

RAMKINKAR BAIJ
SELF-PORTRAIT

WRITINGS AND INTERVIEWS 1962-1979

Translated from original Bengali by
SUDIPTO CHAKRABORTY

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Translated by Sudipto Chakraborty
from the original Bengali book

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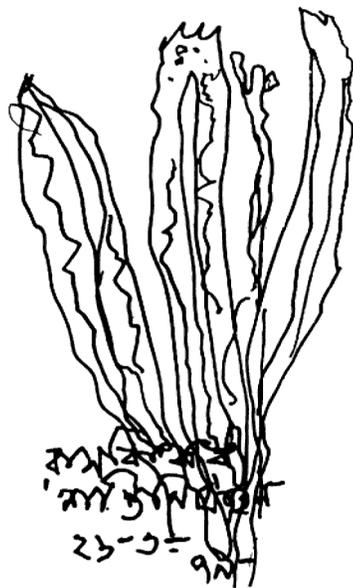
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CHRONICLE OF A JOURNEY

The current work cannot be called the fittest or best translation of such a book. The translator does not possess an art qualification or much exposure to art, neither close acquaintance of artists, connoisseurs or art critics; nor a qualifying degree or proficiency in languages or any experience of translating. Still he has ventured upon the work, as if like a person possessed, simply because he could never overcome the first impact the Bengali original had made upon him. This translation work is thus a product basically of the generosity of the publisher who considered love for art more qualifying than literary prowess or critical competence.

The slim original book has explosive material within its covers, shrouded in profound aesthetic comprehension expressed in mundane dialogues and above all an overpowering aura of simple yet firm contentment obtained from connecting with the inscrutable schemes of Nature.

This book is not only an open window between Ramkinkar and us; it is truly a multilayered mine of rich deposits of human excellence, poised to be unfolded to the motivated and the connoisseur. It is a testimony of how Tagore assimilated the universe, how Nandalal assimilated Tagore and how Ramkinkar assimilated Nandalal. It is also a story of how their sensitive souls sorted through the human legacy of truth and beauty and how their honest hands shaped their own truths into forms of art. Thus this slim book is a great chronicle of a journey into aesthetics and a potential nursery of minds in search of healthy ends.

The prime goal of this translation is to propagate on a wider range the touching tale of a great artist of our times, a true pioneer,

whom we have only partly recognised and hardly publicised. It is wished that people who cannot enjoy Bengali but know English, including a large section of our unfortunate Bengali children, may know about this unknown Titan and feel proud of this true practitioner of plain living, high thinking, higher understanding and highest expressing.

The secondary purpose of this endeavour is to inspire and invite more competent persons to come forward and take up the work of unveiling the brilliance of invaluable yet underexposed gems from our treasury.

We shall be particularly happy if the life, thinking, contribution and character of the great Nandalal Basu could be made available in this manner to enrich our life.

One more point. While studying the book, readers may find a few paragraphs seeming like repetitious of each other. It is really not so. It is in fact not repetitions but reiterations. We are delighted to find that over long gaps of time, against the backdrop of changing age, moods, health, surroundings and media and also against shifts in his own style and expressions, the basic beliefs and prime perceptions of the great artist remain reliably the same; he does not veer from his core conviction. It is in fact reassuring and acts as an unflickering leading light for us.

The life and work of Ramkinkar is as wide as the open fields, as distant as the horizon and as emancipating as the sky. Let us share it and be elevated.

Sudipto Chakraborty

'GO AND WATCH RAMKINKAR AT WORK;
HIS DEXTERITY IS UNNERVING.'

Ramkinkar had a many-splendoured talent. He is famous today for sculpting. His genius for sculpting and painting is widely acclaimed now. His skill of stage décor was extraordinary. Those who have enjoyed his stage setup for *Ha-ja-ba-ra-la*, *Muktadhara*, *Shatranj ke khiladi* would surely agree with me. Let me provide some examples of what kind of public relation Ramkinkar used to possess.

Ramkinkar was shaping up a sculpture (abstract) near the old guest house of the temple. Rasik the sweeper stops there to enquire— 'Pray what is this you make, o *babumosai*?'

'Guess yourself, go ahead, man!'

