

# **E. B. Havell and the Renaissance of Indian Art: Catalysts and Confluences in the Emergence of the Bengal School**

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## **Abstract**

This research explores the emergence of a new consciousness in Indian art during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, focusing on the pivotal role played by E. B. Havell in the development of the Bengal School. The decline of traditional Indian art forms, influenced by the colonial power and the fall of Mughal emperors, created a vacuum that was filled by Western influences in Kolkata, the capital of British colonial power. The rise of the Bengal School, with its emphasis on Indian subjects and styles, marked a transformative period in Indian art. E. B. Havell, as the head of the Art School in Kolkata, challenged Westernised artistic styles and advocated for a return to Indian artistic traditions. This research examines Havell's foresight and influence, as well as his collaboration with Abanindranath Tagore, in shaping the Bengal School and fostering a nationalistic approach to art education.

**Keywords:** Abanindranath Tagore; Bengal School; Colonial Impact on Indian Art; E. B. Havell; Renaissance of Indian Art.

## **Scope of Research**

The research comprehensively investigates the historical context leading to the emergence of the Bengal School, with a particular focus on the impact of colonialism, the decline of traditional Indian art, and the influence of Western artistic practices in Kolkata. The study delves into the role of E. B. Havell as a visionary leader at the Art School in Kolkata and his efforts to introduce Indian subjects and styles into the curriculum. The scope includes an exploration of the collaboration between Havell and Abanindranath Tagore, examining their shared vision for an indigenous

art movement. The research further analyzes the contributions of other artists associated with the Bengal School, such as Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Ganguly, in propagating a nationalistic form of art.

### **Research Methodology**

The research methodology employed in this study involves a historical analysis of the emergence of the Bengal School, a pivotal movement in Indian art during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The primary focus is on understanding the background of the Bengal School's rise in response to the decline of traditional artistic practices and the influence of Western art in Kolkata. The researcher utilises a chronological approach to trace the impact of colonial power, the decline of traditional Indian art, and the subsequent rise of Western influence. The study draws on historical documents, critical writings, and the opinions of key figures such as E. B. Havell, Abanindranath Tagore, and Sister Nivedita. Additionally, the researcher employs a comparative analysis of art practices, contrasting traditional Indian art forms with Western academic realism. The methodology aims to provide insights into the socio-political context, intellectual influences, and key collaborations that shaped the Bengal School. The study relies on the works of eminent art historians such as Ashok K. Bhattacharya, Mrinal Ghosh, and Prof. Guha-Thakurta, integrating their analyses to present a comprehensive understanding of the Bengal School's evolution.

### **Review of Literature**

The literature review contextualises the emergence of the Bengal School within the broader discourse of Indian art history, examining the decline of traditional art forms, the impact of colonialism, and Western influences on artistic practices in Kolkata. Scholars like Ashok K. Bhattacharya and Mrinal Ghosh shed light on how Abanindranath Tagore and E. B. Havell promoted indigenous art in order to counter Westernised forms. Sister Nivedita's views on the contribution of art to the development of national identity provide more light on the philosophical currents influencing this movement. In particular, Havell's emphasis on the revival of India's spiritual and cultural identity had a revolutionary effect. He argues for a restoration to traditional aesthetics while criticising Western materialism in "The Ideals of Indian Art."

According to R. Siva Kumar's "Abanindranath Tagore and the Bengal School of Art," Havell and Abanindranath's partnership redefined Indian painting by fusing traditional methods with nationalist principles.

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Sumathi Ramaswamy's "Bharat Mata" emphasises the School's nationalist symbolism, while Partha Mitter's "The Bengal School of Art" places Havell's endeavours within socio-political circumstances. When seen as a whole, these pieces solidify Havell's reputation as a cultural revivalist who resisted colonial dominance and united tradition and modernity. In order to provide a thorough grasp of the historical and philosophical relevance of the Bengal School, the review attempts to bring various viewpoints together.

## **Introduction**

The emergence of the Bengal School, a pivotal movement in Indian art, was a response to the decline of traditional artistic practices and the influx of Western influences in Kolkata during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This transformative period saw a shift in consciousness, marked by a desire to reclaim and revitalise Indian art forms. At the forefront of this movement was E. B. Havell, the head of the Art School in Kolkata, who challenged Westernised styles and advocated for the incorporation of Indian subjects and styles into artistic education. Collaborating with artists like Abanindranath Tagore, Havell played a crucial role in shaping the Bengal School and fostering a nationalistic approach to art.

