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Fostering Integration of the Global and the Local: Writings on Art and Aesthetics in *The Visva Bharati Quarterly* from 1923 to 1941

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Abstract

During the first half of the twentieth century colonial India saw the rise of print culture, that produced an entire institutional network of printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, periodicals and literary societies outside the purview of the state. The arrival of the printing technology and the processes of mechanical reproduction, brought forth a fresh interest in art, and writings on art and aesthetics among the reading public. The nationalist emotion, that had been turning into a major element in India's socio-political scenario, in tandem with the orientalist points of view that helped in the formulation of national consciousness, contributed to the formation of different positions of art criticism in journals like *Prabasi*, *The Modern Review*, and the journals specifically dedicated to art like *Rupam*, published by the Indian Society of Oriental Art. The question of which narrative of India's past should steer the development of a modern Indian national consciousness became the predominant issue to ponder upon in the writings on art published in the two journals. Is modern India supposed to trace its roots back through Hinduism to its ancient origins? Evidently, there was the ongoing question of how to respond to the influence of the West, thereby forming positions vis-à-vis the idea of modernity. It is during this period of history that the first issue of *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (further referred to as *VBQ*) came out in the year 1923. *VBQ* turned out to be an academic space to acquaint the world about the alternative practice of art at Santiniketan. Selecting some of the writings on art and aesthetics published between 1923 to 1941, this paper seeks to inquire about how different narratives of art criticism were promulgated through the journal with a perennial stress on the syncretic Art culture that Santiniketan stood for.

Keywords: Art, Nationalism, Internationalism, Orientalism, Western Art, Art Criticism.

During the first half of the twentieth century colonial India saw the rise of print culture, that produced an entire institutional network of printing presses, publishing houses, newspapers, periodicals and literary societies outside the purview of the state. Along with this, different art schools and art societies helped to establish the supremacy of academic art in Bombay and Calcutta (Mitter 120). The arrival of the printing technology and the processes of mechanical reproduction, that flourished independently of the government, brought forth a fresh interest in art, writings on art and aesthetics among the reading public. The nationalist emotion, that had been turning into a major element in India's socio-political scenario, in tandem with the orientalist points of view that helped in the formulation of national consciousness, contributed to the formation of different positions of art criticism in journals like *Prabasi*, *The Modern Review*, and the journals specifically dedicated to art like *Rupam*, published by the Indian Society of Oriental Art. Partha Mitter views that in *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review* editor Ramananda Chatterjee combined art and the notion of nationalism with "rare success" (121). The question of which narrative of India's past should steer the development of a modern Indian national consciousness became the predominant issue to ponder upon in the writings on art published in the two journals. Is modern India supposed to trace its roots back through Hinduism to its ancient origins? What should then be the place for the centuries of Mughal rule, and the contribution of Islamic art? And, evidently, there was the ongoing question of how to respond to the influence of the West, thereby forming positions vis-à-vis the idea of modernity.

It is during this period of history that the first issue of *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly* (further

referred to as *VBQ*) came out in the year 1923¹. Rabindranath Tagore, by this time visualized a platform of identity formation, where the local could perennially be in interaction with the global, and its real-life articulation in Santiniketan, emphasizing the free dialogue between the cultures of the East and the West in a syncretic space. The moment of shift from *Brahmacharyashrama* to *Visva-Bharati* in 1921 was the one, when a necessity was increasingly realized by the institution to clarify to itself its location within and reaction to the contemporary reality—a time of chalking its aims and objectives. This transformation necessarily required a shift in focus from the local, (i.e. the limited periphery of the *ashrama*) to the global (i.e. Tagore's broader physical and intellectual engagement/dialogue with the world) embodying Tagore's theorization and cultural praxis in a new mode. Kala-Bhavana was established in 1919, which would gradually frame an alternative register as far as the ideas of tradition and modernity in the purview of art is concerned. Pointing out this accommodative stance of Kala-Bhavana, K. G. Subramanyan holds that in Santiniketan, "the valuing of tradition was not aimed to culminate in inflexibility, resistance to change and cultural insularity. Neither was the stress laid on the modern expected to equate with repudiation of the antecedents with the intention to go to the fundamentals of growth" (xviii). *VBQ* turned out to be an academic space to acquaint the world about the alternative practice of art at Santiniketan. Selecting some of the writings on art and aesthetics published between 1923 to 1941, this paper seeks to inquire about how different narratives of art criticism were promulgated through the journal with a perennial stress on the syncretic Art culture that Santiniketan stood for.

