

Impact of British Colonial Rule on their Indian Subjects: Imposition of Academic Art and Antagonistic Reactions

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Abstract

This research paper explores the significant impact of British colonial rule on Indian subjects, with a particular emphasis on the imposition of academic art, while in Britain, academic art was denounced with the rise of Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood and the Aesthetic Movement, both of which rejected the academic conventions of the time in favour of more innovative and individualistic artistic approaches challenging the dominance of Academic Art and promote new, often symbolist or unconventional styles. During their rule over India, the British government introduced Academic Art as a means of cultural influence and control. This research paper aims to investigate the far-reaching consequences of this imposition of Academic Art, examining how it affected the indigenous artistic expressions, cultural identity, the overall art scene in India and the motives behind this imposition and the strategies employed to integrate academic art into the Indian cultural landscape. Additionally, it explores the contrasting perspective of Europeans who criticised and denounced this imposition. By analysing historical documents, and scholarly discourse, this study sheds light on the multifaceted repercussions of this cultural imposition on Indian society, artistic expression, and identity and contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate mechanism between colonial powers, cultural manipulation, and the artistic evolution of a nation under foreign rule.

Keywords: Academic Art; Colonialism; Indian Art; Indian Renaissance; Nationalist Art.

Introduction

The British colonial rule in India, which lasted for almost two centuries (1757-1947), left an indelible mark on the cultural, social, and artistic landscape of the Indian subcontinent. The significant aspect of this impact was

the development of Company School, defined by blending Indian and European artistic influences and later the imposition of Academic Art, a style rooted in pure European traditions, upon the Indian subjects. During this era, the British East India Company initially sought to establish trade dominance in India. However, their ambitions soon extended to political control, leading to the establishment of direct British rule over the subcontinent. "In 1854 the East India Company initiated a project to enhance Indian taste as a component of its moral improvement efforts" (Mitter 173). As part of this agenda, the British brought with them their own cultural and artistic values, which they sought to impose upon the Indian populace with a counter-culture approach.

Academic art, characterised by its adherence to classical European aesthetics, was regarded as the epitome of artistic excellence in the eyes of the British colonists. It encompassed various genres, including historical painting, portraiture, and landscape painting, all of which were celebrated and promoted within the British artistic circles. Consequently, the British administrators and art institutions actively propagated this style in India, considering it superior to the indigenous artistic traditions.

The imposition of academic art had far-reaching consequences for the Indian subjects. Firstly, it led to the marginalisation and devaluation of indigenous artistic practices, which were deemed primitive and lacking in sophistication by the British. Traditional Indian art forms, such as miniature painting, mural art, and sculpture, were pushed to the periphery, as they were deemed incompatible with the European aesthetic ideals. British colonial authorities set up art institutions and academies throughout India with primary focus on instructing Academic art methods. These institutions became the breeding ground for a new generation of Indian artists who were trained in the European style. Subsequently, these artists were encouraged to mimic European subjects, styles, and themes in their works, further eroding the indigenous artistic identity.

The imposition of academic art also had an acute impact on the cultural identity of the Indian subjects. By promoting European art as the epitome of artistic excellence, the British attempted to undermine and supplant the indigenous cultural values and traditions. This cultural subjugation aimed to reinforce the notion of British cultural superiority, while simultaneously diminishing the significance of Indian cultural heritage. It further distorted the representation of Indian history and society. Historical paintings produced during this period often portrayed India through a colonial lens, emphasising the exotic and the oriental, while downplaying

the rich complexity of Indian society. This distortion perpetuated stereotypes and reinforced the power alignment between the colonisers and the colonised.

The Imposition of Academic Art in British India:

During the period of British colonial rule over India, the British government actively sought to exert control over various aspects of Indian society, including the arts. With the invasion of the East India firm and the subsequent colonial transfer of power from the firm to the Victorian crown, the British controlled India for nearly 200 years (1763–1947). Ami Kantawala in his paper quoted Vishwanathan that “The British formulated an overall education policy for India in 1835 using Lord Macaulay’s “Minutes on Education” from 1834. A network of schools, colleges, and universities under Directors of Public Instruction was established throughout India. Macaulay’s objective was to form a class of Indians with British taste in opinions, morals, intellect, and the capacity to serve as interpreters between the people and government” (Kantawala 211) and also they recognized that Indian artists lacked the scientific and industrial understanding that was required at the time.

