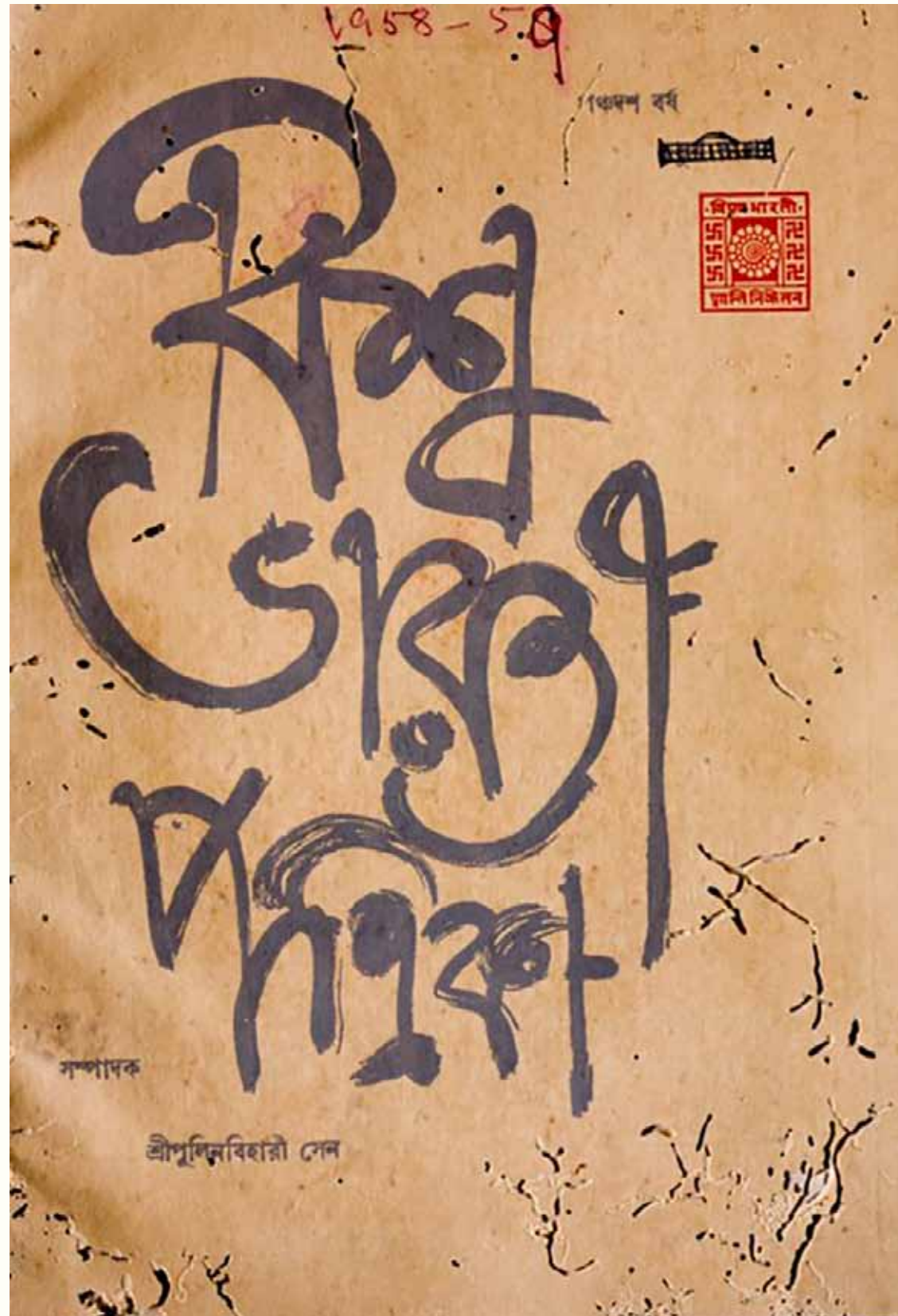


Left: A cover page of Visva Bharati Patrika, University Journal. Possibly the idea of Calligraphic Bengali font thought by Pulin Bihari Sen, who was also the editor of the journal. Those days designing a cover page with calligraphic text was a very innovative idea and still, people work with typography.

