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978-0-521-05273-3 - The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850-1920

Tapati Guha-Thakurta

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## *Introduction*

The book is a study of the emergence of new kinds of art, artists and aesthetic values in Bengal in the colonial and nationalist period. It examines the shifts, not only in the form and practice of painting, but also equally, in the ideas and opinions about Indian art during these years, for the transformations at these two levels were inextricably linked. The changes in pictorial styles and modes of representation assume their real significance only as a part of a wider process of changing visual tastes, expectations and ideologies.

Art history in India has, for long, remained confined within the self-imposed insularity of the discipline: an insularity that stems from a certain entrenched definition of 'art' and a narrow demarcation of its scholarly and aesthetic domain. My work attempts to recover the study of art from the existing strictures and closures of the discipline, and locate it within the broader context of the social and intellectual history of Bengal of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Its approach derives from the basic premise that 'there can be no art history apart from other kinds of history'.<sup>1</sup> This statement of T. J. Clark, with its pointed implications for redefining and broadening the areas of enquiry in European art history, has its special relevance for the period and problems under survey here. For the developments in art and aesthetics in colonial Bengal have remained somewhat on the margins of both the conventional histories of Indian art and the new social histories of thought and culture. Both have operated with certain in-built notions of 'great art' and artistic excellence, as the sacrosanct standards of histories of art and culture. And, by these

<sup>1</sup> T. J. Clark, *Image of the People: Gustave Courbet and the 1848 Revolution* (London, 1982), p. 18. Arguing for a new social history of art, he calls for 'a multiplicity of perspectives' to explain 'the connecting links between artistic form, available systems of visual representation, the current theories of art, other ideologies...and more general historic structures and processes'.

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standards, the changes and achievements in art of this period have appeared to be neither of special artistic significance, nor central in the wider cultural upheaval of Bengal.

But, if the very categories and standards of evaluation are thrown open to question, they themselves can be placed within a particular history of their own – a history of how new notions of 'art' and 'artist', 'taste' and 'beauty' evolved and came to dominate in colonial India. This history, in turn, encapsulates the fundamental consequences of colonialism and nationalism in the sphere of thought and culture. The story of changing styles and techniques can then be situated within a broader spectrum of the encounter with new dominant forms of knowledge and the constitution of new social aspirations and identities. Along with artistic form, taste also emerged as an important site of struggle between different groups who produced pictures and for whom pictures were produced. It became a prime target for refinement and regeneration in Bengali culture. The making of a new 'Indian' art in Bengal at the turn of the century was embroiled in a complex set of mediations between artists, patrons, critics and a 'public', ambiguous but always present.<sup>2</sup>

The overlapping impact of colonialism and nationalism has demarcated the period of my study, focusing it on the years between the 1850s and 1920s. With the setting up of the first British art schools in India, the 1850s witnessed a new systematised phase of colonial intrusion and involvement in the sphere of art and crafts. This vitally transformed the patterns of patronage, training and livelihood, setting up institutions like the School of Art in Calcutta that were to be central in the formation of new categories of 'art' and 'artists'. At the same time, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a growing aesthetic self-awareness and a special concern with individuality, creativity and an 'Indian' identity among the newly constituted group of artists. These preoccupations stemmed primarily from a nationalist movement in painting that flourished in Swadeshi Bengal among a group of Calcutta artists, led by the reformist art

<sup>2</sup> Francis Haskell, *Rediscoveries in Art: Some Aspects of Taste, Fashion and Collecting in England and France* (Oxford, 1976) was a pioneering study of the climate of changing visual tastes in nineteenth century Europe, analysed through trends of art criticism, art histories, art collecting, and organisation of museums and exhibitions. Placing individual artists and their work within this scenario of aesthetic and ideological revaluations remains a more difficult project, best attempted in books like T. J. Clark's *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the art of Manet and his followers* (London, 1985).

