

## Bengal

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# THE POLITICS OF POLARISATION: ART IN BENGAL



## Bengal and Bengalis

We cannot necessarily say that Bengalis are irrevocably at the forefront of innovation, but over the centuries, they have demonstrated their love for art in every form and its inclusion in daily life. Historically, undivided Bengal had an influential culture and its rich and diverse rural traditions became part of India's cultures. The state's cultural traditions remained vibrant despite the development of large cities. Bengal has engendered new philosophies, marked by local domestic traditions and the Bengali ascetic community, which has inspired the country with its influential art and literature.

Beginning with the Pala and Sena dynasties (eighth to thirteenth century AD), Bengal has been renowned for its art, particularly the extraordinary sculptures created during this period. Pala sculpture was at its peak during the ninth century and was widely appreciated. Under the Palas, ardent Buddhists with interest in tantric and esoteric rites and pilgrims came from lands as distant as China, Nepal and states like Assam.



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◀ Detail of a *Jadu Pata*, cult image, Dumka, Bihar. Courtesy: Ashutosh Museum Collection, Kolkata.



Map of Kolkata, published in *The Modern Review* during the mid-thirties.

Pala art was considered the best models for the representation of religious concepts and the works were admired and copied. Although the Senas worshipped Hindu deities, as a community they were tolerant of various other beliefs, so different artistic expressions flourished under their rule.

Among the range of cultures present in Bengal, that of the Sahajiya is another. Sahajiyas are described thus in the *Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*:

*Sahajiya is a religious cult. Its followers believe in the Sabaja or simple way to feel the Sabaja or innate reality that is present in every animate or inanimate object. According to Sahajiya philosophy, along with an external form, every object also has an internal form. This internal form is the eternal, otherwise known as Sabaja. To feel the Sabaja is to feel the internal eternity in one's self. The whole range of animate and inanimate objects can be felt by experiencing this internal form. The followers of this cult think that a simple, direct way is the best means to experience this feeling.*

Philosophy was prevalent in the Tantric tradition that emerged between the eighth and ninth centuries AD. This philosophy sought religious experience through the senses, seeking the divine through man. The seeds of Sahajiya are rooted in both the Vedas and the Upanishads. The movement gave rise to a great deal of literature on the theme of love, including by the great poets Jayadeva, Chandidea and Vidyapati. Many believe that provincial literature and Bengali culture have always evolved thanks to the gentle but persuasive influence of indigenous literature.

As established by the traditions mentioned above, Bengalis never adopted a conformist approach towards society. The Bengali mind has remained free, open to new approaches and ways of thinking. The Bauls, Fakirs, Darbesh and Sufis were also social reformers. Lalan Fakir the great Baul (member of an order of religious singers from Bengal known for their unconventional behaviour and the freedom and spontaneity of their mystical verse; their membership consists both of Hindus and Muslims and their songs deal with the love between the human and their god. Their songs began to be collected and written down only in the twentieth century) ascetic born to a Hindu family in 1794, showed the way to a unified Muslim-Hindu belief through his folk songs. This philosophy has become a fundamental feature of folk and rural art.

One characteristic expression of this syncretic belief is the *pata* or *chitrakar* painting that probably emerged around the twentieth century. *Patnas*



Painting of a malaria mosquito by an unknown artist; records indicate it was possibly Abanindranath Tagore.

are both Hindus and Muslims; traditionally, they were itinerant painters who travelled the countryside singing the stories depicted in their mythological and contemporary art in the seventh-century 'Harsavarita'. The literature mentions detailed images made by the *patuas*. The *pata* paintings draw from a range of art forms and many scholars looked at whole *pata* performance as an early form of cinema.

The concept of time is eternal or fleeting in mythological stories and the puranas. *Pata* songs indicate time and describe specific events and social situations. So, *pata* paintings are necessary evidence of a particular time. The puranas defined another scale of time in paranormal and vast terms. Also, time and notions of eternity flow through the epics in a variety of directions like an unending stream. Novelist Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, in his famous novel *Ganadebata*, talks about rural and folk oral history.