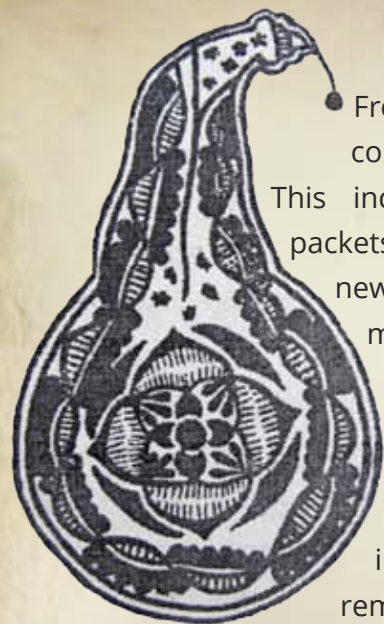
Right page: Floral decoration from undivided Bengal, late nineteenth century.



*Looking
at Art...
Through
the lens of
the past*



“Archives have a close connection to the past, present and future which helps to create a new path for the arts. And this is what is responsible for the enduring nature of art.”



From my very childhood I liked collecting bits and pieces of paper. This included everything from paper packets (*thongas*), calendars and newspapers, to pages from various magazines. They mostly had pictures that I wished to reproduce in my own way. Even if I was not always able to reproduce them properly, I would experience an inner connection with them. I still remember a greetings card with Jyoti

Bhatt's painting clearly; photographs taken by famous photographers in old magazines; *alpana* patterns and so many other things. All these were stored in a box for a long time; these often became subjects for my paintings.

The attraction towards painting developed as I grew older, and along with that, my collection of magazines, books and newspapers started to grow as well. A collection of various articles from the old book bazaar of Jamshedpur helped me expand my horizons and I seemed to fall in love with the smell of old paper. Later in life this very attraction dragged me to the doors of archives related to art. Gradually I started to build up a collection based on my personal needs for research. This collection consisted of old books and newspapers, film negatives, slides, old deeds and digital books. The journey of this collection was centred around my personal interest in art and helped in my practice of art; it also helped me understand the contemporary art of India.

I feel that in order to have a clear understanding of contemporary art, one should have an interest in history and research. Otherwise we would fail to understand the present and move away from the past as well. The modern art of Bengal, for instance, has not been evaluated properly. As a result, contemporary art has failed to follow a proper direction and at present seems

to exist within the periphery of a borrowed culture. In this piece, I have tried to give some information which might lead to a new awareness on why archives are necessary. I have also tried to explain how contemporary art may be seen through the lens of the past ages. However, this article is just a small wave in the vast sea.

Due to our long and complicated colonial history, it has not been an easy task to conserve the relevant records and documents from our rich artistic heritage. As a result, different styles have mingled to give rise to new styles time and time again. These mixed styles have had an important impact, and one ought to be familiar with the details even today. People in the western countries are much more aware of their archives and this is why our contemporary art is easily influenced by the western style – we accept its influences readily because of its easy access. What we have failed to accept is its rigorous attitude. Archives have a close connection to the past, present and future which helps to create a new path for the arts. And this is what is responsible for the enduring nature of art. The research scholar should be conscious of the political influences as well as the implication of the synthesis of the collection in an archive. It is important to know how much of the collection is being displayed. Above all, an archive is the result of the contribution of a few people. It is obvious that the collection will be influenced by the likes, dislikes, and the mentality of those few people.

