

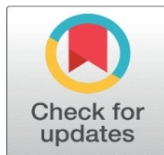
RELIEF MURAL IN SANTINIKETAN: RAMKINKAR BAIJ'S SCULPTURAL LANGUAGE

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ramkinkar was born on 25th May, 1906, at Jogipara, Bankura, into a lower-middle-class Bengali family (Visva-Bharati, 1980, p. 69). His devotion to art was clear from a young age. From a young age, he exhibited a passion for assorted artistic endeavours, including background painting (Ganguly, 2022, p. 276). Ramkinkar Baij was a crucial figure in the evolution of modern Indian art, joining Santiniketan in the 1920s as one of Nandalal Bose's most talented pupils. He is historically significant for asserting an individualist, modernist credo that anticipated contemporary reality, and he is often recognised as the first artist at Santiniketan to use oil paint and produce distinctly modern, abstract work. His path to Santiniketan began in 1925, after his talent for creating posters and portraits of nationalist leaders during the

ABSTRACT

Ramkinkar Baij is recognised as a pioneering artist in the history of Indian sculpture and is often referred to as the father of modern Indian sculpture. He introduced a new visual language and technique that closely correspond to the concepts and nature of his works, adopting dynamic forms and expressive textures that convey emotion and movement. The construction, force, rhythm, and inner vitality apparent in his work distinguish him from other sculptors. His sculptures frequently focus on the lives of marginalised individuals, highlighting their struggles and fortitude in society. Baij developed a revolutionary throwing process and employed new media to merge his sculptures with the local textures, people, and landscapes within their environments, enabling an enhanced connection between the artwork and the community it represents. His renowned open-air environmental works, such as Mill Call, Santhal Family, Thresher, and Sujata, have introduced a unique dimension to Indian modern sculpture. His expertise in mural art is on par with the significance of his well-documented open-air sculptures and drawings. His work to relief murals in Santiniketan has considerably augmented the history of mural art during the modern Indian art era. In addition to his sculptural achievements, Baij has made a durable impact on relief mural art. This study considers the concepts, visual language, and techniques used in his mural art. It also emphasises his contributions to society and how his mural journey has motivated future generations of artists. Furthermore, the study considers how the media he pioneered have gained widespread popularity and keep influencing the artistic language of contemporary society.

Keywords: Relief Mural, Mud Relief, Cement Medium, Santiniketan Mural, Santal, Construction, Force

non-cooperation movement was noticed by local nationalists, including Ramananda Chatterjee, who subsequently brought him to the institution (Shiv Kumar, 1997).

Ramkinkar's visual language was a unique synthesis of varied influences, including traditional Indian sculpture at Sanchi and Konarak, as well as the modernist techniques of artists like Rodin, Epstein, and Picasso (Shiv Kumar, 1997). The work of Ramkinkar Baij exhibits a delicate yet deep influence from the renowned sculptor Auguste Rodin. This influence was transmitted through a lineage of artistic methods passed from Rodin to his disciples, such as Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929), and, further, to his disciple Margaret Milward (1873–1953). Margaret Milward, who arrived in Santiniketan in 1926, transmitted the particular style and techniques to Ramkinkar (Ganguly, 2022, p. 276). Ramkinkar drew deep inspiration from her methods, molding his early sculpture training, which he refined and carried throughout his career.

Unlike many of his contemporaries who were drawn to Far Eastern art, Ramkinkar was deeply responsive to the human figure and body language, finding inspiration in the natural zest for life of the Santhals, whom he represented monumentally in his work. He was an innovator in his use of materials, combining cement and a lateritic-gravel mix to create sculptures which balanced the sensuousness of flesh and the structural strength of stone, a hallmark seen in his landmark 1938 work, *Santhal Family* (Shiv Kumar, 1997).

Over time, his art evolved from early mythological wash paintings to post-Cubist and socially committed allegorical works, prompted by the Second World War and the Bengal Famine of 1943 (Shiv Kumar, 1997). His portraits also shifted from conventional likenesses to expressive, psychological studies that prioritised his subjective response to the subject. Whether working on monumental environmental sculptures or rapid watercolours that captured a daylight vision of beauty, Ramkinkar's practice continued rooted in personal experience rather than academic rules, famously stating, "I do not know if what I am doing is modern or not, but it is based on my experience" (Shiv Kumar, 1997).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To conduct this study, it is necessary to review several significant books, research papers, and catalogues concerning the works of Ramkinkar Baij. Such a review is vital because these sources supply diverse and critical information that serves as the basis for identifying research gaps and defining the study's objectives. Consequently, a thorough review of these key publications is necessary for the research.

Janak Jhankar Narzari's *Some New Trends in Modern Indian Sculpture* (1978) delivers a significant early analysis of the developing trends in post-independence Indian sculpture. The text emphasises a transition from academic realism to experimental forms, materials, and themes, mirrored via broader sociocultural changes. Narzary explores how sculptors began to fuse indigenous traditions with modernist methodologies, thereby building a unique visual language rooted in Indian contexts and attuned to global art movements. This study is important for documenting emerging practices and recognising key tendencies such as abstraction, symbolic expression, and development in materials. It acts as a foundational reference to comprehend the transition and diversification of modern Indian sculptural practices.

J. J. Narzary's *A History of Environmental Sculpture and Ramkinkar Baij* (1980) analyses the inception of environmental sculpture in India via the revolutionary contributions of Ramkinkar Baij. The study contextualises Baij's practice within Santiniketan, revealing his innovative amalgamation of sculpture with the natural environment, architecture, and quotidian life. Narzary emphasises Baij's transition from traditional studio-based sculpture to site-responsive and material-centric experimentation. The text proves central in positioning Baij as a major figure in the evolution of environmental and contextual art practices in India, providing early critical perspectives on the relationship between space, material, and contemporary sculptural expression.

