

A Details Study on Contribution of Bengal School's Artists in Contemporary Art

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Abstract: *The Bengal School of Art stands not merely as a historical movement but as a profound cultural response to colonial dominance a deliberate reclaiming of Indian aesthetic identity in the face of Western artistic hegemony. Emerging during a politically charged atmosphere marked by the Swadeshi movement, this school redefined Indian art through spiritual depth, indigenous techniques, and symbolic narratives drawn from mythology, philosophy, and national pride. Abanindranath Tagore's Bharat Mata, for instance, did not just depict a figure it embodied a nation's soul in transition. What makes this movement especially compelling is its blend of reverence for the past with experiments in modernism, as seen in the evolving works of Gaganendranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. These artists didn't merely replicate traditional motifs; they transformed them into vehicles of contemporary expression. Institutions like Kala Bhavana became crucibles for this evolution, nurturing creativity that married tradition with innovation. This suggests that the Bengal School wasn't just a nostalgic revival but a living, breathing assertion of cultural resilience. Even today, its echoes are felt in the works of Indian artists who strive to root their expression in local ethos while engaging with global art languages. This layered journey of revival, resistance, and reinvention is what, in my opinion, secures the Bengal School a lasting place in the narrative of Indian modernism.*

Keywords: Bengal School of Art, Abanindranath Tagore, Indian nationalism in art, cultural revival, modern Indian painting

1. Introduction

The Bengal School of Art, also called the Bengal Renaissance, was an important art movement that started in the early 20th century in British India. It represented a key shift in Indian art history, pushing back against the Western academic styles that were imposed during colonial rule. The movement aimed to revive traditional Indian art forms and promote a distinctly Indian style based on spiritual and cultural values.

Abanindranath Tagore, the nephew of poet Rabindranath Tagore, led the Bengal School. It grew as a response to the materialism and realism of European art education pushed by British institutions like the Government School of Art in Calcutta. Artists in the Bengal School took inspiration from Mughal miniatures, Ajanta murals, and Japanese wash techniques. They emphasized harmony, idealism, and a return to Indian themes.

The Bengal School was vital to India's cultural awakening and nationalism, connecting itself to the Swadeshi movement. It set the stage for modern Indian art by encouraging artists to connect with their heritage while trying out new forms of expression. While later movements would critique and expand on its ideas, the Bengal School is still an important part of the history of Indian modernism.

2. Contemporary Cultural Environment

The cultural environment in which the Bengal School of Art emerged was one of political unrest, rising nationalism, and a growing desire for cultural revival during British colonial rule in India, particularly in Bengal (now split between West Bengal in India and Bangladesh).

This time, the late 19th to early 20th century, was characterized by intense disenchantment with Western hegemony not just politically but also culturally.

1) Nationalist Feeling and Swadeshi Movement

The Bengal School emerged in the context of the Swadeshi Movement (1905–1911), which itself was a spontaneous response to the British partitioning of Bengal. The movement exhorted Indians to boycott British products and seek out native industries and culture.

2) Reaction Against Western Academic Art

British art schools imparted a style derived from European realism, focusing on oil painting, perspective, and anatomy, which sounded culturally alien to many Indian intellectuals.

3) Influence of Indian Philosophical and Religious Thought

The Bengal School was based on spiritual and philosophical concepts derived from Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sufism. It portrayed mood, symbolism, and emotional depth, usually employing mythological and historical motifs. It was an attempt to develop a contemplative and spiritual art, as opposed to materialism and realism in the West.

3. Abanindranath Tagore in Bengal School

Abanindranath's painting of Bharat Mata created tumult among the agitators. It was natural to be praised and criticized everywhere. He used amalgamation of technique of European water colour – the blend of tempera and wash Japan, to produce effect in the paintings like dreamland. That blended form became the symbol of the Bengal style of painting. Professor E. B. Havell was so impressed with him and his work that he appointed him Vice - Principal and head of the faculty of art of his school of art. In guidance of Mr. E. B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore got inspiration of studying deeply the style of Ajanta, Bagh, the Rajput and the

Mughal arts. Their effect on Bengal paintings can be clearly seen.