'I have never seen such an item. To know this, one has to consult the Vedas.'

Ramkinkar reverberates with his familiar laughter and regales— 'Who says the commoner is no connoisseur?'

Once again, he was busy sculpting his famous *Santhal Family* by the roadside. The Santhals on their way stare, stop by and stroll around it.

One of them comments, 'Are you making a god, Babu?'

'Why don't you all guess it?'

Another quips, 'Hey what have you done Babu, such a big man and so small a *talai*! How would he ever be able to sleep?'

Ramkinkar elongated the *talai* or the mat later on.

Now I mention a remark on Ramkinkar by Acharya Nandalal. Ramkinkar was sculpting clay relief figures on the wall of the 'Kalo Bari' (Black house). At noon, Acharya Nandalal appeared in my

studio room and said, 'Benode, go and watch Ramkinkar sculpting in clay, the dexterity of his hands is really unnerving! This is not achievable with the devotion of one life only! Ramkinkar is born with the continuum of endeavour across many incarnations.'

Ramkinkar used to sing and laugh with a stentorian voice. His lavish laughter and sonorous singing had magnetic attraction for the teachers and students of all sections.

Ramkinkar had a very gentle demeanour. But he never suffered from any artificial urban sophistication at all. A feeling of generosity which impregnates all his sculptures and pictures attracts all spectators instantly. A magnanimous man like Ramkinkar is truly rare. All who have come in contact with him would endorse that. It is not my intention here to introduce his artwork in full. I have just put on record glimpses of certain aspects of his persona which would otherwise have remained obscure to posterity, shrouded in unclear anecdotes and fancied fables. Ramkinkar the equipoised artiste arrived in Santiniketan in his early youth. After that, spanning his life, he withstood many blizzards but never budged from his stance.

Sadhak-Shilpi Ramkinkar : Benodebehari Mukhopadhyay, 1980



THE IMAGEMAKER

To worship the Supreme Being within life's sanctum sanctorum, one's entire consciousness has to be dedicated, still that would not be enough.

I have gazed awestruck at the wondrous play of lightning upon somber clouds; then shared the swelling orchestra of the heavens, highlighting pangs of passion of a lone lovelorn peacock tap-dancing in the rain in full glory of its feathery fan.

I had left home at tender age to seek education. Mother expired and I rushed back. The dismal tidings of death took its time to sink in. I was rendered speechless, even devoid of the capacity to express grief. I just uttered a single word— 'Ma'— and nothing else; a silent manifestation of deepest hurt.

Tagore, the *Gurudev*, abounded in profuse creativity for more than half of his life, involving words and sounds and tunes. His cup of creation filled to the brim and spilled over. Later I watched him enjoy silent satisfaction among abundance of sprightly lines and mellow colours for more than a decade.

There is a conflict between motion and friction. The higher the speed, the rougher it is. Where their relation synchronises amicably, music is born. The creator of music has contained complete analysis of sound within six notes. The division and analysis of notes by musicians is an ancient practice. All our feelings, passions and sentiments are being expressed through these six notes.

I have seen the ultimate concept of art in the *Shiva-linga* or the sculptured idols, toys, figurines or icons from Mohen-jo-daro and Harappa. Nothing remains beyond that revelation— the eyes are the only means of grasping that. Nature offers us two figures—

male and female. The third is their progeny– the child. This theme is a really wonderful one. So much of manifestation of beauty and joy springs from this very core.

The effort is to express this bliss into a form. It is called a symbol– I try to say that.

Friction starts with motion. Sound is born thereof. Melody or cacophony depends on the variety of friction. The composer formulates marvellous tunes out of that; tries to perpetuate that.

This same game of creativity is played everywhere. It is known as symbol. Are there similar such symbols in music? Musicians are competent to comment on that.

The fashion of the day is to proliferate ceaseless talking. Nothing is clear, nothing is audible. The culprit is noise; overwhelming, deafening noise blunting our senses. The clatter and jangle of machines is a major noise of our times. It is enough to stagger us. We have had enough of the sound age, let us hope for the 'silencer age' now.

