

B.C Sanyal Indian Modernist Artist & Delhi Shilp Chakra

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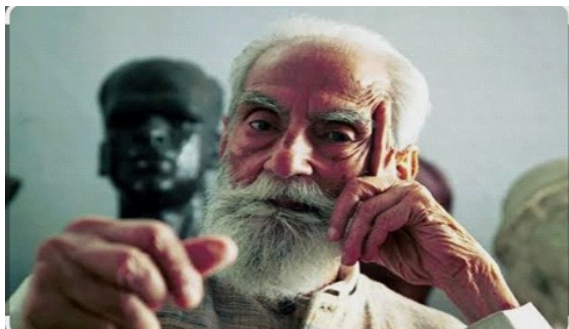
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Abstract

Bhabesh Chandra Sanyal, affectionately known as the “Doyen of Indian Modernism,” stands as a pivotal figure in the evolution of post-independence Indian art. This project explores the life and works of Sanyal, with a primary focus on his instrumental role in founding the **Delhi Shilpi Chakra**, an artist collective that revolutionized the cultural landscape of the capital.

The study examines how Sanyal's transition from Lahore to Delhi following the Partition served as a catalyst for a new artistic movement. Disillusioned by the rigid traditionalism of the All India Fine Arts and Crafts Society (AIFACS), Sanyal, along with contemporaries like P.N. Mago and Kanwal Krishna, established the Shilpi Chakra in 1949. The group's motto, “**Art Illuminates Life**,” reflected a shift toward making art accessible to the common person and integrating contemporary social realities into the creative process.



Key words: Shilpi Chakra, Shilpi Chakra, Artistic, Philosophy, autonomous space, Western academic realism, sensibility, resilience, human spirit, rural folk, living” art culture, humanistic etc.

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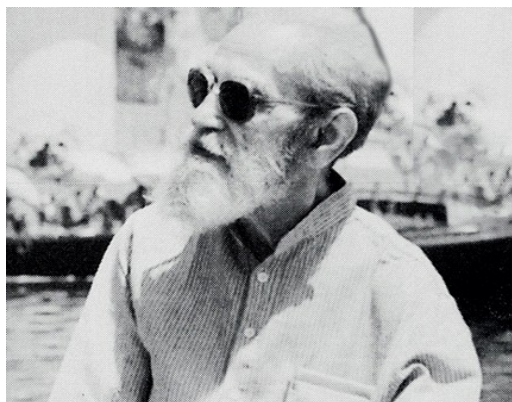
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Introduction to B.C Sanyal

Bhabesh Chandra Sanyal was born in Dibrugarh, Assam, and trained at the Government College of Art & Craft, Calcutta. Before bhabesh Chandra Sanyal was a legendary Indian painter, sculptor, and art educator whose career spanned over a century, mirroring the history of modern India itself. Born in Dibrugarh, Assam, Sanyal was a witness to the Partition of Bengal (1905), the Indian Independence movement, and the Partition of 1947.

His artistic philosophy was rooted in **Humanism**. Unlike many of his contemporaries who strictly followed the Bengal School's romanticism or British academic realism, Sanyal developed an individualistic style that focused on the struggles and dignity of the common man, the economically deprived, and the rural landscape



- **The Lahore Years:** In 1929, he traveled to Lahore to create a bronze statue of Lala Lajpat Rai. He stayed there to teach at the Mayo School of Arts and later founded the **Lahore School of Fine Arts** in 1936.
- **The Delhi Shilpi Chakra:** After the 1947 Partition, Sanyal moved to Delhi as a refugee. In 1949, he co-founded the **Delhi Shilpi Chakra**, an influential artist group that sought to bring art closer to the people and away from colonial-era rigidities.
- **Institutional Leadership:** He served as the Vice-Chairman of the **Lalit Kala Akademi** and the Head of the Delhi College of Art, mentoring generations of artists including Satish Gujral and Krishen Khanna.

