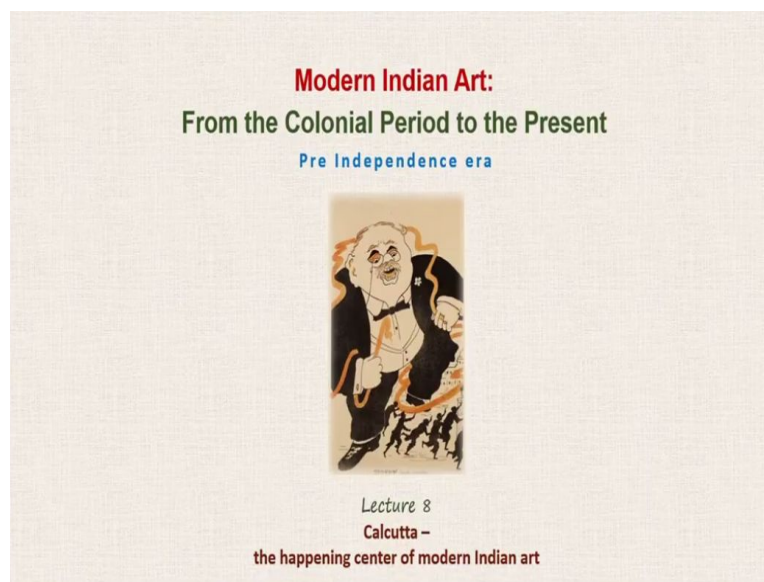


Modern Indian Art From the Colonial Period to the Present
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Lecture No 8
Calcutta- the happening center of modern Indian art

Hello viewers, welcome to NOC's online course on the Modern Indian Art From The Colonial Period to the Present.

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Today, the eighth lecture that is the third from the second week, we are going to talk about Calcutta emerging as the major center for modern Indian art since the early 20th century. Since, we are talking about primarily the pre-independence phase of modern Indian Art as far as this week is concerned, that is the second week of this course, so, therefore, we are going to look at some of the major milestones, as far as some of the brightest individual gifted artists from this period are concerned. We are also going to look at some of the major new kinds of appearances, new forms of Art, new forms of Visual communication happening during this period that is a pre-independence period. And, we are also going to see what is happening in Calcutta, which was emerging as the major center for modern Indian art during this time.

In a scenario, which we may loosely term as post Bengal school, well Bengal school as a form of art, as a chosen ideology was still there, not that it just disappeared one fine morning, but

simultaneously, that is simultaneous to the Bengal School of Art, we see the emergence of a few other trends, that is what we are going to discuss today under this subtitle, 'Calcutta - the happening center of modern Indian art'.

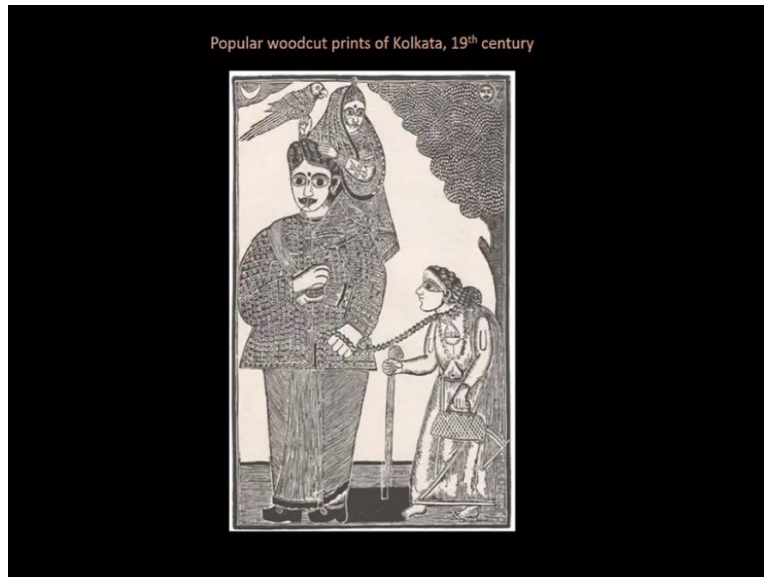
Now, right on the title page, you see a strange image, which in any sense does not appear having any connection, any similarity to whatever we have seen before on this title page so far, mainly because, for the first time ever, during this period, we are coming across a new form of art which was there of course, in the Western countries, but in India, in the context of the Colonial rule, in the context of the Swadeshi movement, in the context of the nationalist movement, here we have another very, very talented brother from the Tagore's family known as Gaganendranath Tagore and this is a cartoon by him.

So, from now onwards, if you have to look at the history of modern Indian art, not only just in terms of paintings and sculptures produced, but also in a more inclusive manner, where you will not hesitate to consider cartoons, book illustrations, and other forms of popular trends to have informed the history of modern Indian art.

In a sense, if we consider the history of art in general and history of modern Indian art in particular, I think it is a good idea to consider the history of modern Indian art as a part of larger visual culture instead of just looking at the specific examples of painting and sculpture. And if we are to look at the larger visual culture, how can we ignore all those hundreds of images being produced, as book illustrations, as book covers, as cartoons and in various other art forms.

