Modernism in India

December 1922 is a convenient starting point for a discussion about the modernist art movement in India. At the end of 1922, through Rabindranath Tagore’s intervention, an exhibition of the works of Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Johannes Itten, and other Bauhaus artists was held in Calcutta. This momentous event brought modernism right to the doorsteps of Bengal, though its impact was not immediately obvious. International modernism added an extra dimension to the earlier dialectic between colonial and indigenous art. The problematic relationship between global modernity and national identity was the dominant theme of Indian art through the twentieth century as indeed of arts of the Third World in general. Modernity, associated with western capitalism and colonial expansion, has involved international communication on an unprecedented scale, giving artists unlimited access to art from all ages and lands. The Industrial Revolution, which ushered in the modern age in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, uprooted communities and undermined social cohesion. Fragmentation of life and art made intellectuals outsiders in their own society, causing alienation and angst, forcing a crisis of identity. These have become the cornerstones of modern art, formally expressed in radical distorion and fragmentation.

In the 1920s, India was still an essentially non-industrial country in which social cohesion had not yet broken down. While colonial rule gave rise to a crisis in cultural identity, this did not necessarily lead to the western sense of alienation of the self. Indeed nationalism—and nationalist art as represented by the Bengal School—was built on the real or imagined unity of all Indians, which could hardly encourage social alienation of the artist. As Indian artists were increasingly exposed to the European avant-garde from the 1920s, each artist responded to the above issues of modernism in their own way. But one problem they could not resolve was the contradiction between a modern sense of alienation and the cultural cohesion expected of a nation engaged in an anti-colonial struggle.

Indian artists and Cubism
Art from the 1920s until 1947, the year of Indian independence, was dominated by three powerful personalities, the poet Tagore, Amrita
Sher-Gil, and Jamini Roy, all of whom responded to modernism in their own unique ways. However, the first Indian response to modernism was a fascination with Cubism, which had become the most widely emulated artistic style in the world. The pioneering figure in this context was Abanindranath Tagore's brother, Gaganendranath (1867–1938), who came to prominence in 1917 with a series of cartoon lithographs. Since the 1870s in Bengal, caricature had been a prime device in art and literature for exposing pretension and mocking contemporary manners. The satirical tradition continued into the twentieth century, but few matched the unsentimental eye of Gaganendranath.¹

In the 1920s, Gaganendranath's discovery of Cubism released an unprecedented creative energy in the artist [122].¹ In order to grasp the nature of Gaganendranath's appropriation, we need to compare it with the reception of Cubism in European countries other than France. But first let us remind ourselves of Cubism's contribution to modern art. European painters since Giotto had related different objects within a picture by means of consistent, directional lighting. The unique importance of Analytical Cubism (the Braque-Picasso experiment of 1909–10) rests on the fact that it finally destroyed the pictorial illusionism created by 'directional lighting'. This was achieved by setting up conflicting relationships of light and shadow 'within' a picture frame, thereby dissolving the solidity of an object.²

Significantly, these revolutionary implications of Cubism did not affect German expressionists such as Georg Grosz, for instance, as much as Cubism's decorative possibilities, namely that objects could be distorted and fragmented at will to create dazzling patterns. To Gaganendranath, who was remote from the European scene, the decorative possibilities of Cubism, with its broken surfaces and the play of light and shadow, proved to be the most gripping. These later works, including Gaganendranath's flights of poetic fancy, may be termed 'post-Cubist', both to indicate the source and its transformations. Indeed, a German critic at an exhibition of modern Indian art in Berlin in 1933 quite perceptively spotted this affinity between the Indian artist and the Expressionists. The complex patterns developed by Gaganendranath in his later painting derived also from his use of a kaleidoscope, a contraption that fascinated him.³

Primitivism and Indian art
The second development in Indian modernism needs to take into account another global phenomenon with its roots in the history of western thought: primitivism.⁴ In the late nineteenth century, the nationalist art fairs in Bengal gave the decorative arts the recognition they deserved. But it was Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha movement that for the first time brought the vast rural population of India into the orbit of the anti-colonial struggle (Gandhi, however, did not directly address the tribal peoples in India). The Gandhian movement gave a new voice to the peasant and forced the urban elite to accept that
Primitivism

