

# Text on Education from Santiniketan

Text compilation by  
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## Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

*Tagore was the founder of the holistic educational institution at Santiniketan. Since 1892, he had been a fierce critic of colonial rote learning that produced an army of clerks for the imperial bureaucracy. He always insisted on the importance of free creativity in a child's upbringing and writes about his own miserable childhood at different schools. His memoirs quoted here in the first excerpt bring out his total alienation from the colonial school system. The second excerpt provides his trenchant criticism of the colonial education system. The third one is the seminal essay dated 1909 setting out his educational ideology at the outbreak of nationalist uprising at the beginning of the twentieth century.*

### 1. Shiksharambha and Normal School (Commencement of my education and Normal School)

Because of my tearful protests I was enrolled at the Oriental Seminary before time. I do not remember what I learned there but I do remember a particular method of punishment. If a boy had not learnt his homework he was made to stand on the bench with outstretched hands, while writing slates were collected and placed on them. Psychologists should discuss whether such external methods have any impact on the mind... When I was at the Oriental Seminary, I found a way to redress my low status as a student by opening a class on the veranda of our house. The railings were my students... My stick would fall on the unruly ones with such regularity that they would have



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The following personalities created an influential curriculum of art teaching at the Kala Bhavan of the Visva-Bharati University in Santiniketan. The teaching institution was the brainchild of the great Indian poet, Rabindranath Tagore, whose ideas had interesting parallels with those of the Bauhaus. His disciple the artist Nandalal Bose translated Tagore's pedagogic principles in his teaching programme for the Kala Bhavan. Bose's foremost disciple, Benodebehari Mukherjee injected modernism into the heady mixture. K. G. Subrahmanyam carried their ideas in his own influential teaching at Santiniketan and later at the MS University of Baroda.

readily taken their own lives to avoid such misery. The more they reacted to the stick the more I was in a paroxysm of rage. I could not think of what con-dign punishment I could inflict on them. No one bore witness to the horrific routine I had imposed on the silent class... I was not too long at the Oriental Se-

minary. Next I was enrolled at the Normal School... Gradually its memory faded except the bits that were vivid and unpleasant... I recall my particular lack of respect for one teacher who used such ugly language that I refused to answer any of his questions.<sup>1</sup> (Translated from the Bengali by Partha Mitter)

### 2. Shikshar Her Pher (Topsy Turvy Education)

It is not human nature to be confined to bare necessities. We are partly constrained by our needs, but we are also reasonably free. Our body can only grow up to around five feet ten inches in

height, but that does not mean that we should build a house of that height. One needs quite a bit of space to move freely; otherwise our health and happiness suffer. This can apply to education. If one confines children within the boundaries of strictly essential education, their minds cannot develop sufficiently. A child will fail to be properly brought up unless one combines basic learning with free and wide reading – in later age he will remain a little boy...unfortunately we do not have time on our hands. As quickly as we can, we need to learn a foreign language, obtain a degree and take up employment. Therefore from our childhood, without looking right or left, with breathless speed, we have no time except to learn by rote. Therefore if one notices a child holding a book for enjoyment, it is at once snatched from his hand... So it is the misfortune of the Bengali child to be assigned nothing beyond grammar, dictionary and geography. No one suffers a greater misfortune than the Bengali child... We are securing BA or MA degrees, devouring masses of books, with the intellect failing to become either mature or robust... Our opinions, our conversations and our behavior are not quite like those of a mature person... The main reason is that from our childhood our education is bereft of any pleasure.<sup>2</sup> (Translated from the Bengali by Partha Mitter)

