Abstract

The early twentieth century in Bengal was a time of great social transformation, when many new ways of being and making a living in the world became suddenly possible and negotiable. Amongst the new livelihoods finding expression in that time and place was the figure of the modern, urban, professional Bengali printmaking artist, one who combined professional artistic training and certification with a determination to carve out spaces of economic and social opportunity for himself, often very difficult circumstances. Most artists struggled to forge successful careers at this time, but those who were engaged with print and printmaking media were able to take advantage of unique opportunities and were faced with particular challenges. Each chapter of this thesis deals with particular images and objects, certain institutions and texts, in order to trace the modern, professional Bengali printmaking artist through the contested spaces of a rapidly professionalizing art world that was itself emerging and transforming in Bengal, particularly in the urban centre of Calcutta from roughly the 1920s to the 1940s. By looking closely at how the relationships between individualism and collectivity, and between village India and modern urban agglomerations, were represented and negotiated in and through print and printmaking media during this period, this thesis also complicates our understanding of how these twinned issues were connected to the experience of modernity and modern art in South Asia. Finally, this thesis addresses the Bengal Famine of 1943, its representation in the art of the period, and how its cataclysmic circumstances were a context in which the issues and themes discussed throughout this project manifest in particularly urgent ways.
Preface

Sections of both chapters one and two are based on papers delivered at the Association for Asian Studies annual conference (Hawaii, March 2011) and at the University Art Association of Canada (Ottawa, October 2011). A preliminary version of chapter three was presented at the International Congress of Bengal Studies (Delhi, March 2010) and was published in the resulting conference proceedings, published from Calcutta in 2011. A version of chapter four was presented at the Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison, Wisconsin (October 2014).

There is no universally accepted system for the transliteration of Bengali into English, so I have endeavoured to follow as closely as possible the standards adopted by the language institute of the American Institute of India Studies in Kolkata, where I pursued my Bengali studies in 2010. However in some cases (especially with regards to proper names) where there is a commonly accepted spelling that differs from this standard, I have maintained the commonly used spelling. Hence the use of “Tagore” instead of “Thakur,” and “Dey” instead of “De,” for example.

When referring to present-day events or institutions I use the spelling Kolkata to refer to the capital of Bengal, which changed its name from Calcutta in 2001. When referring to colonial period events or institutions, I refer to the city as Calcutta.
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Dedication

For my father, Eric Fast
1. Introduction

1.1 Professional Printmaking Artists in Late Colonial Bengal

This thesis examines some of the challenges and opportunities associated with performing the social role of the professional printmaking artist during the late colonial period in Bengal. This study focuses on the city of Calcutta particularly, and on the forming and transforming of new kinds of art worlds in that “second city” of the British Empire during the decades from roughly the 1920s to the 1940s.¹ This project investigates some of the discourses and practices associated with the Bengali art world(s) at that time, and it seeks to better understand the range of social actors who inhabited and embodied its spaces. This thesis also seeks to shed light on particular types of material production and circulation of printed visual imagery in the social and historical context of late-colonial Bengal.

European trading companies had established economic and military presences in the region as early as the sixteenth century, but large-scale European Company colonialism was not a reality in South Asia until the Battle of Plassey in 1757, after which the British East India Company essentially became a sovereign landowner, rent collector and major

¹ Calcutta began to be referred to as the “second city of the British Empire” in the nineteenth century when its population exploded and it became a powerful financial and administrative centre. It continued to be referred to as such for much of the early twentieth as well, although often vying with other cities for the title. Sanjoy Chakravorty, “From Colonial City to Globalizing City?: The Far-From-Complete Spatial Transformation of Calcutta,” in Globalizing Cities: A New Spatial Order? (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 56-77.
power holder in Bengal, in the north-eastern corner of the South Asian subcontinent. Those events ushered in a period of Company colonialism that lasted roughly a century, until the British crown and parliament dissolved the East India Company and took over direct control and administration of Britain’s South Asian territories following the 1857 Rebellion (also referred to as the Mutiny, or as the First Indian War of Independence). This in turn marked the beginning of a late colonial or “high empire” period that lasted almost another century, until India and Pakistan became independent in 1947.

This thesis focuses on the region of Bengal during the late colonial period, specifically on the urban centre of Calcutta during the final decades before Independence and Partition. “Bengal” at that time encompassed both what is now the state of West Bengal in India and the independent nation of Bangladesh. The early twentieth century British administrative designation known as “the Bengal Presidency” at times also included large areas of what are now neighbouring Indian states such as Orissa and Meghalaya, making “Bengal” a region that was both massive and incredibly diverse. Calcutta was Bengal’s economic and administrative hub; it was the first capital established by the British in India to meet the needs of their colonial state. At the end of the seventeenth century Calcutta had been a small trading outpost situated amongst fishing villages, but the city quickly grew and changed dramatically. By the early twentieth century it was a large, densely populated, fashionable, powerful metropolis that had pockets of both extreme wealth and appalling poverty. It was also the testing ground for new social and cultural experiences in the colonial context. Calcutta was the key stage on which British and South Asian cultures
faced and mingled with each other, and where colonial infrastructures of power came into the greatest contact with South Asian lives. And critically, the urban agglomeration of Calcutta was always a landscape that was already flooded with economic émigrés from elsewhere: from Britain, from diverse rural communities across India, and also from elsewhere in Asia, Europe, and the Americas. Calcutta in the 1920s, 30s and 40s was a place of new technologies, new cultural adaptations, new fortunes, and newcomers.

The late colonial period in Bengal (and especially in Calcutta) was characterised by social transformation and upheaval, which made it also a time of great possibility and opportunity: when there emerged a number of newly available social roles and ways of being in the world and in society. Sudipta Kaviraj has argued regarding the explosion of autobiographical texts written in Bengal during the late colonial period that many individuals at this time felt compelled to commit their life stories to writing because they in some way represented a remarkably new kind of life that even a few years previously would have been largely unthinkable. The current project focuses on one such remarkably new social entity: the figure of the modern, urban, professional Bengali printmaking artist. Distinguished by his (very rarely “her”) relationship with new forms of urban patronage, his aggressive self-promotion, his aspirations of social and professional respectability, his pursuit of professional education and certification, and his participation in a cultural


\[\text{3}\] The vast majority (although not all) of those who made a living for themselves as professional printmaking artists in late-colonial Bengal were men, and thus when referring to a general category or phenomenon of such artists I use masculine pronouns wherever a gender-neutral plural proves awkward.
economy of urban leisure, the professional Bengali printmaking artist emerged in the early decades of the twentieth century as an important participant in the Bengali art world(s). Involvement in print and printmaking media (as well as exposure to specialized printmaking training) was particularly advantageous for those struggling to carve out artistic careers at this time; emergent and dynamic print cultures in Bengal offered new avenues for the circulation of both images and text, as well as opportunities to profit from such circulation, financially or otherwise.

One of the most common characteristics of professional, modern, Bengali print artists in the early twentieth century was their determined pursuit of official art school education and certification, and the fact that many of them remained closely associated with institutions of art education for long periods throughout their careers. Artists at the time who were known to have committed the majority of their practice to printmaking media, such as Ramendranath Chakravorty (1902-1955), Mukul Dey (1895-1989), Somnath Hore (1921-2006), and Haren Das (1921-1993), all had long tenures at the Government School of Art in Calcutta in the early twentieth century, for example. Some of them had been students at the school themselves, but as instructors they collectively headed the printmaking and graphics departments, and were vice principal and principal from roughly the 1920s to the 1950s.
The Government School of Art in Calcutta was one of a handful of major art colleges in India that were established by the British in the middle of the nineteenth century.\(^4\) The Calcutta school was established first as a private institute of “Industrial Art” in 1854; a decade later was taken over by the British and renamed the Government School of Art. Its curriculum and goals have changed over the years but it is still an arts college today, currently known as the Government College of Art & Craft. In the 1920s, 30s and 40s what was then called the Government School of Art was one of the largest and most prestigious institutions of art education in India. Almost all of the professional print artists in Bengal in the early twentieth century were associated with the Government Art School at one time or another. But there were other important schools of art in Bengal as well, including the Albert Temple of Science and School of Art, the Jubilee Art Academy, and the Indian Art School, all in Calcutta.\(^5\) They all offered printmaking instruction and training in their curricula, and they employed print artists as instructors. The Indian Society of Oriental Art, also in Calcutta, began offering classes in painting in 1907 but never offered instruction in printmaking. However they were also known as an exhibiting organization and fine art publisher whose presses employed many professional, trained print artists throughout the period. Beyond the urban centre of Calcutta but also within Bengal, there was also an important centre of art education known as *Kala Bhavan* located in the village of Santiniketan. Established in 1919, *Kala Bhavan* was the visual art

\(^4\) Similar institutions were established in Madras (opened in 1850 as a private art school, and taken over and renamed the Government School of Industrial Arts in 1852), and in Bombay (established as the private Sir J.J. School of Art in 1857, and came under government purview in 1866).

department of the rural, utopian university project founded by Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a Nobel-prize winning Bengali poet who later in life also became a visual artist of great renown. The school had a strong graphic and printmaking component from early on, with instructors bringing knowledge of Japanese and Western printmaking traditions to the campus, where they intersected with home-made equipment and indigenous craft traditions. What the existence of all of these institutions testifies to is a significant growth in official forms of arts education in Bengal at this time, and a corresponding growth in the population of art school graduates (many with specialist printmaking training) who then sought to make livings for themselves as professional artists.

There are signs that the Bengali art world had difficulty accommodating this newly trained artistic work force. A sense of how difficult it was to be a professional artist at that time is suggested by an article that appeared in *The Englishman* newspaper in Calcutta, in December of 1920. In it, the anonymous commentator argues that:

“Strange as it may seem, the citizens of Calcutta get on—they have, indeed, got on all this time—without employing any artists. In the big schemes of life the artist has not been able to secure any place. Of late, he has been putting himself in the way, rather obtrusively, whether he is wanted or not.”

More than three decades later the situation does not seem to have significantly improved. In the 1950s Ramanedranath Chakravorty was the Principal of the newly-renamed

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Government College of Art & Craft. In a 1952 article addressed to his fellow Principals of “Technical Institutions” in India, Chakravorty wrote despairingly of the options for graduates of art schools such as his:

It is a surprising fact that there are yet so-called cultural people… who lack taste and have no hesitation to declare with pride that they do not care much for art in these days. …And we all know the State is always faced with great shortages of funds, especially for the case of art. If such are the conditions, then what is the use of artists and sculptors of high merit who can only in the circumstances toil and waste their time for nothing? Why are art Institutes producing trained art students? What are they going to do in life if no one cares about their merit?\textsuperscript{7}

These questions were not rhetorical; the remainder of the article outlines very particular and specific policies and programs that Chakravorty hopes will improve the professional success of art school graduates. For example, he urges his fellow principals of other technical institutions to each establish an art gallery in their own schools, to be filled with work purchased by artists who had studied at nearby institutes of art education.\textsuperscript{8}

The growth in art school education during this period was due in part because official training and certification, such as a degree or government art school diploma, represented a prestige achievement associated with professionalism, success, and legitimacy. It could be a potential pathway to secure forms of employment and a middle-class lifestyle. Critically, such education was largely understood as being a barrier to involvement in manual labour. Those with some form of official qualifications usually sought out even

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid, 239-240.
low-paying clerkships in offices rather than taking physical labour jobs that might pay higher wages. A series of articles and letters published in the *Statesman* newspaper in Calcutta over several months in 1926 bemoaned the fact that Indians with formal education and qualifications were either unsuited or unwilling to perform manual labour. One anonymous reporter summed up the prevailing attitude: “Professions which combine mental and physical exertions are not in much favour among the educated [Indian] classes, and even clerkship appeals to the popular taste more than pure physical labour.” Pursuit of institutional education, such as the earning of an art school certificate, could thus offer a degree of protection against being implicated in physical labour and thus could guarantee membership in at least the lower-rungs of the Bengali middle classes. Involvement in physical labour remained, and continues to remain, a defining characteristic of the lower-than-middle classes in Bengali society.

The concern over being implicated in physical labour had a meaningful impact on those who sought to establish themselves as professional printmaking artists at this time. In each of the chapters of this thesis I demonstrate how the relationship between art as labour and art as leisure was one that professional printmaking artists were in a position to skilfully negotiate. In the early twentieth century, elite and socially aspirant segments of Bengali society tended to subscribe to the notion that the creation of art and literature was something that occurred, in the words of historian Niharranjan Ray, “within a space

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beyond necessity and outside the limits of the requirements of human livelihood.” Those who dominated debates related to the transformation of the Bengali language at this time sought to more clearly distinguish between the terms *kristhi* and *sanskriti* (that is, between cultivation and culture): wherein the former had connotations of everyday matters and, worse yet, physical labour, while the latter implied a more spiritual or cerebral endeavour of personal improvement, and which was understood to be the realm of art. Yet the various media of printmaking implicated labour—and especially the labour of the rural peasant—in ways that painting, for example, did not. Because of the physical carving of the printing matrix, and because of the laboured manipulation of the printing press itself, artists who chose to specialize in printmaking staked a claim to a particular relationship with labour that was uniquely resonant to contemporary audiences, as the chapters that follow will argue.

When considering the relationship between art and labour in early twentieth century Bengal, it is worth noting that when student strikes erupted at the Government School of Art in the late 1920s, one of the points of contention was a new rule requiring all students to physically carry items of their own equipment as they went out into the city to sketch from life. At least one political cartoon from the period (figure 1.1) capitalized on the controversy by depicting a heavily-burdened art student struggling to balance an easel, paints, and papers under an umbrella in the rain, with a Bengali caption asking the

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question (charged with class connotations) of whether this properly represented an art student or a porter?\footnote{The remainder of the Bengali caption reads: “Due to the proposed arrangement at Calcutta’s Government Art School, this is how the situation of the students will stand.” The exact date of this cartoon is unclear, as is the name of the publication in which it originally appeared; it is preserved in the Mukul Dey Archives just as a clipping. However, given that Dey took over the Principalship of the School of Art in 1927 and student strikes occurred shortly thereafter in protest of some of his new rules for the institution, it seems likely that this cartoon certainly dates form this period. There is a hand-written note in the archive that ascribes this cartoon a date of c.1928. It is also unclear what provisions were made for the carrying of equipment before the institution of this new rule, although it would appear in part that sketching from life out in the city environs was not as common a practice before the 1920s.} Unfortunately further details of this student strike and the institution of rules that sparked it do not emerge clearly from the archive. The fact that this particular rule was implemented at all implies that at least some students were of a socio-economic status that would have enabled them to have someone else carrying their materials for them, and therefore that they would have been invested in the elite notion of art as leisure. The reaction of the public, as represented by the class-conscious caption, suggests that the figure of the artist was largely understood as worthy of an elite and respected position, divorced from physical labour. The incident makes clear, however, that these categories and understandings were subject to negotiation and challenge in the late colonial period.

The professional status of the Bengali print artist was inexorably connected on the one hand to his official art school training and certification, and on the other to his need to earn a living through his artistic practice, often supplemented by work as an art school teacher or administrator. In addition, the professional Bengali print artist of the early twentieth century was particularly implicated in the tensions between art as leisure and art as labour in large part because of the physical implications of printmaking’s processes (about which more will be said later). But printmaking in Bengal at this time was also in
some ways related to a craft- and caste-based pulp press industry that had emerged somewhat earlier, in the late 1800s in Calcutta. This pulp-press world in Calcutta is often referred to by the umbrella term *battala*. The artists that this thesis focuses on were familiar with the *battala* print world but were distanced from it in large part by (a) not being hereditarily tied to the profession, and (b) because their careers were characterized by a determined pursuit of official training and certification through one of the various new official schools of art that emerged in Bengal in the late-colonial period. Such educational credentials became a part of the collection of tools and strategies developed by the modern, professional Bengali print artist in order to secure his particular type of career and livelihood.

This was the unique social predicament of the professional Bengali printmaking artist during this period. Suspended and balanced between his aspirations of social and economic success on the one hand and his relationship with manual labour and anxieties about unemployment on the other, this figure in many ways occupied a new, ambiguous space in the social geography of the erstwhile colonial capital of Calcutta. This figure was neither fully elite nor subaltern, neither in close contact with the systems of colonial power nor fully outside them, able to speak English but not always comfortable with it. The professional print artist occupied a socio-economic position in some ways similar to the low-level office clerks, petty merchants, teachers, some factory workers, and many others who constituted the rapidly expanding ranks of the urban middle classes. But in

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12 Calcutta was the capital of British India until 1911, when the government shifted the capital to New Delhi.
other ways the professional print artist had access to more elite forms of sociality and education.

This thesis sheds light on various strategies and means taken up by certain professional, Bengali print artists to help them better perform their social role, as well as the various cultural and institutional structures upon which such performance could be grafted. In the chapters that follow I shall demonstrate that the kinds of tools and opportunities that could be exploited and made productive in the hands of one type of artist were not always as useful to another, and that methods and approaches that were extremely useful at one point in time could prove to be detrimental at others. In the chapters that follow I hope to demonstrate how one’s social position and status in the Bengali art worlds of the period were never, and could not be, fixed, but instead had to be constantly (re)performed and (re)negotiated. The performance of the social role of the professional, modern Bengali print artist—and indeed the very nature of identity as such—is inherently improvisational, responsive, and adaptive.

My use of the term “performance” is based on a sense of the presentation and performance of self in everyday life, strongly influenced by Bourdieu’s articulation of the performance of everyday practices and durable dispositions through the habitus. For Bourdieu, the habitus is what connects and mediates between social actors and the external structures of society. A set of dispositions, reactions, attitudes and experiences that is constantly in flux, the habitus is the “sense of the game” that allows social agents to deal with unanticipated
circumstances and situations. In many ways this thesis is an attempt to locate and better understand the habitus of the professional Bengali printmaking artist of the late colonial period. This project seeks to articulate what practices were enacted by such individuals, within the limits offered by the prevailing social structures, which in turn helped to transform the structures of society into lived experience.13 Moreover, my articulation of the notion of the “performance” of the role of the professional printmaking artist is also strongly influenced by Judith Butler’s theorization of gender as an “embodied set of strategies” that needs to be constantly performed.14 In this project I focus on the embodied set of strategies performed by a certain group of individuals as well as a certain gender, since the vast majority of professional printmaking artists at this time in Bengal were male. It is the same sense of a cognitive-bodily orientation to the world that I invoke when I describe the performance of the social role of the professional Bengali print artist in the early twentieth century, and it is the tools, opportunities and limitations experienced by these artists on which I seek to shed light. One of the most important arguments that I hope this thesis will make clear, is that the ability to make use of the opportunities and possibilities manifest in print and printmaking media was amongst the most crucial of those tools and strategies needed to navigate the precarious social circumstances of the professional artist.

1.2 The Moment Before: Academic Realism and the Bengal School

This project focuses particularly on the figure of the professional Bengali printmaking artist during the last decades of the late-colonial period. This time period, and this particular social figure, have so far received comparatively little attention in the related body of art historical literature, which for a long time tended to focus on nationalist debates that dominated different parts of the Bengali art world(s) in a somewhat earlier period, in the very late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries within the medium of painting. In this section I intend to summarize some of the significant art historical work that has shed light on that earlier moment, in order to establish the state of the current field of scholarship and to situate my own work in relation to it. This art history is critical to understanding the context for what emerged a few decades later, and it also shows how the existing scholarly literature has set the stage for new contributions and approaches.¹⁵

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, in various urban centres across South Asia, there emerged a new category of upper-class, gentlemen artists who embraced and mastered the techniques of European, academic-style oil painting and the revelatory realism it made possible. At the time, realistic oil painting represented the vanguard of modern art in the region, particularly amongst socio-economically elite segments of

¹⁵ There has been a wide and diverse body of literature related to the nationalist Bengal School narrative, but the field remains dominated by two major texts from the early 1990s. These are: Tapati Guha-Thakurta, The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850-1920 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and Partha Mitter, Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
society (both Indian and European). Tapati Guha-Thakurta has shown how in Calcutta in the nineteenth century the “exclusive, Europeanized art-world [began] to accommodate a select society of Indians as patrons and collectors, spreading among them the same tastes for decorating grand halls with portraits, landscapes, genre scenes or neo-classical compositions.”\textsuperscript{16} But it was not just the illusionism or the oil-on-canvas medium that these gentlemen artists adopted that appeared so radically new in the South Asian context, it was also the manner in which they secured patronage and the ways they marketed and distributed their work. These gentlemen artists broke with earlier systems of permanent or semi-permanent courtly patronage that had earlier characterized the careers of professional artists who, in the Mughal and post-Mughal eras in South Asia, were employed in the ateliers and workshops of regional courtly centres like Murshidabad. The gentlemen artists of the nineteenth century instead worked for multiple patrons, marketing their work through available avenues of aristocratic recommendation and elite sociality. In some says these artists embodied some of the same hustle that characterized the professional printmaking artists of a half century later, managing their artistic practices as professional businesses and opening up possibilities for models of artists as free agents and as independent businessmen. But one key difference was that the nineteenth century gentlemen artists presented themselves as charismatic aristocrats, working for numerous wealthy clients, access to whom was undoubtedly aided by such artists’ own aristocratic claims and social behaviour. The gentlemen artists also sought to promote and market

their work through the radically new vehicles (in the South Asian context) of the fine art exhibition and the fine art society, venues generally less open to the less aristocratic professional printmaker of a later period. Also crucial was a difference in preferred medium; the nineteenth century gentleman artist usually worked exclusively in oil on canvas, knowing it was esteemed amongst his wealthy clientele. The printmaking artist of a half century later sought other audiences, through other media.

The Keralan artist Raja Ravi Varma (1848-1906), who made a (very comfortable) living carrying out commissions for royal and aristocratic Indian families and for many powerful European patrons (figure 1.2), is perhaps the most famous example of this type of gentleman artist from the latter half of the nineteenth century in India. But there were also Bengali artists who charted similar career paths at the same time, including Sashi Kumar Hesh (1869-?), Jamini Ganguly (1876-1953), and Bamapada Banerjee (1851-1932). Like Ravi Varma, Jamini Ganguly was born into an elite family. Varma was born into a minor branch of royal family of Travancore in Kerala, whereas Ganguly was related to the illustrious Tagore family, in many ways the most famous and renowned family of Bengali society. They also had similar educational experiences, with both receiving their earliest training at home from private tutors. Also like Ravi Varma, Bamapada Banerjee collaborated with commercial printing presses to reproduce many of his oil-on-canvas paintings into cheap oleograph format. In doing so, both artists broadened their

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audiences beyond those who could afford to commission large canvases, in the process helping to foster a wide popularity for intimately realistic “portraits” of Hindu gods and goddesses that continues to fuel a thriving bazaar-economy market for images and visual culture in South Asia to the present day (figure 1.3). Unlike Ravi Varma, Sashi Hesh dared to break the taboo against caste Hindus travelling overseas. Although Varma won great international acclaim for the paintings he exhibited at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, he himself could never be compelled to travel abroad for fear of losing his caste status. Hesh on the other hand travelled abroad extensively; he went to Italy on a scholarship to study art, lived in Paris, and was the first Indian to be elected to the Royal Scottish Academy. He was even rumoured to have lived a life of “genteel poverty” for a time somewhere in Canada. But during intervening periods when Hesh lived and worked in India, his career charted a very similar path to Varma’s, with both artists achieving fame and success in their own lifetimes particularly for their ability to create flattering, realistic, oil-on-canvas portraits of elite patrons drawn from both the princely and aristocratic Indian class and from amongst the upper ranks of the European population (figures 1.4 and 1.5). In all these matters related to patronage and style, patterns of exhibition and distribution, as well as choice of style and medium, this new breed of gentlemen artists working in Bengal in the late nineteenth century (and in some cases well into the twentieth) represented a significant break from what had come before.

18 Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India 1850-1922: Occidental Orientations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 114-118. According to Mitter, Mukul Dey recounted meeting Hesh in Canada in 1917. However, Dey was only in Canada once in his life: briefly in September 1916, when the ship he had sailed on across the Pacific docked in Vancouver. Dey almost immediately travelled on to Seattle and although he did spend much of 1917 in America he does not appear to have returned to Canada before sailing back to India from San Francisco.
But at the turn of the twentieth century the tide was turning against academically realistic, oil-on-canvas painting in the conservative European tradition. Critics instead began to champion what they saw as a radically new style of modern Indian painting, a style that became known as the Bengal School.\(^{19}\) Epitomized by the early work of Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) and several of his immediate students and imitators, including Kshitindranath Majumdar (1891-1975), Asit Kumar Haldar (1890-1964), and the early work of Nandalal Bose (1882-1966), the Bengal School style was formally characterized by hazy, watercolour washes, a certain stylization and flattening of the picture plane that eschewed attempts at strict naturalism, and a self-conscious drawing of stylistic inspiration from specific sources that included illuminated Mughal manuscripts, Japanese wash paintings, medieval Celtic manuscripts, and the ancient Buddhist murals that had been “discovered” by the British at places like Ajanta and Bagh in Western India in the early nineteenth century.

In terms of subject matter, the Bengal School tended towards allegorical and romanticized mytho-poetic scenes, many of which were drawn from Vedic literature and the Hindu epics. In Nandalal Bose’s *Parthasarathi*, (figure 1.6), for example, the artist has depicted the critical moment just before the battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*, wherein Krishna as charioteer to Arjuna delivers his famous sermon on *dharma* that forms the core

\(^{19}\) The Bengal School has also been referred to as the “Neo-Bengal School,” the “new Indian art,” and the “new Indian style.”
of the Bhagavad Gita. In another example—a painting called *Parash* or *Touch* by Kshitindranath Majumdar—an ethereal Radha and Krishna are depicted engaged in love play in a lyrical landscape (figure 1.7). Some later critics have accused the Bengal School of harbouring an implicit Hindu bias and representing Hindu culture as Indian culture; while there is something to these claims, it nevertheless appears that both Buddhism and Islam were also plumbed for inspiration by the Bengal School artists, not only in terms of subject matter but also in matters of style, format, and medium. Abanindranath Tagore is said to have become enthralled with Mughal miniature painting when he was exposed to the collection of E.B. Havell, and he self-consciously drew on the tradition as inspiration for some of his later work. His *The Passing of Shah Jahan* (figure 1.8), for example, was intended to represent a revitalization of the tradition of Mughal miniature painting; its intimate format recalls the illuminated manuscript tradition of the Mughal period, while the treatment of colour evokes their burnished surfaces. The painting depicts the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan in his final prison in Agra Fort, gazing out at the Taj Mahal in the distance. It was exhibited to great acclaim at the elaborate pageant of colonialism known as the 1903 Delhi Durbar.

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20 E.B. Havell is sometimes credited with making Tagore aware of India’s own indigenous painting traditions, but this claim seems largely embedded in Havell’s own somewhat paternalistic claims to have ‘discovered’ Tagore as the ideal modern Indian artist. See, for example, Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, 153-155.

21 Durbars were a common political practice during the Mughal period, in which the various semi-independent kings and princes would perform homage to the Mughal emperor and acknowledge his authority. The British adopted many of the cultural and political practices of the Mughals, including the staging of durbars. Three durbars were held during the British colonial period, in 1877, 1903, and 1911. The modern durbars included exhibitions of Indian art, with prizes awarded in various categories. *The Passing of Shah Jahan* was awarded a silver medal at the 1903 durbar.
The Buddhist caves at Ajanta were also a clear source of stylistic and formal influence. The sinewy arcs of fingers and eyebrows evident in the previously mentioned painting by Nandalal Bose, *Parthasarathi*, clearly echo the Ajanta murals; this is clear when the work is compared to, for example, the painting of the Bodhisattva Padamapani from cave one at Ajanta (figure 1.9). Not only in the flowing contours and arc of lines, but even in the muted hues that recall the weathered surfaces of the ancient caves, Bose has clearly sought to evoke Ajanta in this work. And while in this instance Bose has drawn on a moment from the Buddhist period of Indian history for his stylistic and formal inspiration in order to then illustrate a story from one of the great Hindu epics, we also find many examples of Buddhist subject matter in the art of the Bengal School. Abanindranath for example, in addition to representing moments of Mughal history, also achieved fame for his painting of *Buddha and Sujata* (figure 1.10), depicting the young woman who offered a bowl of milk and rice to the Buddha when he renounced the ascetic path. Although the Bengal School may have been connected to Hindu identity and politics of the period, we can infer that both Buddhism and Islam were also of popular interest for both the Bengal School artists and its supporters. The painting of *Buddha and Sujata* was also exhibited at the 1903 Durbar to great acclaim alongside *The Passing of Shah Jahan*, and was also generously awarded.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Bengal School style was heralded in books and articles, and in the Government Art School’s curricula, by the likes of Ananda Coomaraswamy, E.B. Havell, Sister Nivedita, Sri Aurobindo and others, as the
appropriate expression of Indian modernity in the visual arts. Rejecting the social, cultural and aesthetic hierarchies that had previously accepted the privileged status of oil-on-canvas painting and Western ideals of verisimilitude, the Bengal School instead appeared to offer a way for artists to be both modern and Indian without adopting or endorsing western aesthetic values and assumptions. Unlike the large, ornately framed canvases designed to hang in elite salons and drawing rooms, which had been the favoured format of the gentlemen artists of the previous century, the Bengal School instead favoured small-scale works on paper that were intended to be viewed with great intimacy. Eschewing the status previously afforded to oil painting, the Bengal School became famous for its preference for a unique watercolour wash technique that was achieved powerful effects of atmosphere and mood. These effects are particularly evident in figure 1.11, for example, in which Sita from the *Ramayana* is depicted as seemingly emerging from and dissolving into an atmospheric cloud of green, blue and black that form the walls of her prison. This image exemplifies the watercolour wash technique that soon became a signature element of the Bengal School style, and which allowed artists to achieve a sense of depth and distance within the picture plane without having to resort to the linear perspective associated with the Western artistic tradition. For such reasons related to subject matter and style, execution and medium, the Bengal School style appeared to its champions to eschew the influences and standards of western art in favour of a modernism with indigenous roots and influences. It was celebrated as a truer expression of a supposedly innate Indian sensibility and spirituality in modern art.
Also crucial to the Bengal School’s success was the endorsement it received from key newspapers and journals of the day. Influential editors such as Ramananda Chatterjee wielded enormous influence. Much valuable scholarship has already shed light on publications like Chatterjee’s Bengali-language magazine *Prabasi* and its English-language counterpart *The Modern Review*, which combined contemporary political, economic and cultural analysis with what was then the cutting edge of available technologies in the region for image reproduction. Such publications became central to the tracking and pushing forward of a cultural shift away from the prominence of gentlemen artists in the academically realistic tradition in the late nineteenth century, towards the eventual “triumph” of the Bengal School style as the hegemonic cultural expression of the first decades of the twentieth century.\(^{22}\) The market for the older style of work was drastically shrinking as an ever-growing discourse in such publications labelled it as being an anachronism and a misguided and uncritical pursuit of mimicry: both mimicry of nature and mimicry of European standards of fine art. Such efforts, the supporters of the Bengal School argued, could only result in a creative dead end and a failure to achieve true modern expression in the visual arts. In effect, during the process of repudiating the authenticity of an earlier kind of modern art, the awareness of an *other* way of being both modern and Indian in the visual arts was effectively imagined and made visible.

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The discourse of the group of critics who closed ranks around the Bengal School was in part connected to the cultural and aesthetic philosophy espoused by the Japanese scholar and art critic Kakuzo Okakura (also known as Okakura Tenshin), who visited Calcutta and met many of the artists and critics related to the Bengal School. Okakura proposed a spiritually united Asia as a counterbalance to Western hegemony, famously declaring that “Asia is One,” and arguing that all Asian civilizations displayed a common “love for the Ultimate and Universal” that distinguished them from (and according to his paradigm, rendered them superior to) “those maritime peoples of the Mediterranean and the Baltic who love to dwell on the Particular, and to search out the means, not the end, of life.”

Okakura’s formula for a modern aesthetics thus rejected the naturalism of (certain) European art traditions in favour of a romanticized, stylized form that supposedly reflected a superior Asian spirituality. In this argument we can recognize an example of strategic essentialism that would have added significantly to the prestige of the Bengal School at that time.

The Bengal School’s remarkable rise to prominence was also significantly tied up with the growth of the urban, intellectual, upper-middle class bhadralok segment of Bengali society, as well as with the specifically anti-colonial movements for self-rule (swaraj) and own-goods (swadeshi) that dominated much of bhadralok public life in Bengal in the late-

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24 Here I am drawing on Gayatri Spivak’s concept of “strategic essentialism” as an often necessary means by which oppressed groups (temporarily) assume a general, essential identity in order to be able to act, “in a scrupulously visible political interest.” See Gayatri Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, eds Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (New York: Routledge, 1996), 214.
colonial period. *Bhadralok* literally translates as “gentlemen,” but it denotes more broadly an upper-middle class (even aristocratic), urban, intellectual Bengali community that emerged in the late-colonial period.\(^\text{25}\) During the nineteenth century in Bengal (and particularly in Calcutta) the *bhadralok* class emerged as a significant demographic of English-educated, economically privileged, socially progressive, reform-minded Bengalis who had often gained wealth and social status through their business and personal dealings with the British. While in theory anyone who could demonstrate sufficient wealth and social standing could become *bhadralok*, in social practice the category tended to be dominated by landowners from elite castes such as the *brahmins* and *kayasths*. Many of these English educated, reform-minded *bhadralok* who were denied access to direct political participation due to the racialized nature of the colonial system channelled their energies into the cultural realms, resulting in a great outpouring of literary, scientific and social reform movements that is collectively referred to as the “Bengal Renaissance” or “Bengali Renaissance,” and of which the Bengal School style of painting is often considered to be a late manifestation. Setting aside the myriad implicit—and explicit—problems involved in applying a term like “renaissance” to a colonial South-Asian context, we can nevertheless acknowledge that in many ways the Bengali Renaissance constituted a powerful elite response to, and critique of, colonial rule. It is possible to admire and pay due respect to the various achievements of the so-called Bengali

\(^{25}\) The feminine equivalent of the masculine *bhadralok* is *bhadramohila* (“gentlewoman”). However, just as in English the masculine term “mankind” often stands as the general designation for all people, so too does the Bengali *bhadralok* refer to an entire socio-economic class, including both its male and female constituents. Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that the access to westernized education, patterns of employment, and other social markers that designated one as *bhadralok* were decidedly more available to men than they were to woman, and thus *bhadralok* culture has always been highly gendered.
Renaissance while also considering how those achievements were in many ways a phenomenon that implicated only the most elite segments of society. The Bengali Renaissance was largely the prerogative of the upper- and upper-middle classes, but its products nevertheless continued to be intensely felt and influential in Bengal throughout the late-colonial period, and they continued to test the edges and limits of colonial hegemony through means that included the visual arts.

In 1905, for example, when the British colonial government first proposed to divide the large and heavily populated province of Bengal into two separate administrative units, the policy was officially promoted as a strategy intended to bring about greater administrative efficiency. But in separating the Muslim-majority East Bengal from the Hindu-majority West Bengal, the deeply unpopular policy was generally understood at the time as an attempt on the part of the British to divide and rule. Moreover, the decision to partition Bengal was widely interpreted as a form of punishment for the ongoing intellectual and political ferment in Bengal at the time. When the partition went into effect, it sparked the first major attempt on the part of an Indian nationalist movement to mobilize popular and widespread protest, first in the form of strikes and economic boycotts of British-made goods (under the banner of *swadeshi*), but also eventually with acts of targeted violence and terrorism intended to weaken and undermine British colonial rule.\(^\text{26}\)

\(^{26}\) Although this first division of Bengal was eventually repealed in 1911, it effectively prefigured the more permanent Partition of 1947, when West Bengal became a state in independent India, and East Bengal became East Pakistan (and after 1971, the independent nation of Bangladesh). For more on Bengali *swadeshi*, Sumit Sarkar’s *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* (new edition, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2010), remains the best introduction to the history of the movement. See also the more recent collection of seminar papers edited by Tapati Sengupta and Shreela Roy, *Contesting Colonialism: Partition and*
protests against the 1905 Bengal partition that erupted, the Bengal School provided a visual expression of “cultural and national aspirations, for independence and emancipation from foreign rule.” During this period Abanindranath Tagore painted his iconic vision of *Bharat Mata* (“Mother India,” figure 1.12), as a saffron-clad and multi-armed goddess figure clutching the symbols of emancipation and independence: a handful of rice paddy denoting self-sufficiency in food production; a bolt of homespun *khadi* cloth representing independence from the cheap English-made textiles that were flooding the Indian market; a palm-leaf book, indicating indigenous systems of learning and education; and finally, a string of prayer beads, meant to symbolize India’s spiritual strength. It was this painting, which Tagore originally envisioned as *Bangla Mata* or “Mother Bengal,” that was hurriedly printed onto banners and paraded through the streets of Calcutta at the head of mass demonstrations. So galvanizing did this image prove to be for the anti-British movement more generally in South Asia, that it was later rebranded as “Mother India.” Despite the Bengal School’s interest in Buddhist and Islamic history and art, it was the galvanizing use of images like the *Bharat Mata* that cemented its reputation as a Hindu movement in the minds of many critics; the multi-armed goddess and saffron robes of Hinduism identified this as a specifically Hindu figure, meant to stand for all of India.

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28 Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, 259. While the nature of the Bengal School’s relationship with nationalism more broadly has begun to be productively complicated in the related literature (as will be argued later) its association with Bengali *swadeshi* is still very much in tact and unchallenged. Note, for example, that Tagore’s *Bharat Mata* illustrates the cover of the latest edition of Sumit Sarkar’s seminal history, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal* (new edition, 2010).
As meteoric as had been the Bengal School’s rise to fame at the turn of the twentieth century, by the 1920s fashions had shifted, the Bengal school quickly began to lose its prestige position and cultural capital. Some scholars have pointed to increasing familiarity amongst Bengali artists at this time with cubist and surrealist experimentations that were happening in European painting as being largely responsible for this cultural shift that rendered the Bengal School style increasingly unpopular. This increasing familiarity is said to have been made possible in part by certain watershed exhibitions in Calcutta and through the increased availability of international art journals.

But this decline in prestige was also connected to the fact that, while the swadeshi movement had by this time been largely reborn as a nation-wide campaign of preference for indigenous goods under Gandhi’s leadership (focused particularly on the production of home-spun khadi cloth), swadeshi’s earlier incarnation as a Bengal-specific, radical revolutionary movement had by this time mostly burned out, leaving behind it “a feeling of disappointment, even anticlimax, at the blighting of so many hopes.” Coupled with a widespread bitterness and weariness with the intense violence (including assassinations,

29 For example, the December 1922 exhibition at the Indian Society of Oriental Art in Calcutta of various European Bauhaus artists including Kandinsky and Klee is often discussed as a transformative moment for modern art in Bengal. See, for example, Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde, 1922-47* (London: Reaction Books, 2007), 15-18.

30 There is a voluminous literature on Gandhi’s khadi-focused swadeshi movement, but a few recent texts offer a particularly useful introduction to the field. See, for example: Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi’s Nation: Homespun and Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007); Rahul Tamagundam, *Gandhi’s Khadi: a History of Contention and Conciliation* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008); and Peter Gonsalves, *Clothing For Liberation: A Communication Analysis of Gandhi’s Swadeshi Revolution* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010).

31 Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal*, 419.
bombings, riots, and brutal government and police oppression) that marked especially the later days of Bengali swadeshi, this sense of disillusionment had the effect of making the earnestness of the Bengal School’s nationalism seem suddenly one-dimensional and naive. In other words, what had been an advantage in 1900 was more of a liability by 1920 or 1930. For much of the rest of the twentieth century, the Bengal School would draw accusations of excessive sentimentality, poor draughtsmanship, racial essentialism, and either Bengali and Hindu chauvinism (amongst other things).

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that especially within elite circles, for the first two decades of the twentieth century the Bengal School represented the dominant authority on what modern Indian art was supposed and presumed to be. Indeed, at the moment when the Bengal School style was beginning to lose its avant-garde relevancy in Bengal, it suddenly and simultaneously acquired the status of a national, institutional authority. In the 1920s, many of the first generation of Bengal School artists who had worked together in Calcutta in the 1900s and 1910s (particularly those who had studied under Abanindranath Tagore when he was serving as Vice-Principal of the Government School of Art from 1905 to 1915) began leaving Calcutta in order to take up key positions as principals and instructors at various institutes of art education across the subcontinent, taking with them many of the formal tenets of the Bengal School style which they then imparted through both personal example and institutional curricula to virtually the entire
next generation of institutionally trained artists in South Asia.\(^{32}\) Thus, it was at the moment when the visual or formal characteristics of the Bengal School were being institutionalized and canonized through India's evolving network of art schools and colleges, that as an avant-garde movement it became watered down and emptied of meaning through endless and formulaic repetition by art school graduates of varying degrees of competency all across the subcontinent. As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, such is the nature of avant-garde movements everywhere: controlled and maintained by those in power in society, if the avant-garde aesthetic is claimed and mobilized by the lower classes then elites will always shift their definition of “taste” in order to disassociate themselves from the masses.\(^{33}\)

### 1.3 Shifting the Focus

This is a key moment in the art historical narrative, and it is here in the histories of the decades immediately following the decline of the Bengal School where the current project seeks to intervene. A valuable body of art historical scholarship, dominated particularly by the work of Partha Mitter and Tapati Guha-Thakurta, has already done much to aid in our understating of the late nineteenth and very early twentieth centuries of Bengali art

\(^{32}\) Samarendranath Gupta became Vice-Principal of the Mayo School of Art in Lahore, Sailendranath Dey worked at the Bharat Kala Bhavan in Benares and later at the Jaipur School of Arts, Asit Kumar Halder taught at Santiniketan, Jaipur, and Lucknow, Manindra Bhushan Gupta taught in Colombo, Promod Kumar Chatterjee taught art in Masulipatam, and Deviprosad Roy Chowdhury taught at the Madras School of Arts. All of them had been students of Tagore. See Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Abanindranath Known and Unknown: The Artist versus the Art of His Times* (Kolkata: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, 2009), 18.

history. That scholarship has tended to focus on nationalistic, *swadeshi* narratives that relate a “rise and fall” narrative for the Bengal School. Building on and from this earlier scholarship, this thesis seeks to shift the focus towards a later period of the late 1920s to the early 1940s. It was during this period that the cracks in the hegemony of the Bengal School were becoming increasingly apparent, and artists were finding other and alternative ways to be both modern and Indian in the visual arts. There was a time, until even quite recently, when the decades of the 1920s to the 1940s were still largely unexplored in Indian and Bengali art history. But recently a new body of work has emerged that seeks to remedy this paucity of literature, looking closely at changes that occurred in the wake of the Bengal School’s popularity, and asking questions about South Asian modernity in ways that do not necessarily relate straightforwardly to the issues of nationalism and anti-colonialism that were so well elaborated in earlier scholarship.

