

“Beyond Borders”: Rabindranath Tagore’s Paintings and Visva-Bharati

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Abstract

This paper seeks to locate Tagore’s paintings and his writings on art in the context of the evolution of his ideas of Visva-Bharati. It intends to argue that as Tagore moved from the idea of the *brahmavidyalaya* to the idea of Visva-Bharati, his paintings and his concept of art changed substantially. The ‘imagined community’ of Visva Bharati was replicated in Tagore’s canvas as he conceptualised a world without borders, where ideas and knowledge could be freely and equally assimilated and exchanged. Setting himself apart from the binaries of the self and the ‘other’ and the rhetoric of nationalism, Tagore’s unique postcoloniality used the aesthetic and the pedagogic to bypass the political.

[Keywords: Tagore, art, painting, Visva Bharati]

“Fondly indulgent is my Mistress of the Line to the errant in the poet”¹

Although Rabindranath Tagore had sporadically experimented, his earlier career as a painter flourished in the first half of the 1920’s. Tagore went on to produce close to 2,500 paintings, exhibited across India, Europe and Asia. This period also saw some of Tagore’s most sensitive writings on art and aesthetics, apart from the setting up of Kala Bhavana, the institute of art that he saw as an integral part of his experimental university. Clearly the “mistress of lines” whom Rabindranath so dearly nurtured, had a deep fascination for him.

It is probably useful to trace the evolution of Visva Bharati from the initial concept of the *brahmavidyalaya*. Established in 1901 the *brahmavidyalaya* was devoted largely to a curriculum of studies of Indian classics and nature with science and English as peripheral subjects. While Tagore retained the basic aspects of the *brahmavidyalaya*, his letters after 1910 witness a desire to extend the purview of his education:

My first intention was to educate Bengali children in close proximity of nature to enhance their sensibilities... however I increasingly felt the need to assimilate it with the spirit of the world ... The study of truth has no borders of the east and the West. My institution will be a pilgrimage of knowledge where the truths will reside.²

Key to Tagore’s ideas was the emergence of a new selfhood in colonial India. By this time, Tagore had firmly turned against the spectre of nationalism and the fervent anti-colonialism of the extremists and the moderates. He refused to allow his self to fall within the rhetoric of nation, instead viewing India’s history as a series of absorption of a series of incursions that progressively widened its borders.³ This was not to deny the pain and anguish that he felt at the exploitative practices of the British, but he genuinely felt that the Indian self would be enhanced by embracing the British virtues, an opinion that he retained even in his last writings like *Crisis in Civilization*.⁴ Positing Rammohun Roy as an ideal,⁵ he argued that this broader self had to work within the country, eradicating

poverty and illiteracy to lay the foundation of a society that could then serve as model for moral regeneration. This society based on sacrifice and mutual co-operation would globally posit an alternative to the aggressive imperialism that Europe had fostered. Thus the self would enrich itself by absorption from the world and in turn enrich the world. For Tagore the binaries of European scientific progress and Asian spirituality could be collapsed to create a new world based on peace and mutual interaction, originating in the spirit of service. He also felt that the nationalist struggle was accepting the same rhetoric of fervent national identity that would always demand its 'other' and therefore fall into the trap of violence and the restriction of the self. It was this utopian extension of the self that he attempted in his idea of Visva-Bharati in 1921, when Vidusekhar Shashtri read out its declaration:

This is Visva-Bharati where the world makes its home in a single nest ... we are of the faith that Truth is one and undivided though diverse be the ways in which may lead us to it. Through separate paths pilgrims from different lands arrive at the same shrine of Truth.

So unto this Visva-Bharati we render our homage by weaving garlands with flowers of learning gathered from all quarters of the earth. To all devotees of truth, both from the West and from the East, we extend our hand with love.⁶

Thus Visva-Bharati brought together scholars across borders moving from Indology to agriculture, from science and rural development to the study of aesthetics.