Primitivism has existed in the West since antiquity as the romantic longing of a complex society for the simplicity of pre-modern existence, the innocence of the ‘noble savage’. The crisis of the industrial age, blamed on the Enlightenment ideology of progress, made the idea of primitivism attractive to many thinkers. Freud’s *Civilisation and Its Discontents* is a classic primitivist document of the twentieth century. His notion of the unconscious accorded a special status to the subliminal level in the human psyche that lies submerged beneath our rational self. The idea of the ‘internal savage’ was complemented by that of the ‘pre-rational’, primitive mentality, put forward by Levy-Bruhl and other anthropologists. This vestigial Darwinism characterized primitivism as the childhood of mankind on the scale of progress, contrasting the rational (western) man with the ‘Other’. Primitives, women, children, and the mentally ill. The myth of the nature of primitive art, although it belied the fact that strict rules governed such works, liberated European artists from the constraints of the classical canon. Primitivism assumed a global status as modernism spread around the world.

Indian society was predominantly rural. In the first phase, artistic nationalism had identified the nation with the past; from the 1920s, it began equating the nation with the soil. This was the time when educated Bengalis discovered Kalighat painting and the village scroll painting (pat).

The creation of the ‘noble savage’

However, from the 1920s it was the Santhals, hunter-gatherers of eastern India, who emerged as the ideal ‘noble savage’ in Bengali consciousness. This stereotyped image of ‘primitive’ groups in India had already been created by colonial anthropology. Santhal women were romanticized by the Bengal School, but in the university founded by Tagore at Santiniketan, Santhals or adilhais (original inhabitants of India) came to stand for the timeless purity of the primitive, set against the corruption of civilization. This paved the way for the admiration of tribal art by the elite, who discovered its affinities with European modernist works.

The quest for rural (and tribal) art as an expression of indigenous resistance to colonialism became a significant aspect of modern art in India. However, in the interactions between elite and folk/popular/tribal artists, despite the undoubtedly idealistic objective, an asymmetrical relationship between them was inevitable. For instance, the elite artist could with all sincerity participate in folk lives in order to gain an insight into folk art, but the reverse was virtually impossible. This underlying tension of our modern age has never been resolved.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941)

The first major modern painter in India, who made primitivism a vehicle for his artistic expression, the great poet Rabindranath Tagore was also the first Indian to make an effective use of bold ‘expressionist’ distortions in his painting. Tagore took up painting somewhat playfully at 67, when his international reputation as a poet was at its zenith. The first exhibition of Tagore’s paintings took place in May 1920 at the Galerie Pigalle in Paris. Henri Matisse, the champion of the Surrealists, drew clear analogies between Tagore’s ‘automatic painting’ and the work of the Surrealists. Similarly, in Germany, where Tagore was a legendary figure, a reviewer commented on his work, ‘How necessary it was for the revival of imagination to descend to the depth from where life comes, so as to be rid of the awful routine of illusionism. They are interesting because they show that ... between these Indian abstractions and the modern European ones there is an association of ideas.’ Tagore’s paintings made a considerable stir in European intellectual circles, which can be partly attributed to his legendary reputation. But importantly, Europeans, already attuned to the poetic licence of Paul Klee and Max Ernst, did not fail to respond to the sheer power of his radical imagination.

Tagore’s affinity with the European avant-garde was not a form of emulation but simply a parallel approach to artistic primitivism. There are several crucial aspects to Tagore’s paintings that display his unmistakably personal style. Tagore’s paintings originated in his game of creating shapes out of crossed-out texts, his ‘erasures’. On the drafts of his writings, he often experimented with the Bengali script and the visual effects of different page designs. Tagore, along with the Bengali intelligentsia, was fascinated with the innovative combinations of text and image developed by Art Nouveau and Jugendstil illustrators, especially by Adolf Hözel. Secondly, his ‘erasures’, produced with pen and ink and wash within a limited range of colours, began to take on human and animal shapes. They demonstrated his interest in the totemic art of the North American west coast Haida people and of Oceanica [123].

