



Bengal School Renaissance (Indian Art)

Hello everybody I welcome you all to this episode of "Bengal School Renaissance". The traditional art practices of ancient Ajanta frescos and medieval Rajput & Mughal miniature became the source of inspiration to the spirit of nationalism and revivalism of Bengal School of Art which was compared with the same spirit of Italian Renaissance. The art of Bengal School continued the wash technique of traditional Indian Art and also in later time proved expertise in Western technique of Oil painting which was introduced by British Art Institutions in India. This episode is designed to make you understand the spirit of Nationalism and struggle for freedom reflected in the art of the time and the important role played by E.B. Havel, Abanindranath Tagore and other artists of Bengal School in this movement.

The subject expert to this episode is Ms. Atiya Parveen who is perusing her Research at Aligarh Muslim University.

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The inception of Bengal School may be seen as the reaction against British colonial rule in India Since 1857 and the tenet of Western art, taught in British art schools at Madras, Calcutta, and Bombay. British



Naturalism and Classical art considerably influenced the painters of Bengal but as soon as Indian struggle for socio-political and cultural independence from the British took place, a new Renaissance movement began. It brought new change in the art form which was inspired by traditions of *Ajanta*, *Mughal*, and *Rajput* miniature. Since total change was not feasible, many artists initiated a blend of elements from *Ajanta*, *Mughal*, and *Rajput* miniature with modern techniques and mediums such as oil which was introduced by British in India. Indian traditional art attracted western artists also who came to India to learn and copy Indian art. Calcutta became the main center of Indian Art due to the city's importance which increased more because it became the capital of British India.

Art before 20th Century, was the means to convey the message which was religious, literally, historical or narrative. But the later period, known as modern, is quite different as it's a period of experimentations, adventures and pictorial revolution. However, in India Modernism came quite late, due to the colonial influence.¹ In the early years of the 20th Century there was a sense of restoration and expansion of nationalist



fervor in the arts, this resulted in search and revitalization of Indian cultural history and spirituality. One that was expressed not through the pictorial vocabulary of foreign rules, but by reviving the indigenous themes, techniques and materials. The art of this time is a hybrid of Indo-European style of painting with a refreshing indigenous spirit, firmly rooted in Indian psyche.

The technique of Wash was the native method of painting which was challenged by European oil technique. The new style of oil painting introduced by the British, aroused a deep sense of perplexities among Indian artists which **Raja Ravi Varma** (1848-1906) could overcome with his determination to learn it. Some of his paintings like '*Shakuntala*' (1898) (Fig.1), '*Jatayu Vadham* (1895)' (Fig.2), '*Damayanti Hamsa Samvad*' (1899) (Fig.3), '*Saraswati*' (Fig.4), '*Shakuntala Composing a Love Letter to King Dushyanta*', '*Vasantasena*', '*Victory of Indrajit*' were mythological themes in which he depicted most of the Gods and Goddesses which shared the spirit of Bengal School.

The most Important name in the inception of Bengal School is of **Ernst Benfield Havell** (1861-



1934). Havell became the Superintendent of Madras School of Art from 1884 to 1896 and subsequently was reassigned as the Principal of the Government School of Art, Calcutta from 1896 until 1906, and in between this duration, he was also a custodian of the Government Art Gallery. In 1897 he met Abanindranath Tagore, at that time Abanindranath had completed his '*Radha-Krishna*' series of paintings. Their collaboration since 1897 had a great impact in progress and initiation of Indian form and style in art practices and education. Havell played a significant role in the enlightening and the developing the ethos of Indian art in the courses of art education. In 1905 by request of Havell, Abanindranath was appointed as Vice Principal of Art School of Calcutta and remained in this position till 1915.