I would like to limit the discussion in this

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article to art research based on archives – and the vacuum that I, as a contemporary artist, feel. The importance of the historical expanse of the 'new art of Bengal' cannot be underestimated. This is because this many-faceted movement was not only concerned with painting; but included theatre, art criticism, music, sculpture, acting, interior decoration and so on. However, much of it has remained unpublished and we are not aware of the relevant details. Instead of pondering over why this happened, one should try to solve the mystery of where the huge amount of paintings and

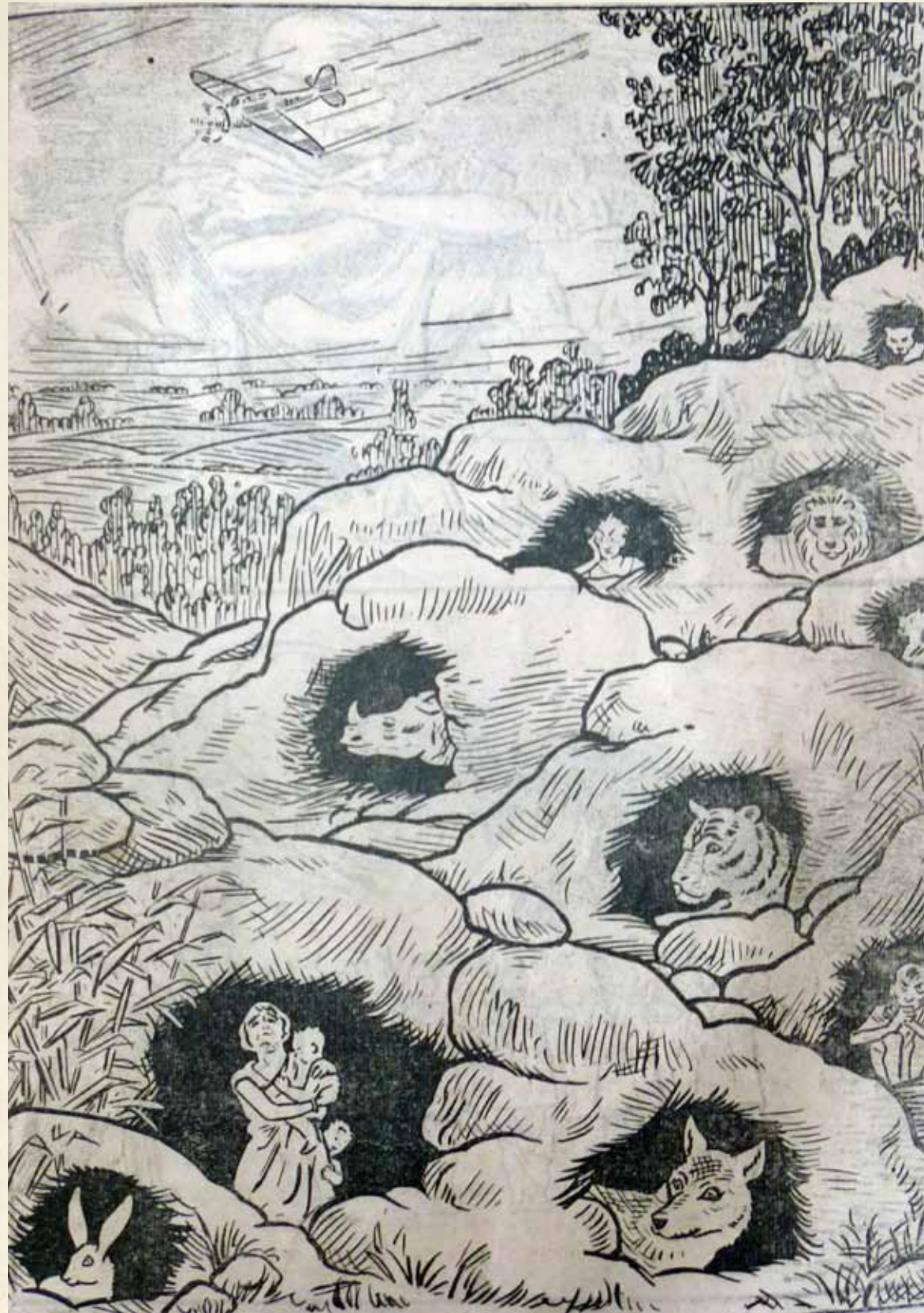


writings could have gone. I have, as a professional artist, often wondered why Indian art has not been evaluated in the Indian context; instead of judging it in the light of the western world in the name of globalisation. Sir Rajendralal Mitra, Akshay Kumar Maitra and Swami Vivekananda were the early advocates of the fact that the glory of Indian art was not dependent on Western art.

