supplement* 26. He explains, " Having realized in the Heart that which underlies all appearances, never forget it. Then play your (allotted)part in the world, O Hero, acting as though attached to it."
169. *Maitri Upaniṣad* 6.18.
170. *Mundaka Upaniṣad* 3.1.3.
171. *Pañcadaśi* XI.19.
172. *Maitrāyaṇi Upaniṣad* VI.34.3,4,6,9; Panikkar:422-423.
173. *Bhagavad Gitā* 10.20.
174. Verse 72. *Nārada Bhakti Sūtras*, Swami Tyāgisānanda (transl) 5th ed. (Madras: Sri Ramakrishna Math:1972) :24.
175. *Vivekacudāmani* 38. Śāṅkara. *Vivekacudāmani*, Swami Madhavananda (transl) (Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1957).
176. Iyer: 229.
177. W. Cenkner, *A Tradition of Teachers: Śāṅkara and the Jagadgurus Today*, rpt. (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass:1984):150-151.
178. Cenkner:161.
179. T.R. Ramachandran, *The Concept of the Vyāvahārika in Advaita Vedānta* (University of Madras Press,1987):118.
180. Jyoti Sahi, "Indian Spiritual Art," in *Art*:57-58.

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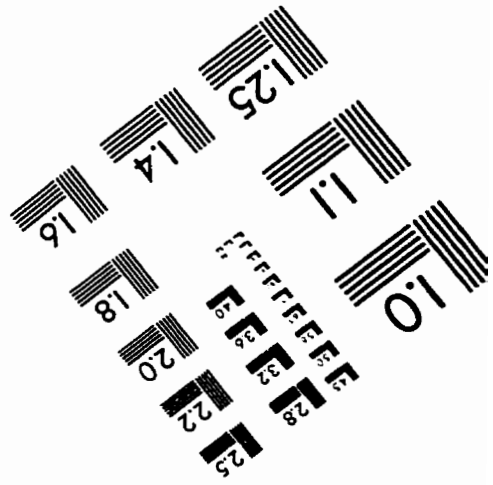
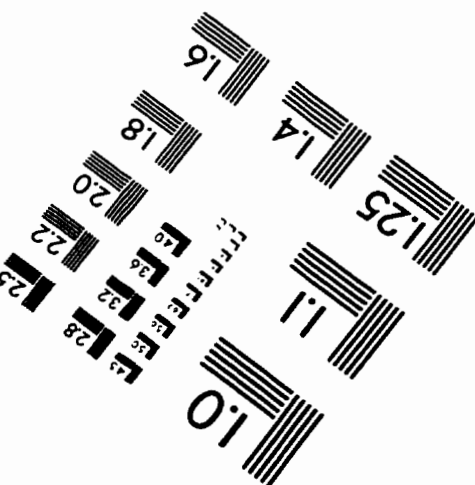
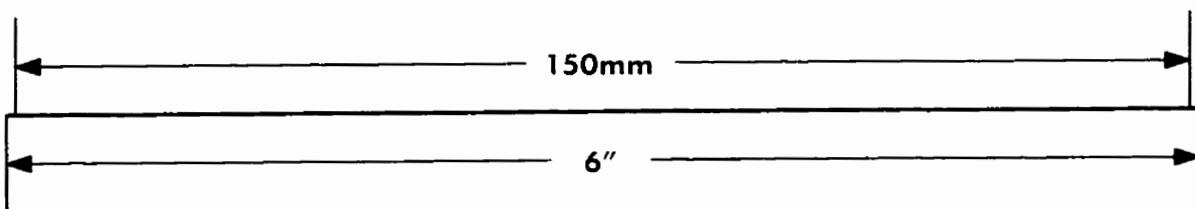
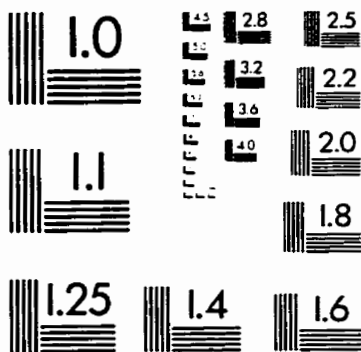
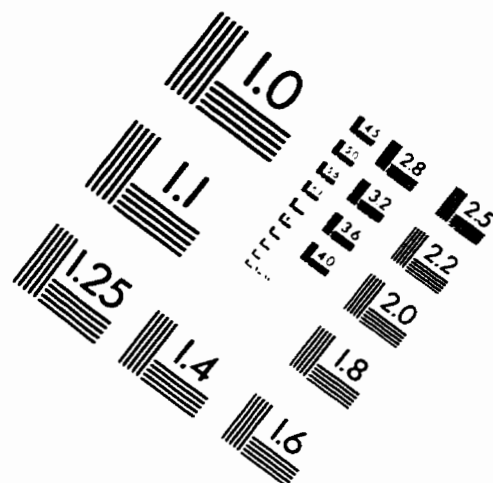
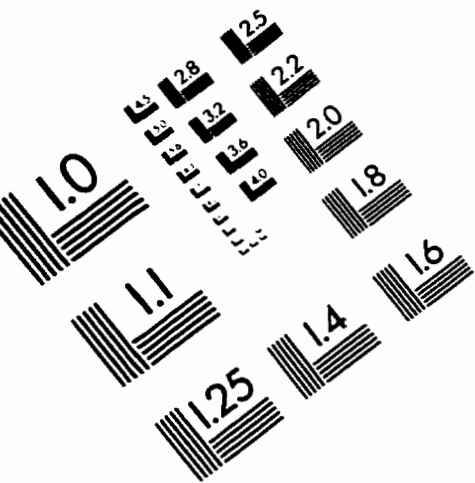
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