

BENGAL SCHOOL AND SANTINIKETAN IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF CONTEMPORARY ART: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

Ranjeet Das

JRF, Research Scholar

Email: samraath.artstudio@gmail.com

Abstract

If art is considered a historical record, it is a chronological representation of the aesthetic ideas of many societies that have been represented throughout time in a variety of formats and mediums. However, a closer examination reveals that the evolutionary history of civilization and society is intrinsically related to art. Art is a saturated and synthesized manifestation of society, much as politics, conventions, and geography influence its advancement. Additionally, this expression can be either personal or representative of a group's evolving ideologies and sentiments. The limitations, conventions, and grammars of art vary throughout nations and times. Radical shifts in the social and economic structures that followed the Industrial Revolution gave rise to modernity as a whole. Thus, there was a wave of change in the fields of culture, art, literature, and music in addition to science. This marked the beginning of the evolution of human ideas and thought, which was no longer limited to the inheritance of societal traditions and practices.

Keywords

Art, Bengal School, Shantiniketan, Western Modernism etc.

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Introduction

The 19th century saw the beginning of the expansion of the definitions, limits, and rights that made up the highest level of art over the ages, expanding the bounds of the customary speculation of artists. New means of expressing oneself were created in defiance of artistic conventions. It was a trend that gave rise to so-called “modernity” in art.

Prominent social scientist and nationalist Prof. Benoy Kumar Sarkar attempted to interpret current western art from the philosophical and linguistic standpoint of ancient Hindu art in a book he wrote in the 1920s. His contextual examination of his observations of the key philosophical tenets of contemporary Western art movements is presented in this book. He made the case that ancient Indian sculptures and Ajanta paintings share intrinsic connections with post-Cezanne Modernism. Professor Sarkar states in the preface of Section IV of the same book that while artists influenced by Cezanne monopolized the term “modern,” ancient Indian paintings and sculptures were the driving force behind its advancement (Sarkar 35).

He adopted the flute-playing Krishna† and dance styles of Shiva†, which have been depicted in Indian sculptures and art, and led by example. He has made the observation that traditional Indian artists aimed to capture the subjects’ “artistic anatomy” as opposed to its “realistic depiction.”

He said that the work of Hindu masters can be reconciled with the trend in Western modern art theory and practice to present “incorrect” anatomy and distortions as “restorations”. He also claimed that the post-impressionist movement was a protest against western academia and a revolutionary movement.

His claim that this movement allowed access to art outside of Europe with the aim of exploring the truth and beauty of and assimilating individual ideas inspired by them is further supported by historical facts. They refused to compromise in their pursuit of inspiration, drawing from traditional and indigenous art styles all around the world. After evaluating the development of western modernism and its methodology at the start of the 20th century, the author took a highly optimistic stance toward the work of India’s “young futurists.” The fact that the publication dates from 1920 indicates that he was undoubtedly calling attention to Bengal School devotees who were itching to reshape Indian art.

He stated at the end of the same section of the book that neither striving to entrap oneself in modern-western ideals nor pushing art to the ancients was the advancement of Young India’s futurists’ creative art undertakings. Professor Sarkar

claimed that all of these inclinations were really the result of abruptly unleashed energy that had been violently suppressed yet had been operating for roughly 150 years without being heard (Sarkar, 1920).

Professor Sarkar identified a group of characters as the foundation of all modern art; they are ...to move and strive freely, to make and unmake, to borrow and to lend as a separate entity in the marketplace of spiritual commerce, free to strive, try new things, and live and he discovers that this is exactly the same with the traditional Indian method of art and cultural practice. Here, he also foresees that the new initiatives may develop at a synthetic stage of cultural swaraj†, which would revive the lost artistic legacy and place it on a contemporary foundation. Prominent art critic of Western modern art Herbert Read expressed his opinion in the preface to his book, “The Philosophy of Modern Art,” that modernism should be viewed through the lens of the “re-emergence of tradition.” Read fully agrees with Prof. Sarkar’s conclusion.

We can now identify some more distinct temporal characteristics from the latter part of the nineteenth century that support the idea that ýswadeshi† emerged as the main inspiration for twentieth-century Indian art articulation. Prof. Thakurta has talked at length about the emergence of a new aesthetic and its ideological underpinnings.

In addition to giving the wealthy access to any artwork they wanted, the school would also give kids from low-income Bhadra Lok households the opportunity to work as modelers or engravers. A clear sign of the high demand in Calcutta for this kind of art instruction was the 200 or so students who enrolled in 1854 in search of better employment prospects. Higher education and professions like teaching, law, journalism, or medicine continued to take precedence over an arts education and career.

