TRANSITION FROM COLONIAL ART TO NATIONALIST RESPONSE

Art in India, prior to the coming of the British, served a very different purpose than it did under colonial rule. It was deeply embedded in religious, cultural, and social life.

Artistic expression could be seen in temple sculptures, miniature paintings illustrating manuscripts, and decorative motifs on the walls of village homes. These forms were guided by tradition, memory, and established conventions rather than direct observation.

However, with the advent of British colonial rule in the eighteenth century, the function and nature of art underwent a significant transformation.

The British were fascinated by the diverse customs, people, flora, fauna, and landscapes of India. In order to document and understand this unfamiliar world, many British officials began commissioning local artists to produce visual records.

These artists, often displaced from declining royal courts such as Murshidabad, Lucknow, and Delhi, adapted their techniques to suit the tastes of their new patrons.

This led to the emergence of what came to be known as the **Company School of Painting**. This style represented a unique blend of Indian artistic traditions and European techniques.

Unlike traditional Indian art, which relied heavily on memory and prescribed rules, Company paintings emphasized close observation of nature and everyday life—an important feature of European art.

These works were typically executed on paper and compiled into albums, which were highly popular both in India and Britain.

Despite its popularity, the Company School began to decline with the introduction of photography in the mid-nineteenth century.

Photography provided a more accurate and efficient means of documentation, reducing the demand for painted records. At the same time, British-established art schools in India began promoting the **academic style of oil painting**, which was rooted in European realism. This style used techniques such as perspective, shading, and anatomical accuracy to depict Indian subjects.

One of the most prominent figures associated with this academic realism was **Raja Ravi Varma**, a self-taught artist from the Travancore court in Kerala.

By studying and imitating European paintings, he mastered the technique of oil painting and applied it to Indian mythological themes drawn from the Ramayana and Mahabharata.

His works gained immense popularity and were reproduced as oleographs, making them accessible to the masses. These images entered everyday life in the form of calendar art, thereby shaping popular visual culture.

However, as nationalist sentiments began to rise in the late nineteenth century, this European-influenced style came under criticism.

Many felt that it was too Western and inappropriate for representing Indian myths and cultural heritage. This dissatisfaction led to the emergence of a new artistic movement—the **Bengal School of Art**—in the early twentieth century.

The Bengal School was not merely a regional phenomenon confined to Bengal; rather, it was a broader artistic and cultural movement that originated in Calcutta, the centre of British power, and later spread to other parts of India.

It was closely associated with the Swadeshi movement and sought to create a distinctly Indian style of painting. The movement was spearheaded by **Abanindranath Tagore**, with the support of British art administrator **E. B. Havell**.

Both Abanindranath and Havell were critical of the colonial art education system, which imposed European artistic standards on Indian students. They believed in reviving indigenous traditions and creating an art form that was Indian not only in subject matter but also in style.

Instead of looking towards European realism or the Company School, they drew inspiration from Mughal and Pahari miniature paintings, which they considered more authentic expressions of Indian aesthetics.

A significant step in this direction was taken in 1896, when Havell and Abanindranath introduced reforms in the Government Art School in Calcutta.

They redesigned the curriculum to emphasize Indian artistic traditions and techniques. Abanindranath also played a key role in establishing the **Indian Society of Oriental Art**, which aimed to promote awareness of India's rich artistic heritage.

The first generation of students trained under Abanindranath engaged in what has been described as the recovery of the "lost language of Indian art." This movement laid the foundation for modern Indian painting by combining artistic revival with nationalist ideology.

Thus, the Bengal School emerged as a powerful response to colonial domination in art. It not only challenged the dominance of European styles but also sought to redefine Indian identity through visual expression, aligning itself closely with the broader nationalist movement.

EXPANSION, IDEOLOGIES, AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES

The ideas initiated by the Bengal School found further development at **Shantiniketan**, where a new phase of artistic experimentation began.

Under the leadership of **Nandalal Bose**, a student of Abanindranath Tagore, the painting department at Kala Bhavana—India's first national art school—became a centre for creative and intellectual activity.

Established as part of Visva-Bharati University by Rabindranath Tagore, Shantiniketan provided an environment where art was closely connected with life, nature, and society.

Nandalal Bose played a crucial role in shaping an Indian artistic identity by drawing inspiration from local folk traditions and rural life. He believed that art should not remain confined to elite circles but should reflect the experiences of ordinary people.

This idea is best illustrated in his famous **Haripura Posters**, created for the Indian National Congress session in 1937.

These posters depicted scenes from everyday rural life—farmers tilling the land, musicians playing instruments, and women engaged in domestic activities. Executed in bold, lively, and sketchy forms, they reflected the influence of folk art traditions such as patua painting.

More importantly, they conveyed Mahatma Gandhi's vision of an inclusive society in which the labour of common people was central to nation-building. Through these works, art became a medium of social and political expression.

Kala Bhavana also served as a training ground for many artists who carried forward this nationalist vision to different parts of the country.

Artists like K. Venkatappa helped disseminate these ideas beyond Bengal, ensuring that art reached a wider audience rather than remaining limited to the anglicised elite.

Another important figure in this context is **Jamini Roy**, who represents a unique approach to modern Indian art. Although he received academic training in a colonial art school, he consciously rejected it in favour of indigenous folk traditions.

