

THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF PAINTING AND THE
NATIONALIST-REVIVALIST MOVEMENT IN BENGAL

by

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ABSTRACT

The Bengal School of painting, which sought to express nationalism through revived techniques and subject matter taken from ancient artistic and literary traditions, has been claimed as a "new national style" for India by critics such as E. B. Havell and A. K. Coomaraswamy. This thesis argues that such a claim is untenable, and that the dichotomy between revivalism and nationalism--inherent in the basic philosophy that fuelled the Bengal School--also caused its failure to create a "new national style." In other words, the basic inconsistency in the desire to revive forms of the past to express the current emotions of nationalism at a time when the country was undergoing revolutionary changes resulted in an art which was weak and moribund, feeding as it did on subjects with which the artists themselves had no personal contact.

The thesis consists of five chapters, the first of which examines the emergence of Swadeshi (nationalist) and revivalist sentiments as a result of English education and the discovery of India's literary and artistic heritage by orientalist scholars like William Carey and Sir William Jones. This movement peaked in the latter half of the nineteenth century in what is generally known as the Bengal Renaissance, the highlights of which are the creation of

modern Bengali literature and the Hindu reform movement, the Brahma Samaj.


Chapter Two goes back to examine the degeneration of indigenous artistic traditions that had resulted from the westernization of Indian art and artistic taste in the eighteenth century.


Chapter Three focuses on the role of Havell and Coomaraswamy as catalysts in the artistic revival of the late nineteenth century that led to the founding of the Bengal School by Abanindranath Tagore.

Chapter Four examines the development and characteristics of the Bengal School and evaluates several representative Bengal School painters and their work.

In conclusion, Chapter Five discusses the failure of the Bengal School to create a national style.


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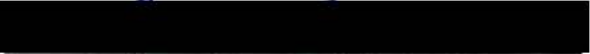

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DEDICATION

To My Daughters
Nilanjana and Nayantara

CHAPTER ONE

THE REVIVALIST MOVEMENT IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BENGAL

The nineteenth century saw India's emergence as a modern nation. As a result of contact with English thought, literature and political traditions, the educated elite in India not only began to question their own religious and social practices but, more importantly, began to question India's subjugation under the British rule. Further, English education also exposed the young Indian intellectuals to the works of orientalist scholars like William Carey and Sir William Jones, whose rediscovery of the Indian literary traditions in the late eighteenth century recognized India's classical heritage. This cultural and intellectual awareness contained the seeds of Indian revivalism. Although the intellectual awakening was taking place all over India, the revivalist movement was centred in Calcutta since it was the major political, commercial and cultural centre of the British East India Company in India. The new sense of national identity and the rekindled awareness of India's heritage expounded by Bengali intellectuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy created the intellectual environment out of which emerged the Hindu Reform movement, the Brahma Samaj, modern Bengali literature and a new school of painting--the Bengal School, all of

which combined to create the Bengal Renaissance towards the second half of the nineteenth century.

During the early stages, the British East India Company policy in India was based on non-interference in the area of religion and social customs as well as education. Western education and proselytization were, therefore, forbidden in Company territories. Yet there was a demand for English education in the late eighteenth century from the Bengalis themselves who had come to realize that to get any place in their dealings with the British, a knowledge of English was essential. In the Danish settlement of Serampore, not far from Calcutta which was outside the East India Company's domain, the Baptist missionaries were providing English education in their mission schools and some Indian progressives benefited from it. The most famous of the Serampore missionaries was the English Baptist missionary, William Carey, who in addition to setting up a mission (1793) and English schools, also set up printing presses and began to translate the Bible into Bengali and other Indian vernaculars. The most important contribution of Carey towards the Bengali Renaissance was the popularisation of the Bengali language. Up until this point Indian literature, philosophy and religious theology were written in classical Sanskrit, accessible only to the Brahmins. Not only did Carey compile several Bengali dictionaries and a

grammar of the Bengali vernacular, he also encouraged Pundits like Mritunjaya Vidyalankar to write original works in Bengali. These works laid the foundation for modern Bengali literature¹ which later during the Swadeshi Movement became a powerful instrument to rouse nationalist sentiments amongst the masses.

It is with Warren Hasting's appointment (1774-1785) as the first Governor General of Company-held territories (Presidencies of Bengal, Bombay and Madras) that a significant change occurred in British attitude towards India. From the beginning, Hasting's aim was to create "an orientalised service elite."² Hasting, who was himself proficient in Persian and Sanskrit, saw a direct relationship "between a acculturated civil servant and an efficient one."³ His contemporary, Sir William Jones, a Supreme Court Judge in Calcutta, exemplified the "orientalised service elite" who now came out to India. Jones studied Sanskrit and explored the ancient literature of India. His translation of the classical Sanskrit drama, Shakuntala, revealed India's great literary heritage, not only to the West but more importantly to the new generation of Indian intellectuals to whom it was

¹David Koph, British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), pp. 112-14.

²Ibid., p. 17.

³Ibid.

lost for centuries due to Muslim domination of India.

The Asiatic Society founded by Hastings in 1787 for the purpose of studying India's past had initiated several archeological excavations responsible for making impressive archeological, historical and linguistic researches of far reaching importance which ultimately led to the recovery of India's classical past. This encounter with India's lost heritage not only spurred the academic pursuits of British Orientalists but provided the Indians with a sense of pride in their own history, which gave birth to the revivalist aspirations of the Indian intellectuals.

By 1813 a change in policy regarding missionary activity occurred as a result of the demand of a new class of "avowed evangelists" like Charles Grant, a member of the Company's Board of Directors. Grant viewed the orientalist policy of Hastings as "both dangerous and a violation of the Christian spirit."⁴ The Company was therefore forced to adopt a policy of permitting missionaries to work and proselytize in Company-held areas. In Calcutta, the missionaries set up English schools primarily to promote proselytization. The establishment of such missionary schools, however, also opened the doors to other secular English schools run by enlightened educators like David Hare. It was schools like these which spread the liberal

⁴Ibid., p. 134.

western ideals of free thinking that inspired the young Bengalis to look to the west and also to the future.

The result of western education, whether imparted by the orientalist or the anglicist, was the creation of a new generation of Bengali intellectuals "aware of its own historic heritage, and progressively alert about its own future in the modern world."⁵ A typical example of this class of new Bengali intellectuals was Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833). A scholar of Sanskrit, Persian, Arabic and English, Roy was enlightened and cosmopolitan in his outlook. He strongly believed that India's future lay not in the rejection of the West, but in a synthesis in which the best of the two worlds, India and Europe, could meet.⁶ It was with this search for a better and a more enlightened future for India that Ram Mohan, along with David Hare, initiated the establishment of the Hindu College in 1817. The main object of the Hindu College was to educate the sons of Bengali elites in both Indian and western languages, literature, and history as well as in the western sciences. The Hindu College became the centre stage where the historic conflict between the "Old" and the "New" was to emerge,

⁵Ibid., p. 4.

⁶Ibid., p. 9.

giving birth to the Young Bengal Movement.⁷

The most dynamic personality to dominate the Young Bengal Movement was Louis Vivian Derozio (1809-1831). An Eurasian by birth, he was educated in Drummond's Schools in Calcutta where he acquired a taste for English literature and philosophy as well as an admiration for the French and American Revolutions.⁸ In 1826, Derozio was appointed a lecturer in the Hindu College. This was the beginning of Derozio's remarkable career as an educator who fired the imagination of the new generation of Bengalis in the Young Bengal Movement. He introduced his students to the concept of free thinking and debate and, most important of all, the concept of western style nationalism. Derozio instilled a sense of patriotism in his students and wrote patriotic poetry:

My Country! in thy days of glory past
A beauteous halo circled thy brows,
And worshipped as a deity thou wast,
Where is that glory, where is thy reverence now.⁹

As a result of exposure to new concepts of equality

⁷Nemai Sadhan Bose, Indian Awakening and Bengal (Calcutta: K. L. Mukopadhyay, 1960), p. 37.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Atul Chandra Gupta, ed., Studies in the Bengal Renaissance, in commemoration of the birth centenary of Bipin Chandra Pal (Jadavpur, The National Council of Education, 1953), p. 41.

and liberty from the West, a new spirit of critical inquiry developed among the Bengali youth. It might be suggested, that though the Young Bengal Movement died a natural death with the passing away of Derozio in 1831 (at a very early age) the revolutionary element in their philosophy, and the idea that rebellion against established order was possible, had an influence on the later nationalists and perhaps even on the revivalists.

The movement which directly led to Bengali nationalism was Brahma Samaj, a reformist religious movement, which was founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy in 1828 to purge Hinduism of its superstitious practices. It had lost its momentum after his death (1833), but Debendranath Tagore (1817-1905) pulled the Samaj together and turned it into a powerful movement as nationalist sentiments were awakening in Bengal. Unlike Raja Ram Mohan Roy's cosmopolitan view regarding western education and social reform, Debendranath's interest was not in western religion or culture but in seeking "to purify Hinduism by getting rid of its crudities and reviving the pure stream of Hindu monotheism."¹⁰ Brahma Samaj, according to Debendranath, was reformed Hinduism.¹¹ The Brahma Samaj now became the force behind the revivalist

¹⁰Sankar Ghose, Renaissance to Militant Nationalism in India (Calcutta: Allied Publishers, 1969), p. 21.

¹¹Ibid.

movement by taking up a study of India's history and culture. In their journal, Tattva Patrika, articles appeared on subjects like the Hindu Shastras and the Sanskrit classics.¹²

At a meeting of the Brahma Samaj in 1848, nationalist sentiments were publicly expressed for the first time.¹³ Rajnarain Basu, a prominent disciple of Debendranath stated in his sermon at this meeting: "I tell you that the pleasure of service to one's country is above every other pleasure." "What a great feeling of joy a patriot experiences," Raynarain went on to say, "when he can beautify his mother tongue and compose in that tongue such as promotes the cause of religion, knowledge and truth."¹⁴ In 1866, Rajnarain founded the Jatio Gaurab Sampadani (The Society for the Promotion of National Feeling). The "object of the Society," according to a recent historian of the Bengal Renaissance, "was to revive the national gymnastic exercises, establish a Model School of Instruction in Hindi Music, establish a school of Hindu medicine, publish in Bengali the results of the researches of the Sanskrit scholars of Europe in Indian history, culture, civilisation,

¹²Nemai Sadhan Bose, Indian Awakening and Bengal, p. 86.