Not that we have enough time or enough scope to discuss all this, but at least in today's lecture, I will touch upon some of these possibilities to enlarge our horizon of our conception pertaining to modern Indian art, particularly in the pre independence era, in the first two quarters of 20th century.

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Now, popular woodcut prints of Kolkata, 19th century, happen to form a part of that visual culture and talking about. Now we have seen another form of popular visual culture that is Kalighat painting. We have already seen another form of popular visual culture that is Company painting, though Company painting was sponsored by, patronised by the British rulers, but the language, the visual language they used, the Company painters used was primarily of a very popular nature.

And now, we have prints, woodcut prints, 19th century woodcut prints, popular woodcut prints from Calcutta. In other words, you can look at this popular woodcut prints of Kolkata 19th century as an extension of Kalighat painting because a similar kind of mentality can be observed in these works. It is popular, it is satirical, a kind of communication which can be done very quickly, you really do not need a lot of intellectual investment to communicate with these popular woodcut prints.

Visually they are easy to understand and at the same time, needless to say, highly popular during those days. And subject matters, like this lady, and she is on top of a man holding a parrot, there is another lady chained. I mean, obviously, all these imageries have a strong satirical note.

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Now, in this particular format and technique that is woodcut in the 19th century, we also see several religious images. And remember what we had mentioned in one of our previous lectures that as the various printing technologies appeared rather handy and more kind of easy even in terms of economy, therefore, hand painted Company paintings or hand painted Kalighat paintings soon disappeared partly due to the arrival of this printing technology, which was quick, which was handy and which was also less expensive not only to produce, but also to collect, to buy.

And remember, once it is no more hand painted, once an imagery is produced through a printing technology, first thing that it means is that you can produce that same image in a huge number. So, multiple images, multiple editions of the same image of the same drawing happens to be the hallmark of any printing technology.

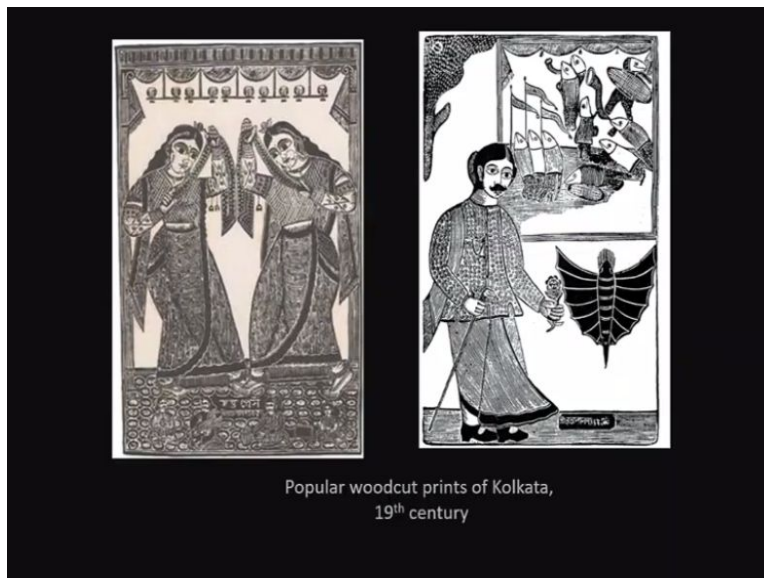
Therefore, this particular printing technology- woodcut and also simultaneously Lithography, all these things became very, very popular, and therefore, this printing technology almost replaced the hand painted popular forms of painting like Kalighat painting and before that Company painting.

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Now, when you look at these images, which were produced either as illustrations inside the pages of almanac or produced separately and sold separately as souvenirs. Even if the subject matters are religious or mythological, there is always a kind of humorous tone. Something that is funny, something that is light hearted and obviously sometimes satirical.

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So, if you remember the imagery on the right hand side, the typical late 19th, early 20th century Babu of Kolkata very nicely decked up with a rose in his left hand is a kind of, it embodies, this

particular image embodies a particular Kolkata culture of late 19th and early 20th century and we have seen painted images in Kalighat painting before.

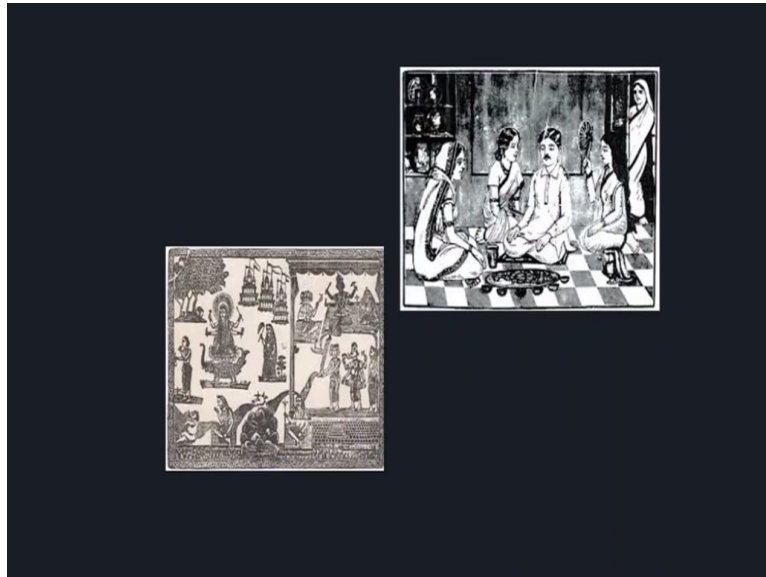
Now, you see the same image in woodcut prints, which clearly indicates that there was a continuation as far as imagery is concerned, from the Kalighat painting to the woodcut prints, but in woodcut prints, of course, new imageries also have come up.

