

## **Overcoming Polarized Modernities: Counter-Modern Art Education: Santiniketan,**

### **The Legacy of a Poet's School**

#### ABSTRACT

Paul Gilroy identified counter cultures of modernity emerging in new-world African Diaspora communities in resistance, but not simply reactionary, to imperial modernity. This paper argues that Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University, founded in 1922 during the escalating struggle for Indian Independence, is similarly an example of counter-modernity. Tagore recognized that race, nationalism, materialism and an over-reliance on and abuse of science and technology, were central problems of European modernity's notion of civilization and progress. In the new experiment in art education in Santiniketan Nandalal Bose and his fellow artist teachers incorporated an understanding of cultural distinctiveness, hybridity, selective disjunctures from, and continuities with, traditions into their pedagogy and art practice. The subtle persistence of modernist presumptions in postmodernity, make Tagore's art education experiment, with its shortcomings, an important source of insight for overcoming imperial modernity's subtle legacies.

Art educators tend to focus on elementary and high school issues, yet a substantial portion of teacher training is in professional art classes. Art and teaching philosophies are intuitively learnt in the process. They are frequently tenacious and difficult to change, whether wrong or right. Yet they are not often the object of investigation by art educators, hence this essay. The model of university level art education developed in

Rabindranath Tagore's Visva-Bharati University during the period 1919 – 1951 was in many ways unique for its time. That period coincides with Nandalal Bose's tenure as Principal of *Kala Bhavana* (the Art Department), during which time the institution developed its aesthetic and pedagogy. Several terms have been used to describe the kind of modernity that emerged in non-European contexts such as Santiniketan's. Art historian R Siva Kumar (1997), used the term 'contextual modernism' to describe Santiniketan's unique response. Tani Barlow used 'Colonial modernity' (1997). The colonial in 'colonial modernity' does not accommodate the refusal of many in colonized situations to internalize inferiority. Santiniketan's artist teachers' refusal of subordination incorporated a counter vision of modernity, which sought to correct the racial and cultural essentialism that drove and characterized imperial Western modernity and modernism. Those European modernities, projected through a triumphant British colonial power, provoked nationalist responses, equally problematic when they incorporated similar essentialisms.

Paul Gilroy's 'counter culture of modernity' (1993) captures the difference in direction that his Black Atlantic subjects constructed in contention with imperial European modernity. What troubled Gilroy was the intersection of race and cultural nationalism, powerfully shaped by 'an absolute sense of ethnic difference' (Gilroy, 1993: 3). Tagore was similarly troubled by the said intersection of social forces in India and the world. But what does counter-modern mean in the case of early phase Visva-Bharati? It certainly does not mean anti-modern or anti-Western. The endorsement of a wholesale rejection of anything Western or 'modern' was the antithesis of Tagore's ideals; the contradiction of the very founding ideals of Visva-Bharati—'where the world finds a home in a single nest.'

Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002), seeking to transcend polarized definitions of modernity, proposed the following questions for guiding historical enquiry in our times.

How do we think of the global legacy of European Enlightenment in lands far away from Europe in geography or history? How do we envision or document ways of being modern that will speak to that which is shared across the world as well as to that which belongs to human cultural diversity? How do we resist the tendency to justify the violence that accompanies imperial or triumphalist moments of modernity? How do we construct critiques of popular violence that have, from time to time, torn apart—and/or given birth to—communities and nations of modern time? (xxi)

Chakrabarty's questions recognize that violence, whether imperial modernity's or perpetrated by freedom movements, can be glossed over. In postmodernity dominance is often subtle. Chakrabarty (2000) recognized that 'a certain version of "Europe," reified and celebrated in the phenomenal world of everyday relationships of power as the scene of the birth of the modern, continues to dominate the discourse of history' (27-28). For Santiniketan the full-blown bluntness of imperial/triumphal European modernity was an undeniable global colonial presence. But as much as Tagore was a critic of Western imperialism he was equally a critic of nationalist movements who presumed resistance to imperial triumphal European or Euro-American modernity a legitimate excuse for glossing over indigenous unjust social and cultural practices. Finally, Tagore knew that enlightenment rationalism's success in science too easily became a tool of inhumanity,

and that inhumanity's universality needed to be countered by recognition of the inherent universality of humanity. What Gilroy identified as problematic--the danger of rigid cultural boundaries, myth of indissoluble coherence, rejection of hybridity--and what Chakrabarty regard as necessary to transcend polarizing definitions of modernity, Tagore attempted to make central to Visva-Bharati's ethos. Such is a general explanation of counter-modernity; its specific Visva-Bharati features will be fleshed out below.