¹³Ibid., p. 170.

¹⁴David Koph, The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Mind (Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 168.

etc."¹⁵

Although Rajnarain Basu was the first to think as a nationalist it was Nabagopal Mitra, a close associate of Basu and Tagore who first made the term "National" popular.¹⁶ In 1867, Nabagopal started the Jatiya Mela (National Fair) which later came to be known as Hindu Mela. The Mela not only organised exhibitions of paintings and the arts and crafts from all over India but also sponsored the development of national literature, songs and physical culture.¹⁷ It was this spirit of self-help which was considered essential to national progress and welfare which gave birth to the concept of Swadeshi or own nation.

One important result of this new search for identity was the creation of Modern Bengali literature pioneered by Bankim Chunder Chatterjee. Chatterjee, a product of western style education, was employed as a Deputy Magistrate. Dissatisfaction caused by limitations imposed on his career by reason of his being an Indian made him conscious of his own Indian identity. Bankim Chunder Chatterjee's search for Indian identity led him to India's past. In his novel, Ananda Math, written in the prose style popular in England

¹⁵Nemai Sadhan Bose, p. 170.

¹⁶Abanindranath Tagore, Gharoa (Calcutta: Visvabharati Press, 1971), p. 54.

¹⁷Ibid.

at the time and based on the eighteenth century Sannyasi Rebellion, Chatterjee conceptualized the motherland for the first time as Mother Goddess Durga. In this powerful novel, the Goddess stood not merely as a "Pauranic Deity . . . but as a visible symbol and representation of the Motherland."¹⁸ Bande Mataram (Hail to the Motherland) the anthem of the Sanatan Sannyasis in the novel became the battle cry of the nationalists during the height of the Swadeshi movement.¹⁹

By the end of the nineteenth century, the Brahma Samaj movement was in decline and a militant neo-Hindu movement emerged under the leadership of a powerful personality, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902). Having grown up in Calcutta during the height of intellectual activity, Vivekananda's experience in Brahma Samaj led him to believe that the regeneration of India could only be achieved by leaning on the tenets of Hinduism. During his pilgrimage across India in 1891 Vivekananda realized that the spiritual heritage of India had to be resurrected. He proclaimed India not only as the "very beloved, most sacred, dear motherland"²⁰ but

¹⁸Bipin Chandra Pal, Swadeshi and Swaraj (The Rise of New Patriotism) (Calcutta: Yugayatri Prakashak Ltd., 1954), pp. 103-5.

¹⁹R. C. Majumdar, History of the Freedom Movement in India, (Calcutta: Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963), p. 105.

²⁰Swami Vivekananda, On India and Her Problems (Mayavati: Advaiten Ashram, 1976), p. 1.

also as "Punya Bhumi"²¹ (Sacred Land). Vivekananda's message roused the Bengalis masses as never before.

The immediate cause that brought the diverse manifestations of emerging Bengali patriotism to a focus in the form of the militant Swadeshi movement was the declaration to Partition Bengal by Lord Curzon, the Governor General in 1903. Bengal was to be partitioned into West Bengal with a Hindu majority, and East Bengal with a Muslim majority. Though the reason given was administrative expediency in governing a large province the people of Bengal, both Hindus and Muslims, perceived it as an attempt to divide and rule and thus were enraged. They accused the British of destroying the unity of their race and motherland. Lord Curzon, however, was determined to crush the nascent nationalism in Bengal. On 6 January 1904, the resolution to partition Bengal was passed by Lord Curzon. On 7 August 1904, when all efforts to prevent the partition failed, poet Rabindranath Tagore called a public meeting in the Town Hall in Calcutta and a resolution was passed to boycott all British goods in favour of indigenous products supported by the concept of "Swadeshi" which now came to signify the revival of every aspect of national culture,

²¹Ibid.

education, dress, art, etc.²²

Public meetings, protest marches and picketing of shops selling British goods, led to repressive counter measures by the British such as throwing agitators into prison. Violence generated more patriotism and willingness to sacrifice everything for their motherland. Soon the Swadeshi Movement entered every aspect of Bengali life, and Bengal captured the imagination of the entire country. This overwhelming protest against his policy forced Lord Curzon to revoke the partition in 1905.

Just as Bankim Chunder Chatterjee's writings had inspired the early phase of the nationalist movement, the poetry, the songs and the plays written by Rabindranath Tagore, the youngest son of Debendranath Tagore, stirred the Bengalis throughout the Swadeshi Movement. The poet idealized Bengal and his song "Amar Sonar Bangla" (My Golden Bengal) became the anthem of the Swadeshi Movement.²³ Poetry, novels, and plays written by other Bengali writers like D. L. Roy and Girish Chandra Ghosh based on the lives and careers of heroic personalities like Shivaji, Guru Govind Singh, Rana Pratap Singh and Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah

²²Roger Lipsey, Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work (Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series LXXXIX, 1977), p. 77.

²³Ibid., p. 142.

were openly used for propaganda purposes for Swadeshi.²⁴

While the new Bengali literature was used as a powerful instrument in promoting nationalism, little use was made of the fine arts as a means of propaganda. This attitude is clearly noticeable, as late as 1869 when Sisir Kumar Ghose, the editor of the leading Bengali newspaper Amrita Bazar Patrika, severely criticised an exhibition of Indian painting organised by Dwijendranath Tagore during the annual Hindu Mela. He argued that more attention should have been devoted to physical culture instead of the arts.²⁵ By the mid-nineteenth century, Indian artistic tradition was practically dead and the new Indo-British art (products of newly-established art schools) which had come in its place was considered frivolous and unworthy of conveying nationalist sentiment. The Buddhist Cave paintings at Ajanta, which were discovered by the British in 1819, did excite their imagination, but the interest was archeological as no effort was made by the Indian artists to revive the old classical art forms found in sites like Ajanta.²⁶

It was not until E. B. Havell and Ananda Coomaraswamy came out to India and took up the cause of

²⁴Ibid., pp. 144-46.

²⁵Nemai Sudhan Bose, Indian Awakening and Bengal, p. 172.

²⁶Asok Mitra, "The Forces Behind the Modern Movement," Lalit Kala Contemporary, vol. 1, June 1962, p. 15.

Indian art, that the Indian artists began to recognize the significance of their artistic heritage and worked towards its revival.

CHAPTER TWO

WESTERN IMPACT ON INDIAN ART

The artistic resurgence which occurred in Bengal in the late nineteenth century was, on the one hand, the expression of nationalism among the Bengali elite. On the other hand, it was also the attempt to fill an artistic vacuum that had existed from the time of the fall of the Mughal Empire and the establishment of the British regime. For a proper understanding of this new activity which led to the creation of a new school of painting in Calcutta, the Bengal School, one must go back in time to the early eighteenth century to events which contributed to the disintegration of Indian artistic traditions.

The disintegration of the Mughal Empire after Emperor Aurangzeb (1658-1707) meant a decline in imperial patronage of the arts. As is well known, Aurangzeb's predecessor's Akbar (1555-1605), Jehangir (1560-1627), and Shah Jehan (1628-1658) were patrons of art and architecture under whom the artistic genius in India had risen to a new peak. Under Aurangzeb, however, patronage of the arts received a setback. Although during the early part of his

reign some excellent Mughal miniatures were painted,¹ his growing religious orthodoxy led to the discouragement of not just painting but all forms of arts. It was inevitable that under such circumstances the Mughal art could not progress any further. A good example of a late Mughal painting is The Emperor Bahadur Shah Enthroned (fig. 1) painted in Delhi in 1838. Although the painting retains the form and content of earlier Mughal miniatures--the Emperor seated on the throne attended by his two sons and an attendant fanning him with a fly whisk--it shows a rigidity unknown in the earlier Mughal portraiture. Unlike early Mughal paintings which depicted lyricism and dramatic activity (hunting scene, court scenes, genre scenes and love scenes) this painting is static. The use of sharp lines and bright enamel-like colours set against a stark white background has resulted in a picture which is "sharply focussed and hard edged"² reflecting the "tinsel grandeur" of the fading Mughal Empire. The faces express western style realism not readily observable in the earlier paintings where the figures are more idealized even when they are naturalistic. This painting is, one could say, a compromise between Mughal

¹Stuart Cary Welch, Imperial Mughal Painting (New York: George Braziller, 1978), p. 29.

²Stuart Cary Welch, Room for Wonder: Indian Painting During the British Period 1760-1880 (Rizzoli International Publication, Inc., p. 20.

miniature and European portraiture which by this time was very popular amongst the Indian nobility.

With the decline of the imperial support from the late seventeenth century, painters from the Mughal atelier began to emigrate to distant imperial provinces like Oudh, Bengal, and the Deccan in search of patronage. They took with them the inferior style which they further modified to suit the tastes of their new patrons, the Nawabs. Once governors of imperial provinces, Nawabs were now semi-independent rulers who were willing to take over from the Mughals the role of patrons of art without, however, the high artistic sense of the Mughals. Besides the Nawabs, the other source of patronage for the painters were the East India Company officials, soldiers and adventurers, who had by this time acquired considerable importance as agents and advisors to the Nawabs and were happy to commission portraits of themselves in the Indian setting. These paintings, executed in a hybrid provincial style, were unable to attain the excellence achieved in the earlier Mughal miniatures.

Murshirabad in the eastern province of Bengal was one of the earliest centres where the hybrid Indo-British style was practiced. The painting titled William Fullerton Receives a Visitor (fig. 2) was painted in Murshirabad in 1760 by Dip Chand. This painting is a good example of the

emerging hybrid style of painting. Fullerton, probably an official at the nearby British settlement at Kasimbazar, is shown wearing a cocked hat and queue, but sitting reclining against a bolster in typical Indian style, smoking the hookah. A pan-dan or beetlenut container stands beside him. He has three attendants; two can be seen standing behind Fullerton with fly whisks while the third in front pays homage thereby reflecting a new self-confidence of the British residents about their position in Indian society. But for his western-style clothes, his bearing and his complexion and his awkward posture, Fullerton here could easily pass for an Indian nobleman.³ Painted in opaque water colour associated with Mughal miniature style, the painting has a flat two-dimensional quality, which is emphasized by the absence of depth in the background and by aerial view of the rectangular carpet on which Fullerton is shown sitting. The faces, as in the Indian tradition, are depicted in the profile. In one case there is a three-fourth view of a face. Although the painting is interesting from the point of view of depicting the British as new patrons of art, it lacks the sophistication and artistry of earlier imperial miniatures. For just as the provincial nobility lacked the refinement and good taste of the Mughal Court, the British factors in the service of the East India

³Ibid., p. 22.