R. Siva Kumar's *The Santiniketan Murals: A Brief History* (1995) offers a succinct and perceptive examination of the development of mural practices at Santiniketan. The text traces the evolution of murals from Nandalal Bose's initial experiments to subsequent innovations by artists such as Benodebehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij. Siva Kumar accentuates the amalgamation of indigenous traditions, contextual narratives, and modernist methodologies within the Santiniketan educational structure. The study emphasises murals as an intersection of art, environment, and education, representing the institution's comprehensive vision. It functions as an important reference to comprehend the historical progression and intellectual basis of mural art in Santiniketan.

R. Siva Kumar's *Santiniketan: The making of a contextual modernism* (1997) exhibition catalogue explores the emergence of contextual modernism in Indian art through the cooperative evolution of the Santiniketan school. Founded

by Rabindranath Tagore, this movement moved away from rigid nationalism and Western imitation to embrace an alternative education that integrated nature, community, and world influences. The author stresses the key roles of artists Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee, and Ramkinkar Baij, who transformed traditional techniques into a personal and versatile visual language. By prioritising experiential reality above mere style, these figures bridged the gap between custom and innovation, grounding their creative expression in the social and environmental context of rural Bengal. Ultimately, the source illustrates how Santiniketan promoted a universal humanism that redefined the aesthetic and philosophical trajectory of modern Indian art.

Arnab Dutta (2019) positions Ramkinkar Baij as a crucial figure in Indian modernity, elucidating his evolution from conventional styles to *avant-garde* modernism. The study emphasises Baij's early development at Santiniketan under Rabindranath Tagore, where he developed a distinctive aesthetic that amalgamated Western expressionism with indigenous Santhal culture. Notable works such as *Santhal Family* are recognised as seminal instances of public modernist sculpture that employed indigenous materials and novel 'open-air' methodologies. Dutta contends that Baij's Dionysian methodology and dismissal of academic conventions facilitated a dynamic, humanistic expression. The source characterises Baij's legacy as a pivotal moment in Indian art history, connecting tradition with the global *avant-garde*.

3. RESEARCH GAP & SCOPE

On the basis of the provided literature reviews and other studies on Ramkinkar, a significant research gap exists regarding the comprehensive study of Ramkinkar Baij as a muralist. Existing academic works extensively analyse his role as a pioneer of modern Indian sculpture, focusing on his visual language, materials, and context, but his mural work remains largely neglected.

The sources highlight that although his relief murals and contributions to the mural history of Santiniketan are indisputable and of equal importance to his sculptures, they have not been properly reviewed. While Indian art historian R. Siva Kumar has touched upon his mural art, most research focuses on his sculptures, drawings, and paintings. Furthermore, his original exploration of media in murals and the influence of his visual language in this field on subsequent artists are areas that lack adequate academic investigation. Therefore, there is a clear need for upcoming research to focus on his identity and legacy as a muralist.

The almost untouched area of Ramkinkar's relief murals affords a rich scope for research and documentation of his mural works. This analysis will examine his mural spaces, visual language, and techniques used in the medium. This study will reveal Ramkinkar Baij's significant contribution to mural art, bringing out the new directions he introduced to Santiniketan murals and Indian mural art in general.

4. METHODS

This study uses both historical as well as and qualitative analysis through an interpretative approach which integrates art history and visual language. Within the present framework, the relief murals of Ramkinkar Baij in Santiniketan are analysed as specimens. The methodology embraces historical documentary and visual ethnographic research. Data collection for the study involves the use of photography, journal articles, website reports, and various documentary films, alongside resources from scholarly educational databases and indexed journals.

5. ANALYSIS

Before starting the analysis, we have a clear idea about the meaning of mural art. The word "mural" comes from the Latin word "murus" (meaning "wall") and is grammatically defined as a large-scale painting on a wall. A mural represents something more. Before analysing this study, it is essential that we understand what a mural is. There is a significant difference between a mural and an independent canvas painting. An independent painting remains autonomous in any space, where its work or quality does not change. In contrast, a mural is created for a specific space and a particular construction. A mural must correspond to the architecture and blend in with the environment. These qualities are necessary requirements for it to truly be considered a mural. "A mural grows out of the wall, with a mutual relation to the architecture and the environment" (Chakraborty, 1995, p. 1).

Binodebehari Mukherjee is a significant personage in both the history of Santiniketan murals and the history of modern Indian muralists. The mural paintings created by Binodebehari Mukherjee established a revolutionary position

in the history of modern Indian mural art, much like how Ramkinkar (Baij) created a similar impact with relief murals. Both were contemporaries who worked together at Santiniketan during the same period, engaging in shared art practices and creative exchanges. Binodbehari Mukherjee believed that "Murals have always been executed with an eye to the public. And this aspect cannot be ignored even today. In preparing a mural, layers of thought should go into its creation. Efforts should be made to determine whether a mural can appeal to the public even if form and similitude are dispensed with, though it is hard to imagine a mural attaining any success without architectonic qualities. The subject matter, if there is one, is likely to be of use in establishing a rapport with the general public" (Mukherjee, 1984: 406).

Therefore, from this review, we can understand that for something to be called a mural, it must have a proper relationship with architecture and preserve harmony with its environment. Additionally, it should be able to easily respond to and communicate with people, including the general public, in the specific space or area where the mural is situated. If an architectural art form possesses these particular qualities, then it can be identified as a mural.

Before analysing the relief murals of Ramkinkar Baij, we can broadly divide his work into two phases.