Tapati Guha-Thakurta, for example, has recently drawn attention to the need to complicate the easy equation between Abanindranath Tagore and burgeoning nationalism in the visual arts, noting that the Bengal School style for which he is most famous was really only a brief, early stage in his career. She sheds light instead on “alternative Abanindranaths,” and on the post-nationalist and anti-nationalist trends that manifest particularly in his later bodies of work from the 1920s, 30s and 40s.\(^4\) Guha-Thakurta notes that the common perception of Abanindranath as a nationalist artist is due in large part to the fact that his

later-career works, having been bequeathed by the Tagore family to the Rabindra Bharati Society in Calcutta, have remained there in storage, unavailable for public viewing, and thus have remained largely unknown. She notes that a reconsideration of Tagore and his work has been made possible in part by a recent commemorative volume that for the first time provides comprehensive documentation of Tagore’s paintings from all periods.\textsuperscript{35}

In a similar move, art historian Debasish Banerji, who happens to be the great-grandson of Abanindranath Tagore, has recently reframed the arguments about his ancestor’s nationalism instead towards a consideration of Tagore’s “alternate nation.”\textsuperscript{36} Banerji argues that Abanindranath in fact worked against any kind of overarching identity formation based on an imagined community of the nation state, in favour of a fragmented subject of modernity that incorporated multiple, overlapping and at times contested narratives related to many definitions and understandings of “nation.” Banerji’s argument is consistent with trends in scholarship that have complicated the meta-narratives of nationalism, for example, by focusing instead on the fragment. In the Bengali context, Partha Chatterjee’s work suggesting how nationalism and modernity in Asia and Africa existed always and already in a state of comparison and difference from western identity, is crucial to this body of scholarship that nevertheless locates within the fragment—that is, within the state of difference—a position of power, opportunity, and flexibility.\textsuperscript{37} Banerji’s re-examination of Abanindranath Tagore makes interesting contributions in this direction,

\textsuperscript{35} R. Siva Kumar, \textit{Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore} (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008).
\textsuperscript{36} Debasish Banerji, \textit{The Alternate Nation of Abanindranath Tagore} (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2010).
but for the purposes of the current project I am particularly intrigued by Banerji’s suggestion that Abanindranath resisted and countered the hegemony of western, post-Enlightenment modernity by seeking a critical balance between the forces of Western, individual autonomy on the one hand and South Asian, communitarian inter-subjectivity on the other. As I will argue in chapter three, this delicate balance between the individual and the larger community was crucial for the performance of the role of the modern, professional, non-aristocratic, Bengali printmaking artist.

Partha Mitter, whose work on the earlier nationalist narratives was seminal in the field, has also recently made a major contribution to the art history of the 1920s to the 1940s. In his most recent book, *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde 1922-1947*, Mitter demonstrates that the hegemony of the Bengal School style was never complete or uncontested, with strains of conservative, academic-style European realism continuing to enjoy a certain popularity and wherewithal (for example, in the realistic work of successful portraitists like Atul Bose) alongside alternative experimentations into cubism and abstraction (particularly in the work of Abanindranath’s elder brother Gaganendranath Tagore). Mitter’s contribution to the project of undermining Euro-centric meta-narratives of modernism and modernity by telling rich and complex histories “from the periphery” is an important one, but what I find most interesting about this recent work from Mitter are the arguments he makes about the trend towards primitivism in Indian art during the late colonial period. While he argues that this primitivism charted unique and local trajectories in the South Asian context that connected at times to both a Gandhian
veneration of village life and an Orientalist search for a primitive Other amongst South Asia’s tribal communities, he nevertheless seeks to connect this primitivizing tendency more generally to a globally-felt discourse of the period, characterized by a common “romantic longing of complex society for the simplicity of pre-modern existence.”\textsuperscript{38} The issue of primitivism, especially as it relates to an idealized vision of village life in the minds of urban Bengalis, is especially important for the current project because the relationship between the village and the city in South Asian modernity is a particularly fraught one. Many aspects of this tension will be taken up in greater detail in the following chapters.

Like this more recent wave of scholarship, the current project also seeks to shed light on the art history of Bengal in the final decades of the late colonial period. However, what even these latest contributions to the field have in common (and where the current project seeks to differentiate itself) is that they too are concerned with stylistic, aesthetic, and political ideologies that tended to manifest within the painting genres of the Bengali art world. In other words, the valuable, recent scholarship of Guha-Thakurta, Banerji, Mitter and others have still tended to focus on, and thereby privilege, forms of art that were manifest primarily, if not exclusively, within painting.

But what if we could shine a light on modern Bengali art that was experienced in and through other media? What other kinds of images could also have been resonant in the

\textsuperscript{38} Partha Mitter, \textit{The Triumph of Modernism}, 33.
modern social world of Bengal at this time? This study seeks to complicate what we can understand about the experience of being a modern Bengali artist at this time by paying greater attention to some of the quotidian negotiations, the creative and performative choices, and the institutional or structural limits that were experienced by other artists who specialised in printmaking and who were of rather more modest economic and social backgrounds, but who were nevertheless also successful in carving out spaces of social possibility for themselves as modern artists in Bengal at this time.

I argue that for such artists, the question of being both modern and Bengali may have had little to do with issues of westernization versus tradition, of oil versus watercolour, or of abstraction versus realism, such as were played out in the academic realism versus Bengal School debates. I will show that the modernity of these artists, and the work they generated, was more invested in issues such as the ways that objects and images circulated and transacted, and how artists could manage to both create and connect with new kinds of audiences. I demonstrate how the modernity of many professional Bengali artists at this time was vested in new, modern, artistic lifestyles and identities that they were able to adopt, negotiate and manage through the media of print and printmaking. I will argue that the various material and historical possibilities manifest in printing and printmaking in late colonial period in Bengal proved to be essential tools for such artists, as both social and artistic practice. But first, in the next section I establish why struggling professional artists in late-colonial Bengal had to hustle and seek out alternative strategies and means through printing and printmaking in the first place. I do this by closely examining the world of
exhibition display and commercial art sales at the time, in order to show how these represented a set of tools and strategies which largely failed to meet the needs of professional printmaking artists at this time.

1.4 The Fine Art Exhibition as Differentiated Utility

The nature of the art world experienced by professional Bengali artists of the late colonial period was perhaps most vividly articulated in the way that they turned to alternative means and strategies for artistic promotion and distribution in order to make a successful living. Their modes of interaction and audience-building were dramatically different from other, arguably more dominant, manifestations of the emerging Bengali art world of this period: particularly those of the fine art exhibition and art institute display. As I will argue, although there was a reasonable smattering of exhibitionary opportunities at this time in Bengal, each with its own set of social exclusions and inclusions, the importance of these as so-called “watershed moments” in Bengali art history have been largely overstated, since the social space of the fine art exhibition was geared only towards highly elite, *bhadralok* segments of society, and had very little to offer or communicate to those of differing socio-economic statuses. I will then propose that the professional, non-aristocratic Bengali artist had to turn to alternative means and strategies of artistic promotion and distribution in order to make a successful living at this time, and that chief amongst these was the ability to actively participate in and engage with local print media
and technologies. But first, a brief reminder of why such alternative means and strategies had to be developed and utilized by the professional working Bengali artist in the first place.

1.4.1 Awkward and Empty Display

In a cartoon (figure 1.13) drawn by Devi Prosad Roy Chowdhury\(^{39}\) (1899-1975) in the 1940s for the journal *Swatantra* and later published in a collection of the artist’s drawings titled *Ironies and Sarcasms*, an Indian man is depicted moving awkwardly sideways through the space of an art exhibition, scratching his head and confusedly peering over his shoulder at a selection of images hung on the wall behind him, each neatly inscribed with a title: “Venus,” “Meditation,” and “Portrait.” These descriptive titles appear to be insufficient, and so further explanation is provided with the word “Exhibition” inscribed in clear, large letters on the wall above. But even all these visual clues and signposts seem to do nothing to assuage the man’s disorientation or to mitigate the strangeness he seems to experience at this encounter. He gazes in confusion at the pictures on the wall, jaw dropped open in disbelief and disapprobation. He rests his right hand on a cane, perhaps suggesting an infirmity or maybe just an overwhelming weakness in the knees brought on by this encounter with the abstract shapes and repurposed folk art on display on the wall, which from the title of the cartoon we are given to understand represent “Modernism in

\(^{39}\) This spelling of the artist’s name is that which appears on the cover of *Ironies and Sarcasms*, but his first two and last two names are also sometimes combined in the spelling Deviprosad Roychowdhury.
Art.” The accompanying caption makes the frustration and aversion that characterizes this situation explicit; the man is identified as an “innocent spectator,” again suggesting that some manner of his victimization has occurred, and when asked, “What are you looking at?” he replies with a resolute “Nothing!”

But it is not just the strangeness of modern art forms and styles that is depicted in this cartoon, it is also the awkwardness and unfamiliarity of the experience of the exhibition space itself. The sideways stance of the figure—with frontal shoulders but with head turned in profile—on the one hand allows this “victim” to address both the artwork on display and us, the viewers of the cartoon. His sideways stance in effect connects our gaze with his and encourages us to imagine ourselves as participants in this confused and unsatisfied act of looking. But when we do imaginatively step forward to occupy his position, it becomes clear that his posture is one of profound physical unease and disorientation. The conflicting planes of the body are twisted and flattened against the back of the picture plane, just like the framed pictures on the wall behind him. The figure’s own deportment and physicality seems to be somehow on display, offered up for our surveillance and judgement. Suddenly this drawing, which at first glance appears to be a straightforwardly satirical lampoon of exotically new art styles and the fashion for things international and modern, becomes on closer examination also an indicator of the intense physical anxieties that manifested in the experience of the modern gallery or exhibition.

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40 Devi Prosad Roy Chowdhury, Ironies and Sarcasms (Calcutta: General Printers, 1951), 35.
space, as visitors struggled to come to terms with the often unfamiliar spatial and social practices that were expected of them therein.

When the phenomenon of the fine art exhibition was introduced by the British in Bengal in the nineteenth century, at that time it represented a radically new model of artistic marketing and distribution for the gentlemen artists described at the beginning of this chapter. The model of the aristocratic, fine art exhibition existed alongside simultaneous practices of practically oriented exhibitions of culture and industry that tended to be organized by local government. While each of these exhibitionary models no doubt informed the other, nevertheless the fine art, aristocratic, salon model of fine art display and marketing did have many unique qualities inherited from European examples. By the early twentieth century there was a small but steady calendar of fine arts exhibitions in Bengal, held mostly in Calcutta. The Indian Society of Oriental Art (ISOA), for example, held regular annual exhibitions that tended to showcase the Bengal School artists. There were also occasional exhibitions mounted by the Society of Fine Art that catered to more conservative, academic tastes. For a brief period in the 1910s there was also a semi-regular show of pictures held at Darjeeling hill station (also in Bengal). Although this last example included a special category of prizes for works by Indian artists, the Darjeeling show nevertheless tended to be the purview of amateur artists and Sunday watercolourists amongst the European population, rather than professional Bengali artists.
Yet even this small smattering of exhibition opportunities often foundered for lack of public interest. As one anonymous commentator noted on the occasion of the ISOA’s 1920 exhibition:

Exhibitions of pictures or other works of art are so rare and few and far between… that one is accustomed to attach more importance to the Annual Exhibition of the Indian Society of Oriental Art than the merits of its average show actually deserve…. But given how few people actually attend the exhibition, there’s no reason to ask for more.41

Indeed, with their palpable absence of any human figures, the two photographs that accompanied this rather scathing review (which appeared in the pages of the ISOA’s own journal, no less) convey to an even greater extent what must have been the eerie sense of isolation and abandonment that prevailed within the few salon-style exhibitions that were mounted during this period (figures 1.14 and 1.15).

Moreover, while these sorts of salon-style society exhibitions were ostensibly “public,” in practice these spaces were carefully socially policed and were only freely accessible to those who enjoyed significant social and economic advantages. In the colonial context this usually meant admittance only for those who were of obvious European appearance, and those Indians who dressed in a European fashion, spoke English, or were visibly upper-middle class or bhadralok. Failure to display one or more of these bodily and performative signifiers (they often went hand-in-hand) did not necessarily guarantee refusal of admission to such spaces, but it would certainly have courted intensified scrutiny and

41 “Notes,” Rupam no. 6 (April 1921), 41.
social anxiety. Indeed, so socially restricted were the salon-style exhibitions that the artists themselves were often not entirely welcome at them. The artist B.C. Sanyal, speaking about this type of fine art society exhibition in India generally at the time, described it as:

…an annual ritualistic Indian art exhibition opened by the respective Governors, the Viceroy at Simla, in the presence of the titled gentry, officials and select invited guests. The functions used to be invariably very starchy… The artists had little to do with these…except to lend their works to be rejected or exhibited.42

In his article, Sanyal also lamented that while in days past there were often distinctive “sold” stickers scattered throughout such exhibitions at the end of the opening receptions, over the years it seemed that works were left increasingly unsold at the end of the exhibitions. Thus, although these sorts of high society, salon-style exhibitions in Bengal could perhaps function as useful vehicles for artists of elite social status who could use them as opportunities for advancing their cultural capital without having to worry about their effectiveness in actually selling their work, such exhibitions would by virtue of social restrictions and structural limitations be of rather less use to the average professional artist of more modest social standing, for whom the pressure to earn a living through the sale of work was often of paramount importance.

There was, meanwhile, a vibrant and thriving street market for images and visual culture at this time, as there continues to be today. But in Bengali society the sale of goods on the street smacked rather too much of the lower-than-middle classes, which anyone wishing to

establish a reputation as a professional artist would have been at pains to try to avoid. This was especially true because such associations, once made in the minds of the art-interested public, were very difficult to shake. Indeed, even some seven decades after the fact, the artist Nandalal Bose reportedly still noted with disdain that his contemporary Mukul Dey had, at the beginning of his career, often sold his work on the street.43

There was one other variant in the exhibitionary model that was also a part of the Bengali art world at this time: the art school exhibition. Most notably at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, but also at some of the other institutions of art training previously mentioned, various exhibitions of student work were occasionally held and opened to the public. But although these exhibitions did offer a useful introduction to exhibitionary practices for emerging artists, they could obviously not offer a long-term solution to the problem of artistic distribution and marketing for artists once they had graduated and moved on from these institutions. Nor was there yet a viable commercial art market in Bengal in the form of art galleries or art dealers. While some high-end furniture stores at the time did sell copies or imitations of Old Master paintings to satisfy the elite British and bhadralok fashion for home decoration, there really was not an effective system of commercial gallery spaces that sold the work of living artists in Calcutta until the 1960s,44 and even well into the 1970s it was still a common complaint that “not much real effort

has been made in art dealing in Calcutta,” and that in general, “exhibiting facilities for artists in Calcutta [were still] pathetic.”

The resulting predicament for the professional artist working in Bengal was that, while occasional fine arts exhibitions were then being held in the region, their cultural exclusivity and unfamiliar social practices rendered them unapproachable and unappealing to those outside the social elite. Art school exhibitions offered a useful introduction into salon-style exhibitionary practices for art students, but these could not be relied upon over the long-haul of a professional career, and meanwhile the street market for images and visual culture was off-limits for those with aspirations of middle-class respectability.

1.5 Print as Exhibitionary Alternative

In such a difficult working environment, in need of both a viable, motivated audience and a means of connecting his work to it, but with restricted access to either elite salons or the street markets of the working-class craftsman, the professional working artist had to turn to alternative means and strategies of artistic promotion and distribution. Chief amongst these was the ability to actively participate in and engage with a wide range of local print media and technologies. Indeed, because of the particular social position occupied by the

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professional working artist at this time, the realm of print and print media constituted in effect both an alternative art world and a working strategy *par excellence*.

The role played by elite journals like *Prabasi* and *The Modern Review* has long been acknowledged as having been crucial in championing the nationalist agenda of the Bengal School style in an earlier period. Partha Mitter has noted now the publisher of both these journals, Ramananda Chatterjee, had “an unfailing instinct for backing promising artists” and that he had “moved painlessly from [his endorsement of] Ravi Varma to Abanindranath” in the first decades of the twentieth century. Tapati Guha-Thakurta has noted that with this shift in support from these two major publications, “the stage was set” for the triumph of Abanindranath Tagore and the new style of Indian painting. Less well-known but also very important were other journals that were not quite at the same elite or prestige end of the social scale—journals like *Bharatavarsha, Basumanti,* and *Sachitra Shishir*—that catered to more popular tastes and continued to promote the work of academically realist artists well into the 1920s. These were all in the nature of high-end illustrated magazines. Alongside them, we can see the expansion of cheaper, more popular (and populist) realms of print culture at this period, particularly in the realm(s) of advertising.

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46 Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 121.
48 Ibid, 321.
Some attention has already been paid to the ways that advertising and advertising imagery participated in Bengali modernity, by scholars like Kajri Jain and Douglas Haynes. This research has tended to focus on advertising as a commodity image, helping to shape new, middle-class notions of consumerism and systems of economic exchange, as well as how people made sense not just of the marketplace but also of the family, the nation, and the public sphere. But such studies have always focused on the reception of advertised images rather than their production. Shifting that focus sheds light on the general social milieu in which the professional print artist engaged and worked, and on the way(s) he could produce images for a different kind of art market than has so far been closely analysed or discussed.

Advertising was one of the most stable means by which aspiring artists could earn a living at this time, and indeed the demand for artists specially trained in the field of commercial art warranted the opening a commercial art section at the Government School of Art in Calcutta in 1925. The commercial art department filled a very real need at the time; Satish Chandra Sinha, the head teacher of the Commercial Section in the 1930s, noted that as soon as the commercial section was opened, “the attention of students were at once attracted by this new and remunerative branch of art” and that “most students found employment as soon as they passed their final examination.”


noted the that there were social and class distinctions between the perceived categories of fine art and commercial art at this time; he wrote that with the opening of the commercial section “art will no longer be a hobby of fancy people, but a good profession and livelihood.” Indeed, whenever the Government Art School or other private schools of art in the city held exhibitions of student work, it was usually the commercial section and the “practical and effective” aspects of such art that was emphasized in the press. For example, two separate reports of exhibitions at the Indian Art School appeared in The Statesman newspaper in 1910: the first report emphasized the idea that art could be a means of “independent livelihood and good income,” while the second took pains to point out that many students of the school had been able to “readily obtain remunerative employment.” In another example, at the 1932 opening of the annual student exhibition of the Government Art School, the Minister for Education specifically addressed the local business community in his speech, as follows:

I would like to take this opportunity of drawing special attention … to the commercial section where students are being trained in drawing of posters and beautifully designed advertisements for business purposes. I have seen some of the works and I can recommend it to the business community. It deserves their support and encouragement, and I am sure the students can execute all the work that is required, and there is no necessity for the businessmen to go outside India for this work.

This call to the business community not to outsource their advertising work corresponds to a shift that can be seen in the advertising and advertising images in major local

51 Ashraf Zaman Khan, “Art and Commerce.” Our Magazine (December 1933), 3.
52 The Statesman, March 1, 1910.
53 The Statesman, April 10, 1910.
54 Reproduced in Our Magazine, December 1932.
newspapers like *The Englishman* and *The Statesman* during the same period. Starting in the 1910s and accelerating through the 1930s, ads that were generic to a particular brand and which were used elsewhere in the world (i.e., which were not specific to India) began to be replaced with locally-produced ads with more India-specific content, which often even included signatures of the local artists who had designed them (figures 1.16 and 1.17). This shift would have greatly impacted the local employment opportunities for commercial artists in the region.

In the 1930s the Government Art School also began publishing a student journal called *Our Magazine*, in which poster and advertising designs by students were commonly featured, as were short congratulatory texts that mentioned when students had found employment (most often in the advertising field, but also sometimes as art teachers). *Our Magazine* provided a medium through which to introduce the work of the school’s students to the wider business community, and indeed eventually there emerged a kind of feedback loop between the commercial section of the school, the business community, and *Our Magazine*. This is demonstrated, for example, in a series of notices that ran in the magazine in 1932, which informed students of a competition to design ads for a local company called Abinash Paints. Students in the commercial section were encouraged to submit their designs to the magazine, which then presented them to representatives of Abinash Paints for their consideration. The chosen designs were then purchased by
Abinash as advertisements, and were run in a later issue of the magazine (figures 1.18 and 1.19).\(^{55}\)

Advertising was not only an important avenue of employment for many professional artists in Calcutta in the early twentieth century, but also an important method of marketing. Non-commercial artists (that is, those who did not work directly in the designing of advertisements) also used ads to market their works in newspapers and journals and to sell directly from artist to buyer. There are many examples of instances where works of art were sold through classified ads in local newspapers throughout this period, but for artists who specialized in printmaking rather than painting or sculpture this became a particularly useful strategy. Such prints were usually characterized by sharp, bold contrasts of black and white space, meaning that their visual impact and material characteristics were largely maintained intact through the commercial printing processes then available in Calcutta (figures 1.20, 1.21 and 1.22). By advertising their prints in newspapers and journals, these artists were not only able to bypass the inadequacies of the local exhibition circuit, but they were also able to reach out to new urban patrons who might think it perfectly common to read an English newspaper but who would either not consider entering, or perhaps would not have been entirely welcome in, a fine art exhibition.\(^{56}\)

\(^{55}\) *Our Magazine*, March and December, 1932.

\(^{56}\) Indeed, even when artists were able to participate in the elite world of art exhibitions, advertising was useful in helping to recoup the associated costs. The artist Subho Tagore, for example, had commemorative catalogues published to accompany several of his solo exhibitions in Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay and Colombo in the 1930s, 40s and 50s. In some editions, more than 50 pages were given over to advertisements, for everything from Ovaltine to tractors. *The Art of Subho Tagore* (Calcutta: Thacker Spink, 1950).
Finally, there is one more way that advertising can shed light on the professional working artist in late colonial Calcutta. Such artists were often compelled to supplement their income with work as private art teachers, and advertising was obviously useful in this regard. This had been a strategy employed for decades by various middling European artists in the city, who placed classified ads in local newspapers offering fine art lessons at moderate terms. It was a bit later before Indian artists began to also take advantage of this practice: the first Indian artist that I have been able to identify with these kinds of ads is Atul Bose, who advertised his availability as an art teacher in *The Statesman* newspaper in December 1928 (figure 1.23). This ad is particularly interesting for the way it highlights some of the spatial politics of the urban landscape of Calcutta in the late colonial period. In all cases of ads for artists with European names that I have to date been able to identify, the addresses of the artists’ studios are all situated in the fashionable and wealthy part of the city immediately beside the large open space known as the *maidan*: this was the bastion of colonial power known as the so-called “white town.” The north of the city, meanwhile, was the older, more densely populated “black town” where indigenous picture production by caste-based guilds operated alongside but separate from the elite art world. When Atul Bose’s ad appears, however, his address signifies that he belongs to neither of these established categories. Instead his address on Bondel Road pinpoints him in neither of these enclaves, but instead in the new middle-class developments in Ballygunge in the southern suburbs. It was precisely such new spaces of in-between-ness that were negotiated by the professional Bengali artist: neither elite nor subaltern, embedded neither
in the black town nor the white, but opening up a new space of social possibility for working artists.

Advertising is simply one sub-genre within a much larger phenomenon of print and print media that was particularly important for artists struggling to make a living for themselves during the late colonial period in Bengal. In the following chapters, I will look closely at several other distinct types of print and printed media that also existed within the larger print world phenomenon, in order to discuss how they each in turn were situated in relation to the non-aristocratic, professional Bengali artist of the period.

1.6 Narrative Outline of Chapters

In this thesis I discuss particular images and objects, certain institutions and texts, in order to trace the figure of the urban, professional, printmaking artist as he negotiated the contested spaces of a highly professionalized, self-consciously modern “art world” that was itself emerging and constantly transforming in Bengal during this same period. I am concerned with questions such as: With what tools did artists of this time and place stake out and negotiate certain identities for themselves as professional artists? By what means were artists able to carve out both economic opportunity and cultural capital for themselves in the urban centre of Calcutta and elsewhere in Bengal? What issues and structures did the working artist have to engage and deal with effectively in order to be
able to succeed as an artist? All these issues are woven throughout my project and emerge in each of the chapters in different ways.

In chapter two, I focus more specifically on the general phenomenon of print media in order to address a particular sub-genre within that category: a collection of books of artists’ prints by some of the few artists in and from Bengal at this time who chose to specialize particularly in relief printmaking media such as woodcut and linocut. These books are rarely discussed in the existing scholarship, yet their characteristics and histories greatly aid our understanding of many aspects of the life and work of artists at this time. As I will argue, in their particular material qualities, in the manner of their distribution and circulation, in the nature of their texts and images, and due to their particular situatedness in a longer history of printing and printmaking in South Asia, these books of artists’ prints manifested a very powerful and unique constellation of historical possibilities that allowed them to resonate with the working out of modern social possibility for the artists who created them. Moreover, in their visual imagining of village Bengal, these books often also intervened directly into the contentious and complex relationship between the rural and the urban, between tradition and modernity, and between labour and leisure, that continues to colour Bengali and South Asian art today.

In chapter three I examine another issue that the professional printmaking artist had to negotiate in order to carve out a successful career in the early twentieth century. In this chapter I examine the debates around the proper role of the individual in relation to a
larger collective or community. I look closely at other key examples of books of artists’ prints that depict individual portraits, in order to explain how the relatively unknown medium of drypoint engraving was particularly relevant for dealing with the issue of modern Bengali individuality and individualism. Also in chapter three, I examine the consequences of shifting the semantic category from “books of artists’ prints” to “print artists’ books,” in order to examine another sub-genre that also exists within this larger phenomenon of art print: autobiographies written by working artists from the early twentieth century in Bengal. I particularly examine the figure of the autobiographical Bengali artist in the early twentieth century, and how artists (particularly print artists) were able to take up and use the tools of biography and autobiography as part of their social and artistic practices.

In chapter four I continue to explore the modern cult of individualism and the relative importance of an individual in relation to a community, the possibilities (and limitations) of print and printmaking, the complex and contested relationship between the rural and the urban in Bengali modernity, and some of the important differences between elite and non-elite experience in Bengali society. In chapter four I push discussion of these issues further by examining at a particular moment of rupture and crisis: the Bengal Famine of 1943. I provide an account of the Famine itself, showing how previously-stable social structures and categories broke down during the circumstances of 1943 and 1944, rendering millions of victims painfully isolated. This chapter also considers representations of the Famine in the art of the period and some of the Famine’s profound consequences for Bengali art and
artists, both in that particular historical moment and for decades afterwards. I explore particularly the involvement and relationship of printmaking to the history of the Famine, and how print artists and printed images participated in what were terrorizing and brutal circumstances. In doing so I show how the artists tested the limits of printmaking’s possibilities in such conditions: how in the presence of profound trauma, some artistic expression transformed into forms of testimony.
2. Artists’ Books of Prints

2.1 Introduction

During the late colonial period, professional Bengali artists often struggled and had to improvise in order to better perform their newly available social role. An ability on the part of such artists to effectively engage with the world of press and print media—in a variety of different ways and registers—was an indispensable tool for artists engaged in this project. For such artists, having an agility and a fluency both with and within print(s) was increasingly vital, both as a social and economic strategy and as an artistic practice.

As the example of advertising discussed in the previous chapter suggests, the advantages and usefulness of print for artists at this time could be both multifaceted and complex. Print advertising, for example, could offer multiple opportunities for professional artists. It could be a potential field of employment for commercial artists, a way to advertise oneself as an art teacher, or a way to connect to buyers and sell artwork directly.

57 As mentioned in the introductory chapter, the vast majority of professional artists in late-colonial Bengal were men. However it is important to note that there were a few rare exceptions of women, such as Rani Chanda (née Rani Dey, younger sister of Mukul Dey), who also managed to carve out careers for themselves as professional artists at this time. More research and work remains to be done on professional Bengali female artists of the colonial period.
The previous chapter dealt with advertising and commercial art media, and how they
involved particular types and methods of print that represented a particular sub-genre or
sub-category within the larger phenomenon of a print-based art world in Bengal in the
early twentieth century. This chapter will shed light on somewhat different types and
methods of print, which were also being effectively used and activated by other
professional artists in and from Bengal at this time. These different types and methods of
print were in some ways related to the world of advertising and commercial printing, but
in other ways were also connected to new and evolving notions of “fine art printmaking”
that were circulating especially amongst the European and western-educated elements of
the Bengali art world during this period. This chapter looks particularly at a set of printed
books and images that emerged from and circulated within the Bengali art world of the
late colonial period, which have so far received fairly little attention in the subsequent art
history. Nevertheless these books, along with many of the myriad images they contain,
reveal important contours of the intersection between print and professionalism in Bengali
modern art during the late colonial period.

This chapter introduces and examines a group of special edition books of artists’ prints
that were published in the early decades of the twentieth century by artists in and from
Bengal, along with a selection of the texts and images contained therein. After offering a
descriptive account of a key selection of the books themselves, and following a
consideration of the issues of price, audience, production processes, and the relationship to
other types of printed media also circulating in Bengal during this period, this chapter
moves towards a discussion of the ways these books effectively and affectively engaged with the issue of the rural. These books demonstrate how the issue of the rural saturated the Bengali art world (and society generally) in the late colonial period. These books shed light on how this was an issue that Bengali print artists had to understand and communicate skilfully if they had any aspirations of professional success. And finally, these books demonstrate that it was printmaking media in particular that could address such an issue most effectively.

2.2 The Objects of Analysis

The books of artists’ prints that I consider in this chapter were for the most part privately commissioned from small printing houses, in limited editions of a few hundred copies at the most, with each copy often signed and individually numbered by the artists themselves. They usually combined short texts with collections of black and white images done in wood engraving, linocut, drypoint or other printmaking media. The texts contained in these books were most commonly just short introductory or dedicatory passages at the front of the book, and caption information (often title only) for subsequent pages with individual images. But occasionally these books also included lengthier texts such as collections of poetry, short biographical sketches, and even travel narratives. The images and texts in these books often concerned themselves with rural or pastoral subject matter. Landscapes and scenes of idyllic village life are the most common types of images
they contain, but some examples of cityscapes, portraits and genre scenes also appear. The titles of these books tend to be enumerative and descriptive, and were usually media- or subject-specific. Examples include *Twelve Portraits* by Mukul Dey (1917), *Twenty-Five Linocuts* by Rani Dey (1932), and *Ten Wood Engravings by Students of the Government School of Art Calcutta* (1944).

It is worth noting that the titles and texts of these books appear to be almost exclusively in English, strongly suggesting that they were designed and intended for an audience in Bengal that was in many ways elite, and certainly English-educated. Pramatha Kumera Bose’s *Woodcuts* (1932) is a possible exception to the English-language rule for these publications; this book was described as presenting 32 original woodcuts “with descriptive notes in Bengali.”58 Another exception was Mukul Dey’s *Portraits of Gandhi* (1948), which did have an English title but which included a fairly lengthy account of the recently-assassinated Gandhi in both English and Hindi. Dey also published the exclusively Bengali *Shat Bachhorer* in 1943, for which the choice of language may have been related to the fact that it was a children’s book, published by Dey to mark the occasion of his daughter’s seventh birthday. These are some interesting counter-examples, worthy of their own closer examination. And there remains open the possibility of additional books of artists’ prints from this period having been published in Bengali that my research has not yet uncovered. Nevertheless, the books that I have identified so far.

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58 *Our Magazine* (September, 1932), 9. I have not yet located a copy of this book, but a review of the publication that appeared in *Our Magazine* included this information regarding language.
strongly suggest an English-reading audience for such literature, with all the complex social hierarchies of class, caste, age and gender that such an audience would have implied in late-colonial South Asia. On the one hand these books appealed to and were addressed to a necessarily elite, English-reading audience. Nevertheless, I will argue below that these books were also sold at moderate prices and embodied certain material characteristics and stylistic qualities that would have rendered them compelling for wider, non-elite Bengali audiences as well.

The earliest examples of this type of book of artists’ prints that I have identified to date were published in the very late 1910s, with some of the latest being from the mid-1950s. The bulk seem to have been published in the 1930s and 1940s, at a time when almost no major artists in Bengal specialized in printmaking media, but almost everyone had dabbled in them. However, the artists whose names are associated with these books of artists’ prints—artists like Ramendranath Chakravorty (1902-1955), Mukul Dey (1895-1989), Rani Dey/Chanda (1912-1997), Chittaprosad (1915-1978), Somnath Hore (1921-2006), and Haren Das (1921-1993)—are exactly those few artists who are the exceptions to that rule. Some of these artists did receive training in drawing and painting, and a few continued to produce work in non-print media over the course of their careers. Ramendranath Chakravorty, for example, initially enrolled in the Government School of Art in Calcutta to study painting. It was not until he went to study at the newly established

59 The fact that this phenomenon of art-print publishing in inexpensive-book format can be observed both before and after 1947 is significant, and perhaps suggests that the great political milestone of Independence and Partition did not have a commensurate impact on the world of artistic practice in Bengal.
Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan that he was exposed to the techniques of woodcut and wood engraving, which would thereafter become his almost exclusive media of choice.\textsuperscript{60}

Similarly, Mukul Dey initially studied painting with Abanindranath at the Tagore family home of Jorasank in north Calcutta, years before he was introduced to the medium of drypoint engraving by William Pearson.\textsuperscript{61} Although he continued to produce large quantities of painting and photographic work throughout his career, Dey is still primarily known as a master of drypoint: the first, in fact, from India.\textsuperscript{62} Mukul Dey’s younger sister Rani Dey (who became Rani Chanda when she married the personal secretary of Rabindranath Tagore) is today perhaps best remembered in Bengal as an author and dramatist,\textsuperscript{63} but in her early career she spent a great deal of time exploring the possibilities of relief print media. She produced a significant body of early printmaking work, including at least one collection of linocuts in a limited edition volume that is included in the group of books of artists’ prints considered in this chapter (\textit{Twenty-Five Linocuts}, 1932). However despite these few counter-examples of interest and work in other media, the artists associated with books of artists’ prints examined in this chapter are in effect the short list of professional Bengali artists who were active in the early twentieth century.


\textsuperscript{61} Mukul Dey, \textit{Amar katha} (Kolkata: Visva Bharati Press, 1995), 25-28.

\textsuperscript{62} Dey’s other major historical claim to fame is that he served as the first Indian Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta, from 1928 to 1943.

\textsuperscript{63} Banglapedia: The National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, s.v., “Rani Chanda.” It is notable that one of the only women to achieve renown in the late colonial Bengali art world was the sister of a major artist (Mukul Dey) who married into the Tagore family and dynasty. It speaks further to the male and \textit{bhadralok} dominance of the Bengali art world at this time.
who, for a significant portion of their careers, dedicated themselves and their artistic practices almost exclusively to printmaking.\textsuperscript{64}

It is also true that, with the exception of the autodidact Chittaprosad, all of these artists were exposed to some manner of official, institutional training in printmaking media in an art school environment, as a part of their pursuit of a professional artistic profession. These artists did not receive their print training in the commercial press and printing world that was active in Calcutta throughout the same period. Rather, they were educated in and exposed to a “high art” version of printmaking that was emerging and constantly transforming in Bengal at this time. In the case of Ramendranath Chakravorty for example, when he arrived at remote, rural Santiniketan to study art at Rabindranath Tagore’s utopian university project Visva Bharati, the exposure he received to the art of printmaking was nevertheless markedly international and deeply rooted in a tradition of fine-art printmaking. He first observed the process of wood engraving from the visiting French artist Madam Karpeles, and later also learned about Japanese colour woodblock printing techniques from a visiting Mexican artist named Fryman.\textsuperscript{65} For several years Chakravorty also studied under Nandalal Bose, who in 1924 had brought examples of Chinese and Japanese woodblock prints back to Santiniketan to expose students to the

\textsuperscript{64} Nandalal Bose is the obvious omission from this list of early twentieth-century Bengali printmakers. While Bose’s work in printmaking was indeed a significant part of his artistic practice and his legacy as an art teacher, nevertheless he was still primarily a painter. Bose did provide woodcut illustrations in the 1930s for Rabindranath Tagore’s \textit{Sahoj Path} series of Bengali grammar books for children, which perhaps occupy a similar intersection between children’s literature and book illustration as Mukul Dey’s \textit{Shat Bachorer}. But for the purposes of this project it is important to note that Dey is today remembered mostly as a printmaker, whereas Bose is remembered primarily as a painter.

\textsuperscript{65} Paula Sengupta, “Haren Das: To Tread Alone,” in \textit{Haren Das: The End of Toil - Prints (1945-1990)} (Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery, 2008), 17.
profound artistic potential of printmaking media. Mukul Dey’s exposure to drypoint engraving was similarly international and just as vested in the status of the original print as a revered, fine art object. After first practising the drypoint technique with William Pearson in India, Dey later studied with and became a member of the Chicago Society of Etchers, and later studied in England under the famed English printmaker Frank Short. These artists and others who are also associated with the books of artists’ prints that this chapter considers were a rare group of professional Bengali print artists, somewhat removed from both the world of commercial printing and also from the salons of elite painting practices.

I have so far identified approximately twenty books of artists’ prints from Bengali artists of this period.66 A few of these survive in the libraries of western universities, but the majority remain in India, not in institutional or governmental archives or libraries but more commonly in private homes and collections. Given their original limited production runs and their rather ephemeral natures, it seems likely that many more of these books could have been produced but have simply escaped preservation in an archive. This is corroborated by the existence of certain ephemeral materials related to the publication of books of artists’ prints (such as advertisements and reviews), where existing copies of the books themselves have so far not been found. Thus what follows is by no means intended as a final word on this subject; rather it is presented as an opportunity to begin a

66 Some books display many of the characteristics of the group but not all, and thus depending on which features one considers critical, the number of constituent representatives varies between 15 and 20. This chapter considers one particular sub-focus within this group of objects, while the following chapter considers the consequences of shifting the focus towards a slightly different sub-category.
conversation about the role of these books of artists’ prints in the late colonial Bengali art world. In what follows I will look closely at two key examples of these publications, in order to establish some of the parameters and characteristics of this particular sub-category of print within the wider, print-embedded, Bengali art world of the late colonial period.

2.2.1 Call of the Himalayas

In 1944 Ramendranath Chakravorty published a book titled *Call of the Himalayas*, a slim volume of about twenty pages, with glossy, off-white paper bound in a stiff cardboard cover decorated with a repeating, black and white woodcut design of a mountain peak contained within a diamond-shaped framing device (figure 2.1). A label that provides the title of the book and the author’s/artist’s name in red letters has been printed separately and subsequently pasted onto the front cover at upper left, rather than printed as an integrated element within the cover itself (the tactile edge around the label is apparent when holding and touching the book). This means that the process of printing both the back and front covers was identical and thus more cost-effective – the only distinction is the glued-on label with title.

The cover of the book gives the short title *Call of the Himalayas*, but the inside title page inside offers an added description: *Call of the Himalayas with Twenty-five Wood Engravings* (figure 2.2). The title page is followed by colophon and dedication pages, then
by a contents page that lists the titles of the twenty-five wood engravings contained thereafter. The colophon page that follows this list of contents provides many key details of the book’s original publication, including that it was “Printed from original wood blocks by Indian Photo Engraving Co. and published by S. Shaha, 2/1 Lake-View Road, Calcutta. Price Rupees Five.” It also states that it was a “limited, autographed edition of two hundred only.” These details help to reinforce the uniqueness and value of the publication, naming the professionals responsible for its production and stipulating that it is in a limited, autographed edition. The copy in my collection is indeed signed by the artist in English on the colophon page, and is also further inscribed in Bengali to a Ms. Kalyani and Mr. Biswanath. The date of April 31, 1944 has also been written in Bengali script (figure 2.3). The colophon page faces an almost-blank page that contains just a simple dedication in letter press: “To my master Nandalal Bose.”

The publication details clearly emphasize that the book was produced from original wood blocks carved by Chakravorty himself. This, together with the fact that is in a limited edition and signed by the artist, all works to embed this book and others like it into a discourse of “fine art printmaking” that has connections to western art traditions. Hand-

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67 The titles of these images are (in order): Storm Clouds; The Watermill; Madal Player; Peora Chatti; The Innkeeper; At Joshi Math; The Wayside Inn; The Pass, Rope Bridge; The Himalayas; Summer; The Kopai River; The Wayside Well; The Centre of Santiniketan; At the Foot of the Himalayas; Hill-Peoples’ Home; The Babbling Fountain; End of the Day’s Journey; The Winding Road; The Glimpse of Snow; Snows; The Caravan; The Hermit; Badrinath; and Back at the Asram.

68 The Bangla handwritten-inscription reads: Srimati Kalyani o Sriman Biswanath ke baba. 31/5/44 (To Ms. Kalyani & Mr. Biswanath....father, 31/5/44). Note that the Bengali symbol for the number four is the same as the western (Arabic) numeral 8, thus what appears to be a date of `88 is in fact 1944.

69 Chakravorty had studied under Bose at Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan in the early 1920s; like many artists of his generation, Chakravorty was devoted to this remarkable teacher and mentor.
numbering and signing of prints have long been strategies adopted by printmakers to legitimate the originality of their work, vis-à-vis painting. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries these practices were incorporated into the formal rules for printmaking societies that were established in many western countries. Organizations such as the Royal Society of Painter-Etchers in the United Kingdom and Atelier 17 in Paris were often established in protest of the then-common Academy rules which allowed for the exhibition of work by engravers whose work involved the translation of paintings done by other artists into printed media, but did not permit the exhibition of work by artists who designed and created entirely new images via printmaking processes. Such printmaking societies staked great claim on the originality of their members’ designs as an indicator of their creative integrity and thus their cultural capital, and sought to emphasize this through strategies such as hand-numbering, signing, and the limiting of production runs. Through exactly the same kinds of strategies (gleaned, no doubt, through channels such as official art school training), professional print artists like Ramendranath Chakravorty staked a claim to the aura of originality and sought to invest their finished products, such as *Call of the Himalayas*, with greater value and appeal.

After the introductory pages to *Call of the Himalayas* there is a short, four-page text written by Chakravorty in English, interspersed throughout with small illustrations (figure 2.4). These are followed by sixteen pages that contain larger images, each displayed on its own separate presentation page (figure 2.5). The presence of these presentation pages is significant, as it goes a long way towards distinguishing these books of artists’ prints from
what could be more straightforwardly considered illustrated books. With the images isolated and individually framed by white space, the viewer is encouraged to invest in them something of the aura of the individual art object. Like the theatricality of the white walls that frame an art object in a contemporary art gallery or museum, the isolation of each image on its own page with white space surrounding it encourages the reader/viewer to linger on each print separately, slowly considering each image’s composition and subject matter independent from the text, and paying each image the respect of time and consideration due to an important work of art. We know, moreover, that in some of the advertisements for these kinds of books of artists’ prints, the potential for each image to be detached from the book and individually framed and displayed was clearly emphasized to buyers and readers (figure 1.21). And in at least one example known to this author, the images that were listed in a particular book’s table of contents does not correspond with the images retained in a particular volume, suggesting that the practice of removing individual pages/images for display was in effect. It is interesting to note that Call of the Himalayas represents something of a combination of the use of inter-textual images common in illustrated books, and the use of separate-page presentation images found in many of the books of artists’ prints. The nine images interspersed throughout Chakravorty’s four-page text and the sixteen that follow on presentation pages together comprise the twenty-five wood engravings designated in the title.

