

EMANCIPATION OF INDIAN ART FROM WESTERN BONDAGE (1900-1947)

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Works of art were created many thousand years before the invention of writing. Moved by the charm of nature, man tries to express his appreciation for it, in the form of art. These works of art are our chief source of information concerning pre-historic and ancient people. As civilization advanced, man tried to imitate more complex techniques which resulted in, the birth of painting, sculpture and architecture, painting being the oldest of the three.

The history of Indian painting is as old as Indian culture itself. Evidences of prehistoric painting in India are scanty, but the few, remains that have been discovered are the hunting scenes crudely drawn on the walls of a group of caves in the Kaimur Range of Central India and in the Vindhya Hills. With the decay of Buddhism in India in the seventh century A. D., the art of painting began to decline and there was a gap of nearly thousand years, before this art again revived its old glory. The decline of Indian painting during this period was due to unsettled political conditions. At the same time, there was foreign invasion. In its religious aspect, India was becoming transformed, on the one hand with the decline of Buddhism and steady rise of Hinduism, and on the other, by the advent of and growth of Islam.

At the end of the 14th century, northern India was invaded by hordes of the Turko-Mongolian conqueror Timur, the ancestor of the later Mughal Emperors. There was a barren desert of nearly a thousand years intervening between the peaks of

the 7th century Ajanta art, and the rise of the Mughal miniature. It came into prominence during the reign of Akbar in the latter half of the 16th century and during the reign of Jehangir, it was at its highest mark. The reign of his successor, Shah Jahan, marks the first step in its decline, while under the unsympathetic rule of Aurangzeb its death knell was rung. Mughal painting is a particular style of South Asian painting, generally confined to miniatures either as book illustrations or as single works to be kept in albums, which emerged from Persian miniature painting, with Indian Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist influences, and developed largely in the court of the Mughal Empire (16th-19th centuries), and later spread to other Indian courts, both Muslim and Hindu, and later Sikh.

The second half of the eighteenth century played an exceptionally important role in the development of paintings. During this period East India Company attained power in Eastern and Southern parts of India. With the advent of the British, new developments began in the field of Indian painting. The paintings of Indian artists attracted the attention of the English and, at the same time, Indian artists were also interested in the paintings brought by the British. Although there was a great demand for Indian paintings, the Indian painters were required to depict Indian life and scenes according to the taste of the British. The Indian artists were forced to adopt the Western methods.

The combination of the Indian and the Western techniques resulted in the synthetic or the hybrid style. Company style or Company painting is a term for hybrid Indo-European style of paintings made in India by Indian artists, many of whom worked for European patrons in the British East India Company in the 18th & 19th centuries.

By the end of the 18th century the East India Company had assumed political and administrative power in India. Having lost their traditional patrons, Indian patrons were looking for new employment. On the other hand, Company officials were interested in paintings that could capture the 'picturesque' and 'exotic' aspects of the land, besides recording the variety in the Indian way of life. Indian artists of that time, with declining traditional patronage fulfilled the growing demand for paintings of flora and fauna, landscapes, historical monuments, durbar scenes, images of native rulers, ceremonies, dance, music as well as portraits.

Company paintings were first produced in Madras Presidency in South India. This new style of painting soon disseminated to other parts of India such as Calcutta Murshidabad, Patna, Benaras, Lucknow, Agra, Delhi, Punjab, and centers in Western India. The favorite subjects were costumes, trades, crafts, methods of transport and festivals.

Calcutta was the flourishing centre of Company painting from the late eighteenth century, with the arrival of painters from the declining courts of Murshidabad, Lucknow and Patna. As many of the Murshidabad artists migrated and settled in Calcutta, there was a more pronounced adaptation to new styles and themes to cater to the tastes of the new British patrons. Indian artists changed their medium and now began to paint with water colour and also used pencil and European paper.

The infiltration of the European art tradition in India caused a wave of reactions in the Indian world of art and aesthetics. The combination of western technique and the Indian form was not very impressive because it was muddled form of Indian

and western style without any specification. Even traditional Indian paintings began to decline.

In order to revive the lost glory of Indian paintings many art schools were opened during 19th Century. The introduction of art teaching on the basis of the British pattern had far reaching implication on Indian Paintings. The British on one hand wanted to develop Indian taste, and on the other, wanted to train craftsmen so that the excellent tradition of Indian crafts might survive. But the actual training given was based on realistic rendering of objects and copying of western pattern.

Towards the end of the 19th century, one notable Indian artist, Ravi Varma, tried to reestablish Indian art through Western methods and techniques. He was successful because he took Indian art back to feudal themes. (With the coming of European painters, myth and religion were no more important subject matter of paintings. Nature, festival, common men's life were introduced as a subject of Indian painting). Raja Ravi Varma was among the first artists in the 19th Century to introduce a radical change by focusing on themes of Indian mythology and literature. He did this by resurrecting classical Indian sources from the Mahabharata and from Kalidasa's Play, and by combining this with European techniques of realism in colour, composition & perspective. Ravi Varma's Contribution has been a reaching. The most profound service he rendered was to invest the Hindu pantheon of gods and goddesses with face, figure and forms and to enable them to find a place in the hearts and homes of the poor and rich.

