

Exploring Indigenous Artistic Identity during the Colonial Period in India

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Abstract

This paper explores the development of indigenous artistic styles in India during the British colonial period, focussing on Bengal, the main hub of cultural rediscovery as well as artistic innovations. During the initial period of European cultural exposure, there was mostly a whole-hearted reception of European artistic styles. Indian traditional art was already in a state of oblivion following the decline of the Mughal rule and the gradual strengthening of the British Empire. Artists like Raja Ravi Varma though initially hailed for their artistic contributions, were later denounced for their thorough imitation of European artistic styles. It was with the emergence of the Bengal School of Art and more importantly with the rise of consciousness in the English art teacher Ernest Binfield Havell and Abanindranath Tagore, one of the most prominent members of Bengal's esteemed Tagore family, regarding the suppression of indigenous Indian art that the indigenous artistic revolution started in India. By focusing on glorious artistic achievements of the previous eras in India and also by incorporating artistic techniques from other parts of Asia, artistic methods more congenial to the formation of indigenous art were developed. The nationalist artistic movement was not only impacted by the prevailing situation of rising national consciousness regarding the atrocities of the British rule but also it acted in turn to generate nationalist fervour.

Key words: Nationalist Art Movement, Indigenous Art, Bengal School of Art, Abanindranath Tagore, Indian Traditional Art.

In a country characterised by colonialism and in its struggle towards freedom, preserving, maintaining and even creating newer forms of indigenous identity in relation to the cultural components of the country, bereft of colonial influence, is a big challenge. With the decline of the Mughal Emperor and the gradual emergence and growing influence of the British empire Indian traditional art reached a state of oblivion. By the end of the 19th century, Western artistic styles proliferated in the domain of

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India art, which took place as a result of the introduction of western education for the emerging elite class in India. In the 1850s, art schools were set up by the British rulers in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta to further promote Western artistic styles. It was not until the early 1900s, that Indian art went through a process of revival, incorporating traditional elements and often explicitly or implicitly expressing nationalist sentiments. This paper explores the emergence of Indian art in the early 1900s, as a means to strengthen national identity and the identity of Indian art itself as well as its role in fostering the fight for freedom. While exploring the development of indigenous art historically during the British colonial period, this article mainly discusses the role of the Bengal School of Art and art in Bengal in general with specific reference to Abanindranath. Abanindranath Tagore went beyond the prevalent European artistic styles and methods and drew inspiration from past artistic styles of India to create a new form of art more congenial to Eastern artistic styles. He wanted to undermine the hegemony of the European artistic dominance, popularised by the British and bring out indigenous art styles from oblivion. Hence Bengal played a pioneering role in the development of nationalist art movement and indigenous art during that period. It can be asserted that the role of the art movement in Bengal had the profoundest impact in the development of indigenous art as well as modern art, developed later in India. Abanindranath Tagore went beyond the prevalent European artistic styles and methods and drew inspiration from past artistic styles of India to create a new form of art more congenial to Eastern artistic styles. He wanted to undermine the hegemony of the European artistic dominance, popularised by the British and bring out indigenous art styles from oblivion.

The British influence on art was seen in the work of local artists whose paintings incorporated subjects to serve British interests, often depicting scenarios of British dominance over India. The British were responsible for popularising self-portraits which were enthusiastically adopted by Indian kings and Nawabs of that time. The style of painting created by Indian painters to suit British taste and which reflected European influence came to be known as Company Style of Paintings. This form of art was mainly romanticised with the usage of watercolour as the primary medium to create soft tones and textures and it incorporated linear perspective and shading. It also involved the combination of Indian miniature style with watercolour. The name “Company painting” was used as many of the

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patrons of these paintings were part of East India companies even though the name was also used to refer to paintings created for Indian patrons and rulers.¹