The author Sukumar Ray has created a Bengali language lexicon with his nonsense poetry. But the nonsense reveals a definite pattern and two opposing forces have introduced new turbulence into the language, giving rise to a new art form. This new form of language has straight and curved lines, layers and multi-angles, satire and a sense of

teasing, and a range of other features. Professor Pradyumna Bhattacharya explains this satirical writing as the many layers of an onion. One never seems to arrive at the core or the succulent portion; instead, it is a composite body with a combination of skin and pulp: innocent and tendentious!

**'Vandemataram': Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay**

The song 'Vandemataram' in the *Anandamath* novel, written by Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, is the focus of the novel. Bankim Chandra, who propagated patriotism, says it beautifully through this song. Hara Prasad Shastri made a memorable comment on 'Vandemataram'. He wrote: 'Everything that Bankim Babu has done has done in unison. That is, worshipping as well as respecting the motherland. No one else in India has done what he has. Therefore, he worships us. He is humble. He is our conductor. He is our sage, he is our saint, and he is our mantra. That mantra is "Vandemataram". Countless Indians have taken initiation into this mantra. Countless young people have been condemned to the gallows after chanting this mantra. Countless patriots have, from time to time, begged the mantra to accept the pledge of self-sacrifice at the altar of patriotism. Today, the song is the source of inspiration for



Abanindranath and Mahindrabhusan Gupta with make-up right before a performance.



Portrait of Divinity. 2007.

Indians.'

In 1882, *Anandamath* was published as a book. A few years before that, 'Vandemataram' was composed (around 1875-76).

**Swadeshi Movement and Dhaka's Anushilan Samiti**

The Anushilan Samiti was the most potent underground political organisation in East Bengal during 1912. The history of the Samiti is not unfamiliar to Bengal. Faridpur-born Pulin Bihari Das was the founder — president of this Samiti. Das was arrested and sent to Andaman prison. That ended his leadership in the Samiti. Amiya Kumar Samanta has published the 'History Sheet' of the police department about him; new information suggests that Pulin Bihari belonged to Bal Gangadhar Tilak's group and a branch of a practice committee in Madras. Amiya Kumar Samanta's collection of documents provides a lot of new information about the association. The Brati Samiti was active in Faridpur for only three to five years. The Anushilan Samiti lasted in Bengal for many years. The list of political criminals has been found in the police department till now, though in the eyes of the government, the list with names of communist leaders, such as Muzaffar Ahmed, Manbendranath Roy, Jadu Gopal

Mukhopadhyay, etc., is even longer.

Jadu Gopal Mukhopadhyay's brother Dhan Gopal Mukherji experimented with diaspora fiction many years ago. The term 'diaspora' was just gaining momentum back then.

**The Art of the Bengal School**

The notion of the polarisation of politics is now commonplace, but politics and polarisation existed in Indian art many years ago. The pre-independent era, from about 1900 onwards, until the post-independent period of about 1950, was the apogee of the Bengal School of Bengal Art movement, which was an intrinsic part of the nationalist movement. It was an initiative to seek a new language in Indian art and to move away from so-called imagery. The nationalist movement started from Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) and extended through most of India. It was not restricted to the visual arts but embraced all forms of art practice, including structuring art historiography before the Bengal School movement. Initially, the historiography of Indian art was mainly associated with the world of archaeology, and discussions on excavation and geographical locations. Moreover, at the time, the term 'art' did not exist in rural India and undivided Bengal. Scholars and artists from

Bengal initiated a process of looking back at India's traditions to reveal a new vocabulary in visual arts.

The story and background of the Bengal School are familiar to most people. However, the analysis of the artistic process is far more complicated than is commonly known. There was a critical approach to study traditions and develop a selection process. It involved transforming thought into a visual narration. This new conceptual approach was expressed through various art forms in those days. The leaders of the Bengal School were well-informed about the Western world and their art activities through various European journals. A team of artists and scholars, including some European scholars, was convinced that the inner power of any art form in Asia was much stronger than that of Western art. This thought was the first significant critical movement in the Indian cultural sector, and it included people from different social groups and classes. It was an attempt to dissolve the hierarchy of artistic practice that existed under royal patronage.