"I have, as a professional artist, often wondered why Indian art has not been evaluated in the Indian context; instead of judging it in the light of the western world in the name of globalisation."

Below: A photograph by Gaganendranath Tagore during the twentieth century at the Kolkata Tagore house. His own family members and cousins are seen in the photo. Photo credit: Rabindra Bharati University Museum, Kolkata.

Left page corner: A bag made with fabric and Kantha stitch, it used to be called a Grandmother's Bag. From the late nineteenth century, undivided Bengal. Museum, Kolkata.



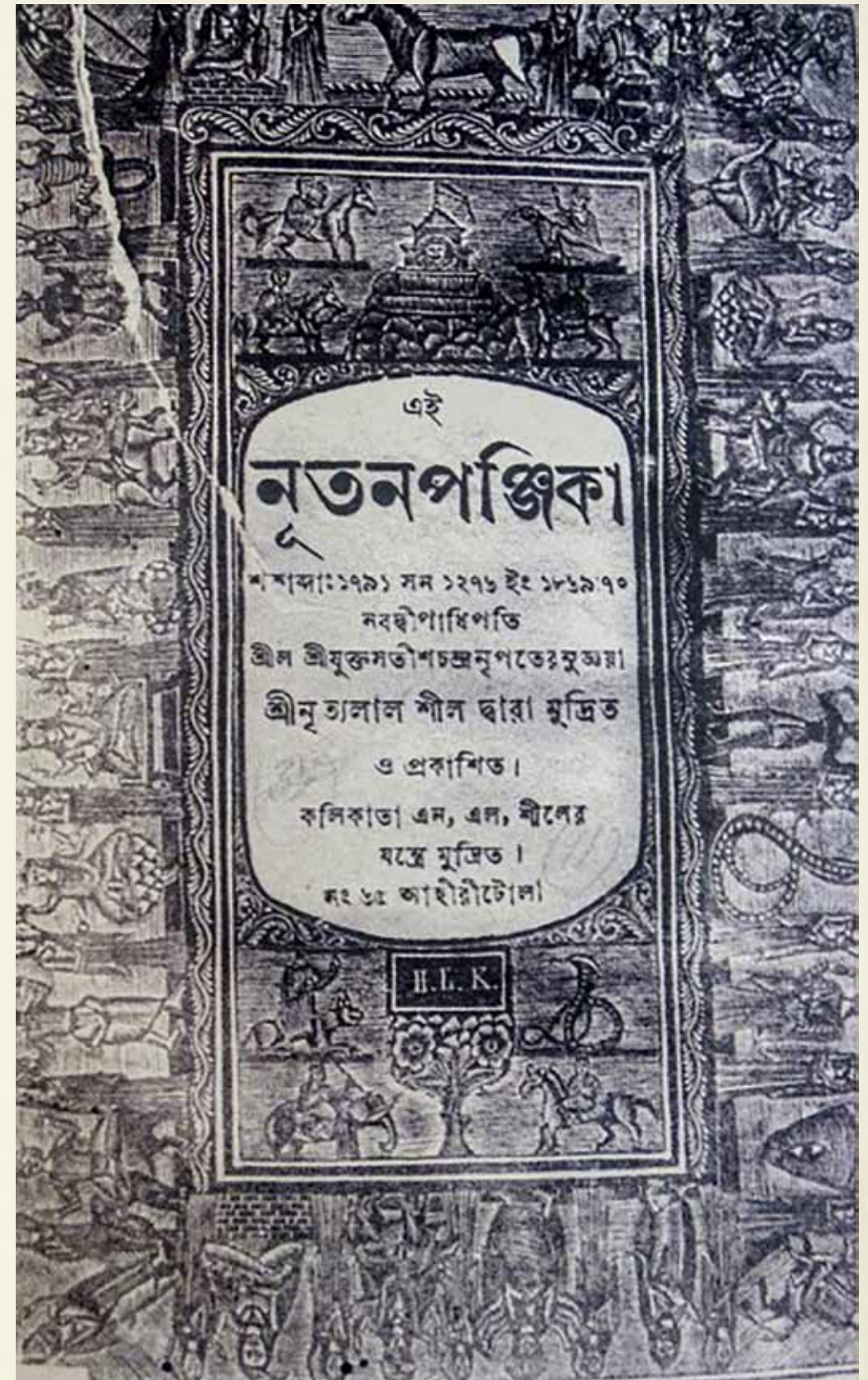
Left: Cartoon titled, 'Towards the cave', during early twentieth century in Bengal. Published in monthly Basumati magazine. [First published in 'Bangashri' weekly].