For Tagore art and aesthetics were not a peripheral; they were an integral part of the self, facilitating the recognition of beauty in all aspects of life and therefore key to the final vision of human harmony. Writing on *Kala Bhavana* (the institute of art) Tagore wrote:

Our notion of culture is limited within the boundary lines of grammar and the laboratory. We almost completely ignore the aesthetic life of man, leaving it uncultivated, allowing weeds to grow there ... But where are our arts, which like the outbreak of spring flowers are the spontaneous overflow of our deeper nature and spiritual magnificence? ... In the centre of Indian culture which I am proposing, music and art must have their prominent seats of honour and not be given merely a tolerant nod of recognition.⁷

Tagore's own ideas on art can be classified into three main stages and they roughly coincide with his educational ideas. The young Rabindranath had grown up on the Jorasanko Thakurbari portraits. In 1900, discussing the paintings of J. P. Gangooly based on Banabhatta's *Kadambari*, he endorsed the practice of combining Indian historicist themes with realist rendering of Western lineage.⁸ Thus at the turn of the century, Tagore's perceptions and views on art were still those of his elite compatriots who saw academic realism as the highest form of art and Ravi Verma as its finest exponent.



(Abanindranath: Bharatmata, 1905)
print, 1930)



(Nandalal: Gandhi, linocut
print, 1930)

The beginning of the century witnessed a new nationalist surge in the sphere of art. Led by Abanindranath and E.B. Havell, the Calcutta Art School questioned the belief that it was essential for the Indian artists to assimilate Western representational methods for the progress of Indian art and began to foreground the cultural imperatives for an independent approach to the representation nurtured by Indian antecedents. Their activities reached a flash point with Havell’s decision to introduce Indian art into the Calcutta Art School’s teaching programme and to replace its European collection and with the original examples of Indian art. In the public furore and debates that ensued, Tagore came out in support of Havell – arguing that more than a passing acquaintance with Western art gained through a few inferior originals and copies, a thorough grounding in one’s own culture would be a better preparation for a fruitful encounter with all cultures.⁹ It was Rabindranath, who in 1891, prodded Abanindranath and Nandalal to take notice of the larger cultural panorama outside the purview of the higher arts and interested them in folk and popular culture. Tagore invited Abanindranath and Nandalal to Kala Bhavana thereby ensuring that Santiniketan remained the centre from which this movement could develop. Subsequently both Abanindranath and Nandalal were to ally art to the nationalist cause.

As Visva-Bharati took shape and Tagore embarked on his career as an artist, his opinions changed substantially. Key to this was his exposure to the global art scenario in the course of his travels. In 1913, he visited the Chicago Art Institute Armory Show with 1600 exhibits, where Rabindranath studied the entire range of modern artists from the Impressionists to Marcel Duchamp. That Tagore

was deeply impressed can be gauged from his attending Stella Krammrisch's lecture in London in 1920. Tagore invited her to Santiniketan in 1922, where she delivered a series of lectures on world Art from Gothic to Dadaism. Rabindranath attended these lectures and translated them himself. In 1921, he also visited Weimer and Bauhaus in Germany and met Kollowitz, Modigliani, Johannes Itten. Tagore's visits to the British Museum also exposed him to primitive art, a form that he would encounter in his travels to Indonesia, China and America.

It was during his trip to Japan in 1916 that we witness Tagore's desire to evolve an art that could syncretise these various strains and would not merely fall back upon tradition, but would boldly enlarge it. Writing to Abanindranath, Tagore's tone is almost one of admonishment:

Aban, the more I travel in Japan the more I feel that you should have been here too. Squatting there all the time in your south verandah you will never realise how very essential it is to have contact with the living art of Japan so that our own art may revive and flourish.¹⁰

Tagore's movement away from the nationalism in aesthetics can be located in his essay *Art and Tradition* (1926):

When in the name of Indian art we cultivate with deliberate aggressiveness a certain bigotry born of the habit of a past generation, we smother our soul under idiosyncrasies that fail to respond to the ever changing play of life.¹¹

Rather art was seen as a sphere where disparate influences could come together to create a world without borders. Thus in *Art and Tradition*, Tagore added:

There was a time when human races lived in comparative segregation and therefore the art adventures had their experience within a narrow range of limit ... But today that range has vastly widened, claiming from us a much greater power of receptivity than what were compelled to cultivate in former ages.¹²

Tagore's own paintings reflect the cosmopolitan approach to art as he freely moved between the various influences to develop a style of his own. He was aware of the different route that he was charting in his letter to Rothenstein in 1937:

I have been playing havoc in the complacent and stagnant world of Indian art and my people are puzzled for they do not know what judgement to pronounce upon my pictures. But I must say I am hugely enjoying my role as a painter.¹³

Key to Tagore's artistic vision was the idea of personality and harmony. As his interaction with Einstein clearly shows, for Tagore, beauty could exist in individual human perception. Thus impressionism appealed to Tagore's individual perception of reality.