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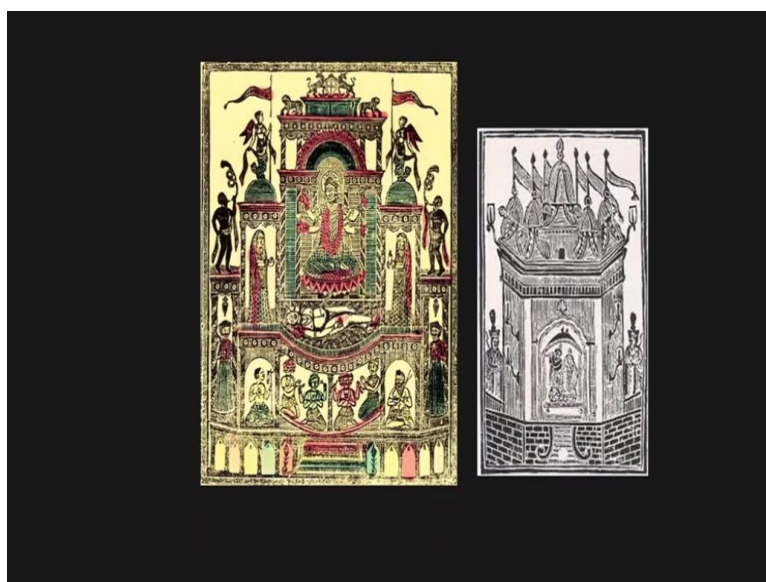
And because of the very process of woodcut print, where a wood was cut, a kind of you can say grooved with certain instruments, therefore, that free flow of hand drawing was not easy to achieve. In fact, they really did not try to achieve that, rather they were satisfied and happy with the techniques, with the technical possibilities that woodcut offered.

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And therefore, this new group of artists, they kind of really explored the medium to the extent that later on the image that you see on the right hand side, it is a slightly later image in the same process made for a book illustration, a typical Bengali household atmosphere- interior environment. But an illustrator in the mid 20th century would not have been able to arrive at this kind of imagery unless there was this pre-history of popular woodcut prints of 19th century and early 20th century in Kolkata.

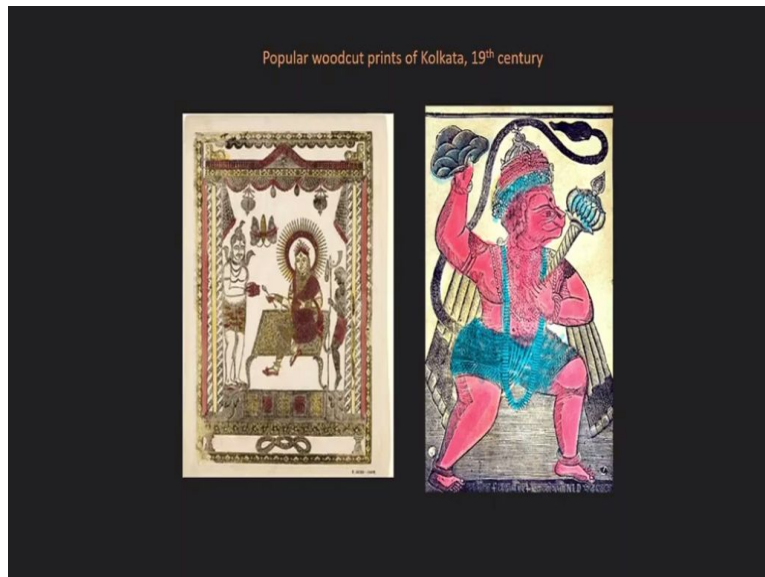
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Now, something interesting begins to happen on the black and white woodcut prints. Sometimes, these artists began to apply slight color, mostly red, green, sometimes blue, that is it. Therefore, these now become hand painted woodcut prints. So, primarily, these are woodcut prints, sometimes they get hand painted. In fact, I remember in my childhood also, I saw black and white photographs with hand painted colors done by a studio artist.