Below: Drawing by Abanindranath Tagore, in a limited edition book titled, 'Chitrakkhar', signed by Abanindranath Tagore, during the forties to the fifties. This belongs to a private collection.



Above: Wooden dolls from a part of God's Chariot, GuptaPara, Bengal, during the early twentieth century. Published in the monthly Basumati magazine.

Right: Early twentieth century 'Panjika', a book with details of rituals and dates of festivals, etc. in Bengali. Published in Kolkata.



Looking at Art... through the lens of the past

One of the biggest all-India art movements at the beginning of the 20th century had its roots in the Jorasanko Thakurbari. It would be wrong to say that this art movement just involved the Bengalis. The Bengal School style was just a name – it was not limited to Bengal. Abanindranath Tagore and his disciples occupied an important place, but this was on the whole a huge attempt to build up Indian art and guide it back in the right direction. Various publications and articles related to art of this period are of immense value today. Rabindranath's letters tell us about the intense communication that existed in Southeast Asia regarding culture, art and other such subjects. Swami Vivekananda expresses his regard for Japan in his letters. A book written by Prof. Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay – 'Rabindrasangame Dwipomoy Bharat O Shyamdes' – deserves special mention in this respect. It tells us of the cultural exchange between India and her neighbours at that time.

The huge expanse of artistic expression of this time has not been recorded in a proper manner; therefore, it has not been possible to evaluate the period correctly. Due to a lack of documents, pictures and publications, the influence of this movement seems to be limited. State-based or city-based art, rather than Indian art as a whole, is given importance even today, which makes it difficult to understand art in the Indian perspective. It is not enough to have government archives in theory; people from all levels need to be acquainted with such personal collections as well. Above all, the question remains as