### **Tagore's Visva-Bharati Ideal**

Tagore's life and work (1861 to 1941) effectively challenged the assertion of inherent European superiority and questioned nationalism. Three historical developments in Bengal were crucial to Tagore's own ideological and artistic development (1950). The appropriation of British liberalism to challenge and reform Hindu cultural practices by Late eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengalis, especially in the person of Rammohan Roy. Second, was the emergence of new forms of Bengali literature. Third, was an emerging nationalist movement critical of the Bengali/Indian, predominantly Hindu, middle class who had internalized the imperial British picture of Indian culture as inferior to European culture. Tagore (1950: 3) described the nationalist movement as 'a voice of indignation at the humiliation constantly heaped upon us by people who were not oriental, and who had, especially at that time, the habit of sharply dividing the human world into good and bad according to what was similar to their life and what was different.' Working within the general presumptions of a materialistic West and spiritual East, Bengali nationalists were able to craft a significantly different, ethically and

spiritually oriented, ideal national subject (Sartori, 2008). Western materialism was a betrayal of its inherent humanity and humanist history, which Tagore feared the East would imitate. That Tagore constructed his relational aesthetics out of both Indian idealist and European romantic traditions should prompt suspicion of postmodernist reactions that see any invocation of universals as masking the attempt to elevate a specific ideology over others. Such a reaction, in an over zealous desire to defend cultural plurality, effectively polarize categorical realities against specific ones, turning cultural relativity into a prison (Bhaskar 2000).

As part of the nationalist movement Tagore looked inward to renewed appreciation of Indian culture and used it to critique British imperialism's assumption of inherent progressiveness and superior civilization.

We have for over a century been dragged by the prosperous West behind its chariot, choked by the dust, deafened by the noise, humbled by our own helplessness, and overwhelmed by the speed. We agreed that this chariot-drive was progress, and that progress was civilization. If we ever ventured to ask, 'progress towards what, and progress for whom,' it was considered to be peculiarly and ridiculously oriental to entertain such doubts about the absoluteness of progress. (Tagore 1950: 44-45)

Britain's global empire resulted from its deep investment in nationalism, gross materialism, and the (ab)use of science and technology. It spurred global proliferation of nationalism by provoking others to secure imperial parity, and to create 'formally similar

discourses [such] as “manifest destiny” (United States); “the white man’s burden” (United Kingdom); “*mission civilisatrice*” [original italics] (France); and Pan-Asian civilizational missions (Japan, China) (Goswami 2002: 788). Goswami effectively describes the emergence of imperial modernities. Nascent nations proliferated in their colonial shadows. The modern nation-state, in its imperial and emerging anti-colonial forms, relied on myths of coherence and dehumanizing discourse that legitimized the exclusion of others in the interest of imagined community. In the context of modern industrialized armaments, competitive nationalisms invite disaster: World War I made this abundantly clear to Tagore. The “Cult of the Nation” (Tagore 1980: 146) was a formula for conflict. Tagore’s pessimistic vision of nationalism was relieved by his faith that it was transient; hence he states,

We cannot but hold firm the faith that this Age of Nationalism, of gigantic vanity and selfishness, is only a passing phase in civilization. And those who are making permanent arrangements for accommodating this temporary mood of history will be unable to fit themselves for the coming age, when the true spirit of freedom will have their sway. (Tagore 1980: 148)