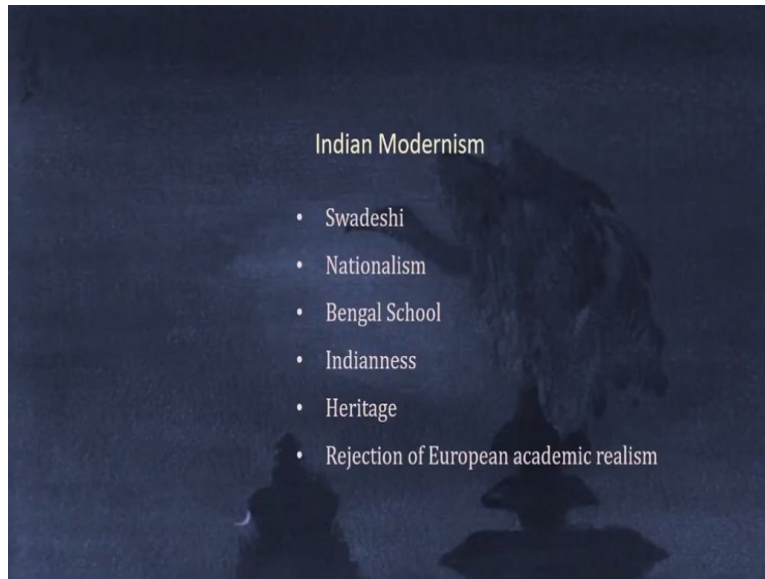
And they were used in our households as color photography. But technically speaking, those were not color photography, not polychromatic photography, monochromatic photography, black and white, but color was separately applied manually on the black and white photographs. Something like that was already happening in early 20th century Kolkata.

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So, in the later part, from the 1930s, 40s or late 1920s, we get to see a number of popular woodcut prints with colors, maybe colors are sometimes very garish, but nevertheless, we do find colors applied manually on the black and white prints.

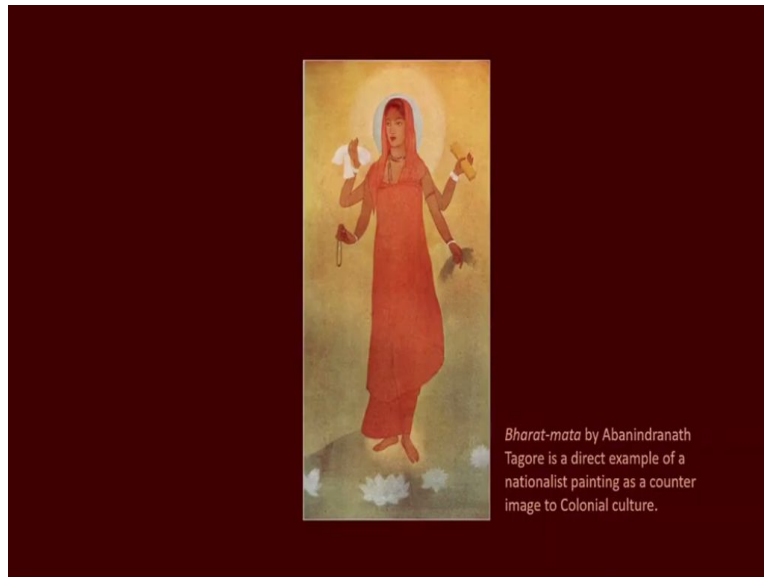
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Now, once again, to recapitulate, when we are talking about Indian modernism, during this period, we are or rather we have to keep in our mind certain pointers. Therefore, we enlisted these pointers like Swadeshi, Nationalism, Bengal School, then Indianness- an Indian identity, Indian flavor, Heritage, that you are not going to forget or reject your heritage, you are going to go back to your heritage, but that does not necessarily mean you leave your time.

So, negotiating the cultural heritage, trying to incorporate certain values of cultural heritage, but very important was the rejection of European academic realism. And we all know that the Bengal School Art was a great byproduct of all these tendencies.

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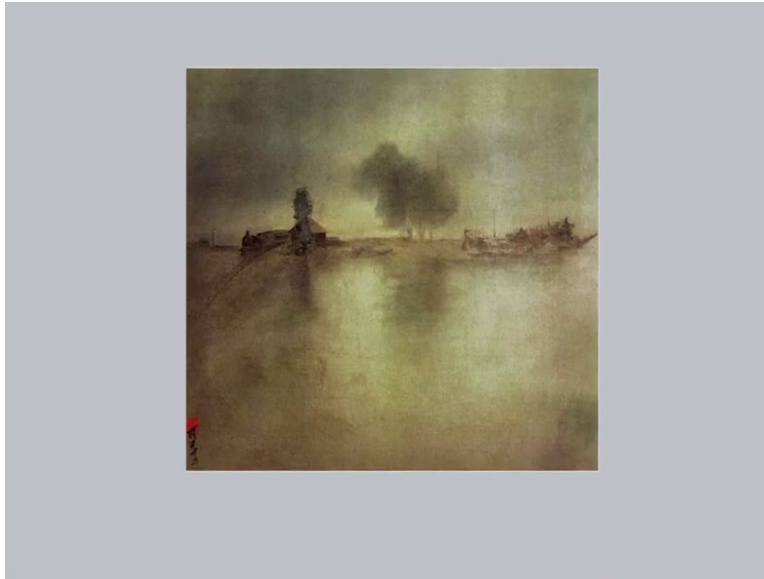
And we all know that it was Abanindranath Tagore and his famous painting called Bharat Mata painted in 1905. Abanindranath Tagore created a direct example of a nationalist painting, as a counter image to the Colonial culture.