In 1910, in the course of establishing the '*Indian Society of Oriental Art*' and by the authority of writing several numbers of books on Indian Art and Indian History, Havell reconstructed the art, architecture and crafts of India which were modern in approach and focused on British education and simultaneously maintained the value of Indian traditional art and



culture.² In London in February 1910, Havell gave a lecture at the Royal Society of Arts on Indian Art, in which British art critique **George Birdwood** while responding to the lecture, shared his thought that *India had no fine art tradition*.³ The remark of George Birdwood activated Havell in initiating the '*Indian Society of Oriental Art*' for the development of Indian art. In his endeavor, Abanindranath Tagore was the first exponent who gave the call of Indian Nationalist values in art very effectively. Within ten years Abanindranath Tagore instituted a new school along with Havel's efforts, in which students studied art education which was based on Indian tradition rather than Western models, which came to be known as the Bengal school of art. In fact, it was known as first recognized art style of Modern India. **Percy Brown** also praised the Indian artists and the efforts of E.B. Havell. He said 'a Group of Bengal Artists' gave confinement to an innovative traditional painting style after copying the painting of Mughal, Rajput and Ajanta



etc., Thus, they created a Renaissance under the headship of Abanindranath Tagore.⁴

In 1930, *Lord Curzon* organized the exhibition of Indian Art and crafts at Delhi Durbar of India in Qudsia Gardens, on the demand of British power, here Abanindranath exhibited his works, on the themes of Mughal miniatures- '*The Building of the Taj*' and '*The Passing of Shah Jahan*' (1903). *The Passing of Shah Jahan*' (Fig-5) was awarded a silver medal.⁵

The profound feelings of nationality have been found among all faculties aesthetically rooted in the arts, literature, music and others, by the consequences of the partition of Bengal, emerged in the serious protest against the British Government, become known as *Swadeshi Movement*, took place on 16 October 1905, *Lord Curzon*⁶ was alleged for his political competence in the divisions of Bengal provinces. It was this time when Abanindranath painted his water colour '*Bharata Mata*' (1905) (Fig-6) and depicted the symbolic aspiration of Indian national love, it was incited on the *Swadeshi Movement*. Through this



painting he created a silent message to maximum Indians inviting to participate in Swadeshi Movement.

Abanindranath Tagore through '*Indian Society of Oriental Art*' assigned the project to produce several new copies of Ajanta cave frescoes to Nandlal Bose and Asit Kumar Halder, under the supervision of English Artist, Lady Heringhem, who came to India in 1908 and was known as the expert copyist of Italian fresco. '*Indian Society of Oriental Art*' also organized painting exhibition participated by several artists including Abanindranath Tagore, Nandlal Bose, K. Vankkatappa, Gaganendranath Tagore and Shailendranath De. The exhibition was appreciated by **Percy Brown** and was a great achievement admired by the European press and subsequently published by Indian Society London.⁷

The year 1916, is known as the best year in which 47 members out of 120 were Indians in this Society, this was the year of the more elite group. In Journals other than ***Rupam***, the artists of Bengal School were frontispiece. Journals of **Ramananda Chatterji** the Bengali monthly journal '***Prabasi***', was first published in 1901, English journal '***Modern Review***' also edited



by him first appeared in 1907.⁸ The first published painting of Abanindranath's '**Journey's End**'(1913)(fig.7) in the ***Prabasi*** magazine was very much admired as a great piece of art. All these journals had substantial impact on growth of Bengal school. The philosophy and thought of the development of art were published in these Journals by the critiques such as **Kakuzo Okakura, Ananda Kentish Coomarswamy** (1877-1947), **E. B. Havell, Aurobindu Ghose (1872-1950)** and **Sister Nivedita (1867-1911)**.⁹

The originator of the Bengal School, highly prolific and the leader of that time was **Abanindranath Tagore** (1871-1951). He was the first major exponent of the Indian nationalist value of art, he turned to Indian traditional art only in 1895 and after working ten years he experimented with the Rajput style of painting. He created a new series of ***Krishna Leela*** and '***Radha and Krishna***' paintings, born out of this fresh enthusiasm. In 1890, around the age of twenty years, he attended the Calcutta School of Art where he took private lessons from **Signor O. Ghilardi**, an



Italian artist, (then Vice-Principal of the Calcutta Government School of Art) on cast drawing, foliage drawing, and pastel and life study. And later learned oil painting from **Charles Palmer**.¹⁰ he became acquainted with **Kakuzo Okakura**, through whom he got a chance to understand the art and culture of China and Japan and was highly influenced by their calligraphic style.¹¹ This influence is visible in his works like, '**Passing of Shah Jahan**' (1903) and a series of '**Omar Khayyam**' (1905-1907) (Fig.8,9,10).

