Images of Nationalism and Modernity: The Reconstruction of "Indian" Art in Calcutta at the Turn of the Century

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The issue of the "modernisation of culture" in late 19th century India was closely tied up with both the colonial and the nationalist project. Ideas of modernity, like the new reified notions of "art" and "culture" that it engendered, were continuously caught in the tensions between colonial models, Orientalist counter-models, and nationalism's selective induction of these in the formulation of its own goals. Nationalist aspirations for the "modern" had to increasingly accommodate, often retreat into, the contending claims of "Indian-ness": an "Indian-ness" that lay waiting to be retrieved from tradition, culture and past history. My work explores this theme in the specific context of the transformation in the form, practice and ideas of Indian art in Calcutta over the late 19th and early 20th century. My emphasis is as much on the changing art practice as on the nature of the aesthetic discourse that determined or altered the terms of that practice.

The focus of my study is on Calcutta, not simply because it was the prime site of colonial and nationalist activity, but also because Calcutta claimed to intellectually and culturally speak for all of Indian nationalism. It is here that we find, during these years, the most effective substitution of a colonial by a nationalist cultural hegemony. My period of study opens with the beginnings of British art education in Calcutta in the 1850s, which systematised the intrusion of Western tastes and standards and new patterns of patronage and livelihood in the arts. It is marked, at the other end, by an orchestration of nationalist self-awareness and the construction of a new entity of "national art" around the paintings of a group of artists led by Abanindranath Tagore, in the first decade of the 20th century. The colonial encounter, while it brought a sharp disjuncture with traditional practices, also paved the way for a conscious rediscovery of tradition by a group of nationalist writers and artists. The outcome was the arrival of a wholly different creed of Indian art, with a range of new aesthetic and ideological connotations accreting around its self-perception as "art" and as "Indian".

A return to this early history of modern Indian art inevitably calls for a reexamination of these very ideologies of "art", "Indian-ness" and "modernity" that it brought into being. These need to be placed within a specific history of their own. It is the history of how new contested notions of "art" and "artist", "taste" and "beauty" evolved and came to dominate in colonial India. It was a part of the wider process of the confrontation with new dominant forms of knowledge and the constitution of new social aspirations and identities. And it led to the process of differentiation of cultural institutions and genres, whereby culture itself was rendered a reified sphere accessible only to a select elite.

Taking up a chunk of this history, this paper studies the emergence of a particular dominant ideology of Indian art in Calcutta during the Swadeshi period,[1] and its powerful propagation as the only legitimate expression of national identity in modern India. This ideology of art and nationalism, while it gave Abanindranath's art movement its unique weight and status, inscribed itself into the whole reading of Indian history. It selectively defined and strung together elements of a "great art" tradition for India through the ages, highlighting certain periods and schools and collapsing others that could not be fitted into its framework. Much of the developments of the 19th century remained outside the scope of this art history, which the period dismissed as one of colonial intrusions and disruptions of tradition. At the end of it, Abanindranath Tagore was seen to emerge out of the long impasse, as the genuine inheritor and sole representative of the line of Indian "great art". To break out of this structure of history, it is essential to underline the extent to which its sacrosanct aesthetic categories and criteria were a construct of Orientalist and nationalist thought of this period. This, in turn, helps to see artists like Abanindranath and the phenomenon of the new "national art" as products of the very discontinuities with the past and severance with tradition which they militated against.

In the other paper presented,[2] I have studied the intrusions and ramifications of Western pictorial modes into local art practice in

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[1] The years of the Swadeshi or anti-partition movement in Bengal (c.1905-8), the first concerted expression of militant nationalism and techniques of open mass struggle, also saw, for the first time, the emergence of a distinct nationalist cultural forum. The political upsurge left its vivid imprint on cultural forms, producing a rich output of Swadeshi songs, plays, literature and art. See Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1973).

[2] Tapati Guha Thakurta, "Artists, Artisans and Mass Picture Production in Late Nineteenth- and Early Twentieth-Century Calcutta: The Changing Iconography of Popular Prints", not included in this collection.

late 19th century Calcutta. While this resulted in a radical displacement of "traditional" by "modern" genres, it also saw the marked appropriation of Western/modern techniques within a popular Indian iconography. This dismantled many of the existing hardened barriers between Western and Indian, high and popular art forms, even as it created new hierarchies of genres and styles within the newly constituted space of a middle-class culture in Bengal.

It is in this milieu, that a new wave of Orientalism and nationalism in Bengal, at the turn of the century, sought to recover a more "authentic" sense of an Indian aesthetic, and its own exclusive domain of "high art". In this paper, I will be studying the combined role of art historians, critics and artists in this project of reconstituting a past "great art" tradition for India and mobilising it to the current agenda of building a modern-day "national art". I also take up the parallel visual reconstruction of tradition and national identity in the paintings of the two most prominent Indian artists of the time, Raja Ravi Varma of Travancore (in Kerala) and Abanindranath Tagore of Bengal. The paintings are placed squarely within the new discourse of Indian art, to open up the significant way meanings and values were produced around images, and the concepts of a "national art" created. If the invasion of Western pictorial styles had marginalised most traditional genres, nationalist interventions in art involved a fresh set of displacements and differentiations. In Calcutta, in the 1900s, the rejection of Ravi Varma's work in favour of Abanindranath Tagore's exemplifies this process, whereby the former's mythological paintings became the foil against which ideas of a more "refined" and "genuine" Indian art were projected around latter's alternative style of painting. Abanindranath Tagore was thus established as the archetypal nationalist artist of modern India, bridging the gap between the glories of the past and the promise of the future. This privileging of one construct of Indian art over all others featured, centrally, in the consolidation of a nationalist cultural hegemony. Simultaneously, the reification and growing autonomy of a separate sphere of "culture"[3] made for the highly rarified nature of Swadeshi art in Bengal. It produced the paradox of an art which was avowedly nationalistic, yet consciously sealed off from the active sphere of politics and contained within its own aura of the "aesthetic" and "spiritual".

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[3] The separation of "art" from social and political life and the institutionalisation of a functionally differentiated sphere of the "aesthetic" has been to be the central experience of art in modernity and post-modernity. This is brilliantly argued in Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis, 1984).

The new Orientalism: the recovery and defence of Indian art

Over the 19th century, the trends of westernisation and modernisation had impressed upon the Bengali middle class a new social model of "artist" and "high art", associated with illusionist oil painting, the practice of the Western Academic style and the Europeanised art world of the Empire. By the end of the century, a second phase of European influence - the Orientalist discovery and definition of an Indian art tradition - overhauled these notions, providing the new Indian artist with a sense of a past heritage and a present mission of recovering and rebuilding that heritage. Paradoxically, the power and charisma of European knowledge now determined the main thrust of anti-colonial developments in art in Bengal.