70 Ramendranath Chakravorty’s Woodcuts (Calcutta: Susil Gupta, 1944) lists twenty-eight woodcuts in its table of contents, but the copy in my own collection is missing four. It should also be noted that many of these techniques and strategies that were used to designate books of artists’ prints as valuable art objects were also true of expensive books of photographic images during the same period.
Although *Call of the Himalayas* was not published until 1944, the text recounts a journey that Chakravorty undertook in the summer of 1923, from Rabindranath Tagore’s rural, utopian university project in Santiniketan where Chakravorty was studying at the time, to the Himalayan village of Badrinath in northern India, very near to the border with Tibet and renowned as one of Hinduism’s holiest pilgrimage sites. While this journey is the presumptive impetus for the book, the narrative that Chakravorty presents both begins and ends in Santiniketan, where Chakravorty spends a great deal of time describing the utopian environment of the university there, which he describes as being marred only by the oppressive heat of that year’s summer. Despite the heat, pleasant distractions were available; Chakravorty describes a local fair or *mela* in a nearby village, which he and several other students attended. He lingers in his narrative over the festive atmosphere that prevailed there and notes the presence of “dark-coloured Santal maidens” who danced to rhythmic tribal music, and whose offering of cool water drawn from a well sparked the idea amongst he and his fellow students to travel to the cool heights of the Himalayas. Chakravorty recounts how collectively they presented their plan to “Gurudev” (a common and familiar name for Tagore), who urged the young men to undertake the journey as a kind of pilgrimage, instructing them to be as respectful of the holy site of Badrinath as they were of their holy ashram (i.e., the school in Santiniketan).  

While the book does not contain an introduction or dedication written by Tagore (which later became a common characteristic of these books of artists’ prints), Chakravorty does quote Tagore at great

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71 While the journey to Badrinath unfolds as a kind of Hindu pilgrimage narrative, it is worth noting that the desire to decamp to the hills to escape the summer weather was also common amongst the British colonial population, who of course established hill stations throughout India for exactly that purpose.

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length at this point in his narrative, thus still managing to provide something of the presence of “The Poet” (another common appellation for Tagore), which was very highly valued by Bengali audiences. Chakravorty quotes Tagore as urging the young men to adopt a new attitude while on their journey:

> Go to the Himalayas. Go to Badrinath. Badrinath is a place of Sadhana and you will meet many a pilgrim on your way. You who go from Santiniketan must know that Santiniketan in also a place of Sadhana. The yonder Chhatim tree is the centre of this Asram. There my father the Maharshi performed his Sadhana. As you respect Santiniketan and realise the spirit of this place so you should respect the spirit of Badrinath and the flow of its pilgrims. Try to understand the spirit that inspires them. Though they may not see the grandeur and beauty of nature around them with your eyes and may miss a large part of it, yet despise them not, and you will have something to learn.  

The narrative goes on to describe various details of the journey, undertaken at first by train and then a further eighteen days on foot, as well as many picturesque details about the villages and tribal peoples that the party encountered along the way. The images in the book depict various elements of the journey as it is described in the text, from the Santal women drawing the water from the well that was the catalyst for the undertaking (figure 2.6), to the temple at Joshi Math where the travellers saw “sadhus with matted locks and bare bodies besmeared with ash sat deep in meditation, looking as old as the rocks themselves” (figure 2.7), to the Tibetan shepherds with their flocks of goats and sheep that they encountered as they neared Badrinath (figures 2.8 and 2.9). The images are all composed of dynamic rhythms of black and white space, which render all depicted objects

72 Ramendranath Chakravorty, *Call of the Himalayas, with Twenty-five Wood Engravings* (Calcutta: S. Shaha, 1944), 2.

73 Ibid, 3.
as essentially an amalgam of repeating diagonal, horizontal, and vertical lines. Trees, hillsides, waterfalls, animals, rocks, human bodies: all are broken down into their common, constituent, linear elements.

The images in the book follow the general chronological progression set out in the narrative, both beginning and ending in Santiniketan. The reference Tagore makes to his father’s act of meditation under a tree that inspired him to found an ashram is alluded to early in the book with the image *The Centre of Santiniketan* (figure 2.10), while the end of the pilgrimage is represented by the final image of the book, *Back at the Asram* (figure 2.11). In the latter image a small crowd of people are depicted seated on the ground, all sharply illuminated by and directing their attention towards an unidentified light source that is hidden just to the right of the picture frame. Seeming to evoke an illuminated theatre production, or even one of the itinerant tent cinema performances that were widely popular in rural India for much of the twentieth century, this strange and unidentified light source suggests the sense of performance that marks the fulfilment of the pilgrimage documented in the book. For the purpose of such a pilgrimage is undoubtedly to return to one’s native place transformed by the journey and prepared to narrate and perform it for others. As the final lines of Chakravorty’s narrative makes clear, the pilgrimage was not considered to be over nor the story complete until “under the canopy of a starlit sky, before Gurudev and other inmates of the Asram, we told the story of this pilgrimage.”

74 Ibid, 4.
This final image in *Call of the Himalayas* is also significant because as we the reader/viewer closely observe the attentive crowd that it represents, we realize that it includes a representation of Tagore himself: the Poet’s characteristic white hair and flowing beard are sufficient details to mark him as distinct from the rest of the crowd and to render this as a portrait of sorts. The artist has also used additional surrounding space and brighter illumination to highlight the figure of Gurudev (figure 2.11, detail). The shock generated by this image arises in part because, at the recognition of this as a portrait (that is, as a depiction of an identifiable individual) it becomes suddenly obvious that all of the other people depicted in Chakravorty’s story and in his images are utterly anonymous. The Santal women drawing water from the well are at least given fully developed physiognomies (figure 2.6) but are still unnamed and undifferentiated from their tribal “type.” But in every other instance the figures that Chakravorty depicted are rendered as both faceless and featureless, in many cases blending utterly into their surrounding environment and landscape (see figures 2.12 and 2.13, for example). Moreover, this unsettling anonymity was not something unique to Chakravorty or to this particular book; it can be found repeatedly in these books of artists’ prints produced by professional print artists in late colonial Bengal. Indeed, images that depicted a faceless, anonymous countryside appeared so often in these publications that it seems to suggest they may have been a contributing factor in their success. The production of images and texts related to a generalized anonymous countryside may well have been a valuable strategy for professional urban artists at this time.
2.2.2  Bengal Village in Wood Engraving

Like Ramendranath Chakravorty, the artist Haren Das also took to printmaking at a time when it was unusual and unpopular. 75 Also like Chakravorty, Haren Das pursued a professional artistic education at the Government School of Art in Calcutta, which he first joined in 1937. Das studied under Chakravorty himself in fact, and under the elder artist’s tutelage Das received his first exposure to graphic print design and execution in a fine art tradition. Like his teacher, Haren Das’s preferred techniques were wood engraving and woodcut. 76 Also like Chakravorty, he developed a penchant for publishing books of prints dealing with rural Bengali life. In 1950, for example, Das published a slim volume titled Bengal Village in Wood Engraving (figure 2.14). Although technically just beyond the chronological boundary of “late colonial” that is the focus of this chapter and this thesis project, Bengal Village in Wood Engraving nevertheless embodies virtually all of the material qualities and characteristics that are common in the books of artists’ prints produced in the 1930s and 1940s, and thus I believe deserves consideration here; if nothing else, it speaks to the continuation of a nostalgia for an imagined idyllic life (and that nostalgia’s expression in woodcut and wood engraving) beyond the chronological boundary of Independence and Partition in 1947.

76 Woodcut involves the carving of the design along the grain of the block, while wood engraving employs the same technique on a matrix of end-grained wood.
Both a front and a back colophon page are included in *Bengal Village in Wood Engravings*. The back colophon page states that the book was printed by S.N. Guha Ray, at Sree Saraswaty Press Lts, 32 Upper Circular Road, Calcutta. The front colophon page indicates that the original price of this book was five rupees. The price is significant, as it indicates a socio-economic level that is neither highly elite nor profoundly disadvantaged. The address of the publisher is significant, as it indicates a central urban locality within easy access to both elite Bengali and European communities.

Like many other books of artists’ prints, Das’s book includes a general dedicatory text that was not a narrative that the images illustrated. The text gives a brief account of the artist and the book itself, and attempts to add some weight of importance and cultural capital to the project by means of the dignity and celebrity of the guest author (only occasionally did the artist himself write these introductory texts). Das’s *Bengal Village in Wood Engravings* takes this tendency to include such texts from famous figures even further than most publications, in that it contains not one but two formal introductions. The first is dated 20 June 1950 and is written by Das’s former teacher Ramendranath Chakravorty, who was then serving as Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta. Chakravorty’s text describes the kind of poor country cousin status that printmaking occupied in India at that time, vis-à-vis painting, and applauds Das’s work for contributing to its improvement and greater status through the publication of such a book. In the text Chakravorty complains that:
I am sorry to see that though there are quite a number of artists in this country who have acquired sufficient knowledge in wood engravings, they do not take it up seriously. The fault is not only theirs, it is also true that no publisher ever cared to make a distinct effort in this line. This book of Sri Haren Das will be able to prove that wood engravings should have a place in the art activities of our country.77

Chakravorty also mentions how books such as these could reach across boundaries of “fine art” and decorative illustration, noting that the printed images provided in the publication “will definitely raise the standard of the publication and it may be valued also as an art publication by lovers of art books” and that “thus, wood engravings and other graphic arts create art consciousness in the general public.”78

The second introduction in *Bengal Village in Wood Engravings* is dated 5 May 1950 and it written by L.M. Sen, who was then the Principal of the Government School of Arts & Crafts in Lucknow. Like Chakravorty, Sen takes this opportunity to decry the lack of interest in printmaking amongst the artistic community in India, “leave alone the unsurmountable [sic] ignorance of the people.” He writes:

> While the bulk of the energy of the artists of the present time is used up in newer and newer channels of expression, dictated by ‘isms’ and ‘ists’ of contemporary renown, comparatively very few of them have taken any interest in media other than painting or sculpture, as represented by the graphic arts like wood-cut, etching or lithography. The technical labour and honesty of working method seem to be too exacting for most of the ‘slapdashers’ of today.79

78 Ibid.
This text provides an interesting insight into the character of labour associated with printmaking media at this time, which helped to position even fine art printmaking (such as that learned by artists like Das, Chakravorty, Dey and others at privileged institutions of art education) in relation to a labouring class and culture in South Asian culture and society. Elite art worlds that focused on painting and sculpture is dismissed in Sen’s introduction as “slapdashery,” as opposed to print artists who laboured “technically” and “honestly.” There is a clear investment in the artisanal labour of the craftsman being made here, set up in contrast to the refined dabbling of the avant-garde painter.

These two introductory texts are followed by ten wood engraving designs by Haren Das that are all given their own presentation pages with printed titles below, just as in Chakravorty’s *Call of the Himalayas*. Each of these images is presented on its own separate page, with suitably dramatic white space surrounding it and discrete caption information provided below, encouraging the consideration of each image as an individual art object and facilitating the removal of any images for individual display. The titles of the images are (in order): *Two Sisters* (figure 2.15), depicting two women threshing rice, seen from behind; *Solitary Guard*, which depicts a landscape with palm trees and a small hut housing an anonymous figure; *Day’s End*, a riverine scene with two boats with thatched, arched roofs tying up at a grassy bank, with several small and faceless human figures alongside; *Fishing* (figure 2.16) in which three figures in a boat are viewed from behind and above, with no facial features visible; *Fight*, depicting two goats butting heads in a rural courtyard; *Going to the Fair*, (figure 2.17) with three figures (shown again from
behind) in a covered wagon; *Towards the Market* (figure 2.18), which depicts women with large bundles of firewood balanced on their heads, all moving in a strong diagonal to the right of the picture plane, again all seen from behind; *Leader Lags Behind*, in which a man on a domesticated water buffalo encourages onwards movement amongst other members of the herd; *Homewards* (figure 2.19), in which another herd of cattle are being led by a barely-discernable human figure masked in shadows at bottom right; and finally *Bijoya*, in which a young girl is portrayed sitting barefoot and cross-legged on the floor of a modest domestic space, lost in concentration in the act of writing a letter (figure 2.20). As in *Call of the Himalayas*, this final image included in *Bengal Village in Wood Engravings* represents a figure with a greater degree of personal specificity and personality than those depicted in the preceding pages. But unlike the example in *Call of the Himalayas*, wherein such specificity was used to depict a historical figure (Rabindranath Tagore), in this case although the composition is sharply different in that the human body is the clear frame of reference, nevertheless the figure’s head tilts strongly downwards preventing a clear view of her features and thus working against the idea that this is a portrait.

### 2.3 Designed to Succeed

#### 2.3.1 Price and Audience

The characteristics outlined for these books allowed them to function as uniquely valuable tool of self promotion and artistic distribution for professional Bengali print artists. Books
of artists’ prints were successful for a number of reasons, but key amongst them was that they were affordable to a wide audience. While in some cases the original prices of these books can not be retraced, in several instances the price is printed on an inside cover or a colophon page (as in the two examples described above). In several other instances, the price is mentioned in surviving newspaper or journal advertisements for, or reviews of, individual books. A review of Mahindra Bhusan Gupta’s 1933 collection *Impressions of a Pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath in Twelve Lino-cuts*, for example, mentions that the book originally sold for 15 rupees (foreign orders 30 shillings, postage extra).\footnote{Our Magazine, April 1933, 5.}

Amongst those examples where the original prices have been recorded or preserved, they have been found to range from as low as one and a half rupees to as high as 70, with the significant majority falling between three and five rupees. More will be said about the significance of this typical three-to-five rupee price in a moment, but first it is important to note the larger range of one and a half to 70 rupees. This would have represented an enormous socio-economic gap during this period, and thus is important for understanding the potential audiences for these books of artists’ prints. It is worth pausing for a moment to look more closely at the differences between the highest and lowest end of this price scale, to suggest reasons for the difference.

By far the most expensive of these books that has been so far identified is *Twenty-Five Linocuts* by Rani Dey, published in 1932. Although I have not yet been able to locate an archival copy of the book itself, the details of its publication are preserved in a number of
ephemeral items, including an advertisement that mentions the following specifications:


A review of this book also appeared in The Statesman newspaper, in their “New Books” section. The review is particularly telling for the insight it offers into the precarious nature of artist employment at that time, and the potential for books such as these to offer a solution to that problem. The review reads:

   This book stands for a real departure in the presentation of art so far as India is concerned and in that respect is a daring venture. The difficulty in India is less to train artists than to discover the commercial return that will enable the artist to live. Here within a folder are twenty-five lino-cuts executed by Miss Rani Dey, a pupil of the Santiniketan School, excellently printed and published in a limited edition at the price of Rs. 70 by M. Dey.82

Twenty-Five Linocuts was unusually expensive for the time, at 67 rupees and eight annas plus postage (i.e., 70 rupees).83 But as both the advertisement and the review make clear, this book was specifically a folio of “Original Artist’s Proofs,” with “Each copy numbered

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81 Our Magazine, September 1932, 17.
82 The Statesman, February 28, 1932.
83 An anna was a pre-decimilisation fraction of a rupee, in use before 1957. One rupee was equal to sixteen annas, therefore the price of 67 rupees and eight annas quoted above for Rani Dey’s book was the equivalent of 67 and one half rupees. Postage was specified as an additional two rupees and eight annas for a total cost of 70 rupees, which is the price mentioned in the review that appeared in The Statesman newspaper.
and all Proofs Signed.” The images bound in this folio were thus promised to be designed, engraved and printed by the hand of the artist herself. Moreover, production was limited to one hundred copies, with specific mention being made of the fact that the lino-blocks used for printing had been subsequently destroyed, thus ensuring that no further reproduction would dilute the distinctiveness of the set. As mentioned earlier, the desire to make clear that the book was produced from original blocks (carved by Dey herself), as well as the limited edition, numbering and addition of signatures would have helped to embed this book in the discourse of “fine art printmaking” that staked a claim to the aura of originality and invested the finished products with greater value and, as a consequence, a higher price. Even if the book was never intended to be resold, and thus was not considered in terms of its investment value, the aura of originality would still have made possible a far higher original asking price for the printed book as art object on the marketplace, and would have worked to differentiate such a publication from the larger category of just illustrated books. The higher price announces prestige value, and marks the book of artist’s prints as something of a luxury item.

The two next-most expensive books I have so far identified are Ramendranath Chakravorty’s Woodcut, also published in 1932, and the previously mentioned Impressions of a Pilgrimage to Kedarnath and Badrinath in Twelve Lino-cuts by Mahindra Bhusan Gupta, published in 1933. Both of these were also bound folios of original prints, “hand printed with the signature of the artist” in limited editions.84

84 Our Magazine (April 1933).
Although still likely beyond the economic reach of many poor Bengalis (at 25 and 15 rupees respectively), these prices would have situated these books within the purview of many upper-class Bengalis as well as the lower rungs of the economic and social strata of European society at the time. It is interesting to note in this regard that both Chakravorty’s and Gupta’s books were advertised with alternative prices for overseas orders (2 guineas and 30 shillings, respectively), making it clear that the audience for such folios of original prints was at least in part beyond Indian shores.

I have so far been able to identify only a few rare examples of this kind of portfolio of original artist prints, which had each image designed, carved, and hand-printed by the artist himself or herself, and which had each print individually signed and numbered by the artist. Thus far it appears that these few such examples were all produced in the early 1930s. In contrast, the bulk of the books of artists’ prints that I have identified were produced somewhat later, with production peaking in the late 1930s and 1940s. And on closer examination it becomes clear that these later publications are of a rather different type. Rather than being collections of original prints, these later publications contain images that were certainly based on the graphic designs supplied by artists who were particularly known for and associated with printmaking, but which were then translated into and reproduced via commercial printing presses. Rather than being hand-printed by

85 The exceptions are Chittaprosad’s *Contemporary Woodcuts from India* (1955) and a much later, *Indian Life and Legend* (1974) by Mukul Dey. In Chittaprosad’s case the shift to an American audience for this book makes a price comparison to the rest of the group difficult, while in Dey’s case this book represented a pet project of great sentimental value at the end of Dey’s career, in which he produced the volume to be given as gifts to various people, and thus a price for the volume was not a consideration.
the artists themselves, the images in these later books were mechanically reproduced on one of the various commercial printing presses then in operation in Calcutta. In the case of the two books described at length above, for example, *Call of the Himalayas* was printed by Indian Photo Engraving Co. and distributed by the book publisher S. Shaha, while *Bengal Village in Wood Engraving* was printed by S.N. Guha Ray at Sree Saraswaty Press. In both cases the original woodcut and wood engraving designs produced by the artists Ramendranath Chakravorty and Haren Das were used by the commercial printing presses as the basis for their mechanically reproduced images, but these publications (along with the majority of those I have thus far identified) would nevertheless be more accurately described as books of reproductions of prints, rather than as books of original prints. In several cases, the resulting books of reproductions were also signed and dated by the artist and they were also released in limited editions in order to lend something of the aura of originality to the production. But the crucial result of this shift to commercial printing was that these examples of books of reproductions of prints tended to be much more affordable, with most of them being priced at between three and five rupees. I have also identified far more of this later, less expensive type of book, which would indicate that higher-priced collections of original prints were not particularly successful in striking a crucial balance between price and desirability that would have allowed them to connect to an available and motivated audience. It would appear that the early, more expensive type of publication was attempted but later abandoned in favour of the less expensive alternative. And it was instead the lower-priced books of reproductions that offered a

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86 I include both types in the category of books of artists’ prints under consideration in this chapter.
better opportunity for artists to tap into interested and motivated markets for their finished products.

It is useful to compare the prices of books of artists’ prints (both folios of original prints and books of mechanically reproduced designs) to the prices paid for paintings by well-known Bengali artists during the same period. Luckily a small archive of such information survives in the documentation preserved by the artist Mukul Dey. Over the course of the first few decades of the twentieth century Dey amassed a large personal collection of works by well-known contemporary artists like the various Tagores, Nandalal Bose, Asit Kumar Haldar and others. When Dey fell on difficult times in the mid-1940s following his removal as Principal of the Government Art School in Calcutta, he first tried to gain support for the creation of a Bengal National Museum with his personal collection at its core. When that plan failed to come to fruition, he then resorted to selling off large portions of his collection. For this purpose he printed several catalogues of works for sale, which are now kept at his eponymous archive in Santiniketan. These catalogues record that in the mid-1940s, Dey was asking between 2,000 and 4,000 rupees for paintings by Rabindranath Tagore, who although made famous for his poetry also turned to painting later in life and quickly became highly regarded as a visual artist. Dey’s catalogue also record that the price for Tagore’s drawings at this time was between 750 and 2,000 rupees, while a “palm impression” by the poet was for sale at 1,250 rupees.87

87 File 012 (dark green), Mukul Dey Archives, Santiniketan. Dey often requested that visitors to his home or studio make a palm-impression by covering a hand in ink and pressing it onto a page. He often asked for an accompanying signature from the ‘sitter.' Several of these palm prints, including those of Tagore, W.G. Archer and Nandalal Bose, are preserved at the Mukul Dey Archives in Santiniketan.
Such sums were enormous amounts of money at the time, and would have necessarily positioned such objects as luxury goods inaccessible to any but the smallest percentage of upper end of the socio-economic system. As a point of comparison, Mukul Dey mentions in his autobiography that as the Principal of the Government School of Art in the early 1940s, a position of significant social standing and importance, he was earning a gross monthly salary of about 1,000 rupees which, after deductions, came to about 500 or 600 rupees that he took “in hand.”88 The advertisement for the position of Principal that ran in The Statesman newspaper in 1927 mentions a gross salary scale of between 600 and 850 rupees per month, depending on qualifications and age.89 Meanwhile, the average salary at the time for someone in a lower-middle class clerkship position, such as an office worker at a post office, was approximately 30 rupees per month.90 It seems clear that whatever art market existed at this time for paintings by well-known Bengali artists priced in the thousands of rupees, this was necessarily an elite niche market.

On the other hand, books of artists’ prints (particularly the mechanically reproduced variety at the lower end of the price range) were priced affordably to appeal to a much larger segment of society. It is important to note that these books of artists’ prints did not necessarily seek to reject or alienate elite audiences, and indeed their almost exclusive use of English testifies to the fact that their public was obviously a socially-aspirant one. But

at an average price of five rupees, these books also addressed a much wider range of socioeconomic groups, which was crucial for artists seeking to make a professional living at the time.

Although it is difficult to know what an average salary would have been at this time for professional working artists, there are some indications that their financial situation was rarely comfortable. For example, when an open exhibition was held at the Darjeeling Hill Station in 1915, the prizes awarded for the best works in particular categories tended to be in the range of 30 to 50 rupees.91 In the same year, artists who advertised their services as art teachers in the classified sections of local newspapers did so while quoting an average salary of around five rupees per month.92 It would require many students for such payment to be enough to live on. Meanwhile, positions as art teachers (or “drawing masters”) at local high schools were advertised with starting salaries of 30-35 rupees per month,93 while teaching positions at the more prestigious Government School of Art in Calcutta could range from 75 to 250 rupees per month.94

92 *The Statesman*, 20 June 1915.
93 *The Statesman*, 4 February 1920 and 21 September 1928, for example.
2.3.2 The Successful Translation of Print

The publication of books of artists’ prints was a useful career strategy for professional Bengali artists for many reasons, not least of which was that the images contained therein were able to successfully translate through the commercially-available printing technologies that were then available in Calcutta particularly. There had been remarkable advances made in print technologies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the city. As a result, decent-quality printed images had suddenly become, if not ubiquitous, then at least common. A boom in pictorial journalism at the very turn of the century was due in large part to the successful experiments in half-tone printing undertaken by Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri. But as revolutionary as such processes were, there was still a wide fluctuation in the quality of the resulting images. For example, it was still the case that colour reproductions of paintings that circulated in illustrated journals such as Prabasi, Bharati, Bharat Barsha, and The Modern Review, tended to render the images oddly and unevenly coloured, and generally flat and lifeless (consider figure 2.21, for example). Such images were some of the highest quality colour reproductions available to Bengali readerships at that time, but they are undeniably reportage on works of art, rather than works of art in and of themselves.

In contrast, as woodcut and linocut print designs, mostly in sharp, bold contrasts of black and white space, images in books of artists’ prints were presented as an affordable work of art whose visual impact and material characteristics were largely maintained intact through the commercial printing processes then affordably available in Bengal. In other words, at this point in time it was possible to purchase a book of rather mediocre reproductions of an artist’s paintings or photographs of his sculptures, but if one had to rely on the translation of an image through the commercially available printing processes (in order for the cost to be effectively reduced), one could not have a book of paintings in the way that one could have a book of artists’ prints. Of course, there was something of an inevitable loss of the essential tactile nature of a hand-printed page which has gone through a hand-printing press; this aspect of an original print did not translate well to books of reproductions of prints. But in many cases artists and publishers attempted to recapture something of the essential and valuable haptic quality of an original print through the use of coarse, hand-made paper and rough-edged pages in the resulting books.\footnote{This practice is evident in books by Haren Das, Mukul Dey, and Chittaprosad, for example.}

It is useful to compare, as an example, the quality of the images in any of these books of artists’ prints to a rare example of a book of the same period that presents readers with reproductions of photographs of sculpture, by the artist Prodosh Das Gupta (figure 2.22). Or we could compare the quality of these printed images to reproductions of a variety of media contained in Sudhir Khastgir’s book \textit{Myself} (1955), which includes reproductions
of his prints, paintings, drawings, and sculpture (figures 2.23, 2.24 and 2.25). Such comparisons immediately reveal the deficiencies of the reproductions of the period that were not based on graphic print designs. It was this inherent translatability of print that allowed for a successful shift from books of original prints to books of reproductions of prints, and it was the latter that would be able to successfully appeal to a much larger socio-economic category of potential viewers/patrons.

2.3.3 Direct Advertising

This translatability of printed images through the commercially available printing processes available in Bengal also had a profound effect on another characteristic of these books that helped to render them successful and popular. As I suggested in the previous chapter, the exhibition and gallery-based art market in Bengal in the late colonial period was extremely limited, and socially circumscribed where it did occur. Such environments tended to be spaces for the performance of elite sociality rather than sites of commercial exchange such as would be needed by professional working artists. Such artists, either restricted from participating in salon-style exhibitions or unsatisfied with the limited financial gain to be had from them, often turned to direct advertising through newspapers and magazines as a kind of exhibitionary alternative, which could allow them to connect their artwork to the general public. While there are many examples of works of art being sold through classified ads in local newspapers throughout this period, it was artists who specialized in printmaking rather than painting or sculpture for whom this strategy could
prove particularly effective. The printed image offered a reasonably accurate sense of the actual artwork for sale, so the idea was made clear visually—not just textually—to a wide audience of potential buyers.

We know that some printmaking artists during this period placed advertisements for their individual prints in magazines and journals. Mukul Dey, for example, advertised a drypoint etching titled *Festive Season* in the August 5, 1945 issue of the *Illustrated Weekly of India* (figure 2.26). In addition to a providing a thorough listing of Dey’s credentials that would qualify him as a respectable artist, the advertisement also explains that for a price of 150 rupees, interested parties could receive an original drypoint etching, taken from a limited edition of five copies only. The entire transaction is set out as a postal exchange, with payment and the work itself moving back and forth between artist and collector without any in-person interaction required. Importantly, the image itself is depicted in the ad, so that prospective purchasers could see that the artwork represented three tribal or rural male figures involved in the production of festive music, each drumming or blowing on a flute or conch shell. A comparison between the version of the image contained in the ad in the *Illustrated Weekly of India* and an actual original print of this image hand-printed by Dey himself (figure 2.27) reveals that while much of the subtle nuance of shading and texture is indeed lost in the translation to an advertising image,

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nevertheless key details about the figures’ grouping and movement is communicated, along with the overall linear nature of the composition. Such visual information would have been critical to securing an invested audience through magazines and postal exchanges.

It was not only individual, unique prints that were marketed and sold through magazines and newspapers. Printmaking artists like Ramendranath Chakravorty and Chittaprosad also used this medium to advertise and market their books of artists’ prints, along with representative images. Chakravorty’s book *Woodcut*, published in 1932, was advertised in the Government Art School journal *Our Magazine* for example, with the majority of the ad being comprised of a large black and white illustration of a flock of ducks (figure 1.22). Similarly, Chittaprosad’s 1955 book *Contemporary Woodcuts from India* was advertised in a journal marketed as a “reminiscing magazine… by and for former members of the U.S. Units stationed in the China-Burma-India Theatre” (figure 1.21). The ad features clear examples of the images that the book contains.

Further connections exist between the use of advertising by professional print artists to sell their work directly to an interested public, and the uses of print and advertising outlined in the introductory chapter (as a field of employment for commercial artists, a way to advertise as an art teacher, or to connect to buyers and sell artwork directly instead of through galleries and exhibitions). The graphic nature of this body of work in general would have been critical for all facets of this phenomenon.
2.3.4 Between Battala and the Drawing Room

Books of artists’ prints also owed a great deal of their success to the particular manner in which they were embedded in the larger history of print media and technologies in Bengal particularly, and in South Asia generally. While a boom in print media and technology has long been associated with the emergence of an early modern identity in Europe and in other parts of Asia from the fifteenth century onwards, as John Richards has pointed out, printing was the one exception to South Asia's participation in a wide range of early modern world processes. In fact, although wood-block printing techniques had been in use for centuries in South Asia for textile dying and decoration, and although there had been an isolated flurry of printing activity undertaken by the Jesuits in Goa in the sixteenth century, it was not until the end of the eighteenth and then over the course of the nineteenth century that printing was taken up with fervour in South Asia, particularly in the new colonial capital of British India: Calcutta. At first the new industry of printing was dominated by Europeans, but as many of the early entrepreneurs employed Indian assistants it was not long before Indians trained in engraving and printing began to establish their own printing presses as well. The first of these Indian-run presses in

98 John F. Richards, “Early Modern India and World History,” Journal of World History, vol. 8, no. 2 (1997): 207-208. The other characteristics he identifies as constitutive of an early modern world view are: increasingly complex and efficient global transportation networks (with associated long-distance commerce and interconnected, global economies); the growth of both large, stable states and human populations; intensification of land use and expansion into so-called settler frontiers; and participation with the technologies of new world crop production, gunpowder, and printing. Of these, he concludes that only in the field of printing did early modern South Asia differ from Europe.

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Calcutta appeared in the northern neighbourhood of Battala, and although others soon opened for business in adjoining neighbourhoods or paras like Baghbazar, Kumortuli, and others, the name battala continues to be a general designator for the entire phenomenon of a vernacular Bengali printing industry that flourished in Calcutta generally from about the late eighteenth to the very early twentieth centuries.\footnote{I use the capital-B “Battala” when referring to the specific Calcutta neighbourhood or para, and the lowercase-b “battala” to indicate the broader system of cheap, popular publishing that occurred in various geographic locations in the city in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.}

The battala publishing world was fundamentally a pulp press industry, characterized by cheap paper and cheap prices and oriented almost exclusively to the Bengali-reading market. Battala publishing covered all manner of subject matter including biography, histories, erotica, drama, poetry, and mysteries. One of the staples of the industry was the production of annual almanacs that featured astrological charts and comparative Bengali and western calendars. Most of the printing was done using woodcut print, but in some cases sets of metal letterpress were also in use.

The battala industry was already booming in the early nineteenth century when a few books began to experiment with woodcut illustrations to decorate or accompany the printed texts.\footnote{The first Bengali book that included images was printed in 1816. Illustrated almanacs and periodicals soon followed. Illustrated books printed from European presses in Calcutta that were beyond the purview of “battala publishing” had also been printed somewhat earlier.} Very soon there appears to have developed a market for full-page images in woodcut, sold separately from bound books but often produced by and purchased from the same publishers. These single-page display prints were soon sold in large quantities.
for a few annas each. Subject matter was often religious or mythological, with images of deities being the most popular (figure 2.28). But battala images were also printed of pictures of flora and fauna (figure 2.29), and even contemporary social commentary and scandal (see figure 2.30). Like the images reproduced in the books of artists’ prints discussed earlier in this chapter, the battala images presented readers with compositions of sharp and distinctive black and white space, they were relatively inexpensive, and they occupied a similar position between book illustration and individual display imagery. It would seem, therefore, that by the time the books of artists’ prints emerged in the early twentieth century, audiences in Calcutta were already familiar with the commodity of inexpensive collections of images in book form, particularly when those images were woodcut and linocut designs. The battala world of print production would have been well known to printmaking artists like Ramendranath Chakravorty, Mukul Dey, Sudhir Khastgir, Devi Prosad Roy Chowdhury, and Haren Das. But all of these artists would also have been somewhat removed from the battala print world by virtue of their academic art school training.

\[101\] The history of battala printing is a fascinating one but unfortunately the demands of this chapter allow no more than a brief survey – that, at least, is absolutely necessary for understanding the kinds of books of artists’ prints that come later and which are my particular focus here. However, for more on the world of battala publishing in late colonial Bengal, interested readers would do well to explore the recent work of Anindita Ghosh, for example, *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); “Revisiting the ‘Bengal Renaissance’: Literary Bengali and Low-Life Print in Colonial Calcutta,” *Economic and Political Weekly* (2002); and “Cheap Books, ‘Bad’ Books: Contesting Print Cultures in Colonial Bengal.” *South Asia Research* (1998). In addition to Ghosh’s newer contributions to the field, there is also the older but still very useful *Woodcut Prints of Nineteenth Century Calcutta*, Ashit Paul, ed. (Calcutta: Seagull, 1983).
By the 1920s, the battala woodblock printing industry had largely been supplanted by cheaper lithographic technologies, while a new generation of artists was emerging from the art schools and colleges with new training in relief printing techniques and practices that emphasized the agency and mark-making of the artist and the creation of so-called unique prints that were individually signed and numbered and thus imbued with the prestige of the modern, independent artist-creator. As mentioned earlier, Mukul Dey studied printmaking for several years abroad, first in the United States and later in England. When he returned to India he was appointed as the first Indian Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta, where he instituted a new policy whereby students had to work the printed plates themselves—they could no longer simply execute a design in pen or pencil and then give it to an engraver for the design to be executed on a printing plate.\footnote{J.C. Bagal, “History,” 45.} As we saw earlier, the emphasis on hand-numbering, limited editions, and artist signatures became a means by which print artists could stake a claim for the legitimacy of their art, vis-à-vis painting. All of these strategies, along with the credentials and academic training of the printmaking artists in question, worked to separate the books of artists’ prints, and the artists who created them, from the world of battala publishing.\footnote{Battala labour was not a traditional caste-based profession printing and publishing, being as they were a newly emerged industry. Studies of the names of battala engravers reveals that they came from a variety of caste professions, including goldsmiths, ironsmiths, and even a few Brahmins. Nevertheless, there was a clear distinction between the battala artists and the world of academically trained artists. See Nikhil Sarkar, “Calcutta Woodcuts: Aspects of a Popular Art,” in \textit{Woodcut Prints of Nineteenth Century Calcutta}, Asit Paul ed. (Calcutta; Seagull, 1983), 17-19.}
Books of artists’ prints were also related to another group of printed images, which represented the opposite end of the social-economic scale to that of the battala publishing world. Extremely expensive volumes of printed reproductions of paintings depicting scenes of India done by European artists had been in circulation, both in India and in Europe, since as early as the eighteenth century. An early example is the work of John Zoffany (1733-1810), a German neoclassical painter who was in Calcutta and Lucknow between 1783 and 1789. Zoffany’s portraits and historical studies in oil made him popular amongst the elite in India, and upon his return to Europe Zoffany had many of his paintings translated into mezzotint engravings by Richard Earldom. These were published in London in several volumes over the course of the very end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Similar projects followed by François Balthazar Solvyns (1760-1824), Sir Charles D’Oyly (1781-1845), and the uncle-and-nephew team of Thomas and William Daniell (1749-1840 and 1769-1837, respectively). Even well into the early twentieth century, extravagant publications such as Lady Herringham’s *Ajanta Frescoes* (subtitle: *Being reproductions in colour and monochrome of frescoes in some of the caves at Ajanta after copies taken in the years 1909-1911*) continued to present printed reproductions of painted imagery in elaborate, highly expensive volumes for elite audiences. Various concerned with the picturesque depiction of the Indian landscape, romanticized views of “ruins” and other ancient architecture, or the classification and cataloguing of Indian flora, fauna, and human populations, what all of these lavish

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publications had in common was an audience that was absolutely limited to the elite upper classes. But it seems clear that both the upper and lower ends of the socio-economic scale in Bengal at this time were familiar with the idea of collecting prints in a book format.

When the books of artists’ prints began to appear in the early twentieth century, the kinds of relief print images that they tended to contain occupied a unique position at a distance from (but still connected to) a street-level popularity of the battala printing world, while the format of books of collections of prints was also reminiscent of elite status objects familiar to the upper echelons of society. In addition, these books were also overlaid with new connotations of reified art practice, specialized training and equipment, and the new reliance on official certification as a mark of qualification and professional status. The particular conflux of overlapping regimes of value were playing out in printing and printed images in a way that allowed these books to function effectively for artists struggling to establish and maintain reputations and livelihoods during this period. This constellation of manifest possibilities—involving the aura of the modern, individual artist, nostalgia for a popular art of the recent past, and prices targeted exactly to the right audience—all crucially combined to actualize these books as important tools in the performance of professional artistic identity in the colonial South Asian context.
2.3.5 Making Use of the Status of Literature

Another crucial quality of these books of artists’ prints that made them such a useful strategy and tool for professional artists at the time was the way they tapped into the centrality of literature, books, and the written word in Bengali cultural identity. Statistics regarding the mushrooming numbers of books, newspapers, and journals published in Bengal and Calcutta over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth century are in stark contrast to what we encountered in the previous chapter regarding the stagnant interest in art galleries and exhibitions over the same period. Graham Shaw has meticulously documented the early presses in Bengal, noting that about 40 were in operation between 1770 and 1800, mostly involved in the publication of newspapers. \(^{105}\) Large-scale book publication took off after the establishment of the Serampore Press in 1800, which consolidated much of the printing and publishing that was then taking place in Bengal. Between 1801 and 1832, it is estimated that roughly 212,000 copies of books in 40 different languages were published from the Serempore Press alone. \(^{106}\) By the early decades of the twentieth century, these statistics had ballooned to more than 740 printing presses, 120 newspapers, and 200 periodicals in Bengal. \(^{107}\) These numbers are an indication of the voracious appetite for written and published material in Bengal in the late colonial period. Indeed, at a time when an audience for art scarcely existed, an audience


for literature ran rampant. Publishing collections of images in book format allowed artists to reach out to a nascent readership for art by connecting to the immense cultural capital enjoyed by literature and literary celebrities of the day. A fairly clear and elegant example of this kind of cross-promotion in action is the book *Fifteen Drypoints* published in 1939, which pairs printed images by Mukul Dey with poems on the same subject by Harindranath Chattopadhyay. Such projects connected Mukul Dey’s art to an audience that it might not otherwise have come into contact with (and of course vice versa for Chattopadhyay’s poetry).

Books of artists’ prints were also able to take advantage of the status of literature and the written/published word by functioning as a sign or testimony of the artists’ legitimacy and standing. When presented to prospective employers, patrons, or anyone else one wished to impress, a published book with one’s name on it functioned as a bona fide that could sometimes open otherwise closed doors. In a recently-published collection of translated letters from the artist Chittaprosad, he mentions his book of prints, *Contemporary Woodcuts from India* (1955), in an anecdote that casts light on the way such books could function as objects of social exchange.

In a letter dated June 27, 1959, Chittaprosad recounts that the defence minister for India came to his neighbourhood in Bombay in order to deliver a speech, the message of which Chittaprosad disagreed with. In his estimation, the minister was goading poor voters to always sacrifice for their country, and not to concern themselves with anything but
constant work. Chittaprosad especially disliked the fact that this minster, who was from Gujarat, gave his entire speech in English and at full speed, thus making everything but the constant refrain of “Vote Congress!” unintelligible to the audience. In the letter, Chittaprosad says he asked the minister how the people who wanted to work were supposed to find jobs in the current political and economic situation. He writes that the minister at first ignored the question, but then promised to answer it personally later. But, when someone whispered in the minister’s ear that the man in the crowd asking the question was a Communist and an artist, the minister quickly left, displaying “visible signs of being scared.”

Later this event was discussed at length amongst those in the neighbourhood, and Chittaprosad was advised to send the minister his “American folio,” (i.e., the book *Contemporary Woodcuts from India*). The rationale for this is not entirely clear; perhaps the volume was meant simply as a gesture of goodwill, or possibly it was intended to convince the minister not to seek retribution for the embarrassing exchange. Or perhaps, by giving his publication of woodcut prints, Chittaprosad sought to open the door again to the possibility of what the minister had initially offered: a personal meeting and an answer to his question. Perhaps all of these motivations played a part.

But by far the most usual way that books of artists’ prints connected to the literary world was by securing a suitably impressive guest author for the introductory or dedicatory text. Almost every example of these books contains this kind of celebrity author endorsement.

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Ads for Ramendranath Chakravorty’s *Woodcut* (1932) for example, highlighted that it had an introduction by Rabindranath Tagore. Chakravorty’s later book *Woodcuts* (1944) also includes introductions from both Tagore and the literary critic and intellectual Amiya Chakravarty. Rani Dey’s, *Twenty-Five Linocuts* (1932) had an illustrated introduction from Tagore, while *Ten Wood Engravings by Students of the Government School of Art* (1944) included an introduction from the renowned Bengali intellectual and author Niharranjan Ray. Similarly, Chittaprosad’s *Contemporary Woodcuts from India* (1955) included an introductory text by the well-known author and art critic Mulk Raj Anand.

In this world of celebrity literary and cultural endorsements and dedications, there was no one more sought-after amongst Bengali artists at this time than the Nobel-prize winning Rabindranath Tagore. When such a text from Tagore was forthcoming, both the artist and the publisher made sure to promote the fact when selling the book. Thus we find that both Rani Dey’s book of *Twenty-five Linocuts* and Ramendranath Chakravorty’s book *Woodcut*, which are both advertised on the same page of the same issue of *Our Magazine* (the student-run publication of the Government School of Art in Calcutta in the 1930s), also both make sure to advertise that the books include introductory texts from Tagore.109

Indeed, Mukul Dey later recorded in his autobiography *Amar Katha* something of the intense demand for Tagore’s endorsement in such endeavours; he recounts how once during this period he playfully confronted Tagore about his habit of writing dedications for every “Tom Dick and Harry.” Dey records that Tagore immediately blushed at this

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109 *Our Magazine* (December 1932), 17.
accusation and replied: “Since when are you concerned with such mundane things? You are a creative man whose head is in the clouds, you are above such matters.”