Essays on art and colour and monochrome reproductions appeared in various publications. However, there was discrimination in terms of the colour reproductions published in *Prabashi*, *The Modern Review* and *Basmati*, a monthly



Cracks and the broken lines have many untold stories. Statue of Hanuman with a broken tail. 2009.





Artwork by Debabrata Mukhopadhyay. Black ink on paper. He was an artist who worked for social causes and issues faced by the common man and was also a believer of the communist manifesto. Image courtesy: Debashish Dutta.

journal. *Basumati* focused more on general academic works, less famous artists, and everyday social subjects. However, *Prabashi* and *The Modern Review* worked with well-known and established typical Bengal School-style works. However, they always included an essay on other art forms.

After 1947, or, perhaps, from the 1950s, the art of the Bengal School and the wave it had created began to decline, and the gaze turned to the Western world, particularly Paris, the cultural capital of the world at the time. In the early 1930s, Rabindranath Tagore had shown his paintings in Paris. One of his letters clearly states that he was not interested in sharing his works in India before they received recognition from abroad. Tagore has exhibited outside the country and gathered most of the critics' comments on his work in an elusive, self-published booklet called *Foreign Comments*.



Front cover of *The Modern Review*. It was the most comprehensive and substantial journal in India before independence.

Number 5 Jorasanko house was the epicentre of the Bengal School movement led by Abanindranath Tagore. Unfortunately, as a result of internal politics, it was demolished and many rare documents were lost. Although to date, the name Tagore is generally understood as a reference to Rabindranath, apart from Rabindranath, many personalities in the Tagore family made an extraordinary contribution to the fields of art and culture in Bengal. Those familiar with it cannot forget the contribution made by the Pathuriaghata Tagore house in Kolkata, located not far from the Jorasanko house. Unfortunately, this branch of the Tagore family never attracted much attention.

#### A Resonance between Paris and the Art of Kolkata

After independence, under Nehru's regime, the idea of a New India adopted the concepts of western urbanism that extended to even Indian art. The French Government offered generous scholarships to Indian artists and the group of artists trained in British academic techniques had the opportunity to go to Paris for greater exposure. However, before anyone else, it was Rabindranath Tagore who exhibited in Paris long before India's independence. After independence, artists who went to Paris were mainly from Kolkata,

Bombay (present-day Mumbai) and Madras (present-day Chennai). However, later, those from Bengal transformed their art practice to include more social and spiritual features. On their return from Paris, they meticulously set about understanding their roots and the ongoing socioeconomic struggle, and content came to speak the loudest in their art practice. Many critical aspects of Bengal art have been published in many little-known magazines. Artists dedicated themselves sincerely to talking about their social and political surroundings. It was an honest practice and a means of self-realisation. There was no money and no 'curator' to direct them. The art practice of the time was far from pretentious, and this came later with political or narrative art. The state itself became a whole body of artistic practice. However, Mumbai-based artists mostly carried the western resonance with them. That style remains at the forefront of Indian modern art, which is unfortunate.

#### The Community of the Contemporary Artist Group

Social issues gradually encouraged artists to make direct and robust statements related to Leftist politics and its ideology. Delhi has been influenced by the Bengal School, thanks to the Ukil Brothers. The



An illustration from Chandrashekhhar Chitre, a popular storybook with a subject of British-Bengal Impression.

Sharada Ukil School of Art in Santiniketan underwent a period of experimentation under Nandalal Bose. During the post-independence era, Bengali art was the most active and addressed sociopolitical issues long before artists from any other state followed their lead. Specifically, etchings, linocut, or woodcut, and many more media were the main tools this generation of artists used to express their thoughts. History, memory, archives and current political issues became significant concepts for artists from Bengal working with any form of art, and this went far beyond the realm of the visual arts.