The period since the 1850s had seen important transitions in British attitudes towards Indian art.[4] The initial fascination for the principles of Indian decorative design and craftsmanship, which followed from Britain's exposure to Indian crafts in the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London, was replaced in time by a criticism of the declining state of handicrafts in the Empire, with the attack directed against British commercialism and government negligence.[5] Simultaneously, in Britain, the reformist movement in industrial design expanded into a new phase of Arts and Crafts idealism. Under this movement of William Morris and C.R. Ashbee, craftsmanship became a "mode of thought" and a way of life; the earlier theoretical interest in the superior principles of Indian ornamental design grew into a broader social concern with the ideal pre-industrial village community in India that kept alive a vital tradition of handicrafts.

The turn of the century saw a further progression in European approaches to Indian art: from a Western classical bias to an exclusive "Indian" point of view, from an appreciation of only the "decorative arts" acknowledgement of the existence of a rich "fine arts" tradition with a sublime spiritual aesthetic that was uniquely its own. The dramatic turning point in attitude found its two most powerful spokesmen in E.B. Havell and A.K. Coomaraswamy. Emerging at

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[4] For British attitudes towards Indian art since the mid 19th century, see Partha Mitter, *Much Maligned Monsters: a History of European Reaction to Indian art* (Oxford, 1976) and Mahrukh K. Tarapor, *Art and Empire: the Discovery of India in Art and Literature* (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard, 1977).

[5] One of the earliest critiques was voiced by Sir G.C.M. Birdwood in his *Handbook to the British Indian Section, Paris Universal Exhibition of 1878*, p. 59.

the head of these shifting currents of thought, Havell and Coomaraswamy represented a confluence of the craft idealism and anti-industrial ethics of late Victorian England with currents of aesthetic nationalism in Bengal. From a career as art-teacher in the Schools of Art at Madras and Calcutta,[6] where his commitment lay primarily in the preservation and revival of the region's industrial arts, Havell emerged in the 1900s in a new role as a champion of Indian "fine arts" and the new movement of "Indian-style" painting. The ideals of William Morris and C.R. Ashbee were fundamental in shaping the young Coomaraswamy's first involvement with traditional arts, crafts and culture of his native land, Ceylon, and of the Indian subcontinent.[7] From the background of Arts and Crafts England he, too, moved to the arena of Swadeshi Bengal; the campaign to resurrect the dying handicraft traditions became part of a wider mission of defending Indian aesthetics and rewriting Indian art history. Both Havell and Coomaraswamy consciously stood outside the existing mainstream of European official thought and policy: determined to set the record right in favour of Indian art, they set up an alternative front in Orientalist scholarship.

This alternative front won its major victory in a momentous debate at the Royal Society of Arts in London in 1910, occasioned by Havell's sharp and extended critique of "Art Administration in India".[8] Here, the long-standing old guard of Euro-centric prejudices, which found Indian iconography "monstrous" and refused to accede to Indian painting and sculpture the status of "fine arts", was stormed by Havell's new claims for the subject: claims which now swept international opinion, rallying an influential British lobby around it. A famous letter of protest to *The Times* (28th February, 1910), drafted by William Rothenstein and twelve other prominent British artists and critics, stands as a vital manifesto of the new Orientalism, outlining the main contours of its aesthetic involvement with Indian art.[9] Indian art was seen both as a "great art" with glorious classical past and a "living art" that was continually being given a new lease of life in her surviving craft traditions. Its greatness as "great art" was located in a central religious

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[6] E.B Havell was Superintendent of the School of Industrial Arts at Madras from 1886 to 1890, and of the Government School of Art, Calcutta from 1897 to 1906.

[7] Coomaraswamy's book, *Medieval Sinhalese Art* (Broad Campden,1908), was printed at Morris' famous Kelmscott press at Ashbee's Chipping Campden guild. It was, in many ways, a manifesto of the Arts and Crafts movement, discovering in the medieval Kandyan Kingdom of Ceylon a nostalgic pre-industrial world of craftsmanship.

[8] *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts*, 4th February, 1910.

[9] The text of this letter is quoted in Partha Mitter, p. 270.

and divine inspiration, with the Buddha image highlighted as its supreme embodiment. And its fresh potentials as a "living tradition" was seen in the emergence of "a school of national art" in the work of Abanindranath Tagore and his group.

In 1902, Havell (then Superintendent of the Calcutta School of Art) had been the first to present Abanindranath Tagore to the West as his "discovery" and as the real hope and future of Indian art.[10] By 1910, following the Royal Society of Arts debate, he stood at the forefront of the defence and reinterpretation of the Indian art tradition. Back in England in 1906, his art-teaching career cut short in India, writing became his most important weapon: his corrective to the so-called ignorance and philistinism of British art administrators in India.[11] Havell's two books, *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (1908) and *The Ideals of Indian Art* (1911), came to be the seminal texts of the new Orientalist discourse. For both Havell and Coomaraswamy, the exercise in art historical scholarship was clearly polemical. Their very point of entry into the subject was as adversaries of the Euro-centric point of view that played up the factor of Hellenic influence on the little they found acceptable in Indian art (namely early Buddhist sculpture) and dismissed all Hindu iconography as barbaric. Their new interpretation of Indian art was thus inevitable ridden by a set of counter-assertions and theories that gave the reconstructed tradition its sharpest edges.

There were two main biases of old Orientalist scholarship that had to be resisted and revised. One was the theory of the Greek origin of the Buddha image,[12] where the focus was on the Buddhist sculptures of Gandhara, which showed a marked Graeco-Roman influence, as "the best specimens of the plastic art ever known to exist in India...".[13] The other was a dry archaeological approach, which while it investigated, classified and documented past traditions, steered clear of any aesthetic appreciation of Indian art. The "archaeological" approach was contested by Havell's "artistic" point of view which claimed to study Indian art in terms of its own unique and exclusive aesthetic philosophy that had found expres-

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[10] E.B. Havell, "Some Notes on Indian Pictorial Art", *The Studio*, October 1902, vol. 27, no. 115.

[11] His critique had found full expression in an earlier article, "British Philistinism and Indian Art", *The Nineteenth Century*, February 1903, no. 53.

[12] The main proponents of this theory were Albrecht Grunwedel's *Buddhist Art in India* (published in German in 1893, translated into English in 1901) and Alfred Foucher's *L'Art Greco-Bouddhique du Gandhara* (vol. 1, 1905).