Academic art, which emphasised technical skill, adherence to classical European traditions, and the portrayal of idealised subjects, was seen as a tool for cultural dominance. By promoting academic art, the British aimed to mould the artistic expression of Indian subjects according to their own aesthetic ideals and cultural values. For instance Sir Charles Malet’s school (1798) in Pune that aimed to train native painters to assist British visiting artists, identified with the colonial perspective (Mitter 30). Britain was even the source of the Mechanical Institute’s concept that arrived in Calcutta in the 1830s. Later in a more organised way art schools were founded around the mid and late nineteenth century with the first one in Madras (1850), followed by Calcutta (1854), and Bombay (1857). These institutions were first organised privately, but since the Department of Public education was established in three presidencies in 1855, they gradually fell under government oversight. While Madras School had already been receiving government assistance since 1852, Calcutta Art School was surpassed in 1858 and Bombay’s JJ School in 1864 (Mitter 32). Following the government’s takeover of these institutions, their focus shifted more precisely toward promoting European culture in order to further colonial growth. At that time, there was a growing interest in scientific developments among educators. These schools were to provide training of industrial art in a more precise way among local artisans. Besides these three

schools another one was founded in Lahore in 1875, which was named after Viceroy Lord Mayo. As the changes were happening in art education in London in the nineteenth century, similar changes were observed in India too, for instance renaming schools as 'school of art' and 'school of art and craft' (Fujita 111). Titling of these institutions tells a lot about their functioning and their objectives.

Henry Haver Locke, John Lockwood Kipling, John Griffiths, E. B. Havell, and other well-known figures linked with these art schools in India were all students at the South Kensington School in London (Mitter 34). Hence the syllabus in South Kensington, which was devised by Richard Redgrave, was the source for Indian art schools' curriculum. Grave's syllabus along with scientific drawing was the foundation of the schools' syllabus. Four types of drawings were added: freehand, geometric, memory, and drawing from models. Two forms of line drawing were covered in the elementary course: perspective and architectural drawing using geometric tools, as well as freehand drawing of flat shapes, ornaments from books, and spherical things. At the advanced stage, shaded drawing, illustration, and figure drawings were added (Mitter 34).

Motives and Strategies of Imposition:

The motives behind the imposition of academic art in British India was the desire to establish a sense of cultural superiority, reinforce colonial authority, and foster a sense of dependency among Indian artists and the strategies employed to integrate academic art into the Indian cultural landscape, such as the establishment of art schools, patronage systems, and the promotion of European art exhibitions.

In regard to education in general, the Company had to say that "None can have a stronger claim on our attention than... education. It is one of our sacred duties to be the means... of conferring upon the native of India those vast moral and material blessings which flow from the general diffusion of useful knowledge, and which India may, under providence, derive from her connection with England" (East India Company, 19 July 1854) (Mitter 29). Teaching Indians scientific and technical skills was also seen as a means to create a pool of educated individuals who could assist in the governance of the colonies, particularly in roles related to infrastructure development, public works, and other administrative functions, in this light they argued that Indians needed instruction in naturalist drawing to compete in the modern world. A uniform syllabus, based on that of the School of Industrial Arts at South Kensington, London, was devised for all

the art schools. Unfortunately, artisans could not afford to attend school, nor did they take to academic art.

Thomas Macaulay in his famous "Minute on Education" in 1835 stated that "We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern, a class of persons Indian by blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in words, and intellect."

According to Dr. F. De Fabeck, the principal of the Jaipur Art School, "to raise the social and moral conditions of natives, proficiency in manual skill should be combined with scientific and intellectual progress" (Mitter 32). There were instances where British individuals dismissed or misunderstood Indian art due to cultural biases. As claimed by British artist, art critic and social thinker John Ruskin, "the natives could only draw an amalgamation of monstrous object" (Pinney 24) and a high-ranking British diplomat Sir Richard Temple stated of the Bombay school, "It might teach them one thing, which through all the years they had never learned, namely sketching objects correctly, whether persons, landscapes, or architecture. Such painting tends to repair some of their mental flaws, to increase their abilities of observation, and to make them logically appreciate those wonders of nature which they adore so well" (Mitter 32).