His career began as an illustrator around 1891. His **Swapnaprayan** a pictorial illustration of Dwijendranaths poem was published in Bengali magazine **Sadhana**. He also made several pictures of Rabindranath's poem **Chitrangada**, **Badhu** and **Bimbabati**. He was popular in Bengali literature, he devotes himself to the compilation of **Ramayana**, **Mahabharata**, and other such books. His literature has been considerably enhanced by his other works on art such as '**Bharat Silpa**', '**Six Limbs of Painting**' and '**Artistic Anatomy**'. his regular contributions



were also published in the Journal of *Indian Society of Oriental Art*.

One of his finest achievement from his brush, gradually developed his original style, was the '*Arabian Nights*' series and '**Sinbad the Sailor**' are famous which were painted in 1930, he depicted the local reality amalgamated with the myths. Among some of his paintings based on his modern styles is '**My Mother**' (Fig.11) with a realistic as well as modern approach.

Other prominent artist of Bengal school was **Gaganendranath Tagore** (1867-1938), the elder brother of Abanindranath Tagore. In his early works he was very much influenced by the Japanese wash technique and later inspired by the cubist style from its geometric frigidity, futuristic and expressionist trends of European art practices.¹² Gaganendranath received no formal education, however, was trained under **Harinarayan Bandopadhyay** to use occidental watercolor in painting. Afterwards Japanese painter **Yokohama** (Okakuru) and **Tykan** (Taikowan) influenced him. Between 1906 and 1910, he drew



some paintings for Rabindranath Tagore's autobiography ***Jeevansmriti*** (1912) wherein he marked Japanese brush techniques and the influence of Far Eastern art. He painted for his personal pleasure. He started painting at an advanced age. His painting shows great range and independence. He is the only painter of his times who did black and white paintings.

Gaganendranath gave a new lease of life to 'The Indian Society of Oriental Art' established in 1907, along with his brother Abanindranath. He eventually abandoned the revivalism of the Bengal School. Gaganendranath's great sense of humor and satire found expression in some remarkable caricatures as the first Indian Caricaturist, who commented on the erosion of social facts and moral values under the colonial rule in India. His satirical drawing also pinpointed the hypocrisies and contradictions within society. Initially he exhibited some of his work in the government house in Calcutta held in December 1919 and later published another caricature entitled '**Millstone of Caste system**' (Fig.12) in 1917.¹³ His blithesome observations on religious views and



exploitation of the common man was expressed with remarkable complexity in his work. His use of thin, wiry lines going over the surface of the paper as well as large patches of black ink showed his sensitivity for surface design. The journal **Modern Review** published many of his caricature in 1917. From 1917 onwards, his satirical lithographs appeared in a series of three volumes, including **Abadhut Lok**, 1915, '**Realm of the Absurd**' and **Naya Hullod**, 1921, **The Chemical Scream, Reform Screams**, 1921 (Fig.13) '**Metamorphoses**' (Fig.14) and '**Deficit**' (Fig.15).¹⁴

Later and more mature phase of his art was his Semi-Cubist fantasy work, including his well-known '**Composition**' (Fig.16), '**Rabindranath Tagore in the Island of Birds**' (Fig.17), '**Meeting at the staircase**' (Fig.18), '**Magician**' (Fig.19), '**Temple Cubistic**' (Fig.20). He dealt these themes based on architectural, fairy palaces, interiors of houses, mostly silent and uninhabited, his arrangements of moving shapes create a new dilemma of forceful shape in cubist paintings. From 1925 onwards, he developed a complex post-cubist style, breaking a new ground of



experiments in modernist painting. He also took keen interest in theatre and in the mode of **Lewis Carroll**. he wrote several children's book such as ***Bhodor Bahadur*** (Otter the Great). When his first series of work in the style of cubism was published in ***Rupam*** Magazine in 1922, it seemed that he took hold of the modernist movement through his artistic vision of cubist style. **Stella Kramrisch** in her significant article entitled '*An Indian Cubist*' praised these cubist works and credited Gaganendranath for introducing cubism in India.