Browsing the writings on art and aesthetics published in the *VBQ*, we find three broad ideological stances. Writings in the first category subscribe to the orientalist and nationalist positions, that were relevant in the contemporary period. An alternative to such stance is nurtured in the writings

of the second category where rejecting orthodox assumptions, writers emphasize the mutual dialogue of the East and the West in the realm of art. In the third category, writings on the theorization of artistic praxis at Santiniketan are formulated.

In the article "The Relation between Art and Religion in India" Radhakamal Mukherjee holds that art works as a "powerful social binder", propagating the sense of a community (149). Tracing the relevance of religion on art he deduces that Islamic art is realistic as opposed to the essentially symbolic nature of Hindu art forms, thereby formulating a religion based aesthetic binary (150). Talking about Indian art as a whole he holds, "Indian art is not abstract but is something living and concrete. It reveals the mass life of man and nature to the individual and is therefore socializing and Ethical" (154). Thus, while viewing Indian art as having an organic bond with the individual and the society, he situates Western art as wanting in such parameters.

The famous pan-Asianist Okakura Kakuzo, who had seminal contribution to the revival of the Nationalist art in India and had an immense influence on Abanindranath Tagore, when he drew his attention to the art of the far East, trenchantly criticizes Western art and art criticism in his essay "A Japanese View of Modern Art". Okakura views that the public criticism of Art in the West in its core lacks in any solid foundation of knowledge and aesthetic perception. Commenting on the Western society he holds that in this, what he terms as the "age of classification", the bond between art and society is severed resulting in the dilapidation of historical consciousness of the artist and the breaking down of the ancient harmony (329). Putting forward his quintessential pan-Asian stance, he opposes the socio-cultural integrity of the East against the mechanized alienation of the West:

We in the East often wonder whether the West cares for Art. The desire

seems to be not for Art, but for decorations,— decoration in the sense of subjugating beauty for the sake of display. In the rush for wealth there is no time for lingering before a picture. In the competition of luxury, the criterion is that the thing should be more expensive. Under such conditions Art is apt to recoil either with insidious flattery or with brutal sarcasm. (334)

The onus of maintaining the uniqueness and purity of Japanese art-tradition according to Okakura demands cultural rigidity. But he still optimistically holds, “A grim pride animates us in tracing the enormous odds which modern society has raised against us. At the present day we feel ourselves to be the sole guardians of the art inheritance of Asia. The battle must be fought out to the very last” (334). It is in such manner that Okakura, in his project of preserving the puritanical notion of Japanese art-tradition takes it to the level of a battle of civilization between the East and the West. Okakura, who is conventionally revered as an eminent personality vocalizing Pan-Asianism through art, seems to appear in this particular essay to be an uncompromising nationalist propagating the supremacy of Japanese art at any cost over any other art tradition.

In the next two articles that are going to be discussed, the idea of a pan-Asian consciousness in the realm of art is fostered. In “China’s Debt to India” Liang Chi Chao, who was simultaneously a Chinese intellectual, a political reformer and one of the most influential vocalizers of Western ideas in Modern China, maintains that since ancient times India and China had been maintaining an uninterrupted communication. The acquaintance of numerous Indian pictures had a shaping influence on Chinese Art. He goes further to say, “We probably owe the very formulation of Chinese painting to Indian Influence” (254).