(Rabindranath : Landscape)



(Tagore: Self Portrait, 1936)

Some of his landscape paintings and his self portrait definitely reveal impressionist tendencies. Tagore's use of colour too reveals idiosyncrasies as he experimented with pigmentation to produce a boldness that was largely absent in contemporary Indian art. As Ashok Mitra points out:

He knew that colour must not lose its richness. This urged him to experiment with pigments ... He produced such powerful ingredients and innovations that a piece of coloured surface acquired a luminous glow, an intense and pulsating brilliance never before experienced.¹⁴

Tagore's fascination for geometrical shapes is also manifested in several of his paintings. Archer notes his fascination with angular geometry, for smooth upward-thrusting shapes, for gaunt ovoids, for protruding beaks, teeth and noses and slimly pointing triangles. For Tagore, these shapes seem to be strangely imbued with the expressionist revelation of deep psychic pain. The pensive, ovoid face of the woman with large unwavering soulful eyes was perhaps a more obsessive theme than any other. Exhibited first in 1930, endless variations of the same mood-image continued to be emergent throughout. The earlier ones were delicately modeled and opalescent, while the later examples were excessively dramatic with intensely lit forehead, exaggerated nose ridge painted in strong colours, foregrounding a primal gloom.



(Tagore: Untitled, 1930)

Both Archer and K. G. Subramanyan trace the expressionist motif in Tagore's repeated representations of the ovoid face of the desolate woman, reading into them the haunting presence of Tagore's sister in law Kadambari Devi:

His art is incontestably modern ... in intimate essentials it presupposes the modern theory of the unconscious, the revolutionary ideas of Freud and the reevaluation of reason which has followed the discoveries of psychoanalysis.¹⁵

In fact, as one moves through the later paintings of Tagore there is an overpowering sense of darkness and the grotesque, an aspect that is also brought out in the numerous mask paintings that depict the subject in pain. Whether they refer to Tagore's anguish at the trauma of his family or a broader anguish at the fate of mankind remains unclear, but the strange brooding mood seems to cut across a variety of forms European and primitive. The influence of the European modernists leads Mitra to evaluate Tagore as, "the only great Indian painter, who starting with his heritage of oriental art gradually proceeded towards the European"¹⁶, but the presence of the influence of primitive art suggests a broader convergence.



(Tagore, untitled)

At the same time Tagore was also collaborating with Nandalal, frequently drawing from him the representation of the everyday details. With Nandalal, Tagore also embarked upon the woodcuts of *Sahaj Path*, the Bengali primer where images from everyday life were used for pedagogic purposes.



(Tagore, untitled, 1938)



(Nandalal, Illustrations for Sahaj Path)

Political reality and the symbolic meet in paintings. This painting seems to reflect the spirit of the self trapped in the sensory world, or is it the colonial self trapped within British hegemony?



(Tagore, Untitled)



(Tagore, Untitled, 1934)

Tagore's pencil sketches and the boldness and clarity of his lines also show his attempt to incorporate the Japanese tradition into his paintings.

However the various influences were integrated within Tagore's theorisation of art. K.G. Subramanyan mentions the point that Tagore's approach to both education and art reveals aspects of the amateur,¹⁷ but this subsequently emerged in a cohesive theorization. Central to this was his idea of rhythm. Writing in 1928 to Rani Mahalanobis, Tagore explained the process he followed in his artistic creation:

First, there is the hint of a line, and then the line becomes a form. The more pronounced the form becomes the clearer becomes the picture of my conception ... The only training which I had from my younger days was the training in rhythm, in thought, the rhythm in sound. I had come to know that rhythm gives reality to which is desultory, insignificant in itself.¹⁸

This rhythm for Tagore was a shadow of the existence of a creator playing within a ceaseless world of forms. Where Tagore differed from the modernists is in this notion of the form as leading to the notion of an organic whole, rather than a fragmented reality.¹⁹ Thus even while drawing upon modernist tendencies, Tagore could freely experiment with them.

This paper is not meant to be a catalogue of the various influences in Tagore's paintings. What I wish to point out is that Tagore's experiment with Visva-Bharati involved the creation of a plural space that could freely acknowledge and sustain itself from all possible sources. Tagore's canvas reflected this plurality where he acknowledged the possibility of the free interaction of cultural traits. Was it a coincidence that Rabindranath's flowering as an artist developed with the emergence of his Visva-Bharati experiment?