- The early phase of mural art, from the 1920s to the 1940s, was during his early life.
- The later phase of mural work, post-1950

These two phases are analysed based on three major aspects:

- The first medium and technique.
- The second is the relationship between concepts and mural spaces.
- The third is a stylistic approach.

5.1. RAMKINKAR'S EARLY PHASE OF MURAL ART (1920S TO 1940S)

Gairik mural (Late 1920s)

The mud relief mural at Gairik, a mud house, has not survived to the present day (Shiv Kumar, 2016, p. 30). Historical sources suggest that the pediment displayed mud reliefs depicting landscape and figurative motifs. One relief was made by Ramkinkar Baij, and another by a peer of Kala Bhavana. At the time of its creation, Ramkinkar was a student at Kala Bhavana, just beginning his formal art education and practice. The technique used involved creating a mud relief and then applying a tar coating, a method that became very popular in Santiniketan. This mud relief was probably executed in the late 1920s, not later than 1930. This mural at Gairik represents an extremely early version of this specific mud-relief technique and is likely Ramkinkar Baij's first relief mural and his first experiment with mud relief (Shiv Kumar, 1997, p. 86).

Figure 1

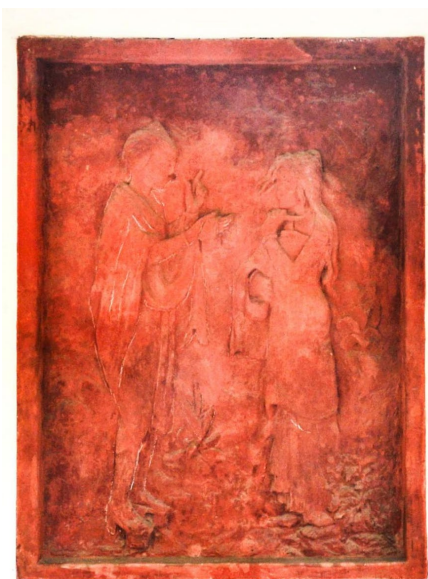


Figure 1 Kacha and Devayani, by Ramkinkar Baij, 1929, Cement relief, Santoshalaya, north verandah, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, Birbhum, West Bengal

Kacha and Devayani (1929)

The relief mural *Kacha and Devayani* (Fig. 1), crafted in cement, holds a prominent place in the history of Santiniketan and may represent the inaugural cement relief mural produced there. This mural was created in 1929 (Shiv Kumar, 2016, p. 30). The dimensions of the mural are 213.5 cm by 157.5 cm. This project was a joint endeavour between Ramkinkar Baij and Sudhir Khastgir, both of whom were presumably students at Kala Bhavana during that period (Shiv Kumar, 1995, p. 86). This mural marks the beginning of Ramkinkar Baij's eventual mastery of cement, laying the foundation for the distinctive style and techniques he would later cultivate.

The mural's thematic essence is rooted in Hindu mythology, specifically an episode from the Mahabharata. The artists were inspired by Abanindranath Tagore's Jaipuri panel depicting the same theme, *Kacha and Devayani* (Shiv Kumar, 1995, p. 86). The artwork illustrates the visual lexicon of the Bengal School, characterised via its emphasis on traditional Indian artistic elements, such as rhythmic lines and the smoothness of figures and poses.

This early work exhibits a distinctly different artistic style from the techniques for which Ramkinkar Baij later became renowned, particularly in its use of traditional Indian motifs and a more restrained colour palette compared to his later, more expressive and abstract works. It is defined as a realistic work that draws on the visual language of the Bengal School. The composition is perfectly balanced, with two figures placed on either side of a central axis, engaging in dialogue. Despite its somewhat static composition, it clearly conveys the entire legend's narrative through pictorial narration.

The mural is acknowledged as an exceptionally skilled piece, featuring an impeccable combination of low, medium, and high relief. It is situated on the ground-level veranda of Santoshala, accessible to passersby. When mythological subjects of this nature are presented at the ground level, it becomes significantly easier to establish a connection with common people and the viewing audience. This type of presentation is considered a crucial aspect because it allows the thematic narrative to achieve a sense of identification and concord with the people.

Shyamali (1935)

During the 1920s and 1930s, two decades, several significant mud-architecture structures were constructed in Santiniketan, most notably Gairik, Chaity, Shyamali, and Kalo Bari (Black House) (Shiv Kumar, 2016, p. 31). While Gairik no longer exists, Shyamali, Chaity, and the Black House remain standing today. Shyamali was built as a residential complex for Rabindranath Tagore, where the entire structure, including the roof, was made of mud. Ramkinkar Baij and Nandalal Bose, who led two different groups of students, oversaw the important relief work on this building. Nandalal Bose's team focused on decorative motifs inspired by local terracotta temples, whereas Ramkinkar Baij's group depicted the daily lives of the local *Santhal* tribal community (Fig. 2) (Shiv Kumar, 2016, p. 31). Thematically, he was also sufficiently inspired by the maquette of the Santal Hunter that Bourdelle had made, titled *Forêt de la Volonté*, which is located in the Kala Bhavana Museum; from that inspiration, he created this *Santal* Hunter and the woman on the other side (Shiv Kumar, 2016, p. 54).