3.1 Introduction of Abanindranath Tagore

- Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) was an early Indian painter, author, and the leading architect of Bengal school Art movement, which endeavored to restore India's artistic legacy under British colonial rule. Tagore was born in Jorasanko, Kolkata, to the wealthy Tagore family. He was the nephew of Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore and the son of artist Gunendranath Tagore.
- Trained at the Government School of Art in Kolkata, Tagore was taught by European artists Ointto Ghilardi and Charles Palmer. His artistic career, though, was shaped by his experiences with traditional Indian art forms, including Mughal miniatures and Ajanta murals, as well as with Japanese wash technique. This exposure had him develop a distinctive style of his own that amalgamated Indian themes with modernity.

In 1907, Tagore established the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Kolkata with the aim of encouraging local art traditions and combating the Western academic style that

dominated British art schools. This effort was instrumental in shaping the Bengal School, which was characterized by spiritual and cultural motifs derived from Indian culture.

Among his most famous paintings is Bharat Mata (Mother India), an allegorical work showing India as a peaceful, four-armed woman representing the country's ideals and aspirations. This painting became a symbol of the freedom movement and a representation of India's struggle for independence.

In addition to painting, Tagore was a successful writer, especially famous for his children's literature in Bengali. His books, like Khirer Putul (The Milk Doll) and Buro Angla, are loved for their fantasy storylines and ornate illustrations.

Abanindranath Tagore's impact remains as a pioneering artist in contemporary Indian art whose pieces continue to drive and resonate in the Indian cultural foreground.

His Famous Paintings: -

- Bharat Mata o Ganesh Janani o Birth of Buddha
- Buddha and Sujata o Taj Mahal
- Death of Shahjahan

3.2 Bengal's Important Role in Contemporary Art



Bengal has been a cornerstone in shaping modern and contemporary Indian art, particularly through the Bengal School of Art. This movement not only challenged colonial artistic norms but also laid the foundation for a distinctive Indian visual language.

4. Revival of Indigenous Artistic Traditions

In the early 20th century, artists like Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose sought to revive traditional Indian art forms, drawing inspiration from Mughal miniatures, Ajanta murals, and folk art. This revival was a response to the Western academic styles imposed during British colonial rule. The Bengal School emphasized spiritual and cultural themes, promoting a nationalistic art that resonated with India's heritage.

1) Integration of Modernism with Indian Identity

While rooted in tradition, the Bengal School also embraced modernism. Artists like Gaganendranath Tagore experimented with styles such as Cubism, blending Western techniques with Indian subjects. This fusion created a unique artistic expression that was both contemporary and culturally resonant.

2) Establishment of Artistic Institutions

Institutions like **Kala Bhavana** in Santiniketan, founded by Rabindranath Tagore, became centers for nurturing artistic talent. Under the leadership of Nandalal Bose, Kala Bhavana attracted artists who contributed significantly to the development of modern Indian art. The institution emphasized a curriculum that integrated traditional Indian art with contemporary practices.

3) Influence on Contemporary Artists

The legacy of the Bengal School continues to influence contemporary artists in Bengal and beyond. Modern artists

draw inspiration from the Bengal School's emphasis on cultural identity and its blend of traditional and modern techniques. This influence is evident in various art forms, including painting, sculpture, and digital media.

4) Preservation and Promotion of Art

Efforts to preserve and promote Bengal's artistic heritage are ongoing. Museums and galleries in Kolkata showcase works from the Bengal School, ensuring that the contributions of artists like Jamini Roy and Ramkinkar Baij are recognized and appreciated. These institutions play a crucial role in educating the public and fostering a deeper understanding of Bengal's artistic legacy.

5. A Discussion of Important Artists in Bengal Schools

A significant movement in Indian art, championed a revival of indigenous aesthetics and techniques, focusing on themes of Indian culture, history, and mythology. Key figures like Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, and Asit Kumar Haldar played crucial roles in shaping this style.

Gaganendranath Tagore:

Gaganendranath Tagore (17 September 1867 – 14 February 1938) was an Indian painter and cartoonist of the Bengal school. Along with his brother Abanindranath Tagore, he was counted as one of the earliest modern artists in India.