### 3. Tapoban (Hermitage)

Modern Goddess of Civilisation lives on a lotus made of bricks and mortar, which is called the town. As progress reaches high noon, the lotus petals come loose and spread in all directions. Mother earth is unable to stem the invasion of cement and mortar... Men are receiving education in this town, applying their education here, amassing wealth here, spending it here, accumulating power and wealth here. In this civilisation, the greatest material wealth belongs to the city... But a surprising thing is noticed in India, the source of the civilisation here is not the town but the forest. We notice the amazing rise of India where human beings were not thrown together cheek-by-jowl. There, trees and plants, rivers and lakes had the opportunity to co-exist with human beings. There, human beings co-existed with open spaces; there was no crush. Yet this open space did not reduce the Indian soul to an inanimate object, rather such a space enabled it to enhance its consci-

ousness. Such an event is rare in the world... We notice in ancient India that the solitary (and uninhabited) forest did not overwhelm human intelligence, rather it gave humans strength, so that the civilisation of forest-dwellers permeated the subcontinent and its flow has not stopped even today... Gradually, cities, kingdoms and empires were established in India; goods were exchanged with other lands; slowly hungry arable lands pushed back shady forests. But the powerful, prosperous and youthful India never hesitated to acknowledge its debt to the forest. It has honoured meditation as superior to other efforts, and has paid respect to forest-dwelling hermits, and even kings and emperors have been proud to acknowledge their descent from these forebears. The inner character of this hermitage consists of the unity of humans and animals... The love of nature of our poets is different to that of other countries. It does not entail controlling nature but being in harmony with it.<sup>3</sup> (Translated from the Bengali by Partha Mitter)

### Nandalal Bose (1882 - 1966)

*Nandalal published a volume that collected his teaching methods at the Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan, and his own interpretation of Tagore's and Gandhi's teachings that nourished his ideals of environmental nationalism. Santiniketan was at the cusp of nationalist art and modernism. This excerpt explains what he believes to be the eastern approach to human anatomy that is unlike the anatomy applied in western academic art. He uses the phrase 'life movement' several times (pranachhanda) to explain the artist's aim.*

#### 1. Shilpe Sharirasthanbi-dyar Prayog (Application of Anatomy in Art)

Certain questions arise in the minds of Indian modern painters and sculptors; that is because certain confusions exist. Let me discuss these problems one by one.

1. Do eastern artists need to learn anatomy like European academic artists?
2. Would such knowledge impair the quality of eastern art? [This is] because western academic artists are convinced that wrong anatomy is a characteristic of eastern art.

3. Can decorative art preserve the integrity of anatomical knowledge?
4. Eastern and modernist western art have produced high quality painting and sculpture even by breaking the scientific rules of anatomy and perspective. What is the reason?

No doubt that Indian artist must know the body's structure and proportion. But not in the western sense... In western art, knowledge of anatomy involves dissection in order to understand the body's structure. In eastern art, the knowledge of anatomy means the knowledge of the shape of the body and its movements. The western artist grasps the totality of the body through detailed analysis. The eastern artist approaches the details through their knowledge of the whole. The one starts with the science or the 'grammar' of anatomy to achieve life movement. The other starts with life movement to learn about the science or 'grammar' of anatomy. Therefore both eastern and western artists need to acquire knowledge of anatomy but their methods and application are different... Many western artists believe that before one applies one's imagination, copying skeletons, antiques and doing life drawing enables one to acquire proper skills. Some say that copying the above enables one to acquire drawing skills. The eastern opinion is that there is no need to acquire drawing skills separately. One should combine imagination with drawing skill. In order to learn drawing, one should copy best paintings and sculptures of best artists; one then does not lose a sense of life movement and life rhythm, rather they increase in proportion to learning to draw... In our opinion, eastern artist is taught anatomy by selecting a rough outline and pose and then studying each details of the body... one should choose the moment of the study of man or animal in movement or action; when the relationship between the joints of the body, and the actions of muscles and tendons are visible. If one observes the body in motion then the details of anatomy are easier to remember, and the study looks natural and lively. When living creatures do something unconsciously they reflect a deep connection between the body and the mind; that is why it easily draws the attention of the artist; it then become easy to understand how each part of the body is used, leading to greater knowledge; the impression created in the artist's mind becomes strong and enduring... one can also learn anatomy from a painting or a sculpture by

a good artist because their poses are correct and sincere. It is not good to pose a model according to a preconceived notion or to use a dummy. A pre-arranged pose lacks conviction. To hold a pose for a long time is painful and requires a lot of energy, leading to a disjuncture between the model's mind and body. The dummy of course is totally lifeless. Therefore to use them in the aid of imagination, leads only to rigidity in painting or sculpture. However in the artist who has grasped life movement, this use of the artificial ideal does no harm. Most of the European artists cannot produce a painting or a sculpture without the aid of models. They have difficulty in using their imagination.<sup>4</sup> (Translated from the Bengali by Partha Mitter)

