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Nationalism and Painting in Colonial Bengal

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NATIONALISM AND PAINTING IN COLONIAL BENGAL

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Abstract

What began as a general inquiry into the nature of nationalism in the paintings of “the Bengal School” turned into a project focused on tracing the pulse of nationalism between two distinct yet related groups in Bengal roughly between the years 1895 and 1920. The bulk of this paper deals with existing scholarship on the painter Abanindranath Tagore, whose name is most often mentioned in the discourse regarding nationalism and painting in Bengal; in addressing this scholarship, I deliver a critical analysis on the relationship between Abanindranath, his paintings, and the idea of nationalism. I then follow that discussion with a treatment of Rabindranath Tagore and his relationship with the *swadeshi* movement in Bengal during the first decade of the twentieth century, and his unique path of patriotic discourse that came after the fervor of Abanindranath’s art movement fizzled away. In my conclusion, I offer a final analysis of Rabindranath and Abanindranath’s “nationalisms.”

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Dedicated to the DC

Introduction

The infiltration of the European art tradition in India caused a wave of reactions in the Indian world of art and aesthetics, all varying in strength and nature. In this paper, I will attempt to examine one of the strongest reactions to this disruption of tradition: that which responded with what has been recognized as a “vehement resistance”¹ in the name of nationalism through the simultaneous preservation and creation of a distinctly Indian identity through art. While discussion of this nationalist sentiment in art is often confined to the study of the “Bengal School” of painting as led by Abanindranath Tagore, I will seek to trace the nationalist sentiments within art in Bengal where they stayed the strongest throughout time. Although the Bengal School established itself, although weakly,² through the “all-India spread” of Abanindranath’s pupils in the 1920s, I will argue that it is perhaps this very normalization of the School that dulled its own once-sharp innovative edge. For this reason, I will follow Abanindranath and the circle of critics whose rhetoric seemed to have a symbiotic, if not slightly parasitic, relationship with his art only up until the year 1910 or so. At that point my finger will remain on the pulse of nationalism, only instead of following the pupils of Abanindranath through history, I will follow the path of a related yet differently nuanced reaction to colonialism with a treatment of Rabindranath Tagore. In this final section, I will treat Tagore’s unique response to the polarized discourse of nationalism versus westernization as one that dissolved the binary nature of the conflict and sought to regenerate the Indian identity “from the inside,”³ through a focus on nature, tradition, and the encouragement of individuality in education. Tagore’s idiosyncratic response to the

¹ Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 3.

² Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 313.

³Siva Kumar R., interview by Jasmin Cohen, Kala-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati International University, Santiniketan. “Second Meeting,” November 22, 2012.

nationalist conflict has been labeled “constructive *swadeshi*” by Sumit Sarkar,⁴ and those are the grounds on which I will discuss it. My intent in discussing the nationalism and *swadeshi* of Abanindranath and Rabindranath Tagore is to reveal the very individualized nature of those expressions that glowed with the strength of creation even while they were in danger of being smothered by the sweeping polemical rhetoric that surrounded the art itself.

Changing Art Traditions in India

Beginning at the arrival of European artists to India in the late 18th century, before India was officially ruled by the British crown, the popular perceptions and ideas of art and artists on the ground began to change.⁵ In 1854, the School of Industrial Art was founded in Calcutta. In 1865, this school would cease to be run privately and its name would change to the Government School of Art. The popular enrollment of Indian students into this school, as well as its sister schools throughout the country, may be read as the institutionalization and public acceptance of a new definition of “artist” in India which had been fermenting since the late 18th century. The students that matriculated into this new type of state-operated art school did so “to master the art of realistic and illusionist oil painting, to secure commissions for portraits, and to gain entry to the prestigious chain of ‘fine art’ exhibitions,”⁶ which were all distinctly European traditions.

It is against this general backdrop of Westernization of the perception of the “artist” that the effort to create a new, distinctly Indian art emerged. In July 1896, the English art historian and teacher Ernest Benfield Havell became the Superintendent of the Government School of Art in Calcutta, after holding the same position at the Madras School of Art for

⁴ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 34.

⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*

about a decade.⁷ A European himself, Havell was a firm believer that the practice of art education in India unquestionably had to be based on the Indian arts tradition.⁸ In a statement expressing his grievances with the arts education system in Calcutta before his arrival, Havell complains: “The study of design, the foundation of all art, was entirely ignored and throughout, the general drawing and painting classes, the worst traditions of the English provincial art school forty years ago, were followed...Oriental art was more or less ignored, thereby taking the Indian art students in a wrong direction.”⁹

Havell’s efforts at reorganizing the educational policy at the Government School of Art were driven by the desire to change the school “from a Fine Arts Academy into a school of design and applied arts, with a special focus on the Indian traditions of decorative arts.”¹⁰ Throughout the 1890s, Havell spilled all his energy into his role as an education reformer, creating a crafts program at the School that taught “decorative design” classes such as stenciling, fresco painting, lacquer-work on wood, and the preparation for stained-glass windows.¹¹ His efforts at “Indianising” the School’s curriculum at this stage in his career, however, was focused solely on revitalizing the “decorative” art portions; he left the “fine” art areas almost totally untouched, therefore creating an implied dichotomy that assigned the “fine arts” as a purely European area of study, and the “decorative arts” its Indian counterpart and only area of concern for reforms.¹²

⁷ Sri Chintamani Kar, and Mukul Dey, *History of Government College of Art & Craft Centenary Publication*, (Calcutta: Statesman Press, 1966), 21.

⁸ Hoskote, Ranjit. "E. B. Havell & A. K. Coomaraswamy." ART India, 2001.

⁹ Sri Chintamani Kar, and Mukul Dey, *History of Government College of Art & Craft Centenary Publication*, (Calcutta: Statesman Press, 1966), 22.

¹⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 151.

¹¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 151-152.

¹² Ibid.

Towards the late 1890s, Havell's focus began to shift from education reform to the engagement of a new emerging Indian fine arts scene, and his role within that scene was not only as an educator, but now as an ideologue as well.¹³ His effort at revamping the collection at the Government Art Gallery adjacent to the Government School of Art, specifically with examples of Mughal miniature painting and samples of the Ajanta murals as well as reproductions of Byzantine and early pre-Renaissance Italian art was the initial precursor to this shift.¹⁴ Havell's acknowledgment of an Indian "fine arts" tradition, and his presentation of it in tandem with pre-Renaissance European art, may signal a dissolving of his conceived dichotomy between the purely "fine" and purely "decorative" arts, which itself allowed him later to promote, in a highly paternalistic manner,¹⁵ the new paintings of the artist Abanindranath Tagore as distinctly original and Indian. Havell even went so far to say, as Tapati Guha-Thakurta reveals, that Abanindranath's evolution as an 'Indian' artist was owed 'entirely to the new collections of the Art Gallery,' despite the fact that Abanindranath had independently experimented with his own Indian-style paintings since 1895.¹⁶

Introducing Abanindranath Tagore

In the volume titled Art & Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922, Partha Mitter identifies two clear periods of art production in colonial Bengal. First, he says, came the Westernising period, which I touched upon at the beginning of this paper. He places this period within the time frame of 1850-1900, and defines it by the introduction and absorption

¹³ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 153.

¹⁴ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 154.

¹⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 155.