This anecdote is particularly revealing because it highlights the very difficult social space that had to be navigated by artists in Bengal at this time who—on the one hand—had to hustle, negotiate and self-promote in order to survive by their art, but at the same time in order to be socially accepted as a “true artist,” they could not appear to be concerned with mundane, material matters such as earning a living. As pointed out earlier, at this time the culturally aspirant in Bengali society tended to subscribe to the notion that the creation of art and literature was something that occurred “within a space beyond necessity and outside the limits of the requirements of human livelihood.”

It was during this period from about the 1920s onwards that the Bengali literary elite, spearheaded by Rabindranath Tagore himself, sought to more clearly distinguish between the terms krishti and sanskriti (that is, between cultivation and culture): wherein the former had connotations of everyday matters and, worse yet, physical labour, while the latter implied a more spiritual or cerebral endeavour of personal improvement and was understood to be the realm of art and literature. As we will see, this pressure to separate the world of art from the demands of physical labour would manifest in interesting ways in many of the individual images depicting rural subject matter that were contained in books of artists’ prints.

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110 In the text, the English phrase “Tom, Dick and Harry” is transliterated into Bengali script as “tom, diken, hyari.” Mukul Dey, *Amar Katha* (Santiniketan: Visva Bharati Press, 1995), 46. See Appendix A for more details related to this translation.

2.4 The Rural and the Urban

As the preceding sections have argued, books of artists’ prints were successful in large part because many of their material qualities rendered them particularly appealing to a wide range of audiences in Bengal during the early twentieth century. In this section I would like to argue that these books were also successful in large part because they were also able to negotiate a productive and appealing position with regards to the intense relationship between the rural and the urban that influenced Bengali cultural identity and modern art.

The complexities of the relationship between village and urban India can not be easily explained or quickly encapsulated. The image of an idealized Indian village is very present in the minds of Indian urbanites, and this was particularly true during the late colonial period. For waves of displaced villagers who came to Calcutta over the course of the early decades of the twentieth century, the countryside they left behind existed in a state of the shadow-monumental: urgent in its absence, and necessary in its fictionalization. For urban Calcuttans, the village was often the site of intense childhood memories, of extended family connections and obligations, a symbol and experience of fecundity and fertility, and a source of nationalist identity that challenged the notion that modernity must necessarily equate with urbanity. Robert Siegle has noted that this
especially manifested itself in literary fiction of the period, in which the village appears as a kind of Arcadian image of the pre-modern, and as “the national shibboleth of [Indian] self-identity”:

In the mytho-cultural life of the nation, Village is always already a sign for the urbanite’s dream of a community, raised with sufficient homogeneity of culture and blood that warmth and deeply shared assumptions bind together its members. Though in reality bound together by established power and unofficial violence, ‘Village’ functions as the place holder for the harmonization of social and gender differences. It is the sign for an ideally functioning caste society in which reciprocal responsibilities bind everyone in humanely conducted relations of caring and tending: a feudal utopia.112

In the books of artists’ prints considered in this chapter, by far the most common type of images they contain are representations of bucolic landscapes and primitivizing tribal scenes. These representations of peaceful rural pastiches appear usually uninhabited, but sometimes peopled with (a) untroubled and anonymous (often faceless) peasants, or (b) stereotypical images of archaic tribal peoples that tend to stand in as antidotes for or alternatives to a technological modernity. These two types are by no means mutually exclusive, and it is useful to consider them together.

Both of the books described in detail earlier in this chapter—Haren Das’s *Bengal Village in Wood Engraving* (1950) and Ramendranath Chakravorty’s *Call of the Himalayas* (1944)—exemplify the kind of image to which I allude: reassuring tropes in relief print

that depict the myth of the eternal, reassuring, pre-modern village utopia. In almost every image in these two books every peasant figure is depicted anonymously, either from a back view or else with their facial features so erased as to render the overall effect positively uncanny. As mentioned earlier, the only figure given the dignity of specificity in Chakravorty’s book is the small portrait of Rabindranath Tagore. Other figures are small and indistinct, in some cases barely seeming to emerge from their surrounding landscape (figures 2.6 to 2.13). In Das’s book, rather than achieving anonymity through distance from the subjects, the viewer is almost always positioned behind and above the peasant figures represented, rendering them as objects to be observed from a position of dominance. We see the back of heads, or heads in outline profile with the features indistinct (figures 2.15 to 2.19). This is particularly striking in two images of similar composition: *Towards the Market* (figure 2.18) and *Homewards* (figure 2.19). The former depicts a line of cattle in a strong diagonal from right to left, while the latter shows a similar procession of women carrying bundles in a mirror-like composition going from left to right. Seen presented together within the pages of *Bengal Village in Wood Engraving*, these two images encourage a similar attitude of detached observation in relation to both the animal and human occupants of rural Bengal. Cattle and peasant are rendered anonymous equivalents.

Das’s and Chakravorty’s books were certainly not the only examples of this tendency to deny the specificity of village and rural subjects. Many other artists explored this subject matter and its treatment, and there are various individual images that repeat a similar
formula in other books like Mukul Dey’s *Fifteen Drypoints* (1939), *Ten Wood Engravings by Students of the Government School of Art, Calcutta* (1944), Ramendranath Chakravorty’s *Woodcuts* (1944), Chittaprosad’s *Contemporary Woodcuts From India* (1955), and Sudhir Khastgir’s *Myself* (1955). These images of an uncomplicated tribal countryside, represented as bountiful, peaceful and reassuring, in many ways participate in what art historian Partha Mitter has described as a unique Indian manifestation of a more globally felt primitivist discourse of the period.

It is true that these books appear at a time when many Bengali artists, including Jamini Roy, Ramkinkar Baij and others, were increasingly turning towards tribal and rural subject matter as a way of seeking alternative visual vocabularies with which to explore the experience of Indian modernity through confrontation with its Other. In the South Asian context, this primitivism charted unique and local trajectories that connected at times to both a Gandhian veneration of village life and with an Orientalist search for a primitive Other amongst South Asia’s tribal communities. But as Mitter argues, it shared with nativist and primitivist movements elsewhere in the world a sense of “the romantic longing of a complex society for the simplicity of pre-modern existence.”

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2.4.1 The Tribal Trope: Images of Santals

In his most recent book Partha Mitter explores the portrayal of the Santals, today the largest tribal community in India who occupy areas primarily in the north-eastern states and in neighbouring Bangladesh. Often visually and textually imagined within the discourses of Indian anthropology, art, and literature in the early twentieth century as pastoral innocents or noble savages uncorrupted by the trappings modern life, the Santals’ role in and experience of Indian modernity by that time had in fact already been both violent and profound.\textsuperscript{114} During the late colonial period in India, Santals were increasingly made the subject (though never the active subjects) of a wide variety of linguistic, cultural, musicological and religious investigations. This kind of intensified interest in studying and documenting various tribal groups such as the Santals during this period was undoubtedly intimately connected to the imagining and enforcing of systems imperial knowledge and control, as the emerging disciplines of biology, anthropology, geography and linguistics worked with, alongside, and at times even against the ongoing entrenchment of colonial power.\textsuperscript{115}


\textsuperscript{115} On the role of collecting, documenting and archiving as a part of the colonial system and process, see Nicholas Dirks, \textit{Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001) and Thomas Richards, \textit{The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire} (London and New York: Verso, 1993). Examples of key anthropological and linguistic studies on Santals undertaken during the late colonial period include the work of Raghunath Murmu and Byomkes Chakrabarti in documenting and codifying the Santal language, as well as the study and cataloging of Santal medicine.
During the early decades of the twentieth century this drive to document and record tribal groups such as the Santals also became particularly tied to the practices and discourses of colonial modernity in India. As Mitter convincingly argues based on a selection of Santal images by a number of different artists in a variety of media, this kind of rural, tribal imagery necessarily idealized as it objectified Santal life, glossing over many of the harsh realities of the Santals’ lives and socio-economic position in order to present them as innocent and child-like. Mitter's arguments make important connections to recent scholarship that has been done on the deconstruction of the myth of “the primitive”, and the argument that such categories were always necessarily constructions from outside and beyond: that is, that the designations “primitive art” or “primitive cultures” were necessarily ideologically driven (and constantly renegotiated) responses to the experience of modernizing forces such as industrialization, urbanization, statism, nationalism and colonialism.116

Mitter's exegesis of “the primitive” is particularly important for understanding certain aspects of the late colonial Bengali art world, but it has already been criticized for its focussing too much on the elite segments of Indian society while overlooking much of the socially engaged work of the progressive and Marxist-oriented artists in Calcutta during

and folklore by the Norwegian-born missionary Paul Olaf Bodding.

the 1940s. As valuable as Mitter’s work is, it also largely avoids the issue of media-specificity. The examples of Santal imagery that Mitter includes in his discussion are in a variety of media, including Sunil Janah’s photographs (figure 2.31), Devi Prosad Roy Chowdhury’s watercolours (figure 2.32), Benodebehari’s murals, and Ramkinkar Baij’s sculptures (figure 2.33). But the different and various material possibilities opened up and articulated by such media are not explored, except where Mitter suggests that the coarse, rough surfaces of Ramkinkar Baij’s famous outdoor sculptures of Santals in Santiniketan are “commensurate with the ruggedness of [the Santals’] lives.” Aside from this one comment, Mitter for the most part subsumes any significance related to media and material difference under the overarching argument that tribal and rural imagery was a manifestation of the modern Indian discourse of primitivism.

This leaves open the opportunity to investigate the material nature and affects of particular Santal images, with particular attention paid to the possibilities manifest by printmaking media. By looking closely at the visual/bodily relationships that are produced between viewer and image in printmaking media, this may complicate or further nuance the “primitivist” arguments of scholars like Mitter. Although none of the examples discussed by Mitter include images produced using printmaking technologies, there were in fact


many etchings, engravings, and woodblock prints of Santal subject matter made by
Bengali artists during this period, including several that can be found in the pages of the
books of artists’ prints that are the focus of this chapter. In considering two such Santal
images made using reproductive techniques of printmaking in the arguments that follow, I
wish to make a case for attending closely to the lines and marks of the printmaking
process and to the experience of bodily engagement with printed and reproduced imagery
at this historical moment in India. Such an analysis may not run counter to the insights
offered by the deconstruction of primitivism as it is outlined by Mitter, but neither can its
observations be entirely or adequately contained by that particular analytical framework.
Therefore, as Fred Myers has suggested regarding the interpretation of so-called primitive
art objects, I wish to attend “to the ways in which material qualities of objects suppressed
within this categorical formation [of primitivist discourse] may persist, and have potential
for new readings and alternative histories.”

Something of the particular material significance of printmaking in Indian modern art can
be illustrated, I believe, through a consideration of Mukul Dey's drypoint engraving *Fulki: A Santal Girl* (also called *Dream Lonely*), published in his book *Fifteen Drypoints* in 1939 (figure 2.34), and Ramendranath Chakravorty's *The Santal Dance*, done in woodcut and included in his book *Woodcut* in 1944 (figure 2.35). These images appear at first glance to be quite different. The clear marks of Chakravorty's gouges into the woodblock matrix are evident in his woodcut, which depicts an animated group of Santal men and women in a

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119 Myers, “‘Primitivism,’ Anthropology, and the Category of ‘Primitive’ Art,” 268.
circular movement of music and dance in an outdoor setting. The bold, large fields of black and white space (so typical of woodcut print) point immediately to the labour of the hand of the artist in carving the surface of the wood matrix. John Ruskin's analysis of wood engraving famously drew attention to the plow-like nature of the wood engraver's tools, and compared the carving of a woodcut to the creation of furrows in fields. Ruskin's theories were particularly relevant and circulated widely in late colonial India. There has been much valuable scholarship done on the complex ways that the Arts & Crafts movement was connected with Orientalist scholarship in the work of E.B. Havell, Ananda Coomaraswamy and others.\(^{120}\) Certainly the agricultural allusions conjured by woodcut printing that Ruskin proposes would have been readily acknowledged and understood by a late colonial audience for art in India that was conversant with the attitudes and rhetoric of the Arts & Crafts movement, and woodcut prints would have necessarily carried connotations of agriculture and village life. Both the awareness of the-block-that-has-been-carved, as well as the subsequent raised-relief surface of the printed page after it has been pressed against the deeply-carved surface, make woodcut the most sculptural of all printed media.

In contrast, the delicate incised lines drawn by Mukul Dey on the metal plate for his image *Fulki* or *Dream Lonely* have thrown up slender, exiguous ridges that held the ink for printing. Drypoint is a direct and subtle technique requiring few specialist tools and none of the chemical baths involved in other forms of etching, but which results in a visual

\(^{120}\) See, for example, Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New 'Indian' Art*, 148-149.
effect here of accomplished delicacy and penmanship, rather than the connotation of the plowing of a field. Unlike Chakravorty's community of movement surrounded by the flora of rural India, here the isolated, eroticized, and anonymous figure occupies an empty 'no-space,' with no environmental or contextual details detracting from the beautifully exotic female body presented for display.

Despite these differences, what these two images have in common is their imagining within a matrix of repetition. Both images are conceived and presented as multiples: as instances in a series, and as gestures towards a non-present other that is complicit in that series (whether that non-present other is imagined as the printing matrix, the other prints in the series, or the labour of the artist). The choice of reproductive techniques by both Dey and Chakravorty is connected, I believe, to the self-conscious, self-referential nature and experience of Indian modern art at this time, insofar as “an essential part of being modern is thinking you are modern.”

Notions of being modern were introduced to Indian art already embedded with the assumption that modernity and modern art were things that first arose in Europe and were then transported or spread elsewhere throughout the world in various ways. Such ideas have continued to have a major impact in South Asia, where one's own modernity has often been imagined in some ways as a being a copy, a mimicry, or a strange variant of the Western experience of modernity. It is in this copying, this repeating, and this gesturing beyond the individual image to that which

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is felt and known but which is not present, which I believe makes printed imagery such as those discussed in this chapter particularly eloquent in the negotiation and performance of modernity and modern art in India in the late colonial period. Thus images like Dey’s and Chakravorty’s, while they do participate in the primitivizing of the rural and the tribal that was a part of urban Bengali modernity in the early twentieth century, also very actively participate in the anxiety over uniqueness and originality that haunted that same modernity.

2.4.2 The No-Space of the Rural

The strange “no-space” observed in Mukul Dey’s *Fulki: A Santal Girl* is by no means an isolated case; it is, in fact, one of the recurring characteristics of many of the bucolic landscapes that, along with tribal imagery like that of the Santals, comprise the largest category of images contained in books of artists’ prints. This is because, although representationally these prints combine landscape and both human and animal figures in a surrounding space that appears to be exclusively rural, this easy association is complicated by the fact that there is often only minimal articulation of any kind of perspectival, comprehensible space in these images.

Consider, for example, the image titled *The Hill People’s Home* by Ramendranath Chakravorty, which was included in the book *Call of the Himalayas* (figure 2.12). The title of the piece immediately locates the scene in the impoverished northeast regions of
South Asia, and the scene depicts a rustic village building set in a field that is being harvested. But rather than offering the viewer a vista of reassuring, fecund landscape, here instead there are repeated, static geometric marks and patterns that are used to simply suggest or imply ripened fields. There is a strange kind of no-space that exists, on one level, as the lack of specificity or detail regarding any particular scene or location; in other words, this is no specific harvest, this is the idea of harvest-ness. The figures in the landscape are interchangeable and anonymous types devoid of facial features, rather than figures of well-defined individuals. Their very forms mimic the shape and the textures of their surroundings, dissolving the figures into the land they are ideologically bound to. At this level, the sense of no-space is almost indistinguishable from that conjured in rural or tribal subject matter across different media like painting that emerge from approximately the same time and place. Whether in painting, sculpture or print, images from this time and place that present anonymous images of the countryside and its inhabitants have this particular kind of no-space in common. There is obviously a major risk that this vague no-space can work to gloss over many of the harsh realities of rural life at this time, with its vulnerability to disease, famine and poverty. We must consider that Chakravorty’s image was created when the countryside was still recovering from the terrible trauma of the Bengal Famine of 1943 which, as we will see in further details in chapter four, underscored all of the dangers inherent in ignoring the specificity of rural reality. Yet this is exactly what Chakravorty’s image does, by evacuating all such detail in order to make images of rural India palatable to an urban audience, such details of specificity are ignored.
But there is also another sense in which these images evoke a no-space (or how they evoke no space) which is peculiar to the medium of relief printing, and which seriously complicates the primitivist vision of both the peasant and of the artisan-artist. Space in these images appears to be flattened against the picture plane, as the lines, marks and inked surfaces push forward, emphasizing the surface of the image on the page, and becoming as much the subject of the picture as any specifically rural symbolism or narrative. This is particularly true when holding the images themselves, and because these images circulated in books we know that they were meant to be held in the hand and viewed very closely to the eye and body. When you do so, in the case of the folios of original prints you are confronted with the subtle undulating waves of a page that has passed through a printing press. This has the ability to push the marked surface forward as the subject of the picture. Although this haptic quality was diminished in the case of books of reproductions of artists’ prints, I would argue that it was by no means entirely erased. The hand-crafted nature of the books themselves, the deliberately rough surfaces and paper, as well as the visual impact of the graphic images, all served to constantly remind the viewer of the carved block that created the image, and the hand of the artist in carving that block.

In this manner, by drawing the viewer’s attention to the labour of the artist and in doing so also redirecting us back to the labour of the peasant, relief-printed images like these are able to subtly subvert the primitivist impulse to deny the connection between art and the
material, physical world, in the process also implicating the tendency to idealize the rural as a serene utopia. Just as in their circulation and marketing on the open market these books denied the social pressures on artists to appear disinterested with their own livelihood, so too do these images’ very materiality and visuality deny the idea that art is somehow not “real work.” What is troubling is that this seems in some ways to be a complex appropriation of the rural in order to serve the visual desires of an urban modernity. At the same moment that these images valorize the idea of peasant labour and invest it with a weight of cultural significance, they also open the possibility of simultaneously drawing our attention away from the realities of that labour and instead towards the hand of the artist as craftsman. There is a risk that such images could not be merely apolitical, but repressive.

2.5 Conclusion

This chapter has dealt specifically with images that tend to be predominant in books of artists’ prints produced in the late colonial period in Bengal. These are images that embody a primitivizing trope in relation to the importance of the rural in the experience of Bengali modernity. However it would be a disservice to suggest that other types of images and books did not also appear in the Bengali art world(s) of this period. As I will argue in the following chapter, a related body of publications also dealt intensely with the issue of
individualism and its relation to the collective/community, particularly through an exploration of the genres of portraiture and biography.

It also worth mentioning that some images from the collection of books of artists’ prints represent urban imagery specifically, sometimes in ways that reinforce the notion of a hostile, impersonal urban space (figure 2.36). These urban images deserve closer individual examination, but this chapter has instead focused on the rural images that predominate. The majority of the art historical literature that deals with late colonial Bengal has tended either to reproduce the trope of primitivism that reinforces an elitism that focuses only on a small number of avant-garde painters, or else it has tended to focus on the spiritual ashram-like environment at the art school at Tagore’s rural university in Santiniketan, where earning a living was thought of as utterly and necessarily separate from the creation and appreciation of art. But by drawing attention to alternative strategies and artistic practices such as those encapsulated by these books of artists’ prints from the 1920s to the 1940s (and beyond), we gain a greater insight into the role of art in the experience of Indian modernity at this time. This was a period of intense social transformation, when the social role of the modern, urban, professional Bengali print artist was still only newly available and in a state of flux. I believe that in this environment, books of artists’ prints such as these were an extremely valuable tool for anyone wishing to embody the particular stylistics of existence that such a social role implied.
3: Print and the Individual

3.1 From the Village to the Self

In the previous chapter, I suggested that in order to successfully negotiate the emerging (and constantly transforming) Bengali art world(s) of the early decades of the twentieth century, it was essential for professional artists to be able to effectively and convincingly deal with the issue of the village and the rural, with its relationship to urban experience and its symbolic importance for and in Bengali identity. By looking closely at certain key examples within the category of “books of artists’ prints,” I pointed out that some of the unique material and historical possibilities that were made manifest in printmaking practices and printed imagery in Bengal during the late colonial period (particularly those related to relief print technologies such as woodcut and linocut) helped to render such books as Haren Das’s *Bengal Village in Wood Engraving* and Ramendraranath Chakravorty’s *Call of the Himalayas* as exceptionally powerful tools in the hands of artists who were attempting to negotiate this complicated relationship between the village and the city.

The present chapter examines books of a slightly different nature than those discussed in the previous chapter, although both sets have in common that they were made by one of the handful of professional Bengali printmakers of the early twentieth century. Also like the books discussed in chapter two, the books discussed in this chapter include
combinations of printed texts and images. But whereas the previous chapter dealt with “books of artists’ prints,” those that are the focus of the current chapter could perhaps better be described as “print artists’ books.” This slight shift in language offers an insight into a different (yet equally complicated) issue that also had to be addressed effectively by anyone attempting to carve out a career as a professional Bengali artist in the early twentieth century. While the books discussed in the previous chapter were heavily connected to issues related to the village and rural India, those that are the focus of this chapter instead address the modern cult of the individual and the ideal of individualism as it relates to Bengali art and modernity. As I will argue, it was yet again the unique capacities and potentialities inherent in printmaking and printed imagery that proved to be valuable tools in the hands of professional Bengali artists in addressing these issues. However, whereas I had argued in the previous chapter that it was relief print technologies that uniquely articulated and negotiated issues related the interplay between the village and the city, in this chapter I explore how the historical, material and experiential possibilities that were manifest in the intaglio processes of drypoint were able to particularly resonate with the experience of individualism in late colonial Bengal.

3.2 Discourse of Individualism and Collectivity in South Asia

A persistent theme encountered in much of the existing scholarship on South Asia is the emphasis placed on the concept of collectivity, and the formation of collective identities.
Whether South Asian identity is conceived of as being traced through the structures of religion, nationality, the village, caste, the extended family, or a combination of such frameworks, the extra-individual forces of religion, family, and community are often conceived of as playing a much greater role in the framing of human subjectivity in South Asia than they are generally perceived of as doing in other parts of the world, particularly when compared to the post-enlightenment West. In anthropological studies of South Asia particularly, but also traceable in the fields of history and art history, there has been a tendency to de-emphasize or erase the agency of the individual in relation to overarching structures of identity and power such as caste, the extended family, or religion. This idea of India’s lack of a sense of individuality and its de-centring of the individual in favour of larger social forces is most commonly associated with the work of anthropologists Louis Dumont and McKim Marriott. Dumont argued that the “basic sociological unit” of the Western individual was entirely lacking in South Asia, and Marriott argued that South Asians could best be understood not as “individuals” but as “dividuals,” with a sense of personhood and agency that he characterized as being largely (if not entirely) derived from sources external to the self. Important bodies of feminist, post-modernist, post-structural and Marxist scholarship have arisen in reaction to these highly structuralist anthropological approaches. But it is worth considering how the earlier scholars increasingly tended to treat bodies as “sites,” where social forces such as class, race,

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gender (and in the case of South Asia, caste) were played out and performed. Taken up and elaborated by the post-structuralist turn, this idea of the constant (re)performance of fluid identity has informed a notion of human beings (perhaps particularly in South Asia) being defined more in terms of intersubjectivity and interconnectivity, than as isolated individuals.

In the South Asian context, the inherent (and through discourse, constantly reiterated) intersubjectivity of South Asian identity seems to offer a particularly powerful example of decentred personhood. But as David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn have pointed out, it is incumbent upon contemporary scholars of South Asia to be cognizant of the enduring consequences of the paradigm of collectivity and the ways that it has been and continues to be reinforced in contemporary scholarship, because in many ways this paradigm has “upheld the dominance of caste identities and the hierarchical ideas and practices that accompan[y] it.”

It is true that the emphasis on collectivity is no longer as pronounced in South Asian scholarship as it used to be, but the theories of both Dumont and Marriott continue to find their way into historical, art historical and anthropological studies of South Asia even well into the twenty-first century. The scholarship of Christopher Pinney is an excellent example of the continued influence of the de-centred personhood model in South Asian-focussed scholarship. In his many valuable studies of Indian photography and photographic practices, Pinney has drawn on the work of both Dumont and Marriott,


126 In addition to numerous articles and chapters in edited volumes, Pinney’s monographs on photography in India include: *Camera Indica: the Social Life of Indian Photographs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press,
arguing for example that various traditions of South Asian photographic portraiture in
which identity appears to be performed in a split or duplicated manner can be best
understood against the backdrop of a general notion of decentred South Asian
personhood.127

Historian and anthropologist Nicholas Dirks has persuasively argued that the late colonial
period was precisely the historical moment when systems of Orientalist ethnography were
arguing—and colonial systems of administration were working to encourage—the belief
that collective identities were dominant in India: that India was somehow devoid of
individuals and individual agency, and was instead constituted as a conglomeration of
castes and religious communities that the colonial administration could effectively
enumerate, measure, negotiate with, and control.128 Thus, it was precisely during the late
colonial period, and specifically within colonialist frames of reference and systems of
knowledge, that the notion of India's somehow flawed or incomplete sense of
individualism was discursively tied to its stigma of flawed or incomplete modernity.
Insofar as the fully articulated individualism of the West was supposed to have evolved
through enlightenment humanism and capitalist enterprise, an emphasis on the individual
became one of the hallmarks by which India could be measured and assigned a particular
position along an evolutionary, developmental scale. As a consequence, the experience of
being both modern and Indian in the late colonial period implicated a very specific (but

127 Christopher Pinney, “Photographic Portraiture in Central India in the 1980s and 1990s,” in Portraiture:
Facing the Subject, ed. Joanne Woodall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 135.
128 Nicholas Dirks, Castes of Mind, 13.
not altogether globally uncommon) sense of anxiety. On the one hand, being modern in India demanded an appreciation and a cultivation of the unique self, while on the other hand it also presented a very real anxiety that one's personhood could somehow be “less discrete, less bounded and more permeable” than it was or could be experienced in the West. This could produce an anxiety that one’s own personhood might somehow be intrinsically incommensurate with the project and experience of modernity itself.

It is important for those of us who study the late colonial period in South Asia to pay close attention to issues of collectivity and its relationship to the individual, because one of the characteristics most commonly associated with the emergence of a self-consciously modern identity was an intensified belief in (and glorification of) the autonomous individual: one who was supposedly freed (or freer) from various external social and religious pressures, and self-governed by a rational and moral authority. Valuable bodies of post-modern and post-colonial scholarship have done much in recent decades to complicate and trouble such a positivist notion of the autonomous, independent, modern individual – both within Western and non-Western history. But we should acknowledge that during the late colonial period in South Asia, it was exactly this kind of a model of the emancipated, modern individual that gained significant cultural capital, particularly in centres of colonial administration such as Calcutta where Western social practices and standards of individualism were much more commonly encountered and more intensely

felt than they were in more rural and semi-rural areas. Indeed, when attempting to articulate the degree to which the pressure to be modern and the pressure to adopt westernized attitudes and behaviours tended to coalesce in late-colonial South Asia, Dipesh Chakrabarty draws specifically on a Bengali, Calcutta-based example: the poet and intellectual Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824-1873). One of the great nineteenth century poets and dramatists in the Bengali language, Dutt self-consciously emulated English society in his early career, even adopting a westernized name when he converted to Christianity. Even his eventual project to embrace Bengali language and culture may be in some ways connected to Dutt’s early exposure to emergent European ideas of nationalism and national identity. For Chakrabarty, all of this means that Dutt perfectly represents the fact that, by the late nineteenth century for many Bengalis, especially those in Calcutta, “to be a ‘modern individual’ meant to become a ‘European’.”

The work of professional Bengali print artists demonstrates that the performance of individuality and the pressure to appear and perform as an individual were strongly felt by professional artists who aspired to make a career for themselves in the Bengali art world. This is because western ideals of modern art were introduced to South Asia already embedded with the accompanying glorification of the figure of the artist as an individual genius (which was central to the practices and theories of art history as they had developed in European art from the Renaissance onwards). The concept of the artist as unique and

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individual genius has been (at least in the academic world, if not in the realm of popular art history) largely deconstructed through recent decades of valuable social art history that has worked to embed artists in their particular historical circumstances: as positioned and able to act/perform in certain ways because of larger social constructs related to gender, race, and class. Nevertheless, it is important to remember that, to a greater degree than those engaged in other forms of livelihood, the modern Bengali artist of the early twentieth century was perhaps more inclined to find ways to announce and promote their investment in individualistic traits such as self-consciousness, moral autonomy, self-reliance, and so on, because of the degree to which these characteristics had been valued in western art history, and because of the degree to which western art history was influential amongst those who attempted to be professional, respectable, Bengali artists at this time.

3.3 Individual Genres: Biography and Portraiture

The literary genres of biography and autobiography have long been associated with the growth of modern individualism in the West. In their emphasis on the production and (re)presentation of unique individuals, biography and autobiography have often been read as markers of the emergence of a particularly modern (and Western) form of historical consciousness.\textsuperscript{131} In recent decades many historians of the non-West have done valuable

\textsuperscript{131} Philip Holden, \textit{Autobiography and Decolonization: Modernity, Masculinity and the Nation State} (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 17.
work to complicate this view, by tracing unique and particular historic and cultural
conventions in non-Western traditions of life writing, which persuasively argue against
any uniquely Western (or modern) prerogative in the field of biographical production.\textsuperscript{132} In
the South Asian context in particular, traditions of self-reflexive writing have been shown
to be both ancient and varied. Some tradition of Indian biography can be traced at least to
the seventh century, to the \textit{Harshacharita} written by Banabhatta at the court of Kanauj.
His account of “a moral life-story” is said to have influenced Gandhi in the writing of his
own “experiments with truth.”\textsuperscript{133} Moreover, a rich tradition of biographical and
autobiographical writing can quite clearly be traced through the medieval and Mughal
periods, often heavily influenced by Persian traditions of life-writing.\textsuperscript{134} But despite these
examples, the modern literary genres of biography and autobiography (along with the
genres of history and the novel) are still often considered to have only really emerged in
South Asia during the modern period, as a part of the larger transformation of “public and
private rituals of modern individualism [that] became visible in India in the nineteenth
century.”\textsuperscript{135} Thus, the earlier, pre-colonial bodies of autobiographical writings can be
acknowledged as both intensely personal and experiential, but are deemed different from
biographical texts in the modern (western) sense, in that they are not entirely revelations

\textsuperscript{132} See, for example, W. Callewaert and R. Snell, eds., \textit{According to Tradition: Hagiographical Writing in
India} (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1994); or M. Kramer, ed., \textit{Middle Eastern Lives: The Practice of

\textsuperscript{133} David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, introduction to \textit{Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography
and Life History} (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 13-14

\textsuperscript{134} Vijaya Ramaswamy, introduction to \textit{Biography as History: Indian Perspectives} (New Delhi: Orient
Blackswn, 2009), 3.

\textsuperscript{135} Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History,” 8.
of private, interior qualities through the narrativization an individual self.\textsuperscript{136} This dismissal of other types of biographical writing serves to reinforce the idea that the “authentically” modern (like “true” biography) is only that which emerged first in the West.

Setting aside for the present purposes the complexities of contemporary scholarship on biographical writing, we may nevertheless acknowledge that during the late colonial period in Bengal, the literary forms of biography and autobiography very actively participated in the kind of anxiety of authenticity in Indian modernity that I have described earlier. On the one hand, there was a veritable explosion of writings in the first-person singular documenting individual lives in Bengal from the nineteenth century onwards, as the new, westernized concept of the individual was taking hold especially amongst the \textit{bhadralok} elite.\textsuperscript{137} Yet at the same time, throughout India, there was also a very real concern about whether such texts that focused on a single individual were appropriate for South Asian subjects, who were often understood as essentially permeable and inter-social. This paradox was articulated by Gandhi in his autobiography \textit{My Experiments with Truth}. In his introduction, Gandhi recounts that a close friend had tried to discourage him from writing such an autobiography on the grounds that such writings were “a practice

\textsuperscript{136} See, for example, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, “Making a Modern Self in Colonial Tamil Nadu,” in \textit{Biography as History: Indian Perspectives}, eds. Vijaya Ramaswamy and Yogesh Sharma (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2009), 32.

\textsuperscript{137} For a detailed study of the emergence and evolution of biographical forms in Bengal, see for example, Ipsita Chanda, \textit{Tracing the Carit as a Genre} (Kolkata: Jadavpur University, 2003) or Debipada Bhattacharya, \textit{Bangla Charit Sahitya} (Calcutta: Dey’s, 1982).
peculiar to the West. I know of nobody in the East having written one, except amongst those who have come under Western influence.”

In what follows, I will consider the entry of visual artists into this contested field of biographical production during the early decades of the twentieth century in Bengal. By looking particularly at key examples of autobiographies written by one particular professional Bengali printmaking artist at this time, I shall demonstrate how artists in this social position could use the tools of biographical production to stake out and negotiate certain identities for themselves as modern, Indian artists. Different opportunities and risks were involved for artists who elected to write autobiographical texts in this period, and biographical writing provided a means by which to introduce a new kind of social entity—the modern, professional artist—to its public. Literature and the written word have played a central role in Bengali cultural identity, both in the late colonial period and now. Therefore I am also concerned with how visual artists in Bengal have been particularly compelled to participate in the textual world in order to claim a role for themselves in Bengali public life. This chapter also seeks to address the means by which modern artists could seek material success by connecting themselves to new forms of urban patronage through an autobiographical medium, and how such texts can therefore be read as reminders of the inherent tensions between the ideal of an independent, artistic, modern self and anxieties over collectivity and dependence (vis-à-vis patronage and audience). By

pursuing the semantic shift from “books of artists’ prints” to “print artists’ books” in order to particularly identify and explore several autobiographical accounts that were written by professional Bengali print artists of the early twentieth century, I explicate the ways that different tools of social and artistic praxis were uniquely exploited by professional Bengali print artists at this time.

In the second part of this chapter, I will return to the category of “books of artists’ prints” in order to explore the interactions between the professional Bengali print artist and the genre of portraiture: a visual rather than predominantly textual genre that also participated deeply in the negotiation and performance of individualism in modern South Asia. While the previous chapter explored books of artists’ prints that tended to combine relief-print images of rural and village scenes with minimal texts, towards the end of this chapter I will introduce and discuss another, smaller sub-group within this category of books, which instead presented collections of portraits of famous individuals usually done in the intaglio process of drypoint, accompanied by biographical texts that were often quite lengthy. By expanding our understanding of the variations to be found within such an archival set, I disprove the notion that books of artists’ prints were in any way a monolithic category. What is particularly interesting in relation to both the “books of artists’ prints” that deal with issues of individualism through the genre of portraiture, and the “print artists’ books” that explore issues related to individualism through

139 The parallels between portraiture and biography, along with each genre’s investiture in individualism, are in many ways self-evident, and indeed have often been remarked upon. See, for example, Peter Burke, “The Renaissance, Individualism and the Portrait,” History of European Ideas, vol. 21, no. 3 (1995): 394.
autobiographical writing, is that both of these categories appear to coalesce around the figure of one particular (one might even say, one profoundly individualistic) artist: Mukul Chandra Dey (1895-1989).

### 3.4 The Artist as Individual: Mukul Chandra Dey

Though often overlooked or marginalized in the existing scholarly literature, Mukul Chandra Dey offers a unique opportunity to explore issues related to the performance of modern individualism in the twentieth century Bengali art world. First and most obviously, the trajectory of Dey's own biography intersects and engages with the rich cultural history of late colonial Bengal. Dey was born in 1895 to a relatively privileged but not excessively wealthy zamindar family that held land in the small village of Akiyadhal, near Bikrampur, in the Dhaka district of East Bengal (now Bangladesh). Dey’s grandfather had been a lawyer and his father a police inspector (and aspiring poet). In his childhood, some of the peasant children from his village teased Mukul Dey for being a privileged “landlord’s son,” as evidenced by the many boats that his family owned and rented out. But later in life Dey had trouble shaking off the reputation of being an East

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140 In the current academic literature, Mukul Dey tends to garner occasional and marginal reference. In the two major texts by Tapati Guha-Thakurta and Partha Mitter that deal with the nationalist narrative of art of the first decades of the twentieth century in India, Mukul Dey is mentioned roughly a half-dozen times and one of his works is illustrated. Guha-Thakurta, *The Making of a New ‘Indian’ Art*, 200 and 301; and Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India*, 117 and 305.

141 The term zamindar derives from the Persian term zamin, meaning ‘land,’ and dar which denotes possession, and it arose first during the Mughal period to refer to the hereditary landholder class in Bengal but its meaning expanded and became more relevant during the British colonial period when the zamindar class became critical to the workings of politics, economics, and culture. *Banglapedia: The National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh*, s.v., “Zamindar.”

Bengali, “rough fellow.” When he settled in the colonial metropolis of Calcutta in West Bengal, Dey’s East Bengali accent and his perceived lack of urban refinements were often a liability. Especially amongst the elite realms of Bengali society, these traits earned Dey the reputation of being not quite respectably *bhadralok*.

In 1907 Mukul Dey’s father sent him to Santiniketan in rural West Bengal, to study at Rabindranath Tagore’s experimental educational project when it was still in its earliest, ashram-like period, before it became Visva-Bharati University. During his studies there, Dey demonstrated a talent for drawing and painting that the ashram at Santiniketan was not yet in a position to adequately accommodate, as this was long before the founding of the Kala Bhavan art school that today forms an important department within Visva-Bharati. Dey was therefore encouraged to send some of his works by post to Calcutta, to be reviewed and critiqued by Rabindranath’s nephew, the famous artist and leader of the Bengal School of painting, Abanindranath Tagore. After five years of living in Santiniketan as a student, Dey went to live and work in Calcutta in 1912. There he continued his artistic education under Abanindranath directly, often staying at the Tagore family home in Jorasanko, a northern neighbourhood of Calcutta that is intrinsically associated with the Tagore family. In Calcutta, Dey became associated with both the Indian Society of Oriental Art and the Bengal School, at a time when both were intensely

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143 To some extent this accusation continues to haunt Dey’s reputation. During the course of my research in Bengal, several sources expressed surprise at my being interested in such a “rough, coarse man,” who was disparagingly described to me on more than one occasion as being “not properly *bhadralok*.”

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involved in the nationalist debates over what constituted the “correct” mode of modern Indian expression in the visual arts, as described in the introductory chapter.

In 1916 and 1917, Dey accompanied Rabindranath Tagore on a tour of Japan and America, undertaken when Tagore was enjoying a particularly intense wave of international celebrity after being awarded the Nobel Prize for literature.\textsuperscript{144} On this journey, Dey was either Tagore’s protégé or his assistant, depending on one’s historical perspective and one’s opinion of Dey. Dey later described his duties on this journey as consisting of observing all that happened around him and telling Rabindranath about it in the evenings. He was also responsible for cleaning and filling Tagore’s many fountain pens, and making fresh fruit juice for him every morning.\textsuperscript{145} Dey also described a clever method by which he was able to take advantage of his particular social position on this journey in order to earn some extra income:

\begin{quote}
Whenever we had meetings or gatherings on this trip to Japan and America, I used to earn a great deal of money. It was a very easy method of gaining income. Many people used to want Gurudev’s autographed books to keep as a souvenir. Some people also wanted him to write one or two lines for them. But it wasn’t possible for all these people to gain direct access to Gurudev. They used to persistently ask me for help. In Gurudev’s leisure time, I used to get him to sign and write poems according to people’s requests. When these people received these things they were extremely happy. In their happiness they used to give me money.\textsuperscript{146}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{144} Tagore was the first Nobel Prize recipient from Asia, winning for poetry in 1913.
\textsuperscript{145} Dey, \textit{Amar Katha}, 49.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid, 56-57.
After travelling in passenger cabins on a cargo ship from Calcutta to Japan, Dey and Tagore eventually sailed on to North America via Hawaii on a passenger ship. They alighted briefly in Vancouver before quickly travelling on to Seattle, California, Chicago, and eventually New York.\(^{147}\) Prior to this journey, Dey had already tried his hand at etching in India, under the instruction and encouragement of William Winstanley Pearson (1881-1923).\(^{148}\) While in America, Dey received critical instruction and encouragement in printmaking techniques and media from James Blanding Sloan (1886-1975). Dey also made the acquaintance of Bertha E. Jaques (1863-1941), founder of the Chicago Society of Etchers; during his stay in Chicago, Dey exhibited with the society and was made a lifetime member of the organization.\(^{149}\) When he returned to India in 1917, Dey brought with him an etching press that he had acquired in America, which remained a valuable tool of his artistic practice throughout his career. Today the press remains in Dey’s family home (and now archive) in Santiniketan.

Mukul Dey’s father died on July 1, 1917, very soon after he and Rabindranath Tagore returned to India from this trip abroad.\(^{150}\) As the eldest son of the family, a great deal of family responsibility fell to the not-yet-22-year-old Mukul. The weight of these family responsibilities

\(^{147}\) Of his brief time in Canada, Dey noted that the people here were, as in India, ruled by the British. Of Vancouverites, Dey remarked that “in their gestures and behaviour they are extremely sluggish and slow. They eat a lot of beef, drink a lot of alcohol, gamble and they’re all musical.” Ibid, 63.

\(^{148}\) Pearson was a friend and associate of Tagore and a mentor to Dey. He was the author of *Santiniketan: the Bolpur School of Rabindranath Tagore* (New York: Macmillan: 1916), for which Dey drew the illustrations.


\(^{150}\) Dey recounted in his later memoirs that he received offers of sponsorship or scholarship that would have allowed him to remain longer in America or Japan, but that Rabindranath insisted that he return with him to India, saying “I took him from his father and I will return him to his father.” Because of this insistence, Dey was able to see his father before he died and to perform the final funeral rites. Dey, *Amar Katha*, 60.
obligations must have been daunting, but he soon received an invitation to stay at the Tagore family home in Jorasanko while teaching art and painting to the some of the young children of the household, for which he was offered a monthly salary of 60 rupees. Such a position must have offered an appealingly stable income for the young, aspiring artist, and indeed he worked for several months in the Tagore household. But in the end, this arrangement fell apart when Dey’s sense of his own status was found to be not in agreement with the treatment that he received from one of his young charges. It seems that one day Abanindranath Tagore’s son called out to Dey in an impolite manner, addressing him as one would address a low-class servant or a manual worker. Dey took offence and slapped the boy across the face for his rudeness, and left Jorasanko immediately. Both Dey and others later recounted this event, which appears to have caused some minor scandal at the time. Different accounts either blame Dey for not showing proper gratitude to the Tagores and having ideas above his station, or else applaud him for taking a stand against the rudeness of a privileged, spoiled boy.