Company also lacked in good taste. These factors and officials were primarily traders and adventurers whose only object was to amass a fortune and then return home to England. However, being cut off from their country and culture, they had adopted the lifestyles of Indians, i.e. smoking the hookah, wearing Indian clothes and even marrying or living with Indian women. In the words of Mildred and W. G. Arthur, "They were traders who had come to terms with the people."⁴ Despite these adjustments made out of perceived necessity, the British in India in the early eighteenth century had no real interest in either their own culture or that of India. Since they lacked in genuine artistic interest, their patronage did not lead to any resurgence of the arts.⁵

By the late eighteenth century, a change occurred in the role the Company was to play in India. Economic exploitation and inefficient administration by the Company officials resulted in a loss of profit which led the British Parliament to take control of its activities in India. The administrators who were sent out to India in the wake of this change were, unlike the early factors, learned and

⁴Mildred and W. G. Archer, Indian Painting during the British Period 1760-1880 (Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 23.

⁵Atul Gupta, ed., Studies in the Bengal Renaissance. In commemoration of the birth centenary of Bipin Chandra Pal (Jadavpur University, p. 320).

enlightened men. These Company officials had very little knowledge of India but being intellectually curious they began to investigate its literature, antiquities and local customs. Along with intellectual curiosity, the civil servants also brought with them the "cult of the picturesque"⁶ which was very popular in England at that time. It was the British fascination for the "picturesque" which led to the creation of the Indo-British style, generally called the Company School style after the East Indian Company.

The painters of the Company School were drawn from the old Mughal ateliers who, as mentioned earlier, had started to spread out after the collapse of the Mughal patronage. These painters were already acquainted with some of the features of western painting observed in biblical and other illustrations presented to the Mughal court during the reign of Akbar and Jehangir, by Jesuit missionaries. Fascinated by Christianity and the West, both Akbar and Jehangir commissioned miniature paintings in the manner of European paintings and engravings presented to them by the Jesuits.⁷ Exposure to the western style of painting enabled the Mughal painters to adapt their technique to cater to the demands of their British patrons.

⁶Mildred and W. G. Archer, pp. 28, 30.

⁷Asok Kumar Das, *Mughal Painting During Jehangir's Time* (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1978), pp. 229-34.

As Calcutta and Patna began to emerge as major administrative and commercial centres, Murshirabad lost its importance. Painters like Sewak Ram and Hulas Lal left Murshirabad and moved to Patna. It was in Patna that the Company School came to acquire its own unique style and characteristics⁸ which made it quite different from earlier Mughal and Rajput miniatures. The Mughal and the Rajput miniatures were concerned with the portrayal of court life and the illustrations of themes from Indian literature and mythology. The Company painters on the other hand, catering to the British taste for the "picturesque" painted not only pictures recording the lives of their patrons but also genre scenes and festivals such as the Durga Puja, Muharram, Hook-swinging, etc. Other popular themes for the paintings were the trades, conveyances, costumes as well as the fauna and flora of India. It is significant that the Company painters, such as Sewak Ram and Hulas Lall, employed by the Company as draughtsmen and mapmakers, learned to paint in the western technique from the British officials some of whom were talented amateur painters.⁹ One Englishman who played an important role in the development of the Company School Painting was Sir Charles D'Oyly, the Company's Opium

⁸Mildred and W. G. Archer, p. 32.

⁹Ratan Parimoo, The Painting of Three Tagores: Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath: Chronology & Comparative Study (M.S. University of Baroda, 1973), p. 27.

Agent in Patna in 1833. An artist of considerable talent, he had received lessons from the British artist Chinnery during his stay in Dacca from 1808 to 1812. D'Oyly, "a sedulous explorer of romantic countryside and a competent amateur artist"¹⁰ published several books on Indian scenes and customs illustrated with his paintings. He founded a lithographic press, "The Behar Lithography," which printed copies of his own art work such as "The Behar Lithographic Scrapbook" and the work of Indian painters. In fact, D'Oyly employed Jairam Das to "transfer the sketches to stone"¹¹ and supplied the Patna painters with copies of his own lithographs as well as specimens of English engravings. It was not surprising that these artists were quick to incorporate elements from western paintings, with which they had thus become superficially familiar, in their work.

Calcutta which emerged as the metropolis in India, also became an important centre for Company painting, and some major Company painters from Patna moved there in search of employment. Among the most important patrons of Company paintings in Calcutta was Lady Mary Impey, the wife of Sir Elijah Impey, the Chief Justice of Bengal (1774-1783). She commissioned three Indian painters, who signed themselves as

¹⁰Mildred and W. G. Archer, p. 33.

¹¹Ibid., p. 34.

"of Patna" to paint for her two types of paintings,¹² first a series to record her life in India and another on the fauna and flora of India. Typical of these two types of painting are Lady Impey Supervising Her Household (fig. 3) and A Mountain Rat on a Hindustani Almond Tree (fig. 4), both painted by Shaykh-Zayn-al-Din. In Lady Impey Supervising Her Household, one notices the Mughal miniature technique, especially in the "isolated placement of the figures and in their proportions as well as in the masterful arabesque patterns" of the carpet.¹³ Even though the technique here is very much in the old Mughal tradition the mood is western, as seen in the salon furnished comfortably in the popular English taste. Like a noble lady holding court, Lady Impey sits in the centre of the large room surrounded by Indian servants and attendants, including an "Anglo-Indian butler in English livery" and a "colourfully dressed page boy."¹⁴ The days of the Nabobs who had adapted themselves to the Indian lifestyle were now over. The large room itself is an example of the new Indo-British architecture with its high ceiling and long shuttered windows. The rooms are furnished with English furniture

¹²Stuart Cary Welch, India: Art and Culture 1300-1900 (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984), p. 281.

¹³Ibid., p. 424.

¹⁴Stuart Cary Welch, Room for Wonder, p. 24.

such as a four poster bed as well as dressing table on which Lady Impey's personal effects are kept. What is most remarkable about this painting is the intimate view it gives of the day to day life of British memsahibs who were beginning to arrive in Bengal in considerable numbers.

Although the records of Lady Impey's life in Bengal are interesting and well executed, the more famous of her collections of Company paintings are those of the fauna and flora of India. A Mountain Rat on a Hindustani Almond Tree, 1778, is a beautiful example of this class of painting and demonstrates how the Indian artist had acquired the ability to combine western naturalism with the delicacy and "exquisite finish" of the old Mughal paintings. According to Stuart Cary Welch:

Although Lady Impey's . . . studies were painted in English water colour technique on English paper, the artist's way of seeing was Indian. Like painting inner as well as the outer views of their subjects. The results, as we can see here, are as sensitive as they are accurate.¹⁵

By the mid-nineteenth century a change in Britain's attitude towards India occurred. The East India Company, unlike the earlier days was no longer a trading company but had by this time emerged as a major political power in India. With political power came a sense of self-assurance

¹⁵Stuart Cary Welch, A Flower from Every Meadow (N.W., 1973), p. 121).

and racial superiority. The feeling of confidence was reflected in the Company School painting which, rather than reproduce picturesque scenes as earlier, began to depict the material wealth of the British officials, the commonest themes being large houses, gardens, pets, servants, and carriages. The painting Pony Riding (fig. 5) is typical of this class. Painted by Shaykh Muhammad Amir of Karaya in Calcutta in 1845, the painting reflects both the change in taste of the British and feeling of authority they were enjoying in India. The painting depicts a young child being taken for a ride in the Calcutta Maidan, a parklike open space reserved for the British. The manner in which the horse is being led, not just by the groom but by two other servants, with one holding a parasol to protect the child from the sun, reflects the attitude of authority and racial superiority which the British held towards India during that period. The painting shows the significant changes that the Company style had undergone during a period of little over half a century (1760-1845). Westernisation had overtaken the Indian artistic elements completely. The picture shows an attempt to paint in the British Academic mode especially noticeable in the realistic treatment of the horse and in the human figures, albeit not completely mastered. The use of light and shadows, gives the picture a sense of depth and volume not known in earlier paintings. The low wall and the

trees in the background are naturalistic. Similarly, the choice of colours too are western, dull brown, sepia, pale blue and a touch of dark green, all very different from the bright colours in the earlier Company Paintings.

Indian painters, as mentioned earlier, had been exposed to European paintings from Mughal times. However, it was not until the late eighteenth century that they came under the influence of professional painters from Britain who came out to India in search of patronage. The better known amongst these artists were Tilly Kettle, Johan Zoffany, Francesco Renaldi, George Chinnery, and the uncle and nephew team of Thomas Daniell and Daniell. These painters worked in three areas: portraiture, genre scenes dealing with British lifestyle in India and the Indian scenes. These artists received patronage not only from highly-placed Company officials, who commissioned large oil paintings to hang on the walls of their palatial homes in Calcutta, but also from Indian elites who were looking to the West for their artistic and decorative needs. The first British artist to arrive in India was Tilly Kettle, who lived in Faizabad, near Lucknow from 1771 to 1773. He was commissioned by Nawab Shuja-ud-daulah to paint several portraits of himself and his sons. Unable to commission large oil paintings, some Europeans like Claude Martin, Antoine Polier and Colonel Jean Baptist Joseph Gentil,

commissioned Indian miniature painters to make copies of Kettle's portrait of the Nawab (fig. 6) for their own private collections.¹⁶ The painting Nawab Shuja-ud-daulah, 1780 (fig. 7), painted in Oudh by Mihir Chand obviously could not get away from his Indian style of painting. The main portrait is an attempted copy of Tilly Kettle's portrait of the Nawab. Kettle's influence is noticeable in the naturalistic frontal pose of the Nawab as well as in his "voluminous" heavily pleated dress.¹⁷ Other elements, such as the background, the sky, the elephant, the two women standing in the window on either side of the Nawab, and the decorative panels on four corners are in the late Mughal style. This painting is a good example of artists' inability to combine the two disparate elements. Challenged by British painters, the Indian artists, who were patronised by both Western and Indian elites, were compelled to satisfy both patrons.

By the middle of the nineteenth century the Company School of painting came to an end. The decline in patronage for Company paintings among the Indian upper class and among British officials was due to a change in attitude and in taste. Western education and the concept of cultural

¹⁶Mildred Archer, India and British Portraiture 1770-1825 (Sotheby Parke Bernet, 198), p. 74.