[13] Vincent Smith, "Graeco-Roman Influence on the civilisation of Ancient India", *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, 1889, vol. 58, no. 3, p. 173.

sion well outside the minor arena of Gandhara.[14] There evolved a new reading of Indian art history which looked back to the early Buddhist art of Nasik, Karle, Bharhut and Sanchi - which also looked past Gandhara to discover the more genuine "Indian" type in the Mathura images of Buddha and in the later sculptures of Sarnath and Amaravati.[15]

The central issue was the definition of Indian-ness: of what one could classify as purely and quintessentially "Indian" in India's art heritage. The answer was found in the abstruse realm of religion and philosophy, and in the very pattern that was devised for the history of Indian art: a history that was conceived as a "paradigm of antiquity and originality".[16] Western misconceptions, it was argued, stemmed from the application of European normative standards to Indian art forms, and the resultant inability to look beyond its decorative aspects and absorb the "spirit of Eastern artistic thought". However, in rejecting Western Renaissance and Academic standards, the new Orientalists did not attempt to analyse the different formal codes and conventions of Indian painting and sculpture. Ignoring the complexities of norm and form, they wrapped up Indian art in the mystique of spirituality and other-worldliness. Under the influence of neo-Platonic ideas, which enjoyed a great preponderance in 19th century Europe among all critics of neo-classical and Academic art, art in India was associated with an abstracted metaphysical ideal of beauty and the "inner" vision of the artist. While the Western artist was seen to capture the outer realities of nature, the Indian artist was seen to look beyond the illusions of the real to create an ideal mental image.[17]

The parallel reconstruction of Indian art history blocked out its development into two main phases - the period of the great efflorescence of Hindu and Buddhist art from about the 3rd to the 9th centuries, A.D.; and the period of Mughal court painting af the 16th and 17th centuries. It was implicit in this classification that the first phase formed the mainstream and core of Indian art history. For Mughal painting, being secular and court-based, could not by de-

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[14] The Hellenic bias was also powerfully overhauled by Coomaraswamy in a lecture he delivered at the International Orientalist Conference at Copenhagen in 1908 - see his "The influence of Greek on Indian Art" in *Essays in National Idealism* (Colombo, 1909).

[15] Coomaraswamy, "The Indian Origin of the Buddha Image", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 46, no. 2; Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting* (London, 1908), pp. 83-109.

[16] E.W. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered" in *Europe and its Others, Papers from the Essex Conference on the Sociology of Literature* (Colchester, 1985), p. 17.

[17] Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, pp. 25, 28-38; Coomaraswamy, "The Aims and Methods of Indian Art" in *Essays in National Idealism*.

finition share the central spiritual ideal of Indian art and claim to be "great art" on par with the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The emphasis thus came to lie on reconstructing an ancient classical period of Indian art of the Maurya and Gupta era, the period of the great diffusion of Indian art and religion all over China, Korea, Japan and South East Asia. For Havell, Ajanta, Ellora, Elephanta and finally Borobudur marked, in ascending order, the "golden" and imperial age of Indian art.[18]

This Orientalist construct of Indian art was full of essentialisms. It followed from the tendency to search out in the history of Indian culture and civilisation a Platonic ideal, a kind of perfect and eternal prototype that embodied the "real" and "essential" India. Such an India was identified with a sublime spiritual aesthetic, a "classical" heritage of Hindu and Buddhist art and an ideal religious, philosophical and social order of the Vedas; it was also associated with an ideal racial type of the Aryan. In contrast to earlier race theories that were being applied to the study of Indian art, which tied up the relative merit of architectural styles with a hierarchy of purer or lesser racial types,[19] Havell's ideal of Aryan India was a wholly essentialist one - it tended to subsume all different religious creeds and all the different phases of Indian art within the concept of an all-pervasive "Indo-Aryan" culture.[20] This was an integral part of his theory of "the great Indian synthesis", where the central masterforce of Hindu religion and culture was seen to engulf and absorb all of Indian art and architecture, running through all the categories of Buddhist, Jain or Muhammadan. Thus, the "Indianness" of Mughal art was emphasised by showing how the Persian and extraneous elements within it were transformed by the greater force of pre-existing Hindu traditions.[21] Coomaraswamy, too, underlined the combination of Persian technique and Indian sentiment in the creation of a full "original", "Indian", school of painting in Mughal India.[22] Later, with Coomaraswamy's discovery and study of medieval Rajput painting in 1916, this Hindu religious genre of painting was projected as more purely "Indian" than Mughal court painting and placed wit-

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[18] Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, p. 19.

[19] See, for example, James Fergusson, *On The Study of Indian Architecture* (London, 1867), pp. 9-10.

[20] Havell, *The Ancient and Medieval Architecture of India, a study in Indo-Aryan Civilisation* (London, 1915), pp. 5-6.

[21] Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, pp. 182-183, 225-226.

[22] Coomaraswamy, "Medieval Indian Painting", *The Modern Review*, April 1910, pp. 318-319.

hin an unbroken line of "Indian" art tradition that could be stretched back to Ajanta.[23]

The defence and definition of Indian art, in these early writings of Havell and Coomaraswamy, tended to be more emotional than scholarly. Many of these ideas would not stand the test of time and academic scrutiny. But, in the first decades of the 20th century, Havell's and Coomaraswamy's writings themselves acted as the main determinants of the nature of scholarship and knowledge on Indian art, with claims to be the only "true" and "legitimate" representation. And the working of their ideas within the nationalist environment in Bengal gave them a unique force and validity at the time, and made for the main power of this new Orientalism. The hegemony of the new knowledge constituted itself precisely around its point of departure - around its opposition to colonial policies and attitudes, and its close alliance with nationalist thought. While it rid itself of its colonial content, the hegemony of the new Orientalism was manifest in its ability to shape, define and fix the image of Indian art in both Western and nationalist imagination.

Orientalism now created a powerful equation between the ideas of "art", "tradition" and "Indian-ness". The image it created of Indian art, as integrally linked with antiquity, religion and transcendental philosophy, reinforced the wider image of India as a part of the "timeless East", encapsulated within an idealised past. The obsession with the past and with essences lay in the very nature of Orientalism: for it successfully reduced India to an object of study, stamping her with her "customary, passive, non-participating" character.[24] Escaping from long-standing images of the monstrous and barbaric, Indian art now receded into an opposite pole of the abstruse and metaphysical. Even as it recovered and reinstated the subject, Orientalism continued to locate it in a separate insulated sphere, where its actuality receded in maintaining it as Europe's exotic Other. The "arrival" on the scene of Indian nationalism would have much the same ramification of mystifying and rarifying the notions of "art" and of an "Indian" tradition.

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[23] Coomaraswamy, *Rajput Painting* (London, 1916), vol. 1: Text, vol. 2: Plates.

[24] Anouar Abdel Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis", *Diogenes*, 44, Winter 1963, pp. 107-8.

The nationalist cause: the polemics of tradition and the aesthetic formulations for "Indian" painting

Modern Indian scholarship on Indian art, as on most aspects of Indian's ancient, classical past, was born and bred under the aegis of Orientalism. A pioneering work, *Essay on the Architecture of the Hindus* (1834) by the young South Indian scholar, Ram Rez, was produced under British initiative and direction for a Western readership.[25] The British relied on a "native" scholar to piece together fragments of an ancient Sanskrit architectural treatise, the *Manasara,* to uncode the aesthetic canons of Hindu architecture. Such a study affirmed the Orientalist emphasis on the sanctity of the "text" as containing the key to the revelation of knowledge. It also marked a new spirit of scientific enquiry in British Orientalism, which tried to define a systematised body of ideas out of what was seen as an amorphous entity of "tradition" in India. More systematic study and classification (of the Hindu temple architecture and sculpture of Orissa, its iconography and its "trammels of orders and styles") marked a later Indian work, Dr. Rajendralal Mitra's two-volume book on *The Antiquities of Orissa* (1875, 1880), sponsored by the newly-established Archaeological survey of India and the Royal Society of Arts, London.