Following this episode, as soon as Dey was able to make arrangements to relocate his mother and his younger siblings to their village home, he then used some money that he had earned through the sale of paintings to set out travelling across India. This period included his first visit to the Ajanta caves (about which more will be said later). During this period from roughly 1918 to 1920, Mukul Dey was a young, struggling artist attempting to scratch out a livelihood by selling portraits and other works of art at very

151 Ibid, 71.
low prices. But after a few years of this rather nomadic existence in India, Dey eventually sailed for England in 1920, where he settled for the most part in London. There he studied first at the Slade School under Henry Tonks (1862-1937), and later at the Royal College of Art under the printmaker Frank Short (1957-1945). Dey also studied privately with Muirhead Bone (1876-1953), through the recommendation of W. W. Pearson. Dey later described his introduction to the system of arts education in England as follows:

When I first went to join the Slade School in London, I had the book *Twelve Portraits* with me. Professor Henry Tonks, having turned a few pages, said to me with a solemn face: “I do not know why you have come to our country to learn our bad art, which we are almost going to discard. You are from India, the country I know is carrying the tradition of spiritual art over a thousand years. What can you learn from our school of Art? You better go to your own country and try to find out the golden treasure of art hidden there.” I then said to the professor, with much hesitation, “Sir, I want to learn the techniques of oil painting, etching, etc.” Then the professor said, with a sweet and light smile, “Alright, you go to the life class.”

From then I started my life class. About fifty people, boys and girls were in this classroom. Everyone was surprised, wondering from where had come this one blackie before them? Many children from important families, even after trying for five or ten years don’t receive entry, and here was one Indian young man, how did he get permission? Thus began my Slade School life.152

Dey spent seven years in England, primarily studying but also towards the end lecturing and exhibiting his work. In general, he worked very hard at assembling a set of skills and connections that would serve him well later in his professional career. Dey sent his works, unsolicited, to the Royal Palaces, and forever kept the official letter of acknowledgement

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152 Dey, *Amar Katha*, 100.
and polite thanks that was sent to him in response. He carried with him all possible letters of introduction and recommendation. He collected every news reference and article related to him and his work, and persistently assembled a resume of accomplishments to prepare him for a successful return to India. The opportunity for such a return arose in the form of an advertisement for the prestigious position of Principal of the Government School of Art in Calcutta. After a rather lengthy application procedure, Dey received the appointment and took up the job in July 1928, making him the first non-European to hold the position.

Dey’s appointment was something of a surprise to those in the Bengali art world at the time, as many people had assumed that the job would be offered to Jamini Prakash Ganguly (1876-1953). Ganguly was a talented, if somewhat old-fashioned, artist of the academic naturalist school who, in addition to being related to the Tagore family, had at that point already been serving as the school’s acting Principal for several months, following the departure of the previous Principal, Percy Brown. However, despite these societal expectations that the post would go to someone from the hereditarily aristocratic realm of Bengali society, instead it seems that at this particular moment, the colonial administration that was in charge of the hiring process for the position of Principal of the Government Art School was inclined not to favour the Tagore family. Instead, a window of opportunity may have opened for the (at that time) less-elite, professional artist Mukul Dey to plant a foothold higher up in the social hierarchy of the Bengali art world. At this moment, Mukul Dey was in a position to be able to swing the appointment of the position in his favour, but the process of application was not easy and required several stages of
documentation and re-application. This was in sharp contrast to the way in which Abanindranath Tagore had been appointed as Vice-Principal of the school in 1905, when the decision was made very quickly and entirely at the local level by Principal E.B. Havell. Indeed, Tagore only had to submit a perfunctory letter by way of application.153

Tension between Mukul Dey and Jamini Ganguly was pronounced following Dey’s appointment as Principal of the Government School of Art. Dey even credited Ganguly with stirring up a student strike against his leadership, in an attempt to make his position as principal untenable. But ultimately Ganguly elected to take a leave of absence from the school, and not long afterwards he tendered his resignation. In the end, Mukul Dey held this post as principal (sometimes tenuously) for fifteen years. During this lengthy tenure, Dey influenced virtually an entire generation of young, professionally-trained Bengali artists—both through his implementation of various institutional initiatives, and by virtue of the fact that his own career trajectory provided students with an instructive model for them to follow, or to rebel against. Eventually, the changing politics of the Government Art School resulted in his being removed as Principal in 1943, after which he suffered a near-total physical and mental collapse. Thereafter, Dey often struggled to earn a regular and sufficient living as an artist that would allow him to support himself and his family.

153 Tagore’s hand-written letter of application acknowledged that he had no university education that would qualify him for the post, but noted that “the fact of my being the great-grandson of the late Dwarka Nath Tagore will, I trust, be sufficient to indicate my general respectability and position in society.” J.C. Bagal, “History,” 30. In contrast, at the Mukul Dey Archive in Santiniketan there exists an exciting yet still partial archive of the voluminous materials that Dey assembled for his application to the Principal position in 1927, including many letters of recommendation from notable persons, as well as examples of his own artwork. Further research into what documentation exists within the colonial archive related to the 1905 and 1927 appointments awaits a future opportunity to access materials in London.
Mukul Dey undertook a few additional international travels later in life, including a trip to America in 1953 and 1954 as a Fulbright Scholar, and a trip to England for an exhibition of his work at the Commonwealth Institute in London in 1960. But for most of the remainder of his life Dey lived quietly at the home he had built in Santiniketan, not far from Visva Bharati University. He died there in 1989.

Although he produced a large body of painting and drawing work and was also a talented amateur photographer, today Mukul Dey is remembered primarily as a printmaker. He was unusual for being one of those few Bengali artists of the period to truly specialize in printmaking media, and in his case the choice of medium was even more unusual and unique: one could say, even more individual. Mukul Dey specialized in and championed the intaglio process of drypoint engraving. Dey pioneered this process in India and he can still be credited as the one of the only South Asian artists to ever so entirely devote himself to that particular medium.

3.5 Mukul Dey and Autobiography

Mukul Dey offers a particularly useful case study for the exploration of issues related to modern artistic individualism in Bengal, not only because of his own fascinating biographical trajectory and the ways it intersects with the rich social and cultural history of late colonial Bengal, but also because he was the most prolific of the small number of
Bengali artists who wrote autobiographical accounts during this period. Texts of this type by members of the Tagore family are today perhaps the most widely known. For example, Rabindranath Tagore’s memoir *My Reminiscences* was first published, to great acclaim, in 1917. Abanindranath Tagore’s *Apon Katha (My Story)* first appeared as a series articles in the Bengali journals *Bangabani* and *Chitra* between 1927 and 1938; they were later collected and published as a book in English translation in 1946. Abanindranath also wrote autobiographical texts titled *Gharoa (Homely Tales)* and *Jorasankar Dhare (By the Side of Jorasanko)*, which were narrated by Abanindranath and transcribed, edited and organized by Rani Chanda (née Rani Dey, the younger sister of Mukul Dey) into their final forms as published books. These were then published in 1941 and 1944, respectively.

Given their fame, the Tagores would have enjoyed an already established audience for autobiographical accounts of their remarkable (and for most people, utterly inaccessible) lives. But there were also a few cases of other, somewhat lesser well-known Bengali artists, such as Sudhir Khastgir and Chittaprosad, who also had occasion to write texts of an autobiographical nature during this period. Sudhir Khastgir’s *Myself*, for example, is a fairly straightforward biographical account written and illustrated by the artist with reproductions of many of his artworks from a variety of media. 

Chittaprosad’s *Hungry Bengal*, on the other hand, while it does contain many of elements of personal narrative, in

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other ways transcends the category of biography or autobiography for reasons that will be
more fully explained and developed in the following chapter.155

Amongst these few examples of Bengali artists writing autobiographies during this period,
Mukul Dey stands out from amongst his contemporaries because he wrote at least three
major texts that can be called autobiographical, as well as numerous smaller
autobiographical articles, catalogue texts, press releases, letters and so on. His three major
autobiographical texts are: (1) his book My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh (figure 3.1),
first published in London by Thornton Butterworth Publishers in 1925 and later
republished in New York by Doran Publishers in 1950; (2) his self-published booklet My
Reminiscences, printed in 1938 (figures 3.2 and 3.3); and (3) the Bengali language memoir
Amar Katha (figure 3.4) which Dey dictated in a series of recorded conversations in the
late 1980s, and which was later compiled, edited and published posthumously in 1995.
Largely textual rather than visual in nature, these books do not easily fit within the criteria
set out in the previous chapter that defined the category of “books of artists’ prints.” But
written as they are by the pioneer etcher-engraver in India, and containing in each instance
several examples of black and white reproductions of photographs, drawings, and prints,
these books most certainly do qualify as “print artists’ books.” In the following sections I
will discuss the first of these texts, My Pilgrimages, in detail. I will then deal more

155 Chittaprosad, Hungry Bengal – A Tour Through Midnapur District, November 1943 (Bombay: People’s
Publishing House, 1944).
generally with the other two texts, and I include lengthy selections of the last, *Amar Katha*, translated from Bengali into English as Appendix A to this thesis.

### 3.5.1 *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh*

The text of the book *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh* (hereinafter referred to as *My Pilgrimages*) recounts two journeys that Dey undertook to the famous Buddhist cave complex at Ajanta, and the somewhat lesser known caves at Bagh, both in Western India. Both trips took place during the brief period after he had returned to India from the journey he took with Rabindranath to Japan and America in 1916 and 1917, and before he left India in 1920 in order to study art in London. These visits to Ajanta and Bagh were a part of Dey’s wide-ranging journeys throughout South Asia during these intervening years when he was struggling to carve out a living for himself as an artist following the death of his father. Dey’s first visit to the Ajanta caves was a relatively brief one in 1918, but he later returned in 1919 and then stayed at the caves for nine months, studying the caves and their decoration, and painting a complete set of copies of the Ajanta murals on paper. After completing this task, he moved on to stay briefly at the Bagh caves where he undertook similar work.

Since their re-discovery by Europeans in the early nineteenth century, the wall paintings that cover the interior surfaces of the Ajanta caves had done much to bolster India’s claims to an indigenous painting tradition. Previously, much of the colonialist art history about
South Asia had suggested that India had traditionally only known the plastic arts of sculpture and architecture, and that the art of painting had been unknown and unpractised in South Asia before the Mughal period. But the (re)discovery of Ajanta (and to a lesser extent Bagh), with their exuberant and fully developed mural painting tradition, had turned that theory on its head. In the nationalist rhetoric that coloured much art discourse in the late colonial period in India, Ajanta was recruited into the role of representing a lost golden age of Indian art and society, on par with the classical past of Greece and Rome in the European tradition. By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many of the government-established schools of art across South Asia (including the Government School of Art in Calcutta) undertook the production of large projects that documented and categorized the antiquities of the newly-acquired colonial holdings; Ajanta figured prominently as the subject of elaborate and expensive volumes of drawings and copies of the murals (such as Lady Herringham’s volume, *Ajanta Frescoes*, mentioned in the previous chapter). For working artists such as Dey was during this period, before he secured his valuable education and connections abroad, Ajanta represented a site of pilgrimage much in the same way that Badrinath functioned as a site of pilgrimage for Ramendranath Chakravorty in his book *Call of the Himalayas* (discussed in chapter two). But in the case of Ajanta, pilgrimage to the site was also overlaid with resonances of an Indian version of the European Grand Tour. By the early twentieth century, a pilgrimage to Ajanta had become *de rigueur* for those attempting to stake their claim to a persona and a livelihood as a professional artist.156

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The narrative of *My Pilgrimages* weaves fluidly through and across the genres of travelogue, personal autobiography and historical text. Suggestions for accommodation and information about the cost of hiring local transportation are offered alongside historical sketches of the life of the Buddha and the monastic community who first built and lived in the Ajanta caves in the early centuries of the Common Era. Crucially, everywhere throughout the text are woven stories of Dey's own personal experiences in travelling to and living at the caves, where he undertook a several-months-long project of producing painted copies on paper of the ancient murals. Throughout the text Dey recounts his “adventures pleasant and otherwise,” including spirited accounts of his travel across India by train (including an amusing anecdote of the sartorial barriers to travelling in a first class carriage: only those Indians in western attire were allowed), his encounters with wild animals, and the death of his servant from cholera.

Dey weaves together the personal and the historic in many ways throughout this text. Chapter nine, for example, begins with a description of a certain set of caves, including standardized information on their chronologies, measurements, features and decorations. The narrative then suddenly breaks away from this inventory to describe some monkeys and the trouble they caused Dey one day while he was trying to do his work in the caves. As the anecdote unfolds, Dey chases the monkeys into the jungle where he discovers a set of enormous, carved stone elephants. Dey realizes that the sculptures are those referred to

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by sixth century Chinese pilgrims, thus bringing his personal anecdotal detour back full circle to the history of Ajanta, its connections to ancient routes of pilgrimage, and the history of Buddhism in Asia.\textsuperscript{158} This is simply one example of a pattern that recurs throughout \textit{My Pilgrimages}; everywhere in this text Dey's own personal narrative is inexorably bound up with and within his recounting of the story of Ajanta itself.

Partha Chatterjee has noted that in many other Indian autobiographies written in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was a tendency to veer away from the exploration of the individual personality and psychology of the subject in favour of instead connecting an individual life to larger political and historical phenomena. In the Bengali context in particular, Chatterjee notes that this trend often manifested as a tendency for early Bengali autobiographers to graft their own story onto the story of the burgeoning nationalist movement. This leads him to suggest that during the late colonial period the figure of the new, modern individual could in some ways only be understood “by inscribing it in the narrative of the nation.”\textsuperscript{159} In a similar manner, I believe that someone like Mukul Dey, who was then still a relative unknown in the Bengali art world and whose social role and status did not seem to immediately demand or warrant its own biographical account, was able to present his own personal narrative at this time only by presenting it alongside and in relation to a national symbol of great cultural significance, such as the Ajanta caves. Thus, the nationalist narrative made possible with an account of the Ajanta

\textsuperscript{158} Ibid, 140-142.
\textsuperscript{159} Chatterjee, \textit{The Nation and its Fragments}, 138.
caves may have provided the opportunity for a relatively unknown artist to assert his credentials and experience. What is particularly significant however, and what distinguishes Dey's autobiography from the examples discussed by Chatterjee, is the choice of a nationalistic model drawn particularly from the field of visual culture or art history on which Dey has elected to graft his own personal narrative. As a visual artist, Dey was compelled to participate in and to identify with national symbols of visual art and culture like Ajanta. These were the tools at hand that could be effectively used by visual artists like Dey as vehicles through which to negotiate and present their artistic identities to the public.

Moreover, insofar as *My Pilgrimages* displays the tendency to veer away from an intense exploration of its author's inner psychology or personality, it also has this trait in common with the large body of artists' lifewritings that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in England. Julie Codell has argued that artists' lifewritings in Britain differed significantly from the usual Victorian models in that, rather than being prone to introspection and spiritual revelation, artists' autobiographies tended instead to function as extensions of their art practice, and were designed to attract readers (and by extension, potential buyers and patrons) through a more casual conversational or anecdotal attitude and approach. Autobiography was, by this time in England, a well-established means by which artists managed to present and promote themselves as respectable working artists.

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In this context it is important to remember that Mukul Dey wrote and published *My Pilgrimages* during the seven-year period that he spent living and working in England. Indeed, a great deal of the text of *My Pilgrimages* was clearly intended for a European audience. Thus it seems likely that the lack of introspection that marks many other early Bengali autobiographies may be connected, in this case at least, less to nationalist notions of the self, and more to a desire for struggling, professional artists to promote themselves as productive, respectable, and fully socialized members of society.

The illustrations in *My Pilgrimages* also serve to distinguish this text from any other colonial-period Bengali autobiographies that have thus far been discussed or analyzed in the related literature. The images in the book are remarkable both for their variety and their sheer volume. They include numerous photographs (figure 3.5), line drawings (figure 3.6), and reproductions of many of the painted copies of the frescoes that Dey made during his time at the caves (figure 3.7). Altogether there are nearly one hundred images, making *My Pilgrimages* the most extensively illustrated early Bengali autobiography to my knowledge. Moreover, it would appear from some correspondence that survives between Dey and his original London publisher that Dey wanted to include even more illustrations in the book. In a letter dated 29 January 1925, a representative of Thornton Butterworth Publishers wrote to Dey explaining that they had not planned or budgeted for the large number of illustrations that Dey had provided, and asking him to come to their offices at his earliest convenience in order to make a reduced selection. Such a strong

161 Letter from Thornton Butterworth to Mukul Dey, 29 January 1925. Courtesy of Mukul Dey Archives.
visual presence in the text obviously speaks to Dey's training and background as a visual artist. His tendency to contemplate the world visually is also obvious from his liberal use of descriptive language throughout the text, and his tendency to linger over visual descriptions of the cave paintings and the wilderness surroundings. It seems only reasonable to surmise that visual artists like Dey, who elected to enter into the textual, biographical world, would do so in a manner that emphasized the role of the visual in public life through both numerous illustrations and rich visual descriptions.

However, the images in *My Pilgrimages* also relate and contribute to Mukul Dey’s ability to fashion himself as a modern Indian artist in another, very concrete, material sense. Before they became illustrations for this book, Dey’s studies of the Ajanta cave murals first circulated as independent commodities. Many of the copies of the Ajanta and Bagh murals which Dey produced during his time at the caves (and which are reproduced in *My Pilgrimages*) were sold to a Mr. Kallianjee Curumsey in Bombay just before Dey sailed for England in 1920. It was in fact the sale of this collection of paintings (and their shift from a non-commodity to a commodity state) that provided Dey with the financial wherewithal to be able to undertake his journey to Europe, where he was in turn able to obtain the additional training, credentials and connections, and where he was able to assemble a suitably impressive résumé, that were all critical to Mukul Dey being able to successfully market himself as an artist both in England and upon his return to India. These images therefore not only reflected an already-established artistic sensibility, they
also actively contributed to the establishment of a viable identity as a successful, professional Indian artist.

3.5.2 My Reminiscences and Amar Katha

The parameters of this chapter preclude a detailed analysis of the two other major autobiographical texts written by Mukul Dey. Briefly however, these are his *My Reminiscences* (figures 3.2 and 3.3), composed in English and self-published in 1938 while Dey was serving as principal of the Government Art School in Calcutta, and his *Amar Katha* (figure 3.4), dictated as a series of conversations in Bengali and published posthumously in 1995. *My Reminiscences* recounts Dey’s childhood and early education, includes a lengthy description of his international travels and successes, and also provides some information about his work as an artist and principal after his return to India. Sudipta Kaviraj has argued that some early Bengali autobiographies were written to present readers with the possibility of a new kind of life. He argues that in times of great social change, such as late-colonial South Asia, people were compelled to write their own stories not because they were exemplary, but because they in some way represented a remarkably new kind of life that even a few years previously would have been largely unthinkable. I believe that in much the same way, the book *My Reminiscences* presents a model of a

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162 In addition to these three major autobiographical texts, there are several other minor texts that Dey also produced that have an autobiographical element, including short journal and newspaper articles like “Amar Chelebela”, and the book *Indian Life and Legends* (1974).

possible life, lived as a professional Bengali artist. This self-published pamphlet in essence presents an outline of a constellation of skills and opportunities that made such a life possible, including details of personal travel, friendships, choice of specialization (crucially, through printmaking), paths of professionalization, and access to and best use of new forms of urban patronage and self-promotion. It is also important that this text was self-published by Dey in the context of intense challenges to his authority as principal of the Government School of Art. Recall that many were surprised the post had not gone to Tagore family member Jamini Ganguly. Even in the 1930s, Dey was still having to justify and validate his position, and producing a text like *My Reminiscences* that set forth his various qualifications would have been an effective tool in that struggle.

*My Reminiscences* is also particularly interesting because it was self-published. The two copies preserved at the Mukul Dey Archive in Santiniketan testify to the hand-made nature of this publication, as they illustrate that some copies had a printed cover (figure 3.2) while others had a hand-written one (figure 3.3). As an artist who specialized in etching and engraving specifically, Dey had privileged access to specialized printmaking equipment, along with the skills and training necessary to be able to use that equipment well. He kept the intaglio printing press he had obtained in America in 1917 in his home for the rest of his life, and he also maintained good working relationships with local publishers, often using them for larger publishing projects. In fact, it would not be an understatement to say that Mukul Dey was a prolific producer of printed imagery and texts for his entire career. *My Reminiscences* is thereby interesting for the ways that it
participates in a much larger body of self-published textual and visual material produced by Dey, including personalized insignia, letterhead and logos, which collectively added greatly to the validation and reinforcement of Dey’s authority, and testified that his printed material was legitimate.

Examples of such additional, self-printed and -produced ephemera made by Mukul Dey include a “With Compliments” card displaying one of his personalized logos (figure 3.8), Christmas cards with reproductions of original etchings by Dey (figure 3.9), and self-published catalogues of works for sale from Dey's collection, which include a boat-shaped logo and seal that was designed for Dey by Rabindranath Tagore (figure 3.10). At times Dey also impressed some of his works with the personalized seals of Okakura Tensin and Gaganendranath Tagore (figure 3.11), which Dey acquired sometime in the 1930s. When considered together, the large body of printed imagery and texts produced by Dey around the time that he produced *My Reminiscences* speaks to the ways that the tools of printing and printmaking were (at that time and for those artists who could wield them) a valuable means by which to promote oneself as a professional Bengali artist. Although Dey may have been the artist who best and most consistently utilized these strategies and tools, his example would have provided a model for many of the art students who passed through the Government School of Art during his fifteen-year tenure as principal.

Finally, towards the end of his life Dey dictated the Bangla-language memoir *Amar Katha* (My Story). The choice of title is significant, as the use of “katha” to refer to one’s
memoirs could have signalled that Dey’s book was staking a claim to a genealogy of autobiography that reached back to Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Katha*, originally published in 1913. Born into prostitution, Dasi eventually became one of the most famous stage actresses of the era, but her humble origins often stood in the way of her receiving her due the recognition and acknowledgement. Written when she was mourning the death of several important people in her life, Binodini Dasi’s *Amar Katha* is tinged with resentment and hostility at a society that did not fully accept her. By choosing to title his own final memoir *Amar Katha* as well, it is possible that Mukul Dey was attempting to draw a parallel between the way that his contributions to the Bengali art world had been unfairly marginalized, as Dasi’s had been to the world of Bengali theatre.

Although not published until after Dey's death, *Amar Katha* was recorded at a time when biographical accounts of several other artists who had also been active in the early twentieth century were also appearing in print. Nandalal Bose's biography *Bharatshilpi Nandalal*, for example, was written by Panchanan Mondal (in consultation with Bose) and published in four volumes between 1982 and 1993. Similarly, the fictionalized biography of Ramkinkar Baij written by Samaresh Basu, *Dekhi Nai Phire*, appeared first as a series of articles in the journal *Desh* through the 1980s before later being published in book form. Autobiographies had been popular in Bengal for a very long time by this point, but the proliferation of autobiographical texts from Bengali artists who had been active in the

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early twentieth century at this time suggests that the art history of the late colonial period was becoming increasingly ripe for revisitation and reinterpretation, and that biographical texts were one of the means by which alternative and competing interpretations and accounts could be presented and debated. Indeed, it seems there was something of an autobiographical war being waged at the end of the twentieth century, with the same events and the same people being presented in very different ways in different memoirs, as artists nearing the end of their careers (and lives) sought a final means by which to secure their place in art history and to ensure that their version of events would be the one remembered. For example, the minor scandal mentioned earlier, when Mukul Dey slapped the face of Abanindranath’s son and quit his employment at the Jorasanko home, is recounted both by Dey in his own memoir *Amar Katha* and by Nandalal Bose and Panchanan Mondal in *Bharatshilpi Nandalal*. In the latter, Dey is criticized for biting the hand that fed him, and not being duly deferential to his illustrious patrons. In the former, Dey stands by his refusal to be insulted by a spoiled young boy. The idea of blame is what may have concerned Dey and Bose, but we as readers can perhaps see the disagreement itself, and the fact that it played itself out in duelling autobiographical texts, as proof that biography was and continues to be an important player in the telling of Bengali art history.

Taken as a whole, the autobiographical writings of Mukul Dey provide a powerful insight into the ways in which one particular Indian artist was able to first enter into the British art world of the early twentieth century by building on a strong tradition of and fascination with artists' biographies (with the book *My Pilgrimages*), how he was also able to reinsert
himself into the Indian art world by presenting evidence of his international successes in a biographical format (with the pamphlet *My Reminiscences*), and finally how he was able to reflect and comment on the successes and failures of his career towards the end of his life (with *Amar Katha*). These kinds of writings testify to the importance of the autobiographical text was a powerful tool by which artists of this period were able to both authorize and author themselves, not only by providing a means by which to introduce the artist to its public, but also by actively contributing to the formation of the identity of the professional modern Bengali artist.

3.6 Portraits and the Individual in South Asia

Portraiture also reflects a complex and fascinating relationship with individualism. Like biography, portraiture is often treated as a particularly modern phenomenon in South Asia, despite the existence of a rich history of pre-modern images in South Asia that could be categorized as portraits; examples of ancient and pre-modern South Asian portraiture are both varied and numerous.\(^{165}\) But historical portrait images from South Asia tend to be dismissed as idealized representations only, not concerned with capturing accurate physiological or psychological details, but instead intended to communicate something of

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\(^{165}\) The earliest images from South Asia that are widely understood as portraits date from the Kushan Dynasty of the first and second centuries of the Common Era. Many later examples of portraits of royalty, donors and individual devotees were also carved in and around the south Indian temples of the Cholá and Pallava dynasties of the seventh to twelfth centuries. For more on the Kushan portraits see John Rosenfield, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967). For more on Chola and Pallava portrait sculpture from South India, see: Padma Kaimal, “The Problem of Portraiture in South Asia, circa 870-970 AD,” *Artibus Asiae* vol. 58, no. 1/2 (1999), 59-133; and T.G. Aravamuthan, *Portrait Sculpture in South India* (London: The India Society, 1931).
the subject’s “veritable spiritual essence.” Thus in many ways the literature on portraiture mirrors how biographical and autobiographical texts have been discussed in much of the existing South Asian-centred scholarship (as originating in the West, despite ample pre-modern South Asian examples).

For example, the seventh century text Pratimanataka has often been quoted in art historical texts dealing with this aspect of South Asian portraiture. In this text, an incident is recounted in which Bharata visits an ancestral picture gallery, where he is unable to distinguish between the portrait of his deceased father Dasaratha and those of his more distant ancestors. From the early twentieth century work of Ananda Coomaraswamy onwards, scholars have interpreted this passage as proof that Indians were not historically interested in portraiture, working according to the assumption that portraiture is always concerned with the capturing of an accurate physiognomic likeness. Recently however, Vishakha Desai and Denise Patry Leidy have pointed out that this inability of Bharata to distinguish his father’s image is not a cause for concern or grief in the text, and have suggested that the indistinguishable representations of Dasaratha and his ancestors are meant to convey the interconnected nature of their shared identities and qualities. This interpretation suggests that ancient examples of portraits in South Asia were not intended

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166 Ananda Coomaraswamy, “The Traditional Conception of Ideal Portraiture,” Journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, vol. 7 (1939), 75. In Coomaraswamy’s paradigm of a spiritually superior Asia to counter the materialism of the West, this formula obviously and intentionally rendered South Asian “portraits” finer and more profound than their western counterparts.


to communicate the individual singularity of particular persons, but were instead meant to convey something of the intricate web of family and clan connections which defined each “individual” subject.

The Mughal period in India is usually credited with the introduction of a style of portraiture in South Asia that was concerned with the representation of particular individuals that display a significant amount of “physiognomic specificity with some psychological orientation.” The Mughals drew in part from Timurid models from Iran and Central Asia, as well as from European art collected by the Imperial court. Beginning in the reign of Emperor Akbar and intensifying during that of Jahangir, European prints and paintings were avidly collected by the Mughal Emperors and by courtiers seeking to imitate the rulers’ models of patronage. The fashion for realistic rendering of volume through shading and accurate rendering of accurate (and even idiosyncratic) facial details then spread rapidly – not only within the Mughal court but also amongst the various Rajput courts who were culturally influenced by the former.

The practice of portraiture with “physiognomic specificity” and “psychological orientation” in South Asia is also connected in part to European cultural and artistic influence first experienced at the Mughal court, and which were later intensified over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This period saw the rapid expansion of the middle classes, which drastically expanded the patronage and demand for flattering

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portraits. At the same time, South Asia also witnessed the importation and mastery of new techniques of oil painting and photography, which made greater degrees of realistic portraiture available to larger and larger audiences. As the new Westernized notions of individualism and celebrity took hold across South Asia (particularly in Bengal), collections of portraits of famous individuals became widespread, much in the same way that biographical accounts did. In the increased interest in portraiture during the late colonial period in Bengal particularly, we can trace the increasing popularity of, and interest in, the life stories of unique individuals.

In addition to his own fascinating biography and his profligacy in writing biographical texts, Mukul Dey is also a useful case study for the exploration of issues related to modern artistic individualism because, when we look at the few examples of books of portraiture that occur within the category of “books of artists’ prints,” almost all of them were produced by Mukul Dey.\textsuperscript{170} Perhaps because of his own fierce individualism, which prevented him from taking up the direct care for his extended family following the death of his father and instead drove him to determinedly pursue his own education and career goals, Mukul Dey appears to have been fascinated with capturing the portraits of other singular individuals around him. During the course of his career Dey produced at least three collections of portraits in book format, as well as many other individual portrait

\textsuperscript{170} The possible exception is Chittaprosad’s Sketchbook of 30 Portraits, which was a sketchbook of original drawings depicting various Indian and international Communist luminaries. This book was given in 1943 to “The Commune National Headquarters, Communist Party of India, by the Communist Student Faction” and was intended as a one-of-a-kind object. It was not reproduced and published until 2011 by the Delhi Art Gallery in conjunction with a retrospective of Chittaprosad’s work. Thus it qualifies as a “print artist’s book” but not as a “book of artists’ prints.”
studies. The three major collections are his *Twelve Portraits* (1917), *20 Portraits* (1943) and *Portraits of Gandhi* (1948). In what follows, I offer a close examination of the first of these publications, followed by a shorter, more general description of the last two.

### 3.6.1 Twelve Portraits (1917)

*Twelve Portraits* represents the first manifestation of what would be a long career of printing and publishing undertaken by Mukul Dey. This book was published by Amal Home publishers in Calcutta in 1917, during the brief period when Dey had returned to India with Tagore following their tour of Japan and America, and before he left South Asia in order to undertake further travels and education abroad. The book begins with a fairly lengthy introduction from Sir John Woodroffe, who at the time was the Chief Justice of the Calcutta High Court. This introductory text is largely a biography (really, something of a curriculum vitae in paragraph form) of Mukul Dey, which begins by noting his educational credentials as a student of Rabindranath’s school at Santiniketan and later a pupil of Abanindranath’s in Calcutta. The introduction goes on to list the periodicals in which Dey’s works had to date been published (*Prabasi* and *The Modern Review*), and the exhibitions in which his works had been displayed (noting when they had found a ready sale). Finally, Woodroffe’s introductory text notes that, following Dey’s return to India after his travels abroad with Rabindranath, he had largely devoted himself to portrait studies in etchings. Woodroffe attests to the veracity of Dey’s work, noting that:
Having met most of the representative Bengalis here depicted I can vouch for the excellence of the likenesses and the skill of the artist in seizing the fundamental characteristics of his sitters.

The present volume is the outcome of the appreciation and encouragement which Mr. Dey has previously received from the artistic public and will itself again, I am sure, generate both.

Portraiture in particular will appeal to all, and most will be glad to have a pictorial record of relations and friends – something which has that artistry which so few photographs show.  

This introductory text from Woodroffe is dated December 5, 1917 in Calcutta, and is followed by six pages of tightly-packed text consisting of biographical notes on the twelve individuals whose portraits follow on individual pages, in the same sequence. Those included and illustrated are (all names are sic, as printed): (1) The Honourable Justice Sir Asutosh Mookerjee; (2) Sir Jagadis Chandra Bose; (3) Sir Satyendra Prasanna Sinha; (4) Prafulla Chandra Ray; (5) Sir Gooroo Dass Banerjee; (6) Brajendra Nath Seal; (7) Surendranath Banerjee; (8) Motilal Ghose; (9) Abanindranath Tagore; (10) Bipin Chandra Pal; (11) Ramananda Chatterjee; (12) Sir Rabindranath Tagore. Each image is signed and dated by the sitter, some in English and others in Bengali.

Biographical texts on each of these sitters are provided, all following a similar format that in many ways mirrors the information provided about Mukul Dey in Sir Woodroffe’s introductory text. First the name of the sitter is given, followed by (in almost every case) a long list of acronyms indicating their credentials. Consider the case of Jagadis Chandra Bose, for example (figure 3.12): his name is followed by “Kt., C.S.I., C.I.E., M.A

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In each case this is then followed by a catalogue-like entry of each sitter’s education, achievements and distinctions, ending in most cases with a list of their publications. If we again consider the example of J.C. Bose, in reproducing his biographical listing below we can gain a sense of the general nature of the rest of the texts contained in this publication. Although lengthy, it is thus worth reproducing in its entirety, and it is also worth noting that it is actually one of the shorter biographical entries in the book:

Emeritus Professor of Physics, Presidency College, Calcutta. Born at the village of Rarirkhal, Dacca. Son of the late Babu Bhagaban Chandra Bose. Educated, Calcutta; Christ College, Cambridge. Natural Science Tripos Scholar, Cambridge. Doctor of Science, University of London. On returning to India was appointed Professor of Physics, Presidency College, Calcutta. Awarded a Parliamentary grant for scientific researches. Attended International Scientific Congress, Paris 1900. Visited Europe several times on deputation by the Government and addressed the Royal Institute, England and various Learned Societies on his researches. Made a C.I.E., 1903 and C.S.I., 1907. Visited Europe and America on a Government deputation, 1914-15. Lectured in England before the Royal Institute, Imperial College of Science, Royal Society of Medicine, Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and in the United States, America before the Universities of Harvard, Columbia, Chicago and Wisconsin as well as other scientific Societies. His latest researches and discoveries on Plant Physiology were appreciated and accepted by the foremost European and American scientists. Retired from the Presidency College as the Emeritus Professor of Physics, 1915. The Government granted him a large sum to erect a Research Laboratory and placed at his disposal an extensive garden upon the Ganges at a village near Calcutta for his experimental researches on Plant Physiology. On the 30th November last Sir Jagadis Chandra delivered to the nation a splendid Laboratory and lecture-theatre in Calcutta for the promotion of original scientific researches. Publications: response in the Living and Non-Living: Plant Response,

\footnote{Ibid.}
This biographical summary indicates already early on in Dey’s career a keen interest in (one might even say an obsession with) the presentation of one’s \textit{bona fides}. Dey is meticulous in listing qualifications and titles, despite the fact that, as Sir Woodroffe’s introductory text indicates, books like \textit{Twelve Portraits} were likely to be bought and collected by those who already knew, either personally or by reputation, the individuals represented therein. Throughout his career, Dey (and many others) would obsessively recount his own qualifications and \textit{bona fides} to all who would listen.

The images—the portraits themselves—offer insights into how this publication functioned somewhat differently from those described in the previous chapter. For example, let us consider the portrait of “Sir Gooroo Das Banerjee” (hereafter referred to by the more common spelling, Gurudas Banerjee), the fifth subject depicted in \textit{Twelve Portraits} (figure 3.13). Banerjee was a judge of the Calcutta High Court and the first Indian appointed Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. Dey’s portrait depicts an already elderly Banerjee in three-quarter profile, gazing out from hooded eyes towards the viewer’s left. Prominent nose and moustache largely define Banerjee’s lower face, while a large, flat expanse of forehead dominates the top of his head, giving way to an unkempt tousle of dark, thinning hair at the temples and at the back of the neck. A pinched collar surrounds Banerjee’s

\footnote{Ibid.}
neck, with the engraved lines trailing off along slight, sloping shoulders. At the bottom of the image are written Banerjee’s signatures in both Bengali and English and the date 24 September 1917. At bottom right is an impressed seal with Mukul Dey’s name, an early precursor of the sometimes elaborate use of seals by Dey later in his career.

In contrast to the sharp bold, compositions of solid black and white space that characterized the woodcut and linocut prints of images of the village and countryside that were discussed in the precious chapter, instead here the delicate lines of the drypoint technique are used to greatest advantage as Mukul Dey concentrates all detail on the face and head, while only the merest outline of the sitter’s body is indicated, fading and blending into the empty space behind. Rather than the strength of physical force used to gouge out sections of the woodblock, instead in drypoint only a gentle pressure is required of the printmaker in order to engrave delicate, subtle lines into the copper plate. As he does so with greater or lesser pressure, fine metal scrapings of varying heights and sizes are thrown up on either side of the engraver’s tool. These ridges, known as the burr, are typically removed before the printing process in other types of engraving but in drypoint they are retained; as a result, not only the line itself but also the surrounding burr is made to hold a film of ink, producing soft, blurred lines and highly painterly effects such as are evident in Mukul Dey’s portrait of Gurudas Banerjee. Although often referred to as “drypoint etching,” that is actually a misnomer. Drypoint uses no acids to cut into the plate, which is an essential characteristic of etching. “The intaglio process of drypoint” or
“drypoint engraving” are therefore more accurate descriptions. Simply “drypoint” is most succinct.

The fragility of the burr is particularly important because it renders drypoint an inherently impractical technique for producing large numbers of prints from a single plate. The burr wears away quickly during the printing process, meaning that only a small number of very good impressions, often no more than a dozen, can be taken from a single plate, whereas a well-engraved plate with the burr removed could yield several hundred or even a thousand good impressions. Mukul Dey worked around this limitation, however, by submitting his original drypoint prints to commercial presses so they could be adapted to more mass-produced publication, thus crucially keeping costs down. But nevertheless, even through that essential translation there is still a resonance of the fact that drypoint renders a very unique kind of multiple: one which announces its profitability through multiplication, while at the same time harbouring a secret inimitability; one in which each multiple has qualities of uniqueness and also sameness, where each iteration exists together and separately at once.

In the negotiation of the tensions between individuality and collectivity, and between uniqueness and the copy, the medium of drypoint offered some interesting possibilities for the professional Bengali artist of the late colonial period. In its production of unusually

unique copies, what drypoint achieves in relation to issues of repetition, mimicry, authenticity and originality resonates with a way of being modern that emerges from places like Bengal, where people became aware of being modern at the same moment that they became aware of the accusation of lateness and unoriginality in their own modernity. Drypoint—and the way it represents and operates—essentially guarantees that no two images can ever be the same, and that with every successive image we witness the transformation and dissolution of representation itself. What is interesting is the entire set with all its iterations and the connections between them, rather than an isolated, individual instance within that continuum. Each drypoint print becomes like a single celluloid cell in a strip of chronological, filmic time: relational only to that which comes before and after, essentially four-dimensional by existing in and through time in the same way that it exists in and through the usual spatial, physical, material dimensions of two-dimensional imagery.

This kind of meta-modernity, which recognizes each local, or “alternative” modernity as iterations in a continuum, is exactly what is evoked in the effect of the burr that plays a paramount role in Mukul Dey's portrait of Gurudas Banerjee included in Twelve Portraits. The delicacy of the fine, interconnected lines that make up the august man’s head of hair, for example, invite the viewer to bring the image close to the eye and body, in effect asking us to step up to the great man himself and to take in his visage and personality at close personal quarters, rather than to appreciate the image as a graphic logo or icon.
3.6.2. 20 Portraits (1943)

Having launched into his career of book publishing with his collection of portraits, Mukul Dey later ventured away from the biography/portrait model (but maintained his commitment to the drypoint technique) in order to publish a book of prints illustrating verses of poetry, titled *Fifteen Drypoints by Mukul Dey, Interpreted in Verse by Harindranath Chattopadhyaya* (1939). But Mukul Dey returned to the portrait/biography model in 1943 with the publication of the book *20 Portraits*. But in this book Dey no longer uses drypoint exclusively, he also includes reproductions of pencil and chalk drawings. He also broadened the social field(s) from which he selected his sitters/subjects. Whereas *Twelve Portraits* (1917) had featured exclusively men, and exclusively Indians, in *20 Portraits* (1943) Dey includes not only foreigners like Albert Einstein, but also three women (Annie Besant, Sarojini Neidu, and Rukmini Devi).

*20 Portraits* includes an author’s preface by Dey (dated February 12, 1943 in Calcutta), but surprisingly no introduction or dedication written by a famous guest author, as these were a common way to add prestige to such a publication. There is also an arrangement of texts and images that is different than what was seen earlier in *Twelve Portraits*. In the earlier book, all of the biographical texts were given first, followed by pages of the images of the sitters in the same sequence. In *20 Portraits* each image has its own facing page with an accompanying biographical text.
20 Portraits also has a detailed table of contents that includes the names of the sitters, the date and location when the portraits were taken from life, the particular medium of each image (mostly drypoint, but also some pencil and chalk drawings), their original sizes, and notes indicating whether the sitters signed or dated their portraits. The individuals featured in the book are: (1) Sri Aurobindo Ghose; (2) Sir Maurice Gwyer; (3) Rabindranath Tagore; (4) Annie Besant; (5) Sir John Anderson; (6) C.F. Andrews; (7) W.W. Pearson; (8) Albert Einstein; (9) Sven Hedin; (10) Sarojini Naidu; (11) Sir Francis Younghusband; (12) Ernest William O’Gorman Kirwan; (13) Sarat Chandra Chatterji; (14) George Arundale; (15) Sir Doabji Tata; (16) Rukmini Devi; (17) Bimala Churn Law; (18) Werner Keventer; (19) M.K. Gandhi; and (20) Abanindranath Tagore.

The book itself is not marked with a price, but in a catalogue of works for sale that Mukul Dey printed when he was selling off much of his personal collection in the late 1940s and early 1950s, a copy of 20 Portraits was then listed as being for sale for five rupees.¹⁷⁵ We can easily recognize in 20 Portraits a maturation of the strategies of publishing inexpensive books of prints, investing in the value of (especially famous and noteworthy) individuals, and the articulation of those individuals' singularity through the medium of drypoint. Dey had used these strategies to great advantage earlier in his career in Twelve Portraits and almost twenty-five years later he was still able to use them to advance his career can carve out spaces of social and economic opportunity for himself.

¹⁷⁵ File 012 (Dark Green), Mukul Dey Archives, Santiniketan.
3.6.3  *Portraits of Gandhi* (1948)

Published very soon after the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi, *Portraits of Gandhi* includes fifteen images that are reproductions of sketches taken from life in both pencil and drypoint, combined with a lengthy introductory passage written by Mukul Dey that recounts each of the three occasions on which he met Gandhi personally (1918, 1928, and 1945), when he had the occasion to make these portraits from life. In terms of investing in the publication of images of unique individuals, *Portraits of Gandhi* demonstrates that such a strategy was still useful for artists even after the end of the colonial period. The text is printed in six pages comprised of facing pages of the same text written in Hindi and in English. The book is published by Orient Longmans, and features a striking yellow cover with *khadi* cloth texture and a repeating graphic of a spinning wheel, outlined in green (figure 3.14). This author’s copy has a hand-written inscription by Mukul Dey on the front cover page, which reads (in English): “To Mr. and Mrs. Brinton Harvey Stone—with greetings of the Season—and with kindest regards from Mukul Dey and family. The College of Idaho, Caldwell, Idaho, November 23, 1953.” There is also a hand-written Bengali signature from Dey.
3.7 A Methodological Shift

In this chapter I have been primarily concerned with books of autobiography and portraiture as objects of analysis, and in a close examination of the autobiographical texts and books of portraiture produced by Mukul Chandra Dey in particular. In doing so, I have demonstrated the ways in which these tools of autobiography and portraiture were powerfully activated in the hands of this particular artist, as he negotiated through the professional art world in Bengal over the course of his career, and especially as he dealt with issues related to individualism and collectivity. Also in this chapter, I pursued a semantic shift from “books of artists’ prints” to “print artists’ books” in order to draw different types of publications into the discussion. As I conclude this chapter, I would like to introduce and propose another shift—in this case a methodological rather than semantic one—in order also to consider the usefulness of biography and autobiography not only as objects of analysis, but also as tools of methodology in contemporary academic historical and art historical analysis.