Themes: He focused on the human condition, rural life, and the struggles of the marginalized.

Key Philosophy: He believed art should not be confined to galleries but should reflect the social realities of the time .

Bhabesh Chandra Sanyal, affectionately known as B.C. Sanyal or “Baba Sanyal,” stands as one of the most significant figures in the history of 20th-century Indian art. Born on April 22, 1902, in Dibrugarh, Assam, his life and career spanned over a century, allowing him to witness the transformation of India from a colonial subject to a modern republic. As a painter, sculptor, teacher, and institution builder, Sanyal was instrumental in steering Indian art away from both rigid British academic realism and the nostalgic romanticism of the Bengal School, carving out a path for indigenous modernism.

The Environmental Sculptor

Few people realize that Sanyal was an early proponent of environmental integration. He believed that sculpture shouldn’t just sit on a pedestal in a museum; it should breathe with the city. His involvement in the landscape planning of Delhi and his insistence on placing art in public parks was a precursor to the modern “Public Art” movement in India.

In your research, Sanyal should be noted not just as a creator of objects, but as a man who lived his life as a “Cultural bridge.” He was the last of the artists who believed that art was a moral duty—a way to mend the broken spirit of a newly independent nation through the simple act of drawing the human face.



Early Life and Artistic Education

Sanyal’s artistic journey began at the Government College of Art and Craft, Calcutta, where he studied under the traditional Western academic style. However, he quickly developed a rebellious spirit, finding the prevailing styles of the time—be it the Victorian aesthetic or the revivalist Bengal School—insufficient for expressing the raw reality of Indian life. His early influences included his mother, whose simple strength and grace later inspired some of his most profound works.

The Lahore Years and Rise as a Sculptor

Sanyal's professional breakthrough came in 1929 when he was commissioned to create a bronze statue of the revolutionary leader Lala Lajpat Rai for the Indian National Congress session in Lahore. This masterpiece established him as a premier sculptor.

Following this success, he remained in Lahore, serving as the Vice-Principal of the Mayo School of Arts (1929–1936). When institutional constraints stifled his vision, he broke away to establish the Lahore School of Fine Arts in 1936. This school became a vibrant hub for budding modernists, including future luminaries like Satish Gujral and Krishen Khanna.

Beyond the accolades and the centuries-long life, the rarest dimension of Bhabesh Chandra Sanyal was his refusal to let art remain a luxury for the elite. While most modernists of his era were seeking validation from European galleries, Sanyal was busy pioneering a socialist approach to aesthetics.

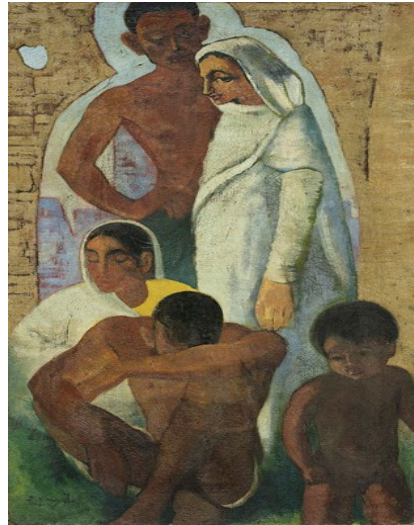
The Gole Market “Art Shop” Phenomenon

One of the most overlooked periods of Sanyal's life was his immediate post-partition struggle in Delhi. Unlike other artists who sought government grants, Sanyal opened a studio in a small shop at Gole Market. This wasn't just a studio; it was a radical social experiment. He believed that an artist should be as accessible as a grocer or a cobbler. In this “art shop,” he would sketch the common vegetable sellers and laborers of Delhi, treating them with the same classical dignity he once afforded to national leaders in Lahore. This period is a rare example of “Living Art,” where the boundaries between the creator and the community were completely erased.

The Delhi Shilp Chakra (The turning point)

Founded on **March 25, 1949**, the Delhi Shilpi Chakra was more than just an art group; it was a movement.