These statements reflect the dismissive attitudes towards Indian art by figures like John Ruskin and Sir Richard Temple which reveal cultural biases and a lack of understanding. Ruskin's assertion of "monstrous objects" reflects a Eurocentric perspective, while Temple's criticism of the Bombay school highlights a condescending view toward Indian artistic capabilities. Mitter's interpretation of Temple's statement underscores an attempt to justify the importance of such art forms for mental development and observational skills among the Indian population. These statements illustrate the complex interplay of colonial attitudes, cultural biases, and attempts to mould the local population in the image of British ideals during that historical period.

However it is important to note that these views were not universally held, and there were British individuals who recognized the sophistication and beauty of Indian artistic traditions. Figures like Sir William Jones and James Prinsep for instance, appreciated the intricacies of Indian languages and art.

European Critiques

According to McGregor 'Education in a country is closely related to its culture, as it provides "intergenerational knowledge transfer" (McGregor 9). It suggests that the educational system and curriculum of a country should be influenced by and intertwined with the cultural values, beliefs, and traditions of that nation.

During the British colonial era, various European individuals and groups criticised the imposition of academic art on Indians. Some of the notable critics included art scholars, social reformers, and artists who believed that this imposition was detrimental to Indian artistic traditions and cultural identity. Vigorous campaigns by Henry Cole, William Morris, George Birdwood, and other influential figures to save the Indian decorative arts had compelled the Raj to address their plight. Accepting that the Indian artisan had little to learn from the West in matters of taste (Mitter 173). And figures like E. B. Havell, John Lockwood Kipling, and Margaret Noble (Sister Nivedita) later joined the league.

E.B. Havell, a British artist and art educator who served as the Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta from 1896 to 1905, expressed strong criticism of the system of academic art education imposed by the British government in India. Havell argues that the British Academic system is fundamentally flawed and has had a detrimental effect on Indian art. He emphasised upon Indian style and in his book "The Ideals of Indian Art" avows that "the whole system of academic art education is based on a wrong idea of what art is. It is a system which has been fostered and developed in India by the British Government, which is responsible for the degradation of Indian art" (Havell 131). Havell's criticism aligns with the broader discourse of cultural imperialism and the impact of colonial rule on indigenous cultures. The imposition of academic art in India can be seen as a manifestation of the British government's desire to assert cultural superiority and control over Indian society.

John Lockwood Kipling, a British art teacher and curator in colonial India, appreciated the artistic traditions of the subcontinent. He expressed concerns about the negative impact of Westernization and the neglect of Indian art under colonial rule. He was an important figure whose experience and experiments in India added significantly to English knowledge of the sense and style of Indian art, particularly in the area of traditional handicrafts. "His reports from the field on Indian handicraft practice were an important source for British craftsmen and designers in the late

nineteenth century. Most remarkably, he opposed the tide of Victorian imperialism and its concomitant attitudes of cultural superiority through his practical efforts on behalf of Indian art. In his writings and even more in his work in the official art schools in India, he dignified and preserved the bases of native handicrafts against the often debilitating effects of misguided and wholly commercially oriented government policies" (Tarapor 53-81).

Sister Nivedita (Margaret Noble), a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, was a European woman who settled in India. She criticised the imposition of European standards on Indian art and actively supported the promotion of Indian cultural heritage. Sister Nivedita in her book *Hints on National Education in India* wisely describes that "it would be futile to try to lead the imagination of an Indian child to this ideal, through the characteristically European conception, and equally foolish to try to lead the European child through the prevailing Indian form. A national education is, first and foremost, an education in national idealism. We must remember, however, that the aim of education is emancipation of sympathy and intellect. This is not often reached by foreign methods" (Nivedita 41,42).

Through the above statement it is perceived that her perspective on national education in India emphasises the importance of cultivating national idealism, nurturing both sympathy and intellect, and tailoring educational methods to the specific cultural context. Her insights challenge the notion that educational practices should be universally standardised and highlight the need for an education system that is rooted in the ideals, values, and aspirations of a nation.

Sir John Birdwood

Ananda Coomaraswamy quoted Sir John Birdwood in 'Art and Swadeshi' where he states that, "Indian native gentlemen and ladies should make it a point of culture never to wear any clothes or ornaments but of native manufacturer and strictly of native design" (Coomaraswamy 14). According to Indian artist pedagogue K.G. Subramanyan, Birdwood's concern was due to the abandonment of native cultural norms by Indian elites (Subramanyan 52), as Mitter discussed in his book *Indian Art*, that with the decline of traditional art, both Indian rulers and the prominent Indian elite shifted towards acquiring Western art and posing for portraits by European artists (Mitter 173). By the mid-nineteenth century, the preferences of the elite, and to some extent, the lower classes, had fully embraced the Victorian aesthetic.