The most prominent artist representing the Europeanised style of Indian painting was Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906). He developed as an artist by watching European painters like Frank Brooks and Theodore Jensen and also by studying European art. He started his career as an academic portrait painter but he was mostly popular for his depiction of Hindu religious themes though the use of western illusionist art. Much of his popularity was based on the westernisation of the Indian cultural preferences in the late 1800s. He was actively encouraged by wealthy patrons like the Gaekwad of Baroda and the royal family at Travancore in pursuing his works on Hindu epics and legends. At the time when Raja Ravi Varma passed away, he was praised by *The Modern Review*, which was one of the leading nationalist journals of that period, as ‘the greatest modern Indian painter and nation-builder.’ However, his works were heavily criticised by being referred as undignified and un-Indian within a decade after his death.² One of the reasons for this was the Swadeshi movement of 1905 which actively attempted to revive the various components of Indian culture which remained suppressed under British dominance. It resulted in the strong rejection of European style paintings like the works of Raja Ravi Varma. His works were considered incompatible with essence of nationalism.³ In his criticism of Europeanised Indian paintings, Mookerjee wrote,

The spirit of European art...could not be successfully assimilated by the Indian artists in their blind imitation. The result was Ravi Varma, whose syrupy pictures were an extreme example of philistine perversity.⁴

However Raja Ravi Varma’s contribution to Indian art could not be completely overshadowed by the strong criticism he faced after his death. In his discussion of the works of Raja Ravi Varma, Rabindranath Tagore expressed:

The secret of their appeal is in reminding us how precious our own culture is to us, in restoring to us our inheritance. Our mind here acts as an ally of the artist. We can almost anticipate what he is about to say...It is all too easy to find fault with him. But we must remember it is also a lot easier to

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imagine a subject than to paint it. A mental image, after all, has the freedom to be imprecise. But if the mental image has to be turned into something as concrete as a picture, with concern for even the minute aspects of representation, then that task ceases to be facile.⁵

The Bengal School emerged as a nationalist art movement in the early 20th century with Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951), the nephew of Rabindranath Tagore, as its leader. The nationalist ideology relating to art developed alongside the changing perception of Indian art in the eyes of the Westerners, as found in the perceptions of Ernest Binfield Havell, the famous English art teacher and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, the art critic.⁶ In the words of Coomaraswamy:

The work of the modern school of Indian painters in Calcutta is a phase of the National reawakening. Whereas the ambition of the nineteenth-century reformers had been to make India like England, that of the later workers has been to bring back or create a state of society in which the ideals expressed and implied in Indian culture shall be more nearly realized.⁷

Havell, who enthusiastically supported the art movement, attempted to shift the attention of the Indian students from foreign methods to the works of the Indo-Persian schools and the Hindu schools from the eighteenth century as he felt they were more instilled with Indian ideals. While facing a bit of difficulty, Havell was able to convince the authorities to replace a collection of European paintings with a range of Indian works of his choice. He admired the artistic talent and intentions of Abanindranath Tagore and thought of him as someone ‘who has come to pick up the broken threads of Indian pictorial tradition’ and also gave him the credit of

giving us a true interpretation of Indian spirituality, and an insight into that higher world, the fairy land of Eastern poetry and romance, which Eastern thought has suggested.⁸

The first significant work in the revival of Indian ideals in art was *The Last Hour of Shah Jahan* by Abanindranath Tagore. The work involved a combination of Mughal and Western techniques and ideas and it was a

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recipient of an award at the Delhi Exhibition of 1902-1903. Portrayal of the recent glorious past of India was one of the important features of the painting. It also reflected the splendour of the Mughal empire and the homage paid by Abanindranath to the miniature tradition of the Mughals.⁹ Havell contributed further in the promotion of the new art movement through the journal called *The Studio* in both 1902 and 1905. Further progress was made when Abanindranath was appointed as Havell's deputy. He worked towards reviving 'the lost language of India art' by engaging with the students of the first generation in selecting themes of glorious events from Indian history. Abanindranath's emphasis on experimentation, free creativity and imagination helped to eradicate the earlier paternalism of the school which dealt with the view that enlightened governmental policies can be employed in the construction of taste. Even though Havell had to depart from India due to his illness, he continued his activities of reviving and popularising India art. It was through his efforts that the Indian Society was established in 1910 in London in order to promote the study of Indian art. It was followed by the formation of the Indian Society of Oriental Art as well in Calcutta with official patronage. With Havell's departure, Abanindranath resigned from the Bengal School of Art and later joined the Indian Society of Oriental Art as a result of which many students shifted to the new school.