The early students of the Calcutta Government School of Art perceived their employment as instructors as a crucial indicator of a respectable living. Additionally, pupils held positions as masters as well as instructors of painting, modeling, and woodcarving. During this time, the school hired Kalidas Pal for the engraving department, Gopal Chandra Pal and Jadunath Pal for the modeling department, Shvama Charan Srimani for the mechanical drawing department, and most significantly, Annada Prasad Bagchi, an oil painter, who first took on the role of tutor for drawing, painting, and lithography before rising to the position of headmaster in 1880.

Well-established techniques of handicraft, such clay modeling, were integrated into the British art education system and drawn to new channels of

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government demand and sponsorship, enabling the creation of images that fit into the colonial ethnography and anthropological systems. India's colonial anthropology was rendered indispensable as a visual aid by such templates and casts. Under H. H. Locke, further significant commissions arrived to showcase an array of opulent British periodicals for art school students.

The largest single illustration project arrived with Dr. Rajendra Lal along with a series of diagrams of human anatomy ordered by Dr. Gayer, Professor of Calcutta Medical College, and drawings of snakes from original specimens held in the Indian Museum for Sir Joseph Farer's book *The Thanatophidia of India: Being a Description of the Venomous Snakes of the Indian Peninsula* (London, 1872). The government ordered numerous more student drawings in the 1870s and 1880s for various science publications and catalogs, including the *Records of the Geological Survey of India* and the *Annals of the Royal Botanical Gardens, Calcutta*.

Through official training and patronage, the copyist's position gained additional levels of social acceptability as well as refinement and polish. But among all these up-and-coming painters, oil painting ability and practical portraiture skill were the most sought-after qualities. But among all these up-and-coming painters, oil painting ability and practical portraiture skill were the most sought-after qualities. Two students who became even more well-known than themselves were J P Gangooly and Bamapada Banerjee, who received private oil painting instruction from Gangadhar Dey and Pramath Anath Mitra. Another potential portrait painter of this type was Poeshnath Sen, whose endeavors appeared to be focused mostly on copying previous portraits of Pathuriaghata Tagore Family members created by European painters.

Painting portraits appears to have been a popular subject among several wealthy, self-taught Calcutta amateurs. Annada Prasad Bagchi (1849–1905), who gravitated toward a private studio in Jorasanko, is the first name that suggests itself. He eventually had a lucky break in 1865 when he was admitted to the School of Art. In addition, he started working part-time at the copper-graving workshop when he started school due to financial hardship and dissatisfaction with his intended career. His wider reputation as a skilled oil portrait painter was also important to his prestige; it was this reputation that led to Viceroy Lord Northbrook commissioning pictures from him of Raja Romanath Tagore, Dr. Rajendra Lal Mitra, and Keshab Chandra Sen. His portraits in my 1879 show were also some of the most expensive paintings on display.

Sashi Hesh (1869), who had the privilege of going to Italy for additional education. His family was impoverished when he was born in Mymensingh, so he

had to drop out of school to work as a rural school master inspector. He attended the Government School of Art in Calcutta in the 1880s on a scholarship from the Mymensingh District Board, when Vice Principal O. Ghilardi and Principal W. H. Jobbins took particular notice of his exceptional ability. The artist was able to return to Mymensingh through connections, where he was able to gain the favor of his affluent families and secure commissions for portraits of the entire Maharaja Suryankanta Acharya Choudhury family.

The biggest breakthrough came to Sashi Hesh in 1898 when he was able to take a plane to Italy and enroll in the Royal Academy in Rome. The artist's biography demonstrates his interest in education in Italy, the country that produced many of the great Renaissance Masters. Even though he was cut off from his peers by this nearly unachievable objective, it reflects the aspirations of all exceptional students at modern English or French art schools and highlights the unmistakably Eurocentric nature of fine arts education in India. In November 1899, after spending almost two years at the Royal Academies in Munich and Rome, Sashi Hesh arrived in London and was greeted warmly by the National Indian Association.

As with Ravi Varma in Bombay in the 1890s, early nationalist leaders like W. C. Bonerjee, Romesh Chandra Dutta, and Dadabhai Naoroji were drawn to Sashi Hesh in London and his other well-known Indian artists of the time. He created portraits of numerous of these individuals.

One of his first assignments upon returning to Calcutta in the early years of 1900 was to ask Baroda to paint the family portraits of Gaekwad. His two most significant portraits, one of Maharshi Debendranath Tagore and the other of Pandit Shivrath Shastri, were painted against the backdrop of his conversion into the Brahmo religion in the year of his homecoming. Among the most significant individuals in the gallery were the British and Indian Dwijendranath Tagore, Dinshaw Wacha, Sir G. C. M. Birdwood, Sir Stuart Hogg, and Allan Octavian Hume.