In both Ram Raz's and Rajendralal Mitra's works, the emphasis was on "antiquity" as a self-professing value and the essence of India. For Rajendralal Mitra, archaeologist and antiquarian, the choice of Orissa itself carried the point. Protected from the intrusion of commerce, the ravages of war and inroads of Muslim rule, the ancient monuments of Orissa were seen to represent the most "authentic" and pristine of Indian traditions.[26] In another two-volume compendium on the ancient and medieval history of Indo-Aryans, Rajendralal Mitra strongly reiterated the Orientalist race theories to expound the "Aryan" pedigree of Indian civilisation.[27] One of the first Bengali books on the history of Indian art, written in 1874, by a teacher of the Calcutta School of Art, Shyama Charan Srimani, *Suksha Shilper Utpatti o Arya Jatir Shilpa Chaturi* (Fine arts in ancient India, with a short sketch of the origin of art), was concerned with the similar theme of the "ancient", "classical" and "Aryan" heritage of Indian art.

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25 The book was published from London for the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland.

26 *The Antiquities of Orissa,* vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1875), p. 2.

27 *Indo-Aryans: Contributions towards the Elucidation of their Ancient and Medieval History,* vols. 1 and 2 (London/Calcutta, 1881).

These first Indian forays into art history had their distinct nationalist undertones. Well before Havell and Coomaraswamy, Rajendralal Mitra entered into a long controversy with James Fergusson to refute the latter's theory about the Greek origins of ancient Hindu and Buddhist architecture and to assert an independent "original" tradition of stone architecture of the "Indo-Aryans".[28] And Shyama Charan Srimani's book concluded with an appeal to his countrymen to come to the service of the "motherland" by recovering her past art traditions. The "motherland" was accorded the sanctity of a Hindu temple or of a Hindu mother, whose privacy and purity was under threat from foreign obtrusion. But European Orientalists, he believed, were still hovering on the outer peripheries; the full wealth and secret of the interior would only be revealed to Indians.[29]

Such a zealous sense of protectiveness about the past heritage ran parallel to a concern with the present state of art in the country and discussions about what could be posited as the right and best form of "art". Srimani's book, a slim inexpensive publication consciously intended for a wide local readership, set the trend towards a popular forum of writing and debates on art in Bengal in the late 19th century, that gave voice to a growing aesthetic self-awareness among the educated middle class.

The art world of colonial Calcutta remained sharply polarised between the exclusive world of European "high art" and traditional "bazaar" practices; in between, an emerging middle class, with its new stock of writers, critics and artists tried to situate itself, consciously evolving its own middle space. The new artistic codes it cultivated needed both its marks of "improvement" and "refinement" vis-à-vis traditional pictures, and its marks of cultural autonomy vis-à-vis European "high art". The negotiation of its new artistic identity was caught in a two-way pull - between India's past as a source of pride and autonomy, and the present colonial model of "progress" and "modernisation". Its very conception of "art" still remained couched in the training of the British Art Schools. A strong sense of artistic degeneration separated their past from their present, and produced a driving desire for self-improvement and progress through proper instruction and effort.

At the same time, the Bengali middle class began to carve out its own space for manoeuvre and self-expression within a new culture

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[28] Ibid., vol. 1, pp. v, 4-6,11.

[29] Srimani, *Suksha Shilper Utpatti o Arya Jatir Shilpa Chaturi* (Calcutta, 1874), p. 76.

of art journals and a new trend of art-criticism. This involved some striking shifts in aesthetic preferences and concerns. From its status as a lucrative and respectable profession, art became a part of the high literary culture of Bengal, riding on a new wave of reproductions and criticisms in illustrated magazines. The interest in the acquisition of the "right" artistic skills and modes of representation was topped by new preoccupations with aesthetic sensibility and the emotive powers of art. The concepts of beauty (*saundarya*), lyricism (*rasa*) and emotion (*bhava*) now appeared as key categories of art criticism in Bengal. Both the work of art and the vocabulary of criticism assumed a strong literary flavour. The idea gained ground with prominent litterateurs and critics that the greatest potentials for new painting in India lay in giving visual form to the themes, images and metaphors of ancient Sanskrit literature and mythology. While the artist, inspired by Western neo-classical paintings resorted to themes from Indian epics and classical literature, the critic's approach tended to be even more overtly literary, meandering away from the visuals to reflect broadly on the ideals and emotions embodied in the classical themes. It was all a part of the attempt to define a new Indian "high art" and its requisite codes of appreciation. It contributed directly to the process of the reification of art in society. The nature of criticism, removing from pictures their non-literary communicative potentials, increasingly appropriated them within a secluded zone of "art" to which only a few select literati had access.

A specific nationalist ideology in art emerged in the first decade of the 20th century out of these changing trends of painting and criticism and the changing opinions on art. But it would articulate itself primarily through a "sense of distinction"[30] from preceding trends, differing sharply on its definition of "Indian" painting, arguing a new case for what made Indian art exclusively "Indian". Nationalist sentiments now directed themselves not merely at developing a "high art" for the nation, but also at cultivating some Romantic aesthetic values and an Oriental style, in clear opposition to Western Academic norms. The notion of Indian-ness came to rest, centrally, on these alternative forms and formulations. Where critics had earlier marked out for Indian artists a separate domain of themes, images and literary moods, a new camp of writers and aesthetes stressed the accompanying need for a separate "Indian" style and sensibility, which alone could convey the greatness and

30 As formulated by Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London, 1984), such a "sense of distinction" provides a social elite with its exclusive stance as the chosen bearers and formulators of the only "legitimate" culture of the time.

uniqueness of the themes. The obsession with a "superior" and autonomous Indian aesthetic now shaped a new approach to Indian art history, polemicising the entire discourse on tradition. For the whole interpretation of India's artistic past was intended to legitimise the aesthetic concerns and assertions of the present.

The Orientalist championship of Indian "fine arts" at this time became crucial for nationalist self-esteem. In fact, it was the new Orientalism which gave nationalism in Bengal a distinct artistic cause: a manifesto for a reinterpretation of the past and a present-day artistic "renaissance". The alliance with the Orientalists also made for the special power and prestige of a select nationalist coterie, giving it its sense of exclusiveness in the understanding of past tradition and in the formulations for a new "Indian" painting.