Though the poet saw Eastern cultures as having a clearer grasp of spiritual values, and possessing traditions that ensured their perpetuation, nevertheless, he warned Asians against adopting problematic Western cultural forms. Undoubtedly, a sense of mission linked his notion of culture as having ‘personality,’ to his sense that India, particularly,

and Asia generally, had a role to play in counteracting imperial modernity's distortions. Hence, in a speech, significantly delivered in America (1916), he stated,

From the earliest beginnings of history, India has had her own problem constantly before her--it is the race problem. Each Nation must be conscious of its mission, and we in India, must realize that we cut a poor figure when we are trying to be political simply because we have not yet been finally able to accomplish what was set before us by providence. (Tagore 1950:101-102)

Tagore regarded political solutions as artificial and temporal. Cultural practices, which had not lost sight of fundamental humanity, were more durable and substantial. Culture was affected by education, but the forms developed by imperial modernity were stifling. Similarly the forms developed in the Calcutta Government Art School did not connect with Indian traditions in ways Tagore felt were important to its social and cultural rejuvenation. Hence, the need for founding a university rooted in Eastern concepts of art, traditions of gnosis, and pedagogy, where international cultural relations could be fostered. The world had already 'globalized;' cultural meetings were already in process. So far clash rather than confluence characterized the encounters. The latter, Tagore understood, was desperately needed.

When races come together [sic], as in the present age, it should not be merely the gathering of a crowd; there must be a bond of relation, or they will collide with each other [ . . . ] Education must enable every child to understand and fulfill this

purpose of the age, not defeat it by acquiring the habit of divisions and cherishing national prejudices. There are of course natural differences in human races which should be preserved and respected, and the task of our education should be to realize unity in spite of them, to discover truth through the wilderness of their contradictions. (Tagore 1961: 216)

Tagore's notions of culture, individuality, and 'personality' are informed substantially by India's philosophical traditions, which have long comprehended the constructed and fluid nature of identity. Yet in the concept of dharma, whose specific meaning is "that principle which holds us firm together and leads us to our best welfare" (Tagore 1950: 43), there seems to be a provisional essence in things, giving them existential difference and peculiarity. This is the context in which the term 'natural' qualifying 'differences' must be understood. Tagore's concept of 'personality' is not reducible to a cultural genetic code, but emerges from human interaction between self and others that expresses the distinctiveness of the relationship. Both Hindu and Buddhist philosophy acknowledge the ultimate transience of phenomenal forms and 'personal identity'. Tagore employed their insights to call attention to the cultural and historical limitations of enlightenment rationalism and science.

A drop of water is not a particular assortment of elements, it is their mutuality. In fact matter, as a mass, is an abstraction to us; we know it by a betrayal of secret through science. We do not directly perceive it. We see a flower, but not matter. Matter in the laboratory has its use but no expression. This expression alone is



creation; it is an end in itself. So also does our civilization find its completeness when it expresses humanity, not when it displays its power to amass materials.

(Tagore 1950: 61-62)

Behind Tagore's humanism was a refusal to accept imperial modernity's cultural chauvinism that the only legitimate form of rationalism was that constructed by European 'enlightenment;' that all of religion, and all religions, were irrational; and that the irrational did not inhabit science. It was also a refusal to cede humanism and spirituality to exclusive kinds of religious, ethnic or racial nationalisms.

### **Pedagogy In Kala Bhavana Under Nandalal Bose**

Tagore's ideas and the global circumstances described above was the context in which Visva-Bharati and its Art Department emerged. Tagore turned to the ancient Indian tapovana model, which ran counter to industrialized ones. Its key components are a withdrawal from urban centers, pursuit of truth, living simply in harmony with nature, and developing craft and agricultural skills. Life and learning were to be pursued through a direct engagement with mental and mundane realities (Tagore, 1961: 222). The poet's vision pivoted around the conviction that art and culture, society's glue, depended on the kind of understanding that resulted from the quality of relationships cultivated with others, including the non-human world: which required empathetic recognition of vital personality, or life rhythm, in others.