Suniti Kumar Chatterjee in his “Some

Problems in the Origin of Art and Culture” explores the origin of the ancient Indian art. Chatterjee holds that the Aryan influence is the most seminal one in the formation of Indian Art. He, thereby, seeks to form a quintessential canon of the ancient Indian art, to which he ascribes the project of nationalism. Surprisingly, Chatterjee holds that it is during the period of the Gupta dynasty that the final form was given to Indian Art and thus, it was definitely established as “National Art” (281). We are forced to think about the existence of the idea of the “National” in the ancient Gupta period, and wonder if such formation of the idea conceived by Chatterjee was attested by the dominant discourses of nationalism in his contemporary time.

Going through the writings of the first group as have been discussed above, one might get a false impression regarding the aims and objectives of the journal that claimed to have a flexible attitude towards unfamiliar cultures. Such strongly orientalist as well as nationalist ideas might appear contradictory to the visions of Rabindranath regarding the journal as has been expressed in one of his letters to C. F. Andrews: “This is a journal [i.e. *VBQ*] which is not merely for India, and as I claim the co-operation of the West for my work, I must prepare the minds of the Western people. It can chiefly be done through this journal” (Tagore, “Letter” 1). Probing into the writings of the second group we explore that a counter discourse to the essentialist assumptions mentioned above was thoroughly propagated in the journal that sought to constantly stress cultural osmosis and assimilative attitude.

The two articles “Meaning of Art” and “Art and Tradition” give us an entirely new perspective on the idea of tradition. In the first article, Tagore formulates his theory of the surplus and holds, “Art reveals man’s wealth of life, which seeks its freedom in forms of perfection which are an end in themselves” (“Meaning”, 1-2). From an inclusive stance, he approaches the idea of Indian tradition:

“When we talk of such fact as Indian Art, it indicates some truth based upon Indian tradition and temperament. At the same time, we must know that there is no such thing as absolute restriction in human cultures” (“Meaning”, 9). Rabindranath further holds, “I strongly urge our artists vehemently to deny their obligation carefully to produce something that can be labeled as Indian art according to some old-world mannerism. Let them proudly refuse to be herded into a pen like branded beasts that are treated as cattle and not as cows” (“Art and Tradition”, 7). Tradition according to Tagore cannot ever be pure, rather it is a hybrid of different cultural influences assimilated into a whole, with new variations and unique combinations. He compares the notion of tradition to a channel that guides water where it might tend to change direction (“Art and Tradition”, 7-8). R. Siva Kumar considers Rabindranath as the first Indian artist to be a representative of modernist internationalism who saw “eclecticism” as a “historical imperative” (*Santiniketan*, par. 141, line 3). Such dismantling of the hierarchies of culture, according to Tagore, can only be achieved through a dialogic interaction between disparate cultures. We ponder over the fact that such a unique coinage of the idea of tradition functions as a counterpoint to the insular and essentialist notion of tradition propagated by Okakura. These two essays by Tagore also subvert the notions of Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, where the latter seeks to validate the singular influence of Aryan culture on ancient Indian art as the most important one.

The very first essay on art published in *VBQ* is, interestingly, not on Oriental or Indian art, rather its subject is modern European art. The essay titled “The New Art in Europe” is written by O. C. Gangoli, the editor of *Rupam*. Discussing the growing apathy for realistic representation in the minds of the European artists Gangoli holds,

The importation of the works of Art of the Far East into Europe, and their appreciation meant but another step

towards the depreciation of art ideals of the old European traditions. This called for . . . the framing of a scheme of aesthetics, in which all possible forms of art contributed by man at different periods and different places should have their appropriate place. (69-70)

Gangoli, thus, stresses the importance of eclecticism in the formation of modernism in Europe, which could only be attained through the subversion of cultural hegemonies.