Initiating a reformist programme for Indianising the curriculum of the Calcutta School of Art, Havell between 1897 and 1906 stood as the lead figure of the movement to save Indian art. With the publication of his *Indian Sculpture and Painting* in 1908, he became the "guru", not just of Abanindranath, but of a wider body of Bengali art enthusiasts, who were effusive in their gratitude to him for revising their entire view of the Indian art tradition. The book was seen as a "weapon" by which all enemies of Indian art could be "vanquished" and the primacy of "old national ideals" reasserted.[31] Havell's new "Indian" and "artistic" point of view found a powerful indigenous parallel in the writings of Abanindranath Tagore. From the 1900s, Abanindranath's pen proved to be as influential as his brush in setting up the case for Indian art, as he, along with some other artists and critics of his group, took up the simultaneous scholarly investigation of Indian art and aesthetics. Circulating widely in journals like *Prabasi*, *Bharati* or *Bharatvarsha*, this corpus of Bengali writing would give the Orientalist ideas a new relevance and dimension in the contemporary environment.

One of Abanindranath's first expositions on the subject, *Bharat-Shilpa* (1909) dealt explicitly with the issue of "the excellence of Indian art and reasons for its revival." It upheld a Pan-Asian ideal of a single united Asiatic art, combining the heritage of China, Japan and India, standing proudly apart from the European tradition. This idea of a united Asiatic art had emerged, most forcefully, in the book, *The Ideals of the East* (1903), written by the Japanese

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[31] Special address for Havell at a meeting of the Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, Calcutta, 1909; letters to Havell from Priyanath Sinha (31st March, 1909) and Mohini Ranjan Sen (26th July, 1909) - Havell Papers (India Office Library and Records, London).

scholar-ideologue, Kakuzo Okakura, during his visit and stay in Calcutta. The book had immediately entered the new discourse of Orientalism - an Orientalism which now sought, not merely a lost ancient civilisation in the East, but a living wave of spirituality and wisdom that could resist the colonisation of the West. It also had immense nationalist appeal for India, for its vision of a Pan-Asian art placed Indian art and religion as the master tradition within it, the source from which influences moved outwards in the age of Buddhism.

Following the lead of Okakura, Abanindranath moved from an Oriental to an Indian national consciousness keeping as his central theme the spiritual and meditative essence of all Eastern art. While "great art" in India was integrally linked with religion and philosophy, the very idea of art now acquired a religious mystique. Abanindranath believed that art, like religion, was a matter of a profound intuitive sensibility, eluding all explanation and definition of scholars, accessible only through devotion and worship (*bhakti* and *sadhana*).[32] At the same time, nonetheless, Abanindranath turned to the study of ancient Sanskrit texts to recover an " authentic" sense of an Indian aesthetic and unveil its secret codes and canons. Delving into two texts, *Sukranitisara* and *Pratima-lakshana* (a chapter in Varahamihira's *Vrihat Samhita*), he outlines a set of norms for the creation of images of Hindu deities, which constituted the basis of what he termed an "Indian artistic anatomy".[33] He particularly explored the way different human limbs and organs were given their "ideal" shape through comparison with the natural forms of flowers, foliage, birds and animals. It was Abanindranath's opinion that when such poetic similes and analogies came into play in art, form transcended itself and reached the "region of thought".[34] While he was probing, quite specifically, the question of form, he was working throughout with the notion of a transcendental Indian aesthetic. And he defended the stylised conventions of anatomy in Indian art as suggestive of a "higher" perception, "beyond the form of things".[35]

The similar theme of the role of the mind in art predominated Abanindranath's reconstruction of the six canons of Indian pain-

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32 Abanindranath Tagore, *Bharat-Shilpa* (Calcutta, 1909), pp. 82-83; "Shilpe Bhakti-mantra", *Bharati*, Jaishtha 1317/1910.

33 "Murti", *Prabasi*, Paush, Magh 1320/1913. English translation, *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy* (Calcutta, 1941).

34 This idea is elaborated in an essay called "Sadrishya" in Abanindranath Tagore's *Bageshwari Shilpa Prabandhavali* (Calcutta, 1941).

35 *Some Notes on Indian Artistic Anatomy*, p. i.

ting, which he retrieved and pieced together from a single couplet in Yashodhara's commentary on Vatsayana's *Kamasutra*.[36] Each of the "six limbs", as they were called, were interpreted in terms of the greater importance of inner perceptions and symbolic significances vis-a-vis a mere grasp of external form. There was a special concern with providing the antiquity of the source and the "classical" pedigree of the canons. While the dating of both the Vatsayana text and Yashodhara's commentary remained uncertain, the aesthetic prescripts were located around the 4th and 5th centuries A.D., to coincide with the "period of brilliant activity" of Indian painting at Ajanta and Bagh.[37] Art was placed before the code: the achievement in painting was used to corroborate the prevalence of the canons.

In the nationalist writings of the period, Ajanta emerged as the highpoint of the Indian art tradition, the epitome of Indian's artistic and spiritual past. The early archaeological excavations at Ajanta, and the project undertaken in the 1870s by Principal Griffiths' students of the Bombay School of art of copying the frescoes was superseded by a fresh "artistic" discovery of Ajanta in the Orientalist circles in London. In 1909-1910, Lady Christiana Herringham, under the sponsorship of the newly established Indian Society of London, went on a study tour of the caves, accompanied by some of Abanindranath's young students, Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar and Samarendranath Gupta. Abanindranath described their trip to Ajanta as a "pilgrimage", hoping that it would rekindle the flame of Indian art in modern times.[38]

Asit Haldar's book, *Ajanta*, written soon after in 1913, brings into focus again the metaphysical aesthetic concerns that had accreted around the issue of Indian art. In his pioneering work of 1871, Srimani, with his standards set by Western Academic art, had attributed to Ajanta the "merits" of perspective, light and shade, and realistic anatomy drawing.[39] By 1910, the points of admiration had significantly shifted, as had the whole idea of "great art" . For Asit Haldar, the true greatness of the Ajanta paintings lay in the faculty of *dhyana*, which enabled the painters to conceptualise images through the inner eye. Form in art was now sublimated by the greater force of the "ideal" that it was meant to embody. Just as an aversion to the Academic illusionist style led Asit Haldar to high-

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36 "Shadanga or Six Limbs of Painting" and "Philosophy of Shadanga", *The Modern Review*, May, June 1914. Reprinted as a single booklet (Calcutta, 1921).