- **The Motto:** “*Art Illuminates Life.*”
- **The Goal:** To create a platform where artists could work with total freedom, independent of government or wealthy patronage.
- **Democratizing Art:** Sanyal and his colleagues (like P.N. Mago and Kanwal Krishna) took art to the streets. They held exhibitions in residential colonies like Karol Bagh and Gole Market to make art accessible to middle-class families.
- **Refugee Identity:** Many members were displaced artists from Lahore. The Chakra provided them with a sense of community and a shared purpose in a new city.



Post partition and Delhi Shilp Chakra

The 1947 Partition forced Sanyal to leave Lahore for Delhi. He famously arrived with nothing but his talent and established a “refugee studio” at **26 Gole Market**.

Delhi Silpi Chakra (1949): Frustrated with the rigid traditionalism of existing art societies, Sanyal co-founded this collective. Their motto was “*Art should be the total expression of life,*” aiming to make art accessible to the common man rather than just the elite.

Democratic Art: The Chakra moved away from the romanticized themes of the Bengal School, focusing instead on the lived experiences of a new, independent India.

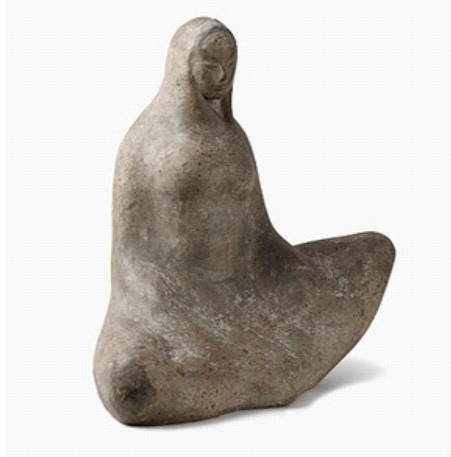
Artistic Contributions

Sanyal was a master of many mediums. His sculptures, like the bust of Mahatma Gandhi, and his paintings, such as *The Flying Scarecrow* and *Despair*, are legendary. He often depicted the “commoner”—the laborer, the beggar, and the refugee—with immense dignity.

Historical keywords

- **Cultural Ambassador:** Sanyal didn’t just paint; he acted as a diplomat, taking Indian aesthetics to the West and the Soviet Bloc.
- **Doyen of Indian Modernism:** Use this title often; it signifies his role as the “senior-most” respected figure who mentored three generations of artists (like Satish Gujral and Krishen Khanna).

- **Mayo School of Arts:** Mention that he was dismissed from this school in Lahore by the British in 1936, which led him to start his own independent school—a key act of rebellion and artistic freedom.



- **The Vertical Woman:** This is the title of his famous autobiography (Reminiscences of B.C. Sanyal). Referencing this shows you have looked into his personal writings.



The middle part of modernism

Sanyal's artistic philosophy did not follow a single school of thought. Instead, he developed a theory often called the “**Middle Path**”:

- **Rejection of Insularity:** He argued against the “insularity” (isolation) of the Bengal School, which he felt was too focused on the past.
- **Adaptation of Western Techniques:** While trained in Western academic realism (oil, charcoal, watercolor), he didn’t “copy” the West. He used these tools to paint the **Indian Reality**.
- **The Humanist Lens:** His theory suggested that the most “modern” thing an artist could do was to portray the struggle of the common man—laborers, peasants, and refugees—with dignity rather than pity.



His career spanned nearly a century, making him one of the most decorated and traveled Indian artists of his time.

Partition and the refugee memory

Sanyal’s life was punctuated by displacement. In 1947, he was forced to leave Lahore (where he had established a thriving art scene) and move to Delhi. This transition transformed his artistic identity and his depiction of culture.