## **I. Historical Background and Decline of Traditional Indian Art**

In this section, the paper delves into the historical context that led to the rise of the Bengal School. It explores the impact of colonial power and the subsequent decline of traditional Indian art forms, such as Mughal, Rajput, Deccanese, and eastern Indian traditions. The section highlights the challenges faced by classical painting traditions across India due to the political chaos and changes during the late eighteenth century.

In order to understand the background of the rise of the Bengal School as a consequence of the origin and growth of modern Indian art, it is important to realise the existing approaches in that period. The emergence of colonial power and the subsequent fall of Mughal emperors directly impacted the court painting traditions across India since the late eighteenth century. The traditional Indian art, like Mughal, Rajput, and the Deccanese and eastern Indian traditions, was declining in lack of patronization. Some evidence of creativity in painting was being visible in Pahari School on the Punjab Himalayas, and some more in temple-patronised wall hangings and murals were still being painted at Nathdwara in Rajasthan and Travancore-Cochin in Kerala, respectively. Nowhere apart from

these marginal practices could the classical painting tradition survive political chaos and changes of that period.

## **II. Western Influence in Kolkata and the Emergence of the Bengal School**

Focusing on the unique scenario in Kolkata, this section highlights the capital's role as a centre of British colonial power. It examines the influence of European and native populations in promoting Western art, the establishment of art schools teaching academic realism by British teachers, and the acceptance of Western art as superior to traditional Indian forms. The section also touches upon the impact of the Kalighat School and the popularity of Ravi Varma's work in Kolkata.

The scenario in Kolkata was, however, different. Kolkata was the capital of British colonial power. European and native populations started to promote the art of the West in the last decades of the 18th century. The academic oil paintings were being painted to decorate the walls of rich European merchants and their fellow people. Some British painters reached the city to earn money by painting portraits of these growing aristocrats. Cheaper lithography and aquatint prints were being imported to enter into the middle-class Bengali households. In the middle of the 19th century, art schools were established to train students in academic realism by the British teachers. People took to western education as a means of accomplishing personal aspiration and achieving social progress. They accepted Western art as superior to that of Indian tradition.

The Kalighat School of Painting enchanted the modernists of India and abroad, which flourished as a folk-art practice around the famous Kali temple of Kolkata. Ravi Varma won the Bengali mind by depicting Indian epic scenes and deities in Western realism in the oleograph, which was sold at a very cheap price. At that time, a number of painters who came out of the Government school of Art and Craft successfully were able to handle oil on canvas acquired the ideal Renaissance skills of light and shadow, aspect and proportion. They earned fame in India and praise in Europe. Annadaprasad Bagchi, Bamapada Banerjee, and Shashi Kumar Hesh were among them. So, Abanindranath was not the first famous Bengali artist. But, Abanindranath was the key who succeeded in introducing an art movement that eventually transformed Indian art and set the steps to enter the modern era. (Bhattacharya) The movement was supported by such important intellectuals and art authorities like Rabindranath Tagore, Sister Nivedita, Earnest B. Havell, C. F. Andrews, Sri Aurobindo and Ananda Komaraswamy. They helped define and broaden the idea of

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school with their words.

### III. Havell's Vision, Bengal School Formation, and Artistic Ideals

This section delves into the pivotal role played by E. B. Havell, the head of the Art School in Kolkata, in challenging Westernised creative styles. It discusses Havell's critique of Raja Ravi Varma's paintings and his efforts to introduce indigenous art styles in the art school's pedagogy. The section emphasises the collaboration between Havell and Abanindranath Tagore, exploring their influence in introducing and promoting Indian style in art education and practice. The Bengal School's alignment with the vision of key intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore, Sister Nivedita, and others is also discussed. The section concludes with the Bengal School's early years, emphasising its significance as the first important aesthetic movement of the modern era and its diverse directions under the guidance of Abanindranath and his disciples.