### Benode Behari Mukherjee (1904 - 1980)

*The foremost pupil of Nandalal and a seminal figure in the development of the mural tradition as well as modernism at Santiniketan, the two excerpts from Benodebehari's writings, the first theoretical and the second one practical, offer an unusual insight into the mind of the artist.*

#### 1. Bharatiya Murti o Bimurtabad (Indian Images and Non-Objective Art)

Indian art was created for ordinary people. Without being involved in politics, Indian art has been able to offer unity to all communities. Indian art does not display high intellectual content. Major Indian art, namely temple sculptures and paintings were created for spiritual ends. Even though beauty was not the only object of Indian art, ideal artists and art teachers paid attention to human beauty. The viewpoint of contemporary people is very different. People have become relatively more intellectual. That is why in modern art, theory has become more important than subject matter. That is also why modern man is not prepared to accept gods and goddesses as being all-powerful. I have embarked on this discussion in order to examine Indian art from a modern perspective. I have a strong conviction that Indian art contains much that could inspire modern or future era. For this we need to abandon many aspects that would have to be given up as debris from the past. In terms of visual language



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(style), Indian art needs to change. To bring about this change one has to reject certain injunctions of past authorities. One would also need to understand the inherent meaning of these injunctions. Many may consider this as focusing on the chaff instead of the wheat and [therefore a] meaningless [exercise]. [However] in order to grow something new, one must sow the seed... Modern artists are searching for new canons of proportion in sculpture [tala]<sup>5</sup> ... The human proportions in modern art and the combination of different canons in Indian iconometry have produced a consonance. Modern art created a new canon by manipulating proportions and representation. In this particular case, there is no variety. Especially European images, now divorced from sculpture, seldom demonstrate a refined expression of proportions even though they display diverse forms. We are able to discover a non-objective form only with the support of a canon of proportions, even as we encounter the flow of life in the objective world through its myriad expressions. Because of life force, the whole universe reveals itself in all its diversities. Tranquil, lively and unbridled – the harmony and conflict of these three elements create variety in the visible world.<sup>6</sup> (Translated from the Bengali by Partha Mitter)

## 2. My Experiments with Murals

*This is a blow-by-blow account of his experiments and the courses he took in eastern and western methods as well as Japanese*

*screen paintings that he saw on his visit to the country in 1935. From his account one learns how he maintained a balance between abstraction and representation.*

When I started to learn painting I had only my ideas and thoughts to depend upon. I hardly knew of the importance of experiments. Fortunately our teacher Acharya Nandalal Bose was quite keen on technical experiments. It was on his encouragement that we first attempted to do a mural on the wall of the room where we lived... It is only now that we realise that these paintings on the wall of a small room 10x12 feet hardly added any beauty to it. But at that time we felt as if we had begun another new chapter in the wake of the Ajanta murals (ancient Buddhist cave paintings)... Quite soon after completing the work at the Shishu Vibhag I began my next painting on the wall of the Pantha-sala (guest house). By this time I had learnt something about the relationship between decorative qualities of a mural and architecture... Although there are certain differences in the indigenous and foreign techniques, such as the method of working on a wet wall or in the manner of mixing lime, sand and stone, basically the problem is the same. Both have to be done on a wet ground and the result invariably depends on this particular stage of the work... In 1940, after a pretty long gap, work could be started at Santiniketan on the ceiling of the verandah of the students' hostel in Kala Bhavan. By this time my experience had been greatly enri-