- **The Gole Market “Refugee Studio”:** Upon arriving in Delhi, he set up a studio in a small space in Gole Market. This space itself became a symbol of cultural memory—a hub for displaced artists who would later form the **Delhi Silpi Chakra**.
- **Shift in Palette:** Research indicates that his work underwent a physical shift post-Partition. His earlier vibrant, fresh colors often gave way to more somber **blues and browns**, reflecting the internal landscape of a displaced person and the “agony of the immigrant experience.”

- **Themes of Peace:** His work *Way to Peace*—depicting Mahatma Gandhi with a Hindu and a Muslim child—serves as a memorial to the hope for communal harmony amidst the memory of brutal violence.

The cultural archetype

Sanyal rejected both the revivalism of the Bengal School and the rigidity of British Academic realism. Instead, he focused on the “living culture” of India.

- **The Marginalized:** His paintings often feature the economically deprived, rural peasants, and the urban labor class. By elevating these figures to the center of his canvas, he preserved the memory of a segment of society often ignored by mainstream history.
- **Everyday Life:** His focus was on the “archetypal human struggle.” Even when his subjects are semi-abstracted, they evoke a deep sense of empathy, serving as a cultural record of resilience.

Personal memory and the vertical Women

His most famous sculpture, “**The Vertical Woman**,” is a profound case study for your research into memory.

- **Maternal Influence:** Sanyal explicitly stated that his mother was the primary inspiration for this work. The sculpture serves as a monumental tribute to her strength and the “memory of his mother,” blending personal lineage with universal womanhood.
- **Reminiscences:** He titled his two-volume autobiography *The Vertical Woman*, signaling that this piece was the anchor for his entire life’s narrative. It represents a “monumentalization” of memory—turning a private recollection into a public cultural landmark.

Statue of Lala Lajpat Rai (1929)

This was the commission that defined his early career. Created for the Indian National Congress session in Lahore, this bronze portrait of the “Lion of Punjab” solidified Sanyal’s reputation as a master sculptor capable of capturing both likeness and nationalistic fervor.

The Vertical Woman (also known as The Veiled Figure)

Perhaps his most famous and personal sculpture, this work was a tribute to his mother.

- **Concept:** He captured the memory of his mother, whom he always saw behind a ghunghat (veil).
- **Significance:** It broke new ground in Indian sculpture by blending traditional imagery with a modern, emotive aesthetic. The “Vertical Woman” became a recurring motif in his later paintings as well

- The Refugee Family: A poignant sculpture capturing the collective trauma and resilience of those displaced by the Partition.

Way to Peace: A painting/sculptural concept depicting Mahatma Gandhi with a Hindu and a Muslim child, symbolizing his lifelong commitment to communal harmony.

Exhibitions and shows

B.C. Sanyal was a global representative of Indian art. His participation in these international shows helped put modern Indian art on the world map:

- **Salon de Mai, Paris (1949):** One of his first major international exposures after moving to Delhi.
- *Venice Biennale (1953):* He represented India at one of the world's most prestigious art Olympics.
- *Traveling Representative (1955–1956):* He led a major exhibition of Indian art that toured through **Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, the USSR, and Poland.**
- **Sao Paulo Biennale, Brazil:** Participated during his tenure as Secretary of the Lalit Kala Akademi.
- **Tokyo International Art Exhibition:** He led the Indian delegation to Japan, further bridging Asian art connections.
- **Birth Centenary Exhibition (2001):** Organized by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA), New Delhi, to honor his 100th birthday.

Awards and national honors

Sanyal received the highest civilian and artistic honors from both the Indian government and international bodies:

Year	Award / Honor	Issued By
1980	Lalit Kala Akademi Fellowship	National Academy of Art (Highest honor in Visual Arts)
1984	Padma Bhushan	Government of India (Third-highest civilian award)
1989	Honorary Citizenship of Baltimore	Government of the United States
1993	Gagan Abani Puraskar	Visva Bharati University (Santiniketan)
1999	Sankar Dev Award	Government of Assam
2000	Commemorative Postage Stamp	Government of India (Released for his 100th Year)

Major publications (books and memories)

Sanyal was a writer who documented the history of modern Indian art through his own life experiences.