In an age of new media why go back to Tagore's images? When Tagore approached art the energy of modernism was sweeping Europe. He recognized the experimental urges of modernism and sought to harness it within the traditional. Rabindranath realized that narrow national boundaries would not facilitate exchange across civilization and would fail to create the cosmopolitan man. At the same time, he recognized that the fine balance between

heterogeneity and individuality had to be retained. Many of the papers will this conference will talk about the diverse modes of hybridity that the new media display in an age of advanced postcoloniality. It is indeed stunning to discover the radical postcolonial ideas of the university, the artist and the self in the writings and paintings of Tagore.

Notes

1. Rabindranath Tagore, “My Mistress of the Line”, 11 September 1938, in Rabindranath Tagore, *On Art and Aesthetics: A Selection of Lectures, Essays and Letters*, ed. Prithwish Neogy (Kolkata: Subarnarekha, 2005), p. 78.
2. Rabindranath Tagore, *Visva-Bharati* (Kolkata: Visva-Bharati, 1318), p. 114. Translations mine.
3. See Tagore’s poem, *He mor chitta* where he articulates this idea. The same idea may be found in his essay on Rammohun Roy:

From the early dawn of our history it has been India’s privilege and also its problem as a host, to harmonize the diverse elements of humanity which have inevitably been brought to our midst, to synthesize contrasting articles in the light of a comprehensive ideal (Tagore, “Rammohun Roy”, in Das, Vol. III, p.667)
4. See Tagore, *Crisis in Civilization* (1941), in *The English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore* ed. Sisir Kumar Das (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi), Vol. III, p. 725.
5. See Tagore’s essay, “Rammohun Roy” (1933), in Das, Vol. III, p. 667. Tagore hails Rammohun as the individual who attempted;

to establish our people’s on the full consciousness of their own cultural personality, to make them comprehend the reality of all that was unique and indestructible in their civilization and simultaneously to make them approach other civilizations in the spirit of sympathetic co-operation. (p. 667)
6. Rabindranath Tagore, “Declaration” in *Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, 1.1 (1923), p.i.
7. Rabindranath Tagore, “An Eastern University” (1922), in Das, Vol II, p. 567.
8. For details see, R. Siv Kumar, “Rabindranath and the Indian Art Scene” in *My Pictures: A Collection of Paintings by Rabindranth Tagore* (New Delhi, Viva, 2005): vi-xiv, p. vii.
9. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
10. Rabindranth Tagore, *Japan Jatri* (Kolkata, Visva-Bharati, 1326), p. 182.
11. Rabindranath Tagore, “Art and Tradition” (1726) in Neogy, p. 54.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 54.
13. “Rabindranath Tagore to William Rothenstein”, Letter no 195, in *Imperfect Encounters: Letters of William Rothenstein and Rabindranath Tagore 1911-1941*, ed. Mary M. Lago (Harvard: Harvard University press, 1972), p. 75.
14. Ashok Mitra, *Four Painters* (Kolkata: New Age, 1965)
15. W. G. Archer, *India and Modern Art* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), p 75. According to Hiranmoy Banerjee, Tagore is reported to have told Nandalal Bose that:

The look of the eyes of *Notun Bouthan* have become so deeply imprinted in my mind that I can never forget about them and when I paint portraits, not unoften her glowing eyes present themselves before my sight. Probably that is why the eyes in my portraits take after her eyes. [Hiranmoy Banerjee, *Rabindranath Tagore* (New Delhi: Publications Division, 1971), p. 18.]
16. Mitra, p. 69.
17. K. G. Subramanyan, “The Amateur and the Professional – Some Issues Raised by Rabindranath’s Paintings”, in *Rabindranth Tagore and the Challenges of Today*, eds. Bhudeb Chaudhuri and K. G. Subramanyan (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1988), p. 215.
18. “Rabindranth Tagore to Rani Mahalanobis”, November 1928, trans. Khitish Roy, in Neogy, pp 79-80.
19. See Rabindranth Tagore, “The Religion of an Artist” (1924) for a more detailed discussion on Tagore’s response to Modernism. Tagore writes:

I have read some modern writing ... from the point of realism the image may not be wholly inappropriate and may be considered as outrageously virile in its unshrinking incivility. But this is not art; this is a jerky shriek ... when we find that the literature of any period is laborious in the pursuit of a spurious novelty in its manner and matter, we must know it is the symptom of old age. (p. 45)

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