¹⁷Ibid.

superiority of the West had led to an increasing demand for British Academy style painting. There was an additional threat to traditional portraiture from the new art of photography which was introduced to India in 1840, a year after it was invented in Paris. The collapse of the Company School meant the end of a long tradition of miniature painting in India. While it lasted, however, the Company School played a very important role as ". . . the last original contribution by Indian artist before the modern deluge."¹⁸

The new influences which affected the intellectual and cultural activity in Bengal were active in Bengali folk art as well. The Kalighat Pata, a variant expression of the old patua folk art of Bengal, was created in Calcutta in the nineteenth century to satisfy the desire of pilgrims to take back with them souvenirs of their visit to the Temple of Goddess Kali. The influence of western style water colours and lithographs which were readily available in the bazaars near the temple,¹⁹ is clearly evident in this new school of painting.

The indigenous patua tradition of painting on scrolls, handmade paper and earthen ware, uses primary

¹⁸Mildred Archer, Company Drawings in India Office Library (London, 1972), p. 10.

¹⁹W. G. Archer, Bazaar Painting of Calcutta (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1953), p. 8.

colours like red, green, yellow and blue. The Kalighat paintings are painted in watercolour on large sheets of cheap machine-made paper which were being produced in Calcutta by that time. The other more important innovation noticeable in these paintings is the use of light and cast shadows to give depth and volume to the figures. This aspect is very different from the rural patua paintings which are painted with quick strokes of colour and are basically flat and calligraphic in nature. In the choice of subject matter too, influence of the hybrid Company School is apparent for, besides the traditional mythological and religious themes, the Kalighat patuas were also painting pictures of birds, animals, and fishes as well as genre scenes like Cat with Prawn (fig. 8). The most interesting of the Kalighat painting, however, are the ones depicting scenes taken from contemporary life in Calcutta. These show the disruptive effect of westernisation on the bhadraloks (gentlemen) and bhadramahilas (ladies) of Calcutta. In the painting A Husband Slaying His Westernized Wife (fig. 9) effects of westernisation are reflected in the use of foreign items such as the handbag. The handbag is used to symbolise the negative western influences which were beginning to give Indian women wrong notions of fashion and liberated behaviour which, as is obvious, in this painting the husbands were not too happy about. The gentleman

himself represents a typically foppish bhadralok of Calcutta. His hairstyle and the elaborate outfit which includes patent leather shoes as well as an umbrella are especially reflective of intruding British taste amongst upper class elite. Paintings of this nature expressed what the ordinary people thought about the lifestyle of the nouveaux riche "Bengali Baboos" of Calcutta.²⁰

In spite of its popularity among the ordinary people, the upper class Bengali bhadraloks looked down on the Kalighat paintings as cheap bazaar art and ignored them. With the arrival of cheap and brightly-coloured oleographs of Indian Gods and Goddesses, however, the Kalighat patuas lost their hold on the common people too.

The effect of the west was disastrous not only for painting and other arts, but also for the craft industry. The impact of British manufactured goods, which virtually flooded the Indian countryside, led to the breakdown of Indian craftsmanship and devalued the Indian cottage industries in the eyes of Indian consumers. Dislocation and unemployment amongst craftsmen occurred at such a frightening pace that the British Government was forced to take some action. To counteract the evil effects of importing industrial goods, the British Government set up Industrial Art Schools in four major centres in India,

²⁰W. G. Archer, *ibid.*, p. 13.

Madras (1850), Calcutta (1854), Bombay (1857), and Lahore (1875). These schools were expected "to maintain, restore and improve the application of oriental art to Industry and manufacture."²¹ In addition to providing instruction in industrial arts like metal work, carpet making, etc., these colleges also provided training in drawing, painting, sculpture, lithography and engraving.

Unfortunately, however, instead of improving the state of the arts in India, these art colleges, actually contributed to the complete collapse of the Indian art tradition. The first blow was struck when imported British principals rather than Indians were made responsible for the artists training. These appointments were made to implement a programme calculated to modify existing designs in the light of British taste so as to make them more suitable for export.²² With this in mind, art educators then brought out from England copies of old masters and reproductions of classical sculptures. As might be expected, such efforts led to more confusion and degeneration of indigenous craftsmanship and aesthetics. The students in the new art schools could do no better than to imitate second rate copies of British painting and sculpture. It is also significant that

²¹W. G. Archer, India and Modern Art (George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 23.

²²Ibid., p. 24.

the people who were trained in these schools were not members of the traditional artist families; they were often newcomers alien to the ancient tradition. Other than working as illustrators for organisations like the Calcutta Art Studio the artists turned out by these schools found few other sources of income as mass-produced chromolithographs from England began to flood the Indian marketplace.

Despite these negative effects, some Indian artists, for instance Raja Ravi Varma of Travancore, M. V. Dhurander of Bombay and Bamapada Bannerjee of Calcutta (fig. 10) did have some success as artists painting in the western style. Among these new artists, Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1905) was one of the first Indian artists to achieve any kind of recognition in India as well as in Europe. Perhaps the fact that he was related to the royal family of Travancore provided him with opportunities not available to his contemporaries elsewhere. Although not a product of any art school, Ravi Varma did get his initial training in the western technique of oil painting from a visiting Dutch painter to the court of Travancore, Theodore Jensen, who had been commissioned to paint the portrait of the Maharaja. After his training from Jensen, Ravi Varma was commissioned to paint portraits not only of Indian aristocrats like Sayyaji Rao, the Maharaja of Baroda (1881), but also that of British administrators, for instance the Duke of Buckingham

(1878) and Lord Ampthill (1901) both governors of Madras. Ravi Varma won the Governor's gold medal twice at exhibitions held in Madras (1873 and 1878) and the first prize at an exhibition held in honour of the visit by the Prince of Wales to Madras in 1874.

Raja Ravi Varma's fame rests not so much on his portraits as his depiction of mythological scenes. Unlike the lyricism of the Medieval Rajput paintings which illustrated scenes from late Sanskrit and vernacular poems Gita Govinda and Caurapancasikha and Bhagawatapurana, Ravi Varma's mythological paintings reflect older classical literary tradition. Ravi Varma's paintings, for instance, his Rama and Jatayu (fig. 11), have often been criticised as being too theatrical. An avid admirer of the Parsi and Marathi theatre in Bombay, the artist was naturally prone to drape the figure in the costumes of the stage as well as "to pose them in stances and attitudes"²³ seen in the Marathi theatre of Bombay.

Significant in the changing artistic scene at the time is Ravi Varma's recognition of Indian themes such as poverty never before considered worthy of being painted, as depicted in Street Scene in Poverty (fig. 12). The use of chiaroscuro and an untraditional colour scheme are of

²³Krishna Chaitanya, Ravi Varma (Contemporary Indian Art Series, LaLit Kala Akademi, 1987), p. 9.

particular import. The painting is most significant for its successful expression of the sentiments and thoughts of each despondent individual in the group.

Raja Ravi Varma's paintings were severely criticised by scholars like E. B. Havell and A. Coomaraswamy who were soon to spearhead the revivalist art movement in Calcutta. Ravi Varma was accused of lacking in "poetic faculty"²⁴ and of making his gods look like badly-dressed Yatra actors.²⁵ A much later critic, Ashok Mitra, on the other hand, pleads "instead of rejecting Ravi Varma, historians of art should regard the modern age of Indian painting as beginning with Ravi Varma."²⁶

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵H. Goetz, "The Great Crisis from Traditional to Modern Art," LaLit Kala Contemporary, No. 1, June 1962, p. 12.

²⁶Ashok Mitra, The Forces Behind the Modern Movement (LaLit Kala Contemporary, vol. 1, June 1962, p. 16.

CHAPTER THREE

E. B. HAVELL AND A. COOMARASWAMY

CATALYSTS OF THE ARTISTIC REVIVALISM IN BENGAL

In 1884, just prior to Ernest Binfield Havell's departure for India to assume the post of the Principal of the Madras School of Art, he was informed by one of his predecessors, that Madras was "artistically a desert."¹ That remark appears to be the most common British opinion regarding Indian art at that time. Critic Sir George Birdwood, Keeper of the Indian Section of the Victoria and Albert Museum, categorically stated that it was beyond the capacity of Indian artists to express the "unfettered and impassioned ideals"² found in Western art. He ridiculed the Buddha image as follows: "This senseless similitude in its immemorial fixed pose is nothing more than an uninspired brazen image, vacuously squinting down its nose to its thumbs and knees and toes. A boiled suet pudding would serve equally well as a symbol."³

Arriving in Madras Havell discovered, much to his

¹E. B. Havell, The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India (Adyar, Madras: The Theosophist Office, 1912), p. 96.

²E. B. Havell, Indian Sculpture and Painting (London: John Murray, 1924), p. 24).

³Sir George Birdwood, Journal of the Royal Society of Arts (February 1910), pp. 286-87.

surprise, that art in India instead of being dead was a living thing:⁴ there every craftsman was an artist and all that was needed to give Indian art back its rightful place in society was Government recognition and public support. Therefore Havell's main mission in life turned to "help educated Indians to a better understanding of their own national art, and to give them that faith and pride in it without which the wisest measures that any Government could devise will always be thrown away."⁵

To understand Havell's role as a catalyst of a revivalist movement in art, one must look to Victorian England, where a strong anti-material, anti-industrial movement had come into existence under the leadership of people like John Ruskin and William Morris. These men condemned the effects of industrialisation on indigenous arts and crafts which were then fast disappearing in England. It was in defence of craftsmen that they established the Arts and Crafts Guild in 1888 to promote the concept of beauty in simple handcrafted objects. The fact that Havell was familiar with the Arts and Crafts Movement is apparent from the steps he took to reorganise the curriculum of the Madras Art School and to make training in Indian crafts compulsory for all students. Instead of

⁴E. B. Havell, The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival, p. 96.

⁵E. B. Havell, Indian Sculpture and Painting, p. xi.

western-trained artists, Havell employed Indian craftsmen to teach woodwork, metal craft, stencilling and weaving.