Nandlal Bose (1883-1966) was a disciple of Abanendra Nath Tagore. His early days began with interest in modeling images of Gods and Goddesses like Durga, Ganesha, Elephants and Bulls seen in fairs and festivals. He was enthusiastic in decorating *Puja*, *Pandals* or *Tazia* structure and other community work. He learned from potters, carpenters and toy makers and delighted to see their crafts with simple instruments or simple materials. He observed the craftsman's intimate understanding of each material and how his craft skill manipulated into his work. This rhythm found expression in his works like '*Nouka*



Bihar' of 1909, '*Jatugrihadaha'* of 1910, '*Parthasarathi'* of 1912 etc. He got admitted to the institution and learnt under Abanindranath and later as a teacher played a vital role in the development of Bengal style. He was chief of painting department and a responsible person of kalabhavan of Shantiniketan.

After Abanindranath, he was the person who devoted his wisdom and life to create a nationalist art. He experimented in variety of different styles including tempera technique. One of his painting ***Sati*** (1943)(Fig.21), depicts self-immolation of a woman which shows her devotion to his husband by burning herself after his death.

Bose was a close friend of Mahatma Gandhi and discussed many of his ideas with him. In 1930 Mahatma Gandhi was arrested in protest against the British tax on salt. At that time, he created canonical black and white linocut of the Gandhi's 240 mile '***Dandi March'*** (Fig.22). It became a masterpiece work for the non-violence movement. when the Indian National Congress session was held at Haripura in 1938 he made a set of seven posters on the request of



Mahatma Gandhi (Fig.23).¹⁵ Gandhi Ji placed Nandlal Bose as incharge of local craft artists in this session where he made about 80 posters and made 400 copies along with students and teachers.¹⁶

Through some of his creative works, based on Bengal tribal known Santhal community, he revived and gave new life to it which was depicted powerfully in his famous work of tempera '**New Clouds**' (1937) (Fig.24). he also worked on mythological themes such as '**Radha Virah**' (Fig.25) and '**Shiva drinking Poison**'(Fig.26).

Another important artist, who worked in folk tradition style in Bengal School was **Jamini Roy** (1887-1972) who belonged to the rural area of Bengal. At his early age he moved to Calcutta to join Government College of Art to be trained in the academic manner. The new style of Jamini Roy passes through three stages of development. In his early works, around 1925 onwards, he adopted the folk tradition of Kalighat, he used simple flat color sweeping, bold strokes and his figures come out in



formal ideas from Orissa and Jain manuscripts. In the second stage, he attempts to paint in glowing colors with flowing curves and the portraits in the manner of daring simplification. His elitist approach which was found a different quality of robustness, a new innovation and a new direction in the spirit of art was seen in the dolls and toys, in the *Pujas* images, *Kanthas* and *Alpanas*. From about 1931, his third stage return to a colorless subdued palette, he emphasized on brush work and some emotional quality explored in his drawing, the characters look like in oval shapes with protruding eyes, but the painting continues to be ornamental which highlighted the true identity of Indian art. Vishnu Dev points out that *Jamini Roy and Rabindra Nath Tagore 'liberated' the younger artists.*¹⁷ As both of them were free from norms and rules of Bengal School. Some of his paintings like '**Mother and Child**'(early work)(Fig. 27), '**Three Pujarins**' (Fig. 28), '**Blacksmith**'(Fig. 29), '**Mother and Child**' (later work))(Fig. 30), '**Five Women**' (Fig. 31) depicts all the range of evolution in his work from traditional Bengal school style to his own creative style inspired from folk art.



Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) had a lively imagination, a natural dexterity, and fine calligraphy for flowing hand found accidentally. Rabindranath Tagore was a creative exponent of the modern painting. His first exhibition was presented in Paris and after that in England, Germany, Denmark, Russia and in America in 1930, he had created over two thousand drawings and paintings. His creative expression came late in his life but his modern approach left a deep mark on the Indian Contemporary Art.