I propose this shift while recognizing that there has been ample and convincing scholarship that has worked to de-centre the emphasis on the individual and to instead theorize people and bodies as networks of power relations rather than as autonomous agents. Moreover, I propose this biographical methodology with no desire to return to any “great man” or “great artist” theory of history or art history. My interest in pursuing a
biographical approach to research is in keeping with the work of scholars such as Richard Eaton, who has written and lectured extensively on his use of biography as an essential strategy for “de-territorializing” the teaching and writing of South Asian history. Eaton convincingly argues that while in popular culture fascination with life-narratives has never diminished, in the (western, recent) academy there has been a marked suspicion of biography as a legitimate and reputable methodology. He suggests that this suspicion can be traced back to Marx’s 1859 declaration that “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but on the contrary it is their social existence that determines their consciousness,” thus making it incumbent upon historians (and art historians) to explore the past precisely “not by tracing the lives of individual actors, but by studying vast, impersonal socio-economic forces.” However Eaton recognizes that by the early twenty-first century some scholars, particularly those studying South Asia, began to view biography not as antithetical to the writing of good social history and art history, but as a valuable vehicle that could be recovered and mobilized precisely for that purpose. He notes David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn’s edited volume *Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography, and Life History*, published in 2004, and Vijaya Ramaswamy and Yogesh Sharma’s volume *Biography as History: Indian Perspectives* (2009) as prime examples of how biography can be so mobilized. Eaton’s own study, *A Social History of the Deccan, 1300-1761: Eight Indian Lives* (2005) is also a key example of this trend. In fact, Eaton credits seeing an exhibit of portraits, and his consideration of portraiture’s

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Richard Eaton, “Removing Territory from the Teaching of History,” (paper presented at the University of Pennsylvania, Annenberg Seminars in History series, April 15, 2005, and re-presented as the keynote address at the 35th Annual Conference on South Asia in Madison Wisconsin, October 7, 2005).
relationship to biography, with his realization of the value of a methodological approach that dealt with the lives of specific people as microcosms of the larger social forces that they have lived through, and in which they were thoroughly immersed.

In the study of the art world and art history of late colonial Bengal, I believe it is particularly important to approach the field through a biographical lens because by looking closely at the life of someone like Mukul Dey, for example, that we can better illustrate the various possibilities and options that existed for the modern, professional, Bengali printmaking artist at this time. One’s position on that social and economic scale was something that could be (and indeed had to be) constantly negotiated. At the beginning of his career, Dey struggled to earn a living by selling portraits quickly, often on the street. But after his assembly of suitably impressive credentials and personal connections, Dey was able to secure such a prestige position as that of the Principal of the Government Art School. During his tenure there from 1928 to 1943, Dey was undoubtedly in a powerful and well-paid position that afforded him social advantage and access that more tenuous, junior artists could not hope of. But by the 1940s, the political situation in India had changed, rendering many of the skills and tools that had served Dey so well in the past—especially his connections to British institutions and patrons—as suddenly a liability. Following a tumultuous power struggle, Dey was forced to step down as Principal of the Government School of Art in 1943, after which he suffered a profound physical and mental collapse. Thereafter he struggled greatly to earn a living and support himself and his family, selling off most of his personal art collection in the process. We
see glimpses in the archive of how Dey continued to try to use his old connections and strategies to secure employment, but how the situation had changed sufficiently to render these strategies and tools ineffective. In a letter preserved at his family archive in Santiniketan written by Muirhead Bone to Mukul Dey, dated 16 June 1947, Bone refers to a letter of recommendation Dey had asked him to write in support of his application for the position of Curator at the Victoria Memorial Hall in Calcutta. Bone refers to the grandiose list of credentials and references that Dey assembled for his application as being unlikely to succeed, and suggests that it instead be pitched “in a more sober key.”

I also believe that it is important for us to study the art history of this period biographically because doing so allows us, for example, to tease out some of the significant similarities and differences between artists who may appear at first to have a great deal in common, such as Mukul Dey and Chittaprosad. Both of these men were amongst those few Bengali artists who specialized in printmaking in the early twentieth century, although (perhaps crucially) Chittaprosad’s specialities were woodcut and linocut while Dey’s was drypoint. Both men had backgrounds in and connections to East Bengal; Dey was born outside of Dhaka while Chittaprosad received much of his education in Myemsingh. This experience in East Bengal situated both artists as somewhat detached from the culturally elite in Calcutta. And both artists were connected to Rabindranath Tagore and his educational project at Santiniketan, although Chittaprosad did not study there formally as Dey did. Nevertheless, despite these superficial similarities, when we look more closely at each of

\[177\] Uncatalogued album of correspondence, Mukul Dey Archives, Santiniketan.
these artists’ biographies we find a critical difference in the significance of the year 1943. For Dey, 1943 was a moment of personal suffering, when he was forced out of his position at the Government Art School and withdrew into an internal world of illness and despair. For Mukul Dey, 1943 was a personal tragedy. But for Chittaprosad, 1943 was inexorably bound up in the larger historical events of the 1943 Bengal Famine. As I will argue in the following chapter, it was the Famine that would prove to be the breaking ground on which the issues of the rural versus the urban, and the individual versus the collective, came to a head in the most horrific circumstances imaginable.
4: The Famine

4.1 Constellation, Rupture, Aporia

This chapter continues to examine the perceived binaries of the rural and the urban, and the individual and the collective, as they were particularly negotiated through print media and print culture in late colonial Bengal. This chapter specifically addresses some of ways these issues were played out during a particular moment of great crisis that represented a rupture in the constellation of artistic and economic forces that had previously established a certain balance during the 1920s and 1930s. The particular crisis that this chapter addresses is the famine that decimated Bengal beginning in 1943 and lasting into at least 1945. In this chapter I consider the Famine’s representation in some of the art of the period, but what follows is not intended as a catalogue of Famine related artwork. Rather, I intend to look closely at certain images to explore the limits of print’s possibilities at the time, and perhaps even the limits of representation itself. I shall suggest how, in such terrible circumstances, there were some characteristics of print and printed imagery that could be uniquely involved and animated, while there were also other characteristics of print that weighed heavily against its active mobilization.

These events are sometimes referred to as the Great Bengal Famine, or the Bengal Famine of 1943, to distinguish it from other major famines that took place in Bengal in 1770, 1783, 1866, 1873-1874, 1892, and 1897. In the Bengali language, this crisis is referred to as the Famine of ’50, corresponding to the year 1350 of the Bengali calendar (1943). In this project I use the upper-case “Famine” when I am referring to the particular historical events that occurred in Bengal in 1943 to roughly 1945, and I use the lower-case “famine” when referring generally to a situation of widespread starvation amongst a given population.
The circumstances of the 1943 Bengal Famine warrant remembering and reiterating. The long-lasting consequences and ramifications of the Famine were keenly felt in Bengal and surrounding regions for decades, well into the post-Independence period for both India and Pakistan (which then included East Pakistan/East Bengal). Nevertheless, it is true that outside of South Asia the 1943 Bengal Famine is little known and rarely discussed, even in many histories dealing with World War Two or the end of the British colonial period in India. The Famine tends to have been edged out of focus in narratives that are more concerned with the European and East Asian theatres of World War Two. The Famine also tends to be overlooked by nationalist Indian (and Pakistani, and even Bangladeshi) narratives that focus on 1947 and the events of Independence and Partition. Lost in the excess of events of historical significance (and trauma), the 1943 Bengal Famine has become something of a “lost history” in the general historical consciousness. The Nobel Prize-winning work of Amartya Sen has certainly contributed to a greater awareness of the Bengal Famine amongst economists and scholars of South Asia. But in other disciplines of scholarship (including art history), discussion of the Famine has been muted.

179 For example, Open University’s podcast on BBC Radio, “Things We Forgot to Remember,” featured a history of the Bengal Famine on 14 January 2008: http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/history/social-economic-history/listen-the-bengal-famine
180 Sen won the 1998 Nobel Prize for his work on welfare economics and the economics of poverty and famines generally, with particular reference to the 1943 Bengal Famine which he himself lived through as a young boy. His Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlements and Deprivation (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) remains a critical text on the subject.
The fact that there is only a small body of art historical literature dealing with the Famine could perhaps be explained by the historical aporia noted earlier, wherein the pre-occupation with the rise (and fall) of the Bengal School (ending in roughly 1920) and the art histories of independent India and Pakistan (beginning in 1947) have left the intervening period relatively under-researched. This was true of the existing scholarship for some time. But thankfully, recently there has been some valuable work on exactly this in-between era of Bengali art history. Partha Mitter’s *The Triumph of Modernism: India’s Artists and the Avant-Garde 1922-1947* is situated exactly in the intervening period for example, and sheds light on many important aspects of the avant-garde art world and forms of artistic expression during that era. However, unfortunately Mitter’s book has only a very brief mention of the Bengal Famine and its impact on art or society.\(^{181}\)

This is perhaps not altogether surprising, given that Mitter’s focus is explicitly the avant-garde. This means that the particular art world(s) that Mitter explicates would have been relevant/resonant with a relatively small population of socio-economic elite of the period, comprised of both members of the European (colonial) community and wealthy Bengalis who enjoyed *bhadralok* at least. These were not communities that were the most profoundly affected by the Famine, and therefore it is possible that art histories that focus on such communities would miss the Famine’s impact elsewhere, and on others. What the images and books that this chapter examines suggest is that artists who worked with

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\(^{181}\) Mitter’s *The Triumph of Modernism* does refer to the Famine once, in reference to a painting by Deviprosad Roy Choudhury of a peasant woman with a starving child. Mitter writes that “of course, this harrowing subject inspired not only Deviprosad but a number of artists in Bengal,” but does not elaborate. *The Triumph of Modernism*, 171.
printmaking and print media in Bengal at this time engaged with and were affected by the Famine differently than has been presented in much of the existing art history.

Iftikhar Dadi suggests that Mitter in his most recent book would have done well to pay closer attention to the effects of the Famine on the socially engaged art movements that emerged from Calcutta in the 1940s.¹⁸² Dadi is right; many professional artists became intensely politically during this period. Perhaps the compulsion to earn a living in difficult circumstances had the effect of radicalizing artists in various ways. Dadi’s own work on the “in-between” era of the 1920s to the 1940s in South Asian art history is another important recent contribution to the field. His *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* takes up a narrative in the early 1920s and extends to the end of the twentieth century, charting several interconnected narratives of nationalism, modernism, tradition and cosmopolitanism in the work of Muslim artists from both India and Pakistan (including East Pakistan, now Bangladesh and previously East Bengal). But unfortunately like Mitter, Dadi also only briefly discusses the Famine and its impact.

Dadi mentions the Famine in his discussion of Zainul Abedin (1914-1976). Abedin is known for his pen and ink sketches of Famine subjects and Dadi deals with these briefly, mostly as a way of filling in background details about the artist’s early career before moving on to a more sustained discussion of Abedin’s work as an art administrator in post-1947 Dhaka, East Pakistan. Dadi does offer a visual analysis of one of Abedin’s Famine

images, which exactly hits the mark. He suggests that the way Abedin isolated individual figures in his Famine sketches bespoke the fragmentation of networks of family and responsibility during the historical crisis itself.\textsuperscript{183} This characteristic will be examined in other Famine work explored later on in this chapter.

\section*{4.2 A Brief History of the Famine}

A recounting of the series of events that led to the monumental suffering and horrible deaths of millions of people in Bengal in 1943, 1944 and 1945 reveals a great deal about the inherently ruthless and inequitable nature of modernity, and about the possibilities for art and representation in the face of profound trauma. It also reveals a great deal about what it means to be human, both for better and for worse; the history of the Famine highlights humanity’s horrific twin capacities for both suffering and cruelty. No one who survived the Famine did so without the exercise of self-preservation that often meant terrible brutality enacted against others, and many people manipulated their positions of privilege in order to personally benefit from the situation financially. People have not wanted to look at the Famine, perhaps, because this history implicates everyone.

Bengal was prosperous in the early 1940s. It is true that Calcutta no longer had the prestige of being the administrative capital of the British colonial government—by that

point the capital had been moved to New Delhi. But Calcutta remained a lucrative trading and shipping centre, while the larger region of Bengal (which, following the repeal of the 1905 partition, again comprised both East and West Bengal) was an extremely important and productive region. When World War Two erupted in Europe in 1939 and spread to the Pacific theatre by 1941, the human and material resources represented by Britain’s colonial holdings in South Asia generally and in Bengal specifically were of critical importance to the Allied war effort. In addition to the millions of South Asians who were soon serving in the British Indian Army, rice grown in South Asia (especially in the north-eastern regions of Bengal and neighbouring Burma) became a strategic wartime asset, one which was commandeered in large quantities by government and military forces and which was also exported out of the region in order to feed Allied troops that were elsewhere engaged in the war effort.

Rice is typically grown in Bengal in cycles of three harvests per year. The aman harvest has the largest yield, occurring in November or December and usually amounting to between half and two thirds of yearly production. The small aus harvest represents roughly a quarter of annual production and occurs usually in August, and another, even smaller harvest, called the boro, appears around March. By the early 1940s, Bengal produced huge quantities of rice through these three combined annual harvests (exact

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184 The decision to move the capital from Calcutta to Delhi was announced by King George V at the 1911 Durbar, and the new city was officially inaugurated in 1931. The decision to move the capital was, like the 1905 decision to partition Bengal, officially justified as a means to ease administrative stresses, but was widely and publicly understood in Bengal at least as intended to reduce Bengali power and influence.

185 Amartya Sen, Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation, 52.
figures are a cause of much debate and speculation), but it was still not enough to meet the overwhelming combined demands of both the military (domestic use and for export) and the private citizenry. Additional rice still had to be imported into Bengal from the even more productive agricultural areas to the east, in Burma.

In 1942, first the *boro* and then the *aus* harvests in Bengal had somewhat lower yields than in previous years, but the large *amān* harvest that was anticipated for November or December of 1942 was expected to be normal, or perhaps also slightly on the disappointing side. Nevertheless, the stocks of the staple grain that remained in the region were, in the summer and early autumn of 1942, still relatively stable and adequate. Certainly, they were nowhere near low enough that they should have, in themselves, resulted in food shortages manifesting amongst the general population. But on October 16, 1942, the additional elements of panic and speculation were introduced into these circumstances, when a powerful cyclone hit the region immediately followed by a series of devastating tidal waves.

In the immediate wake of the October 1942 cyclone and tsunamis, approximately 15,000 people and nearly 200,000 head of cattle in Bengal were killed. Hundreds of square miles of inhabited land were swept bare, and much vaster areas were badly affected by floods and further damaged by wind and torrential rain. Large portions of the anticipated 1942 *amān* rice crop in Bengal and in neighbouring Burma were destroyed or damaged. In many of those areas where the rice crop did survive, wet conditions soon led to an
infestation of fungus, which in some areas destroyed as much as 90% of the rice crop that had survived the cyclone.\textsuperscript{186}

This series of natural disasters coincided with drastically altered circumstances in the Pacific theatre of World War Two, which together led to catastrophic consequences for the people of Bengal. The Japanese invasion of the Malay Peninsula had begun in late 1941 and soon culminated in the capture of Singapore and Rangoon in early 1942. While more than a hundred thousand British, Indian, and Australian troops were taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese during their swift conquest of large portions of Southeast Asia, there were also large numbers of both military and civilian refugees who fled westward towards the territories of British India, travelling overland through Burma and onward into Bengal. As many of these forces retreated, scorched-earth practices were implemented with the goal of hindering the onward expansion of the Japanese. Not only cultivated land and stores of food and agricultural products, but also various peasant means of transportation (and livelihood), such as boats, bicycles, and bullock carts (all of which had been used by the Japanese to great advantage during the Malayan campaign), were confiscated and destroyed in large numbers by retreating British and British-allied forces, both in Burma and eastern Bengal. These actions drastically limited the ability of people in this region to respond to and recover from the rice shortages that were soon to manifest, by making it impossible for people to supplement their diets through fishing or other industries.

By the end of 1942, the Japanese utterly dominated the Bay of Bengal militarily, both in the air and at sea. Japanese bombing raids hit the city of Calcutta several times in late 1942, and a very real fear arose that the Japanese invasion of not only eastern Bengal, but also the city of Calcutta itself, was inevitable. A witness described the prevailing atmosphere in Calcutta at this time in the following anxious testimony:

There was a feeling of tenseness and expectancy in Calcutta…. In general the impression was that nobody knew whether by the next cold weather Calcutta would be in the possession of the Japanese… There was little panic in the districts, but there was a great deal of confusion. Transport was unpunctual and very crowded and the districts of Chittagong, Noakhali and Tipperah [sic] were just like an active theatre of war behind the front…. A continuous stream of refugees was arriving from Burma. They were finding their way through Assam, after the initial influx into Chittagong, and were moving into the country. They were arriving diseased, bringing in a virulent type of malaria, and bringing hair-raising stories of atrocities and sufferings… The natural effect of all that on the people of Bengal was to make them feel that the times were extremely uncertain and that terrible things might happen.187

This generalized sense of panic intersected with and was amplified by a growing “common sense” belief and expectation that the significant damage that had been done to the 1942 aman harvest by the cyclone and tsunamis must surely result in shortages of rice in the marketplace (or else, they must surely offer opportunities for profitable speculation in the rice markets).

187 *Famine Enquiry Commission Report on Bengal*, 25. The districts mentioned were, at that time, on the eastern edge of Bengal. Chittagong and Noakhali are now in Bangladesh, while Tripura (home to the Tipperah or Tripuri people) is in the extreme northeast of India. See figure 4.1.
The *Famine Enquiry Commission Report on Bengal* published by the Government of British India in 1945 concluded that shortages caused by the cyclone and tidal waves had not been adequately or properly responded to, eventually leading to a widespread absence of available rice, and thus resulting in the Famine conditions that soon followed. However, Amartya Sen has argued that there was, in fact, no significant shortage of rice in Bengal immediately after the October 1942 cyclone, nor even into the early months of 1943 when starvation began to take hold across the region. According to Sen’s calculations, overall there was only a 5% reduction in available rice stores in Bengal even at the height of the Famine (relative to the average of the previous five years), which still left regional stores that were 13% higher than they had been in 1941, which as he points out was a non-famine year.\(^\text{188}\) Instead, Sen has argued that it was not an actual shortage of rice that caused the terrible famine conditions that took hold across Bengal throughout 1943 and into 1944, but rather a series of changes to entitlements that made it impossible for the poorest members of Bengali society to gain access to existing rice stores. Not all of Sen’s calculations and arguments are beyond challenge, and indeed some historians have made a minor industry out of questioning some of the statistics and data that he relies on.\(^\text{189}\) But few serious historians today deny that the famine conditions that decimated Bengal in 1943 and 1944 were largely man-made, and therefore avoidable. Much of the responsibility for how the Famine took such terrible hold in Bengal in 1943

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\(^{188}\) Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 58.

and 1944 can be traced to the British government’s refusal to free up shipping in order to import rice into the region, or indeed to stop rice exports from leaving other areas of South Asia instead of being redirected to Bengal. The responsibility of the racist nature of the colonial system for the deaths of millions of Bengalis during the 1943 Famine is undeniable, and I believe has already been well mapped by the valuable work of scholars such as Sen.

But the tragedy of 1943 and 1944 in Bengal was also made possible by not only international inequities of race and nationality, but also by regional and local inequities of politics, class, and caste. Within India, regional tariffs and other barriers that the government in Delhi had put in place to restrict trade and transportation between districts also hampered relief efforts. And within Bengal itself, overwhelming instances of mismanagement, corruption, hoarding, profiteering, and the wanton manipulation of the rice market for profit—all of which were commonplace in 1943 and 1944—also contributed significantly to poor people’s suffering. These practices at the local, regional, and global levels implicate not only the callousness of a colonial administration, but also the casual cruelty of many wealthy landowners, moneylenders and blackmarketeers.

When shortages of rice began to be felt in late 1942 and early 1943, they were especially acute in the coastal regions of Bengal that had been most badly hit by the cyclone, and the eastern regions that had been already bearing the burden of incoming waves of refugees arriving from Burma. Yet, officials in Delhi in Calcutta were slow to respond with the
implementation of policies or practices that would have been sufficient to mitigate
starvation circumstances. Instead, the eastern districts of Bengal increasingly came to be
thought of as existing in a separate theatre of war: unfortunate but expendable losses at a
time when priorities were deemed to be better concentrated elsewhere. In many ways,
these regions of eastern Bengal came to be thought of (not only by politicians in Delhi but
also by the people of Calcutta) as an already-absent foreign country. In some ways, the
eventual re-partition of Bengal in 1947 into West Bengal and East Pakistan was prefigured
in the ways that Calcuttans began to think about and relate to East Bengal during the
Famine of 1943.

When the authorities were slow in responding to or adequately addressing the needs of
Famine victims, some accused the government of turning a blind eye for overtly political
reasons. Many of the regions in eastern Bengal that were most badly hit by the cyclone—
regions like Chittagong, for example—had been hotbeds for much of the violent,
revolutionary *swadeshi* protests that had been mounted against British colonial rule in
previous years. In August 1942 the British government in India had instigated a
widespread and repressive response to the Quit India movement announced by Congress,
which had called for the immediate withdrawal of British forces from India. In response,
the government arrested tens of thousands of people associated with the movement,
including both Gandhi and Nehru. Many of those arrested remained imprisoned for the

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191 The Chittagong Armoury Raid of 1930 is perhaps the most famous example of such acts of violent
revolutionary protest, but there were also many other, less famous, acts perpetrated by members of the many
revolutionary *jugantar* societies that flourished in eastern Bengal throughout the early twentieth century.
duration of the war. Many others were executed. Several districts of East Bengal, as well as the south-western district of Midnapore (see figure 4.1), were by this time established fields of radical revolutionary politics. They all experienced a series of systematic arrests, imprisonments and other forms of punishment meted out to those members of the nationalist movement that were identified and caught by the colonial police. When these same regions were amongst the first to severely suffer in late 1942 (being all coastal regions directly hit by the cyclone and tsunamis), the fact that the colonial administration was slow to react was interpreted by some as further indication of an attitude of callousness and indifference on the part of the colonial administration, which was accused of playing casual and loose with the lives of millions of Bengalis in order to enact some kind of petty political revenge.\(^{192}\)

Estimates of the number of people who died as a result of the famine conditions that ravaged Bengal from 1943 through 1945 are highly variable. The official *Famine Inquiry Commission Report on Bengal* was published in 1945, when the consequences and casualties of the Famine were really still accumulating and unfolding. At that time, the report estimated the number of deaths at approximately one and a half million people.\(^{193}\) Few scholars today put the number at less than two million. Amartya Sen, over the course of his career, has estimated the number of deaths at between three and five million, while other scholars working in the field of history of medicine, when attempting to also account


for the victims of a number of “aftershock” famines that occurred in neighbouring regions such as Assam, Bihar and Orissa in the years that followed, have raised the estimate to as much as between six and seven million people. While deaths resulting from malnutrition and starvation reached their peak in late 1943, related epidemics of cholera, smallpox and malaria continued to devastate the region throughout 1944 and 1945, and even into 1946.

Throughout, it was undoubtedly the poorest Bengalis who suffered most, especially those in the countryside. The British population in Bengal was largely concentrated in the towns, and were insulated from the effects of the Famine. So too were the elite classes of Bengali society located in the cities. People in these socio-economic categories had sufficient power, money and influence to enable them to gain access to rice even when prices in the marketplaces rose exponentially. Shortages and scarcity were common, but deaths amongst the privileged classes were few. Meanwhile, masses of poor cultivators, labourers and fishing communities in rural Bengal very quickly found themselves bankrupt, starving, and destitute. As the Famine unfolded, it exposed (and pressure on) the fault line in modern Bengali society between the rich and the poor, the powerful and the powerless. The Famine laid bare the fact that allegiances based on national or religious identity at this time in Bengal were at least challenged by allegiances based on social categories determined by class. In the end, survival during the Famine was determined not

194 Sanjoy Bhattacharya, Propaganda and Information in Eastern India, 1939-45: A Necessary Weapon of War (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 56.
so much by one’s nationality, ethnicity nor even religion, but rather by one’s wealth and privilege (or lack thereof).

The Famine also particularly fractured Bengali society along the fault line between the rural and the urban. The colonial government, in a desire to prevent the spread of panic in Calcutta, instituted a system of ration shops that continued to guarantee the sale of rice at fair prices in the city. Government agents were ordered to purchase rice at whatever prices they could achieve in the countryside, with the loss being subsidized when the rice was later resold at cheap rates through the Calcutta ration shops (sold to those with papers, with permanent residence, with money or influence). Rural cultivators were pressured to sell all of their rice stocks immediately to the agents who were willing to buy it at seemingly high prices. Then, over the course of many subsequent months, the cultivators watched powerless as the price of rice in the countryside increased dramatically and relentlessly so that no amount of cash could buy the staple grain, if any could even be found for sale. Rice had been approximately 13 or 14 rupees per maund\(^{195}\) in December 1942, but it rose to nearly 40 rupees per maund by August 1943. In October 1943 there were reports of rice being sold at more than 100 rupees per maund in the district of Dacca.\(^{196}\) While the ration system in place continued to ensure rice availability for the urban population, the rural poor were largely cut out, and cut off.

\(^{195}\) A maund is a unit of weight in South Asia that is equal to approximately 82 pounds or 37 kilograms.

\(^{196}\) Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines*, 54.
As the price of rice skyrocketed, conditions in the countryside worsened. Massive numbers of the rural poor first mortgaged or sold their possessions in order to purchase whatever food was available at exorbitantly inflated prices. Having sold their ornaments, their instruments and tools, their livestock, their land and their furniture, many women resorted to selling their bodies. Some parents sold the children they could no longer care for, sometimes for as little as a few rupees. Some of these children became domestic slaves, while others—especially girls—were collected by prostitution rings that sold them into lives of sexual exploitation. Faced with such horrible limitations of choice, some parents resorted to desperate acts of infanticide. Children were drowned, buried alive, or simply abandoned by the roadside, under trees, or in fields.  

The breakdown of normal family and community networks during the Famine years was cataclysmic. It scarred Bengali society almost as powerfully as the loss of life itself. Families, villages and communities broke apart as individuals either set off on their own, abandoning their relations and dependants, or else were themselves abandoned in huge numbers. Cut off from their previous networks of family, religion, caste and community mutual indebtedness and responsibility, many victims of the Famine experienced it from a position of horrible isolation. It was disproportionately women and children who suffered most in these circumstances of abandonment and isolation. As Peter Greenough has argued, the dissolution of the Bengali extended family unfolded according to tendency to

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197 Kali Charan Ghosh provides an unsettling but informative summary of incidents of child-selling and infanticide that marked the breakdown of normal social and familial networks during the 1943 Famine. *Famines in Bengal 1770-1943* (Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Company, 1944), 221-225.
preserve family patrimony (represented by the figure of the *korta*, literally “doer” or “maker,” i.e. the male head of the Bengali extended family) as paramount over the survival of the family’s less-valued members (such as widowed sisters and aunts, and female children). The consequences for women and children were dire. As Greenough puts it: “The abandonment or exclusion of familial dependants constituted the greatest social cost of the Famine, excepting famine deaths. It exposed women and children to exploitation at best, and starvation at worst.”

Many of the rural poor migrated from their villages into the city of Calcutta in search of help. By the spring of 1943, tens of thousands of what period news reports referred to as “living corpses” were flooding the streets of Calcutta. Their condition was terrible: “In the terrible summer and autumn of 1943, three *lakhs* [300,000] of people from the neighbourhood trekked to Calcutta to starve to death on its streets, begging no longer for rice but for the water in which rice was cooked.” By all accounts, the effect of this influx of living corpses on the population of Calcutta was profound, as many people came face to face for the first time with the scale of the disaster. Faced with this display of overwhelming suffering, many people in Calcutta reached out to help by donating money, time and resources, both to individuals and to organized relief efforts. However, it is

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200 The Bengal Relief Committee, for example, was a large, Indian-run, private organization that spearheaded much of the relief projects in the region, and continued its work well into 1946. Peter Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal: The Famine of 1943-1944*, ix.
also true that in this overwhelming and unceasing exposure to the suffering of others, many of the upper-classes in Calcutta, who were themselves still largely protected from food shortages, came to feel a terrible and paralysing sense of hopelessness: a belief that the problem was simply too large for any personal response or assistance to be sufficient, coupled with a desire (even a need, for the sake of one’s own sanity) to not see what was happening everywhere around them. In his novel set during the 1943 Famine, So Many Hungers, Bhabani Bhattacharya perfectly expresses the combination of “confusion, pity, guilt, and detestation”\textsuperscript{201} that gripped the upper classes of Calcutta society during the Famine:

The ceaseless, whining wail, the long hollow wail threshing out of depths beyond the throat, out of the belly’s deep despair: “Ma! Ma-go-ma! [Mother! Oh mother!] A sip of rice water, pray, ma, ma-go-o!” You heard it and you heard it, and sickness arose in your throat, and the food you ate stuck like glue. You heard it day in and day out, every hour and every minute, at your own house-door and at your neighbours’, till the surfeit of the cry stunted the pain and pity it had first started, till it pierced no longer, and was no more hurtful than the death-rattle of stricken animals. You hated the hideous monotony of the wail. The destitutes became a race apart, insensitive, sub-human.\textsuperscript{202}

Although the multitudes who undertook their migrations from deserted villages to the city had done so with a hope of receiving help, in the end there was disappointingly little forthcoming. There were large amounts of food distributed through free kitchens in the city, but it was of limited nutritional quality and was not nearly sufficient in quantity to meet the demand.

\textsuperscript{201} Ibid., 226.
\textsuperscript{202} Bhattacharya, So Many Hungers, 173.
Throughout these circumstances, many witnesses remarked with disbelief and confusion there were no riots or acts of violence reported in Calcutta during these months. Many of the victims seemed to be tragically resigned to their fate, and either unwilling to resort to begging or else at a loss for how to go about it. Some blamed this on the fact that so many of those who found themselves destitute in 1943 and 1944 had not come from the traditional begging castes. Many of thee people arrived in the city only to lay down and die in the Calcutta streets in a final act conspicuous display, making the visual presence of their bodies testify in a way their words could not.

Soon the regular removal of corpses from Calcutta’s streets became necessary, and before long this service was expanded to also include the rounding up of the sick and destitute. Some of these people were transported to refugee camps and shelter homes in the suburbs of the city, where they received what help was available. Others were strongly encouraged (sometimes through physical violence or the threat of it) to leave the city and return to their villages. Few of them survived the return journey, and those who did found nothing in the villages waiting for them. By the summer of 1943, the roads into and out of Calcutta were littered with human bones.

No single event or moment definitively marks the end of the Famine. The strength of the 1944 harvests certainly helped to ease the situation, as did the relaxing of some of the internal trade restrictions that allowed for the freer movement of rice stores from
elsewhere in the subcontinent. Westminster’s decision to make shipping available for relief efforts in late 1943 also made a positive difference. Eventually, the cumulative effect of changing economic, environmental, and political circumstances led to an easing of the circumstances of the rural poor in Bengal. But this process of improvement was painfully slow, and often hampered by bureaucracy and corruption at every step.

4.3 The Invisible Famine

In the face of such trauma, what can visual art do? What should it do and what, in fact, did it do? One of the several artists who emerged from the illustrious Tagore family wrote directly about how difficult it was for an elite art world to adequately deal with and represent the Famine’s experiences of profound trauma. Shubho Tagore was one of the many nephews of Rabindranath, and in addition to being a cubist-inspired painter and sculptor (and something of a professional bohemian amongst the Bengali upper-classes of the time) he was also an author of several short stories. In a semi-autobiographical story set during the Famine, titled “An Artist’s Protest,” Shubho Tagore recounts the plight of an artist named Tutul who is trying to work in his studio on a commission for a wealthy patron, but who is driven to distraction by the wailing of a woman on the street beneath his window, who calls out constantly that she has not eaten for days and that her child is dying. Tutul eventually finds an anna coin in a corner of his workspace, and then weighs the options of either giving it to the woman or buying cigarettes for himself. Throughout
the story, Tagore depicts an upper-class artist who sees his circumstances in narcissistic terms, related to his own inability to complete his work: “It really seemed as though a conspiracy had been hatched against him. He was not going to be allowed to paint… Any time he tried to get down to working on a canvas, there would invariably rise that ghastly wail starting with ‘kind sir’ and ending in a crescendo of despair.” Finally Tutul comes face to face with the starving woman and her child, which brings about a crisis of identity for the narrator:

Was it of any use to go on painting the sort of pictures he was working on? At a time when men were fighting dogs for a morsel of food lying in a dustbin, what earthly use were paintings…? Tutul looked out at the night sky. The starry sky would lend him no inspiration with its stellar spots of small pox. He felt like spitting at the sky.

At the end of the story, Tutul is driven towards madness by the differences he sees between his world and that of the destitute woman and child. The story concludes with him attacking his own painting with a knife, in a grand gesture of the failures of his art and his art world when faced with the reality of the Famine.

There has been relatively little art historical scholarship dealing with the 1943 Bengal Famine, but Nikhil Sarkar’s book, *A Matter of Conscience: Artists Bear Witness to the Great Bengal Famine of 1943* is one significant attempt to systematically document and survey the work of Bengali writers and visual artists who directly engaged with the

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204 Ibid, 97.
Famine in their bodies of work. Sarkar discusses at length the novels of Tarashankar Bandyopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay, and Gopal Haldar, the poetry of Sukanta Bhattachara, as well as the work of many other Bengali authors whose work extensively and repeatedly engaged with the Famine. After surveying the work of these and many other writers, Sarkar concludes that:

“It would be hard to find a writer in Bengali from those times who had not written a story against the setting of the Famine…. There is no scope here to catalogue all the works on the Famine written by creative writers of the time. There is no need for such a venture either. All that needs to be put across is that the Bengali writers as a community found the time compellingly potent.”

Sarkar also discusses the Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), a socialist theatre group founded in 1943 to communicate—through dances, songs, and theatre—the message of the Indian Communist movement to the masses throughout India, for whom written literature was still largely inaccessible. During the Famine, Bijan Bhattacharya’s play *Nabanna (Harvest)* became famous, and was staged throughout Bengal under the auspices of the IPTA. So too were Famine-related dances and songs with names like *The Dance of the Epidemic* and *Hyay Bengal (Bengal Starves)*. Sarkar is not alone in his estimation of the IPTA as “the most important role in the cultural scene” of the period.

Scholars like Rustom Bharucha and Malini Bhattacharya have also had much to say about

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207 Ibid, 22.
the IPTA’s role in Bengal during the Famine, not only in terms of their motivational songs and performances, but also in terms of IPTA workers’ direct interventions into food distribution and relief efforts. This body of scholarly work on the IPTA is valuable, most obviously for the ways it explicates how artists were involved with, affected by, and engaged with the Famine, but also for how this scholarship draws interestingly on performance theories. Nevertheless, the existing scholarship still leaves open the opportunity to further explore the interactions between two-dimensional visual art and the Famine. Accounts of this aspect of artistic responses to the Famine have, so far, been somewhat abridged.

Sarkar’s book, for example, discusses at length the work of many writers, playwrights, singers and theatre performers. But when he turns to cataloguing the response of visual artists to the Famine, the selection is markedly more limited and his language far less effusive. He writes, for example, that “one is never in doubt that several artists in Bengal had unhesitatingly acknowledged in 1943 the compulsive social obligations of an artist” (emphasis mine). Sarkar takes pains to trace an impressive South Asian heritage of visual art that takes up issues of famine and hunger. At a loss for actual images of the 1943 Famine to discuss, or perhaps due to an aversion in showing and discussing them

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209 Rustom Bharucha notes that in 1944 members of the Delhi IPTA disrupted a planned ritual sacrifice of thousands of pounds of foodstuffs, and instead arranged for the redirection of the food and donations of money to famine relief efforts. In the Name of the Secular: Contemporary Cultural Activism in India (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 34. Malini Bhattacharya notes that although the IPTA moved away from direct interventions by the late 1940s, during the Famine IPTA workers were tirelessly engaged in agitprop efforts at many levels. “The IPTA in Bengal,” Journal of Arts & Ideas, no. 2 (1983): 12-13.

directly, Sarkar instead details a heritage of famine images beginning with first century statues of the Buddha as a starving acetic (figure 4.2), and extending through the naturalistic studies of sick and starving men and animals from the Mughal period of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (figure 4.3). Having established this lineage of resources for such imagery, when Sarkar comes to the events of 1943 and 1944 he is hard pressed to list more than a small handful of contemporary visual artists who represented the Famine or engaged with Famine-related themes in their work.

Sarkar does address the work of three visual artists who are most commonly associated with the Famine and who are known for having engaged with its themes repeatedly; these are Chittaprosad, Somnath Hore, and Zainul Abedin. Sarkar also acknowledges the photographic work of Sunil Janah, although his opinion of photography does not permit him to consider this material to be on par with the work of the first three artists, writing that “the camera as a machine can not ultimately transcend its limitations,” and “hence we are not ultimately content with the photographic evidence of Sunil Jana (sic) and his contemporaries in the field, and seek out the [non-photographic artists] for a harsher insight into the reality.” Nevertheless, Sarkar does provide a brief survey of the Famine-related work of these few artists, although afterwards he is at pains to name any other visual artists who engaged with the Famine and dissolves into hearsay, suggesting that “we are told” that another artist drew sketches of Famine victims, or he “seems to recall” a

211 So common is the grouping of these three artists with the subject of representing the 1943 Famine that, as Rita Dutta notes, “These three names always occur together, as though they were triplets.” “Social Concern and Protest,” Art Etc: Art of Bengal, issue 30 (July 2012), n.p.
Famine scene done by another, or “we do not have a clear enough record” of what one artist did or did not draw at the time of the Famine.\textsuperscript{213}

It is surprising to note that amongst many of the major Bengali artists who were active in the early 1940s—Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy, and others—there is very little work that addresses or engages with the Famine at all. Virtually none of these artists are known to have engaged directly with the Famine in their work, and no Famine-related subjects emerge from their oeuvres. Earlier I suggested that the lack of a significant body of art historical literature that addresses the Famine may be in part the result of a chronological bias in the art historical literature, which has skimmed over the period of the final few decades of the colonial era. However, another possible explanation now arises: could there be so little art history written about the Famine because there was, in fact, very little in the way of any sustained artistic response to it, at least from those artists on whom the existing art histories have tended to focus?

In one sense, this does seem to be the case: relatively few artists directly depicted or engaged with the subject of the Famine in their work. However, some of those artists who resisted depicting or representing the Famine in their work did nevertheless participate in fundraising and relief efforts to assist the victims of the Famine. A small publication printed in December of 1944, titled \textit{Bengal Painters’ Testimony} (figure 4.4), contains

\textsuperscript{213} Ibid, 33-34, 42. Sarkar writes that he recalls a Famine scene by Mukul Dey that appeared in a periodical. Dey’s grandson Satyasri Ukil, who runs the Mukul Dey Archive in Santiniketan and is the leading authority on his grandfather’s oeuvre, does not recall any such Famine-related work by Dey, making Sarkar’s claims seem that much more tenuous. Email to author, May 12, 2012.
reproductions of paintings and drawings by a number of artists, including the then-already-deceased Rabindranath Tagore, as well as his (still living) nephew Abanindranath. Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy and Ramkinkar Baij were also represented with reproductions of their works. Taken together, this list of artists represents most of the significant figures of early-twentieth century Bengali modern painting; although they may not have represented the Famine in their work, they nevertheless gave their names and work for this fundraising endeavour. The slim volume was published in December 1944, for the eighth annual conference of the All India Students’ Federation, with all proceeds from its sale (at the price at five rupees) going to Famine relief efforts.214

*Bengal Painters’ Testimony* offers an interesting insight into how the tool and strategy (explored earlier in this thesis) of publishing books of reproductions of artworks at moderate prices, thus making them accessible to wider audiences, could be taken up and used to advantage during the crisis of the Famine. This speaks to the ways that the value and effectiveness of print/printing/printmaking could be mobilized not just by professional printmaking artists for the purposes of carving out a livelihood and promoting their careers, but also for social welfare and humanitarian causes by artists who made livings for themselves as painters. It is perhaps an encouraging thought, but it is also worth noting that the price of this publication—five rupees—was not only the most common price of the books of artists’ prints and print artists’ books discussed in chapters two and three, it

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214 Sarojini Naidu, forward to *Bengal Painters’ Testimony* (Calcutta: A. Das Gupta, 1944), n.p.
was also repeatedly mentioned in accounts of the Famine as a common price for which desperate parents were willing to sell their children.  

It is also important to note that many of the artworks reproduced in Bengal Painters’ Testimony were paintings and drawings that had actually been done much earlier, in some cases many decades earlier. Thus many of the images do not themselves deal with issues of famine or hunger in their subject matter. Abanindranath’s Journey’s End (figure 4.5) might speak generally to a state of physical exhaustion, but as it was originally painted in 1913 it was obviously not directly inspired by or related to the 1943 Famine. Similarly, Nandalal Bose’s elegant but sombre painting of A Mendicant (figure 4.6) was also done years earlier, and had been published in 1919 in a collection of the famous Chatterjee’s Picture Albums. Jamini Roy’s two works represented in the Bengal Painters’ Testimony are untitled and undated, like virtually all of the artist’s works (figure 4.7), but visually it is clear that neither of them appear to have emerged out of a direct engagement with the 1943 Famine and the crisis it erupted in the Bengali countryside. They appear rather to represent ordered, calm and reassuring rural life, with a woman tending to a cow and a five-figure panchayat of hierarchically arranged male leaders. It could be that the works chosen for inclusion in this publication were those that were already known in the Bengali art world, and in some cases which had already been reproduced in other publications (and for which printing plates were therefore already available). Such works were accessible,

215 Ghosh, Famines in Bengal 1770-1943, 221-225.
socially valued, and could be easily and inexpensively rallied for the purposes of a fundraising publication such as *The Bengal Painters’ Testimony*. As mentioned earlier, even those artists who did not directly engage with the Famine in their work were often compelled to contribute to these kinds of humanitarian efforts. But this leaves open the opportunity to look more closely at those few artists who *did* closely engage with the Famine in their work.