¹⁶ Ibid..

of Renaissance naturalism in India.¹⁷ Then, between the years 1900-1922, he explains, came the “counterpoint,” during which a cultural nationalism emerged within the *bhadralok* and Orientalist groups in Bengal.¹⁸ He explains this nationalist sensibility as being tied in with the *swadeshi* movement that surfaced in response to the 1905 partition of Bengal, and emphasizes that this nationalism was not confined to the form in painting alone, but implied an entirely new *weltanschauung*, or world view, for the participants.¹⁹ Although as an artist, Abanindranath explored the indigenous traditions of miniature painting, ornamental design, and calligraphy before 1905 and the surge of political nationalism in the region,²⁰ it is within this *swadeshi* context and environment that Abanindranath is often introduced and discussed. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes in one article on the artist, “His name became synonymous with the age of nationalism in modern Indian art, and the rise and spread of the movement that took on the denomination of the Bengal School...Frozen in time in his fixed slot, Abanindranath could then be dropped from that later history with no qualms.”²¹

While Abanindranath did emerge as a publically recognized artist during this historical period of *swadeshi* upsurge and nationalist polemics, it would be unfair to analyze his work as dependent on this environment. As R. Siva Kumar points out in one article, “the artist is well capable of making an original and independent response to his times.”²² Later in the same essay, Siva Kumar agrees that Abanindranath’s introduction as an artist happened at “the juncture at which the first wave of Westernisation was breaking and a new wave of cultural nationalism was beginning to take shape,” adding that “Like most modern artists

¹⁷ Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Abanindranath, Known and Unknown: The Artist Versus the Art of His Times," *Archive Series*, Center for Studies in Social Sciences (2009): 5.

²¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Abanindranath, Known and Unknown: The Artist Versus the Art of His Times," *Archive Series*, Center for Studies in Social Sciences (2009): 2.

²² Siva Kumar, R. “Abanindranath: From Cultural Nationalism to Modernism.” Nandan, 1996, 49.

looking for alternatives he turned from his immediate past to more distant antecedents and towards fringe-practices. Thus his moment of personal difficulties coalesced with the moment of nationalist cultural assertion.”²³ Siva Kumar’s crucial assessment here of Abanindranath’s own personal development as an artist as something that merely “coalesced” with the advent of cultural nationalism is extremely important for a true understanding of the situation: Abanindranath’s art should be understood not as a “mere confirmation or exemplification” of the ideological discourse in the air at the time, but instead as an individual expression of creativity that happened to be contemporaneous with that discourse. As Siva Kumar reaffirms later in his essay, “Abanindranath’s involvement in the nationalist movement and his artistic career were two intertwined but distinct strands.”²⁴ It is important to keep this distinction in mind when treating the relationship between Abanindranath, Havell, and the other cultural commentators to be dealt with in this essay, so as not to let the personality of Abanindranath become obscured by the anti-colonial polemics that weighed heavy in the air of his environment.

Abanindranath’s Relationship With Nationalism

It was through the advent of popular journalism that Abanindranath’s art was first popularized on a large scale in India during the first decade of the 20th century. It was mainly through Ramananda Chatterjee’s publications *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review*, appearing in Bengali and English, respectively, that the paintings of Abanindranath were able to stand next to a nationalist dialogue expounded by three principle Orientalists: E. B. Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy, and Sister Nivedita. *Prabasi* was Ramananda Chatterjee’s first publication of the kind, but he decided in 1907 to produce *The Modern Review* as its English counterpart because, as Partha Mitter explains, Chatterjee was “convinced that the foreign rulers must be

²³ Siva Kumar, R. “Abanindranath: From Cultural Nationalism to Modernism.” Nandan, 1996, 49.

²⁴ Siva Kumar, R. “Abanindranath: From Cultural Nationalism to Modernism.” Nandan, 1996, 60.

made aware of the emergent nationalism.”²⁵ Clearly, *The Modern Review* was a cultural magazine with a mission, and it is within this forum that the Orientalists were able to brand Abanindranath’s art as nationalist.

Just as E. B. Havell demonstrated in his efforts at education reform, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Sister Nivedita were both deeply committed, as R. Siva Kumar explains, to reviving the Indian art traditions which they believed were being smothered under the weight of Westernisation under Colonial rule.²⁶ In a different work, Siva Kumar explains that these kind of politically-charged assertions were padded by a deep background of Orientalist research in Indian art traditions²⁷ that inevitably led to the binary categorization between “Western” and “Eastern” art. While the creation of this dichotomous conflict was largely of the Orientalists’ making, Abanindranath “went through the motions of subscribing to the program” in his own right, and was by no means a silent artist without personal agency.²⁸ Although he made the conscious effort to forge his own “Indian-style” painting before he had even met Havell, as will be discussed later in my treatment of his paintings, Abanindranath still allowed himself to be co-opted by the spirit of the cultural nationalist movement that was immortalized in *The Modern Review*. While the “nationalist” sentiments of his paintings were drawn almost completely by the rhetoric surrounding the art in *The Modern Review*, Abanindranath’s friendship with Havell led him to make his own *swadeshi* assertions. For example, when Havell put all of the Western-style paintings in the Government Gallery up for auction in March of 1905, Abanindranath followed suit by selling his own collection of naturalist oil paintings to a flea-market vendor, including his own.²⁹

²⁵ Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 122.

²⁶ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 23.

²⁷ Siva Kumar R., "Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview," *Art Journal*, 58, no. 3 (1999): 15.

²⁸ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 23.

²⁹ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 84.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta mentions in her book that at this stage in his career, the artist “consciously insulated himself from all Western pictures, in fear of ‘contamination.’”³⁰ In a similar example of “de-westernization,”³¹ Abanindranath, along with his brother and fellow painter Gaganendranath, directed a Japanese and a South Indian carpenter to completely replace the Western-style furniture in their house with that of a more “Eastern” taste.³²

Besides these efforts at rejecting Western aesthetics in his own life, Abanindranath also agreed, in August of 1905, to become the Vice-Principal of the Government School of Art, where as a paid employee of the British Government³³ he would be able to disseminate his unique teachings on art to young Indian artists. His acceptance, although reluctant, to become a government employee in the name of spreading the ideas of a “nationalist” art movement is the perfect embodiment of the nature of Abanindranath’s nationalism. No matter how much people like Sister Nivedita or Ananda Coomaraswamy, and later generations of informed art historians, were to laud Abanindranath’s art as “nationalist,” it is undeniable that whatever resistance Abanindranath posed towards the colonial establishment was submissive at best. Siva Kumar summarizes the reality very well, with his statement that, “They were pressing for a de-westernization of taste without turning openly anti-colonial or politically confrontational.”³⁴

Tapati Guha-Thakurta marks the same period that Abanindranath was on government salary, the first decade of the twentieth century, as decisive years for the artist because of a series of developments that placed Abanindranath “in the full throes of the new artistic

³⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 242.

³¹ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 84.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

mission,” including “his involvement with the Swadeshi movement.”³⁵ Indeed, it was very likely that his brief and reluctant involvement with the Swadeshi movement, at the heels of his uncle Rabindranath, was what defined the *artistic* mission as his true place in the popular reaction to Westernization. In one article, Siva Kumar graciously reproduces Abanindranath’s recollection of his uncle’s famous *rakhi bandhan* day, during which Rabindranath transformed a holiday that usually involved ceremony only between siblings to include literally everyone he and his procession encountered, regardless even of religion, in an ecstatic expression of *swadeshi*. The following gives the English-speaking observer a rare and precious insight into the personality of the artist as he recollects this day:

“Rabi *kaka* said one day, we have to organize a festival of *Rakhi bandhan*, tie *rakhis* on everyones wrists... It was decided that we shall take a dip in the Ganges and then tie the *rakhis*... What a fix! I was not fond of walking. But I was in his hands and Rabi *kaka* was not one to listen...Multitudes thronged the ghat since morning, and a crowd gathered around us to have a glimpse of Rabi *kaka*. The bathing over, we tied the loads of *rachis* we had carried on each others wrist. We also tied it on others. Man or woman no one was left out, a *rakhi* was tied on everyone who stood close by. That was quite something on the Ghat. While we were returning through Pathuriaghat at Biru Mullicks stables some ostlers were massaging the horses, all on a sudden Rabi *kaka* and a few others plunged up to them and tied *rhakis* on their wrists. What have they done, I thought, the ostlers were musulmans and they have tied *rachis* on musulmans—there would be a fight now...Suddenly Rabi *kaka* fancied going to the big mosque at Chitpur and tying *rakhis* on everyone there. It was decreed, everyone will go. A real pass, this time—It’s all over, I thought, if we enter the mosque and tie *rakhis* on the musalmans it would be impossible to avoid blood shed. Besides one never knows where Rabi *kaka*’s whimsy is going to lead him; he might as well walk me to death. And what did I do. I remained silent...”³⁶

As we can gain from this insight onto the shallow depth of Abanindranath’s political disposition, any amount of true resistance or response to Westernization under Colonialism was present only in his paintings themselves.

³⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 242.

³⁶ Siva Kumar, R. “Abanindranath: From Cultural Nationalism to Modernism.” Nandan, 1996, 62-63.

The paintings of Abanindranath Tagore

The beginning of Abanindranath's effort at creating an "Indian-style" painting is often traced to the year 1897, when he made two artistic encounters that were to change the course of the content and form of his painting towards the direction of the style that characterized his early paintings under study here. The first encounter was his contact with the painter Frances Martindale, who gifted Abanindranath a set of Irish Melodies illuminated by her (figure 1).³⁷ In the same period of time, his brother-in-law Sheshendrabhusan Chattopadhyay gave him a set of Indian miniatures; it has been inferred by scholars that this album of miniatures were likely examples of late Mughal painting, and possibly a product of a provincial Mughal school in Delhi from the nineteenth century.³⁸ Both of these samples introduced to Abanindranath a new kind of art in terms of scale, format, and medium,⁴⁰ that agreed not only with his aversion to European-style naturalistic oil painting, but also with his sudden inspiration to create art that was distinctly Indian. As Tapati Guha-Thakurta writes on the subject, "The artist himself felt that he had found 'the path of Indian art' and in it the direction of his own true development. Memories of previous dissatisfaction with the painting skills he had learnt from his European tutors added to this sent of elation at the new prospects before him."⁴¹ Abanindranath was drawn to the relationship between image and text in the pieces, which attracted him in a way that "the visual transcription of perceptual facts,"⁴² was unable to.

³⁷ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 35

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235.

⁴⁰ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 36.

⁴¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235.

⁴² R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 36.

The first painting Abanindranath made with this new mentality and under the influence of the aforementioned works was *Avisar* (figure 2). This small watercolor is fully Indian in its content: it depicts Radha out on her tryst, a scene pulled from the Vaishnava verses of Govindadas. As both R. Siva Kumar and Tapati Guha Thakurta point out, however, the format of the painting is modeled almost completely after the illuminated manuscripts painted by Frances Martindale.⁴³⁴⁴ One need only compare the floral border and stylized text surrounding the image of Radha in this painting to an example of Francis Martindale's work to identify the affinity between the two. Although the artist himself described the painting as his first attempt at painting "in an Indian manner," he was to later reflect on it with a suggestion that he was unsuccessful, saying that the subject of the painting looked less like Radha and more like a "European woman clothed in a sari and set out in the open on a cold winter night."⁴⁵ It was his dissatisfaction with this painting that led Abanindranath to train directly within indigenous painting techniques, and so he sought out to learn from a local artisan the method of applying gold leaf to paintings.⁴⁶

It was in his next series of paintings called the *Krishna Lila* series that Abanindranath moved even closer towards the tradition of Mughal painting, employing devices like intricate borders, calligraphic text, dense application of colors,⁴⁷ and an abundance of gold leaf.⁴⁸ In the form of these paintings one may find not just one, but an array of influences: for example, in a painting such as *Expectation* (figure 3), the image occupies only half of the piece, and the other half is dominated by the Vaishnavite text written in a calligraphic script. While the

⁴³ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 26.

⁴⁴ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235.

⁴⁵ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 36.

⁴⁶ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235.

⁴⁷ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 37.

⁴⁸ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 235.

composition of the painting was inspired by Rajput painting, the Persian-like calligraphy surrounded by cloud-borders was inspired by Mughal painting, and most likely by those he received from his brother-in-law.⁴⁹ While Abanindranath was successful in combining Indian form and subject matter in this series, it is interesting to observe the “aesthetic secularization” involved in its presentation. While the theme of *Krishna Lila* came from medieval Vaishnava literature, the casting of this story into a format that recalls Mughal miniatures is exemplary of the bricolage effect delivered by the paintings. In *Krishna Lila*, Abanindranath does revive the indigenous, but does so within “the contours of a new heterogeneity, a new cultural space, growing out of cultural cross-connections beginning to emerge from this eclectic conundrum.”⁵⁰ It is this mixture of Indian themes that by itself may be able to debunk claims made by scholars such as Partha Mitter that the “new sensibility, expressed by the *swadeshi* (indigenous) doctrine of art, closely linked it to the emergent Hindu identity,”⁵¹ since the projection of a Hindu theme into a Mughal format is itself an implicit fragmentation of any sort of hard-line religious identity.

Soon after finishing the *Krishna Lila* series, Abanindranath met E. B. Havell, who was at that point in the thick of his reforms at the Government Art School described at the beginning of this paper. It was a meeting that proved to have some amount of symbiosis to it: Havell was learned in the Indian art tradition, and was being met with a level of resistance from the students who were not convinced of the necessity for his reforms. Abanindranath, on the other end, was already deeply committed to creating a new Indian style of painting, and was at that point completely detached from the Art School institution, since he had never enrolled in one and at that point had severed ties with his private European tutors. It was

⁴⁹ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 38.

⁵⁰ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008, 40.

⁵¹ Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India, 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations*, (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 9.

under these circumstances that “Havell found in him [Abanindranath] a ‘collaborator’; and Abanindranath... found in Havell his mentor and ‘guru.’”⁵² During the years following the formation of their friendship, Abanindranath made an even more distinct effort to distance himself from Western art, and was drawn particularly to a wider range of Mughal and Pahari miniatures that were made available by Havell.⁵³

Avisarika, the image of which symbolizes the spirit of the monsoon night,⁵⁴ does not come directly after *Krishna Lila* in a chronology of Abanindranath’s painting, but it is nonetheless exemplary of his development as an artist during the years he was close to Havell. In this painting, the artist borrows both theme and compositional model from indigenous sources;⁵⁵ the subject matter is familiar to the Indian viewer, and it is delivered within a decorative border that is also familiar to those acquainted with Mughal art. The figure displays a level of naturalistic appearance, but she is so elongated that, combined with the thick, murky background against which she seems totally lost, the image itself is turned into a projection of fantasy from the artist’s imagination. While Guha-Thakurta argues that this combination of “contoured body lines, elongated finger tips, gesticulating pose, and flowing drapery” themselves “set the standard for the new ‘Indian-style painting,’”⁵⁶ R. Siva Kumar takes his analysis in another direction, adding up her “dainty,” “nimble,” and “rarefied” features to equal the idea that “Her reality is thus essentially subjective and pictorial.”⁵⁷ Besides a further consolidation of his ‘Indian-style,’ this painting is an early

⁵² R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 67.

⁵³ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 68.

⁵⁴ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 241.

⁵⁵ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 68.

⁵⁶ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 241..

⁵⁷ R. Siva Kumar, *The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore*, (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 68.

example of Abanindranath infusing into his work a distinctly individualized sense of *bhava*, or emotion.

Abanindranath was first fully successful in infusing *bhava* into the style of Mughal painting in his famous *The Passing of Shahjahan* (figure 5). The artist succeeds here in capturing the details in the Mughal architecture of the scene, doing true justice to the “delicate details and meticulous workmanship of the miniature compositions.”⁵⁸ While *The Passing of Shahjahan* adapts the essential feel of the Mughal style, it is even more important in its success of rendering not just a moment in history, but in capturing the essence of a universal emotion. In this oil painting on wood and condensed to the size of a Mughal miniature,⁵⁹ Abanindranath captures the “central theme of death and eternal separation, and the symbolism of the transitoriness of life vis-à-vis the immortality of art.”⁶⁰ It is not the rendering of architectural detail here that speaks to the viewer, but instead the simplistic forms of the dying emperor and his daughter at his feet, as well as the tiny Taj Mahal in the distance that causes the viewer’s eye to weave in and out of the space. “Abanindranath, according to his own account, poured into his image of Shahjahan remembering his beloved in his dying moments his own grief at the death of his daughter,” who had just died in the plague of 1902. This poignant work stands as a perfect example of the truly personal nature of Abanindranath’s work.