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teacher, E. B. Havell, and the pioneer artist, Abanindranath Tagore (a movement referred to since as the Bengal School).<sup>3</sup>

By the 1920s, a powerful entity of a new 'national art' had emerged under the auspices of this movement, seeking to reverse the 'Western impact' by propagating an alternative model of 'Indian-style' painting associated with the work of Abanindranath and his following. While the colonial encounter involved a sharp disjuncture with existing forms and practices, it also created new paths for a conscious rediscovery and reformulation of 'tradition' among a new group of artists and critics. The outcome was the arrival of a wholly different creed of Indian art, with a range of new aesthetic and ideological connotations surrounding its self-definition as 'art' and as 'Indian'.

One of the main issues raised by this study is the need critically to reexamine these ideologies of 'art' and 'Indian-ness', which have structured much of the discussion of the emergence of modern Indian art. A legacy of the colonial and nationalist period, resonances of these ideologies linger on. Colonial rule had imposed radically new models of 'art' and 'artist' on indigenous society, bolstering these with an elaborate structure of patronage and education. Nationalism internalised these models, appropriated them towards its own ends, arguing its alternative claims largely within its framework. The exclusiveness of the colonial art establishment was matched by the counter-exclusiveness of the nationalist art movement. As the new ideals of taste, beauty and aesthetic refinement became central in the self-identity of the Bengali middle-class, nationalism sought to supplant colonial practice with its own 'high art' culture. What emerged from these trends was a particular dominant ideology of Indian art, which was to be powerfully propagated and established as the only legitimate 'national art' of modern India.

This ideology of Indian art, while it gave the movement of Abanindranath Tagore its main weight and its unique status, inscribed itself into the whole reading of Indian art history. It produced a type of art history which selectively defined and strung together the history of 'great art' tradition through the ages, highlighting certain schools and periods, and collapsing others that

<sup>3</sup> Contemporaries referred to this group as the 'New Calcutta School' or the 'Neo-Bengal School'. The term 'Bengal School' came into usage later, in the context of the all-India spread of the movement and challenges from other parts of the country.

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could not be fitted into its framework. Most of the developments of the nineteenth century remained outside the scope of this art history – for the period was dismissed as one of alien intrusions, disruption of tradition and mediocre imitative standards. While the great traditions of Indian painting were seen to have petered out by the late eighteenth century, with the decline of Pahari painting,<sup>4</sup> studies of modern Indian art tended to jump over this interim period, in search of new creative beginnings in the twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> As ideas of modernity differed, the focus has moved back and forth from Abanindranath to the post-Abanindranath phases of modern Indian art.

In general, till recently, studies of this period of colonial transition have been dominated by the phenomenon of a 'renaissance' of Indian painting among Abanindranath Tagore and his group of artists, who broke away from the sterile imitative trends of Western Academic art then pervading the country. Jaya Appasamy's monograph on Abanindranath,<sup>6</sup> and Ratan Parimoo's study of Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Rabindranath Tagore<sup>7</sup> share the general consensus that this art represented the 'first aesthetic development' and the only respectable area of concern for the art historian of this period. While Jaya Appasamy considered all forms of westernised art in nineteenth-century India to be in 'a state of stagnation',<sup>8</sup> Parimoo's book, even as it devotes greater attention to the 'Western impact', handles it as a blanket concept, involving rigid Academic training and the reduction of Indians to copyists, draughtsmen and third-rate portrait painters. And nationalism, like westernisation, is relegated to a generalised backdrop of transformations against which the new art emerged.<sup>9</sup> The transition from the phase of sterile westernisation to that of creative nationalism in Indian art remains in need of a more critical enquiry. Such linear

<sup>4</sup> The end of Pahari painting is the point where most of the general histories of Indian art trail off – see, for example, Douglas Barrett and Basil Gray, *Indian Painting* (Geneva, 1978) or J. C. Harle, *The Art and Architecture of the Indian Subcontinent*, The Pelican History of Art (Harmondsworth, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> For most of our first art historians, Abanindranath, alone, emerged out of the darkness and decadence of the colonial period to herald a new optimistic era of Indian art. At the same time, books like Ajit Mookerjee's *Modern Art in India* (Calcutta, 1956) or W. G. Archer's *India and Modern Art* (London, 1959) treated the phase of the Bengal School as one of archaisms and faltering development that preceded the coming of a 'genuine' modern art in the works of Rabindranath Tagore or Jamini Roy.