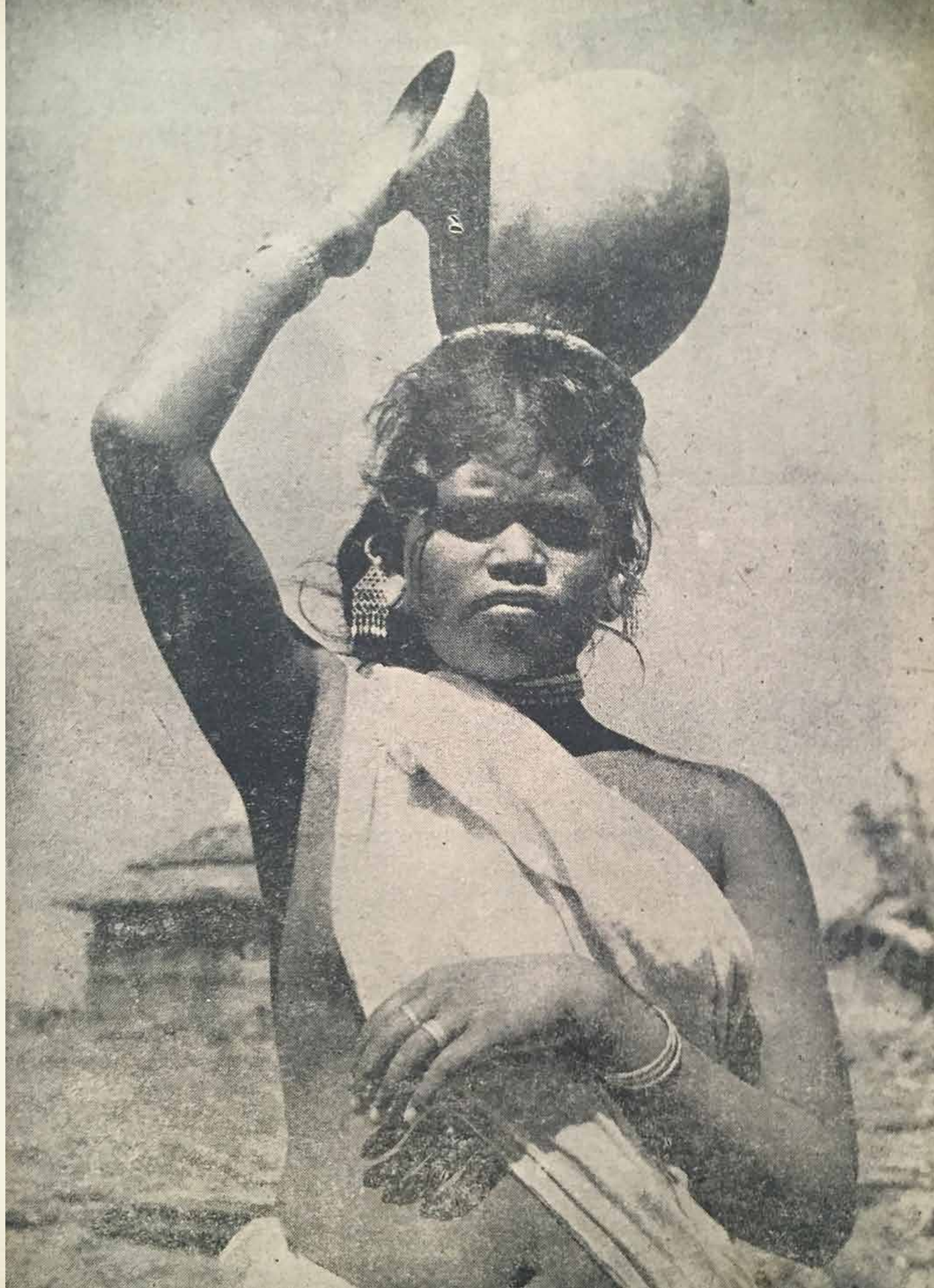
Morning breakfast in a middle class family home in the village. Amateur photographer Dulal Sengupta took this photo.



Above: A village picnic. Amateur photographer Shachindranath Das took this photo.
Below: Villagers sit in front of a fire on a winter morning. Caption: Friends of Winter.
Photographer: P K Chattopadhyay.



A Tribal Girl. Amateur photographer Nitu Sarkar has taken this photo. All photographs were taken during the mid-twentieth century in Bengal and published in the Monthly Basumati magazine.





A wood cut illustration by artist and writer Kamal Kumar Mazumdar for his own book. Kolkata, mid-twentieth century. He was also very passionate about displaying books at book stores those days.

to why art critics and art historians have chosen to move away from the all-encompassing point of view. There is hardly any proper discussion revolving around art in the 21st century. It is an age of curators who refuse to take any responsibility of historical explanations.