A change in Abanindranath's approach towards art took place with his shift from Mughal art styles to the wash technique of Japan as he perceived it to be more congenial to his art style. It also was a reflection of the idea that nationalist art movement needed to focus not only on the past traditions of India but also on the gems of oriental art.¹⁰ The artistic movement in Bengal derived its artistic influence from a number of traditional Asian art styles. According to Kanjilal,

The Bengal painting was inspired from Ajanta and Bagh and Persian and Mughal, Rajasthani and Pahari miniatures and Shilpasastra. Chinese cloth painting and Japanese woodcut were fused with themes mostly from Indian mythology and religion. The preferred medium of these artists was water colour, ink and tempera. Japanese inspired wash technique was applied to the paintings giving a mystic sense of space and atmosphere, diluting the impact of colour.¹¹

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With Rabindranath Tagore and Okakura Kakuzo, the Japanese intellectual and the main contributor towards the cultural revival of Japan, as the leader, Asian intellectuals strove to form the ideal of an united Asia as a means to counter the problem of western dominance, by emphasising on the spirituality of Asian culture against the materialism of the Western countries. The atmosphere of orientalism in Bengal was a reflection of that. Okakura visited Calcutta several times from 1901-1903 and while residing with the Tagores, he completed his influential work the *Ideals of the East*. Two of the best students of Okakura, Yokoyama Taikwan and Shunsho Hishida later came to learn with Abanindranath Tagore, which strongly affected Abanindranath and led to the creation of some of his best works.¹²

The influence of working with the Japanese artists led to Abanindranath's creation of *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), recognised as the 'first major nationalist icon.'¹³ It was made during a period of profound national unrest, which took place due to the Partition of Bengal (1905) by Lord Curzon. The painting was initially named *Banga Mata* and was later changed to *Bharat Mata*. The painting portrayed India as a Goddess with four arms representing the four attributes of nationalist goals: food, clothing, learning and spiritual knowledge. Dressed in saffron coloured robes, the Goddess is holding the Vedas, a mala, sheaves of rice and white cloth in her hands depicting the gifts of Shikhsa, Dikhsa, Anna and Bastra to her children of India. The painting acted as a source of national consciousness and motivated Indians to join the Swadeshi Movement, which emerged as a reaction to the Partition of Bengal. According to historians, Sister Nivedita wanted to take the painting all throughout India in order to promote the spirit of nationalism among the people.¹⁴ The influence and popularity of the nationalist art movement in Bengal began to decline in the 1920s as a result of the proliferation of modernist ideas. However the movement's contribution is unparalleled in inspiring artists to form a distinct Indian artistic identity and its role as the forerunner of Indian modern art. The legacy of this movement is still carried forward by institutions like the Viswa Bharati University in Santiniketan and the Government College of Art and Craft in Kolkata as they continue to use the traditional methods of wash painting and tempera in training students.¹⁵

In discussing the contributions of the Bengal School of Art, Kanjilal expressed:

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The school laid down the foundation stone for the growth of modern painting. As teachers, from the first batch of Abanindranath's students- Nandalal, Asit Halder, Kshitindranath Mazumdar, spread out around the country giving Indian painting a new cultural consciousness.¹⁶

The pupils of Abanindranath also possessed strong nationalist fervour, which was evident in their works. Nandalal Bose is one of the major figures in the field of Indian art. Inspired by the art works of Ajanta, his paintings mainly focussed on Indian mythology, village life and women. On Mahatma Gandhi's insistence, he created a series of art works known as the *Haripura Posters* for the Congress Committee's meet at Haripura. He produced artworks based on indigenous people of India in handmade paper and him along with his disciples highlighted and celebrated indigenous occupations and Indian way of life through the art works. The Haripura posters are considered his most important contribution in Indian art.¹⁷ The Haripura Posters still continue to hold a dominant position in the world of art. They are exhibited at the Venice Biennale 2019, one of the most esteemed art events in the world.¹⁸ He also created a painting of Mahatma Gandhi executing his salt march as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement. He and his students were also responsible for designing all the pages of the Constitution of Independent India¹⁹ Another pupil of Abanindranath, Asit Halder was another major artist from the period of the Bengal artistic Renaissance. His paintings were inspired by Buddhist Art as well as Indian history.²⁰