Figure 2

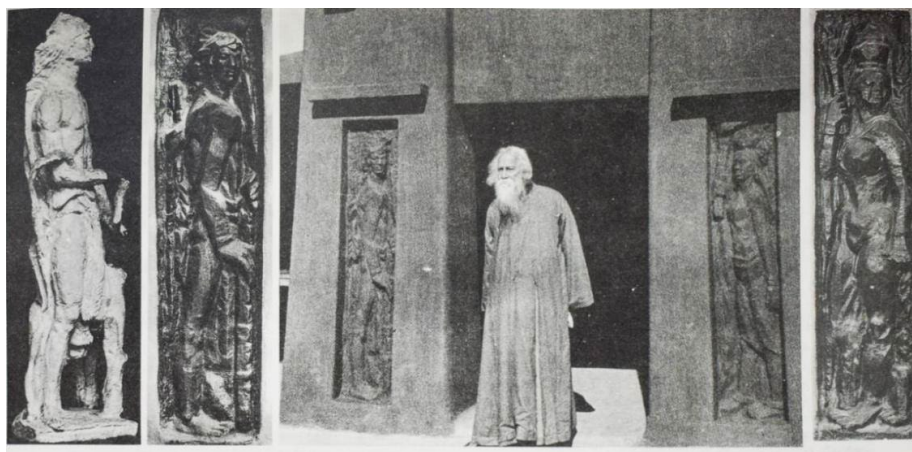


Figure 2 Shyamali Reliefs, by Ramkinkar Baij, 1935, Terracotta on Mud wall, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

The group led by Nandalal Bose created mud relief murals directly on mud walls, using various motifs inspired by local terracotta temples. In contrast, the group that Ramkinkar Baij worked with followed a different process; inspired by Bourdelle, Baij worked in a studio to first create terracotta plates, which were subsequently installed on the wall. As a result, Ramkinkar Baij's work consists of terracotta applied to a mud wall. (Shiv Kumar, 2016, p. 54)

The Shyamali relief, executed around 1935, represented an important advance in the context of mural relief art in Santiniketan by presenting local people and their environment as central subjects. These mud structures were protected by a specific plaster mixture of mud, cow dung, rice husk, and fenugreek water. A final bitumen-based tar-coat paint was applied to the surface to make it moisture-resistant. European trends, particularly after a period of instruction from Bourdelle, a follower of Rodin, markedly influenced Ramkinkar Baij's artistic style. With these influences, Ramkinkar developed a unique visual language characterised by strong construction.

A prime example of this style is the depiction of slightly elongated figures of a Santhal woman and man placed on either side of the entrance. In the past, these kinds of positions were only for guards or figures like the *Yaksha*. However, Ramkinkar chose to show the local *Santhal* people as equals, drawing on what he saw around him at the time. These figures demonstrate solid and geometric construction, with the structural strength and sturdiness of the *Santhal* physique. This created a new visual language within the context of Santiniketan's murals. This approach sharply contrasted with his earlier work, *Kacha-Devayani*, which was influenced by the Bengal School and traditional Indian art, ultimately assisting to the establishment of his own unique creative identity.

Black House, or Kalo baRi (1936-38)

The Black House, also known as the Kalo Bari Mud Relief Project (Fig. 3), functions as the largest mud relief mural site in Santiniketan and was built as a student hostel. It is still being used for the same purpose. This project is a prime example of collaborative pedagogy and art practice, in which students and teachers worked together under the leadership of Nandalal Bose to complete mud relief murals on the inner and outer veranda walls. A total of 38 panels were completed in Black House. In the southern inner veranda, thirteen panels were created in 1936 by senior students of Kala Bhavana, under Nandalal's supervision, depicting the marriage of Shiva (Visva Bharati, 1936).

While Nandalal initiated work on the southern inner veranda, he delegated responsibility to Ramkinkar Baij in December 1936, when he left for the Faizpur Congress (Shiv Kumar, 2026, p. 33). Ramkinkar, along with senior students, carried out relief work on the southern outer veranda wall at Visva Bharati (1937). The murals depict various subjects, including copies of Indian classical art and sculpture as well as scenes of daily life. These scenes feature *Bauls*, *Santhals*, musicians, and dancers. Of the 38 total relief works, two are almost three-dimensional, free-standing sculptures—specifically, a *dhol badok* (drummer) and a dancer (Fig. 4 & 5, middle panel)—located on the southern outer veranda, which highlight Ramkinkar's significant artistic contribution to the project.

Figure 3



Figure 3 Black House (*Kalo Bari*), 1936-38, Mud reliefs coated with tar, North Wall, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

Figure 4



Figure 4 Black House (*Kalo Bari*), 1936-38, Mud reliefs coated with tar, Exterior of South Varandah, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

Figure 5



Figure 5 Black House (*Kalo Bari*), 1936-38, Mud reliefs coated with tar, Exterior of South Varandah, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

Figure 6



Figure 6 Black House (*Kalo Bari*), 1936-38, Mud reliefs coated with tar Exterior of South Varandah, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

Figure 7



Figure 7 Black House (*Kalo Bari*), 1936-38, Mud reliefs coated with tar Exterior of South Varandah, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

Senior students of that time, under the supervision of Ramkinkar Baij, created most of the exterior walls of the South and North. These murals include replicas of great paintings and sculptures from various periods of art history, alongside narratives from daily life, such as *Santal* dance scenes (Fig. 6), *Baul* (Fig. 5, left panel), drummers, and musicians, as well as historical scenes. Specifically, the *Santal* dance relief work uses a constructive, visual language that closely corresponds to Ramkinkar's personal style. However, it cannot be claimed as his sole work, as it was a collaborative mural project in which he guided and supervised his students.

In works like the drummer relief (Fig. 4, middle panel), the tangible construction and structural strength typical of Ramkinkar are notably evident, distinguishing them from other murals in which stylistic differences among students are more apparent. In these projects, Ramkinkar's role was less that of an individual sculptor and more that of a mentor, teacher, and facilitator. This joint effort emphasizes his significant contribution as an educator who taught relief mural techniques, showing his influence through the guidance of his students rather than through his own handiwork alone.