According to Havell, the soundest basis for the industrial regeneration of India was the revival of indigenous crafts which were geared to the basic needs of the average Indian.⁶

According to W. G. Archer, the other mode of thought which may have played an important role in molding Havell's revivalist tendencies was the Theosophist Movement which had gained considerable popularity in India under the leadership of Mrs. Annie Besant.⁷ The headquarters of the Theosophists in India was in Adyar, a suburb of Madras where Havell was staying. Influenced by Hinduism, the Theosophists under Mrs. Besant's leadership were playing a very important role in the Indian nationalist-revivalist movement which was beginning to dominate India during the late nineteenth century. Havell never openly professed to have been actively involved with either the Arts and Craft Movement in England, or the Theosophists. Nevertheless, these thoughts most likely influenced Havell in shaping his own revivalist ideology in regard to Indian art.⁸

Havell's opportunity to put his ideas into practice

⁶E. B. Havell, The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival in India.

⁷W. G. Archer, India and Modern Art (Great Britain: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1959), p. 29.

⁸E. B. Havell, The Basis for Artistic and Industrial Revival, pp. 26, 30.

came in 1896 with his appointment as the Principal of the Calcutta School of Art (earlier known as the School of Industrial Arts in Calcutta). On joining the Calcutta School of Art one of the first steps that Havell took was to do away with the "antique class"⁹ and the ritual of copying from European reproductions. This break with the traditional British art education was not too difficult. His problem was its replacement. For Havell, there seemed only one way to dismantle the British system: the Indian artists must return "to the Indian tradition as it had existed before the British. They must use traditional themes, express traditional sentiments, employ traditional styles."¹⁰ In line with this thinking, Havell restructured the art curriculum on the principles and methods of Indian painting and sculpture. His next step was to sell the European art collection at the Calcutta Art Gallery, which was attached to the Art School. With the money earned from this sale Havell bought Mughal miniatures and Indian sculptures. Interestingly enough, the most vehement protest to Havell's policy, came not from the British Government but instead from Indian nationalists who "attributed to the Government a sinister intention of suppressing higher

⁹E. B. Havell, "The New Indian School of Painting, The Studio (London, 1908), p. 111.

¹⁰W. G. Archer, India and Modern Art, p. 29.

education in art."¹¹

In 1908 Havell set forth his revolutionary ideas on Indian art in his book Indian Sculpture and Painting. There is a tone of challenge in the preface of this book where he says: "To Artists, Art Workers and Those who Respect Art, This Attempt to Vindicate India's Position in the Fine Arts is Dedicated."¹² Havell goes on to express his hope of having successfully expressed the concept that "Indian art is not . . . a form of artistic cretinism, but an opening into a new world of aesthetic thought full of the deepest interest. . . ."¹³ Ananda Coomaraswamy in his review of the book claimed that "this was the first serious attempt to understand and appreciate Indian art."¹⁴

In discussing the difference between Western and Indian ideals, Havell made the following claim: "While Modern European art hardly concerns itself with the Unseen, but limits its mental range to the realm of Nature and thus retains, even in its highest flights, the sense and form of its earthly environment, Indian art is always striving to realise something of the universal, the eternal, and the

¹¹E. B. Havell, "The New Indian School of Painting," The Studio (London, 1908), p. 111.

¹²E. B. Havell, Indian Sculpture and Painting, first edition (London: John Murray, 1908).

¹³E. B. Havell, Indian Sculpture and Painting, second edition (1928), p. 8.

¹⁴A. Coomaraswamy, The Hindustan Review (1910), p. 271.

infinite."¹⁵ For the Indian artist, therefore, art is essentially idealistic, mystic and symbolic.

According to Havell, the idealised representation of Gods and Goddesses in Indian art does not mean that Indian artists were incapable of creating realistic images but that they considered the naturalistic treatment of divines as being symbolically inadequate to express the divine nature.¹⁶ For them, divine beings shown as having "limbs rounded and smooth skinned like a woman's, but with the massive neck and shoulders and narrow waist of an Indian hero" was an abstract expression of "Universal Form and a symbol of spiritual strength transcending human thought."¹⁷

The Indian artistic heritage, as seen at places like Ajanta, was for the first time referred to in non-archaeological terms when Havell writes that the Indian ideal came to fruition in the Cave paintings of Ajanta, Bagh, and Sigiriya.¹⁸ This ideal, Havell goes on to say, Indian artists learned from the classical literature like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and from masterpieces of Sanskrit drama such as Shakuntala.¹⁹ It is to be noted,

¹⁵E. B. Havell, Indian Sculpture and Painting (1924), p. 8.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁸Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁹Ibid.

however, that these ideals of physical beauty were current in Indian lore from a period much earlier than that of the classical literature of India and are to be seen in places like Barhut and Sanchi, which existed around the second century B.C.

Havell followed his work on sculpture and painting with a book, Ideals of Indian Art, dealing with the cultural and religious background of Indian art. In another book, Artistic and Industrial Revival in India, Havell argued that it was wrong to think that Indian art was "too old and worn out to be capable of adaptation to modern life and ways of thought."²⁰ According to him, art of India survived and even gained fresh stimulus from earlier invasions from the outside. Especially during the invigorating atmosphere of the early Mughal Empire, Havell argued, a new school had emerged as a result of Indian artists' ability to adjust to a new environment and to assimilate foreign techniques without giving up their own ideas.²¹ Pointing to a Sikh Provincial School of painting from the nineteenth century, Havell says that even though this painting is not nearly as attractive as earlier miniatures, nevertheless it was "truly Indian"²² and that it ". . . would form the surest and best

²⁰E. B. Havell, Artistic and Industrial Revival in India, p. 20.

²¹E. B. Havell, Indian Sculpture and Painting, p. 230.

²²Ibid., p. 233.

foundation on which to build up the revival of Indian painting."²³ Havell further urges: ". . . let the Indians of the present generation, who through Macaulay's narrow and short sighted policy have never enjoyed this precious heritage, see that their children are put in possession of it."²⁴

Although Havell is considered to be the major source of inspiration for the Bengal School of painting, no study of the artistic revivalism in Bengal would be complete without reference to Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy who pioneered Art Historical Studies in India. Born in Sri Lanka in 1877, Coomaraswamy grew up in England at a time when the Arts and Crafts, as well as the Theosophist Movements dominated the intellectual scene.²⁵ He was also influenced by the spirit of nationalism which was then sweeping through Asia as a whole. It was, however, not until his return to Sri Lanka as an adult that Coomaraswamy became aware of the rich artistic heritage of Sri Lanka and he gradually came to realise that the steady degeneration in the taste and craftsmanship was due to poor imitation of the West. In 1908 Coomaraswamy's first book on art, Medieval Sinhalese Art, was published. Besides, providing a history

²³Ibid., p. 239.

²⁴Ibid., p. xi.

²⁵Roger Lipsey, Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work, pp. 31, 40-54.

of later Sinhalese art, the book levels an attack on industrialisation.²⁶

Like Havell, Coomaraswamy too, was more concerned with the spiritual and cultural aspect of nationalism than with the political and economic. He was just as critical as Havell was of the unenlightened swadeshi reformers when he wrote: "Never have I seen in any Swadeshi literature the wish expressed to preserve Indian manufacture on account of intrinsic excellence."²⁷ True Swadeshi according to Coomaraswamy "is something more than a political weapon. It must be a religious-artistic ideal."²⁸ It was with this ideal in view that Coomaraswamy exhibited his own extensive collection of art at various Provincial Exhibitions. This was his way of educating the public taste for Indian art.²⁹

Coomaraswamy believed that the future function of schools of art in India "is not to introduce European methods and ideals but to gather up and revitalize the broken threads of Indian tradition, to build up the idea of Indian art as an integral part of the national culture, and to relate the work of Indian craftsmen to the life and

²⁶Ibid., p. 34.

²⁷A. Coomaraswamy, Swadeshi True or False in Art and Swadeshi (Madras: Ganesh & Co., Publishers, 1910), p. 10.

²⁸Ibid., p. 27.

²⁹Roger Lipsey, Coomaraswamy: His Life and Work, p. .

thought of the Indian people."³⁰

Convinced in his belief that tradition would play an important role in the revival of arts in India, Coomaraswamy recommended two things. "One, that he [the Indian] should be saturated with the traditional art of his race in order that he may know how to see, the other that he be saturated with the traditional culture of the East, that he may know what to see. . . ."³¹ In defence of tradition, Coomaraswamy proclaimed, ". . . tradition is a wonderful expressive language, that enables the artist working through it to speak directly to the heart . . . it is a mother tongue."³² With the Swadeshi movement going at full tilt in Bengal, the time was just right to express such revivalist ideas.

Such ideas as that of Havell and Coomaraswamy on the meaning and purpose of Indian art are clearly the complement of the political and social ideals being set forth by the nationalist-revivalist intellectuals of Calcutta (and elsewhere). These two aesthetes were pointing to one possible way of realizing some of their ideals, the use of the arts as an educational tool. It was in this atmosphere (in 1897) that the first meeting between Havell and

³⁰A. Coomaraswamy, Functions of Schools of Art in Art and Swadeshi, pp. 53-54.

³¹Ibid., p. 50.

³²Ibid.

Abanindranath Tagore, who would become Havell's instrument, took place in Calcutta. Havell was attempting to bring about radical changes in the curriculum at the Calcutta School of Art. Tagore was at the time deeply involved in the nationalist-revivalist movement and his house in Jorasanko was the meeting place for intellectuals like Havell and Coomaraswamy. Being in a nationalistic frame of mind, Abanindranath was searching for an Indian style in which to paint and express his nationalist sentiments. For Havell, therefore, Abanindranath Tagore was just the right person to promote his concept of artistic revivalism in India. Between Havell and Abanindranath, there was a sense of mutual understanding and a desire to create a national style in painting which would be Indian in spirit and in style. Havell claimed Abanindranath as the founder of a neo-Indian school of art and in 1905 offered him the position of the Vice-Principal of the Calcutta School of Art.

CHAPTER FOUR
THE BENGAL SCHOOL OF PAINTING:
ITS DEVELOPMENT AND CHARACTERISTICS

The Bengal School of painting was an expression of the revivalist sentiment which swept through Bengal in the late nineteenth century.

Since the Bengal School style was basically moulded on Abanindranath's own personal style and temperament, it is necessary to dwell on his development as an artist and his search for an Indian idiom.

Abanindranath Tagore was born at Jorasanko the ancestral home of the Tagores in Calcutta on 7 August 1871. Apart from being leading figures in socio-religious movements such as the Brahma Samaj, the Tagores were also well known patrons of art, literature, theatre and music. Both his grandfather, Girindranath Tagore, and father Gunendranath Tagore, were artists in the western tradition.¹ It was his father who first instilled an interest in art in Abanindranath.²

He received his first formal training in western techniques of oil, watercolour and pastel from 1891 to 1897

¹Rai Govind Chandra, Abanindranath Tagore (Thacker, Spink & Co. Ltd., 1933), preface.