The painter and sculptor Ramkinkar Baij is the most likely candidate for an artist who one would expect to directly engage with the Famine in his work; he was socially committed and engaged throughout his career, and often addressed the issues of poverty and hunger in his work. His representative image in the *Bengal Painters’ Testimony* perhaps comes closest of all the famous Bengali artists to addressing the Famine, representing as it does the aftermath of the October 1942 cyclone in Midnapore (figure 4.8). But despite its harrowing skeletal subject matter, this image still seems to suggest or foreshadow the Famine, rather than address it head-on. There is one other painting by Baij that is sometimes also mentioned by scholars who seek to link his work with the Famine: an oil on canvas called *Annapurna* (figure 4.9), but this was a painting done by Baij much later in the 1970s. Baij was certainly a socially committed artist throughout his career, and he was one of the members of the radical Calcutta Group when it was founded in 1943. But he does not seem to have engaged repeatedly with the Famine in his body of visual art.

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art. He does address (lower case f) famine in the general sense often, but not the specifics of the (capital F) Famine of 1943. Therefore I believe Baij can best be grouped with other artists like Atul Bose and Gopal Ghose, who addressed the Famine occasionally or generally, but not with the obsession of repetitive reportage that can be seen in the work of Chittaprosad, Somnath Hore, Zainul Abedin and Sunil Janah. As mentioned earlier, the images included in the *Bengal Painters’ Testimony* could have been included for a variety of legitimate reasons. But one consequence of having such publications largely devoid of images that represented the Famine itself was to further render the suffering of millions of poor Bengalis unseen or invisible, at least to the audience that such a fundraising publication would have been addressed to.

This tendency of invisibility also manifested beyond the pages of the *Bengal Painters’ Testimony*. Consider, for example, a watercolour work on paper by Nandalal Bose titled either *Shiva* or *Annapurna*, which is believed to represent the only instance in which this famous and important painter directly addressed the contemporary events of the Famine (figure 4.10). Bose was a major Bengali artist of the modern period, and as an inspirational teacher he influenced virtually the entire next generation of Bengali artists. In 1943 Bose was himself leaning away from the enthusiastic patriotism of his earliest Bengal School style canvases towards more experimental forays into abstract forms that would have great consequences for the future path of the Bengali avant-garde. But whatever his stylistic and aesthetic experiments, in terms of socio-economic position, in the early 1940s Bose was a respected and honoured professor at Visva-Bharati university.
in Santiniketan, who was himself relatively protected from the most difficult experiences of the Famine. In Annapurna we see a skeletal Shiva, dancing before the figure of the goddess Annapurna, known in India as the goddess of plenty and food. In the painting, Bose has juxtaposed the sharp, anatomical angles of the dancing Shiva with the classical curves of the goddess, just as the terrible energy suggested by his flailing extremities and garments are contrasted with her deliberate mudra and steady, frontal gaze. The contrast between emaciated and robust forms is underscored by a quote from the eighteenth century Bengali poet Bharatchandra, which Bose inscribed on the reverse: “The sheer inscrutability of it all! When he who has Annapurna in his home, cries for food!”

Sanjoy Kumar Mallik has recently offered a valuable critical analysis of this image, arguing that its vague reference to the Famine, “garbed in the cloak of the ‘classical,’ sufficiently refined, sophisticated and anaesthetized” remained at a hopeless distance from the realities of suffering that were then unfolding across Bengal. And like so many of the images that were included in the Bengal Painters’ Testimony, Annapurna was also not painted in the critical moment of crisis and rupture. Bose had done an earlier version of Annapurna decades earlier. It had been illustrated in Bharati in 1910, and was rather rapturously reviewed by Sister Nivedita. In its earlier incarnation the painting had been known by the title Shiva. Then, the artist had inscribed the painting with a different quote,

218 Quoted in Sarkar, A Matter of Conscience, 34.
taken from a poem by Rabindranath Tagore, which contrasted song and silence, and dance and stillness, but which did not have any direct reference to food or hunger. In 1943 Bose swapped the poetic inscription by Tagore for the other by Bharatchandra and “redressed” the image as Annapurna, to a new purpose. The gesture of re-naming is a powerful one, especially in South Asia, and Bose’s painting may well have acquired a unique legacy by being tied not only to Tagore and Nivedita but also to Bharatchandra. But in the process, a sense of urgency and immediacy that could have connected the image to its immediate contemporary events is nevertheless diluted.

How can we explain this strange invisibility of the Famine in the work of those artists we have come to think of as central to the debates around the modern Bengali art? Was it just that these artists knew instinctively that the Famine would not appeal to the wealthy patrons that might collect their work? Or could it be that many artists at that time chose not to directly address the Famine because they themselves were relatively insulated from its disastrous consequences and could not bear to force themselves to visualize the trauma they could not themselves correct or redeem? Faced with the overwhelming nature of the crisis, many of the wealthier citizens of Calcutta withdrew into an experience of not-seeing, becoming desensitized to the suffering caused by the Famine. Would it not be natural for successful and economically comfortable artists to respond in a similar way, and to become blind to the Famine in their work? Such blindness or invisibility can be a natural response to trauma; in a psychoanalytic sense, the traumatic wound is theorized as that which can not (yet) be represented and remembered properly, and which, until it can
be reconciled, exists in a state beyond language or representation. Perhaps such traumatic blindness (or un-representability) manifested in a general paucity of Famine imagery by the successful artists who have become the mainstay of Bengali art history. Silence and absence may well have been one kind of response to the Famine by Bengali artist, but that trauma also manifested in other ways in the work of those few artists who did repeatedly represent and directly address the Famine in their work. Before turning to look specifically at those bodies of Famine-related work, I will first explore another realm in which the Famine was rendered invisible for wealthy audiences.

### 4.3.1 The Modern Review and its Public

The wealthy and powerful sections of Bengali society were personally relatively protected from the worst of the Famine’s affects, but they could not easily avoid the trauma of witnessing its many victims. Many artists could not or chose not to bring this trauma into representation in their work, and in the same way many publications assiduously avoided looking at or representing the Famine even during its most horrific months. While the tendency (or even need) to not-see the Famine is suggested by Sanjoy Kumar Mallik’s interpretation of the painting *Annapurna* by Nandalal Bose, and by my discussion of the

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221 There is a large field of psychoanalytic literature related to trauma, from Freud and Lacan to more recent work by Ruth Leys, all of which emphasizes this aspect of the traumatic wound as existing beyond language and representation. See, for example, Ruth Leys, *Trauma, a Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Lisa Saltzman and Eric Rosenberg, eds., *Trauma and Visuality in Modernity.* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 2006); or Kristina Stiles, “Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma,” in *On Violence: A Reader*, eds. Bruce Lawrence and Aisha Karim (Durham, Duke University Press, 2007), 522-538.
Bengal Painters’ Testimony publication, I would like to further this argument by looking also at the visual and textual evidence that can be found in a particularly elite periodical publication, in the hopes of coming to a better understanding of the way(s) that the ability to see-without-seeing was exercised for and by that publication’s readership.

Established in 1907 in Calcutta, The Modern Review (figure 4.11) was the English-language counterpart of the Bengali journal Prabasi, which had begun publication six years earlier. Both publications were owned and operated by the nationalist entrepreneur Ramananda Chatterjee, and were a part of the flourishing field of pictorial journalism in India in the early twentieth century that exerted enormous influence on contemporary political and cultural debates. The Modern Review was immediately popular in large part due to what was at the time the cutting edge of illustrative technologies, and the monthly periodical quickly became one of the most popular and influential arts and current events journals published during the second quarter of the twentieth century in India. The Modern Review was aimed primarily at English-reading Indian elites across the subcontinent, as well as the European population in India. Ramananda Chatterjee’s decision to launch an English-language counterpart to the already-successful Prabasi had been inspired in part by his desire to reach both a European audience and the English-educated Indian elites in other parts of India, for whom the Bengali-language Prabasi was inaccessible.222

222 Mitter, Art and Nationalism, 122.
This heterogeneous mixture of elite English and Indian readerships contributed to the multiple and often conflicting voices contained within *The Modern Review*, and was further articulated within the public sphere of private individuals that were connected through the circulation and shared experience of reading it. My use of the term “public sphere” and its location within a particular print culture is obviously indebted to Jurgen Habermas’s concept of a liberal, bourgeois public sphere, which he traces from its emergence in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, through its subsequent decline in the twentieth. Habermas articulated the idea of the public sphere as a field of rational-critical debate, in which private individuals came together to counter and check the power of the state. Many scholars have identified some of the difficulties in applying Habermas’s idealized model of the public sphere even to the realities of European history, let alone in trying to graft it onto histories from other parts of the world. In the South Asian context for example, Sandria Freitag has tried to sidestep the problem of locating a Habermasian model of literary society in South Asian communities where illiteracy rates are still high by shifting the idea of a public sphere into the realm of *visual* literacy. This has allowed Freitag to argue in favour of a South Asian “public arena” (instead of a “public sphere”), in which conceptions of community are forged, contested and perpetuated largely through participation in visual and image-based (rather than literary) cultures. Similarly, Sudipta Kaviraj has shifted Habermas’s concept of the public sphere

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to a South Asian concept of “the common,” in order to discuss the highly charged contest for public space that is enacted in South Asia between the demands of rich and poor urban constituents. However, despite such complications, I tend to agree with Craig Calhoun that, while Habermas’s study does indeed focus on a particular, idealized historical and geographic moment that complicates any efforts to easily apply it to a situation as far afield as late-colonial Bengal, nevertheless the concept of the public sphere as Habermas articulated it still “aims to reach beyond the flawed realities of this history to recover something of continuing normative importance.” As I have elsewhere discussed the issue of Habermas’s applicability to the late-colonial Bengali context, here I wish simply to point out that the public sphere that was represented in the pages of The Modern Review spoke not with a single voice, nor even with a shared goal of achieving consensus. Rather, it spoke to and from the intersection of multiple identities and competing allegiances. It is my belief that these multiple and conflicting perspectives became particularly manifest in the texts and images contained in the issues of The Modern Review that were published during the worst of the Famine months in 1943 and 1944. For it is in the pages of this glossy, elite, intellectual magazine that we can clearly see the degree to which the idea of rural Bengal had become intensely problematic, both within and for the urban imagination of The Modern Review’s readership.

Issues of *The Modern Review* published between 1943 and 1945 contained texts and images that express, on the one hand, a very deep anxiety over the idea of rural India, and on the other, a desire to control and regulate the rural on the part of the urban public sphere. The rural “problem” is presented repeatedly in *The Modern Review* as something that can be solved through the intervention of modern scientific methods that have been developed in the city (either in Calcutta or abroad, which serves as another obvious source of imagined authority). Within the pages of *The Modern Review*, the imagined village is presented to both British and elite Indian readers as an Other that can not control or regulate itself: as that which requires studying, correcting and engineering on the part of the metropolis. But at the same time, the imagined, idealized village also often becomes a vision of pastoral paradise, the repository of traditional wisdom and spirituality, the embodiment of the harmony of nature, and the upholder of established class, caste and gender norms. According to Ashis Nandy, such contradictions have helped to make the myth of the journey to and from the city one of the primary organizing principles of contemporary Indian culture and identity.  

Short and scattered textual references to food shortages began to appear in *The Modern Review* in the February 1943 issue, four months after the cyclone and tidal waves that devastated the 1943 *aman* crop. The first key text to appear in the journal is a single-column article titled “Is Rationing Desirable?” The (anonymous) author suggests that a

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fatigue of vision was already beginning to affect the privileged classes in Calcutta when he writes: “already every day we witness the nauseating and disgusting sight of long queues consisting even of women and children standing in the sun for long hours together for a few servings of rice or sugar.” Note that his complaint is not levelled at the fact that such queues exist, simply that “we” are forced to witness them. This kind of complaint is echoed in many successive reports and articles in The Modern Review.

For several months after this first report, each successive monthly issue of The Modern Review typically contained a small handful of single-column articles on the Famine, usually two or three inches in length, giving brief descriptions of events and circumstances in the countryside, such as the threat of rural hoarding of foodstuffs or the looting of boat-loads of rice. But towards the end of 1943 there was a sharp change in The Modern Review’s coverage of the Famine, and in the August 1943 issue there are two references that are particularly relevant to explaining the subsequent shift in focus. First, there was an article reporting that the government was going to start enforcing strict rationing in urban areas. Second, there was a report regarding corpses that were appearing on the streets of Calcutta. Then suddenly, in sharp contrast to the previous issues which each usually had a combined total of perhaps ten to twelve inches of news items related to food and the Famine, the next issue of The Modern Review (September 1943) contained nearly

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seventeen pages dedicated to Famine-related topics. This included the journal’s first feature-length article on the subject, titled “Some Aspects of the Food Muddle.”

This first Famine-related feature article sheds valuable light on the nature of the public sphere that was enacted and engaged by *The Modern Review*. After criticising the government for its continued export of grain to feed Allied troops in Europe, for its stockpiling of grain for the use of the military, and for failing to implement price controls over rice and grain, the author concludes with reference to the fact that all studies and most relief efforts had thus far been concentrated mostly in urban Calcutta and Howrah, while the needs of rural Bengal had not yet received sufficient attention. Although speaking specifically of the efforts of government authorities, the author of this article perhaps unknowingly also echoes his own voice and those of others that wrote for and read *The Modern Review*, for it was only when the “problem” of the rural infiltrated the city in the form of the enforcement of stricter rationing and the appearance of dead bodies on Calcutta’s streets that *The Modern Review* began to seriously report on the Famine.

As this selection of articles related to the Famine suggests, within *The Modern Review* at this time, often within the same issue and at times even within the same article, we find on the one hand expressions of a deep anxiety over the idea of poor, rural India (manifested explicitly in reports of rural hoarding of food, for example), and on the other hand a desire to save the countryside through the proper intervention of urban regulation and control.

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231 *The Modern Review*, (September 1943), n.p.
Indeed, some members of the urban public sphere sought to use the suffering rural peasantry as a tool—an anonymous tool in which individuality is effaced—with which they could confront and critique the colonial government (this was manifested, for example, in articles denouncing the government’s inaction in relieving the suffering of the rural population). But such critiques were always at a distance from the rural; the rural was not speaking for itself. Ashis Nandy has used Gayatri Spivak’s phrase to refer to the Indian village as “the subaltern that cannot speak.” This description is particularly relevant to the idea of the rural that was articulated in the texts of The Modern Review, and it is a pattern that we also see recurring in the various Famine-related images published in the journal during the same period.

The first Famine-related image to appear in The Modern Review was in the October 1943 issue, and it takes the form of an advertisement for Mahalaxmi Cotton Mills (figure 4.12). The advertisement speaks to the preparations being made that year for the annual Durga Puja festival in Calcutta. The text of the ad reads:

Bare Inside and Out. Durga Puja, but where is the joy and festivity? This year it comes to a barebacked, starving people. In these distressing times we aim at supplying the largest number of people with sarees and dhotis at the cheapest possible price.

Visually, this ad represents a fairly abstracted, graphic depiction of a naked female figure, rendered in sharp, quick slashes of black and white forms and lines. The inverse, triangular shape indicated behind the woman’s body seems to repeat and extend the

232 Nandy, An Ambiguous Journey to the City, 13.
angular (and triangular) twists of her own form, making it appear as if her body is mapped onto the looming, grey space above and behind her. This grey, inverted triangular shape immediately calls to mind the popular visual trope (common especially during the late colonial period but still observable today) of visualizing and representing the Indian nation cartographically, as the body of a “Mother India” figure, whose garments and limbs occupy and delineate the same space as the geographic shape of the Indian nation itself (see, for example, figure 4.13). This modern visual trope of “Mother India” has been discussed at length by such scholars as Sumathi Ramaswamy and the team of Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger. But the image represented in the Mahalaxmi Cotton Mills ad seems to reverse and invalidate the image of a benevolent, fecund, nationalist goddess such as those scholars have theorized. Instead it depicts a shrivelled victim of Famine; her body is fractured, done violence to, and rendered broken.

Meanwhile, the vagueness of her semi-abstract form, along with the inclusion of only the most general environmental or locational details that would indicate a sense of reportage or specificity, keeps the reality of rural suffering at a discrete distance. This was a distance that was in fact prefigured and developed by some of the images of rural scenes discussed in chapter two. It is a distance that could make possible the recognition of rural suffering while simultaneously transforming it into a commodity image.

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The vague no-space in which the Mahalaxmi Cotton Mills figure is located is a recurring characteristic of all the Famine-related images that appeared in *The Modern Review*, and it bears more than a superficial similarity to the anonymous, faceless, any-space that was conjured by many of the images of village life contained in the books of artists’ prints explored in chapter two, such as Ramendranath Chakravorty’s *Call of the Himalayas* and Haren Das’s *Bengal Village in Wood Engraving*. In the Mahalaxmi Cotton Mills ad there is only an abstracted geometric pattern behind the woman to indicate space, while in other Famine-related images in *The Modern Review* the backgrounds are either entirely blank or are indicated only perfunctorily by the barest indications of sky or by a single, symbolic object in the foreground (figures 4.14, 4.15 and 4.16). Real-life scenes of starvation and desperation were, by this time, a part of common lived experience on the streets of Calcutta. Yet, rather than publish images within a realistic space that could be recognizable to the urban readership of *The Modern Review*, here we find that the materiality of human suffering has been abstracted to a safe, containable distance. A similar argument could be made to explain why *The Modern Review* included virtually no photographs of the Famine in any of its 1943 or 1944 issues, despite the fact that photographic reproductions were by then the most common type of image that tended to be reproduced in the journal, and despite the fact that Famine photographs were appearing in other newspapers and journals at the time. Photographic and realistic images of the Famine were available, but these were not favoured by *The Modern Review* or its public.
During this period *The Modern Review* was published with extensive illustrations (usually photographic reproductions) in black and white, with one colour image per issue acting as the frontispiece. There were two issues in 1943 and 1944 that had frontispieces related to the Famine. The first was a reproduction of a painting by Sailoz Mokherjea (1906-1960) titled *The Tragedy*, which appeared in the December 1943 issue (figure 4.14). The second, which appeared in the March 1944 issue, was a reproduction of a painting by Khagen Roy (1907-1983) titled *Hunger* (figure 4.15). Both images repeat the trope of a vague no-space that distanced the suffering of Famine victims from the lived reality of the viewer or witness, while the blurry and indistinct quality of the reproductions themselves (the result of the still-limited colour reproduction technologies then available in Bengal) further distances the viewer from the subject matter. Nevertheless, one could argue that the inclusion of two Famine-related frontispieces in *The Modern Review* does to a certain extent serve to announce the magnitude of events then unfolding, and the journal’s engagement with those events.

However, in the same March 1944 issue that opened with Khagen Roy’s *Hunger* as its frontispiece, there is only one small article related to the Famine in the entire issue, and references in subsequent issues became increasingly scarce. Despite the fact that many areas of rural Bengal remained in the most horrific states of starvation and disease for months and even years afterwards, nevertheless by early 1944 *The Modern Review* felt able to claim that the Famine was already “quickly passing into memory.”235

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The same March 1944 issue that opened with Khagen Roy’s painting also contained the final Famine-related image to appear in *The Modern Review*: an illustration of a poster that was exhibited in the 1944 Art in Industry Exhibition (figure 4.16), which was reproduced in an article that reported on that event. Amongst the accounts of commercial photography and designs, recruitment posters and letter-heads that were on display in the exhibition, the author of this article lingers over his descriptions of the “Grow More Rice” campaign, which featured posters of emaciated and hungry children begging for food. The author talks about these images as being especially relevant and powerful because they were motivated by “spontaneous observation of a real event,” and I would tend to agree. This is perhaps only a small gesture, one generated within a discussion of a cultural event, but it is a gesture that nevertheless continues to speak of a personal experience of the Famine, and which emphasizes the relevance of visual art that speaks to an immediacy of (shared) human experience at moments of great trauma.

4.4 The Famine in Representation

If the reaction of the elite art world to the 1943 Bengal Famine was a traumatized unwillingness to see that manifested in the images and texts of journals like *The Modern Review*, or in the sanitized mythological gloss of a painting like *Annapurna*, or in well-meaning fundraising efforts such as the *Bengal Painters’ Testimony*, there were other

responses that also registered within the Bengali artistic community and art world at the
time. In fact, a very different experience of the Famine and its relationship to art and
artistic practice manifested elsewhere, in different types of printed media and for different
kinds of public spheres. For artists of more modest social and economic status, the ability
to visually remove oneself from the suffering of the Famine through a gesture of looking-
without-seeing was a strategy that many simply did not have or desire access to. Instead,
for a small handful of artists, the contemporary situation could in no way be avoided or
mistaken. For Chittaprosad, Zainul Abedin, Somnath Hore and Sunil Janah, the Famine
demanded direct engagement and unrelenting visibility. It required constant reiteration and
repetition, and it came to dominate practically the entire scope of all of their artistic
practices during the Famine years. Invisibility, un-representability, and blindness represent
one possible response to trauma, while this kind of inescapability, saturation, and
repetition represent another. The field of trauma studies in the humanities has transformed
significantly since the 1990s, and it has especially proliferated after September 11, 2001.
This new work has produced “an iconoclastic notion of the traumatic event as that which
simultaneously demands urgent representation but shatters all potential frames of
comprehension and reference.”237 As we shall see, this kind of vexed, traumatic tension
between visuality and its impossibility is precisely what manifested in much of the work
of these artists who did elect to directly engage with the Famine in their work.

237 Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, introduction to The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and
The four artists who repeatedly and relentlessly engaged with the Famine in their work were all committed members of the radical political left during this period. As members of the either the Communist Party itself or the associated Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA) or Anti-Fascist Writers and Artists Association (AFWAA), Chittaprosad, Somnath Hore, Zainul Abedin and Sunil Janah were all committed to the causes of defeating fascism, ending colonial rule in South Asia, and establishing a more egalitarian social order in its place. And although later on in their careers these artists all experienced some degree of alienation from the official Communist movement in South Asia, nevertheless in 1943 and 1944 they had all made a strong commitment to work for the cause of, and to identify themselves with, the poorest and most marginalized elements of Bengali society. Some of these artists had been born into more comfortable socio-economic positions than others; Zainul Abedin, for example, was born into a struggling, lower-middle class Muslim family in East Bengal, while Chittaprosad was born to a solidly middle class, even bhadralok, Hindu family in West Bengal (his father was a civil servant). Yet by 1943 they had all embraced the Communist movement and rejected not only the principle of inherited social position but also the idea of art for art’s sake, instead

238 The colonial government had lifted its previous ban on the Communist Party in July 1942, after the Party opposed Congress’s Quit India movement on the grounds that all assistance and cooperation had to be given during the war in order to defeat fascism and assist the Soviet Union. Soon after the Party was officially recognized by the government, both the IPTA and the AFWAA were established as cultural offshoots.

239 Chittaprosad, Sunil Janah and Somnath Hore all distanced themselves from the Communist Party after Independence, particularly after infighting led to former leader J.C. Joshi being expelled from the Party in 1949. After Independence Zainul Abedin became a public servant in East Pakistan and somewhat distanced himself from the Communist associations of his youth.


self-consciously seeking ways to use their work in order to “promote the awareness of
human rights, and spread national consciousness and patriotic fervour.”242

It is also interesting to note that of this small group of artists, two (Chittaprosad and
Somnath Hore) were also members in that small fraternity of Bengali artists who
specialized in relief printmaking in the early twentieth century. Relief print media
occupied a unique position in relation to physical labour in Bengal at this time (as
described in chapter two), owing to the fact that the physical mark-making of the
printmaker serves as a constant reminder of the physical labour of the carving of the block
itself. This relationship with labour and the practice of art making as a highly physical
process may have led these artists towards a greater sympathy and identification with the
labouring masses in Bengal who suffered the most during the Famine years. Zainul
Abedin was also very active and interested in printmaking, although he now perhaps best
remembered as a painter. Sunil Janah meanwhile was exclusively a photographer,
although printmaking and photography did have certain connections and crossovers in
Bengal at the time. For example, both were reproductive trades that were often grouped
together in matters of educational curricula and social status; Janah was for a time a senior
lecturer at the School of Printing Technology in Calcutta, in fact.243

2011), s.v. “Indian People’s Theatre Association.”
243 Sunil Janah, Photographing India, 45.
This is not to suggest that all printmaking artists in Bengal at the time were compelled to represent the Famine in their work or to identify with the poorest segments of Bengali society. As discussed in chapters two and three, artists such as Ramendranath Chakravorty and Mukul Dey were specialists in printmaking, but neither addressed the Famine in their work. Dey was mired in personal suffering in 1943, but Chakravorty was continuing to depict idyllic scenes of the Bengali countryside even through the worst of the Famine months (his *Call of the Himalayas* was published in 1944). However, it is interesting to see how those print artists who did choose or were compelled to face the Famine head-on were forced to reconsider their choice of media in such circumstances. Although Chittaprosad, Somnath Hore and to a lesser extent Zainul Abedin had all favoured printmaking media, when it came to the task of representing the horrific contemporary events that were unfolding around them in 1943 and 1944 they all turned exclusively to other media that offered greater immediacy, instantaneity, and urgency. While Sunil Janah remained in the field of photography, the other three artists began to produce highly graphic sketches in black and white for their Famine-related work. Indeed, the entire body of images produced by Chittaprosad, Somnath Hore, and Zainul Abedin during the Famine is all in the form of small, hurried sketches made from the most basic materials and scrap paper. It is true that some Famine-related themes did re-emerge later on in each of their careers, often re-worked into woodcut print designs or large painted compositions. But in 1943 and 1944 neither the polished production of finished paintings nor the multi-stage processes of printmaking offered these artists the essential qualities of urgency and simultaneity that representing the crisis demanded.
This is also not to say that there were no Bengali artists who engaged with the Famine in other media, such as painting or sculpture. But amongst those who did, there were very few who are known to have created more than one or two Famine-related images, at most. The artists discussed above whose works were illustrated in *The Modern Review*—Khagen Roy and Sailoz Mokherjea—are perfect examples; both achieved minor success as professional painters in the early twentieth century in Bengal, and although neither one is particularly known for his engagement with the Famine, nevertheless each obviously produced at least one Famine-related work that now survives in *The Modern Review* archive. A few other painters such as Atul Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar similarly created one-off studies of contemporary Famine-related themes. But compared to the sustained and invested representation of the Famine in sketched drawings (and photography), painterly and sculptural engagement with the Famine is limited. Perhaps there are more, as-yet-undiscovered cases of painters who, like Gobardhan Ash, made private studies of Famine subjects in watercolour that were not intended to be viewed by a wider audience. But such speculations aside, of those artists who are best known for their intense and repeated engagement with the Famine (because they themselves were adamant about having it seen), all moved away from printmaking media whose processes required extensive time and multiple steps. In such an environment, when these artists were seeking

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244. *Bengal Painters’ Testimony*, n.p.
245. Ash’s Famine sketches were discovered in 1945 and subsequently publicly exhibited. Sanjoy Kumar Mallik, *Chittaprosad: A Retrospective*, volume 1, 40.
ways to turn their art into some kind of instantaneous reportage, it seems that only the immediacy of sketching (or photography) would do.

4.4.1 Chittaprosad’s Famine

Each artist must sooner or later, consciously or unconsciously, express his moral and political opinion. In my artwork, I represent the tradition of moralists and political reformers. To save people means to save art itself. The activity of an artist means the active denial of death.246

Born in 1915 into a reasonably middle-class family in a town not far from Calcutta, by 1943 Chittaprosad had, like many other reform-minded Bengalis, rejected his brahminical surname and had become an active supporter of the Communist movement in India. In fact, he became involved with the Communist movement even before the Party was officially legalized and recognized by the colonial government in 1942. After a childhood spent moving around to several different places throughout then-undivided Bengal,247 during the 1930s Chittaprosad’s family settled for a time in Chittagong in East Bengal, where he attended both secondary school and then the Chittagong Government College. It was in Chittagong (a hotbed of radical politics of both the Congress and Communist varieties) where Chittaprosad met the socialist leader Purnendu Dastider. It seems that soon thereafter, Chittaprosad became actively involved with local, underground, left-wing

246 Chittaprosad, Confession, directed by Pavel Hobl (Prague: Kratky Film, 1972).
247 Like Mukul Dey, Chittaprosad and his family moved to many different places in both West and East Bengal as a result of his father's transfers as a civil servant. Prabhas Sen, “Chittaprosad – the Artist,” n.p.
movements, transforming rapidly from a formerly “footloose” and carefree teenager into a serious, “sometimes irascible, sometimes intolerant,” highly politicized young man.248

Already by this point Chittaprosad had demonstrated a talent for drawing and painting, despite the fact that he had had only the most rudimentary art instruction while at school. After his studies at the Chittagong Government College in pursuit of a degree in humanities he desired to pursue further, specialized artistic education and training, but for some reason this did not come to pass. Some scholars have claimed that Chittaprosad’s application to the Government Art School in Calcutta was rejected, while others say he had wanted to study under Nandalal Bose at Kala Bhavan in Santiniketan, but that his had not happened “due to some misunderstanding.”249 Regardless, what seems clear is that as an artist, Chittaprosad was largely self-taught. Certainly by 1943 he had had little exposure to the kind of formal training that would have been available though the institutions of art education that existed then in Bengal, and which typically cast struggling artists into professional status. Nevertheless, he was determined to use the skills and tools at his disposal for the betterment of the Communist movement. In the late 1930s and early 1940s in Chittagong, Chittaprosad busied himself with making posters, drawing political cartoons, and illustrating articles for the Party’s publications. In 1943 he made a one-of-a-kind sketchbook of thirty original portraits of Indian and international

Communist leaders, which was presented by the Communist Student Faction as a gift to the National Headquarters of the Communist Party of India to mark Lenin Day.²⁵⁰

When the magnitude of the Famine became clear, Chittaprosad undertook a series of journeys that in many ways reversed the heartbreaking migration that thousands of poor Bengali villagers had already made from the countryside into the city. First, in November of 1943, the Party sent Chittaprosad to the extreme south-west corner of Bengal, to the coastal district of Midnapore (see figure 4.1).²⁵¹ Midnapore had been one of the regions most badly affected by the 1942 cyclone and tsunamis, and was amongst the longest suffering in terms of food shortages and starvation conditions. Chittaprosad first travelled by train from Calcutta, then set out on foot, “carrying with him in his string bag paper and pen, and chida (paddy moulded into flattened rice by boiling and then threshing) and gud (sweet molasses) for sustenance.”²⁵² For weeks he walked from abandoned village to abandoned village, from orphanage to burning grounds, speaking to everyone he encountered about their individual circumstances and histories, trying to ascertain in each

²⁵⁰ The original manuscript has recently been reproduced by the Delhi Art Gallery as A Sketchbook of 30 Portraits by Chittaprosad (Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery, 2011). The Communist leaders that Chittaprosad represents are Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, Semyon Timoshenko, Kliment Voroshilov, Boris Shaposhnikov, Gregory Zhukov, Filipp Golikov, Vyacheslav Molotov, Mikhail Kalinin, Georgi Dimitrov, Rajani Pale Dutt, Mao Zedong, Maurice Thorez, José Diaz, Dolored Gómez (also known as La Pasionaria), Earl Browder, B.T. Ranadive, P.C. Joshi, Dr. Gangadhar Adhikari, Muzsaffar Ahmed, Bankim Mukherjee, Somnath Lahiri, Abdullah Rasul, Bhowani Sen, Rahul Sankrityayana, Puchalapalli Sundaravyya, Ajoy Ghose, and Biswanath Mukherjee. The portraits of foreign leaders are clearly based on iconic versions that were then in popular circulation, but many of the Indian subjects appear to have been drawn from life.

²⁵¹ Chittaprosad often refers to this district by the alternative spelling of “Midnapur.” I use the more common “Midnapore” except where quoting Chittaprosad directly. The boundaries of this district as they existed in 1943 have since radically changed, most notably when it was divided into East and West Midnapore (Purba and Paschim Medinipur, in Bengali) in 2002.

case what chain of events had brought them to their present conditions. Everywhere he went Chittaprosad sought to bear witness to the devastating conditions unfolding in this particular corner of rural Bengal, and he prepared himself to testify to those conditions by sketching and taking notes on what he saw and learned. After a month spent walking through the devastated district, Chittaprosad returned to Calcutta in order to undertake more work for the Party. But soon he felt compelled to again abandon the relative insulation and safety of the city to set out again into the rural areas.

In June and August of 1944 Chittaprosad set out, again travelling primarily by foot, through the areas of Birkampur, Cox’s Bazaar, Munshiganj and Chittagong, all in eastern Bengal (now Bangladesh). There he visited relief kitchens and hospitals overflowing with starving and diseased people. Everywhere he went he saw ample evidence that although for many wealthy and urban Bengalis the Famine was already fading into memory (it was long past being mentioned in journals like *The Modern Review*, for example), the suffering of millions of peasant Bengalis was still far from over. In Chittagong, Chittaprosad met with P.C. Joshi, the general secretary of the Communist Party, and the photographer Sunil Janah who was then travelling in his retinue. The printmaker and the photographer were both tasked by Joshi with documenting the Famine visually and textually, and working with the Party to get their images and testimony out to the population. Chittaprosad and Janah also at that time began an enduring friendship

which saw them travelling together in rural India for many years to follow, and remaining in close personal contact for the rest of their lives.\textsuperscript{254}

The texts and images that Chittaprosad produced during his journeys in the Bengali countryside circulated in number of different ways. First, there was at least one exhibition of Famine-related work organized by the Communist Party, which toured to several cities in India and which featured the drawings of Chittaprosad and Zainul Abedin, and the photographs of Sunil Janah. Although the mainstream press appears to have avoided commenting on or publicizing the exhibition, more than 5,000 people are recorded as visiting during the week the exhibition was on display in Bombay, and a thousand rupees were collected there for relief projects.\textsuperscript{255} The use of the exhibition format by the Communist Party at this time is noteworthy, as was their decision to shift the event from the usual social spaces of the art school or elite salon to their own communal halls and other improvised spaces. This repurposing of the exhibition format into something (and somewhere) that a greater range of society could access would no doubt have helped the movement in communicating its message as broadly as possible.

The second way that Chittaprosad’s texts and images circulated was through his improvised performance of them. Many of the images that he sketched were accompanied by Chittaprosad’s lengthy inscriptions on the reverse side, which recounted various details

\textsuperscript{254} Sunil Janah, *Photographing India*, 9.
\textsuperscript{255} “Bhooka Bengal Exhibition,” *People’s War*, January 2, 1944, n.p.
about the individuals pictured (figure 4.17). For example, on the back of an image depicting a rag-covered woman identified by name as “Bimala” and by caste as “raw hide supplying, wicker worker, untouchable caste,” the following text is recorded in Chittaprosad’s handwriting:

Husband, a son, brother and his wife and child, and a daughter all died of starvation, fever, and dropsy last year. She and her baby son were saved, as they were supported by the mistress she worked for. The mistress is away this year and Bimala’s baby had also died just the other day, and she herself is starving and is without any shelter of her own, and lives on charity. In the picture she is seen sitting on the plot of land that last year belonged to her family but had been sold to a rice dealer in exchange for only 20 rupees.256

Somnath Hore was Chittaprosad’s student and younger colleague during this period. He later described how, during the Famine, he often encountered the elder artist holding up and displaying such images at Communist meetings and gatherings, narrating the notes he had scribbled on the reverse to captivate and horrify his audiences with his accounts of the circumstances in the villages, and the personal narratives of the individuals represented.257

It is not difficult to see in this practice of performing and presenting the image something in common with the pat painting and singing tradition of Bengal, in which itinerant artists travel from village to village performing and singing the stories of their scroll paintings to rural audiences. Moreover, an element of protest against social inequity and exploitation has long been acknowledged as an inherent part of the performances of the patua artists.258

256 Quoted in Mallik, Chittaprosad – A Retrospective, vol. 2: 265.
Therefore this traditional pattern of the performative use of texts and images may well have helped make sense of Chittaprosad’s performances of his Famine images and stories. In all the personal narratives that he collected and reiterated, it seems that he was intent on highlighting the ease and rapidity with which even prosperous and reasonably well-off people fell to the most terrible states of destitution, and reminding his audience always of the humanity of the suffering. Chittaprosad was always definitive in his naming of his subjects, refusing to let even a decomposed body become a generalization or a “type” (figure 4.20). Instead, he reminds the viewer incessantly of the individual personality of every one of his subjects, through both the act of naming and the depiction of realistic portraiture.

This third way that Chittaprosad’s images and texts circulated was in the pages of the Communist Party’s newspapers: the English-language People’s War (later renamed People’s Age), and the Bengali Janajuddha. Like The Modern Review and its Bengali-language equivalent Prabasi, these publications also reached out to both a local and a pan-Indian, English-reading audience (People’s War was published in English from Bombay, although there were also several versions of the publication in local dialects). But politically, the public sphere represented by these publications was profoundly different. Whereas The Modern Review and Prabasi represented conservative, elite segments of society, the publications to which Chittaprosad provided his texts and images were a part of a political movement committed to undermining the established class and caste status quo along with the injustices of the colonial system. It is not surprising, therefore, that the
An article with two accompanying images that appeared in *People’s War* in January 1944 is typical of the kinds of contributions that Chittaprosad was making to the Party’s journals throughout 1943 and 1944 (figure 4.18). In the full-page article, titled “Midnapore as I Saw It,” Chittaprosad is quick to comment on the political consequences of the conditions he had witnessed in that district, lamenting that “the last spark of patriotism in the people of Midnapore is being killed by fear, hunger and epidemics.”

He also describes in bare, factual language the kinds of everyday horrors he encountered in the village of Janubason: “We were startled by a crunching sound coming from a bush – it was a dog gnawing on a human skull.” He describes the experience of visiting a village orphanage where thirty children, “all skin and bones” had arrived unsolicited in the course of three or four days, many of them brought there as a final act by their dying parents. He ends his dispatch with a plea for donations of clothing and medicine.

The article is accompanied by two illustrations by Chittaprosad, both pen and brush sketches in black and white. The top-most image depicts two emaciated human bodies that Chittaprosad encountered in the village of Janubason. The bodies are both sprawled across an uneven ledge of earth in a way that makes it unclear whether these people were already

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260 Ibid.
dead or if they were “living corpses” when Chittaprosad sketched them. In the foreground are some pieces of shattered pottery, a commonly understood symbol of hunger and an empty hearth. In the background is a dilapidated hut that clearly evokes the fragility of poor men’s shelter against natural disaster. Chittaprosad has rendered much of the landscape in quick, sketched lines, but the two bodies he has treated with very different, thick pools of black ink that weigh heavily on the page, drawing the eye always back to the forms of their shattered bodies.

The second image places a similar emphasis on the human body through the heavy application of pools of ink that contrasts with the linear and more sketch-like treatment of other elements of the composition. In this case, a body is stretched diagonally across the entire foreground of the image, dominating the picture, while the heavy black treatment of the limbs and bottom edge of the figure’s torso has the effect of visually weighing it down. In this way, Chittaprosad continually draws our attention to the fate of the human body, and to the suffering that has saturated it. Unlike in the previous image, here there is no question about the fate of the human subject depicted. This sketch obviously shows a corpse, one that is already partially decayed; the femur of one leg and the ribs on one side of the body are clearly visible, and the body is being eaten by a wild dog while vultures hover in the background. Although the body seems utterly objectified, the caption reclaims the figure’s personhood by naming the man as Kshetramohan. In the article it describes that this man—here reduced visually to only bones and rotting flesh—had lost his entire family to malaria before falling victim to the same disease. Chittaprosad notes
that those who had tried to cremate his body were seized with sickness themselves and had fled in fear, leaving his body to the dogs and the vultures. At the left of the picture plane we see again the standard symbol of the empty pot, indicating loss, hunger, and destitution. This kind of visual shorthand would have been essential and effective vocabulary for Chittaprosad to quickly communicate with his reader.

Many of Chittaprosad’s drawings and notes taken during his tour through Midnapore, including those in the “Midnapore as I Saw It” article, were later compiled into a stand-alone publication titled *Hungry Bengal*, which was published by the People’s Publishing House (run by the Communist Party) in Bombay early in 1944. *Hungry Bengal* is in some ways very similar to the books of artists’ prints and print artists’ books that were explored in chapters two and three. It combines short texts with sharp black and white imagery done by an artist who was known primarily as a printmaker. It was produced in a relatively small print run, and it was inexpensively priced (three rupees). And like Mukul Dey’s *My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh*, the book relates a narrative of travel undertaken by an artist that reaps personal and artistic transformation. But despite these similarities, for reasons inexorably linked to the Famine, *Hungry Bengal* is something quite different. This book was intended as an accusation and a catalyst. In both his images and his accompanying written accounts, Chittaprosad dispenses with detached objectivity in favour of an impassioned appeal for visuality. He refuses to relax the viewer’s gaze, drawing it again and again to the point of greatest pathos, greatest misery, and greatest suffering: the human body. He fights against the instinct towards blindness and demands
that his audience bear witness with him. He refuses to be impersonal, as he refuses to not
see.

Chittaprosad’s insistence on visualizing the Famine did not go unnoticed by the colonial
authorities, who clearly recognized its dangerous potential. Very soon after it was
published, Hungry Bengal was banned by British censors and several thousand copies
were burned as a result. Two copies are known to have survived: one was kept by
Chittaprosad’s family, and the other is in the collection of the British Library as a
disconcerting reminder (one of many) of the ongoing legacy of colonial networks of
information gathering and surveillance. But the question arises: if Chittaprosad’s texts
and images reporting on the situation in Midnapore were dangerous enough to warrant the
censure of the colonial state, why did this fate befall Hungry Bengal but not People’s
War? Why were these images and texts allowed to circulate in newspapers and journals,
but not as a stand-alone publication? What, about the images or the texts (or both), was
different?

One possible answer is revealed by a close consideration of the use of space, and the
relationship between image and text, in Hungry Bengal. At first it appears that the book
adopts a similar structure to many of those discussed in chapters two and three, with the
first pages dedicated to text alone, followed by individual images each displayed on its

261 The Delhi Art Gallery recently used the family copy to publish a reprint of Hungry Bengal on the
occasion of a retrospective of his work held in 2011. In the accompanying two-volume catalogue, Sanjoy
Kumar Mallik refers to the family copy as quite possibly the only one to survive, apparently unaware of the
copy retained by the British Library.
own separate presentation page (figures 4.19 and 4.20). On each of these separate image pages a small quotation has been separated out from the text to function as a kind of caption or description. In the cases of both of the images described above, we find that the artist has taken the opportunity to revisit the captions he had assigned them in the *People’s War* article. The two bodies lying before a broken hut are no longer identified as the inhabitants of the village of Janubason, but are instead “Humanity Dehumanized.” The partially-eaten corpse is still identified by name (“His name was Kshetramohan Naik…”), but the caption “Unhonoured and Unsung” has been added.

The drawings themselves appear identical to those that appeared earlier in the newspaper, but what has changed dramatically is the surrounding empty space that frames them. Released from the space constrictions imposed on a newspaper article format, here the images instead float detached alongside a blank, empty space that is presented beside them. Whereas on the newspaper page the scenes being depicted have been carefully contained and framed by heavy black lines or by walls of text on all sides, in *Hungry Bengal* the image has been entirely uprooted, set adrift, and the effect is far more pathetic and sorrowful.