The task of directing the art program in Kala Bhavana fell on the shoulders of Nandalal Bose. His training under Abanindranath Tagore at Calcutta Government Art School emphasized informality. E B Havell, the principal, an Indophile who saw British and Indian interests served by recognition of Aryan dominance in Indian culture (Havell 1918), promoted a revival of Indian arts and crafts. These circumstances of training inclined Bose toward Rabindranath and Abanindranath Tagore's pedagogical and cultural perspectives (Mukherjee 1982, Subramanyan 1982). However, he personally believed in giving students more freedom to develop their ideas rather than to rely on formulas, and the importance of reconnecting with Indian traditions. However, it was Government School of Art's (after Havell) antipathy to informal approaches that finally determined Bose's decision to accept Rabindranath's invitation to teach at Visva-Bharati. By 1922 he had replaced Asit Haldar as principal of Kala Bhavana.

Bose's inquisitiveness about Indian and Asian art traditions especially, and guidance in terms of his broad comprehension of art, made a difference to the department. It grew from a small faculty, initially students of Abanindranath; and later those drawn from the ranks of its most promising students. It benefited from the contribution of many visiting scholars, attracted by Tagore's international renown. It offered a fairly diverse curriculum and carried out research into traditional techniques -- murals making, miniatures, and other more everyday or popular, art techniques and styles—alpona, patua, for example. This was coupled with direct study of people and things in living situations rather than in studios. The influence of Indian and in particular Far Eastern aesthetics were critical factors in shaping Santiniketan's aesthetic, but

avoiding the cost of paying models was also important for a fledgling institution with limited funds.

Tagore encouraged more openness to all traditions: Bose responded, to the benefit of himself and Santiniketan. Art history had to include both the East and West, a fact easier for the colonized to appreciate than the colonizer. Pedagogy implied a relationship to the rest of the world. To comprehend the vital ‘personality’ of things around you required studying them in living contexts. Trying to understand by dissection was tantamount to trying to find out how cars ran by making them stop. R. Siva Kumar (1979) described Bose’s pedagogy as a combination of direct observation and representation from memory. This attitude to art making synchronized well with seeing the plethora of Indian art, and expressive idioms, as ‘creative circuits’ (Subramanyan1992), or as interrelated artworlds (Erickson and Young, 2002). Gita Kapur (2000) traced this concept of creative circuits/living traditions to Ananda Coomaraswamy; transmitted to Nandalal through their discussions at the Tagores’ residence in Calcutta. It was confirmed for Nandalal in a personal way by his research excursions to various historical art sites in India where he saw the interconnections between traditional and contemporary vernacular cultures (Subramanyan 1982). Such excursions were part of the way in which faculty and students could connect with traditional Indian art. This concept of creative circuit/living traditions, which generally corresponds to “visual culture”--found an entry, there were others (Stankiewicz, 2004)--into Western art education theory through Rudolf Arnheim, who subscribed to this concept of Coomaraswamy’s (then curator of Indian art at the Boston Museum of Art from 1917), evident in the following quotation from *Visual Thinking* (1969).

It is no longer possible to view the hierarchy of art as dominated by the fine arts, the aristocracy of painting and sculpture, while the so-called applied arts, architecture and the other varieties of design, are relegated to the base of the pyramid as impure compromises with utility. [It is] this broader concept, which the late Ananda K. Coomaraswamy defended so lucidly as “the normal view of art.” (295)

The creative circuit strand of global art concept deviates somewhat from its postmodern Western variant in its emphasis on the producing rather than consuming arc of the creative circuit. Postmodern art education in its desire to turn students into critical consumers also critiques modernist excesses, but has tended to emphasize the consuming arc of visual culture. In the case of Santiniketan’s art education program its emphasis was on influencing cultural production and change through the students it trained, hopefully to be more globally sensitive. We must also keep in mind that for a significant part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century India’s visual culture traditions, still relatively unaffected by industrialization, still vast and varied, still vibrant, were the means by which a considerable segment of Indian society not only made a living and crafted identities, but used visual forms as personal religious expression (Subramanyan, 1987: 40). Fortunately for Santiniketan there was a deep appreciation by Bose of the importance of the everyday use of visual expression, which restrained tendencies to distance “fine art” forms from their vernacular/folk and popular culture relatives, thus making unnecessary dramatic (Dada) acts to bridge the schism.