37 Ibid.,p. ii.

38 Asit Haldar, *Ajanta* (Calcutta, 1913), foreword by Abanindranath Tagore.

39 Srimani, pp. 63-76.

light only the linear elements in Ajanta painting, so also the obsession with the idea and emotion in art produced the view that pictorial composition, here, converged only on a single primary ideal. Clearly, the construct of an idealistic super-sensory art was limiting and distorting the view of Ajanta and Indian painting in general, obscuring the importance of colour and volume, and of narrative, multi-focal structures. However, it was this very definition of Ajanta painting which now placed it at the peak of the hieratic pattern for Indian art history that Havell and Coomaraswamy had devised, placing the ancient above the medieval past, the Buddhist and Hindu tradition above the Mughal. Feeding on the same contrast with the secular court art of the Mughals, the religious art of Ajanta formed the central point around which another artist, Samarendranath Gupta, defined for Indian art a "classical" tradition that was supremely her own.[40]

All such studies of the past heritage, were meant to directly inspire the growth of a new "national art" in the country. Nationalist discourse on art in Bengal centered around the critical theme of a recovery of tradition. Yet, the potentials of utilising traditional forms, motifs and conventions in constructing a modern self-identity were seldom concretely explored. Tradition was evoked, less in terms of particular styles and modes, more as a value in itself: a perennial value of any "great art".[41] It lay in the nature of the aesthetic discourse of the time, that nationalism in art became primarily a matter of a heightened moral and aesthetic value. What it upheld, in the name of Indian-ness, were some rarified ideals of "beauty", "sublimity", and "spirituality" which it saw as the essence of Indian art and the birthright of the new nation.[42] The cultivation of a "higher" aesthetic sense was seen to be indispensable to the process of "nation-building" and "national greatness". The early nationalists, too, had placed high premium on artistic progress; the new nationalist ideology, however, rested on claims to a "higher" aesthetic sensibility and a more "authentic" conception of "Indian" art. The paintings of Abanindranath Tagore and his following concretised its ideas of a "superior" Indian-ness; conversely, the ideology and its propaganda were vital in creating a "movement" out of the work of Abanindranath Tagore and a select group of artists,

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[40] Samarendranath Gupta, "The Classic Art of Ajanta", *The Modern Review*, December 1913, January, February 1914.

[41] O.C. Gangoly, "The Value of Tradition in Art", *The Modern Review*, October 1909.

[42] This theme is powerfully expounded by Samarendranath Gupta in his article , "Art and Art Culture", *The Modern Review*, June 1911, and by Sri Aurobindo in his manifesto, *The National Value of Art* (Calcutta, 1936).

and in giving it its status as the sole representative of an "artistic revival" in modern India.[43]

The making of an "Indian-style" and a "national art"

The nationalist art movement in Bengal found its lifeline in the thriving culture of journals and literary miscellanies which circulated reproductions of painting with long notes by critics and served as a lively forum for debates and discourses on Indian art. More than before, the writer and critic were now catapulted to a central role in the making of the movement. The moulding of an "art public" with discerning tastes for a "true" Indian art became as crucial as the painting of "Indian" pictures or expositions of Indian tradition.[44] The role of the critic became vital in the evaluation of "right" and "wrong", in the interpretation of content, and in the avowed need to delve beneath form and unravel the inner "ideal" of a painting. Words formed a shield around images, as the language of the visual was mediated through the critic's language of description and appreciation. This function of criticism manifested itself, most pointedly, in the way the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore and his group were propagated in the two prestigious journals of Bengal, *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review*, and presented to a specially constructed audience for "high art". Here, influential critics like Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita (disciple of Vivekananda and ideologue of a militant Hindu nationalism) projected these paintings as the only genuine specimens of a "national art", in pointed exclusion of the mythological paintings of Raja Ravi Varma that had once excited admiration. Once again, it was Orientalist opinion, the verdict of Havell, Coomaraswamy and Nivedita, which took the lead in revising attitudes and shifting preferences from the work of Ravi Varma to those of Abanindranath's "New School of Indian Painting". This contrast between Ravi Varma and Abanindranath Tagore was the main premise on which a new nationalist ideology in art was erected.

Yet, in the 1890s, when prints of Ravi Varma's mythological paintings first arrived in Calcutta, they had been enthusiastically rated as India's own new genre of "high art", evoking all the technical finesse and aestheticism associated with the concept. A member of the Travancorean aristocracy and a self-taught oil painter, Ravi Varma, then, was at the peak of his career, resting on the patro-

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[43] Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, pp. 256-257.

[44] The importance of the critic's role was propagated by Coomaraswamy, in particular - "About Pictures", *The Modern Review*, November 1910.

nage of the colonial rulers and Indian Maharajas, enjoying all-India fame for his application of a polished Academic style to themes from classical literature and Hindu mythology. A painting like "Hamsa-Damayanti", a visualisation of a cameo from the legend of Nala and Damayanti, provides one of the finest examples of this genre of *pauranic* paintings perfected by the artist.[45] The equivalent of European history and neo-classical paintings, such pictures replicated a similar grandeur of costumes and scenario and dramatisation of episodes within epic Indian settings. The figure of Damayanti in the painting carries a contemporary cognisable identity: that of an aristocratic, resplendently attired South Indian lady, posing against the marble column and steps of a stately mansion. But the surface presence of the image acquires a new underlayer of meanings through its literary allusions and its placement within mythic narrative. The stance and expressions of the woman, and the presence of the swan messenger introduce a new set of referents, transporting the scene from its immediate to its imagined mythological setting.

The speech delivered by Lord Minto on "The Fine Arts of India" in 1871, exhorting the new Indian artist, trained in the European style of painting, to enrich their "superior" skills with a true stuffing of India, found its answer in such mythological paintings of Ravi Varma.[46] Interestingly, here too, Orientalist tastes and ideas defined the scope of new, improved Indian painting. Ravi Varma, himself, saw his paintings as fulfilling a vital need in Indian art - as "refining" the visual tastes of his countrymen by providing an alternative to the "atrocious" forms of religious pictures on the market.[47] A combination of such altruistic and commercial motives led the artist to set up an oleography press on the outskirts of Bombay in 1892, which began the mass-production and country-wide circulation of colour prints of his paintings. Ravi Varma, the most prestigious name in the elite circles of Anglo-Indian art, also became the most popular symbol of mass art. Simultaneously, the arrival of the Ravi Varma pictures in Calcutta coincided with the surfacing of a new cultural elite who would be the arbiters of middle class taste. It augured the use of some novel aesthetic criterions for the appraisal of Indian painting, by which Ravi Varma's

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45 For technical reasons, it has been impossible to reproduce here the illustrations which accompanied the presentation of the paper.

46 The speech is qouted in V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual* (Trivandrum, 1906), vol. 3, chapter XVII.

47 Reminiscences of the artist's son, Rama Varma, as qouted in the Malayali biography by Balakrishna Nayar, *Raja Ravi Varma* (Trivandrum, 1953).

paintings were placed on a scale far above other prevalent varieties of Hindu mythological pictures.