History and research may seem to be a burden, but it is necessary to a large extent. People often feel that glancing at the past will lead one backwards, but personally, I do not think that is true. When we take a look at the research-based writings of the so-called unknown writers, we realize how little we have tried to know the history of our country. If I had not read Ramachandra Guha's 'Makers of Modern India', I would not have known the names of a lot of people connected to the freedom movement. On the other hand, if one does not read the works of scholars like Buddhadev Acharya and Siddheshwar Mukherjee, one would be deprived of the knowledge of the history of Birbhum, Bolpur and Shantiniketan. Although their work is invaluable, these two scholars remain practically unrecognized. There are many other such examples of people who should be brought into the limelight. There are many artists of the modern period whose work has not been evaluated even today. Sailoz Mukherjee is one of them. His works are a matter of national pride, but till date there is no comprehensive publication about him.

Similarly, there are a great number of letters written by Rabindranath in the archives at Rabindra Bhavan, Viswa Bharati - but there aren't many letters by others who have written to him. Therefore, the relationship between Rabindranath and these people is not wholly clear and one does not get a complete picture of Rabindranath as an individual. A letter by the artist Asit Halder is worth mentioning. [Original letter: from the Delhi Art Gallery archive/ dated 14/4/49, from Lucknow/ "When the price of envelopes went up, Rabida {Rabindranath Tagore} started to write on post-cards, but one couldn't write personal matters on an open card."] This shows up

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Rabindranath in a different light. In another letter Halder writes, “Rabindranath left an area of darkness under his lamp. It was all mud and therefore did not reflect any light; had it been glass, not gold, there would have been some amount of reflection.” [Written to Sourindra Mohan Mukherjee on 22/1/51 from Lucknow/ original letter in Delhi Art Gallery archive/ unpublished.]

I was fortunate enough to see almost 15,000 images in the archives at Rabindra Bhavan. Out of these most were portraits of Rabindranath Tagore. The spotlight remains on him, even in group photographs. It was Rathindranath Tagore who was responsible for building the archive, although his name remains in the shadows. (Interestingly, all the woodwork and furniture in the houses of Shantiniketan were his creation, and this work remains an extraordinary part of the Bengal new art movement.) Rathindranath seems to have been an indifferent person who kept himself away from the pages of history. Is this because of his famous father, one wonders. If we take a look at Rabindranath’s creations, we are likely to find the overpowering presence of the self.

Research depends both on the viewpoint of the researcher and the basis and politics behind the archive collection. The research scholar should be able to look into the future. Institutional archives, government archives, personal collections – all of these have different outlooks. Of late, the influence of internet-based archives is growing in important. The collection and originality of an archive poses a big question and it is difficult to say how the facts can be verified. There is a difference in the explanations offered by different people, and it is on the basis of this that the collection progresses and ultimately is accepted as the truth – we believe in it and it goes on to become history. There is a lot of variety as a result. An example of this is the different interpretations of Gaganendranath Tagore’s paintings. It has been said that Gaganbabu’s paintings are influenced by Picasso, but those who have observed the Jorasanko Thakurbari

closely will not be ready to accept this point of view. Many old buildings of North Kolkata exuded a mysterious appearance in the evenings as a result of the eerie play of light and darkness – it is the portrayal of this daily scene that one finds in Gaganbabu’s canvases, and not the influence of Picasso. Later on, the same kind of mystery is evident in the works of the artist Bikash Bhattacharya. We have fallen into the habit of comparing Indian art with Western art and artists due to greater access to publications in the west. Do the Indian artists have no place that they can call their own, which reminds them of their roots? Do they always have to accept a comparison with the West?

We are all familiar with the pictures of Nandalal Bose in the popular Bengali primer ‘Shahaj Path’. We are however, not very familiar with the book ‘Tiles Mosaic from Lahore Fort’ by J.P.H. Bhogel, chief officer of the department of Archaeology.