²Ibid.

from two European artists Signor Gilhardi, an Italian, who was at the time the Vice-Principal of the Calcutta School of Art, and Charles Palmer, an English artist. Soon Abanindranath set himself up as a western style artist and painted several portraits of his grand uncle Devendranath Tagore and uncle Rabindranath Tagore. The portrait of Rabindranath Tagore, 1894 (fig. 13) done in pastel technique shows a soft impressionistic treatment which is very different from Raja Ravi Varma's academic style of oil painting which was very popular in India at the time.

Abanindranath, however, was not satisfied to continue with the western style of painting.³ Jorasanko at the time was the focal point of the Swadeshi movement in Bengal which highlighted the conflict between native and western traditional interests. This created a sense of restlessness within Abanindranath as can be seen in his memoir, Gharoa, where he says: "It was like a wave flowing over everything, this new spirit of Swadeshi. Every one wanted to give something of themselves to the cause. I decided that my contributions was going to be through the arts. I must learn how to feel like an Indian and paint like an Indian."⁴

³Abanindranath Tagore, Gharoa (Calcutta: Visvabharati Press, 1971), p. 33.

⁴Ibid.

It was with the intention of attempting to create a new style that Abanindranath gave up painting in oil and decided to stick to water colour, which he felt was more suited to express Indian sentiments.⁵ His first attempt was to illustrate Rabindranath Tagore's play Chitrangada, based on an episode from the Indian epic, Mahabharata. Abanindranath was not happy with the results.⁶ He continued his search for an idiom when he received an album of Mughal miniatures from Delhi. Impressed with the style of the miniatures, he made an attempt to use this style in illustrating the Vaisnava love lyrics of the medieval Bengali poets Chandidas and Vidyapati. The first attempt in this new technique was Abhisar, 1895 (fig. 14). He painted it in the style of the Indian manuscript illuminations "where the text, the illumination and the border decoration integrate into a total whole."⁷ The theme of this painting, Abhisarika, adapted from the classical dramatic tradition of Nayikas (Heroines) is here used to illustrate, as Abanindranath has stated, the Vaisnava episode of Radha

⁵Mukel De, Abanindranath Tagore, The Visva-Bharati Quarterly, May 1942, p. 32.

⁶Abanindranath Tagore, Jorasankher Dharé (Calcutta: Visvabhareht Press, 1908), p. 154.

⁷Ratan Parimoo, The Painting of the Three Tagores: Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, Rabindranath: Chronology and Comparative Study (Maharaja Sayajirao, University of Baroda, 1973), p. 75.

keeping tryst with Krsna.⁸ Although the theme is traditional it fails both in its style and in the sentiment it expresses as it totally lacks in the quality of Bhava or emotion, usually associated with such themes. Abanindranath's confusion is clearly evident in this painting. The nayika depicted here does not reflect the idealised concept of feminine beauty expressed in Indian miniatures. Instead, she is shown tall and angular, western in form and attitude.⁹ Even the manner in which she has worn her sari is modern. Unlike the stylized, almost abstract form of the trees in the Indian miniature tradition, in Tagore's Abhisar they are treated realistically. Abanindranath himself was very unhappy with this painting and he wrote: "I locked the picture safely away, but I told myself I would not give up the attempt."¹⁰

In search for Indian roots, Abanindranath took lessons from a Patna painter, Pawan, from whom he learned the technique of miniature painting. He also learned the method of making Indian colours and the application of gold and silver leaf. His painting, Ritu Samhar, 1898-99 (fig. 15) stylistically based on the Patna School of Company painting, reflects a mixture of Company School style in the

⁸Abanindranath Tagore, Jorasankhor Dhare, p. 158.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Abanindranath Tagore, Jorasankhor Dhari, p. 158.

treatment of human figures and the background which is in the Mughal style. The flat planes of the walls in the background and the aerial view of the bed and the low table in front, reflect the compositional layout of the Indian prototype.¹¹ However, the artistic conflict from which Abanindranath could never escape is evident in the naturalistic treatment of the human figures and particularly evident in the folds of the woman's clothes.

Abanindranath encountered another idiom when Kakuzo Okakura, a great Japanese thinker, aesthete, and nationalist who had founded the Nippon Bijistuin to revive traditional art in Japan, visited Calcutta in 1890 as the guest of the Tagores. He was at the time crusading for the cause of pan-Asian sentiment which he had expressed in his book Ideals of the East. Having seen Abanindranath's efforts to revive the Indian style of painting, Okakura, on his return to Japan, sent two painters, Wokoyama Taikan and Shunsho Hishida to Calcutta. The two Japanese painters were to learn about Indian art and, in turn, teach Indian artists, like Abanindranath, the techniques of traditional Japanese painting. At Jorasankho where they stayed, Taikan and Hishida painted large paintings on silk, on themes from the Ramayana and the Mahabharata and on the life of the Buddha. From watching the two Japanese artists at work Abanindranath

¹¹Ratan Parimoo, p. 76.

evolved his own "wash technique" which was to become the hallmark of the Bengal School of painting. Of the wash technique, Abanindranath writes: "At a particular stage of the picture, [Taikan] would go over it with a flat brush dipped in water. I gave the whole picture a bath and discovered the effect to be quite pleasing."¹²

The first painting that Abanindranath painted in the wash style was Bharat Mata or Mother India, 1903 (fig. 16). In Bharat Mata the concept of Mother India was given a visual representation for the first time. Its symbolism was timely perhaps: the cloth and grain in two hands promised plenty: the book and rosary in the other two symbolised knowledge and spirituality. This painting mounted on a silk flag was hoisted on 7 August 1905 by the Swadeshi leaders and paraded through the streets of Calcutta to symbolise their boycott of foreign goods.¹³

The painting Bharat Mata, however, lacked the sense of power of the medieval sculptures of the Mother Goddess, Durga, worshipped by the Swadeshists as the symbol of the Motherland. Instead what one sees in this painting is a new Goddess, carrying new symbols relevant only to the Swadeshi spirit. Unlike Durga who has other iconographical elements to signify her powers, such as her lion Vahana or pedestal,

¹²Abanindranath Tagore, Jorasankhor Dharé, p. 134.

¹³Abanindranath Tagore, Gharoa, p. 26.

Bharat Mata here is shown floating in a rarified atmosphere. Despite the four arms of traditional Hindu iconography, she lacks character and appears ephemeral, artificially made to look traditional. Her saffron coloured sari and her rudraksha necklace and bracelet are more reminiscent of Indian ascetics rather than the richly clad goddess of the Hindu pantheon. She also lacks the posture, tri-bhanga, usually associated with Hindu Gods and Goddesses. In spite of these inherent weaknesses, Abanindranath's efforts to create a new Indian idiom caught the attention of people like E. B. Havell, the Principal of the Calcutta School of Art, who began to regard him as the person capable of creating a new Indian style.¹⁴

The opportunity to create his own school of painting, however, came in 1905, when Havell offered Abanindranath the position of Vice-Principal in the Calcutta School of Art (1905-1915). In that year Abanindranath, following his uncle Rabindranath Tagore, had left politics and devoted himself wholly to his art.

The very first day of his appointment, Havell had shown Abanindranath some examples of late Mughal miniatures which Havell had collected for the Art Gallery. For Abanindranath this came as an inspiration and a revelation

¹⁴Binodbehari Mukhopadhyay, The Art of Abanindranath Tagore (Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, Golden Jubilee Number, 1961), p. 68.

of "what treasures lay hidden in the medieval art of India."¹⁵ Although Abanindranath, initially adopted the Mughal miniature style in his paintings, he later sought inspiration from the frescoes at Ajanta as well. If he found in the Mughal miniatures what he thought was the perfect technique most suited to his temperament, he found them lacking in bhava emotional content. Abanindranath decided that it was his mission to infuse Indian painting with bhava.¹⁶ Hence his desire to learn from Ajanta.

Unlike in Abhisar and Ritu Samhar, one could notice more of the Mughal miniature style in Abanindranath's Death of Shah Jehan, 1907 (fig. 17) which was painted two years after his assumption of duties at the Calcutta School of Art. Mughal miniature technique is evident in the arabesque type motifs, such as the inlaid designs on architecture. Abanindranath's inability to get away from the influence of his western training is evident in the naturalistic treatment of the figures. He claimed that the success of this painting lay in its ability to express bhava which he felt was successfully expressed in the old emperor pulling himself to have a last look at the distant mausoleum of his beloved Queen.¹⁷ The primary emotion Abanindranath attempts

¹⁵Abanindranath Tagore, Jorasankor Dharé, p. 162.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 162-63.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 163.

to express in this painting is grief: the Taj Mahal receding into the haze, the grief-stricken daughter at the foot of the bed, the half hidden moon, are elements that the artist has used to create a sense of loss. The painting was acclaimed as a success by Havell who had it shown at the Delhi Durbar Exhibition (1907), where it was awarded the silver medal and at the Congress Exhibition (1907) where it won the gold medal.¹⁸ The Taj Mahal which is of such symbolic value is not visually effective on account of its unimposing size, being relegated as it is to the distant horizon for the sake of realism. Never having visited the Taj, Abanindranath was unable to capture the essence for which it stood. On the other hand, the architecture of the Red Fort where the scene is located dominates the picture and tends to detract from the principle emotional content. Shah Jehan's daughter, Jehanara, bundled up in dull red, lacks in delicacy and grace typical of the traditional female form. The personality of the Emperor is lost in the formless heap of his clothes. The painting fails to evoke any sentiments as are associated with Mughal and Rajput miniatures on similar themes.

The human figures in most of Abanindranath's paintings are tall, languid and attenuated with small heads,

¹⁸Ibid.

hands and feet,¹⁹ (fig. 18) and they possess a certain sentimental quality which became associated with the Bengal School. In the wash technique, Abanindranath found a perfect medium to paint pictures which are "gentle and languid." Typical of this mood are his paintings The Last Journey (fig. 19), Dreaming of the Taj (fig. 20) and his series on the Omar Khayyam and the Arabian Nights. It could be said that Abanindranath's paintings were to be a continuation of the old Mughal tradition, where pictures were to be savoured by a private few. Being remote from political struggle, Abanindranath's paintings were therefore aristocratic rather than nationalistic.