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However, not that all the paintings that Abanindranath Tagore did throughout his life necessarily followed the same ideology, or the same stylistic features. In fact, other examples of paintings by Abanindranath Tagore suggest different ideas to create a non Colonial art practice.

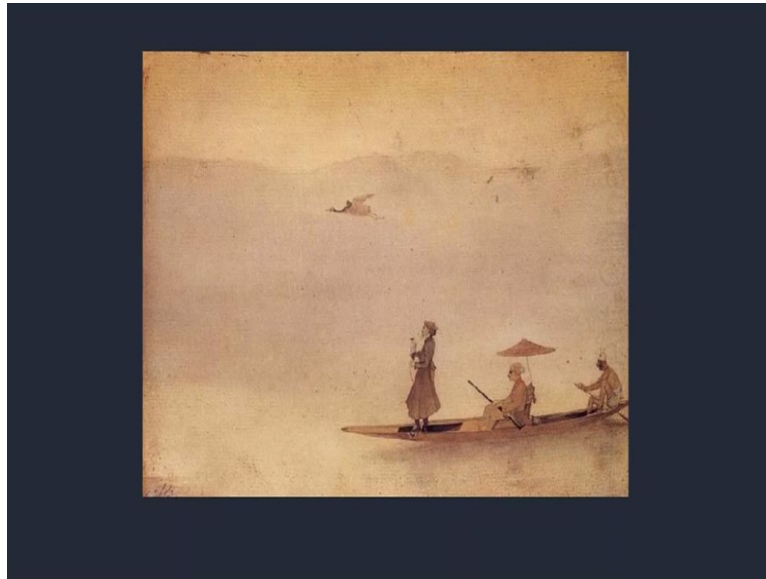
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For example, in this painting, or in this painting, Abanindranath was actually borrowing the Japanese wash painting technique and applying to his own imageries with slight changes. Now, this kind of wash painting was never there in India before. Of course, this wash painting technique does not come from European traditions. This is Japanese, therefore, Abanindranath and of course Rabindranath Tagore was behind this idea that we may not be looking at the West right now.

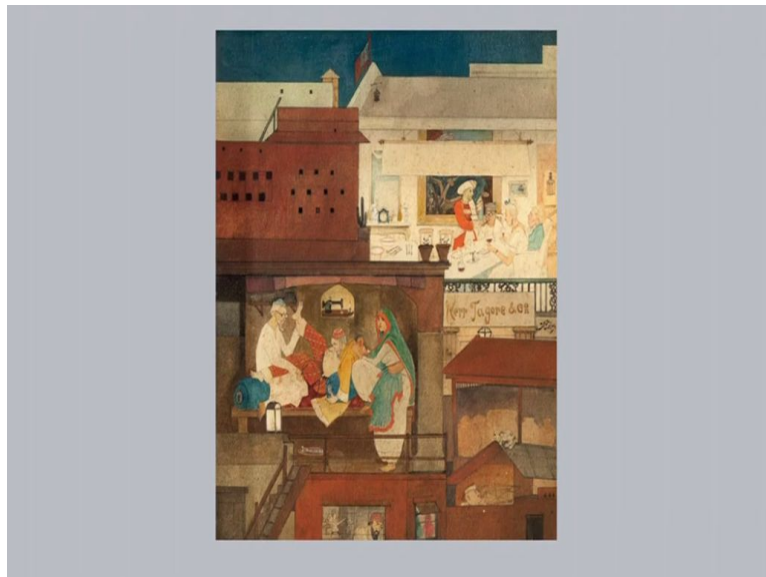
We are refusing to look at Western traditions right now. But, what about the vast pan-Asian traditions like Japanese traditions, Chinese traditions, Southeast Asian traditions? Why don't you derive that also? Therefore, the revivalist school that we are talking about.

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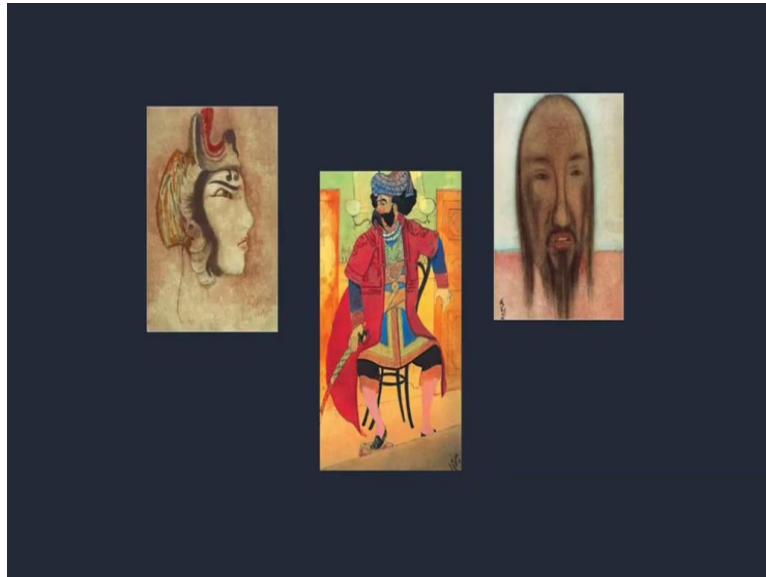
The Bengal School that we are talking about, the Nationalist Art movement we are talking about, is not necessarily or only rooted in Indian cultural traditions. Some of these artists like Abanindranath Tagore and his brother Gaganendranath Tagore, later Abanindranath Tagore's very, very illustrious, and talented student Nandalal Bose, who later on from 1919 going to be the leader of Santiniketan Art movement.