The lithographs circulated by a press called the Calcutta Art Studio, which had flooded the Calcutta market in the 1880s provided critics with their main point of contrast to Ravi Varma. Such mythological scenes, as the representation of an episode from the same legend of Nala-Damayanti, were also the product of Western training: the work of ex-students of the Calcutta School of Art who had set up this lithographic enterprise. A "Western style" was clearly apparent, in these pictures, in the realistic modelling of anatomies, treatment of landscapes, and frequent affinities of images with European Venuses, Cupids or cherubs. But, despite the grafting of a Western Academic style, these mythological pictures were found by critics to be singularly lacking in "emotive feeling" (*bhava*) and a sense of beauty - the central attributes of "art". They were now lumped together with the "bazaar" pictures of Battala and Kalighat (the very pictures they had displaced by virtue of their "improved" techniques and representational skills) in a common category of the "hideous" and "debased". As half-tone block prints of Ravi Varma's *pauranic* paintings found their way into a new crop of Bengali magazines, they represented the much needed "artistic" alternative to the crudities of the Calcutta Art Studio prints. The critic and litterateur, Balendranath Tagore, in his detailed appreciation of individual pictures of Ravi Varma, highlighted the elements of romantic and lyrical emotion in each: the pain and poignance of separation writ large across the faces of the love-lorn heroines, "Damayanti" and "Shankutala", as she is shown glancing back at her lover Dushyanta under the pretext of picking a thorn from her feet or the lofty characterisation of the lovers in the painting he considered one of the artist's best, "Arjun and Subhadra".[48] The naive application of literary metaphors by the Calcutta Art Studio artists, it was alleged, led to distortions of "natural" appearances. But Ravi Varma showed the way a painting could appropriate literary images and descriptions, while remaining within the bounds of what was visually "beautiful" and "pleasing".

Clearly, the notions of "grace" and "beauty" were inextricably tied to degrees of accomplishment within the conventions of Western Academic art. In late 19th century Bengal, such conventions had acquired the sanctity of a universal standard. Writers like Rabindranath Tagore emphasised, in this context, the advantages

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48 Balendranath Tagore, "Ravi Varma", "Hindu Debdebir Chitra" in *Chitra o Kavya* (Calcutta, 1894).

enjoyed by the visual arts over literature in India in making national unity. Looking proudly to the paintings of Raja Ravi Varma and others of its kind, he upheld the universality of their appeal to his countrymen, both in terms of their ancient "classical" themes, and of the perfected naturalism of their form.[49] Liberally reproducing Ravi Varma's paintings in the first issue of *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review*, the editor, Ramananda Chatterjee, in 1907, was also regarding Ravi Varma as "the greatest painter of modern India" and an important agent of "nation building". He believed that art in modern India had three main purposes to serve: a historical purpose of reconstructing the glorious past of the country; a moral purpose of elevating the thoughts and emotions of the viewer; and the political purpose of nation building. Ravi Varma's mythological paintings were seen to have fulfilled all these didactic ends.[50] At the time, however, there was a definite awareness, now, of a "foreign style" in Ravi Varma, notwithstanding the "national usefulness" of his paintings.

By that stage, the appearance of a professed "Indian style" of painting of Abanindranath Tagore had shifted the site of nationalist aesthetic preferences and brought a new focus to its artistic cause. Academic realism, so long regarded as the "proper" and most improved form of representation, was now dismissed by a select group as alien and inferior. Held out as a symbol of the mediocrity and imitative culture that pervaded India under colonial rule, the realistic style was also attacked as a "cheap external gloss", which seduced an untrained public by its surface imitation of life. A strong weight of Orientalist admiration behind Abanindranath Tagore served to drive in a deep wedge between him and Ravi Varma, narrowing the definition of Indian-ness. Stamped with the authority of "true" understanding of past tradition, critics like Havell, Coomaraswamy and Nivedita could also command the same authority in their opinions about the present. It was argued that the choice of themes from classical Indian literature and mythology was not enough; the treatment of these had to correspond to a level of idealism, reverence and lofty emotion in keeping with the sacred, epic quality of the subjects.

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[49] Rabindranath expressed these views with reference also to paintings and sculpture on "Indian" themes by other Art Schools artists of Calcutta and Bombay in "Mandirabhimukhe" and "Kadambari Chitra", *Pradip*, Paush 1305 (1898-99), Magh 1306 (1900).

[50] "Ravi Varma", *The Modern Review*, January 1907.

The same painting of "Arjun and Subadhra", rated so highly by Balendranath, strongly violated Nivedita's Victorian sense of decorum:

> Not every scene is fit for a picture... in a country in which romantic emotion is never allowed to show itself publicly, pictures of the wooing Arjuna and Subadhra abound.[51]

Allegations of "vulgar" sensuality and "theatrical conceptions", hurled by Coomaraswamy against Ravi Varma's paintings, were directly contrasted with the "reticence" and "moral dignity" that were seen to characterise the new paintings of Abanindranath Tagore.[52] It was through a classic Kantian opposition between a "taste of sense" and "a taste of reflection" - between sensual pleasure and pleasure purified of itself - that a new sacred notion of a "higher" aesthetic was constructed and projected as the essence of the Indian tradition. To highlight the difference with Ravi Varma, Coomaraswamy picked out Abanindranath's illustrations of lyric themes from Kalidasa's literature - such as "The Banished Yaksha" (an illustration of Meghaduta/The Cloud Messenger) or "The Traveller and the Lotus" (an illustration of the stanza describing the autumn season in Ritusamhara). The choice of themes from Kalidasa, the great *litterateur* of the "Gupta golden age", had also invested Ravi Varma's paintings with their Indian "classical" pedigree. But, where earlier critics had lauded Ravi Varma's ability to adapt the vivid word-pictures and metaphors of works like *Abhijnana Shakuntala,* while remaining fully within the parameters of the "natural"/"real",[53] a new camp of writers found that very feature of real-life resemblances in his style to be "Western" and at odds with the "higher" aesthetics of Indian art. The alternative style of Abanindranath's paintings was now held up as a more "authentic" evocation of the lyricism of Kalidasa's literature and the idealistic spirit of Indian aesthetics.

Abanindranath's rejection of the inherited conventions of Western Academic painting and his reconstruction of an "Indian style" is well encapsulated in paintings such as "The Traveller and the Lotus" or "The Banished Yaksha". It can be seen in the miniaturised scale of form and composition; in the reemployment of some of the decora-

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[51]Nivedita, "The Function of Art in Shaping nationality", *The Modern Review,* February 1907, p. 120.

[52]Coomaraswamy, "The Present State of Indian Art, I Painting and Sculpture", *The Modern Review,* August 1907, pp. 107-8.

[53] Balendranath Tagore, "Ravi Varma", "Kalidaser Chitrankani Pratibha" in *Chitra o Kavya.*

tive and stylised modes of Mughal and Pahari miniature painting, combining these with *art nouveau* influences; in the substitution of oils by the new technique of "wash" painting; and in the replacement of the tactile illusionism of Academic oil painting by frail willowy figures and evanescent backdrops. Abandoning the narrative, theatrical modes of the Ravi Varma paintings, Abanindranath's technique of deep colour "washes" condenses the story into a "mood" picture, deleting details of time and place within an ambivalent mental zone.