All of the aforementioned paintings are extremely important in understanding Abanindranath as an artist above all the nationalist contextual history, but all of them preclude his introduction to the “wash” technique that he developed after 1903. It was his interaction with two Japanese artists, Taikan Yokoyama and Hishida Shunso, both students of

⁵⁸ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 243.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

the famous Pan-Asianist Okakura Kakuzo, that allowed him to adapt this style. He noticed that while painting, Taikan Yokoyama would intermittently go over his paintings with a large brush dipped in water to soften its forms. This inspired Abanindranath to adapt this technique by dipping his entire paintings in water instead of merely using a brush. Early examples of this technique include *Dewali* (1903) (figure 6), which in its elongation of the figure, naturalism, and marked rendering of drapery is characteristic of Abanindranath's older works,⁶¹ and serves as a perfect example of transition for the artist.

Abanindranath made what may be his most famous painting, *Bharat Mata* (Bharat Mata), around the climax of the Swadeshi movement in 1905. This work, which was originally conceived as a representation of the regional linguistic community of Bengal as *Banga Mata* (Mother Bengal),⁶² is considered now as an emblematic symbol of the Swadeshi movement as a symbolic image of Mother India. While *Bharat Mata* was and still remains the most straightforwardly political painting in Abanindranath's oeuvre, and possibly the only one used in political action (it was enlarged by one Japanese artist and carried in fundraising *swadeshi* processions), much of its significance comes, once again, from the rhetoric surrounding it. For example, in her capstone article in *The Modern Review*, "The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality," Sister Nivedita wrote on the painting in the same issue which it was published, although two years after it was painted: "But how can a man be a painter of Nationality? Can an abstract idea be given form and clothed with flesh and painted? Undoubtedly it can. Indeed, if we had questioned this, Mr. A. N. Tagore's exquisite picture of 'Bharat-mata' would have proved its possibility."⁶³ While she does not delve deeply into an analysis of the painting, it is the only contemporary Indian picture she gives treatment to

⁶¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 74.

⁶² Debashish Banerji, *The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore*, (New Delhi: SAGE Publications, 2010), XX.

⁶³ Sister, Nivedita. "The Function of Art in Shaping Nationality." *The Modern Review*, February 1907, 129.

in the article and therefore holds a great significance due to its exclusivity. R. Siva Kumar summarizes the allegorical significance of the painting well:

The young and full-bodied, four-armed ascetic figure holding a sheaf, cloth, palm leaf manuscript and prayer beads in her hands was read as a nationalist mother-goddess bestowing the blessings of food, clothing, learning and spiritual strength on her children. Considering that the issues that stoked the Swadeshi movement included dissatisfaction with the agrarian, manufactural, educational and political policies of the colonial government, and that the segments of the society that the activists sought to bring together under the banner of Swadeshi included landowners, traders, students, and the intelligentsia, the iconography is self-explanatory.

It may be useful at this point to include one example of what seems to be one agreed-upon sentiment within the scholarly community to the relationship between Abanindranath and the *Swadeshi* movement. In her 1968 work titled Abanindranath Tagore and the Art of His Times, Jaya Appasamy writes that, “Though Abanindranath’s paintings are contemporaneous with all [this], and though his paintings are specifically Indian, I would not agree that their greatest stimulus was the urge to feel and act patriotically.”⁶⁴ However, as Guha-Thakurta interjects, “...more than any other, this painting firmly fixed the epithet ‘nationalist’ to his recreation of Indian-style.”⁶⁵ In another article, Tapati provides a snippet of Abanindranath’s personal remembrance of the impact of the *Swadeshi* movement on his famous Jorasanko household, which may arguably contradict Appasamy’s comment: “As I felt the tug of the wind, I tore free the ropes and flung myself in; I set the boat afloat in the course of the current. Getting rid of Western art, I now took up Indian art.”⁶⁶ So, while there is no doubt that Abanindranath was inspired by the *Swadeshi* movement’s affect on his household, we know from previous discussion that his revolutionary vigour did not extend very far past his immediate physical space or even artistic mediums. Indeed, when the *Swadeshi* spirit began to pale in Jorasanko, Abanindranath wrote that “what remained of it was a certain spirit and

⁶⁴ Jaya Appasamy. *Abanindranath Tagore and the Art of His Times*. (New Delhi: Lalit Kala Academy), 1968.

⁶⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 255.

⁶⁶ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Abanindranath, Known and Unknown: The Artist Versus the Art of His Times," Archive Series, Center for Studies in Social Sciences (2009), 5.

commitment” that he gave over fully to the world of painting.⁶⁷ In fact, although *Bharat Mata* is considered the most nationalist or political or *Swadeshi* painting not only of Abanindranath’s but of the period, it was actually modelled after something very personal: the face of his daughter. Additionally, from a pure art historical standpoint, the image only has a limited amount of significance as an example of Abanindranath’s early wash paintings.

Even after enthusiasm for the *Swadeshi* movement dwindled in Jorasanko, Abanindranath’s career as an artist continued. It is after *Bharat Mata* that popular art history usually departs from treatment of his paintings, and leaves him “frozen in time in that fixed spot.”⁶⁸ While he did not realize the full potential of his original combination of tradition and modern individualism in painting until the 1930s with his *Arabian Nights* series, the discussion of his paintings all too often ends here. Unfortunately, because this paper is focused on tracking the purely nationalistic tendencies of the artist, we will also take the all too worn road of departure from his paintings, and turn instead to focus on Abanindranath as an art teacher.

Abanindranath Tagore and “the Bengal School”

Besides producing art, Abanindranath also played a very important role as a teacher of painting in the Government School of Art. In fact, it was through this role that he gained his own students and the seeds of “the Bengal School” were planted. Ironically, Abanindranath started to teach at the Government School in 1905, the same year he produced “Bharat Mata” and the same year the first *Swadeshi* boycott of all schools and colleges was called for.⁶⁹ In hindsight, this seems completely antithetical to the writings of those like Nivedita, but it was

⁶⁷ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 259.

⁶⁸ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, "Abanindranath, Known and Unknown: The Artist Versus the Art of His Times," Archive Series, Center for Studies in Social Sciences (2009), 2.

⁶⁹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 269.

the distinction between “extremist” and “constructive” *Swadeshi*, which we will discuss soon, and the arbitrary placement of the artist within the “constructive” camp that excused Abanindranath from blame for this contradiction.⁷⁰ The coercive nature of Abanindranath’s appointment at the school is evident in the grounds on which he accepted the job: specifically, “on the assurance that he would have the freedom to work independently in his own studio in the school.”⁷¹ Although Abanindranath was finally convinced to teach at the Government School by Havell, their styles of teaching were not exactly the same. While Havell’s mission was to create a purely pedagogic base to revive certain “indigenous” techniques and aesthetics in order to reconnect the chord that had been torn from past tradition, Abanindranath was focused almost completely on instilling a sense of cultural identity within each individual artist that was meant to inspire the powers of imagination. For example, in an often-cited instance of Abanindranath telling his students to first read the poetry of Kalidasa and then attempt to paint nature,⁷² Abanindranath was not aiming for his students to practice either revivalism or illustration of literature. Instead, he was seeking to encourage the use of imagination within a clear, grounded cultural framework.⁷³ This is supported in the quote by the artist, translated by Tapati Guha-Thakurta: “Aesthetic sensibility, intense thought and emotion, a discerning taste, a discerning eye, enthusiasm, single-minded dedication, self control, a thirst for knowledge, a deep attachment to one’s country, and skills in drawing and painting—only through such an aggregation of numerous qualities is an artist made.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 270.