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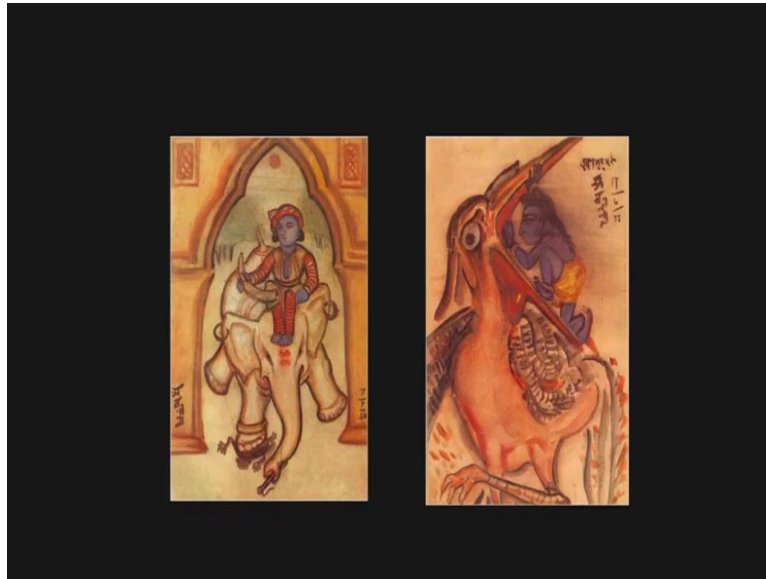
All of them, instead of just looking at Indian Art traditions, were also looking at non Indian, other Asian Art traditions. For example, Persian painting, Japanese painting, Chinese painting, so on and so forth.

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Now, there was a time when Abanindranath was painting these faces based on the made up faces, that is the makeups on the faces of the local popular theatre actors, what in local Bengali is known as Jatra. So these are Jatra actors, not the real characters, the Jatra actors whom Abanindranath was painting. Therefore, the stylistic changes that you see in these faces are the result of his observation of those popular theater actors and their makeup. So, he is sourcing his ideas, not only from tradition, but also from real life observation.

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And sometimes, he kind of uses a loose rather, more flexible art style, which you see in many folk arts. Well, we have seen previously, Jamini Roy was also using Folk Art style in order to create his modern art, fine. But here, what Abanindranath was trying to do is not really he was trying to completely transform the Folk Art style into his own brand of Art. He is simply following certain elements or tendencies of Folk Art, where you see the brush stroke is slightly loose, colors applied in a wash kind of way more in terms of tonality and wash.

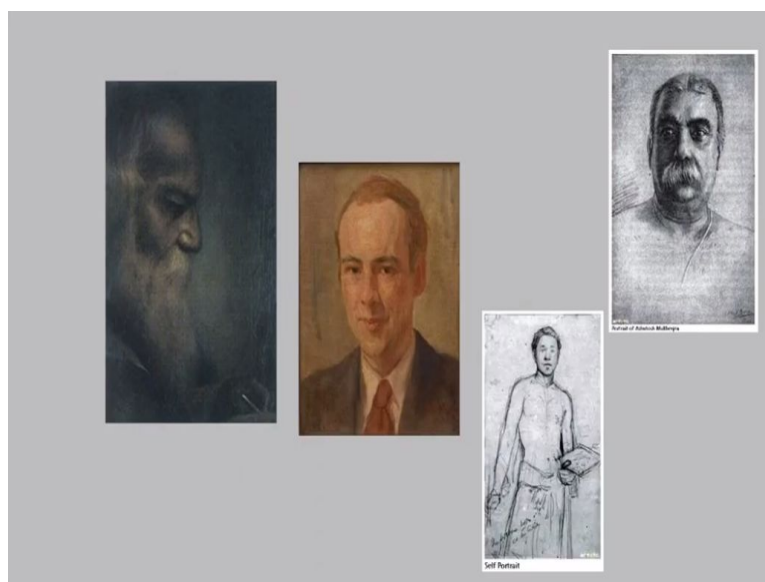
And therefore, we really cannot say that these paintings by Abanindranath have a strong influence of Folk Art, but definitely, he is also not looking at the miniature painting tradition at least for these paintings.