His story followed the same path as that of A.P. Bagchi and Sashi Hesh's fallout from the Training Academy; the local landlord and editor Shambhu Chandra Mukherjee's discovery of his artistic talent; and his admission to the Government School of Art, Calcutta, where he studied under H. H. Locke. But Bamapada Banerjee thought the education at school was terribly inadequate, especially when it came to training in oil painting. Although Annada Prasad Bagchi's instance demonstrated differently, this could serve as an example of how the school's fine arts program was still in its infancy when it opened in the early 1870s and how few students were enrolled in advanced oil painting classes. Throughout his whole career, he has painted

portraits, traveling to the United Provinces, Punjab, and Rajasthan; many of his models are Bengali professionals.

The careers of the barrister Manmohan Ghosh, the Maharajas of Darbhanga and Murshidabad, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, and Maharaja Jatindra Mohun Tagore all continued in full force. Narendranath Sen, the editor of *The Indian Mirror*, also continued in this capacity.

These portrait painting careers point to a crucial sponsorship for upcoming young Calcutta artists in the late 1800s. However, this potential was mostly unrealized. The primary purpose of the analysis of private patronage and art collection patterns in Calcutta was to highlight the relative lack of opportunities and resources for Indian artists compared to the exclusivity of the Western art scene. With time, contemporary Indian artists began to focus their skills on the latter set of requirements and tastes. These two artists' careers—Annada Prasad Bagchi and Bama Pada Banerjee—have required a specific element for them to be successful. While working as portrait painters and art school lecturers, they also pursued parallel careers in commercial painting and common picture creation.

The Indians' standing as artists suggested a certain level of exclusivity and separation from the bazaar art. Nonetheless, difficulties in making a living and the increased marketability of their skill have caused many of them to cross the line between "high" and "low" art in the city and enter the most lucrative painting and printmaking scene.

The common outcome of Western education and art school backgrounds was that the new artists of Bengal had come to occupy a space that was as contradictory as it was ambivalent. They managed to place themselves within a wide range of careers and opportunities, including portraitists, oil painters, drawing makers, engravers, and drawing masters, but they found themselves wedged between an exclusive world of "high art" and opportunities for independent entrepreneurial business. Instead, they avoided the elite's and government's patronage by focusing on the broader mass market, which overshadowed their talents. Their own projects and initiatives mostly focused on the newest methods of printing, including chromolithography, oleography, lithography, and metal graving. In popular culture, developing reproduction techniques had taken precedence over all other means when it came to printing.

In his early roles, Abanindranath made his illustration debut at the turn of the century, using the same range of styles and methods. *Shakuntala*, Debendranath Dhar's debut book, was lithographed in his art studio using the Indian Art Cottage

press. His drawings can be found in *Sadhana*, where they illustrate Dwyendranath Tagore's poem "Swapnaprayan" as well as Rabindranath's poems "Badhu" and "Bimbabati." Ishwari Prasad Varma, a painter from a long line of Delhi and Patna painters, lithographed all of the drawings for the journal. Principal E.B. Havel later recruited Varma to the Calcutta School of Art."

In addition to a strong suggestion of Victorian imagery in the motifs of a crescent moon, floating clouds, and a winged angel (personalizing night and night dreams), falling on a man's sleeping figure, the drawings adopted the typical trend of the time: a crude naturalism of faces and images, a gritty sketchy quality of painting, a concentration on color and tonal modeling.

The names Abanindranath Tagore and Ishwari Prasad Varma foreshadowed the modern movement to resurrect the "Indian-style" of painting, which impacted Calcutta's art scene in the early 1900s. It appears that Abanindranath and Ishwari Prasad Varma were involved in the lithography and book illustration scene of the 1890s, which dominated the art market.

This complete set of drawings and image prints created in Calcutta in the late 1800s for a reworked genre of popular commercial art. The term used primarily as an "enabling tool, a means of altering the means of the West and a means of improving the way that Indians were portrayed in the late nineteenth century. As a result, it gave rise to a new iconography for Indian visual arts, with a shape and typology that was both uniquely Indian—given their Western bends—and specific to the linkages and developments that pushed the country's art scene during that time.

The greatest opportunity for "realism to demonstrate excellent representation and replication skills was given by the growth of architectural studies, portraits, landscape views, and cityscapes in Calcutta. While intricate hatchings in wood and metal engravings created a sense of density and dimension, the use of lithostone generated softer, more subdued tones and improved light and shade photography.

When compared to historical figures such as Shivaji and Aurangzeb, modern Bengali personalities were the most genuine and strikingly similar. We discover that these lithographed portraits, which were arguably the most advanced creations of Indian painters and printers in the contemporary commercial art and popular image development milieu, bore the strongest resemblance to Western academic style and art school instruction.