⁷² Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 204.

⁷³ Siva Kumar R., interview by Jasmin Cohen, Kala-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati International University, Santiniketan. “Third Meeting,” November 26, 2012.

⁷⁴ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 262.

The individualist nature Abanindranath sought to instill in his students was evident in his idiosyncratic behaviour as a painting teacher. Instead of teaching a specific way to paint “Indian art,” he would instead sit and work on his own paintings, surrounded by a group of his students who would watch him paint.⁷⁵ They would then work on their own paintings, and bring him their work for his input.⁷⁶

Abanindranath’s first two students were Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Gangoly, and following these two students came another wave of pupils that comprised the first wave of the new art movement soon to be called the Bengal School. This group included names like Asit Kumar Haldar, Kshitindranath Majumdar, Sailendranath Dey, Samarendranath Gupta, Surendranath Kar, sarada Charan Ukil, and K. Venkattapa.⁷⁷ These students were taught by Abanindranath in his eclectic pedagogic style, but not before they learned traditional techniques of painting and color preparation by the ‘artisan’ painter Ishwari Prasad.⁷⁸ It is interesting to consider that while Ishwari Prasad, the “artisan,” was paid Rs. 75 a month at the Government College of Art, Abanindranath’s salary was Rs. 300.⁷⁹

The Government College of Art began to pick up speed around 1906-7, with its new circle of Indian students producing an outpouring of paintings that corresponded to “the master’s formula of an ‘Indian-style.’”⁸⁰ However, Abanindranath’s attention was not on the grounds of the Government College but instead on what was happening at his Jorasanko Household. In a parallel sphere of interest and activity, the Tagore residence at Jorasanko

⁷⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 270.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 272.

⁷⁸ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 274.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 273.

developed as the more powerful and influential center of the new art movement.⁸¹ It was there that Abanindranath founded the Bichitra Club, which served as an art class and studio during the day, and hosted various cultural events like concerts and art salons at night.⁸² Although he did not resign until 1915, Abanindranath wrote to Havell as early as 1911 that he was thinking about resigning from the Government College, and spoke of a small studio at his own house where “Nandalal Bose and other boys from the school would come and work every day.”⁸³ Additionally, it was not until after Abanindranath’s resignation in 1915 that the Bichitra Club was officially established.

The establishment of the Bichitra Club at Jorasanko corresponded with two parallel developing paths that disseminated the paintings of the then-dubbed “New Calcutta School.” One of these paths was that of European exhibition and patronage of painting, based on the institutional framework of the Society of Oriental Art, which was established seven years earlier in 1907 but did not totally co-opt the art movement until 1915. The two main functions of the Society of Oriental Art were to organize annual exhibitions of Abanindranath’s and his students’ paintings, and to host periodic talks on Oriental art.⁸⁴ These exhibitions and popular patronage from rich Europeans are one half of the causes for solidifying the movement as “India’s most authentic new ‘national art.’”⁸⁵ The other half of this cause has been explained already: the advent of reproduction of paintings in Ramananda Chatterjee’s periodicals, *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review*. As this art movement continues to reveal its elitist colors, Tapati Guha-Thakurta explains that the aim of the reproductions of

⁸¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 274.

⁸² Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 275.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 278

⁸⁵ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 280.

the paintings was “to purge public taste by bringing into play a superior print culture as an alternative to oleographs of Ravi Varma...The new prints, like the new language of art criticism, were intended to reach out to a specially cultivated ‘art public’, to screen them off from the average consumers of cheap pictures.”⁸⁶

It was this dissemination and consolidation of the art movement that created what we call “The Bengal School” today. The paradox at the heart of the situation is that it was the very creation of a “school” of art which came from the solidification of the “movement” that drained it of its revolutionary, nationalist, innovative zeal. There was an inherent contradiction between Abanindranath’s aversion to laying down any kind of specific set of rules to create Indian art and the consolidation of a formula of an “Indian-style” that was set to counter the established formula of popular Western academic art.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, as Tapati succinctly explains, “it was a tendency towards standardization rather than innovation which came to dominate Abanindranath’s ‘new school’ of painting.”⁸⁸

The main aesthetic trademark of “The Bengal School” was the wash technique, which gave each painting the effect of either delicate, subtle monotonous or dank, murky layers of color.⁸⁹ These visual attributes served to express moods and ideas more than representations of concrete beings, and also obscured the physical setting of the story being told by removing the specificity of the physical environments.⁹⁰ It was this expression of *bhava* or emotion that lent the paintings to interpretation by the nationalist/Orientalist bystanders. For example, Nandalal Bose’s 1907 painting of *Sati* (figure 8) was praised by Sister Nivedita as

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 285.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 286.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

symbolizing “a glorious ‘Hindu ideal of womanhood’,” in its “attributes of tranquillity, selflessness and sacrifice.”⁹¹ This is another example of the frail image of a woman lost in a blend of color being elevated to a “national symbol”: indeed, the Orientalists were fond of placing women at the center of their rhetoric for the “transcendent,” spiritual quality of India’s nationalist identity.⁹² The very creation of a type, or “formulae” of painting to represent a national identity, is what caused the Bengal School to “fold inwards,” and “stagnate even as it reached its peak of success.”⁹³

The Bengal School was, unfortunately, limited by the very nature of its creation, which was to typify a kind of art that was based in an ideology not of a homogeneous expression of national identity, but instead in the encouragement of imagination to be engaged within a solid framework of cultural identity. It was the pre-determined paradox of normalizing something that was supposed to be unique that drained the Bengal School of its vigour, and urges us to depart from the Bengal School to follow the advent of nationalism in a discussion of Rabindranath’s “nationalist” efforts at Santiniketan.

Rabindranath Tagore, the Anti-Nationalist Nationalist

In 1903, the first draft of the partition plan for the state of Bengal was announced by the British Government, which served as a catalyst for the wave of nationalist agitation that emerged throughout the Bengali-speaking region in India.⁹⁴ The nationalist response to the partition announcement was grounded in a frustration with the assumption that the political motives behind the partition included at least one of the following: the encouragement of Muslim separatism, the encouragement of sectarianism within nationalist Hindu groups, and

⁹¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 286.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics, and Nationalism in Bengal, c. 1850 – 1920*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 314.

⁹⁴ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 4.

a widespread anti-Bengali sentiment felt throughout British official circles.⁹⁵ It is argued that the Japanese victory against Russia in 1904-5 in their war over Korean territory debunked the idea of European technological superiority over the East, and instilled a newfound sense of confidence especially in colonial India.⁹⁶ As one ideologue wrote in a 1907 issue of *the Modern Review*, “Japan was the first to rise in rebellion against the sordid claim of Europe, and its success has not only once and for all set back the tide of European aggression, but has besides taught other Asiatic nations the material and moral evils of foreign dependence, and the priceless virtue of self-respect and independence.”⁹⁷ It was the combination of this feeling of self reliance and frustration with the British regime that urged the eruption and continuation of *swadeshi* in the first decade of the 20th century.

The rise of *swadeshi* in Bengal was not, however, defined by a homogenous reaction to British colonialism. In his book The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908, Sumit Sarkar identifies a continuum on which any one actor or group in the movement may be placed.⁹⁸ On one extreme lay the moderates, who were passive in their resistance at best, and were criticised by other actors in the movement for perpetuating a spirit of “mendicancy,” or of being beggarly towards the British instead of resistant.⁹⁹ At the other extreme end were the advocates of an armed terrorist struggle against the British; it was this group that demanded an immediate evacuation of the British from Indian land.¹⁰⁰ In the middle left was what has been dubbed “constructive *swadeshi*,” which is the ideology most important to this discussion.¹⁰¹ Mainly advocated by Rabindranath Tagore, constructive *swadeshi* encouraged self development of Indian society without inviting a political clash with the British. In other

⁹⁵ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 12.

⁹⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 27-28.