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Now, I must say, it will be a gross injustice if I do not mention the fact that during this time, when almost everybody was going for that kind of art practice, where the central motivation was nationalism, Swadeshi which gave rise to Bengal school, etc. I miss that atmosphere, we also have a few artists whose practice was completely different, rather, whose practice was more close to the style of Western Academic Art. Here we are going to quickly look at three such artists, for example, Atul Bose.

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Look at his portraits, his portraits do not conform to any Asian or Indian stylistic tendency. He learned the European Academic Naturalism very, very thoroughly. And such a skilled and gifted artist could only produce this kind of artworks, whose technical skill and dexterity can match easily with any great Western artist.

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Then we have another person called Jamini Prakash Gangooly, from the same era, who was also using the three dimensional qualities, the tonalities and perspective very typically along the line of Western Academic Naturalism, nothing to do with the Indian miniature traditions, nothing to do with Bengal school.

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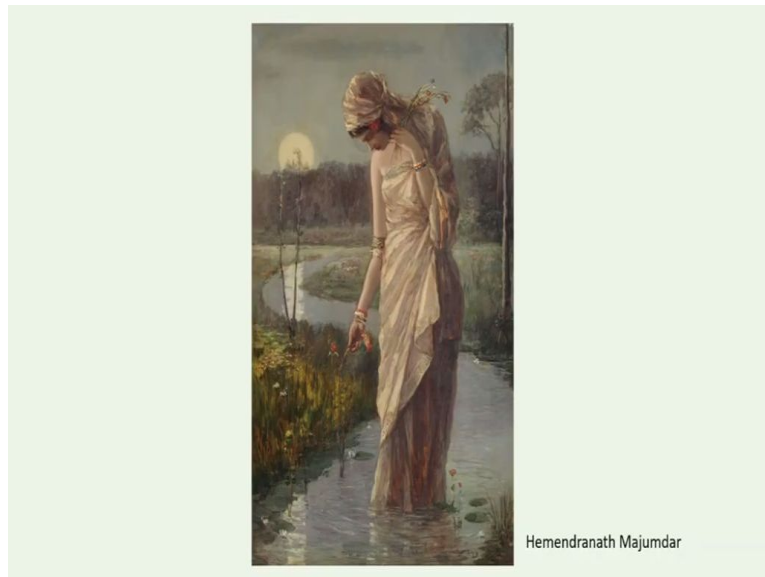


Jamini Prakash Gangooly

But in Jamini Prakash Gangooly's landscape paintings, sometimes you do see a certain kind of mellowed down atmosphere, not very harsh atmosphere, certain kind of tonality, which evokes a sense of not high pitched melodrama, but a sense of emotionally controlled feeling. Maybe a certain kind of pathos.

It is only on this count that Jamini Prakash Gangooly can be connected to certain ethos, or feelings of Bengal School. Otherwise, his stylistic aspects are very, very close to Western Academic Naturalism.

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And then we have Hemendranath Majumdar. Again, a person who was modeling his figures, who was actually creating ideas, deriving his ideas of figures and figuration and landscape, mostly from his own surrounding, from his own models. He used to actually ask the woman models to stand in a particular pose, he would study them and then paint them in a particular setting.

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Hemendranath Majumdar

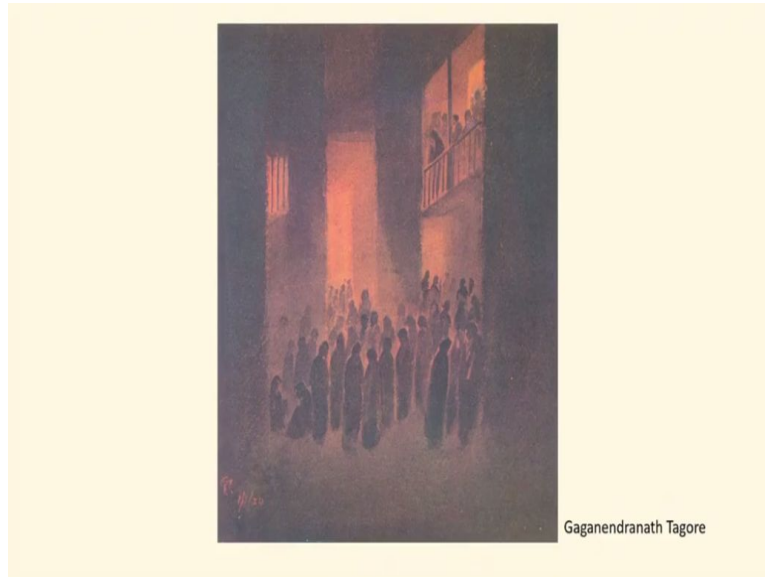
But again, Hemendranath Majumdar was actually using certain Academic Naturalistic techniques, I must say, techniques which allow you to show transparency of your dress, which allows you to show tactile feeling, almost you can touch the water, you can touch the transparent dress, we can almost feel the wetness of the bodies.