## **Toward a Counter-Modern Art Education**

Besides a general teaching approach that was more informal and directed at coaching students to find their peculiar expressive relationship to their environment, the convergence of several factors would prove important to Santiniketan's art program. Visva-Bharati started with very limited physical infrastructure, and so had to embark on building, which meant wall spaces for murals and areas for environmental sculptures. Surendranath Kar, also a student of Abanindranath Tagore, one of the first teachers to work with Nandalal Bose, would be the designer of many of the buildings. The opportunity to explore art that responded to community aspirations would be part of the process of maturing their aesthetic. Mural painting and environmental sculpture would become an important aspect of the pedagogical program that developed in Santiniketan for the duration of Bose's tenure. It shifted the emphasis in art making away from the gallery to integration with environment. It allowed for an apprenticeship-like atmosphere to exist. Teachers and students did personal work, but collaborated on work for the community (Siva Kumar 1995).

This first phase of Visva-Bharati's art program would produce three artist/teachers who stood out from the others. Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherji, and Ram Kinkar Veij are now recognized as important modern Indian artists. Bose and Mukherji as painters and muralist, Veij as a sculptor and painter. Along with Rabindranath, who produced paintings in his latter days, they form the quartet of artists whose works are a significant response to their, and India's, early 20<sup>th</sup> Century situation;

particularly to the challenge of imperial triumphant modernity. Though their artworks engage issues that are of interest to the art educator as much as the historian and critic, they are best addressed at another time. The other comparable example of a use of murals to affect a community's identity, are the Mexican murals. Yet, the Santiniketan program's high value of pedagogy, its relationship with Tagore's critique of imperial triumphal modernity, affirmation of spirituality, humanism, and rationality in Indian and Asian religious traditions, make it distinct and counter-modern as has been defined.

The third factor affecting Bose's pedagogy and aesthetic was his visit to the Far East with Rabindranath, particularly to Japan, but also to China. Far Eastern aesthetics would be pivotal in helping Bose recognize the sublime in the simple. Sublime expression was not restricted to the authorized forms of Deity, or grand murals, but could tremulously shake in a sketch of a leaf. Referring to the impact of the Far East, Bose (1983:13), states, 'previously I sought for divinity only in the image of the gods and goddesses, now I try to find it in "sky, water and mountains.'" Far Eastern traditions led Bose and his fellow teachers to a deeper appreciation of the simple everyday object/event and of simple art forms – a simple gesture could suggest a mountain, an ink smear fluttering birds, full of sublime life and meaning. Their status as humble communication and expression performed the important function of allowing the otherwise ineffable, subtle, and potent to be unassuming, familiar, intimate. That recognition, added to the grandeur of the murals, distinctive architecture, and environmental sculpture, which make the Visva-Bharati campus distinctive, inclined Santiniketan's experiment away from gallery commodification that already possessed the modern art market. For certain the

latter cannot be escaped, and there is a place for it, alongside others rather than by displacing others.

The final aspect of Santiniketan's aesthetic and pedagogical program is the creation of community rituals, designed to celebrate aspects of community life in relation to nature, hence are agricultural. These involved all the arts, visual, music, and dance: Halakarsana (symbolic plowing), Vasanta Utsva (spring celebration), Briksharupan (tree planting). The last, for example, was the annual ritual planting of a tree. The ceremony attempted to inculcate in the community a regard for the natural environment through a valuing of trees, symbolic of nature in general. It effectively helped transform what was a desert into a verdant landscape. As communal ritual it was not counter-posed as an alternative aesthetic against a separated fine art establishment, but simply filled a space in a community's life appropriate to its form and their needs. As a pedagogical objective it was to find the appropriate 'natural' social space for specific kinds of 'art' production and consumption, so they could be imbibed intuitively and intellectually. It was more about finding perfect rhythm of relation between things, people, and context, than about conforming to a prescribed code, or about exposing issues through dramatic disjuncture of art contexts, even though the latter also has its social value.