123 Rabindranath Tagore

West, c. 1930

Tagore’s most striking creations were mask-like faces and heads in profile, some whose features were strikingly simple, expressionless, like primitive masks. Tagore’s faces concentrate on the ‘unbeautiful, and on raw emotions’, in a rejection of naturalism. The other striking subjects are birds and a variety of antediluvian monsters, sometimes reptilian, other times canine, that seem to lurk in the depths of the primaeval forest.
Among Tagore’s primitivist imagery gathered from around the world, there is, interestingly enough, none from India, even though he was drawn to the simple lives of the Santals in Bengal. What we must remember is that tribal art was not yet widely known in India. Freud, who had offered a new insight into automatic drawing, children’s art, and naïve art, gave European Expressionists and Surrealists a weapon to combat the academic canon. As with the European avant-garde, Tagore’s primitivism sprung from an inner psychological need. This is where Tagore’s painting differed from the bulk of his literature, in which his style was Olympian and formal, seldom plumbing the unconscious. In his late years, he sought escape from the formal conventions of literature into a personal, erotic, and enigmatic language of art.” Tagore found the Bengal School unacceptably parochial and sought refuge in what he regarded as the universal in art. His direct and untutored approach made him the most radical painter in India and an inspiration to the younger generation.

Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–41)
The second major figure in Indian modernism was the legendary Amrita Sher-Gil, the first professional woman artist in India, who died tragically young. Sher-Gil was born in Budapest in 1913, to a Sikh nobleman and a cultivated Hungarian-Jewish musician. In 1934, Amrita returned to India after training in Paris, declaring with youthful impetuosity that she wished to see the art of India break away and produce something vital connected with the soil, yet essentially Indian. Sher-Gil’s primitivist longings were first kindled by Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings. She declared her artistic mission to be the interpretation of the lives of poor, mute, ungrounded Indians, “the silent images of infinite submission ... angular brown bodies strangely beautiful in their ugliness.” Apart from her well-known Gauguinque paintings, she also produced a thick ‘textural’ style related to the Neue Sachlichkeit movement, which had influenced Hungarian artists. She came to adopt this style on her visits to Hungary, where she met a number of artists. Sher-Gil had commenced yet another style with dramatic colours and flat shapes but this was cut short by her sudden death. In her works, what comes across is her instinctive sympathy for women, as in The Child Bride.[124]

Paradoxically, it was not her painting style, which was less radical than Tagore’s, but her vital personality that marked her out as the quintessential modern artist as an alienated outsider. With her mixed parentage, she embodied the contradictions and ambiguities inherent in the modern concepts of ethnicity, nationalism, and cultural ‘purity’. Unconventional and bashful yet vulnerable, she shared with many gifted people a voracious sexual appetite that outraged her contemporaries. She had a series of bisexual affairs and her feelings for men were
ambivalent. One of her lovers, the English journalist Malcolm Muggeridge, described her as 'a mixture of rose water and methylated spirit'. In the final analysis, she represents the emancipated woman whose work takes precedence over everything else, a professional woman in a world of men.

**Jamini Roy (1887–1974)**

The third leading modernist before 1947 was Jamini Roy, whose primitivism made a consistent ideological statement. Whereas works produced in Santiniketan and by Sher-Gil idealized the 'children of the soil', Roy took these ideas to their logical conclusion. A member of the landed gentry, Roy received his training at the Calcutta Art School. In his early career, Roy searched for an 'authentic' national expression in art, flirting with an array of styles from both East and West, ranging from academic naturalism and Impressionism to orientalism and Chinese wash painting. The process by which he eventually discovered the style that fulfilled his spiritual and intellectual needs was slow. It was attended with a spiritual crisis at one point, when he questioned the very need for painting. After seeking inspiration in the art of Kalighat, Roy turned to rural India, to the Santahls, who were already being romanticized by the Bengali nationalists, and finally to the scroll paintings of his own village in the Bankura district of West Bengal. By the end of an exciting voyage of discovery he was creating bold and simple works that were marked by a fresh vision of traditional Bengal [125].