The IPTA and Third Theatre groups started with great enthusiasm. After the Calcutta Group and the Calcutta Painters, the Society of Contemporary artists was a significant initiative from Bengal. Unfortunately, this group was left behind because of the polarisation of politics and positioning in history became a fixed agenda. National Gallery of Modern Art gave the art of the Bengal School pride of place, the Society of Contemporary Artists were left behind slowly. Nonetheless, we cannot ignore the role Bengal played in making art a significant social statement in those times. The glorious past of Bengal culture and its contribution have been recorded in many journals like the



An illustration from Chandrashekhhar Chitre layered with semi-transparent paper and a few lines of romantic poems. It was a new experimentation with a popular storybook in Bengal during the sixties.

*Indian Society of Oriental Arts, Basumati, DESH, Rooplekha, Rupam, The Modern Review* and many others. A few cultural groups with left leanings emerged and began to work with artists from rural Bengal and social issues. This was another phase of modernism in the art movement in India after the Bengal School movement. Subject and narrative were always critical themes in the art produced in Bengal. One of the most potent stories is to be found in *Jukti Tokko Aar Golpo*, a film by Ritwik Ghatak that also describes the making of the film.

The traditional *pata* paintings are a significant example of community art and interactive art practice, and this art form continues to address current political and social issues. It remains a living tradition and performative art. Many see *pata* performances as three-dimensional art because of the songs and words. The *pata* paintings cross the borders of caste and religion. Political cartoons and graphic tales are other expressions of social consciousness from Bengal. In the heyday of left-wing politics, political wall inscription/graffiti was an essential event that took the form of community practice. In the mid-1970s, in Kolkata, the communist party of West Bengal created an organisation to research oral, folk, rural and living traditions. Professor Pradyumna Bhattacharya prepared a

draft for this work, to help those involved to think further, but unfortunately, this project was never implemented.

Calcutta was also a city of photography and many studios developed. During the early twentieth century, amateur photography clubs and the art of photography became a passion among the wealthy and then the middle class. These photographers mainly clicked pictures of daily life, landscapes and rural Bengal, leaving behind a significant body of critical evidence and documentation related to the Bengal of their time.

Bengal's significant contribution of woodcut printing and lithography was extremely popular in the nineteenth century. Lino and woodcut became reliable tools for artistic expression in Bengal for many years. In the beginning of the twentieth century, with the arrival of photography, printing technology became another significant contribution from Bengal. This technique was responsible to create a new language in Bengal art and helped to create a new popular visual culture. Early nineteenth-century woodcut prints created a new visual vocabulary in human anatomy drawing. Later many trained artists used it in their own artworks. The Chitpur litho poster for *yatra* performances had a vibrant appearance to attract viewers. Art in all



Portrait of Rashbehari Law, the first Bengali to buy a share of Tata Steel during the 1920s, on a hoarding of a Tata Steel advertisement. He was seventy-nine then.

its forms has always been appreciated in Bengal as we can see from the Kolkata book fair which, until the mid-twenty-first century, was always a multi-layered cultural event. Apart from selling books, it served as a platform to showcase a variety of forms of talent, and such events did not exist anywhere else in India.

**Effect of Quasi-intellectualism and the Art Market**

India is a diverse country and home to several vernacular languages. Significant literature on Bengal and its art has been published in several Bengali magazines. Though Bengal was once the capital of the British empire, today it is difficult to access the archives for information on Bengal's history. Bengal art is not always easy to understand, and art in northern India has gradually fallen under the influence of irrelevant concepts and theoretical jargon along with a vague idea of modernism constructed in Indian art history.

The curator has become the ultimate statement of artistic practice, often leading artists away from an in-depth practice. Modernism, constructed by a group of artists who use Western references, has become a natural means of defining the country's leading artists while Bengal and many other forms of art have been ignored. Apart from

the role art critics and curators play, auction houses raise other issues related to the art market. Buying art from auction houses serves primarily to satisfy the ego, as it is not the quality of the artwork that is the criterion there. Artists from Bengal never created or thought of a hierarchy in the art world. Art was part of a regular middle-class mentality, something entrenched in a community and a means of keeping the culture alive. We see this in the *pata* scroll paintings where the composition flows through the river Ganges and narrative elements occupy both banks of the river. It is present in the soil and emerges in all kinds of folk objects and art. It was much later that artists started thinking about memory and history, but many Bengal artists seem to have been far ahead of their time. However, to gain recognition, the right time, context and terminology are a must as this is how people and events position themselves in society. Research on Bengal needs painstaking work, which market pressures rarely allow. Earlier, the Bengal School of Art was a significant force in the Indian art world. Today, the art scene has shifted to metropolises like Delhi and Mumbai.