During his early age he supported Bengal art movement but after 1915 pointed out its limitations and lack of interest to be connected to higher mental views of the outside world. He formed *Vichitra* studio at Jorasanko in 1915 but unfortunately this project did not succeed and was closed after one and half year in 1917. Over two years later in 1919 he started *Kala Bhavan* at Shantineketan, in 1921, later the school was promoted to Visva-Bharti. Also Kala Bhavan became part of it after that Rabindranath invited Nandlal Bose to take all the responsibility of Kala Bhavan. It thrived under Nandlal's leadership from 1921-1940s. A global spirit was ingrained with national traditional traits or



qualities in this school. There was a regeneration of the Bengal School in its third stage developed at Shantiniketan, it is now a prestigious open air university, a universal meeting place for East and West.

his association with German **Bauhaus Group** and their first exhibition in India at Calcutta on the invitation of Rabindra Nath Tagor in 1921 turned the course of Indian Art. This was marked as the beginning of Modernism in Indian Art. The paintings of Rabindranath mostly depicted gloomy and shadowed faces with scribbling lines with little colours and ink. Paintings were mostly themed as '**head study**'(Fig.32,33), and '**Vase**'(Fig.34). his '**Veiled Woman**'(Fig.35) '**Brooding**'(Fig.36) '**Bird Fantastic**'(Fig.37) and '**Woman Face**'(Fig.38) are some of his important works.

1940s Calcutta saw the climax of the national freedom struggle, it was also the time of disaster and the fearful impact of the World War II. The effect of famine at the same time stirred Calcutta very strongly. Among the entire artist community the artists who painted the destruction scenes of famine in changing



media included **Zainul Abedin** and **Adinath Mukherjee**.

In 1943 the Calcutta group was formed. The group of eight artists in Calcutta were **Nirode Majumdar, Subho Tagore, Gopal Ghosh, Paritosh Sen, Prodosh Das Gupta, Rathin Maitra, Prankrishna Pal,** and **Kamala Das Gupta**. Soon the group morphed into a movement and served as the new life and energy to the Art of Bengal. The goal of the group was "*Art should be aiming to be international and interdependent*".¹⁸ Entire group aimed to reject or discard the dreamy imagery of the Bengal School and also the rigidity of academic art, to claim allegiance with movement in Europe. Later, **Ramkinker Baij, Govardhan Ash, Arbani Sen, Sunil Madhav Sen and Hemanta Mishra** joined this group also in 1952 and 1953 respectively, and this was a step toward setting a modern movement in art.¹⁹

During 1930's, Indian Sculptors started to cultivate individual styles and experimented with different method and media and with different ideas and messages. **Ramkinker Baij** (1910-1980) a versatile



genius, enjoyed in exploring new pastures in search of new vocabulary or new experiments. European art movements like impressionism, expressionism, surrealism and even abstraction boosted his artistic enthusiasm. Perhaps Ramkinker was the first Indian sculptor who suitably employed abstract idioms in his creation, witnessed in his outstanding composition of **Lamp Stand** at Santiniketan in 1914 (Fig.39). His sculptures like **Sujata** (1955), **Santhal Family** (1938) and **Mill Call** (1906), **Mithun** (1931) and **Harvester** (1943) are noticeable examples which reveals force and wild vitality visible in many of his concrete and cement sculptures also.²⁰

Modern vision have found expression in the works of **Devi Prasad Roy Chaudhury** (1899-1975) also such as in half bust portrait of his father Umaprasad Roy Chaudhury in 1924, **God of Destruction** (1934) and the tribute sculpture of his **Guruji Abanindranath Tagore** (Fig.40). Apart from these some unique sculptures such as **Triumph of Labor** (1954)(Fig.41) **Martyr's Memorial** (1956)(Fig. 42) **Gyarah Murti Statue** near President's estate, New Delhi(Fig.43),



When winter comes (1957), **Martyr's Column** (installed after artist's demise in 1982), are a few names in Indian history of sculptures which occupied a significant position for its detailed accuracy of anatomical particulars with high technical excellence. Amongst the Western artists *Epstein* and *Bourdelle* were highly esteemed by Devi Prasad Roy Chaudhury but he considered *Rodin* as the greatest of all others.²¹

To conclude on the saga of the Bengal School, it is necessary to acknowledge the importance of the art development which took place in this time of colonial supremacy in India. The initial Bengal School artists, while countering the direct influence of European art, tried to fill the breach of the lost connection of Indian Art tradition of Ajanta, Rajput and Mughal Miniature. The initial inspiration and the desire to revive the traditional art however, did not last long due to the need of the younger generation artists to identify themselves with the international trends in art. they drove the spirit of Bengal School towards more creative and innovative techniques. The change further advanced after the independence from British rule in



India in 1947. From here onwards Indian art was known as Contemporary Art of India.