⁹⁷ G., Subramaniya Iyer. "The Swadeshi Movement: A Natural Development." *The Modern Review*, April 1907, 140.

⁹⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 34.

⁹⁹ G., Subramaniya Iyer. "The Swadeshi Movement: A Natural Development." *The Modern Review*, April 1907, 138.

¹⁰⁰ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

words, it was an effort of “self-help” that intrinsically opposed British rule, but did not involve confrontation but rather deliberate isolation from the enemy. This kind of effort may be distinguished from the moderates in the sense of initiation that lay at the heart of such a movement, as opposed to stagnant passivity. Finally, to the middle-right of the spectrum were the “political extremists,” who, just a step short of those encouraging violence, advocated most of the tenets included in constructive *swadeshi* with the added imposition of an “extended boycott” of all British goods.¹⁰² It was under this slot that Aurobindo Ghose fell: while he advocated national schools and arbitration courts just as Tagore, he only wanted them if they were supplements to a total boycott of the foreign administration.¹⁰³

Tagore’s special brand of constructive *swadeshi* was double-pronged: part of it was focused on educating the village masses, while the other part was focused on a new kind of education for the elite. With these two parts together, Rabindranath was hoping to “re-construct” a modern India.¹⁰⁴ Like Abanindranath, Rabindranath Tagore’s ideology was grounded in the conception of a shared, grounded, distinctly Indian identity. While Tagore began writing articles against British government policies and “the overall attitude of white arrogance”¹⁰⁵ as early as the 1890s, it was not until 1901, when he founded the ashram at Santiniketan, that the beginning of a national education movement that distinguished constructive *swadeshi* began. Tagore’s program of autonomous rural development, as based on the model of Armenian nationalists in Russia,¹⁰⁶ was a call for “patient, sustained, unostentatious constructive work in the villages—organizing associations, introducing cooperative techniques in agriculture and handicrafts, instilling a sense of unity and self

¹⁰² Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 34.

¹⁰³ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 61.

¹⁰⁴ Siva Kumar R., interview by Jasmin Cohen, Kala-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati International University, Santiniketan. “Second Meeting,” November 22, 2012.

¹⁰⁵ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 52.

¹⁰⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 56.

reliance...so that national consciousness really reache[d] out to the masses.”¹⁰⁷ It was this model of resistance that served as an alternative to more extreme expressions of *swadeshi*, which Tagore avoided mainly because of their lack of ability to bridge the gap between the predominantly Hindu educated elite and the masses.¹⁰⁸ Sarkar explains that during the *swadeshi* period, some of the boycotts that took place were forced upon low-caste Hindus and Muslims under the threat of social ostracism: it was this kind of social injustice that Tagore sought to contradict and counteract with his program.¹⁰⁹

At the heart of Tagore’s model of alternative *swadeshi* was a sense of isolation for the sake of individual development. Not only did the ideology encourage isolation from the British in terms of political confrontation, but it was manifested in physical isolation as well. When Tagore founded the ashram at Santiniketan in 1901, which was to soon turn into Visva Bharati, the actual setting was much less developed than it is today. Besides denial of the British regime through physical and ideological isolation, Tagore also radically wished to reject the idea of the nation-state as a whole, painting, as it were, the nation-state as the cause of all strife. In his three lectures titled “Nationalism in the West,” “in Japan,” and “in India,” Tagore seems not only to shield, but to violently sever himself from the label of “nationalist.” Indeed, Tagore was not a nationalist in the way Sister Nivedita or E. B. Havell were: at the same time, as an *Indian*, he was not an Orientalist either. While those other characters looked mainly to an imagined glorious art-historical Indian past for their brand of cultural nationalism, Tagore was focused on the present, and specifically how to build a new, modern India that responds to contemporary political and social problems.¹¹⁰ A part of Tagore’s focus on contemporary issues was to reject nationalism, and instead focus on the ideas of

¹⁰⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 86.

¹⁰⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 83.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Siva Kumar R., interview by Jasmin Cohen, Kala-Bhavana, Visva-Bharati International University, Santiniketan. “Second Meeting,” November 22, 2012.

place and environment,¹¹¹ specifically the construction of a regional identity based on the Bengali language and culture.

In “Nationalism in the West,” Tagore spoke against the danger of “when [an] organization of politics and commerce, whose...name is the Nation, becomes all-powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life,” adding, “then it is an evil day for humanity.”¹¹² It would be wrong to interpret this as a rejection of the West as a whole, since Tagore makes it clear that he is only against the Western *nations*, and not the “West” itself. It is this sentiment that distinguished Tagore’s ideology from the kind of chauvinistic Hindu-supremacy advocated by the more extremist groups in the *swadeshi* movement. He makes a clear distinction between the “spirit of the West,” which “marches under its banner of freedom,” and “the nation of the West,” which “forges its iron chains of organization which are the most relentless and unbreakable that have ever been manufactured in the whole history of men.”¹¹³ At the same time, Tagore also differentiates between what is “modern” from what is “European”: When he refers to “the idea of the Nation” as “one of the most powerful anaesthetics that man has invented,”¹¹⁴ he is at once pointing to the Nation as harmful while also nodding to his own prescription of constructive *swadeshi* as something that may be considered a call for renewed action and sensitivity to one’s own culture.

Tagore summarizes the core of his ideology towards the idea of mainstream nationalism in his final lecture in the series, called “Nationalism in India”:

“The general opinion in the majority of present-day nationalists in India is that we have come to a final completedness in our social and spiritual ideals, the task of the constructive work of society having been done several thousand years before we were born, and that how we are free to employ all our activities in the political direction. We never dream of blaming our social inadequacy as the origin of our present helplessness, for we have accepted as the creed

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, (London, United Kingdom: Macmillan & Co., 1918), 10.

¹¹³ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, (London, United Kingdom: Macmillan & Co., 1918), 24-27.

¹¹⁴ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, (London, United Kingdom: Macmillan & Co., 1918), 42.

of our nationalism that this social system has been perfected for all time to come by our ancestors, who had the superhuman vision of all eternity and supernatural power for making infinite provision for future ages...This is why we think that our one task is to build a political miracle of freedom upon the quicksand of social slavery...”¹¹⁵

Tagore’s rejection of nationalism combined with his aversion to bashing the Western world resulted in a dissolving of the usual binary conflict between East and West that so characterized the arguments of the Bengal School. At the core, Tagore believed in an ethical respect that leads to cultural preservation,¹¹⁶ and a non-hierarchical dialogue between cultures that would encourage change, but not wipe out all differences.¹¹⁷ When Tagore began to aim his full attention towards the establishment of his school at Santiniketan, which would in 1921 become the International University Visva-Bharati, he had all of these humanistic ideas in mind. Tagore described his efforts at Santiniketan as leading towards the creation of a school that could be “an indigenous attempt at adapting modern methods of education in a truly Indian cultural environment.”¹¹⁸

It is argued that Tagore’s vision manifested itself most vitally at the Institute of Fine Arts at Visva Bharati, Kala Bhavana.¹¹⁹ Here, where Abanindranath’s foremost pupil Nandalal Bose came to be acting principal, Rabindranath urged the art students to take a Universalist stand point in allowing themselves to borrow from other cultures, while always remaining rooted in the own specific experiences, so as not to wipe out differences between cultures and to remain true to one’s own personality.¹²⁰ Kala Bhavana may be seen as the final culmination of the modern expression of Indian art that was kickstarted by the Bengal

¹¹⁵ Rabindranath Tagore, *Nationalism*, (London, United Kingdom: Macmillan & Co., 1918), 122.

¹¹⁶ Patrick Colm Hogan, *Colonialism and Cultural Identity*, (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2000), XVI.

¹¹⁷ Siva Kumar R., "Modern Indian Art: A Brief Overview," *Art Journal*, 58, no. 3 (1999): 16.

¹¹⁸ Uma Das Gupta, ed. R. Siva Kumar, *The Last Harvest: Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore Catalogue*, (Usmanpura, Allahabad: Mapin Publishing, 2011), chap. Rabindranath Tagore: A Biographical Sketch, 14.