### **Conclusion**

Visva-Bharati's art program was by no means perfect. Nevertheless, its emphasis on keeping art production closely intertwined with everyday life, and the transformation

of the practicing subject as a primary objective, embodied a different trajectory of values to imperial European modernity and to some extent modernism. The imperial trajectory has generally prevailed in and beyond the art sphere, within nations and internationally, even in subtle ways in academe, as Chakrabarty's (2000, 2002) experience shows. The very terms postmodernity and postmodernism carry forward the hegemony of European modernity and culture. Even though some examples of postmodern art, such as Joseph Beuys' Tree planting project, similar to Tagore's Briksharupan, are motivated by a concern for nature, the former contends with the modern institutional domination of recognition and value, no doubt also and objective, with ambiguous success. Though such works seek to counteract the hegemony of the mainstream artworld's subtly but firmly demarcated space of art from everyday life at the systemic institutional level, they are inevitably dependent on it. As Yuriko Saito (2007: 40) observed, '[Such] art, whatever its designation, no matter how inclusive the notion becomes, and even when its intent is to blur the distinction from life, is necessarily characterized as an *exception to or commentary on* [original italics] everyday affairs.' They invariably require the agents of the very institutionalized artworld they seek to displace or whose aesthetic they challenge, to mediate between them and the everyday world in order to be recognizable and comprehensible.

Recognition of the plurality of cultures, of artworlds/creative circuits is normal now. Yet there remains the asymmetry in recognition and authority of counter-modern and postmodern subjects. Imperial modernism, like nationalism's Janus character, simultaneously universal and particular as described by Goswami (2002), has been able to transpose itself into local contexts as modern/local, or now postmodern, art. In any



case, the asymmetry between imperial modernist legacies of art and postcolonial and counter modernity's, tends to be facilitated rather than undermined by a globalized art concept whose universal attribute is lack of specific form, and whose difference from the everyday requires specialist mediation. This comes in the form of deep intervention from higher art institutions, who tend to emphasize exceptional artists, and deemphasize work done by everyday people for less dramatic 'transformations.' Turning our gaze on the transformative power of humble 'art' acts, is less spectacular but is necessary for real development and progress to take place.

The Visva-Bharati experiment in art education can be regarded as 'modern Indian art.' However, it may still be regarded as nostalgia for a kind of community that can no longer exist; that was an anachronism even in the early twentieth century: capitalism and industrialism after all dominate life everywhere. However, whether through a reading of Santiniketan as nostalgia for something 'spiritual,' or out of some enlightenment fear of the irrational in religion, we should not (and Santiniketan did not), as Chakrabary (2002: 37) observed, cede 'to the fascists [exclusive nationalist] all moments of poetry, mysticism, and the religious and mysterious in the construction of political sentiments and communities (however transient or inoperative).' Technology has so progressed that soon robots or machines may completely displace human beings as workers, even intellectual workers and designers, what will be the role of art education then?

Along with a vision de-centered from consumerism, which only feeds the imperium of capital, what is required are different metaphors for culture. In place of a metaphor of roots, maritime metaphors are better. Gilroy intuited such metaphors as crucial to the displacement of nationalist definitions of culture. Not roots, but navigation

recognizes the flow and interaction of currents of culture that connect and constellate its various elements to create distinctiveness and similarity. Maritime metaphors are better metaphors of culture, not only for counter-modern aesthetics but generally. The early Santiniketan artists communicated that understanding more intuitively through practice, and less theoretically through writing. They created a learning environment that kept art close to everyday life, drew on traditions that had a long comprehension of identity's fluidity, and recognized the different levels of complexity involved in making and consuming.

Therefore, rather than simply an example of modern Indian art, the Santiniketan art education experiment can be regarded as an effort to perform art as part of life, outside avantgarde drama, no matter how simple the act. If we are willing to conceive of art as a sort of personal transformative practice, and as a process which seeks to comprehend the relationship within and between different artworlds/circuits, then, rather than nostalgic, Santiniketan aesthetics and pedagogy can legitimately be regarded as counter-modern: an effort to overcome polarized representations of imperial and 'colonized' modernities.

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