**The Struggle in Art and Politics during the Twenty-first Century**

In the twentieth century, Bengal was dominated

by communist ideas and, today, it is ruled by the Trinamool Congress. After the partition of Bengal, it took many years to forget the pain, and this terrible event remains an open wound for many. This experience of the crisis remains a subject of artistic expression, which, over time, came to be less appreciated in the commercial art market, although the real impact of the partition is challenging to define precisely. After the late 1990s, art in India underwent a significant transformation, perhaps more closely related to its articulation than the appearance of a visual language. The artistic approach in Bengal includes narrative and visual experiences, with its active vocabulary! A false narrative and a forced articulation shifted to the forefront at the time when the art of Bengal lost its pre-eminence. The power of money and position has played a considerable role in the transformation of the history of art in India. Politics in Bengal has become regional and created a gap between the state and centre's power politics.

**The Definition of Modern, Post-modern, Working with History Memories and Archives!**

Memory and archives were central to the work done by many artists from the Bengal School movement, including



Omar Khayyam note page with a romantic gift note. This was gifted to someone's elder brother's wife, wishing them happiness after marriage.

Abanindranath and Gaganendranath, who started looking at archival documents and historical evidence and successfully transformed them into new visual languages.

Later Santiniketan became a centre for new languages based on personal and community spaces. During the Bengal famine, artists also expressed their concern for society through their visual language, to connect with the common man. Some of the great artists who worked on this theme were Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Zainul Abedin, Surya Roy and Muralidhar Tali. Perhaps this was one of the earliest examples of such imagery in Indian art. The Society of Contemporary Artists came together to raise a new voice in the field of drawings. Ganesh Pyne's world shows the idea of history and memories through his jottings and paintings. The factual history of Bengal art does not need to be validated,



Worshipping the woman: A person making fun of a woman under the false pretext of showing respect. A popular illustration by Binay Krishna Basu from the monthly Bengali magazine Basumati.

but it requires an in-depth and focused mind for reading. This art form is slowly being erased by the domination of non-environment-friendly material like polymer, resin and fibreglass used to cast works in multiple editions. This form of art practice makes personal issues universal, revealing a significant lack of a unique approach. There are also a few curators seriously interested in identifying talented Bengali artists.

Long ago, Rabindranath wrote that history always remembers the winners, but there is another history of the losers, which also reveals essential facts of civilisation. Auction prices have become the dominant defining factor of quality. Research on the art of the Bengal School has taken a back seat due to issues regarding the availability of material and access. The art of forgery is a massive obstacle to an appreciation of the past. After the late eighties, there was little precise documentation and few substantial publications. Hardly anybody tried to join the bits and pieces into a single thread: their constant pride in their past and a certain arrogance is also highly detrimental to the Bengalis. Sometimes historical baggage may be an obstacle to the future. One needs to handle the trail of the past intelligently. From *Basumati*

socially conscious, and this expression has reflected across all their art forms. During the late eighties, the cultural organisation of the Communist party (Painters Front) in West Bengal encouraged this approach. The state art education policy and art institutions are also stakeholders in this non-arable land. History and movements have their difficulties; they change direction. However, after a long silence, there is always noise. Art from Bengal still stands alone with a distinct narrative and strong visual language that is not just dominated by the jargon of words! Nandalal Bose realized:

*Looking at various ideas, we can create our own definition of art: This is an attempt of quality. Research on to make some of the divine beauty which the artist glimpses accessible to ordinary mortals; he strives to translate these into colours, sounds, forms and words by creating pictures, melodies, sculptures, poems and other literature.*

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in Bengal were always