ched and I could work more confidently... While executing large murals the accepted practice is to prepare cartoons. But for the work done on the hostel ceiling I did not make any use of cartoon... For the work on the Hindi Bhavan wall (one of his major works) again no cartoon was used. That is why no mark of any tracing is noticeable in the fresco. Of course, I did use a number of small sketches, as is my usual practice. The purpose of these sketches was to achieve some abstract effects, as for example to establish a relationship between the filled-in and empty spaces, or the ratio between dark and light areas and their placements. Rather than using realistic proportions I tried to introduce a comparative proportion. I used my hand as a measuring unit. This I learnt from the Indian tradition. In this connection mention may be made of Giotto and Masaccio whose works should be studied. By insisting on relationships a tension is introduced between blank spaces and forms which is not found in proportion based on realistic volume or mass... I have endeavoured to work directly on walls because the spontaneity, which went with it, appeared to me to be very valuable. In my view, even with cartoons there is an imitation of reality, which is not at all befitting to mural work. The habit of working directly on the wall helps the pictorial quality to be free from the effects of reality. However, unless one is conscious about abstract qualities neither the direct method nor the cartoons can make any true creative work possible. On the other hand, I doubt

the usefulness of murals totally divorced from reality. That is why I have never attempted to create anything in which reality is altogether rejected... murals have always been executed with an eye to the public. And this aspect of the subject cannot be ignored even today. In the preparation of a mural layers of thinking should go into its making. Efforts should be made to find out if a mural can appeal to the public even if form and similitude are done away with, though it is hard to imagine a mural attaining success without architectural qualities.<sup>7</sup>

## K. G. Subrahmanyam (1924-2016)

*Subrahmanyam was the last heir to the great tradition at Santiniketan represented by Rabindranath, Nandalal and Benodebehari. He imported their artistic principles to the MS University of Baroda, now regarded as one of the leading art institutions in the land. The previous three pioneering modernists, who identified modernity with colonial rule, thus had an agonistic relationship with modernism as part of wider modernity. A universalist, Subrahmanyam accepted modernity as a progressive force, considering unchanging tradition as reactionary, thwarting artistic progress and artistic individualism, which, he argued, were universal categories. He employs the term 'environment' in many of his essays to mean contemporary society that has evolved from the past but is not bound by it – it is also a rejection of historicism in favour of the ordinary people.*

### 1. Art and Change

This brings us to the question of tradition. Tradition is a complex concept. It may be taken to mean the complete cultural inheritance a man starts with at a time, or certain cultural predispositions within a continuity of environment, physical and psychological, or, at the popular level, perhaps certain conventions and mannerisms with which man holds on to the apron strings of history. No man can escape the first, no sensitive artist can be free of the second; the area of controversy is generally round the third connotation. The conservative section of each society wants to think of culture as a static situation; they are afraid of the undercurrent of change. In this fear they forget that all valid conventions and mannerisms

are the external manifestations of certain internal compulsions and cannot be imposed from outside. Perceptive traditionalists remember this and want to revive the environment along with the conventions but it is too presumptuous a task. Besides, serious artists start where conventionalists like them to end; rising from an environment they strive to exceed it and not be imprisoned by it. Tradition should, therefore, be conceived as a root from which each individual artist branches away in a gesture of escape, not conformity; and, if it is so conceived, change is not its enemy.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. The Struggle for Image in Contemporary Art

*In this second extract, he begins with a trenchant criticism of academic naturalism of the colonial art schools as well as the nationalist, semi-representational Bengal School of Painting, led by Abanindranath Tagore, both of which came under attack from the 1920s from the rising group of modernists, notably Amrita Sher-Gil (1913-1941), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), Jamini Roy (1887-1972) and the Santiniketan school. While Subrahmanyam is careful to praise his own teacher, Nandalal Bose, and his teacher, Abanindranath Tagore, who was the leader of the Bengal School, he dismisses attempts of the school to revive pre-colonial art tradition as an artificial endeavor, expressing scepticism about their anti-western nationalist stance. The background to this is his faith in art as an ahistorical universal category that is not bound by cultural difference. But he is also critical of the modernists of the 1940s-1960s for losing their cultural identity. However, his argument is complicated by what he believes to be the genuine tradition, rather than empty historicism, which one may guess, refers to the modernism emerging at Santiniketan.*