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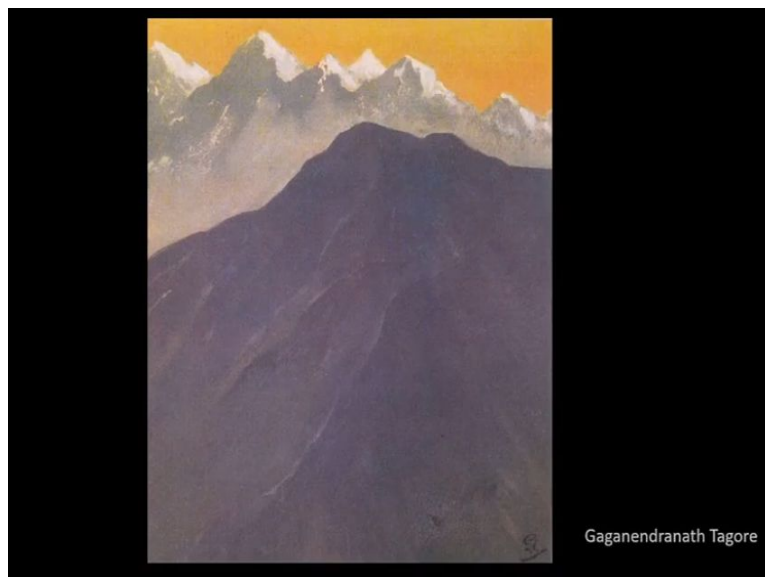
And then you have Gaganendranath Tagore who was definitely not a part of that Western Academic Naturalistic school. In fact, many of his paintings evoke the sense of Bengal School Art, like these paintings.

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But at the same time, he was also applying certain East Asian, Japanese and Chinese calligraphic quality in his works.

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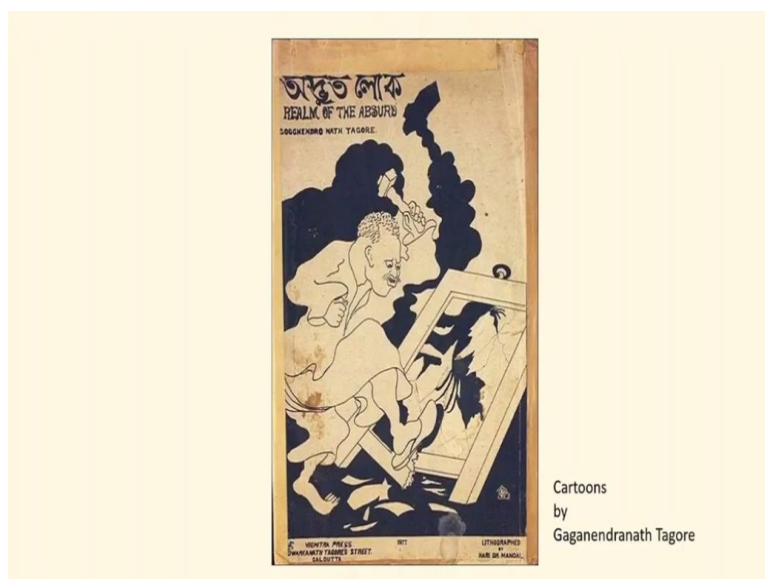
And interestingly, some of his landscapes do not tell you, cannot tell you, and we cannot also tell whether this kind of landscape that he did belong to, do they belong to the western academic realism, or Bengal School. We have a feeling that probably, at times Gaganendranath Tagore was also playing on a possible combination, the blending of various traditions.

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And then he also did paintings like this, where evidently he was using a particular modern western art technique, or method. Or even you may call it an ideology, stylistic ideology called Cubism. We know that Cubism was invented by famous artist, Pablo Picasso, and his friend artist, George Braque. But the Cubism that we see in Gaganendranath Tagore's paintings do not have any kind of similarity with Picasso's brand of Cubism. Gaganendranath Tagore reinvents Cubism to create mystery and different facets of light and shade in his paintings. This is a unique contribution to modern Indian art.

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Whereas the rest of the artists were all leaving behind Western art Gaganendranath instead was picking up one particular strand that was Cubism and applying it to his art. And finally, we must mention that it is the same person Gaganendranath Tagore, who did a great number of political cartoons during those days. He reproduced them and without any hesitation, with an absolutely upright open minded position Gaganendranath attacked the British Colonial rule and also many Indian social and cultural hypocrisies through his Cartoons.

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So, there are plenty of such cartoons where Gaganendranath is directly and very, very intelligently addressing different kinds of events, issues, and even certain discrepancies that he had noticed and was very, very uncomfortable with in his cartoons. For example, if we quickly look at the one at your right, where you can see a big fat man with a black coat trying to thump, stomp rather, the people- small little black silhouette people underneath his left feet.

It is a very brutal kind of imagery, where you can see a British General or a British ruler trying to dominate brutally the Indian people down there. But what is the title of this painting? In Bangla, it says Prachanda Mamata. In English, it means Terribly Sympathetic. So, on the one hand, the British rulers were talking about a sympathetic treatment to the Indians. On the other hand, this is exactly what they were doing. And Gaganendranath was addressing these issues in his cartoons. So, that is all for today. Thank you.