Gaganendranath Tagore was born at Jorasanko into a family whose creativity defined Bengal's cultural life. Gaganendranath was the eldest son of Gunendranath Tagore, grandson of Girindranath Tagore and a great - grandson of Prince Dwarkanath Tagore. His brother Abanindranath was a pioneer and leading exponent of the Bengal School of Art. He was a nephew of the poet Rabindranath Tagore and the paternal great - grandfather of actress Sharmila Tagore.

Gaganendranath received no formal education but trained under the watercolourist Harinarayan Bandopadhyay. In 1907, along with his brother Abanindranath, he founded the Indian Society of Oriental Art which later published the influential journal Rupam. Between 1906 and 1910, the artist studied and assimilated Japanese brush techniques and the influence of Far Eastern art into his own work, as demonstrated by his illustrations for Rabindranath Tagore's autobiography Jeevansmriti (1912). He went on to develop his own approach in his Chaitanya and Pilgrim series. Gaganendranath eventually abandoned the revivalism of the Bengal School and took up caricature. The Modern Review published many of his cartoons in 1917. From 1917 onwards, his satirical lithographs appeared in a series of books, including Play of Opposites, Realm of the Absurd and Reform Screams.

Between 1920 and 1925, Gaganendranath pioneered experiments in modernist painting. Partha Mitter describes him as "the only Indian painter before the 1940s who made use of the language and syntax of Cubism in his painting". From 1925 onwards, the artist developed a complex post - cubist style.

Gaganendranath also took a keen interest in theatre, and wrote a children's book in the manner of Lewis Carroll, Bhodor Bahadur ('Otter the Great').

His famous Paintings

- Pratima Visarjan
- City in the night
- Dwarkapuri
- Temple Cubistic
- Asit Kumar Haldar

Asit Kumar Haldar (10 September 1890 – 13 February 1964) was an Indian painter of Bengal school and an assistant of Rabindranath Tagore at Shantiniketan. He was one of the major artists of the Bengal renaissance.

From 1909 to 1911 he was in the Ajanta documenting the paintings on the frescoes. He did this on an expedition with Lady Herringham, and in conjunction with two other Bengali painters, the object of which was to bring cave art to a wider Indian audience. In 1921, he undertook another expedition, this time to the Bagh Caves and his reflections on the art there indicate quite a few surrealistic depictions.

From 1911 to 1915 he was an art teacher at Shantiniketan. He was also the principal of the Kala Bhavan school from 1911 to 1923, assisting Tagore with cultural and artistic activities. During this time, he introduced many different styles to art to the students, and revolutionized decorative and ceremonial displays there.

Haldar was the first Indian to be appointed as the principal of a Government Art School. He was also the first Indian to be elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, London in 1934. The Allahabad Museum opened a large "Haldar Hall" with many of his works in 1938.

He was the mentor of eminent artist Prof. Sukhvir Sanghal, who studied under him and later served as the principal of the Lucknow School of Arts and Crafts in Lucknow.

His famous paintings

- Krishna and Yashoda
- Awakening of Mother India
- Rai - Raja Lotus
- Kunala and Ashoka
- Nandalal Bose

Nandalal Bose was born at Munger (Kharagpur) on December 3, 1883. While studying at Art college, Kolkata, he was introduced to the Vice - Principal, Abanindranath Tagore, and there he learnt tricks or short formulae of modern Bengal paintings. With the co - operation of Abanindranath, to assist English mural painter Caves. In this way he got an opportunity to come into contact with the excellent paintings of Indian art. From this very place came wide maturity and changes in his life.

In 1920, he was appointed as the Principal of 'Kala Bhavan'. Several universities honoured him with particular titles. In 1961, the Government of India honoured him with the embellishment of 'Padma Bhushan'.

His famous paintings o Sati

- Shiv Drinking Poison o Parthsarathi
- Sujata

6. Conclusion

The Bengal School of Art was a culmination of artistic renaissance, through which the retrieval of lost cultural identity and the richness of Indian life were attempted through aesthetics. The great masters of the movement, after Abanindranath Tagore, were Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij, and Binode Behari Mukherjee all of whom were artists but visionaries who strongly believed in the transcendent power of art to convey the universal.

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