Figure 8



Figure 8 *Aurangabad Caves Dancer and Musicians* by Ramkinkar Baij and students of Kala Bhavana, 1941. Cement relief, Ceramic Department, Kala Bhavan, Visva-Bharati. Size: 229 x 285 cm.

Aurangabad Caves Dancer and Musicians(1941)

This work (Fig. 8) is a replica of a panel depicting *dancers and musicians* from the Aurangabad Caves in Maharashtra, dating to approximately the 8th century AD. A well-known approach in Santiniketan's art practice and pedagogy is the philosophy of learning from our own past, which involves studying classical art through copying in order to understand its forms, lines, and shapes. Numerous such copy works exist in both painting and murals, and several replicas and imitations from various periods can already be seen in the Black House. This specific project was completed by Ramkinkar Baij, along with Sankho Chaudhuri, Prabhas Sen, and Ravi Chatterjee (Shiv Kumar, 1995, p.89). Executed in a cement medium, it is a highly skilful piece that transitions from low relief to high relief. The work is predominantly characterised by high relief, where the central dancing figure has become almost three-dimensional and free-standing, emulating the composition of the authentic cave carving. Ultimately, the objective of this work was to enhance practice and technical skill by learning directly from these ancient forms and dimensions.

By copying this relief sculpture, Ramkinkar and his students recreate various poses and turns of figures in Indian art, such as the *bahubhanga* (multi-bend) pose, which adds dynamism. The curves and lines that run through the body create a rhythm that reflects the flow of dance. This piece has been copied exceptionally well, and the accompanying figures in the background also exhibit a variety of gestures, creating a sense of distance between the figures. Ultimately, this serves as a complete lesson that highlights diverse gestures and postures conveyed with deep expression, which is the core character of Indian sculpture.

Cheena Bhavan Reliefs (1942)

There are four consecutive relief panels on the facade of Cheena Bhavana at Visva-Bharati. Ramkinkar Baij created one of these panels, while his students, Shankho Chowdhury, Prabhas Sen, and Rabi Chatterjee, created the others. This group had previously collaborated on the Aurangabad Caves *Musicians and Dancers* relief panel, but in this instance, the four murals are distinct individual works. When moving from west to east, the panel on the extreme west is by Ramkinkar Baij, followed by Shankho Chowdhury, then Prabhas Sen, and finally Rabi Chatterjee. (Shiv Kumar, 1995, p. 89) The work was executed using a wet-process in-situ medium, in which the plaster is carved while still wet. Of these four compositions, only Ramkinkar's depicts a Santhal dance, whereas the others are based on various plays by Rabindranath Tagore. Prabhas Sen's information indicates that the studio carried out the actual execution and experimentation for those other panels (Shiv Kumar, 1995, p. 75).

This mural is based on Ramkinkar Baij's highly familiar and favourite subject, the Santal Dance, and is executed in low relief. According to Professor Sutanu Chatterjee, a faculty member in the Department of Sculpture at Kala Bhavana, it stands as an excellent example of a low-relief mural. The mural demonstrates Baiji's ability to create distinct surfaces through very low relief, resulting in a play of light and shadow that is very difficult to achieve. Through these techniques, he successfully established a sense of distance and a complete ambience, which serves as a testament to his exceptional skill and unique artistic style.

5.1.1. MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE:

During this stage of his work, Ramkinkar primarily used three media and materials: mud relief murals, terracotta murals, and cement murals. His first work, created in Goenka and no longer in existence, was a mud relief mural. Towards the end of his time as a student, he created the mural *Kacha and Devayani* (Fig. 1) using the cement medium. For this particular work, he used the casting technique. The work was prepared in raw clay, then a mould was created to cast the mural in a studio space before it was installed at the designated site. This studio-based casting method enabled greater precision and finer lines, as the initial work was done in clay before being moulded into concrete.

Ramkinkar also worked in terracotta, specifically in mud relief and mud constructions. For example, the two figures on either side of *Shyamali* (Fig. 2) were crafted in terracotta; they were first sculpted in clay, then fired to create plates, and finally installed appropriately. When working with students at Black House (Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7), he performed direct mud relief on mud plaster. This technique involved mixing mud with materials such as cow dung and rice husk; the finished work was then coated with bitumen-based paint tar to protect it from water damage.

In contrast, the "situ" method used at China Bhavan involved working directly on the wall surface while the plaster was still wet. This technique required working very quickly and served as a testament to his exceptional skill. The "Dancer and Musician" panel (Fig. 8) in the Kala Bhavan courtyard, a copy of an Aurangabad cave mural, was first created

in a studio, moulded, and then cast in concrete before being fixed to the wall. Ultimately, while he primarily relied on mud and cement, his techniques were diverse: direct clay-on-clay relief, fired terracotta sculptures affixed to mud walls, cement casting, and direct carving or cutting into wet cement.

5.1.2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONCEPTS AND MURAL SPACES

Ramkinkar Baij's early artistic phase during the 1930s and 1940s began with student-era works, starting with Gairik murals made of mud that combined landscape and figurative elements. These original works no longer exist today. His early relief murals were based on mythology, such as *Kacha-Devayani* (1929) (Fig. 1), based on the Mahabharata narrative. Some later works, such as *Musicians and Dancers* from Aurangabad Cave (1941) (Fig. 8), and his supervision of various relief murals at the Black House (1936–38) (Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) drew on Indian and global art history. However, early Santiniketan mural practice has an inclination towards traditional art practice. He departed from tradition by placing mythological characters directly on the ground level rather than elevating them, making these figures feel much more accessible to ordinary people. This grounded approach is also evident in his depictions of local life, such as the Santal woman and youth at the main gate of Shyamali (1935) (Fig. 2) and the *Santal Dance* (1942) found on the Cheena Bhavana facade and the south exterior veranda of the Black House (1936-38) (Fig. 4, 5, 6, 7). These works captured the daily lives, physical structures, and body language of the working-class *Santal* community within their local environment.