¹¹⁹ Kathleen M. O’Connell, ed. R. Siva Kumar, *The Last Harvest: Paintings of Rabindranath Tagore Catalogue*, (Usmanpura, Allahabad: Mapin Publishing, 2011), chap. Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan: Where Life & Art Meet, 21.

¹²⁰ R. Siva Kumar, *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997).

School. That is at least how Rabindranath saw it; in a letter to Abanindranath, shortly after he founded Visva Bharati, Rabindranath wrote, “The seed you have sown in this country, it is my wish that it might germinate, become lasting and belong to this country forever...Since it did not take its roots in Calcutta, I have started work here, and signs of success are also visible.”¹²¹

Conclusion

I began this project hoping to identify the true nature of the nationalism so often talked about within the context of Abanindranath Tagore and “the Bengal School.” What I learned, somewhat disappointingly, was that the “nationalism” so often ascribed to this topic, while inherent in the style of painting, was an idea largely inflated by the rhetoric produced in the popular cultural journals contemporaneous to the art movement. Additionally, the truly patriotic sentiments I did come across in my research were all distinctly non-political, especially those found in studying Rabindranath Tagore. That is, while a special kind of nationalist sentiment *is* present in the paintings of Abanindranath Tagore and in the ideas of Rabindranath, there was always an aversion to direct political confrontation at the core of those sentiments. The nationalism propagated by the Tagores as dealt within this paper always existed in an isolated, parallel world to colonial India: it involved a denial and negation of the British presence and influence without ever directly confronting it.

¹²¹ R. Siva Kumar, *Santiniketan: The Making of a Contextual Modernism*, (New Delhi: National Gallery of Modern Art, 1997).

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Recommendations for Further Study

- An ISP completely devoted to Rabindranath Tagore's educational policies at Santiniketan.
- A practicum-based ISP that creates a series of paintings in "the Bengal School" style
- An ISP devoted to either the paintings, poems, or music of Rabindranath Tagore
- A study on early-20th century cultural magazines in India

Useful Contact Information

- Country Roads Homestay in Santiniketan:
 - countryroads.homestay@gmail.com
 - #99 03398059

Appendix A

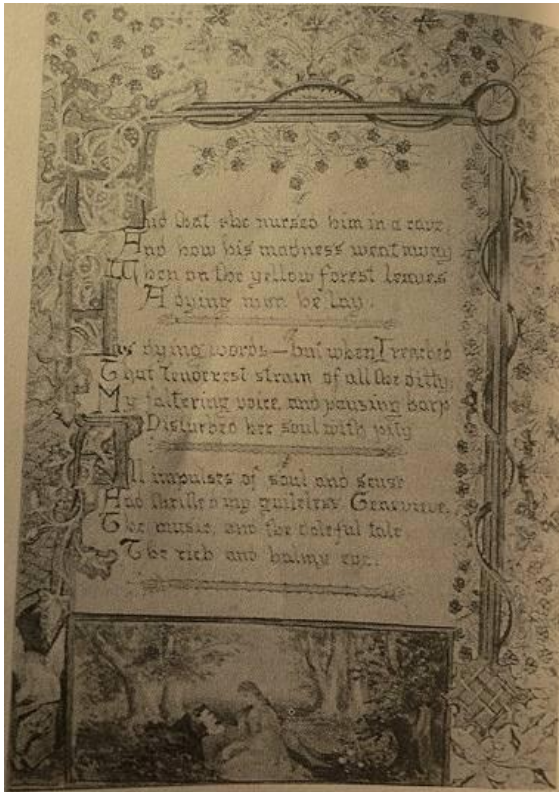


Figure 1: A Page from Francis Martindale's album of illuminated manuscripts, courtesy of Tapati Guha-Thakurta in [The Making of a New 'Indian' Art](#)



Figure 2: Abanindranath Tagore, *Avisara*, c. 1897. Watercolor. Courtesy of R. Siva Kumar in [The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore](#)

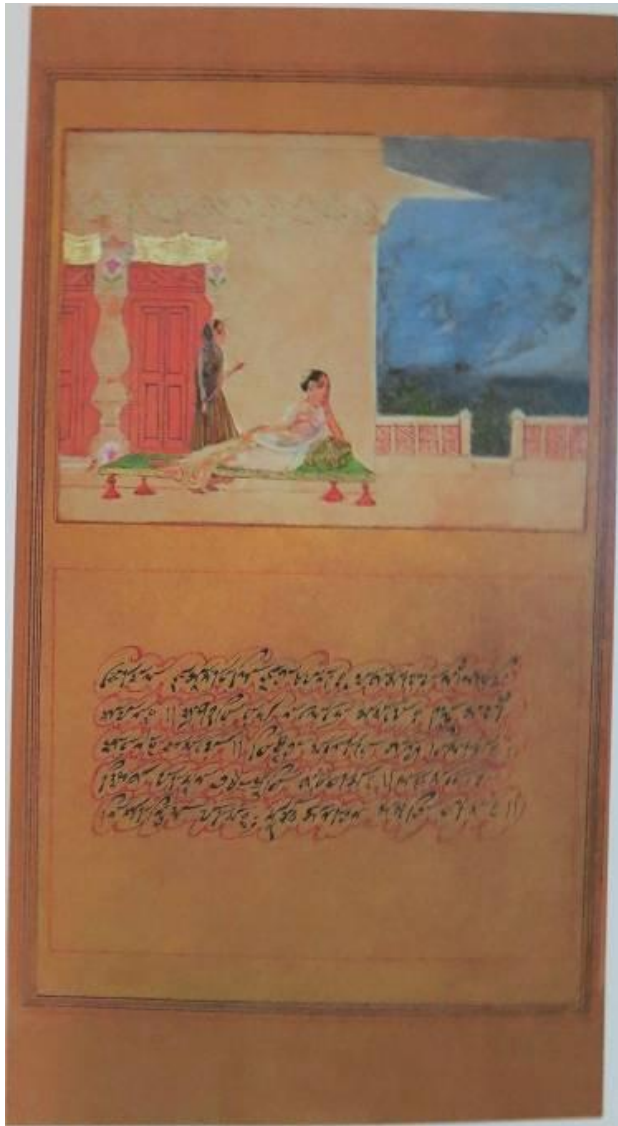


Figure 4: Abanindranath Tagore. *Expectation*, from the *Krishna Lila* series, c. 1897, watercolour. Courtesy of R. Siva Kumar, in [The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore](#)

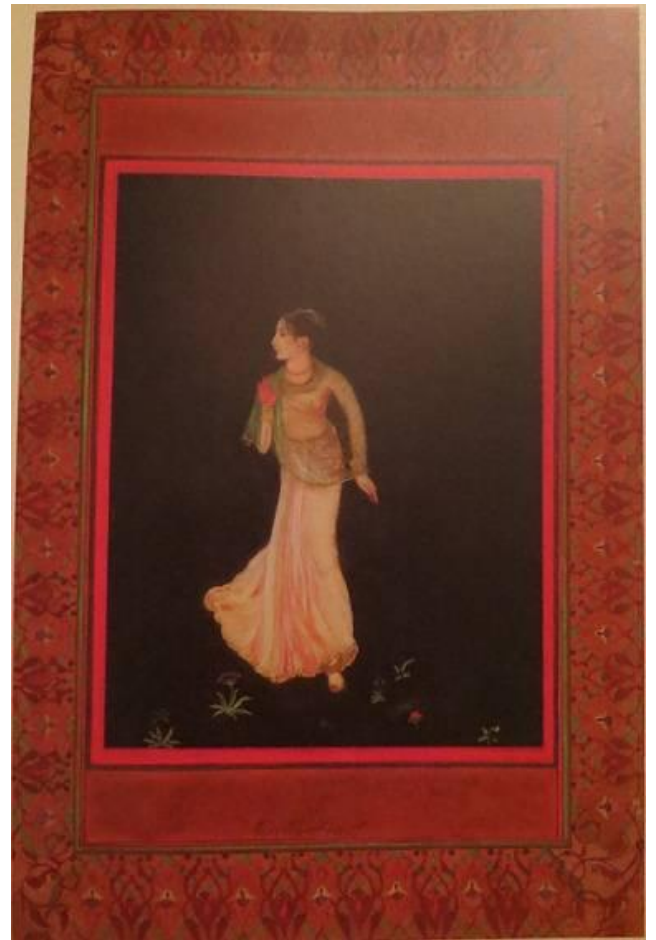


Figure 3. Abanindranath Tagore: *Avisarika*, c. 1901, watercolour. Courtesy of R. Siva Kumar, in [The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore](#).