- ***The Vertical Woman: Reminiscences of B.C. Sanyal*** (Volumes I & II): This is his most important literary work.
- **Volume I (1902–1947):** Covers his early life in Assam, his training in Calcutta, and his career in Lahore before the Partition.
- **Volume II (1947–Present):** Details his life after moving to Delhi, the formation of the Delhi Shilpi Chakra, and his role in building India's national art institutions.
- **The Story Behind the Title:** The title comes from a stone sculpture he was carving in the 1950s—a “veiled woman” emerging from a vertical boulder. As he hammered the stone, his memories “flashed back,” leading him to write his autobiography.
- **Bhabesh Chandra Sanyal** (Lalit Kala Akademi, 1967): A monograph edited by Jaya Appasamy and S.A. Krishnan, providing an academic analysis of his early works.
- **Art Journalism:** In his Lahore days (1930s-40s), he was deeply involved in writing for art journals, helping to shape the discourse on Indian modernism even before independence.



Key Artwork

Artwork	Theme	Research Significance
The Vertical Woman	Personal/Maternal Memory	Symbolizes the strength of the feminine and the continuity of personal history.
The Veiled Figure	Grief and Memory	Portrays the memory of his mother; broke new ground in Indian sculpture.
Way to Peace	Cultural Harmony	Uses the figure of Gandhi to memorialize the search for peace after Partition.
Despair	Human Condition	Captures the emotional resonance of displacement and loss.
The Last Moghul	Lost Memory	A self-portrait that he later described as a "lost" part of his own history after it was taken by an art dealer.

Media presence & film

Sanyal's magnetic personality and longevity (he lived to be 101) made him a subject of interest for filmmakers and documentarians.

- **Film Acting: *Dance of the Wind* (1997):** In a rare move for a visual artist, Sanyal acted in this internationally acclaimed film directed by Rajan Khosa. He played the role of an elderly music teacher, bringing his real-life “doyen” persona to the screen.
- **Documentary: *B. C. Sanyal* (1988):** Commissioned by the Lalit Kala Akademi and directed by Partha Chatterjee. This documentary is a vital research tool as it captures Sanyal in his studio, explaining his techniques and his philosophy that “Art Illuminates Life.”
- **Television: *Zinda Itihaas* (Prasar Bharati):** The National Archives of India produced a series on legendary personalities, and the episode on B.C. Sanyal serves as a primary source for understanding his impact as a teacher to three generations of artists.



Institutional legacy

In your “Media Presence” section, you can note that he didn’t just appear in media; he *created* the platforms for it:

- **Andretta Artist Village:** He helped establish this artist resort in Himachal Pradesh, which has been featured in numerous travel and art documentaries as a “living museum” of his legacy.
- **Secretary of Lalit Kala Akademi:** During his tenure, he helped launch the *Triennale-India*, a permanent international art exhibition that brought global media attention to New Delhi.

Conclusion

B.C. Sanyal's journey from a displaced artist to a cultural architect shows the power of resilience. By founding the Delhi Shilpi Chakra, he ensured that Indian art remained connected to its people and its land. His legacy is not just in his paintings, but in the institutions and the freedom he created for future generations of Indian artists. The emergence of the **Delhi Shilpi Chakra** in 1949, led by the "Doyen of Indian Art," **B.C. Sanyal**, marked the birth of a truly independent art movement in North India. While the Bombay Progressive Artists' Group was exploring international styles, Sanyal and his colleagues focused on democratizing art and making it relevant to the post-Independence Indian identity.

The Delhi Shilpi Chakra laid the foundation for the contemporary art scene in the capital, proving that art could be both **modern in its execution** and **deeply rooted in the socio-political reality** of its people. Their legacy remains a testament to the idea that creativity thrives best when it is free from rigid institutional boundaries and remains accessible to the masses.

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