The value of sound is feeble for the imagemaker. When Tagore himself was working with forms, I observed that he remained tranquil. But he had spent almost all of his life juggling words and sounds. The art of conversation, the art of music– both involve sound. On the contrary, the art of form is totally silent. It demands only meditation. One of the song compositions of Tagore carry the words *Dhyaner dhankhani, paibe apan bani* (The treasure of my meditation shall find its own intonation). The use of sound and words is relevant and justified here. This expression is meaningless without a sound instrument. Either the vocal chord or a musical instrument is required here.

Sir, I am the witness, the imagemaker only. Not a dealer of sounds. Anyway, sounds also have their own forms but they clash and clamour when in conflict. There is enough sound already– the noise of trams, motor cars, locomotives, factories, human uproar– you people hear all these and still wish for more and print magazines? I wonder at your patience at that!

SELF - P O R T R A I T

–*What was the main problem of artists in your time?*

RAMKINKAR : Nothing. . .there was no problem. If one could paint at all. . .then there was no problem. The only problem was, what style to follow or evolve. Oh yes, another problem was regarding women. But let us not discuss it (*loud laughter*). No more problems. If at all, problem was to produce, to procure! Except that, no problem.

–*What is the main problem of artists today?*

RAMKINKAR : Freedom. . .freedom of work. Freedom. . .the will to work. (*He pauses to think*). . .It will develop. . .it develops generally. . .And then the issue of public relations and exposure to people. . .I have seen real full-fledged humans. . .never bothered about dwarfs.

–*You have not married. Would you like to comment on that?*

RAMKINKAR : I never had marriage and family life in my preference. . .I was obsessed with the will for continuous creative work. . .marriage would have marred it. Art has given me the happiness of matrimony and family; Creation has replaced procreation for me. . .Woman. . .woman is indispensable. . .for man is a creation of Nature.

–*Your paintings and sculptures– both seem to be so phenomenally intertwined with Nature.*

RAMKINKAR : Man himself is within Nature.

–*Within Nature again, you have valued the tree the most.*

RAMKINKAR : Living. . .tree. . .because the tree is living.

–*Even not all the parts of a tree; the trunk is most relevant regarding art.*

RAMKINKAR : The trunk is main. . .it is the core of life. . .leaves and and flowers follow. The roots and the trunk sustain everything. (The artist is talking philosophically here but the actual truth at surface may be that the trunk has the best sculptural quality which may be seen in *Sujata*.)

–Picasso once said in an interview during one of his exhibitions that the artist does not exist without Nature. The artist sort of insults Nature by trying to reconstruct or reproduce it.

RAMKINKAR : Insulting is not possible. . .not insulting. . .it is not insult. The artist does not imitate Nature. Nature. . .Nature is creation manifest; Nature is an illusion made by God. This is how He plays. . .He has granted us liberty to play too. . .we shall play. His play has discipline; a liberal discipline. It's a game. . .you can play it too. This whole creation is a game. So I play without worry. . .A Tagore poem says *Tomari naam bolbo, bolbo naana chhaley* (Thy name shall I recite, on any pretext repeat.). . .(Ramkinkar starts chanting the song to himself and gradually comes out with a full-throated rendition). . .*Bolbo mukher haasi diye, bolbo chokher joley* (In my smile thine name appears, thou shalt reside in my tears). . .My laughters are His and such are my emotions and perceptions. Picasso has hesitation and so he said that. . .God has created. . .spontaneously, causelessly, without purpose. And procreation is the purpose of that purposelessness. Just reap your dividend of joy from God's creation. . .Not conflict . . .neither fight. . .only play.

–How?

RAMKINKAR : How? You can earn the answer yourself. I would not have worked if I could not derive joy from it. No questions. . . you have to forget everything and play. If you harbour grudges, that means you are not oblivious still. Birth is for future. . .This will continue. We see, we recognise, we understand. . .it leads to comprehension. . .then we create. . .it generates bliss (*gets lost in contemplation*). . .The Budhdha. . .the Budhdha. (Probably the artist drifted into reference of the *Jataka* which narrates the cycle of creation and improvement...that is what the Hindus call *Leela*.) . . .the present. . .begetting a child is in a sense rebirth of the



parent. . .not without me but through me. All these are aspects of illusion, *maya*.

–Most of your work relates to the Santhal natives of Birbhum.