Inspired by the pat paintings of rural Bengal, Roy adopted a style characterized by flat colours, bold outlines, and simplified forms. His subjects often included women, children, and scenes from rural life.

Roy's use of natural pigments and handmade materials further emphasized his commitment to indigenous practices.

His aim was to create art that was simple, accessible, and easily reproducible, thereby reaching a broader audience. In this sense, his work can be seen as a form of resistance to colonial influence, transforming local artistic traditions into symbols of national identity.

Despite these developments, the tension between European and Indian artistic preferences continued. This was evident in the policies of the British administration, which often favoured academic realism.

For instance, the mural decorations for Lutyens' Delhi were assigned to artists trained in the realistic style of the Bombay School of Art, while Bengal School artists received limited opportunities under strict supervision.

During this period, new ideas also began to influence Indian art from outside the country. The **Swadeshi movement**, especially after the Partition of Bengal in 1905, encouraged cultural self-reliance.

At the same time, the concept of **pan-Asianism** gained prominence. Thinkers like Ananda Coomaraswamy and Japanese scholar Kakuzo Okakura advocated for a unity of Asian cultures in opposition to Western imperialism.

Japanese artists visiting India introduced the **wash technique** of painting, which became an important alternative to Western oil painting.

This technique, characterized by soft, fluid, and atmospheric effects, was widely adopted by artists of the Bengal School.

Simultaneously, Indian artists were exposed to modern European art. A landmark event in this regard was the 1922 exhibition of works by artists associated with the Bauhaus School, such as Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky, held in Calcutta.

These artists had rejected academic realism and developed an abstract visual language based on geometric forms and colour.

This exposure opened new possibilities for Indian artists, leading to experimentation with abstraction and modernist techniques.

Thus, Indian art during this period became a dynamic field of interaction between indigenous traditions, Asian influences, and Western modernism.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS, KEY WORKS, AND MODERNISM

One of the most significant artists to engage with modernist ideas was **Gaganendranath Tagore**, the brother of Abanindranath Tagore.

He adopted elements of Cubism to create a new visual language characterized by geometric forms, multiple perspectives, and fragmented structures.

His paintings often depicted imaginary cities such as Dwarka and Swarnapuri, using prismatic colours and jagged planes to create a sense of mystery and dynamism.

Gaganendranath also used caricature as a means of social critique, often satirizing the Westernised lifestyle of the Bengali elite. His work demonstrates how Indian artists were not merely passive recipients of Western influences but actively engaged with and transformed them.

The richness of the Bengal School can also be understood through specific works of art. For instance, **Nandalal Bose's "Tiller of the Soil"** portrays a farmer engaged in ploughing, symbolizing the dignity of labour and the central role of rural life in nation-building.

The use of bold brushwork and tempera technique reflects influences from folk art as well as classical traditions like the Ajanta murals.

Similarly, **Kshitindranath Majumdar's "Rasa-Lila"** exemplifies the use of the wash technique to depict mythological themes.

The delicate lines, slender figures, and soft colours create an atmosphere of spiritual devotion, drawing from the Bhakti tradition.

In **Abdul Rehman Chughtai's "Radhika"**, one finds a synthesis of Mughal, Persian, and East Asian influences. The painting is marked by graceful, calligraphic lines and a lyrical quality that gives it a poetic dimension. The subject, drawn from Hindu mythology, is rendered with a sense of emotional depth and refinement.

Abanindranath Tagore's "Journey's End" is another important work that reflects the symbolic and evocative nature of Bengal School art. Using the wash technique, the painting depicts a collapsed camel against a dusky background, suggesting the end of a journey or life. The use of soft, misty effects enhances its emotional resonance.

In contrast, **Jamini Roy's "Woman with Child"** represents a deliberate shift towards folk aesthetics. The bold outlines, flat colours, and simplified forms reflect the influence of pat paintings, while the subject emphasizes maternal affection and rural life.

Meanwhile, **Raja Ravi Varma's "Rama Vanquishing the Pride of the Ocean"** illustrates the academic realist approach. The dramatic composition and detailed depiction of a mythological scene highlight his mastery of European techniques, even as his work remained rooted in Indian themes.

The period also witnessed an ongoing debate about the nature of modernism in Indian art. This debate was not simply between Indians and Europeans but involved differing ideological positions. For example, the Bengali intellectual Benoy Sarkar supported Western modernism, considering it progressive and forward-looking, while E. B. Havell advocated a return to indigenous traditions.

A significant figure who bridged these opposing perspectives was **Amrita Sher-Gil**, who combined elements of Western modernism with Indian themes. Her work represents a synthesis of global and local influences, highlighting the complexity of modern Indian art.

Ultimately, modern art in India can be understood as a product of the interaction between colonialism and nationalism.

While colonialism introduced new institutions such as art schools, exhibitions, and galleries, nationalist artists sought to assert an Indian identity within this framework.

This resulted in a continuous negotiation between international influences and indigenous traditions.

The Bengal School played a crucial role in this process by establishing a national artistic identity and reviving traditional techniques.

Its legacy continues to shape Indian art, which remains characterized by a dynamic interplay between the global and the local.