Another major figure in the world of Indian art, Jamini Roy (1887-1972) was a student of Abanindranath at the Government College of Art, Calcutta. He initially gained recognition as a skilled portraitist. After graduating from college, he received commissions on a regular basis. His initial style reflected Western influence like Impressionism. However, the widespread fervour of nationalism influenced him and led him to abandon Western techniques and look for indigenous artistic styles. He looked for inspiration in folk art, terracotta temple friezes and the calligraphy of East Asia. His works also reflect the style of Kalighat painting of Calcutta. He also started using earth pigments and traditional organic elements as a substitute of western paints as he believed that indigenous medium should be used for the creation of indigenous art. In 1954, he received the

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prestigious award Padma Bhushan from the Government of India. His art works are displayed not only in India like the National Gallery of Modern Art in New Delhi and Victoria Memorial Hall Kolkata but also at museums in different parts of the world like Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Naprstek Museum in Prague and the Harn Museum of Art at the University of Florida.²¹ As expressed by Mitter:

At the end of an exciting intellectual journey, his paintings attained a fine balance between tradition and modernity, between the west and the east, turning to contemporary village art, instead of the romantic past, for inspiration.²²

The Indian art styles developed during the colonial period may be understood as the earlier and preceding forms of India's modern art. From the initial almost unquestioned acceptance of Western artistic techniques to the growth of new art styles inspired from traditional sources, Indian art went through an interesting journey based on past discoveries and new innovations. It also reflected the growing national consciousness and further acted to instil the fervour of nationalism within the people. The nationalist art movement in Bengal and the role of Abanindranath Tagore is unparalleled in this context.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3

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- Figure 1. *Raja Ravi Varma, Woman Holding a Fruit, Oil on Canvas, National Museum of Modern Art, New Delhi* (Digital Image); commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Raja_Ravi_Varma_-_Woman_Holding_a_Fruit_-_Google_Art_Project.jpg. Accessed 08.09.19.
- Figure 2. *Abanindranath Tagore, The Passing of Shah Jahan, Victoria Memorial Hall, Kolkata* (Digital Image); [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: The_Passing_of_Shah_Jahan.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:The_Passing_of_Shah_Jahan.jpg). Accessed 08.09.19.
- Figure 3. *Abanindranath Tagore, Bharat Mata, Watercolour, Victoria Memorial Hall* (Digital Image); inspiroindia.com/bharat-mata-the-iconic-painting/. Accessed 08.09.19.

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Endnotes:

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- ² Vincent Arthur Smith, *Art of India* (New York: Parkstone Press International, 2012), p. 281; Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 281-285.
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- ⁴ Ajit Mookerjee, *The Arts of India: From Prehistoric to Modern Times* (Tokyo: Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1966), p. 32.
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- ⁶ Partha Mitter, 'Reviewed Work: The Making of a New 'Indian Art': Art, Aesthetics and Nationalism by Tapati Guha-Thakurta,' *Oxford Art Journal* 18.1(1995): 140-143, p.141; www.jstor.org/stable/1360601. Accessed 06.08.19.
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- ¹² Mitter, 'Reviewed Work: The Making of a New 'Indian Art': Art, Aesthetics and Nationalism by Tapati Guha-Thakurta,' p. 142; Ashoke Nag, *The*

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- ¹⁴ Mitter, 'Reviewed Work: The Making of a New 'Indian Art': Art, Aesthetics and Nationalism by Tapati Guha-Thakurta,' p. 142; Museums of India: National Portal and Digital Repository. *Bharat Mata*; www.museumsofindia.gov.in/repository/record/vmh_kol-RBS27ANT-16706. Accessed 07.08.19; Shiv Sahay Singh, *Abanindranath's Iconic Painting to be Exhibited*, *The Hindu* (2016), www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/abanindranaths-iconic-painting-to-be-exhibited/article8573156.ece. Accessed 07.08.19; Ruchi Bhalla, *10 Artworks that Define the Swadeshi Movement*; blog.artsome.co/10-artworks-that-define-the-swadeshi-movement/. Accessed 07.08.19; Surabhi Sharman, *Nationalism and Art in India*.
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