<sup>6</sup> *Abanindranath Tagore and the Art of his Times* (New Delhi, 1968).

<sup>7</sup> *The Painting of the Three Tagores, Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath – Chronology and Comparative Study* (Baroda, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Appasamy, pp. 1, 9–14.

<sup>9</sup> Parimoo, pp. 17–22, 23–41.

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models of history leave little room for studying either the complexities and diversities of the changes generated by Western contacts, or the specific nature and weight of nationalist preoccupations in art.

Of late, a more positive view of westernisation as 'modernisation' has emerged in the writings of Partha Mitter. Emphasising the indigenous absorptions of a 'Western-style' that shaped the nature of modern Indian art, the Bengal School is placed against the trends of Academic painting in Bombay and the avant-garde trends of the 20s and 30s.<sup>10</sup> By contrast, the disruptions and dislocations of the colonial experience figure centrally in Ratnabali Chattopadhyay's recent book, which surveys the broad sweep of changes from the court painting of Murshidabad to the modern art of Jamini Roy.<sup>11</sup> Highlighting the marginalisation of the traditional court and 'bazaar' painters and the formation of a new entity of middle-class artists supported by a middle-class art public, the book places the changes in art forms at each historic juncture within this central transformation of society and ideology in colonial Bengal.

With a tighter focus on time and place, the present work attempts to discern the different strands of change of both the 'westernising' and 'nationalist' phases, studying their oppositions and their convergences. The choice of the time span – the inclusion of almost five decades of change prior to the rise of Abanindranath's 'new school of Indian painting' – is intended to underline certain continuities and ambivalences in the situation along with the turning points. Clearly, Abanindranath's art movement represented a major break: it marked the coming of age of Indian 'art' and 'artists', in the new modern sense of the terms. But it is essential to place this movement within the specific historic context of its evolution – to see it as an outcome of the very discontinuities which it militated against. The idea of an 'Indian' aesthetic that could be recovered and reconstructed from the past must be pitted against the fundamental process of colonial education and severance with tradition that produced modern Indian art. An overview of the entire period isolates the Bengal School as one dominant tier amidst many other levels of painting and print-making that had evolved out of Western influences, but were no less Indian in the images they explored or the markets they catered to. It also helps to identify the sharply polarised

<sup>10</sup> Partha Mitter, 'Art and Nationalism in India', *History Today*, July 1982; 'Indian Artists, Western Art and Tradition' in K. Ballhatchet, ed., *Changing South Asia: City and Country* (London, 1984).

<sup>11</sup> *From the Karkhana to the Studio: Changing Social Roles of Patrons and Artists in Bengal* (New Delhi, 1990).

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categories of 'Western' and 'Indian' styles as largely a product of the exclusive nationalist ideology of this school. The dividing lines between 'westernised' and 'nationalist' painting, between an imitative Academic art and a creative Indian art were often more ideological than actual: they were consciously reared to sustain the 'new-wave' and 'nationalist' identity of Abanindranath's movement. This is not to suggest that these distinctions and hierarchies can be dissolved. But more complex grids in these separate categories and a closer overlapping of these become apparent once the study moves beyond the artificial seclusion of the Bengal School to encompass the broader arena of artists, institutions and art activity that had evolved over the late nineteenth century. This perspective places the phenomenon of the new 'national art' within a continuing process of the changing social status of Indian artists and the changing configurations of aesthetic tastes over this period.

There are two central themes which run through this book, mapping out its division into two broad sections. The first concerns the different facets of the process of westernisation: the permeation of new techniques and modes of representation; the shifting status of artisans and artists; the expansion in patronage and market, and the emergence of new professional and commercial opportunities in art. The first three chapters identify the multi-tiered nature of the westernised art world that emerged in Calcutta by the turn of the century. At the peak prevailed an exclusive world of 'high art' centred around the fine-art exhibitions, the perfected practice of Western-style oil painting, and the patronage of the European and Indian rich; beneath it flourished a spectrum of second-tier art professions, those of small-time portrait painters, drawing masters, engravers and lithographers; in parallel, occurred a widespread diffusion of Western norms and techniques that transformed the popular commercial art of the city, replacing traditional forms by a different variety of 'Indian' pictures. Calcutta's new gentlemen artists straddled all three worlds of art activity.