Their [Bengal School of Painting] position certainly had its weaknesses. They over-romanticized their cultural past and read into it postulates not wholly genuine. They tried to keep alive traditional theme-structures based on history and mythology that held little credibility to the new public, in spite of their being clothed in quasi-contemporary vestment. Narrative art was losing ground; art that concerned itself with the visual scene and presented it in a united image was the need of the times; only Abanindranath himself and a few of his distinguished

followers accepted this change. In the next few decades the positions changed. Indian artists fell open to various eclectic influences as zonal barriers were breaking down on the global scene. Artists disavowed cultural specialities and took the stand that the whole world was their heritage and their work was their personal document, individual and unique. Their positions...were not dissimilar from those of some modern Western artists, though their work never came under the shadow of a realist aesthetic, and facticity was rarely a major concern in their work. But an art bereft of both factual and cultural ties with their immediate environment, except in the most superficial sense, could not satisfy them for long. They started yearning for roots in their environment... a number of artists found that their national anonymity on the global art spectrum was singularly unrewarding...To find contact points with areas of one's own tradition even at the instance of external stimuli is nothing to be ashamed of, if it pushes one into a genuine position in terms of art and life relationships, or gets one to interpret them in real terms. In most cases this has not happened... This working into the environment [cultural roots] may depend on his [the artist's] coming out of his purist isolation and widening the horizons of art, or his working on projects of definite environmental applications, appropriate to it in meaning and function without any special desire for historical conformity... There are signs of this already but we may need it on a bigger scale.<sup>9</sup>

## 3. Benodebehari Mukherjee

*In this extract he pays homage to his teacher, Benodebehari. He finds him to be the ideal artist who combines modernism with a deep empathy for Indian culture, and for the ordinary people in particular; a true painter of the environment by his denition.*

Benodebehari Mukherjee stands a little apart from most of his contemporaries on the Indian scene. When other Indian artists were torn between the conflicting attractions of the East and the West he is, gracefully, an artist without a dilemma. Although he grew up together with the artists of the so-called Bengal school his work is astonishingly devoid of their unctuous sentimentalism. When most Indian landscape painters painted the Indian scene in the broad generalities of European academic and

neo-Impressionist modes he painted it in an intimate calligraphic idiom reminiscent of the Far East but modified to suit its textural luxuriance and variety. When most Indian artists were involved exclusively with easel or miniature painting he explored the dimensions of screen, scroll and mural; when they tended to be professional purists out of contact with their environment he emphasized the continuities of Indian art through its various hierarchies. So, he does not fall easily into the usual classifications Indian art critics are fond of.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thakur (Tagore) Rabindranath, 'Shiksharambha' and 'Normal School' in Jibansmriti (Reminiscences of my life), *Rabindra-Rachanabali* (Centenary Edition), X, Kalikata (Kolkata) 1368 (1961) 7-8, and 18-20.

<sup>2</sup> Thakur, Rabindranath, 'Shikshar Her-Pher', in Shiksha, *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, XI, 537-545. It was published in 1299 (1892).

<sup>3</sup> Thakur, Rabindranath, 'Tapoban', in Shiksha, *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, XI, 589-606.

<sup>4</sup> Basu (Bose), Nandalal, 'Shilpey Sharirasthanbidyar Prayog', *Drish-ti o Shristi* (Vision and Creation), Visvabharati Granthanibhag Kalikata (Kolkata) 1392 (1985), 22-23.

<sup>5</sup> This is a complex term going back to the ancient period where theoretical texts explain the different sets of proportions [tala and mana] of the body that relate to different types of figural images. See J. N. Banerjee, *The Development of Hindu Iconography*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1956, 316-7.

<sup>6</sup> Mukhopadhyaya (Mukherjee), Benodebehari, 'Bharatiya Murti o Bimurtabad', *Chitrakatha*, Aruna Prakashani, Kolkata, 1390 (1983), 39-41.

<sup>7</sup> Mukhopadhyaya (Mukherjee), Benodebehari, 'My Experiments with Murals', *Chitrakatha*, 395-406.

<sup>8</sup> Subrahmanyam, K. G. 'Art and Change', *Moving Focus: Essays on Indian Art*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2006, 16.

<sup>9</sup> Subrahmanyam, 'The Struggle for Image in Contemporary Art', in *Moving Focus*, 46-8.

<sup>10</sup> Subrahmanyam, 'Benodebehari Mukherjee', in *Moving Focus*, 94.