In the early years of the 20th century it was soon realized that the new trend started by Europeans in the art of painting was bound to cut Indian painters from their past. It was during this period that E.B.Havell arrived as the Principal of Calcutta Art School in 1896. He was the first Englishman to appreciate Indian art for its own values. E.B.Havell, drew the conclusion that Western art could never prosper in India. He believed that painting in India must remain Indian in spirit even when it adopted Western techniques of execution. With his efforts there emerged distinct-school of

Indian painting that came to be known as the Modern School of Artists.

The pioneer of the new school was Abanindranath Tagore. His work was twofold, to rediscover the best in the Indian art of the ancient and medieval eras and to regenerate art in its modern setting. Abanindranath Tagore, the founder of the Bengal school, was the first to evolve a typical Indian Style, characterized by a delicacy of line and color and lyrical romanticism. The "Indian style" soon spread throughout the country and the Bengal school assumed a national character. To revive the lost spirit of Indian art he decided to use the ancient artist's supreme mental weapon- emotion or feeling. For him, Art without *bhava* or the inner feeling of heart was mere mechanical exercise for the reproduction of the objects observed.

With the combined efforts of E.B.Havell and Abanindranath Tagore, the new phase of Indian art began. The new school started by Abanindranath contained a number of distinguished artists; prominent among them was Nandalal Bose. Nandalal's debut as a painter in 1905 had coincided with the great Swadeshi movement. It was largely due to the influence and encouragement of Tagores that Nandalal was exposed to the art and ideals of East Asia. Nandalal had briefly painted *patas* in the Kalighat style before he traveled to Ajanta, and once he saw the murals there he discerned a kinship between the Kalighat and Ajanta styles. He felt that the contemporary Kalighat style had a similar relationship to the classical Ajanta style as the art of the turn-of-the-century Tagore school did to Mughal and Persian painting. After seeing the Ajanta murals, he felt "a desire to tackle serious and thoughtful themes as in that [Ajanta] tradition." His later works, such as the Haripura Posters (1937) heralded a new realism in Indian art.

The artists of Bengal School like Gagandranath Tagore, Jamini Roy, Rabindranath Tagore and Amrita Shergil were pursuing their own creative experiments, giving diversity to Modern Indian painting. These artists tried to create an art that is unmistakably Indian, yet contemporary. By

1905, the Bengal School had rejected the Victorian history painting as the handmaiden of imperialism.

Moving away from the realism of the Colonial Art Schools, and the revivalist visual language of Abanindranath Tagore's Bengal School, artists such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Jamini Roy (1887-1972), and Gaganendranath Tagore (1867-1938), embraced a modernist simplification of form in the 1930s. Simultaneously, Amrita Shergil (1913-1941), made rural India a surrogate for her own gendered location within the larger nationalist struggle.

In early 1916, Rabindranath Tagore expressed his thoughts on the developments in Indian art. He wanted to broaden the vision of the Bengal School of Art. He wanted art to be a universal language not limited to a particular school. Painting for Tagore was the universal language through which an artist could communicate universally.

Gaganendranath Tagore began to paint in a cubist style. His exposure to art practices all around the world helped him to create a distinctly original style of painting. On the one hand he was inspired by the Japanese wash technique and on the other by the cubistic, futuristic and expressionist trends of European art practices. In spite of the eclecticism of his outlook, his vision and technique were very individual. Gaganendranath's great sense of humour and satire found expression in some remarkable caricatures, which were a commentary on the erosion of social and moral values under the impact of colonial rule.

In 1920s, Jamini Roy too experimented seriously with an alternative art language. Though trained in academic style, he became restless with the aesthetics of European art language. He even rejected the lyricism of the Bengal School. He went back to the vibrant language of the folk paintings and terracotta temples, images and idioms that he had first encountered during his childhood in his village, Beliatare, in Bankura.

Amrita Shergil received her art education in Paris and developed her own style of painting through the influence of Cezanne and Gauguin,

mixed with that of the Ajanta style. Her artistic mission was to express the lives of Indian people through her paintings.

During the 1940s, Indian art experienced an ideological shift in its course and a part of it veered more towards Marxist-Socialist ideals. For the first time in the history of Indian art, those artists emerged whose political consciousness was based on their immediate realities. During 1940s, young artists like Chittaprosad Bhattacharya (1915–78), Zainul Abedin (1917-76), Govardhan Ash (1907-96), Somnath Hore (1921-2006) and Gopal Ghose (1930-80), felt the exigency to respond to the appalling ground-reality of Bengal in the wake of the devastating Bengal Famine (1943-44) and the traumatic experiences of communal riots (1946).

The formation of the Calcutta Group in 1943, amidst the commotion of the Second World War, and the infamous Bengal famine, is a testimony of the artists waking up to a call different from the typical Nationalist agendas and Bengal School 'romanticism.' The artists professed humanistic ideals and, in their work, attempted to show their sense of concern in a language that combined the Bengali pictorial idiom with the contemporary modernist manner. The guiding motto of our Group is best expressed in the slogan: "Art should be international and inter-dependent."

Calcutta Group and Jamini Roy were among the sources of inspiration to artists in western India. It was during this period the Progressive Artists group came into existence. A number of young and intrepid artists made common cause against the prevalent confusion and stalemate to form what was called the Progressive Artists' Group. After partition

many artists migrated from Pakistan to India and formed Silpi Chakra. The Chakra believed that art, a creative adventure, should be the total expression of life, keeping pace with time and environment.

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