In her essay “The Present Moment of Art, East and West” Stella Kramrisch formulates her position almost along the same lines as that of O. C. Gangoli. She discusses how modern Western art developed imbibing the influences of Oriental art forms and cites the influence of Buddhist reliefs on Cubism. It is quite interesting to note that although Kramrisch apparently shows openness in her depiction of Indian influence on Western Art, there is a parallel strain of biased orientalist assumptions in her writing. She maintains, “Indian art has all the consistency of organic life. Where this is hurt, a crisis occurs which does not admit of compromise; the wound must either be healed or it will be fatal. Such crisis eventually came upon Indian art in Western form” (223). Tapati Guha-thakurta in this regard contends that the orientalists, while showing admiration for Indian art were actually contained by the orientalist formation of the Other, essentially a tool for maintaining European hegemony (136-71). Kramrisch’s construct of the organicity of Indian art in opposition to the defiling influence of European art, hence, creates a new hierarchy in the capacity to shape, define and fix the image of Indian art in both Western imagination and nationalist perception of contemporary India.

Ananda Coomaraswamy in his essay “The Appreciation of the Unfamiliar Arts” holds that it is only through our ability to appreciate “unfamiliar

beauties, to enjoy new sensations”, can we call ourselves “more universally human” (17-18). He further holds that to judge all things “only by inherited taste is precisely to be ‘provincial’” (17-18). It is through such painstaking effort that the barriers of race and language can be broken down. Whereas in this particular essay Coomaraswamy keeps a syncretic position regarding unfamiliar arts, in the essay “On Mughal and Rajput Painting” published in *The Modern Review* in January 1911, he views that Hindu tradition is “almost entirely free from foreign influence” (72). Thus, we find that in the essay mentioned last, Coomaraswamy himself becomes “provincial”. We wonder whether the editorial stances of both *Modern Review* and *VBQ* affected the formulation of such contradictory ideas in Coomaraswamy’s mind?

In his essay “The Art of Japan” Benode Behari Mukherjee takes Coomaraswamy’s position further, and maintains that any unfamiliar tradition of art always appears strange to us. If we are unable to contain this apparent strangeness, the appeal of the art gets restricted to the intellectual realm that puts barrier in the path of assimilation. According to him, when the Japanese artists were exposed to European art, two things happened parallelly. Some artists were able to get rid of the strangeness, and thus were able to create art “with a novel perspective, new subjects, and a broad artistic outlook”, while some others got obsessed with sterile formalism, and gradually got further away from their tradition (Mukherjee, “The Art of Japan” 140-41). A letter of Benode Behari was published in *Visva-Bharati News*, March 1937 where he vehemently criticized the attitude of Japanese people to their own art. The museumization of art, against which the practitioners of art at Santiniketan propagated, in Japan went to such an extent that as Benode Behari views, “To see and understand Japanese Art one has to go to Boston or to the British Museum, that is what the Japanese people say themselves” (“A Letter” 69-70). It is quite interesting to note how Benode Behari tones down the language of his criticism, keeping in mind the

requirements of an academic journal like *VBQ* that was circulated world-wide. *Visva-Bharati News*, on the other hand, was a monthly that was mainly circulated in the *ashrama*, thereby providing him an intimate space to speak in a more subjective and undiplomatic manner. In *Visva-Bharati News* of February 1935 Krishna Kripalani, the then editor of *VBQ*, contributes a small article about the editorial strategy of the new series of *VBQ*. Kripalani maintains that in the old series of *VBQ* the artists and teachers of Kala-Bhavana contributed not so frequently. He assures that this issue would be addressed in the new series, and we find that in the new series the artists contributed largely with their art works and writings (61). While the theorization of Art and culture at Santiniketan was vocalized in the *VBQ*, *Visva-Bharati News* sought to do an empirical documentation of the quotidian praxis of art at the *ashrama*.

With the establishment of Kala-Bhavana a need was felt in Santiniketan to view art and crafts as a unified phenomenon rather than as disparate entities, resulting in the search for, as well as reenergizing of traditional practices, which went beyond the restrictions of a mere “revival”. On the other hand, a well thought off attempt to liberate art from its museum/gallery location and to (re)introduce a more organic link between art and daily life², gave a purpose to the practice. Writings in the third group seek to make the world aware of this cultural practice that went against the grain of the traditional.