Above: Sound recording during a Bengali film shooting at Kolkata, 2008. Photo credit: Samit Das.
Left: Portrait of a lady, mica painting by Lala Ishwari Prasad Verma, early twentieth century. Published in a Bengali Journal ‘Bharatbarsha’.

The pictures of the tiles mosaic of Lahore fort throw a new light on the pictures of ‘Shahaj Path’. This was not blind imitation, but an expression of an inherited style. Sometimes, not only archives, but small personal collections turn out to be very important. Two notebooks of Rabindranath may be cited as an example. One of them contained the script of ‘Sishu Bholanath’, each word in its place, every sentence neatly arranged; so that the technicians at the press would have no trouble in reproducing it. It was something like the desktop publishing layout of these days. This was a wonderful expression of Rabindranath’s intellectual mind. The second notebook contains his songs,

poems, drawings and doodles. It also contains a description of his visit to Puri with Balendranath. The line drawings in this notebook do not make us think that he was imitating the German expressionists; rather we take them as they are - expressions of his very own experiences. In Rani Chanda’s (when I spoke to her, she still had a good memory) book there is no reference to the German expressionists. Thus we can see that without proper exposure and evaluation, a lot of information from different phases of a certain creative period never sees the light of day. And the lack of these archives has led to the dominance of the so-called western culture. One of the undesirable effects of this could be that different cultures would move away from their originality and end up in a homogenous mix. And if this were to happen, Indian art

would lose its individuality, or maybe it is already doing so. Maybe that is why in the 1920s Nandalal Bose had written to Rathindranath Tagore how China was losing its own flavour in trying to imitate cheap American art. This influence is being greatly felt in Indian art at present, as most people feel that this path will lead to internationalism. Abanindranath Tagore had written to Rani Chanda that sudden surprises could not lead to art, but now that is what is considered to be art.

Any discussion on contemporary art at present has a foreign perspective and this distance seems to be ever increasing. Until the 1970s and 80s most writings on art were based on the backdrop of ancient Indian civilization; in other words, towards spreading indigenous culture. However, post this period, the western concept of globalisation has spread its roots into every nook and corner of intellectual and creative expression. Is it just a ploy to destroy originality of thoughts and individuality in culture? A lot of intellectuals feel that the distinction between the west and east does not exist in these days. But in spite of globalisation, one cannot ignore the socio-cultural specificities, geographical borders, and the environment and soil of each country. And that would include cultural individuality and originality. We need to have more publications regarding Indian culture, with their proper distribution; we need to be aware of the role of archives and we need to connect them to our education system. Otherwise we will have to depend on a borrowed culture in order to fill up the gaps in ours. A ‘culture mafia’ is at work throughout the world in its attempt to destroy the originality of various cultures; many intellectuals are involved in this goal, those who have no responsibility towards their country, age or society.



Left and right images: Last pages of an important journal titled ‘Saraswat’, designed and published by Dilip Kumar Gupta, during the early twentieth century. He was also known as D K Gupta, head of famous advertising company ‘D G Keemer’ and founder of a famous publication house called Signate Press, which is currently owned by ABP Group. Centre image: An advertisement for a tonic to enhance energy with lucid text and description. It reads, ‘To make a skilled idol one needs good energy and this tonic can keep alive the entire creative process while a person makes the idol.’ Published in the monthly Basumati magazine during the mid-twentieth century, Kolkata.



Left: A village performer from Bengal, mid-twentieth century. Published in ‘Probashi’, a Bengali journal edited by Ramananda Chattopadhyaya.

Below: A lady swinging, late nineteenth century wooden toy/sculpture from undivided Bengal.



Samit Das specializes in painting, photography, interactive artworks and artist’s books creating multi-sensory environments through art and architectural installations. He has deep interest in archiving and documentation. Samit has held several solo shows world over. Recent works include the documentation of the Tagore House Museum and his book ‘Architecture of Santiniketan: Tagore’s concepts of space.’