The most important type of popular, commercial art was made popular by the Calcutta Art Studio and Shilpa-Pushpanjali, who promoted religious and mythical

imagery. The more traditional iconography was reflected in the lower end of the scale Bat-tala engravings from the 1860s and 1870s, with their stylized images and crude color stains; by the 1890s, however, Raja Ravi Varma's mythological oleographs were projected as the most distinctive Indian art of the time.

The Bengali middle class witnessed a surge in evolving ideas about art and tradition as well as an increase in aesthetic self-awareness in the late nineteenth century. The hegemonic middle-class culture's rise and cohesion depended heavily on the cultivation of a new "artistic" taste, which was essential to its sense of exclusivity, mission of self-improvement and modernization, and aspirations for leadership. Bengal's already thriving literary society was the driving force behind the desire to revitalize and rekindle a taste for art. A rise in magazine literature that reproduced painting prints and contained a wide range of articles, discussions, and significant observations on the past, present, and future of Indian art was a result of shifting tastes and perspectives on art.

Nationalism's waves generated their own thought-provoking queries on the advancement of creativity. This brings up the conundrum of shifting tastes in locally produced imagery and the forming hierarchies within them on what was considered a more powerful and sophisticated appearance. Three-dimensionality and realism had created a clear divide between the old and the new, between the Bat-tala woodcuts and the pal's stylized conventions.

The Calcutta Art Studio's mythological paintings produced after the late 1870s and Shilpa-Pushpanjali's 1886 depictions of the Ramayana and Mahabharata offered some of the earliest alternatives to the other traditional iconographies, signifying a clear shift in the preference for avant-garde Indian art. Early exposure to Western schooling led to the belief that art may be a tool for transformation. Additionally, the colonizer's aversion for "native" art forms was reflected in his resistance to Hindu idolatry and superstitious beliefs, as well as his assessment of the Hindu "monstrous" gods. Images from Art Studio appeared to fulfill this promise.

The techniques of "realistic" portrayal seemed to both elevate the status of the gods and give these images a contemporary "craft" aesthetic. Paintings depicted images, patterns, and analogies from traditional Sanskrit literature in India. These are the questions that prominent young critic and Sanskrit scholar Balendranath Tagore discusses in his works. In anticipation of the demands of subsequent nationalists, Belandarnath's essays showed a new Indian art aesthetic proclamation, and Ravi Verma—one of the most fascinating artists of modern India—discovered the possibility for creation.

In Calcutta at the turn of the century, a narrow-minded philosophy and a drastically transformed understanding of tradition would fight against the desire to establish an Indian aesthetics and national art that matched the modern era. It was largely Western as well, but the impact of a new, powerful group of Orientalists resulted in a reconstruction of its attitudes and aesthetic choices as well as the promotion of a new standard of genuine taste. A large portion of British Orientalism's interpretation of Indian art culture has been formed and structured. At the turn of the century, it led the creative reinterpretation of Indian art since it served as the hub for historical knowledge and firsthand archeological expertise on the subject. During this time, there was a significant change in European perceptions of Indian art from a Western classical bias to a distinctly "Indian" perspective. Instead of honoring "decorative arts," there was a discovery of a thriving community of "fine arts" with a profoundly Eastern cultural aesthetic. A. K. Coomaraswamy and E. B. Havell became this alternate front's two most well-known spokespeople in the first ten years of the 20th century.

Conclusion

Abanindranath, on the other hand, painted with the intention of incorporating bhava, or the emotional core of Indian performing arts, into his works. His identity ultimately emerged as the theme or subject holding the essence, and he went on to become the most significant figure in the Bengal School of Art during that time. Under the leadership of Abanindranath's disciples, the entire creative legacy of the notorious Bengal School was transformed into a journey of experimentation and the extraction of beauty and emotion from the rich literary and artistic heritage, all expressed through the presumptive values embodied by their Guru Abanindranath. In order to establish and validate their Indian identity, they have adopted it.

Despite the fact that the Santiniketan artists experimented with and adopted a wide range of approaches and strategies, this fundamental principle allowed them to remain true to their own unique perspectives. The expressive representation of nature, the attempt to enhance the individual experience in nature's representation, the sensible and expressive representation of the common human being, the attempt to incorporate local materials and methods into art practice, and—most importantly—the lack of any stylistic binding of their expressions are the commonalities among the works created by Santiniketan artists. Therefore, it is quite reasonable to argue that the Santiniketan artists were living within the reality they were observing with their senses and maintaining a shared knowledge of the need of being true to it. Even so, it was the Bengal school that liberated Indian art from the shackles of British Realism in the early 20th century and gave rise to its renaissance. While

individual perception was at the center of contemporary art at the time, artists may have lost legitimacy in the larger context of modern art due to the allure of examining Indianness in their work based on their ancestry (Kumar et al., Victoria).

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