E. B. Havell had been a leader of extraordinary foresight and prudence. Prior to his job in Kolkata, he had gained a thorough understanding of the scope of classical Indian art tradition and common handicrafts during his period at Government School, Madras. He realised that the Royal Academy model of art training was adding no value to the idealistic nature of Indian art, which was often built on imaginative representations of reality instead of realistic observation. He also felt that these organised trainings were pushing the art practice to such a hybridity with extreme aesthetic deficiency that it would be inconsistent and harmful for the Indian art. Havell was the first British academic to challenge the importance of Westernised creative styles within the sense of art education (Ghosh). As per his opinion, well-acclaimed painter Raja Ravi Varma was the best example of that hybridity.

In an article published in *The Studio Magazine* in London in 1908, E. B. Havell expressed his critique of Raja Ravi Varma's art, highlighting its deviation from traditional Indian aesthetics. Havell observed that Ravi Varma's works reflected the influence of Anglo-Indian art schools and European artistic conventions, even though the artist had not received formal training in such institutions. He criticised Varma's reliance on what he described as "academic nostrums" propagated by these schools, the Fine Arts Society, and contemporary art critics. He attributed the popularity of Ravi Varma's paintings either to their realistic techniques, which were borrowed from European painters, or to their selection of Indian themes. However, he found the artist's work deficient in evoking the po-

etic essence of Indian literature and allegory, noting a “painful lack of the poetic faculty” in their representation. Furthermore, he emphasised that the technical execution of the paintings did not compensate for their artistic shortcomings. Havell’s remarks underscore his belief in preserving the integrity of traditional Indian art forms and his disapproval of Ravi Varma’s approach, which he viewed as a departure from authentic Indian aesthetics. (*Bhattacharya*)

Havell, the head of the Art School, introduced a section in the indigenous art style and substituted the replicas of Greek and Roman carvings with Indian miniatures in the collection of the museum too for radical changes in the art pedagogy. However, even after that, he kept his intentions, and he persuaded Abanindranath to accept the role of vice principal of the art school and as a teacher of the Indian style. By then, Abanindranath had completed his series of “Radha Krishna” paintings. Their association and alliance served as a great influence in introducing and generating Indian style in art education and art practice since 1897 (Ghosh). Abanindranath instructed students to work with the subjects from Indian sources and study Nature, works of traditional artisans and craftsmen in their ambience. He aimed to make them inventive while maintaining awareness of their very own cultural heritage. Ashok K. Bhattacharya, eminent art historian and a former director of the Indian Museum, Kolkata, explains that Abanindranath wanted to create art that would be aligned with sister Nivedita’s anticipation for true Indian art forms (Bhattacharya). Nivedita, who was a great disciple of Swami Vivekananda, was very concerned about the upliftment of Indians through its own heritage and culture. She was one of his mentors. In an essay, Nivedita described the role of art in shaping national identity, emphasising that Indian painting, to be truly Indian and great, must appeal to the Indian heart in an Indian way by conveying familiar or immediately comprehensible ideas and arousing a sense of revelation that elevates the spectator. She noted that great Indian art must incorporate elements already approved by communal taste, observing that an Indian familiar with the carved stone doorways of Orissa or the beaten silver of Southern temples possesses a “great language of the beautiful.” When this language is used, it is understood universally in India and by those sufficiently trained or gifted outside the country. This perspective highlights the importance of tradition, cultural heritage, and artistic expression in fostering a cohesive national identity. (Nivedita)

The Bengal School worked broadly with this vision and goal in its initial years during the first two decades of the 20th century. The tireless efforts and enthusiastic exploration of subjects from Ramayana, Mahabharata,

the immortal work of Kalidasa, the life of Buddhadev and SriChaitanya, Rabindranath's poems and life, and the essence of the Bengal countryside, collectively in an ideal or ideal way by Abanindranath, his colleagues, and the students, was cultivating an aesthetic that is Oriental in origin and is principally linked to the root of Indian culture. After a relatively confusing time, the Bengal school reflects the first important aesthetic movement of the modern era. In addition to Abanindranath and Rabindranath's contributions to the Bengal school, E.B. Havell rendered significant contributions to it.