RAMKINKAR : No. . .not that. . .there is much variety. (*Ponders a bit*) Yes, maybe. They are toilers. . .they work. . .they have active hands. . .in the sun. . .under open light. . .flowing unkempt hair. . .oozing sweat. They feel hunger. They suffer. . .they have sorrow. . .they are poor. (*After some silence*) They are very active. I love activity of work. . .Rhythmic. . .active life.

(*He points to distant residential houses and office buildings*) Dull life. . .those who sit there. . .scribes away. . .what do they have? Let them sit inactive. Those who trade (*pointing to the market*), where is vibrancy in them? Wherever I travelled. . .I painted only those who I found were really active. They offer richness of form.

–Haven't you ever made a self-portrait?

RAMKINKAR : I did, . . .in my native village. Before coming here . . .in childhood. Maybe I'll do it sometime in the future again. It's a matter of mood. . .others have done quite a few. . .good ones. (Many artists have made Ramkinkar's portraits.)

–*So you'll make a self-portrait?*

RAMKINKAR : Whatever an artist creates, is his self-portrait.

–*What is the most important prerequisite for taking up creation?*

RAMKINKAR : An open mind. Openness of mind is a must. Then feelings...feelings.

–*For comprehension or for expression?*

RAMKINKAR : Expression; required more for expression.

–*Expression for whom?*

RAMKINKAR : Primarily for self, then for all others. . . .For whom did Tagore create? . . .For the sake of creation. There is an obsession. . .a madness, addiction, then the creation takes shape. (Takes a pause) No, I'm not sure. Tagore used to comment on himself as 'crazy maniac'. . . .Joy comes first.

–*Consciously?*

RAMKINKAR : No, unconsciously. You should not want to know whether anybody else will understand your work of art. A painting means a painting only. Tagore used to say, I don't care, I really don't care. I have drawn as I felt. I do not demand or command you to understand it. You are free to form your own opinion.

–*At what stage did you get the maximum pleasure during work?*

RAMKINKAR : At every stage, each time, always (his face lights up in a gentle smile). Every time since childhood.

–*You have worked with all media?*

RAMKINKAR : It's a matter of mood. . .as per availability.

–*Do you work on pre-selected themes? How do you start work?*

RAMKINKAR : Sometimes. . .sometimes not. . . .I do not think, I only feel and work. . .things take shape on their own.

–*Does any work become so complete as to require no addition, omission or alteration later on?*

RAMKINKAR : No. No work is ever so complete. I work on the same and go on working. Maybe I stop if too tired; maybe at a new concept. The dissatisfaction remains. As long as the sky of creativity is empty, there is satisfaction. Otherwise the picture goes on changing and improvising itself. I do it again. . .finish it. . .do it over again as long as it does not change drastically. Then I do it still once. . .do a fresh one.

Tagore had written five thousand poems, even then he started painting. Why? Why did he do that? . . .The desire remains. He has taught us such things. . .so we could learn something. I had taken up new and newer work.

–*What do you consider most important for work?*

(Note it is a repeat question but also note that the answer is fully compatible.)

RAMKINKAR : Feeling. Feeling for everything. If the feeling is weak, disappointment is certain. So feel. . .feel. . .feeling depends on right line of contemplation.

–*These days you fall sick quite often, still you are creating so much, don't you feel like taking some rest?*

RAMKINKAR : (Mockingly) How to take rest? What rest, man? (Chuckling) I have to do something. . .what should I do? Sing? Chat? Gossip? There is no time. Time is so limited. . .I have crossed seventy. . . .I wonder where the time has gone. . .No!

–*Work. New work. New Topics.*

RAMKINKAR : Continuum of fresh observations– if the eyes are kept open, we can see so many things in their interplay.

–*Haven't you ever assessed what the country and society have given you in recognition of such pursuit of art?*

RAMKINKAR : (In a gruff tone) I'm not such a beggar! . . .I want nothing. . .I get everything out of my work.

–*Last question, for how long do you wish to work like this?*

RAMKINKAR : As long as I can. . .up to the last. When work will end, meditation will conclude too. . .Then. . .void. . .emptiness. . .like the sky. The sky. . .rest.