While this dissolved some of the barriers between 'high' and 'bazaar' art, different hierarchies evolved as new standards of stylistic finesse pressed upon the traditional market for religious pictures and book illustrations. One of the main significances of this trend lay in the ways the Western art training were absorbed and appropriated within the popular art market. This connects the entire theme of westernisation with the widespread change in visual tastes

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that was cutting across social divides which, far from dismissing a 'Western-style' in Indian pictures, saw the new realism as an essential ingredient of 'art' and of the Indian iconography of the time.

The painting of 'Indian' pictures acquired radically different connotations, with the rise of Abanindranath Tagore and his art movement. It became a novel emotional and intellectual issue, symbolising the recovery of tradition and lost identity. The shifts towards an alternative pictorial form became an integral part of a much wider transformation in ideas and aesthetics, in the scholarly and critical approach to India's art heritage, and in the very notions of 'art' and 'artist'.

The second section of the book moves from the sphere of the practice of the arts into this inter-related sphere of changing values and perceptions within which it locates the emergence of new art forms. Its major theme is the role and nature of nationalist ideology in art during these years, in its varying concerns with progress, national regeneration and the recovery of tradition. It deals with the central paradox of an art movement that was avowedly nationalist, yet consciously depoliticised. The new art of Abanindranath and his following was bred in the atmosphere of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal, and was clearly labelled in its time as 'Swadeshi'. Yet its ideologies of 'art' and 'Indian-ness' would constantly distance it from the sphere of politics. Art was firmly sealed off and contained within its own sphere of the 'aesthetic' and 'spiritual'.

From its status as a lucrative and respectable profession, art in the late nineteenth century was fast becoming a part of the high literary culture of Bengal. The interest in the acquisition and polishing of the right skills and techniques was topped by new preoccupations with aesthetic sensibility and the expressive and emotive powers of art. Art came to be seen less as a matter of training, and more as an area of innate talent and creativity. From his direct reliance on the patron and the buyer, the artist emerged in a new stand *vis-à-vis* the critic, the writer and a wider 'art-public'. At the same time, the cultivation of art and artistic tastes became crucial in the constitution of a middle-class culture. These were central strands of the transformations in the realm of art and taste in Bengal.

The later chapters of this book make a close study of this intellectual milieu which gave art its new meanings and values in Bengali middle-class society, during the late nineteenth century and

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the years of Swadeshi. They examine the Orientalist and nationalist environment of writing, debates and polemics which accreted around the Bengal School of painting, generating around it a broader forum of artistic self-awareness and assertions.

The recent studies on nationalist thought of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century have drawn attention to its richness and its ambivalence – to its political and cultural discourse of power and regeneration, to its mixed and guarded perceptions of the West, and to its definitions of 'self', and 'tradition' *vis-à-vis* the image of the Western colonial power.<sup>12</sup> One main concern in these writings has been the extent to which the ideas of 'nation', 'nationality' and 'tradition' have been produced and shaped by European Orientalism, by post-Enlightenment Western rational thought.<sup>13</sup> The importance of a new wave of Orientalist researches and writings in determining the main thrust of nationalist fervour is specially manifest in the sphere of art. The process of westernisation and modernisation had provided the Bengali middle classes with a new social model of 'artist' and 'high art'. At the same time, a second stream of European knowledge – the Orientalist discoveries and definition of an Indian art tradition – guided much of the anti-colonial departures in art, equipping the new Indian artists with a sense of a past heritage, and a present goal of recreating a 'national art'. The transition from the initial dismissals and denigrations of Indian art to a new romantic and spiritual involvement with the subject gave the new Orientalist writings a greater power and edge over the older Orientalism. The 'hegemony' of the new knowledge and scholarship lay precisely in the open stand it took against colonial policies and ideas, and in the power it wielded over nationalist representations of Indian art.<sup>14</sup>

Yet, even as it was shaped and conditioned by Orientalist constructs, nationalist ideology in art in Bengal acquired a life force that was distinctly its own, creating an art culture that thrived through debates and dialogues, challenges and counter definitions.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy, Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (New Delhi, 1983), Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World, A Derivative Discourse?* (New Delhi, 1986) and Tapan Raychaudhuri's, *Europe Reconsidered, Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-century Bengal* (New Delhi, 1988).