Among the first students of Abanindranath were Nandalal Bose, Surendranath Gangoli, Asit Kumar Haldar, Kshitindranath Majumdar, Saroda Ukil, K. Venkatappa, Samarendranath Gupta and Deviprasad Roychoudhuri. Determined to create a new school of painting which would be Indian in sentiment and technique, Abanindranath introduced the students to old Indian techniques of miniature painting, fresco painting, tempera painting, and sculpture. He employed traditional artists from all over India as teachers in the College. Along with them he also engaged a Pundit to read to the students while they were painting, episodes from

¹⁹Jaya Appaswamy, Abanindranath Tagore and the Art of His Times (New Delhi: LaLit Kala Akademi, 1968), p. 20.

the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas. His intention was to steep his disciples in old classical ethos.²⁰ With help from Havell,²¹ Abanindranath studied the Indian treatise on art the Silpa Shastras and wrote and lectured on the subject of Indian ideals and styles. The best known of his writings on art are: Bharat Silpa Parichay, an Introduction to Indian Art (1909), Sadanga: Six Limbs of Painting (1914), Some Notes of Indian Artistic Anatomy (1914).

The first time the Bengal School painters came face to face with classical art of India was in 1910-11, when Abanindranath sent Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar to Ajanta as part of Lady Herringham's group to make copies of the Ajanta murals. This experience would have a far reaching influence on the style of the Bengal School painters.

Most representative of the new school are the works of Nandalal Bose, Kshitindralal Majumdar, and Sarada Charan Ukil. Nandalal Bose is the best known among them. For not only was he rooted in the Indian tradition, but he was the only Bengal School artist who openly combined art with nationalist sentiments.²²

²⁰Rai Govind Chandra, Abanindranath Tagore (Thackes, Spink & Co. Ltd., 1933), p. 30.

²¹Abanindranath Tagore, Jorashankhor Dharé, p. 114.

²²Binode Behari Mukherjee, Abanindranath and His Tradition, Lalit Kala Contemporary, Vol., June 1962, p. 26.

Coming from a rural background in Bengal, Nandalal had no western education. As a result he was free to explore the Indian tradition with no inhibitions. Unlike Abanindranath who turned to the Mughal tradition to illustrate romantic literary episodes from non-Indian classics like Omar Khayyam and the Arabian Nights, Nandalal, rooted in Indian culture, sought inspiration from Indian classical sources such as Ajanta, as well as from the Bengali folk tradition. The main characteristic of Nandalal's works is the dynamic vitality of the lines which the artist clearly picked up from his visit to Ajanta and the Bagh Caves he visited in 1910-11 and again in 1920-21.

Nandalal's early paintings are in the wash technique which he had learned from Abanindranath. A typical example of this early phase is Siva Drinking Poison, 1913 (fig. 21). Here the use of dull ochre colours, the abstract treatment of Mount Kailasa and Siva's gesture and posture and his ornaments, are all reminiscent of Ajanta's murals. Although by no means as dynamic as the classical masterpieces, this painting does express "Siva's brooding presence."²³ In discussing this painting Jaya Appaswamy writes: "Nandalal's drawing is essentially Indian, the line here has the capacity to convey the plasticity of forms and has greater

²³Jaya Appaswamy, Abanindranath and His Tradition, p. 56.

vigour. He was enthusiastic about drawing and had also studied antiquity with great care."²⁴

The second source from which Nandalal drew his inspiration for his paintings is the Pata tradition of Bengal and it was in this technique that Nandalal painted the panels for the Haripura Congress marquee in 1937. Mahatma Gandhi, at the time a major force behind the Indian nationalist movement, invited Nandalal to decorate the marquee. Inspired by this request Nandalal painted sixty paintings which are now referred to as the Haripura panels. Nandalal's own background enabled him to express the rural aspects of Indian life in a very natural manner. Painted in the tempera technique, Haripura panels evoke the lucidity evident in the Bengali pata tradition. The panel, Mother and Child, 1937 (fig. 22) depicting a baby playing in his mother's lap and the mother affectionately looking up at the pet parrot, is drawn with quick calligraphic strokes and dabs of colour typical of Bengali pata tradition, successfully depicts an intimate scene of rural Bengal. In line with Mahatma Gandhi's philosophy of rural regeneration, an Indian artist has for the first time recognized the beauty of the rural culture of India and gives it a simple but effective expression.

Nandalal showed the same facility in the use of the

²⁴Ibid.

Oriental brush technique which he learned from visiting Japanese artist Arai-Kampo,²⁵ a member of the Okakura's Nippon Bijistuin. Later, during his visit to Japan with Rabindranath Tagore in 1924, Nandalal was exposed to the tradition at first hand. In his Oriental style paintings, one can distinguish a difference in approach from that of Abanindranath. While Abanindranath used the technique to evolve his own wash style to give his paintings a sense of misty romanticism, Nandalal used the original brush and ink technique with great success without attempting to modify it. Fishermen at Gopalpur, 1947 (fig. 23) is a typical example of Nandalal's undisguised use of the Oriental brush technique. With a few calligraphic strokes of his ink brush, Nandalal has attempted in this painting to capture the mood of the Oriya-fishermen about to launch their boat into the stormy Bay of Bengal. It is apparent that though he has not been able to achieve the finesse one expects of a Chinese or Japanese master, nevertheless, Bose has been able to display the ease with which he could handle the brush.

Nandalal's genius and versatility allowed him remarkable freedom to experiment with various techniques. His contribution to the Bengal style led to its consolidation and finally to its spread to other parts of

²⁵Binode Bihari Mukherjee, Abanindranath and His Tradition, p. 56.

India. Nandalal had the genius to instil a new vigour to old traditional styles. However, the other painters of the Bengal School lacked in creative genius and for that reason failed to achieve any success in their attempt to utilize the old technique. Typical examples of early Bengal School painters in whose works one notices the symptom of future dissipation of the Bengal School, are Kshitindranath Majumdar, Venkatappa and Sarada Charan Ukil. Majumdar, like Nandalal, belonged to the rural tradition of Bengal. Lacking in formal education, he had learned about India's literary and religious heritage from the village Jatras (plays) and Kirtans (devotional songs). His paintings are, therefore, heavily influenced by the Vaisnava cult popular in rural Bengal. Compared to Nandalal's style, which is dynamic and eclectic, Kshitendranath's paintings are introspective and limited both in technique and subject matter. His paintings, basically in the wash technique, have a curious backdrop of architectural design almost stage-like in effect in front of which his figures are placed.²⁶ This effect can be seen in his Sri Chaitanya, 1946 (fig. 24), portrait of the medieval Bengali saint of that name. In this painting the background has been blocked off by a balustrade, reminiscent of the old Buddhist

²⁶Ibid., p. 60.

vedikas.²⁷ This provides contrast to the softly delineated figure of the saint who is placed in the foreground enveloped in his white robe. There is a stark austerity in the picture, an effect which has been achieved by the use of white and off-white set against gradations of umber against a dark sky.²⁸ Kshitindranath's wash technique has a luminous quality which gives the painting a clarity of vision absent in Abanindranath's works. It is the small effects like the gourd bowl in front of Sri Chaitanya with a small insect fluttering on the handle which gives the painting an element of life, otherwise lacking in the painting. Perhaps influenced by the revivalist sentiments Kshitindranath painted a number of pictures on the medieval saints and other Vaisnava themes. While Kshitindranath's paintings dealing with the life of the medieval saints have a certain austere charm, his depiction of female beauty like those of most Bengal school painters, are weak and sentimental as can be seen in his painting, The Pet Deer, 1916 (fig. 25). Here unlike the fullblooded robustness of Ajanta murals, the woman is shown drooping and almost sickly in her posture.

Venkatappa, a painter from Mysore in South India,

²⁷Jaya Appaswamy, Abanindranath and the Art of His Times, p. 60.

²⁸Ibid.

unlike Nandalal Bose and Kshitendranath Majumdar, had formal training at the Government Industrial School in Madras, prior to his coming to Calcutta to study Indian art. His painting, Ravana and Jatayu, 1913 (fig. 26) is a typical example of his painting done the Bengal School style. This painting is one of many he painted to illustrate Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita's book, Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists, published in 1914. The painting depicts the famous episode from the epic, Ramayana, in which the multiheaded demon king Ravana of Lanka is attacked by Jataya the eagle while abducting Sita, the wife of the God-like hero Rama. Unlike Raja Ravi Varma's painting on the same theme mentioned earlier, which successfully expressed the sentiments like violence, lust and anger, Venkatappa fails to express any of those emotions. Instead, the body of Ravana, with his many hands holding weapons of war, seems "more delicate than dangerous."²⁹ Jatayu who is fighting for his life to save Sita seems like a friendly sparrow rather than a powerful eagle and, therefore, looks "more lovable than heroic."³⁰ Venkatappa uses the wash technique here but the effect is like that of tempera with its clear flat space instead of gradations of shades and colours that one notices in Abanindranath's paintings.³¹ In effect, the

²⁹Ibid., p. 66.

³⁰Ibid.

³¹Ibid.

painting is folkish although elements of realism can be noticed in the treatment of the clothes and in the faces and especially in the realistic treatment of Jatayu's glistening eyes and beak.

Similar stylistic weaknesses can be seen in the works of another student of Abanindranath's, Sarada Charan Ukil. His painting, Eternal Flute, 1916 (fig. 27) is typical of his style. Here the theme of Radha and Krishna has been over sentimentalised, as it depicts the divine lovers "clinging like creepers."³² The vapoury background achieved by the use of pale colours gives this painting an atmosphere of artificial sweetness.

These stylistic weaknesses already manifest in the first generation of Bengal School painters became progressively more pronounced. By the middle of the twentieth century, far removed as they were from the spirit of Swadeshi which was the basis for the revivalist movement, the painters lacked enthusiasm and vigour. Moreover, exposed to techniques learned secondhand from second and third generation students of the School led to further weakening of the already weak style until it finally lost itself in remote, attenuated and weak variation of "revivalist formulae."