Abanindranath joined the art school as a faculty member in 1905 and served till 1915. Nandalal Bose (1882-1966) joined the art school as a student and learnt under him. His role as teacher and disciple played an instructive role in the development of the Bengal School style. 1905 was a very significant year from the perspective of the national movement in Bengal. A rebellious and widespread movement opposing the partition of Bengal brought the longing aspiration for freedom and a political and cultural awakening across the nation. Rabindranath Tagore played an important role among various personalities. Nandalal, the prized disciple of Abanindranath, devoted his entire life to exploring a national ethos in art. In an article, eminent art historian and critic Mrinal Ghosh writes: Nandalal was the second personality after Abanindranath, who devoted his entire life to creating a nationalistic form of art (Ghosh).

The Bengal School flourished in diverse directions, mostly by the artists who joined the art school during Abanindranath's tenure. Artists like Surendranath Ganguly (1885-1909) joined in 1905, Asit Kumar Haldar (1890-1964) in 1906, Kshitindranath Majumdar (1891-1975) in 1907, and K. Venkatappa (1887-1965) in 1909. Other artists such as Durgeshchandra Singha (1892-1928), Shailendranath Dey (?-1972), Samarendranath Gupta (1887-1964), Jatindra Kumar Sen (1882-1966), Pramod Kumar Chattopadhyay (1885-1979), Satyen Dutta, Hakim Muhammad Khan, and others joined during the nearby period. If Abanindranath is honoured as the pioneer of the first generation of Bengal school, these artists, who were his disciples, may be placed as second generation (Ghosh). The Government School of Art began to reach its new dimension in 1906-07, with the emerging generation of Indian learners making an explosion of paintings that resembled "the master's formula of an Indian style" (Guha-Thakurta 273). Even so, Abanindranath's focus was never concentrated on the Government School of Art but rather on the phenomenon unfolding at his Jorasanko residence. Tagore House at Jorasanko became a significant venue within the newly evolving Bengal art movement (Guha-Thakurta

274). It was then that Abanindranath formed the Bichitra Club; the location acted as art classrooms and workshops during day hours and at night held gatherings such as musical performances, art exhibits, and other cultural gatherings (Guha-Thakurta 275). The formation of the Bichitra Club in the Tagores' residence at Jorasanko paralleled two emerging routes that spread the paintings of the "New Calcutta School," as called at that time. One of these routes was the European display and benefit of painting, built within the specified standards by the Indian Society of Oriental Art that was established in 1907. It began as a consequence of the social connections of Gaganendranath and Abanindranath with important personalities and art lovers (Rabindranath 90). The forum was founded by English lovers of Indian culture and a few Indian intellectuals and artists. Sir John Woodroffe, Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court, was at the forefront of the society's efforts. His primary focus was in the mysterious fiction of Tantric cults. There were a couple of other members of the party were Thornton, an aspiring painter and engineer, and Norman Blunt, who happened to be a prominent representative of the English population in Calcutta. Sister Nivedita, who was enthusiastic about the artistic movement, was also an influential associate. The Bengal School movement was spearheaded by Abanindranath and Gaganendranath Tagore, who were both very dedicated stakeholders. Ardhendu Kumar Gangooly was also a leading group member. He went on to become the editor of the popular art magazine "Roopam," which was published there under Society's cover. Aside from its annual program of exhibitions and journals, the Society was particularly interested in promoting art and artists of India. (Kowshik)

However, it was not entirely into the art movement until 1915. Art historian and critic, Prof. Guha-Thakurta, in her book *"The Making of a New 'Indian' Art,"* describes how the activities of society were very limited before Abanindranath's joining. The Society of Oriental Art's two key purposes, according to her, were to organise annual exhibitions of Abanindranath and his pupils' work, as well as to hold regular sessions on Oriental art (Guha-Thakurta 278).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research sheds light on the emergence of a new consciousness in Indian art through the Bengal School, highlighting the visionary leadership of E. B. Havell. The decline of traditional art forms, coupled with the influence of colonialism, set the stage for a transformative movement that sought to reclaim and celebrate India's artistic heri-

tage. Havel's efforts, along with the collaboration with Abanindranath Tagore and other artists, led to the establishment of the Bengal School as a symbol of nationalistic art. The research contributes to a deeper understanding of the historical and intellectual currents that shaped the Bengal School and its lasting impact on Indian art.

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