The significant break had occurred in form and style. But the ideological battle for a new Indian art was fought over the abstracted qualities of emotions, imagination and idealism. The greater "Indian" pedigree of Abanindranath's paintings was argued out in terms of the "true interpretation of Indian spirituality and an insight into that higher world" which he brought to bear on the literary, mythological or historical subjects he painted.[54] This rhetoric of art criticism, because it skimmed over specific definitions or formal analyses, gave critics a remarkably free hand in construing meanings and values around images. In the process, the new aesthetics of Indian art could play an overpowering and legitimising role.

Abanindranath Tagore, himself, participated actively in the discourse of writers and critics. The nature of his new "Indian style" (his technique of the "wash", in particular) was meant to reinforce the mystical, idealistic construct of Indian art. The subtle layering of colours and the floating shadowy quality of images appeared to infuse a painting with "inner" meanings. Negating the physicality of forms, it converted these into abstracted "ideals". The artist distinguished between two kinds of paintings: those dominated by skilled workmanship and technical expertise and those suffused primarily with mood and emotion, and he talked of the greater creative talent of an artist who could evoke the right mood and feeling not so much by the use of line and colour as by the lack of it.[55] The expressiveness or the mood-intensive aura of a painting was looked on as the hall-mark of its Indian-ness.

Even as he underplayed the importance of form, Abanindranath's identity as an "Indian" artist had centred around the links he established with old Indian pictorial traditions, specially with Mughal miniature paintings. His close perusal and study of Mughal miniature paintings culminated in his famous history painting of 1903,

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54 Havell, *Indian Sculpture and Painting*, pp. 256-257.

55 Abanindranath Tagore, *Priyadarshika* (Calcutta, 1921).

"The Passing of Shah Jahan", a painting consciously Mughal in theme and technique. While he had marvelled at the splendour of design and workmanship in Mughal painting, he found them lacking in the vital element of *bhava* (emotion). This painting now fulfilled his mission of filling in this missing element into Mughal pictorial conventions.[56] Painted in the immediate aftermath of the death of his young daughter, the artist poured his personal grief into the relationship of Shah Jahan and Jahanara, and the theme of impending death. The attention in the painting is focused on the two small figures, and then drawn to the tiny image of the Taj Mahal in the distance, through the twist in the emperor's head and the direction of his gaze. A poignant theme of Mughal history was transformed into an allegory of death and immortality.

Awarded a medal at the Delhi Durbar exhibition of 1903, this painting established Abanindranath's reputation as the modern rejuvenator of Indian art. The appeal of the painting lay lodged in between its obvious resemblance to a Mughal miniature and its subtle departures of style and ambience. The artist developed a "Mughal" series through other paintings centering around the idea and image of the Taj Mahal, where history and myth closely overlapped, and the story line was subsumed within a flood of rarified sentiment. In a painting like "Shah Jahan dreaming of the Taj", Abanindranath's "wash" technique was used to great effect to blur out forms and suggest the evanescent quality of the emperor's dream. The artist had talked about the greater creative talent of an artist who could evoke the right mood and emotion, not so much by the use of line and colour as by the lack of it. This painting shows the way colour had become Abanindranath's main tool of expression, but it was colour almost divested of itself.

Such paintings became the best prop of the new art-critical discourse, in its obsession with moral and emotional values and in its mystical conception of Indian art as something elusive, unapproachable, beyond form. The emphasis was on subtlety and reticence. Using the Ruskinian analogy, a painting was seen to be like a poem: more than telling a story, it had to capture and express a mood and emotion. This was particularly true of one of Abanindranath's first experiments with "Indian-style" painting - of his image of "Abhisarika", again an illustration of Kalidasa's *Ritusamhara*, of a stanza describing the rainy night of the monsoon season, a season pregnant with the pains of separation and deep intangible year-

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56 Abanindranath Tagore, *Jorasankor Dhare* in *Abanindra Rachanabali*, Vol. 1 (Calcutta, 1973) pp. 308-9.

nings. The painting clearly takes its theme and motif from Pahari miniature painting: that of Radha's *abhisar* (romantic adventure) on a dark and stormy night to keep her tryst with Krishna. Floating in open space, free of any specific reference to time and place, "Abhisarika" stood primarily as an embodiment of a literary metaphor. And the image became the archetypal romantic *nayika* of modern Indian art, replacing Ravi Varma's Damayanti and Shakuntala to stand as the more "authentic" representative of the Indian tradition.

The "Indian" essence of these paintings tended to be wrapped up in elements of history and myth, literary moods and ideals. There were instances where the mythic, romantic imagery of these paintings were also open to more specific, nationalist readings. For example, in Abanindranath's painting of "Deepavali or The Feast of Lamps", the critic interpreted the nocturnal atmosphere as a symbol of the darkness in which British India was plunged, and the image of the woman with the lamp as the spirit of the motherland trying to dispel the darkness.[57]

However, the artist himself provided his viewers with an explicit nationalist icon in his famous image of the motherland, "Bharat Mata", painted in 1905 as a symbol of Swadeshi. The painting was also one of the most mature products of the artist's recreated "Indian style": the combination of soft wash of colours with contoured body lines and a delicate naturalism would set the standard of the new art movement. To Nivedita, the painting became the supreme example of the way the abstract ideal of "nationality" could "be given form with flesh and painted":[58]

> We have here a picture which bids fair to prove the beginning of a new age in Indian idea... This is the first masterpiece in which an Indian artist has actually succeeded in disengaging... the spirit of the motherland.[59]

Here was a painting which offered itself as "modern", "Indian" and "national", at the same time. It was revered both as the new icon of Indian nationalism and as "the first masterpiece" of modern Indian art. The motherland, visualised as a young ascetic carrying the blessings of food, clothing, learning and spiritual salvation, held no direct religious association. But the image assumed a mythic quality

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57 "Chitra-parichay", *Prabasi*, Agrahayan 1314 (1907), p. 475.

58 "The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality", p. 120.

59 *The Modern Review*, February 1907, p. 221.

that was uniquely its own: unique to the new idea of "art" and of the "nation".

Although painted in the heat of the Swadeshi "fever" that gripped the Tagore family, "Bharat-Mata" was a Yogic image, sifted out of the real world to one of divine transcendence. The painting exemplifies the paradox of the new "national art" of Bengal that was avowedly nationalistic, yet consciously distanced from politics. What the orientalist admirers of Indian art valued most about this painting were "the controlling influences of both art and religion" which kept the picture within the safe bounds of the aesthetic and spiritual and rid it of all disruptive political connotations.[60] The new "national art" was seen to provide the safest outlet for Indian nationalism. Combining the "divine ideal" of the past with the nationalist ideals of the present, "Bharat-Mata" served as the new "artistic icon" of the nation. And its painter was exalted as "the greatest of Indian living artists", recalling the greatness of the past in the promise he held for the future. Everything that Abanindranath painted would be touched and transformed by the magic of his position. The aura of tradition, aestheticism and nationalism that surrounded the work of the "master" spread among the work of his whole group, imbibing it with a unique status as "Indian" art.

60 Review of the first exhibition of the paintings of Abanindranath and his group, *The Englishman*, 30th July, 1907.