Discussing the art of Abanindranath and his

³²G. Venkatachalam, Contemporary Indian Painting, p. 64.

followers, i.e., the Bengal School, Ananda Coomaraswamy states the following:

The work of the modern school of Indian painters in Calcutta is a phase of the national reawakening. The subject chosen by the Calcutta painters are taken from Indian history, romance and epic, and from the mythology and religious literature and legends, as well as from the life of the people around them. Their significance lies in their distinctive Indianness. They are, however, by no means free from European and Japanese influence. The work is full of refinement and subtlety in colour, and of a deep love of all things Indian; but contrasted with the Ajanta and Mughal and Rajput paintings, which have in the past inspired it, it is frequently lacking in strength. The work should be considered as a promise rather than a fulfillment.³³

³³A. K. Coomaraswamy, as quoted by Binod Bihari Mukhopadhyay, in Abanindranath Tagore (Calcutta: Indian Society of Oriental Art, Golden Jubilee Number, 1961), p. 68.

CHAPTER FIVE

FAILURE OF THE BENGAL SCHOOL TO CREATE
A NATIONAL STYLE

Havell's criticism of the Italian Renaissance, expressed in An Open Letter to Educated Indians, could very well have been used against the Bengal School which he himself had inspired.

. . . the so called Renaissance . . . as far as art was concerned, was a purely intellectual movement. But the renaissance contained within itself the germs of decay, for it did not spring from any deep-seated national sentiment, without which no art can continue to flourish, but was only an outburst of intellectual admiration for the newly-found treasures of ancient Greek and Roman art.¹

The parallel is evident in the development of the Bengal School. By the late nineteenth century when Abanindranath was searching for an Indian idiom everything Indian including the arts had come to be romanticised and every aspect of Indian life dominated by a new sense of national identity. In this first flush of nationalism² and the resultant voyage of self discovery,³ the primary goal of

¹Binode Bihari Mukherjee, E. B. Havell, Lalit Kala Contemporary, vol. XXV, nos. 3 & 4, 1960, p. 73.

²Asok Mitra, "The Forces Behind the Modern Movement, Lalit Kala Contemporary, vol. 1, June 1962, p. 15.

³Ibid.

the Indian nationalists was the revival of India's glorious past, a past that also provided Abanindranath with his inspiration. However, by the early twentieth century, this idealised and intellectual climate had given way to an environment of hardened political conflict with the British. This aggressive nationalism, which could have fueled a dynamic artistic movement, was however abhorred by Abanindranath who retreated from the world of reality into the world of fantasy and nostalgia. As a result, the world of the Bengal School was submerged in an idealised past.

Havell's and Ananda Coomaraswamy's admonition to look into the past and paint and to gather up and revitalize the broken threads of the Indian tradition⁴ came as an incentive to Abanindranath and endorsed his own direction of looking back into the past for inspiration. But taking this direction sowed the seeds of the Bengal School's failure.

The first drawback was that while they extolled in theory the classical and medieval traditions of art, the artists of the Bengal School failed to establish any relevance between their art and the life around them. This weakness was noticed by O. C. Ganguli.

They have kept themselves aloof from contemporary life. They find no inspiration in modern life in its costumes and gestures in its new environments

⁴A. K. Coomaraswamy, Art and Swadeshi (Madras: Ganesh & Co., Publishers, 1910), p. 53.

and settings and occupations. The subject which attracts these artists are almost entirely of Pauranic character--scenes and legends from the national epics and the popular folk lores--those radiant crystals of national memories! But whether the interpretations of these legends are founded on emotional experiences that come from reality may be questioned. And in many of the works of the less talented disciples of Mr. Tagore this affected interest in ancient classic themes has meant no more than reproducing the formulas of old traditions. And it is easy to construe their affectation as due to an incapacity to grapple with profound thoughts and a shallowness disposed to fribble and antic with old thoughts for lack of power to evolve new ones. It must be remembered that the forms of the old art of India were born of the necessity of expressing the feelings which the artists were led to experience, and the forms of the old frescoes of Ajanta, of the conventions of Rajput drawings, could never compensate for lack of feeling directly born of personal experience. However honourable a place these classic themes may have in the race-culture of India, they have practically ceased to have any roots in present-day national beliefs.⁵

While he embraced the traditional technique, Abanindranath had rejected the western method of art training. However, he did not offer adequate formal training in the traditional Silpa Sastras, which were mostly lost to contemporary artists despite his attempt to revive them. Deprived of any formal training in either Western art or Indian art, it was only natural that the Bengal School painters were not capable of producing masterpieces of the caliber of the ancient works.

⁵O. C. Gangoli, "The New Indian School of Painting," Journal of Indian Art and Industry, No. 17, January 1916, p. 51.

Abanindranath's attitude to the subject matter of art was similarly detrimental to creativity and originality. For example, he says:

Soak your heart first in the shower of Kalidasa's poetry, then lift your eyes towards the sky and you will then appreciate the eternal rhythm of the ever fresh cloud messenger. First soak yourself in the great poet Valmiki's description of the sea, then proceed to paint a sea of your own.⁶

In demanding that his students take themes and emotions second hand from great poets of the past like Kalidasa and Valmiki for their artistic creations, Abanindranath nipped in the bud any attempt at individual expression on the part of the students and dampened their artistic imagination. The path he extolled his students to take was bound to end up, as it did, in lifeless and manneristic copies of past styles and removed emotions.

Unlike the Bengali literature created during the height of the Bengal Renaissance, when writers like Bankim Chunder Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore made use of historical events to express the contemporary nationalist sentiments in a living language in which the people were at home, the Bengal School got bogged down with sentiments of the past. Harkening back to a past which in its romanticism provided an escape from the realities that the Swaraj

⁶Pulinbehari Sen., ed., "The Art of Abanindranath Tagore," The Journal of the Oriental Art, 1961, p. 70.

movement represented, the artists' failed to use the artistic symbols with any dynamism or relevance to express desire for freedom which dominated India at the time. In fact, the only painting which one could describe as being blatantly nationalistic and propagandist in sentiment was Abanindranath's painting Bharat-Mata. As pointed out earlier, this painting failed to achieve the goal that Abanindranath set himself.

Despite their claims to nationalist sentiments and revivalist fervour, the average middle class Indian did not patronise the Bengal School. Its patrons were Indian aristocrats and European connoisseurs living in Calcutta, such as Lord Ronaldsay, Marquis of Zetland, Sir John Woodroff, Norman Blunt, etc.⁷ It was they along with some anglicised native princes and zamindars like the Maharaja of Burdwan, who in 1907 created the Indian Society of Oriental Arts. The aim of the Society was to promote the Bengal School artists by holding exhibitions and writing articles in art magazines like The Studio, Rupam and Modern Review. In spite of claims to swadeshi sentiments, the annual exhibitions of the Bengal School painters at the Society were inaugurated "not by any nationalist leaders nor by anyone who symbolised in himself the culture of India, but

⁷Arabinda Poddar, Renaissance in Bengal, A Search for Identity (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), p. 246.

invariably by Governor Generals and Governors"⁸ who also happened to be frequent guests of honor at the Tagore residence at Jorasankho. It is reasonable to state that Abanindranath Tagore "looked at Indian art through the eyes of its European lovers" and that he painted for European patrons, "who didn't seek to know India in the complexity of her modern problems, but were satisfied with the discovery of her soul as revealed in her ancient literature, mythology, religion and tantric cults."⁹

The weakness of the Bengal School was noted by even its mentors Coomaraswamy and Havell. Although they acclaimed the School as a new national style which had tried to revive old Indian themes and ideals, they were both aware of the shortcomings in the style. Coomaraswamy, for example, comments in his article, Modern School of Painting, that while "most Calcutta paintings are graceful; . . . They are sentimental in conception, weak in drawing, and dull in colouring."¹⁰

It is significant that even Rabindranath Tagore became critical of Abanindranath's approach to art as in the article "The Meaning of Art," where he states:

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid., p. 238.

¹⁰A. K. Coomaraswamy, Art and Swadeshi, p. 131.

When in the name of Indian Art, we cultivate with a deliberate aggressiveness a certain bigotry born of habit of a past generation, we smother our souls under idiosyncracies unearthed from buried centuries. These are like masks with exaggerated grimaces that fail to respond to the ever-changing play of life. I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny their obligation carefully to produce something that can be labelled Indian Art according to some old world mannerism. Let them proudly refuse to be herded into a pen like branded beasts that are treated as cattle not as cow. All traditional structures of art must have a sufficient degree of elasticity to allow it to respond to varied impulses of life, deliberate or virile, to grow with its growth, to dance with its rhythm.¹¹

The style of painting propogated by the Bengal School may be seen to be constrained by its lack of elasticity and spontaneity to capture or respond to the "varied impulses of life" that characterized the changing and complex social political conditions of contemporary India. Years of British colonial administration had imposed western tastes and values as well as an industrialized economy upon Indian society, contributing to the degeneration of the indigenous artistic traditions. The classic art of ancient and medieval India was largely unknown to the general public who, by the end of the nineteenth century, had become more familiar with the realism of western artistic styles as reflected in the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma popularized by the mass circulation of inexpensive

¹¹Rabindranath Tagore, "The Meaning of Art," Vishva-Bharati Quarterly (Santiniketan, 1926).

oleographs of his work.

While this kind of conversion to the western academic style of art was taking place on the one hand, Indian society was also in the grip of the Swadeshi Movement which sought to go back to the indigenous roots of the past. It was this revivalist ideology of the Swadeshi Movement which inspired Abanindranath Tagore to search for a native artistic idiom and restore Indian art to its traditional role. Support for his quest came from scholars and educators like E. B. Havell and Ananda Coomaraswamy who encouraged Abanindranath's attempts to revive the art of Ajanta and Bagh as well as Mughal miniatures.

Yet, though born of a genuine need for national identity, and at a time when the country seemed ideologically ready for it, the Bengal School failed to evolve a truly nationalistic style because of its inability to rid itself of the revivalist attitude which was its basis. Because of this commitment to revivalism, the artists were unsuccessful in resolving the dilemma of reconciling the past modes with current needs--a dilemma which confronts most revivalist attempts in a society in transition. For, although the country at large was seeking a national identity, the artistic past that the Bengal School was attempting to recapture for them was too remote and elusive to have public appeal. The themes as well as the style and

technique were too esoteric and elitist to reflect or capture the rhythm or impulses of contemporary life or interests. The works of Abanindranath Tagore and his followers, with a very few exceptions, were unrelated to the reality of contemporary life and were patterned on a form already empty of content. Consequently they failed to reach out to the general public for whom the classical tradition was no more than a distant memory, if even that. Lacking in public appeal, the Bengal School failed to forge a nationalist artistic idiom. It remains today only as an aspect of Bengal's nostalgic memory of the Swadeshi Movement.

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