Baij's work also integrated copy work as a vital part of the pedagogy at Kala Bhavana. By selecting specific subjects like dance, he aimed to teach his students about rhythm, proportion, and various bodily gestures. These instructional compositions allowed students to explore figurative sculpture and the creation of space within a narrative framework. Another critical reason behind copying this panel of *musicians and dancers* is that until 1933, Sangit Bhavana and Kala Bhavana were located on the same campus. In 1933, Sangit Bhavana was provided with a separate campus and building adjacent to Kala Bhavana. Therefore, depicting the practice of music and dance within this space was one of the primary reasons for selecting this particular copy.

Ultimately, this phase of Baij's career was marked by a dual focus: the exploration of mythological themes and a deep, realistic portrayal of the local community's everyday existence.

5.1.3. STYLISTIC APPROACH

In the 1930s to 1940s, Ramkinkar Baij's relief murals demonstrate two primary stylistic approaches: one rooted in traditional Indian art and another that represents a unique visual language influenced by European sculptors like Rodin, which he evolved into a constructive, forceful style. During his student years, his 1929 work *Kacha and Devayani* (Fig. 1) was inspired by Abanindranath Tagore's Jaipuri panel on the same theme, adhering closely to the sophisticated, rhythmic lines and "flow" of the Bengal School. He also practised traditional Indian styles by copying works such as the *Musician and Dancer* (Fig. 8) from the Aurangabad caves, where he and his students meticulously maintained the proportions, gestures, and rhythmic lines characteristic of classical Indian sculpture.

By 1935, a shift toward a more westernised influence became apparent in the Santal male and female figures (Fig. 2) on the main door of Shyamali. While inspired by Bourdelle's *Hunter*, these figures incorporated the firm, geometric physical structures of the Santal people, signalling the development of his personal style. This evolution continued through the early 1940s, notably with the 1942 *Santal Dance* (in situ medium) on the facade of China Bhavana and the mud reliefs at Black House (Fig. 6). At Black House, relief works of drummers and dancers supervised by Baij blended structural solidity with traditional Indian rhythmic gestures. On the exterior walls of the south veranda of Black House, the *Santal Dance* mud relief (Fig. 6) showcases the solid construction and inherent force for which Baij became famous.

Between 1930 and 1950, Ramkinkar Baij gradually developed his unique sculptural style and visual language, significantly influenced by Western art traditions. Solid construction was a fundamental element of his artistic expression across various media, including sculpture, painting, drawing, and murals. His work integrated this structural force with the daily life stories and physical language of the hard-working Santal people, serving as both his subject matter and visual language.

During this period, he produced several landmark outdoor sculptures, including *Sujata* (1935), *Santhal Family* (1938), *Threshing* (1943), and *Mill Call* (1956). By mixing cement with local gravel and utilising a *throwing technique*, he enriched his personal artistic style and created textures that blended seamlessly with the region's natural landscape.

This integration of sculpture and land texture transformed his pieces from individual artworks into true environmental art, making them an organic part of their surroundings. This innovative approach established Ramkinkar Baij as a pivotal figure in the history of both Indian and global art.

5.2. RAMKINKAR'S LATER PHASE OF MURAL WORK, POST-1950

At this stage, Ramkinkar Baij had established himself as a remarkably powerful artist, particularly in his exploration of new media and the distinctive artistic language he developed. Over time, his focus shifted significantly towards using cement as a core medium. Several factors contributed to this change, notably his income and status, which prompted him to select locally available, inexpensive materials for his sculptures. The *Natyaghar* auditorium at Visva-Bharati provides a dedicated space for his relief murals. This venue houses three cement murals: two on either side of the stage and one on the upper podium. By this time, he had decisively affirmed his choice of medium. Despite the rarity of other relief murals he personally created, many students he mentored or inspired bear his influence in their works. This discussion will centre on the three murals located in the *Natyaghar* auditorium: *Baul Lalan Fakir*, *Dancing Girl*, and *The Birth of Fire*.

The Birth of Fire

The relief mural titled *The Birth of Fire* (Fig. 10) is an unfinished work by Ramkinkar Baij, where certain elements, particularly the background plastering and possibly other details, remain incomplete. Janak Jhankar Narzary, a professor in the History of Art Department at Kala Bhavana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, shared this information. The artwork depicts two divine male and female figures with wings on their backs, yet their anatomical structure is highly characteristic of Ramkinkar's familiar style of figure construction. There is an inherent primitivity found in both the figures and their expressions. In this composition, the artist depicts a man and a woman in the nude, and fire arises from their union, which gives rise to the title *The Birth of Fire*. The composition is perfectly suited to its triangular space, appearing compact and properly balanced from both sides. Stylistically, it is a recognisable example of Ramkinkar's work, characterised by its strong, sturdy construction.

Dancing Girl

The mural *Dancing Girl* (Fig. 11) is located at ground level, directly to the right of the stage at the *Natyaghar* auditorium. It portrays a dancing woman holding a musical instrument, the *Veena*, which she plays as she dances. The figure's visual language and physical construction exhibit notable boldness. In this work, the artist has positioned the *Veena* in the opposite direction of the body's motion, creating a sense of action and reaction. This compositional choice results in a conflict and torque between the figure's movement and the instrument. The background is kept simple, featuring earthy textures and elements of nature near the feet, while the rest of the space is left mostly empty with only a light texture representing the land.

Figure 9



Figure 9 *Natya Ghar*- Auditorium at Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan.