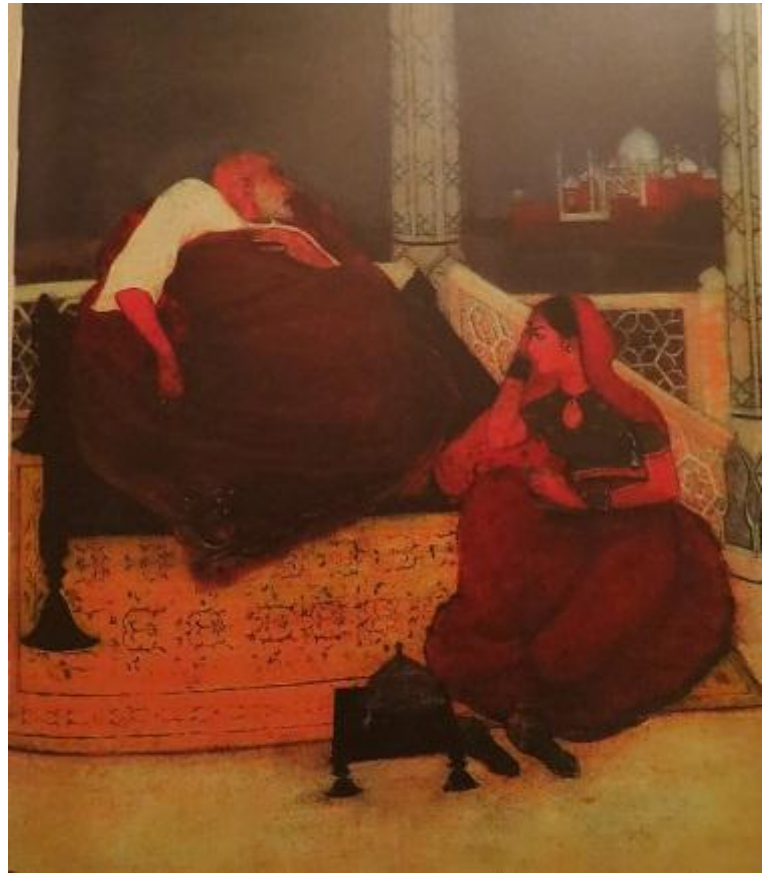
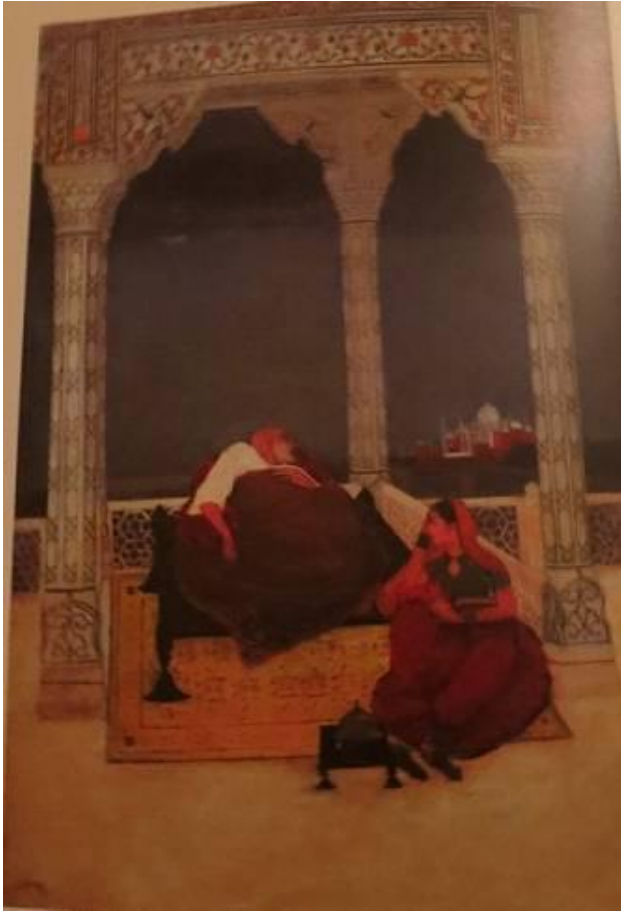


Figure 5 and Figure 5.1: *The Passing of Shahjahan*, and detail from the same painting. Oil on wood, c. 1902. Courtesy of R. Siva Kumar, in [The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore](#).

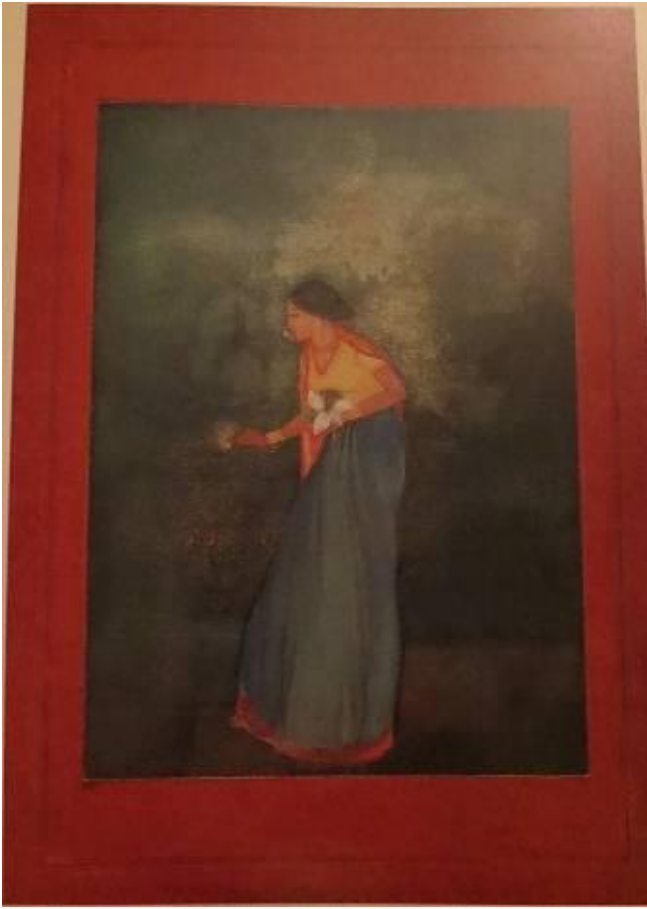


Figure 7: Abanindranath Tagore. *Dewali*. C. 1902, water color. Courtesy of R. Siva Kumar in [The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore](#).



Figure 6: Abanindranath Tagore. *Bharat Mata*. C. 1905, water color. Courtesy of R. Siva Kumar, in [The Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore](#).



Figure 8: Nandalal Bose. *Sati*. C. 1907, water color. Courtesy of Sonya Rhie Quintanilla in [Rhythms of India: The Art of Nandalal Bose](#).

Glossary

Bhadralok: Bengali middle-class gentleman, used by historians to refer to the social group of the Bengali western-educated elite

Bhava: emotion, feeling, sentiment

Orientalist: European scholar dealing with the “East,” a subject called Orientalism

Swadeshi: literally “self sufficiency,” and a word for specifically Indian nationalism