Roy's achievements as a nationalist artist must be set against his own definition of indigenous art. Firstly, he was convinced that genuine indigenous art could not be produced with foreign commercial pigments. With this in mind, he gave up oil painting, turning to indigenous earth colours and organic pigments. Secondly, Roy ultimately rejected Kalighat in favour of village scroll painting because he found the former to be too closely associated with the urban and colonial milieu of Calcutta. His indigenism sprang from a social commitment to art. Renouncing artistic individualism, a sine qua non of colonial art, he sought to make his workshop anonymous, deliberately subverting the 'aura' of authenticity of an elitist painting by producing collaborative works and refusing to sign them.

** Developments in art on the eve of Independence **

The strong undercurrent of romantic primitivism was not confined to the three leading figures. From the 1930s, it radicalized art with its stress on rural art at Tagore's 'holistic' Viva Bharati University in Santiniketan. Nandalal Bose, an influential teacher at Santiniketan and a leading member of the Bengal School, gave up historicism in favour of traditional village art, encouraging students to commune directly with nature. However, he was eclectic in drawing upon both western and eastern art. But above all, for Nandalal, only the primitive Santahls had retained the sense of humanity that had been lost with colonial rule. Nandalal's innovative teaching was given a radical twist by his pupil Binode Bhattacharya: 'In his mural based on the lives
of saints (who were significantly peasants and artisans) Mukherjee works out a rhythmic structure to comprehend the dynamic of Indian life ... between community and dissent. A radical consciousness of traditional India is visualised." Ramkinkar Bajj, the leading sculptor at Santiniketan, created a heroic image of the Santals, injecting a new robustness to outdoor sculptures with the use of unconventional materials such as rubble, cement, and concrete [126]. This was a significant departure, because the major sculptor before him, Debiprasad Raychaudhury, had produced monumental sculptures on patriotic themes, but these were confined to bronze and other more conventional materials.

The second development on the eve of Independence was the widening of the social horizon of artists, a number of whom, including two leading Bombay artists, M. F. Husain and K. H. Ara, came from a humble background. Although this widening brought in new sensibilities, these artists, despite their non-elite origins, did not produce artisanal works. They joined the colonial-modernist artistic milieu, governed by the rules of the market and an urban artist-patron relationship. Above all, their individualistic outlook was quite different from that of the village potter, for instance. The desire of many of the artists of this period, from both elite and non-elite backgrounds, to return to rural roots did not make their art less genuine; it is simply that their works were different from the art of the traditional village craftsman or -woman. These contradictory and at times irreconcilable tensions—cosmopolitan versus nationalist, urban versus rural—gave a certain urgency to the works of modern artists in India.

During the closing decade of the colonial era, art and literature moved towards greater social commitment, in sympathy with the burgeoning socialist movements in the country. This was reflected in the 'progressive art' groups that sprang up in various parts of India that strongly rejected artistic nationalism in favour of social justice and equality. Progressive artists were self-confessed modernists pitted against the 'dead wood' of tradition, their idols Jamini Roy, Amrita Sher-Gil, and Tagore and their target the 'historicism' Bengal School. They established close links with Marxist intellectuals, especially the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the Progressive Writers groups. The earliest Progressive Artists Group was formed in Calcutta in 1945, in the shadow of the Bengal famine of 1943. Its members included the sculptor Pradosh Das Gupta and the painters Paritosh Sen, Gopal Ghose, Nirode Mazumder, Subho Tagore, and Zainul Abedin. Among them, Abedin became renowned for some of the most haunting sketches of the great famine. The first artists' commune in India was established in the village of Cholamandalam near Madras. Of these various initiatives, the Bombay Progressive Artists Group has been the most influential. The impact of these new ideas was to be felt in the decades following Independence.