Figure 10



Figure 10 *The Birth of Fire* by Ramkinkar Baij, 1965. Cement relief mural, Pediment of the stage of 'Natya Ghar' (an auditorium), Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, Birbhum, West Bengal. Size: Base of the pediment approximately 950 cm.

Figure 11

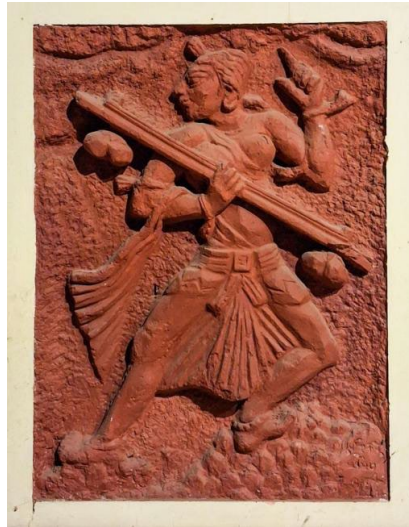


Figure 11 *Dancing Girl* by Ramkinkar Baij, 1965. Coloured Cement, Write side of the stage, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, Birbhum, West Bengal. Size: 240 cm by 180 cm.

Figure 12

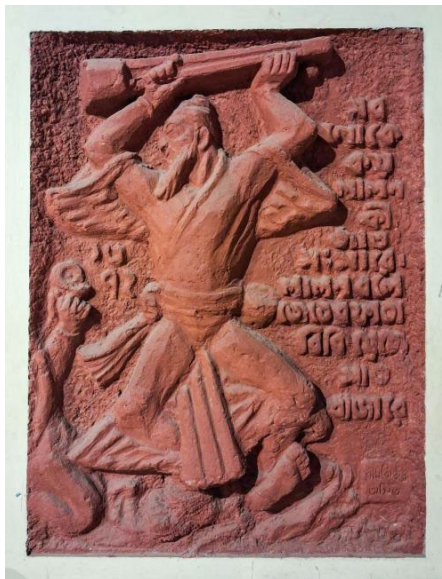


Figure 12 *Baul Lalan Fakir* by Ramkinkar Baij, 1965. Coloured Cement, Left side of the stage, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, Birbhum, West Bengal. Size: 242 cm by 180 cm

Baul Lalan Fakir

The mural of *Baul Lalon Phakir* is positioned at ground level, directly to the left of the stage, and depicts him in a dancing posture. *Lalon Phakir* is a highly popular cultural and philosophical figure among the *Baul* community, a group that practices spirituality through song and dance rather than adhering to conventional religions. *Bauls* do not align themselves with any religious communities; instead, they maintain a distinct spiritual practice centred on their own music, compositions, and lifestyle. This community is prevalent in Shantiniketan and across Bengal, including modern-day Bangladesh. *Lalon Phakir* himself was born and resided in Bangladesh, and Rabindranath Tagore met him and drew significant inspiration from *Baul* music for some of his own songs.

In this specific depiction, *Baul* is shown dancing with his arms and legs extending outward from his body, like energy spreading from the centre of the composition. At the top, near his head, his *dotara* (musical string instrument) is placed horizontally, while the lower section features another person's hand and leg parts playing the *khanjani* (percussion instrument), illustrating that he is dancing to the rhythm. The background includes a line from one of *Lalon's* very famous songs written in Bengali script. At the bottom, the dust rising from the ground due to the dance is represented as a spiral or smoky effect. The rest of the mural uses a texture similar to that found in the *Dancing Girl* piece. Regarding his physical structure, the artist utilises a solid construction that conveys a sense of force and power from his well-built physique.

5.2.1. MEDIUM AND TECHNIQUE

In the later period, Ramkinkar Baij primarily created three murals at the *Natyaghar* auditorium using the cement medium. He applied layers of cement and then used various tools to cut and mould the material, creating textures, lines, and distinct planes, all while the cement was still wet. While his earlier relief murals utilised various media—including in-situ techniques, terracotta, mud relief, and cement—he chose to work with a single medium in these later instances. This shift occurred because he had increasingly focused on sculpture, which is why a high volume of his mural work is not found after 1950, at least within Santiniketan.

5.2.2. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONCEPTS AND MURAL SPACES:

The sculptures at the *Natyaghar* consist of three separate panels, including a triangular section on the podium that explores the concept of *The Birth of Fire*, in which the union of two divine characters gives rise to fire. This work incorporates philosophical content and symbolic divine elements, such as wings; however, rather than the typical grace associated with divine figures, these are depicted with a primitive, muscular physicality that mirrors the body language and physique of the local tribal community. By doing so, the artist integrates local identity into a divine composition. At the ground level on either side of the stage are two other figures deeply connected to the venue: *Lalon Fakir* and a *dancing figure*. *Lalon Fakir* represents the *Baul* tradition, which is renowned for its music and dance in Bengal, while the *dancing figure* reflects the musical and educational activities of the Sangeet Bhavan (Music Institution of Visva-Bharati) on the Santiniketan campus. The nature of the stage intricately links these subjects, making them appear to continuously perform within that space.

5.2.3. STYLISTIC APPROACH

Ramkinkar's murals reflect his signature style, where solid construction and force work simultaneously, inspired by the body language and physical structure of the local *Santhals* and the working class. Even when portraying divine figures, he completely transforms their character, making them resemble localised male and female individuals. In the upper pediment composition, he presents an almost symmetrical and completely balanced arrangement where two figures converge in the centre to create fire, symbolising two opposing forces merging into a new creation. In his composition of the dancing girl, the opposing directions of the figures and musical instruments create forces that cancel each other out, establishing a sense of unity. Conversely, in *Lalon Fakir's* depiction, the limbs spread outward, representing forces expanding from a central point. Ultimately, his work is inherently dynamic, integrating movement and construction while employing opposing forces to create a profound sense of equilibrium in which one force balances another.