Repercussions of Indian Society, Artistic Expression:

The imposition of academic art had profound repercussions on Indian society, artistic expression, and identity. On one hand it stifled indigenous artistic traditions, suppressed alternative artistic voices, and perpetuated a Eurocentric aesthetic framework on the other hand it gave the artists of the colonial era an intellectual approach. Exposure to colonial influences and access to European art and to a greater extent, the foisting of Academic curriculum, gave some artists a broader perspective and access to new concepts within the laps of traditional approach, which they could incorporate into their work. Mitter discussed that the works of artists like Ravi Varma, who were the epitome of academic art, were denounced as hybrid, undignified, and above all 'unspiritual'. Such a change of opinion resulted from the upsurge in nationalist sentiment in the second half of the nineteenth century, which fed on the potent myth of India's spirituality (Mitter 177).

E. B. Havell in his book "The Ideals of Indian Art" cites Japanese art-critic, Okakura, who has rightly insisted that, "in the domain of art-philosophy, all Asia is one. But if we apply Western analytical methods to the exegesis of Asiatic aesthetics, we shall never form any just or complete conception of them until we have learnt to discard all our Western academic prejudices, and realised the paramount importance of Indian philosophy and religion among the great creative forces which moulded Asiatic art" (Havell 3, 4). This perspective challenges the dominant Western-centric approach to art criticism and scholarship, which often prioritises Western art traditions and aesthetic frameworks. It calls for a shift in perspective and a recognition of the diverse and rich artistic traditions that exist beyond the Western canon. Havell's first step in countering academic training at the art school was to introduce an Indian mode of teaching, for which he faced strong reproval by his students. He faced allegations of attempting to withhold Western art education from Bengalis, this was the time when artists and students were struggling with their identity as they were not fully part of the ancient Indian tradition, and at the same time, they were witnessing the gradual unfolding of the vision of Indian independence.

The Swadeshi campaign, and Civil Disobedience Movement led by Mahatma Gandhi were some of the significant landmarks that led artists crusade against the British foisting, meanwhile Havell steadfastly upheld his dedication to Indian art and culture with his ally Abanindranath Tagore. Together they opened the front for cultural renaissance, and Abanindranath's students like Nandlal Bose, together with Rabindranath Tag-

oreplayed a significant role in shaping 'Kala Bhawan' at Shantiniketan which was established to provide a space for artistic and intellectual freedom, as it was outside the purview of colonial administration, it attracted the nationalists and those who did not want to attend colonial educational institutions and in the meantime it developed as a centre for Contextual Modernism.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, this paper has thoroughly examined the complex dynamics and wide-ranging impact of the British imposition of academic art in colonial India. Through comprehensive analysis of historical documents and scholarly discourse, the study has shed light on the strategic motives and methods employed by the colonial administration to propagate European aesthetic values and styles. This cultural imposition was an integral part of the civilising mission of the British Raj, aimed at asserting ideological domination and a sense of racial superiority.

The establishment of British art institutions and patronage systems served to undermine indigenous artistic traditions and increasingly moulded Indian artists to mimic foreign themes and conventions. However, the paper also highlights that this phenomenon did not go unchallenged, as several British intellectuals and educationists critiqued this forced acculturation of the colonised population. Nevertheless, academic art left an indelible imprint on artistic production in India during the Raj period and shaped the trajectory of later Indian art movements. The tensions between colonial indoctrination and the search for cultural identity drove innovation but also created deep fissures.

In encapsulating this cultural struggle, the research makes significant contributions to postcolonial history, art historiography and the understanding of both colonialism's tools of control as well as its unintended consequences. By studying intersections of culture, knowledge and power interplay, it enables more nuanced perspectives on the coloniser-colonised relationship. It also serves as an attestation to culture's ability to be both a site of domination as well as resistance. As the arts evolve both under and in spite of external constraints, this research provides valuable insights into the layered intricacies involved in the artistic evolution of a nation. Further interdisciplinary studies can continue to uncover how socio-political forces influence art and cultural expressions, identity and heritage in India.

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