In his seminal essay “The Santiniketan School of Art” Benode Behari Mukherjee explores the evolution of Kala-Bhavana. He holds that the art of Abanindranath Tagore was inspired by mythology, history and literature. He was introduced to the Mughal and Japanese technique by Havell, and together with him Abanindranath started the Bengal School that was popularized through patriotic zeal (84-87). Abanindranath’s student Nandalal Bose, on the other hand, sought to

walk a different path and was inspired by life and nature. When Nandalal joined Kala Bhavana as principal, the nature around Santiniketan provided him the subjects that he sought to pursue. Nandalal was later drawn to Egyptian, Persian and Chinese techniques and taught them to his students. Thus, Benode Behari explores the gradual shift of trend in art in Santiniketan. He further holds, “Art in Santiniketan was fostered by Rabindranath not as a national activity, but as an educational and cultural necessity for the complete individual” (92). While exploring the pedagogical practice at Kala Bhavana Benode Behari contends that the students were exposed to different schools of European art. Echoing Tagore’s notion of the flexible tradition Benode Behari explores the practical application of this notion, “This of course does not mean that the artist began to look for inspiration abroad; it only means that they were freed from any forced fidelity to any particular charmed ideal” (92). While discussing Abanindranath’s view of art and craft, Benode Behari emphasizes the two forms of art that are related to the daily life of common Bengali household, that are dolls, and *alpna* (92-97).

In his article “The Plea of Art in Education” Nandalal Bose laments the fact that art does not get the attention it deserves in Indian universities. Coupled with this is the general apathy of the educated mass regarding art, resulting in the decline of people’s taste and the aesthetic ability to appreciate what is beautiful. The common perception relegates the cultivation of art as the sole property of the elite. Nandalal questions this perception by giving the instance of a Santal villager, whose articulation of a keen aesthetic sense in his daily life according to Nandalal has no match in the urban mass. Stressing the importance of craft, he asserts that craft has a dual function in our life. First, it gives us aesthetic pleasure, and secondly it has a financial value. He further sarcastically maintains that the degeneration of artistic sense among the masses actually turn them aesthetically challenged to appreciate the works of art of national importance. We have to look up to “experts from

foreign lands to come and explain their beauties to us. To our shame . . . the same is also the case with our modern works of art which so often have to await appraisal abroad before they receive our own recognition” (89). While prescribing remedies to this crisis Nandalal specifically mentions the role of the illustrated papers and magazines in developing the taste of the public (91).

Exploring the importance that Nandalal ascribed to crafts Pulak Dutta holds that craftsmen from neighbourhood and from all over India were invited to Kala-Bhavana (71). These marginalized people got warm acceptance and respect as teachers (72). Dutta further holds that *Alpna* making was an essential part of the community life at Santiniketan, because it requires a collaborative venture. It is in this manner that pedagogy was intrinsically related at Santiniketan to the level of the day-to-day life (73-76). Thus, by maintaining a flexible attitude to different conventions of art, by relating art directly to day-to-day life in a communitarian ambience, and by dissolving the hierarchy between art and craft Santiniketan provided a space that was significantly different from other art institutions.

VBQ, thus, appears to be a flexible print space, where seminal discourses of art criticism of the first half of twentieth century had a dialogue with each other. The academic space of the journal was not rigid enough to exclude the discourses that were incongruous to its broader and syncretic strategy, rather *VBQ* sought to accommodate the rigidly nationalist and orientalist discourses, and questioned their validity from within vis-à-vis its own standpoint, thereby transcending and virtually redefining the nationalist public sphere in colonial India. *VBQ*, in this manner, could incorporate Tagore’s notion of embracing the world without losing local specificities.

End Note

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¹ The publication of VBQ started in 1923, and it was discontinued after 1931 due to fund shortage. The publication was resumed again in 1935 and has been continued since then. The volumes published between 1923 to 1931 are cumulatively referred to as the Old Series, (mentioned as “os” in the Works Cited list). The volumes after resumption of publication in 1935 are referred to as belonging to the New Series (mentioned as “ns” in the Works Cited list).

² Benode Behari discusses in detail the relevance of art as a quotidian experience, organically linked to the daily life of the Ashrama in his article “Art and Daily Life”.

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