Figure 13



Figure 13 *Wounded Bear* by Rajkumar Jaitley working Under Ramkinkar Baij, 1953. Cement relief mural,

Figure 14



Figure 14 *Sun Worshippers* by Suren De, 1961-63. Coloured Cement Casting relief mural, 'Nandan', Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, Birbhum, West Bengal

6. IMPACT ON THE ART COMMUNITY

Ramkinkar Baij's work, style, and artistic language have an impact that extends far beyond Santiniketan, as seen in the relief murals where his visual language and influence remain clearly visible. Recently, numerous students have utilised the cement medium for Master's degree projects, and many residential walls in the surrounding locality now feature cement relief murals. Ramkinkar became a renowned artist not only for his style and aesthetic content but also for his choice of cement—a medium he selected for its sustainability and affordability, which yielded quick results and suited his personal circumstances. He explored this medium uniquely, ensuring its future popularity through the high quality of his artistic outcomes.

A notable example of this influence is the *Wounded Bear* (Fig. 13) relief panel on the Graphic Department's exterior wall, created by Rajkumar Jetley under Ramkinkar's guidance; the construction and expression of the animal's agony clearly reflect Ramkinkar's stylistic presence. Similarly, the 1961–1963 work *Sun Worshippers* (Fig. 14) on the Nandan wall, executed by the artist Surendra in cement casting, bears a striking resemblance to the structure of Ramkinkar's Santal figures. The background texture of this piece also matches the murals of the *Baul Lalon Fakir* and the *dancing girl* located at the *Natyaghar*.

This tradition has been continued by various master's students whose direct cement works are scattered across Santiniketan, such as Basuki Dasgupta's murals on the hostel walls and Suresh Nair's projects. Additionally, Baidyanath Murmu's mural *First Marriage*, which uses cement and other elements to tell tribal mythological stories, follows the cement application methods inspired by Ramkinkar. Today, the popularity of this medium is evident in the numerous cement murals found in local houses and hotels, often featuring replicas of iconic figures such as *Baul Lalon Fakir*. Ultimately, Ramkinkar popularised not just a medium but an entire technique and visual language, leaving a multifaceted impact where some artists adopt his materials, some his style, and others his specific subjects, local tribes, *Santal*, *Baul*, etc.

7. FINDINGS & CONCLUSIONS:

Ramkinkar's early phase of work during the 1930s and 40s, spanning from his time as a student to his mature stage, was heavily influenced by traditional art, as seen in the themes of *Kacha and Devayani* (Fig. 1). These works were made in the Bengal School style, which is characterised by its emphasis on traditional Indian themes and techniques, and were created by casting cement, a process that involves pouring a mixture of cement and water into a mould to form solid structures. Earlier mud reliefs depicting nature and figurative motifs in the Gairik building have since been lost. His later mud reliefs (Fig. 2) which he created at Shyamali in 1935, and the terracotta figures at the main gate began to show European influences, specifically the construction styles of Rodin and the geometric presentations inspired by Bourdelle, marking his integration of both Indian and Western artistic traditions.

In 1936-38, shortly after Shyamali's reliefs, he took an important role as a mentor in a major collaborative mud relief project (Fig. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7) with Kala Bhavana students at *Kalo Bari* (Black House). Notable works from this period include the *Dholbadak* (Drummer) (Fig. 4 middle panel), which is almost a free-standing sculpture, and the *Santhal Dance* (Fig. 6) relief on the exterior wall of the south veranda. In 1941, he also worked with students to replicate the *dancer and musician* (Fig. 8) panel from the Aurangabad caves, capturing the rhythm, proportion, and grace inherent in Indian art. In 1942, he used a wet-situ technique for the low-relief mural on the facade of China Bhavana. In the China Bhavana mural, he again depicted the *Santhal Dance*, achieving remarkable depth within a low relief format. This period showcased his versatility, as he worked across at least three mediums: mud, cement, and terracotta with different techniques. By blending Indian subjects with the visual language of Western art, he developed a unique visual style, evident in the murals at China Bhavana and Black House. Although he was primarily a sculptor, his contributions as a muralist were significant, utilising a language of construction and diagonal forces to create compositions that were simultaneously dynamic and balanced. Both his open-air sculptures, such as the *Santhal Family*, and his relief murals exhibit these artistic characteristics—force and balance.

In 1965, he created three cement relief panels for the *Natyaghar* auditorium (Fig. 9), which were part of his later work in relief murals. One of these panels features *Lalon Fakir* (Fig. 12), the king of the Baul community and a cultural icon of Bengal, portrayed alongside a *dancing girl* (Fig. 11). In this work, Ramkinkar used constructive forces and opposite directions to maintain an unusual sense of balance within the composition.

Another panel at *Natyaghar*, titled *The Birth of Fire* (Fig. 10), depicts two divine figures—a male and a female—flying toward each other to create fire. According to scholar Janak Jhankar Narzary, this symbolic panel remains unfinished. Notably, Ramkinkar did not give these divine figures traditional soft or graceful qualities; instead, he modelled them on the physiques of local hard workers, creating a distinct contrast in character.

Ramkinkar's work was deeply rooted in the local *Santhal* community and the working class, as he was fascinated by their physical structures and daily movements. His exploration of the cement medium had a profound impact on the local society; his influence was so widespread that even today, small relief murals inspired by his style and medium can be seen on the walls and fences of ordinary houses in and around Shantiniketan. This represents his significant contribution to the region's visual language, shaping society through his choice of themes, media, and artistic expression.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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