<sup>13</sup> Here the main conceptual framework for analyses has been provided by E. W. Said's *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth, 1985), with its central hypothesis about the way Orientalism 'created' the Oriental, and the Orient was 'contained and represented' within this dominating framework of knowledge.

<sup>14</sup> The 'cultural hegemony' of Orientalism (Said, *Orientalism*, p. 7) changed many shades and was reinforced, as Orientalism established its alliances with nationalist thought.



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The language of nationalism, in some ways 'a derivative discourse', was no less 'a different discourse' in its imaginings of power, glory and achievement.<sup>15</sup> My study argues that the professedly 'nationalist' claims of Havell, Abanindranath and their circle represented only one strand of nationalist sentiments in art – even as it established itself, in close conjunction with the new Orientalism, as the most articulate and dominant ideology of the day. It had been preceded over the late nineteenth century by a growing preoccupation with issues of tradition, artistic progress and refinement. The heightened exuberance of the Swadeshi movement (c. 1903–8), as it left its vivid imprints on various realms of thought and culture, also changed the thrust of artistic concerns in Bengal. Abanindranath's art movement revelled in the spirit of Swadeshi, contributing a new visual dimension to its 'appeal to imagination'.<sup>16</sup> It evolved its exclusive claims to a 'nationalist' identity through the force of a new visual idiom, a new language of art criticism, and a special 'Indian' aesthetic. It created its own fortified 'high-art' culture around its particular formula of 'Indian-style' painting. The notion of a 'legitimate' taste, reared on an exclusive Indian sensibility, became an instrument of power in the hands of this select coterie of artists and ideologues. But even in its heyday, this dominant nationalist ideology met with a heated feed back of ideas, challenges and criticisms which cut through the veneer of unanimity that surrounded the cause of Indian art. Far from detracting from the power of nationalism in Indian art, these debates contributed to it a richness and complexity that can best be savoured in the diverse shades of opinion and convictions. There was no single nor one genuine Indian art which was produced during this period of change and endeavour in Bengal. The relative authenticity or falsity of these multiple interpretations of Indian art is not the point at issue. Their importance lies in the way these differing claims were construed and projected, and the way they coexisted within a particular milieu, with powerful ramifications on the practice and propagation of art.<sup>17</sup>

Nationalism produced its special 'community' of artists, who saw themselves as different from all others before and around them, who also 'imagined' themselves as genuinely Indian by placing themselves on an imaginary line of continuity with a glorious past and a 'great

<sup>15</sup> Partha Chatterjee, pp. 41–43.

<sup>16</sup> Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* (New Delhi, 1973), pp. 286–87.

<sup>17</sup> As Benedict Anderson writes, the power of nations and the communities they engender lie not in their falsity/genuineness but in the style in which they are imagined and created – *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1985), pp. 14–15.

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art' tradition. Abanindranath and his group held themselves up as this new select community of 'Indian' artists. The phenomenon of Abanindranath and his art movement is studied in the specific context of Orientalist and nationalist discourses on Indian art. The self-definition and sense of separateness of the movement was closely wrapped up in this discourse. And this broader aesthetic and intellectual culture is crucial to the understanding of both the successes and the inherent limitations of the Bengal School. There was a central dissonance between form and ideology, between pictorial structures and aesthetic assertions that lay at the heart of this movement. While it emerged out of a wave of creative self-expression, the very nature of the movement posed its inevitable limits to individuality and innovation. The unresolved tensions between westernisation, modernisation and nationalism of these years would anticipate the continuing flux in the course of Indian art over the subsequent decades.