Whereas I argued that the vague no-space we encountered in chapter two had the effect of distancing the viewer from the (predominantly rural) subject and rendering its suffering indistinct, here instead we find a different kind of composition of emptiness. In each case in *Hungry Bengal* the page is virtually split down the middle, with one half containing
Chittaprosad’s drawing and the other half facing it, empty (figures 4.19 and 4.20). Unlike the top-heavy arrangement of images on the page that facilitated the individual framing and display of images on a wall as valuable works of art (as was described in chapter two), the no-space conjured by these images is instead profoundly coloured by the subject matter of the Famine itself. This empty space is not the balanced frame of a unique work of art; rather, the composition sits heavily on one side of the page facing and drawing attention to the emptiness balanced against it. This shift in the balance of emptiness, along with the critical fact that the nature of the subject matter has changed from an idyllic scene of the countryside to one of the countryside in a state of suffering, makes the empty space in *Hungry Bengal* a constant reminder of what is *not* represented. This empty space stares back across the page at the image as an indication (and an accusation) of what is always in excess of and beyond representation, especially in traumatic circumstances. The empty space no longer frames the image, it is balanced as equal to the image, suggesting that as powerfully as Chittaprosad wants his viewer to participate in the act of bearing witness to this trauma such participation in and understanding of the trauma of others is essentially unachievable, that the true import of these events and the loss of these lives is beyond the viewer’s (our) comprehension. In achieving this unique relationship between visuality and its impossibility, Chittaprosad’s work in *Hungry Bengal* effectively avoids the trap of an overly simplistic identification based on an effacement of difference.\(^{262}\) His work in *Hungry Bengal* becomes instead a very powerful form of art that emerges from traumatic

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circumstances: an art that “expands the sympathetic imagination while teaching us about
the limits of sympathy.”

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5. Conclusion

This project has been principally concerned with the figure of the modern, urban, professional Bengali printmaking artist and the types of work that such artist created. I have sought to trace this figure through the period of the last decades of British colonial rule, or roughly from the 1920s to the 1940s, with some slight extension of that chronological boundary either forward or backward where it seemed warranted. This figure of the professional Bengali print artist was in many ways a newly available social role at this time: one that differed from artists involved in the world of painting and those who emerged from communities of contemporary artisans. While both the elite painting and artisan art worlds have each already generated their own significant bodies of art historical scholarship, this project shines light on the overlooked space in between, and at how this social space was navigated and negotiated by printmakers and artists engaged in the print-based art world in particular. I have focused on various strategies and means taken up by print artists to help them perform this newly available social role, as well as various cultural and institutional structures with which such performances interacted.

In chapter one I introduced the idea of differentiated utility by discussing the use and effectiveness of the fine art exhibition and the art school exhibition for different categories of artists in Bengal and this time. I argued that art histories that place great emphasis on exhibitionary practices and spaces as primary sites in which the late colonial Bengali art
world played itself out, have tended to privilege a history that deals only with a small component of the Bengali art world and particularly with painting. My arguments regarding the exhibitionary model functioned as an example of how certain tools and strategies could be of different degrees of usefulness for different categories of artists at different historical moments. I then suggested that in order to shed light on the ways that other professional artists participated in the Bengali art world it is more useful to specifically explore the fields of print and printed media. By outlining the ways in which a particular form of print—advertising—could be used by professional artists as a kind of exhibitionary alternative, I set the stage for the exploration of other unique forms of print in the chapters that followed.

In chapter two, I suggested that the specific material and historical possibilities that were manifest in relief print media (such as woodcut and linocut) were particularly and intimately bound up with and within the negotiation of an intense relationship between urban and rural experiences in late colonial, modern Bengal. At the time, the overt and recognized analogy between the relief carving of a print matrix (like a block of wood) and the plowing of an agricultural field meant that Bengali relief print artists could occupy a unique state of balance, between demands for “art as culture” (śrāvaṇā) on the one hand, and associations with physical labour (such as carving or plowing) that bespoke a kind of “art as cultivation” (kṛṣṭi), on the other. By considering the phenomenon of “books of artists’ prints” (and “books of reproductions of artists’ prints”), I pointed out that the often overt choice of rural subject matter in these publications served to further cement the
intense relationship between content (the village) and media (relief printing) in the late colonial Bengali art world. By looking closely at some of the unique material and ideological qualities that were embodied by key examples of these publications (namely, Ramendranath Chakravorty’s *Call of the Himalayas* and Haren Das’s *Bengal Village in Wood Engraving*), as well as many details of the images and texts these publications contained, in chapter two I also suggested how these publications often presented an idealized, anonymous image of the rural that satisfied the visual appetites of urban audiences, but which left rural or village India as something spoken *about*, not *to*. Finally, in chapter two I also examined the phenomenon of “books of artists prints” in order to shed light on how these publications functioned as one of a collection of useful tools and strategies that were utilized by professional printmaking artists in Bengal at this time in order to improve their chances of successfully carving out artistic careers for themselves. Key amongst such advantageous tools and strategies, as I have argued throughout this project, was a familiarity and virtuosity with and within the fields of print/printing/printmaking.

In chapter three I continued my investigation into the print-based Bengali art world of the late colonial period while considering another unique constellation of historical possibilities. In this case, these possibilities were manifest not in and through relief print processes like woodcut and linocut, but rather in and through the intaglio process of drypoint. In chapter three, I drew particular attention to drypoint’s unique possibilities, qualities and meanings, in order to reveal how this medium was able to resonate
profoundly with the negotiation of individuality vis-à-vis communal identity, particularly in Bengal in the early part of the twentieth century. By looking closely at one particular example of the drypoint artist Mukul Dey’s published collections of portraits of famous individuals (namely, Twelve Portraits, published in 1917) I was able to delve into some of the tensions between uniqueness and repetition, between originality and mimicry, which characterized much of the experience of Bengali modernity in the visual arts of the late colonial period, and that are also held in unique balance by the process, materials, and visual effects achieved through the medium of drypoint. I suggested that it was the particular capacities of drypoint—which by its very nature is a reproductive medium that both pushes forward and against its own imitability—that offered artists of the period an eloquent means of performing the negotiation of tension between the notion of an autonomous individual on the one hand, and the undeniable forces of larger social, familial, religious and caste networks to which all Bengalis belong, on the other.

In the third chapter I also pushed the consideration of individualism vis-à-vis collective identity in modern, late-colonial Bengal by pivoting from the category of “books of artists’ prints” to “print artists’ books.” This semantic shift allowed for a fruitful examination of the autobiographies written by one particular professional printmaking artist of the period: Mukul Chandra Dey. This chapter examined some of the tensions inherent in biographical writing in modern South Asia, which in many ways was seen as a way to challenge to the idea that South Asian culture, historically as well as in the modern
period, has tended to suppress the “individualist accent”\textsuperscript{264} in favour of notions of the self that are instead derived from elaborate inter-personal webs of family, caste, and religious communities. I suggested that biographical and autobiographical writing—already so intimately associated with concepts of modern identity, autonomy and individualism in the West—became a means by which certain artists could negotiate their public personas as respectable professionals. By considering the output of autobiographical accounts written by Mukul Dey (and looking closely at the book \textit{My Pilgrimages to Ajanta and Bagh} in particular), chapter three shed light on another strategic tool that was available for artists such as Dey at this time: the tool of literary biography. Artists who were active during the late-colonial period in Bengal often turned to biographical and autobiographical writing at the end of the twentieth century, in an effort to either cement their legacy or to imprint their opinions of that time period onto an official history. This suggests the kinds of stakes that continue to be involved in our understanding of how biography has intersected and engaged with the Bengali art world for the last century or more.

Throughout this thesis project I have been committed to exploring issues related to the modern cult of individualism and the relative importance of an individual in relation to the collective in late-colonial Bengal. I have considered the possibilities (and limitations) of print and printmaking at this time, including the ability of print culture to articulate and negotiate a specific kind of Bengali modern art, one that addressed head-on (indeed, which

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\textsuperscript{264} “It was not surprising that the individualist accent was muted [in India]: Indian society did not have a place for the individual, but in the form of the renouncer, a category relegated to the margins of society. Individuality as a way of social being was a precarious undertaking.” Sunil Khilnani, \textit{The Idea of India} (London: Penguin, 2003), 26.
often effortlessly manipulated) concepts like authenticity and mimicry. I have examined some of the tools and strategies that could be employed by professional Bengali printmaking artists to help them negotiate and navigate social and economic difference. Within this framework also, I have examined complex and contested relationships between the rural and the urban in Bengali modernity, along with the way(s) that relationship has been represented and negotiated in visual arts and culture. In the fourth chapter, these issues of class distinctions and mobility, and of the binary of the rural and the urban, as they were all negotiated through print culture, were examined in relation to a particular moment of crisis: the Bengal Famine of 1943.

In chapter four I first provided a historical account of the Famine itself before moving on to consider the Famine’s representation in the art world of the period. I explored particularly the involvement and relationship of printmaking to the history of the Famine, and how print artists and printed images participated in what were unquestionably terrorizing and brutal circumstances. In doing so I considered the limits of printmaking’s possibilities in such conditions: in traumatic circumstances when socially engaged artists are compelled to find ways to make art into a kind of testimony for it to maintain a humanitarian legitimacy, I sought to understand how print/printing/printmaking could best be involved.

Finally, I compared the response to and representation of the Famine in two very different kinds of printed media (*The Modern Review* and the socialist-oriented print media that
published Chittaprosad's Famine images and texts). By comparing the traumatized blindness towards the Famine embodied in the images (and lack thereof) produced by the elite Bengali art world to the compulsive repetition of traumatic subject matter amongst socially-engaged, Communist artists like Chittaprosad, I further developed my arguments about the different categories of the Bengali art world(s) during the Famine.

This project has attempted to shed greater light on the variety of lived experiences of artists in late colonial Bengal, allowing us to understand in fuller terms the diverse groups of people entering a changing art market in the late colonial period. As such, it contributes to our understanding of the development of the post-colonial art market in subsequent decades and the opening of the role of the “artist” to individuals from diverse social locations. The work also focuses particularly on the importance of printmaking and print media in negotiating a successful artistic career at this time. As such, it contributes to and builds on a small body of new scholarship that has begun to emerge from the gallery and museum context in India, and which focuses particularly on printmaking in the South Asian context. For example, the analysis of Chittaprosad’s work during the Famine years undertaken in chapter four was greatly facilitated by a recent retrospective of his work shown in Delhi, and the accompanying publication of many related materials that were previously unavailable to scholars. Such an exhibition (and accompanying publication) that focuses on the work of one individual artist obviously reflects a continued fascination

265 The Delhi Art Gallery published a reprint of Hungry Bengal and the Sketchbook of 30 Portraits, as well as a collection of personal correspondence of Chittaprosad’s and a two-volume catalogue (with many reproductions of original documentation and archival materials) in conjunction with their exhibition Chittaprosad: A Retrospective, held in 2011.
with biographical accounts of artists and art history, particularly in the gallery and exhibition context. Building on such work, this thesis has sought to incorporate accounts of several printmaker artists in order to paint a wider picture of the social and economic forces that were at work in the Bengali art world(s). A major historical exhibition tracing the history of print and printmaking in South Asia was also recently shown in both Kolkata and Delhi, and was accompanied by an encyclopaedic two-volume catalogue.\textsuperscript{266} That project is further proof of an important and growing interest in printmaking in India. However, although the show represented a valiant attempt to trace the development of printmaking in India back to the sixteenth century, nevertheless it remained highly invested in the work of contemporary printmakers in particular, arguing essentially that printmaking as an art form did not emerge in India until the 1950s.\textsuperscript{267} These are two examples of a growing interest in printmaking in India, each with their particular strengths and weaknesses. This thesis project has been an attempt to contribute to this growing literature, by providing a more focused and specific approach than the latter, and a more general argument than the former, while also encouraging greater migration of such debates and discussions from the gallery and museum context into the academic art historical field.

\textsuperscript{266} Paula Sengupta, \textit{The Printed Picture: Four Centuries of Indian Printmaking} (New Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery, 2012).
\textsuperscript{267} Ibid, vol. 1, 130.
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Image redacted for copyright purposes

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Collection of Mukul Dey Archives, Santiniketan

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Appendix A: Original translations from Bengali into English of selections of *Amar Katha* by Mukul Chandra Dey (Kolkata: Visva Bharati Press, 1995).

Translator’s Note: *Amar Katha* was recorded as a series of conversations conducted in the Bengali language (Bangla) between Mukul Dey and Jukto Adhikari, in the presence of Dey’s assiduously note-taking wife, Bina. Prompted by questions by Jukto and Bina, Mukul Dey’s spoken reminiscences were then transcribed, organized, edited and finally published posthumously as *Amar Katha*. As a result, the published text retains a style and cadence typical of an informal (albeit highly educated), spoken Bangla which is rarely encountered in published material. In the translations that follow, I have endeavoured as much as possible to retain this conversational style, complete with its fragmentary sentences and healthy disrespect for strict grammatical rules. I have also elected to retain much of the characteristic sentence order and verb construction of Bangla, such as the use of introductory clauses with incomplete verbs (for example, “having seen the picture, I became amazed”) and the use of causative verbs (for example, “I caused the work to be sold” rather than “I sold the work”). Although this may make the final text somewhat awkward as an English text, I believe that these attributes are necessary in order to retain something of the original nuance of the text and in order to communicate something of the worldview that Bangla offers its users. One marked characteristic of the Bangla spoken by those with relatively high levels of education is a liberal incorporation of English terms and phrases. This trait is clearly manifest in *Amar Katha*, in which Dey’s spoken Bangla is
peppered with English terms like “ping-pong,” “Edwards Tonic,” and even “prostitute.” While such casual and frequent use of English is common in spoken Bangla, it is far less conventional in written texts. Even more unusual, when Dey’s words were transcribed for publication it seems that a decision was made to transliterate almost all these English phrases into Bangla script rather than writing them in English. Thus “ping pong” appears as রপবাং পবাং, “diary” as ডবলয়েররি, and so on. In order to indicate the uncanny effect that these “Banglish” phrases have on the reader (but which would have been far less affective or unusual to someone listening to the conversation), and in order to indicate in some cases how they further nuance the text, I have often included these transliterations in brackets or as footnotes in the translations that follow. (The choice of the English word “prostitute” in lieu of any of the various Bangla terms that could have been used,\(^\text{268}\) for example, was certainly not without significance and should be noted.)

The translation of the entire text of *Amar Katha* could not be achieved within the timeframe of the current project. Instead I have selected large portions of text that I consider to be particularly interesting and relevant to the issues and themes addressed in this thesis project, and I present them below in original translation. The page numbers that appear in the left margin indicate the page numbers in the original publication.

\(^{268}\)Some of the most obvious Bangla synonyms for prostitute include বেঝা (beshsha, implying a “common” woman of the night), গণিকা (ganika, a more Sanskritized term used more in formal language) and নাটী (nati). There are more than a hundred Bangla terms that Dey could have used to imply “prostitute” instead of using the English word. Many thanks to Durba Mitra for further elucidating this point for me.
Parents and Birthplace

I am from East Bengal. Dhaka District, Bikrompur Subdivision, near Louhajong. The name of the village was Akiyadhol. My family’s land spread wide along the bank of the river Padma. Now that village has been submerged by the river. Our house was situated by the side of the river, on a high bank of land, spreading over a large area. The house had a tin roof and wood walls.

I was born into a zamindar family. I was the oldest son. My father’s name was Kul Chandra Dey. I heard that our surname used to be Deb. Later it was corrupted to Dey.269 My paternal grandfather, Mahim Chandra Dey, was a lawyer in Mymensingh district. My father was the only child of my grandfather’s first wife.

“Young grandmother,” my father’s stepmother, was very dark-skinned. For that reason, my step-uncle Bibhas Chandro Dey, and my paternal aunt’s colour was also dark. I remember my grandfather well—he was a handsome and strong man. He used to pick me up in his two hands and make me dance on his chest while he sang. His dream was that I would become a judge. Chandra Madhab was a famous justice at that time, and he used to call me that name. My father was a poet. He gave me my name Mukul.270 In those days many people knew Kul Chandra Dey in East Bengal. I heard that Atulprosad Sen271 used

269 While the family name is spelled ḍ, and thus would be strictly transliterated into English as De, throughout this thesis I maintain the more conventional English spelling of Dey.
270 In Bengali, “mukul” (মুকুল) means a flower bud or blossom, particularly of the mango tree.
271 A famous Bengali musician, singer and composer.
to come to see my father and to make him listen to his poems/songs. My father was of a mind to send me to kobiguru’s\textsuperscript{272} ashram.

My mother Purna Soshi Dey was a born artist. Her stitching was so beautiful that you couldn’t bear to look away from it. Pictures from the Ramayana and Mahabharata, elephants, horses, boats, soldiers, princes, birds – she could make all those images appear on the surface of the fabric. Nowadays you don’t see that kind of stitching. Bit-by-bit\textsuperscript{273} on the surface of wood panels she used to carve moulds (for sweets, etc.). If the stone plate was broken or chipped she never threw it away. Using a carving tool she would again and again make beautiful designs for moulds from the large dish instead of throwing it out. Later, when I was in London, she used to send me the mango preserve made from her own moulds. It wasn’t edible but nevertheless that beautifully formed mango cake was to me very special and cherished. Perhaps my mother’s making of these moulds was the inspiration for my carving on copper plates. Even in the making of a bamboo back-scratching tool my mother was like an artist. In childhood, these things made me very happy, I liked these things very much. But when I was an adult just seeing a few of these things caused me great amazement. I think that my subconscious mind developed an aesthetic sense because of my father’s poetic mind and my mother’s artistic talent. When my father came to Tamluk in Medinipur district because of his job, my mother learned the

\begin{footnotes}
\item\textsuperscript{272} Kobiguru literally means a poet so great as to be a guru, and is a common title used by Bengalis to refer to Rabindranath Tagore. The reference to kobiguru’s ashram is to the school established by Tagore in Santiniketan, which later became Visva Bharati University.
\item\textsuperscript{273} The term used is কুট কুট করিব (kut kut kora) an onomatopoeic verb phrase meant to imitate the repeated tapping sound of the carving tool. Such onomatopoeic words and phrases are common in Bangla and contribute greatly to its lyrical quality.
\end{footnotes}
art of making images on wool carpets from the missionary women. Flower designs were made on velvet shoes, with silk thread. Very quickly she learned to do this beautifully. In fact my mother’s hand was an artist’s hand. Her handiwork was very subtle, perfect and comprehensive, that was her sense of art.

I was born in my maternal uncle’s house in 1302\textsuperscript{274} in monsoon season, on a Tuesday morning. I was my parent’s first child, the eldest son. My mother’s home was at Sridharkhola village in Dhaka district. My grandfather’s name was Gokul Chandra Basu. My mother was the only sister of eight brothers. Therefore she was very adored, and very spoiled. This obstinate nature I inherited from my mother, along with her artistic sense. Near my mother’s house was Ramaprasad Chanda’s house.\textsuperscript{275} My maternal grandmother’s name was Rajlakshmi Basu. She was a very simple, naive, innocent and good person. My grandmother was very scared of my mother. Whatever my mother said, my didima did it quickly. After my grandfather died, my didima continued to live for a long time, but she wouldn’t look at herself in the mirror and she stopped wearing vermillion.

Many years later, in 1933, I took my wife to meet my grandmother and to see my birthplace, leaving early in the morning from Chowringhee and going to my maternal uncle’s house. Having spent all night on a boat on Aroil Lake, at around the end of the night we reached Barui Canal. We parked on our own ghat, having amazed the whole

\textsuperscript{274} 1895 according to the Western calendar.
\textsuperscript{275} A renowned Bengali historian and archaeologist.
village. I was visiting my uncle’s home after many years. Chondon’s house was empty, everyone had left for Kolkata. Before this, Bina had never seen East Bengal. Having stayed one day we left by the same boat, taking grandmother with us.

At that time grandmother was an elderly lady of more than 80, and she was a thoroughly village person. But she was very enthusiastic. From a remote, backwards sort of village (Shridharkhola), she came straight to Kolkata’s sahib neighbourhood of Chowringhee. One day she asked, “Who is the old person in this house of yours? I don’t see her in any other room but when I enter your room she comes with me.” As much as we tried to explain to her that there was no one else there, she didn’t understand. Eventually, going into my room with her, she pointed to the large mirror and said, “Look there.” On her face was the mark of fear. After much effort we were able to make her understand that it was her own reflection. She said only “Is it true that I’m so old?” In fact since her husband’s death she hadn’t looked at her own reflection in a mirror. From then on she became absentminded. She wanted to return to the countryside (to her village). Taking my mother with her she went back to Shridharkhola to her own house. She showed my mother the place on the house’s property where she wanted to be cremated, where her remains should be buried. A few days later she died. I think that if she hadn’t seen her reflection, perhaps she would have lived longer. She used to love me very much. She used to call me mona.\textsuperscript{276}

In the original home of my grandfather, there is now no one from the family. Who knows who all is staying there now!

\textsuperscript{276} A pet name derived from the Bangla word for heart/mind.
The house in Akiyadhal was very spacious, a huge house. It was made of wood and tin. No matter how wealthy a person may have been, no one ever used to build houses along the banks of the Padma with brick. The Padma has been called the destroyer of edifices. As soon as erosion began, it happened so quickly that overnight the houses had to be dismantled and taken away. I remember lying in bed in the house in Akiyadhal, listening to the sound of things crashing into the water as it eroded the land around it. Women used to say that the noise came from cannons under the river. I used to hear this typical noise, very loud. Now I know this was the sound of erosion, of things falling into the river. Lying in the house I used to see steamers’ searchlights, and through the garden thousands of banana leaves swaying. What a unique sight, at night. Now that house and that village all have disappeared without a trace into the river.

Childhood

My childhood was spent moving around to many places. In East Bengal it was sometimes in Shridharkhola, sometimes Akiyadhal. And also in West Bengal in Medinipur district, in various places: Tamluk, Ghatal, Daspur, Keshpur, Binpur. The reason for this wandering was my father. He had a transferable job. He was a police inspector. At his core (basically) he was a poet, but look at what kind of job he had! I have heard that at that time a commissioner named Nandonulal went to Dhaka. My father was only eighteen then, an upcoming poet. He wrote poetry all the time then. He wrote one poem to give greetings to the commissioner. The commissioner read the poem and was amazed by it, and wanted to
meet the author. What could he do for the author, what did he want? Father had a friend named Jashoda Talukdar. He suggested a plan to my father, saying “Say that you want to become a police officer, you’ll like it.” Naively, my father did say he wanted to be a police officer. And the commissioner did make my father a police officer. My god, a born poet become a police officer. If this isn’t a tragedy, what is? But then again, if father hadn’t had this transferable type of job, would I have had the same kinds of opportunity to mix with different people, in different environments? Everything happens for a reason.

The people of Akiyadhal used to call us bhuiya or even ramnoilar majhi. Bhuiya means someone with landed property, a landowner. They used to call me “landlord’s son.” This teasing made me angry. They used to say “landlord lying around in the street.” They used to say ramnoilar majhi because we had many boats which we used to rent out. Therefore we had many boatmen and other people staying there. My grandmother used to stay there. I said before that my grandmother was my grandfather’s second wife. As far as I can recall her name was Swarnokumari but her complexion was dark. She was a woman of Brahmo sensibility. But in her area, Durga Puja was celebrated with great pomp. When I grew up I painted the image of that Durga Puja.

On the Akiyadhal property we had four houses, one in each corner of the property, and in the garden there were plenty of banana trees. So many different types of bananas. Perhaps all

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277 Literally, “golden girl.”
278 The Brahmo Samaj was a reformist, monotheistic version of Hinduism adopted by many Bengali intellectuals in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.
the different kinds of bananas in India existed in our garden. I remember one kind of banana well, bright red, very big and very sweet to the taste. It was called *agnishwar*. I’ve heard that it is usually only available in south India, near Kanyakumari.

The image of Akiyadhal village exists in my mind like a dream. This village had so many big trees, shrubs, all suffused with a kind of dream-like quality. So much running around, playing, swinging from trees, the river Padma was by the side of the house. There were no other houses nearby. Wide open spaces, unobstructed breezes.

Those days in East Bengal there were small and large ponds (or marshes) in front of all the houses. As a result, instead of walking from house to house you had to go by boat. There used to be lots of little boats. We used to row the boats ourselves from house to house. In the marshes in front of the houses there would be a little boat tied up and sunk in the water. When you pulled on a rope, the boat would rise, along with lots of little fish in it. A fish trap made from straw and leaves would be put in the hold of the boat. The fish would gather in the hold of the boat to eat. So many little fish would be in the boat when it was pulled up, so many that you could eat. I used to eat more fish than rice. To tell the truth my addiction to fish continues to this day.

There were no restrictions on me wandering around anywhere. I used to go wherever I wanted. One day something happened: while walking on the raised path (embankment) separating one field from another I saw something white and started to dig in the soil with
my hands. The soil was very soft. While digging I found so many of these things, maybe about 50. Whitish, about the size of ping pong balls (রপবাং পবাং বল), the eggs of something! Having filled my shirttails with them I returned home in great joy. My mother looked at them and said they were tortoise eggs, “Where did you find them?” They are very good to eat fried or boiled. Ma gave them to be after boiling them. I quickly ate them one after another. I liked them a lot. Since then I’ve always enjoyed eating tortoise eggs. I’ve heard the story that tortoises go deep into underwater caves to lay their eggs. They don’t sit on their eggs to incubate them. They go into the water after laying their eggs. They incubate with their mind. If the mother tortoise is killed or dies, the eggs will be spoiled. No baby tortoise will be born from that egg.

I have always been very skilful in the matter of food and eating, ever since childhood. I even enjoy thinking about food. Now in Santiniketan I can eat only a small bowl of puffed rice, some thin toast or some small amount of soup. If I were to tell stories about the food from those days, you would get indigestion just from listening. And where can you get all those foods today? They simply aren’t available nowadays. So much ghee we used to eat. I remember one big stone bowl that my mother would fill with ghee, she would then add warm rice, and I would take the rice and eat it with the ghee. I would eat a lot, and very enthusiastically, sinking my whole hand into the bowl.

279 Here and elsewhere throughout the text, Dey makes use of the common comparison between “these days” (আজকবল) and “those days” (ছসকবল) which, as Partha Chatterjee has noted, is a common characteristic of many Bengali autobiographies. The Nation and its Fragments (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 139.
Louhajong market in Tarpasha was very big, with salt and fish godowns, *rosogollas*, and other sweets. *Patkhir* is a sweet wrapped in banana leaves, a great tasting *khir*. In my whole life I’ve never eaten such a beautiful *khir*. Even now, if I think about it my mouth waters. Many times in many sweet shops I’ve explained in various ways what I want, but these smells and tastes of childhood are gone now. This market was famous for its *patali* made from date molasses. Many travellers on ships would come there to buy the *patkhir* and would take more with them. I remember they strung *hilsa* fish for drying, four *hilsa* fish on a string cost four *paise*. Who would believe it now? They won’t understand. Even then I thought that it was a significant amount of money. And even at that price there was haggling. *Illish* fish steamed with mustard and salt, served with warm *illish* fish roe. On banana leaf, with warm rice, mixed to eat, what can I say about how wonderful this was? My mother’s brother’s wives used to cook these things very well. *Illish* fish steamed in the rice’s steam. Whoever has never eaten these things can't understand them, it was an unbelievable taste! The food was cooked in a mud pot over a wood fire. I saw hanging from the roof beams strings of *illish* fish roe, strung like garlands. They were kept there for drying. You would just take them as you needed.

Having intended to talk about my childhood, I realize I’ve only told stories about food. It’s true that I love to eat. Even after growing up and going to London, sometimes at night lying on the bed I would think only about the food of my country. But let these stories go, let’s move on.

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280 A condensed milk sweet.
From childhood to today, I have always lived in nature. Even now, when I’m able to stay outdoors amongst trees, I am happy. I remember when I was very young, sitting on the bank of the Padma and watching the river. And on the river floated ships and barges, sometimes near and sometimes far. My mind used to float along with them. From how far had they come? They used to come from Burma with huge planks of wood, pillars, planks, etc; on the river, transport of wood was a strange sight. And it was a thing I used to enjoy very much, even now I remember. In our village of Akiyadhal many barges used to be built. The builders used to join in the wood planks together by hammering nails. I used to hear the sound of their hammering especially on quiet summer afternoons. That specific rhythm used to awaken certain feelings in me. In fact wherever there is music, rhythm, melody—however insignificant it is—I am attracted to that place. I’ve always had an irresistible attraction to and love of rhythm.

Perhaps I’m talking too much about my childhood. Of course I’m doing so willingly. I want to write about many other events. Because the artist Mukul Dey did not develop instantly. Every footstep is a hint of his artist’s life. Therefore if you want to know about Mukul Dey it is as important to look at his pictures from each stage of his life as it is to have an idea of the detailed events of his life. Though they may seem insignificant, I believe that many of these things are influential in life.
Anyway, I spoke about how my childhood was spent in East Bengal. Now I’ll begin to speak about West Bengal. But before that, let me finish telling about how I made the Kali image while playing at my grandparent’s house in Shridharkhola. It can be said that this was my first initiation into the life of an artist. One day in the morning, having eaten the sweet meat of a coconut prepared in molasses, I went out to play. I went with my uncle who was almost the same age as me, and some of the neighbour children. Many others immediately came and joined us, I was the leader. The soil of that place is very beautiful. It is dense and sticky, not rocky or sandy like the soil of this place. Having started to work the earth into a doll, I ended up making a Kali image out of sticks and clay. It was a wonderful Kali image, almost an arm’s length high. How I made such a beautiful image, even I don’t know. I was surprised. I coloured it with soot and sindoor and alta,\(^{281}\) and it was finished off with tin foil on the scythe and silver paper. Then, I was even more surprised. Those who saw it were surprised too and wondered how such a beautiful image could be made by such a small boy. In the end, we group of children did puja with this image. My mother and aunties gave food enthusiastically to the goddess. Dhal, khichuri, fried eggplant, and ghee spread on banana leaves, we filled our stomachs. Almost everyone in the small village gathered, what a happy occasion. I can’t express the happiness of that time.

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\(^{281}\) Natural red pigments.
Memories of Medinipur and the Beginning of Studies

I must tell you first of all, that at the time I am speaking of there was no East Bengal and West Bengal. Together it was all Bangladesh. But the people of the Ganga river used to call people of the Padma river bangal\textsuperscript{282} and the people of the Padma used to call the people of the Ganga ghoti\textsuperscript{283}. I don’t know the reason for this. Let it be. When I was about five we came to Medinipur with my father. We often went back and forth between our house there and our native place. I never used to think the journey to our native place was complicated. I went straight from Sealdah station (লশয়েবলদব ছস্টেশন) to Goyaland. From there by steamer to Bhaggokul. From the steamer at Bhaggokul you could catch a boat. In that boat you crossed Aroil Lake (marsh) and entered the Baruikhal Canal. From there my material uncle’s home was very near. I remember it was not more than twenty miles from Sridharkhola to Akiyadhal. I often used to go there during my school holidays, especially at Durga Puja. Durga Puja was celebrated on a grand scale at the zamindar’s house. I used to pass those days with such happiness. On the ninth day (of Durga Puja) there would be buffalo sacrifice. Goat sacrifice also happened.

Now let’s come to the matter of my studies. At the beginning I already said that father had a transferable job. I spent my childhood in Medinipur. After Binpur, some time was spent wandering in the various places of Medinipur. After Binpur, father got transferred to Daspur. At the age of five I went to the village school, that means the hatekhorhi\textsuperscript{282}\textsuperscript{283}

\textsuperscript{282} This word has a pejorative connotation.
\textsuperscript{283} While this originally meant someone from West Bengal, later on this term came to mean the population of Calcutta specifically.
ceremony happened. At dawn breakfast was a bowl of rice and milk, prepared by my mother. If banana leaves were buried in the earth, after some days they would turn yellow. I used to write on that with a reed pen. All of us had earthen ink pots. I used to make ink from the soot of the earthen lamps for Saraswati puja, burnt rice, and the juice of the haritaki fruit. When rice was being made we used to sing a rhyme: “ink, ink on Saraswati’s feet, which inkpot has the good ink, have it come into my inkpot.” For that the writing instruments acquired a kind of permanence, and we always worked on these kinds of tasks. I used to keep lamb’s hair in the inkpot to keep the ink from spilling.

One time in Daspur I burned the little finger on my left hand by reaching to take a fried eggplant from the hot oven, and even now there is a scar. The nail on that finger never grew back. Even now I still have a greed for fried eggplant. I remember one more incident. In Daspur near my area there was once a pond being dug. Every day I went to watch the pond being dug, many Santal men and women were working as a group to do this work. One day I saw a Santal woman have a baby while working! She made no fuss and showed no reaction! A few minutes after the baby was born, having wiped it clean and placed it on a mat under a tree, she returned to work. Even now it amazes me to think of it.

In 1932 or 1933 when I was the Principal of the Government Art School in Calcutta (আটর সমুললরি রপ্রিরন্সিপবল), the head teacher of Daspur not only came to visit me but he also invited

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284 The ceremony by which young Bengali children are initiated into the writing of letters, performed as a puja to Saraswati, and after which education formally begins.
me to Daspur. It saddens me now to think that although I said I would go, I really couldn’t.

In Daspur I did one terrible thing. A curtain used to hang in the doorway of our house. While I was lying in my mother’s lap and she was fanning me, she fell asleep. In that brief window of time I got up off the bed and managed to collect a box of matches, then by the door I lit them one by one. Little by little the curtain burned, went out again, etc. Again I lit it, it seemed to much fun to me. Oh my, the whole curtain suddenly lit up, I don’t know how! Suddenly “Fire! Fire!” Suddenly everyone came running, and the thatched roof was burning intensely. I became scared and hid in a haystack. I was very scared, seeing the incident, my heart was beating wildly. I was very scared. All the servants of the house and the policemen together put out the fire and then looked for me everywhere in the house. Having searched everywhere, they couldn’t find me. They searched the whole neighbourhood. When they took me out of the haystack I was speechless with fear.

When I speak about Daspur I always think about my brother Chonchu. Although he was younger than me, he was so naughty and smart. I’ve always been of a naive nature. Although I did naughty things, basically I was harmless. It makes me sad even today to think about Chonchu. He died so young. We were then in our village home and father was in Tamluk for work. Suddenly one night at midnight Chonchu died of cholera. The next night my sister Bhima died as well. If everyone hadn’t immediately sent me to the house of our guard/caretaker Dashrath Dube, I don’t know if I would still be alive. Having heard
the news, father rushed from Tamluk to Dashrath Dube’s house about fifteen days later and took me with him and returned me home. In great sadness, so that no one else would die of illness without treatment, he consulted many homeopathic books from different places and he wrote *Homeogatha* a simple book for mothers in rhyme form, so they could easily remember, like a lullaby. This book of father’s became very popular at that time.

Much later when I was studying in Santiniketan, one time when I was travelling from my home to Santiniketan I brought with me a copy of *Homeogatha* for my friend Somindronath. I saw that he used to wander from village to village with a box of homeopathic medicine. What a cruel irony of fate, upon returning to Santiniketan I didn’t get to see that angel Somi, I heard that he also died of cholera. Speechless, I gave the book to Gurudev.

…

**Meeting Rabindranath**

Many people want me to tell them about Gurudev and Santiniketan. There is so much to say, about such a long time period, I have to organize it a little. Is it possible to measure the sea? I must say that the stories of Gurudev and Santiniketan are to me as bottomless as the sea. What remains of Mukul Dey without Gurudev and Santiniketan? Santiniketan is involved in all my life’s successes and failures, happiness and sadness, crying and laughter, mistakes and truth. In the end I built a house in Santiniketan. After wandering to

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285 Literally: Rabindranath Darsan (রবীন্দ্রনাথ দর্শন).
many places in the end I built my studio *Chitralekha* here, Gurudev gave it its name.

My father brought me with him to Kolkata, to Jorasanko. We stood waiting in a big room. I was looking around in all directions. On the wall there was a big picture. Pointing out that picture to me, father said that was Rabindranath. It was a black and white picture. He had a small beard and long hair, I didn’t much like the look of him. I thought, my goodness, I have to stay with him! Suddenly I saw father get up from his chair respectfully. A fall, fair, handsome image of a god wearing a *dhoti* and *panjabi* had entered the room. Father touched his feet, then I did, it seemed like a god had touched my head. I liked him very much. Father said, this is my son, he’s very naughty. “My business is with naughty boys,” he said and pulled me towards him. I’d never heard such a beautiful voice. What a touch of affection! I thought I could love him, I could stay with him. From then I stayed with him, I will stay with him until death.

Father and I went around Kolkata buying things—*dhoti*, wrap, mat, dish, mug—various types of things. With these things I also bought a book of tales by Gopal Bhand.\textsuperscript{286} If I were to miss home or mother, I would read it. With that father also bought and gave me a bottle of Edward’s tonic (Edward’s Tonic), a medicine for fever and malaria. I often suffered from fever.

\textsuperscript{286} A popular writer of humourous folk tales, popularly believed to have been a jester at the court of Krishna Chandra Roy in the eighteenth century.
We came by train from Kolkata to Bolpur. Then I was ten or eleven. I was with father. Various types of questions came into my mind. I didn’t know this place, Santiniketan. I would have to stay there all alone. There is also a joy in seeing a new place. I can’t exactly explain my thoughts at that time. On the one hand I had to leave my family. On the other hand there was the attraction of a new place. Sometimes I was thinking all these thoughts and sometimes I was reading Gopal Bhand’s stories. Also I received strength while watching the view of the landscape through the train window. Sometimes, I thought of the face of Gurudev, his loving touch provoked profound feelings in me.

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My Friend Pearson, Learning to Etch, and Travels Abroad

In Santiniketan among those whose friendship I benefited from, after Gurudev the first name has got to be William Pearson (উইলিয়াম পিয়ারসন).

As well as being my very close friend, Pearson was also my teacher. I can’t ever repay my debt to him. I consider myself fortunate when I think of how he selflessly tried to help me, with such deep love and sympathy.

One day in Santiniketan Pearson showed me about four or five pictures from his collection (কলকর্ষণ). Among them was one by Sir Muirhead Bone (সার মুয়ারহেড বোন). One thing I heard from Pearson was that after Rembrandt, if you search the whole world you will not
find a better etcher than Muirhead Bone. I saw a picture by Muirhead Bone in Pearson’s collection. There was also a drawing of Gurudev’s head. I was surprised. Such delicacy of line. In excitement I thought, I can try also to do this kind of thing, I can draw. That was the beginning of my journey in the making of portraits.

I told my intentions to Pearson. Hearing it, he became keen and enthusiastic. He then said to me that he would make all the arrangements for me to learn etching. He was true to his word. As the first step in his promise, he collected a copper plate and an iron needle from the Survey of India in Kolkata and gave them to me. First I watched him etch, he showed me how it was done. At that time I only had a little knowledge about etching. This incident happened in about 1914 or 1915, when I was no longer permanently at the ashram (Santiniketan). In 1912 or 1913 I had finished my studies from Santiniketan. Even still, I often went to Santiniketan. I used to teach drawing to the young students there. Anyway, now I will speak about my first etching work in my life. It seemed to me to be interesting and thrilling.

Having received the copper plate and needle I went and sat on the bank of the Ganga in Kolkata. The current was flowing, two barges were travelling along the river, near to them were a few small boats, and by the steps to the river many people were bathing. Some people were swimming very far out in the water. Smoke was coming from the factory chimneys above the river bank. That was more or less the scene, even now I can see it
clearly. That was my first etching, which is a type of engraving (টাইপ অফ এনলেগ্রেসিভ). When the work was finished I showed it to Pearson. Pearson was so happy. He got it printed from the Survey of India. I didn’t like the proof. He then sent my plate by post (বন্দো ছপবস্টে) to the world’s best etcher in England, Sir Muirhead. I still have that iron needle that Pearson gave to me. Much later, Jawarhalal Nehru came to my studio and he looked for a long time at that first etching of mine. Only Nehru knows what he thought of it while looking.

I have not yet spoken about Andrews. I will speak about him slowly, gradually. I was introduced to C.F. Andrews in Santiniketan. Through him, I was introduced to Gandhi. Later I stayed at Gandhi’s ashram at Sabarmati for almost a month. In fact that was much later, after I returned from abroad, in fact I was there to study and draw Gandhi. Gandhi asked me to open an art school there. But after much thought I understood that I couldn’t stay there. And I had already applied for a job. Let this story go, it will come up later. Let’s come back to the story of the ashram.

Since I was young I loved art, I wanted to know art’s mysteries. I wanted it from deep in my soul. For this reason although I had almost no contact with Kolkata, I somehow got

287 Etching and engraving are in fact quite distinct methods of intaglio printmaking. The latter involves the physical carving into a metal plate, while the former uses chemical acids to remove material from the plate. As an experienced and trained printmaker, Dey would have been quite familiar with the differences between these media but it seems likely that while relaying this story near the end of his life to a young man (Jukto Adhikari) who was not familiar with printmaking, he chose to simplify matters. According to Satyasri Ukil at the Mukul Dey archives, Dey’s first ever print was in fact an engraving. The resulting print is still preserved at the archives in Santiniketan.
news of a big exhibition in Kolkata’s Park Street (পার্ক স্ট্রিট) of the Indian Society of
Oriental Art (ইরন্ডিয়েবন সোসাইটি অব ওরিয়েন্টাল আর্ট). This was about 1909-10. I decided I
had to go there. Immediately I thought, how would I go? I didn’t then know anything
about art exhibitions (আর্ট একজিবিশন). I could only sense one thing, that this thing called
an art exhibition was something special. I knew I would be able to see many pictures by
renowned artists. I didn’t have any money. It was not easy to get permission to go.
Nevertheless, I was stubborn, and I decided that I must go, by any means at all. At last,
having asked for and received five rupees of caution money from Jogdananda Babu,288 I
set off for Kolkata. I stayed in the house of Asit Halder’s father, Sukumar Haldar. I stayed
there for only one night. I stayed at the exhibition for as long as it was open, forgetting my
bath and meals.

At that exhibition my eyes were opened to the world of art. I saw hundreds of pictures.
There were pictures by many of the world’s most famous artists. To express myself I had
only thus far made the “Blind Beggar” picture. While looking at the exhibition I decided
that painting/art would be my medium of expression. I have only made pictures, through-
out my life. Whatever hardships I’ve suffered, I can’t stop. I still have much to learn,
about type and technique (টেকনিক). I saw so many artists wandering around the art
exhibition. They received so much adoration and honour. I also wandered around,
mesmerized by the line of each picture. What satisfaction! After having so much difficulty

288 Jagadananda Roy (1869-1933), a science teacher at Tagore’s school in Santiniketan.
in coming to Kolkata. In my mind all difficulty was wiped away. In my mind, there was only pictures.

Abanindranath

Aban Thakur In my life, one important, indispensable chapter is Abanindranath Tagore. If Aban Tagore hadn’t been, what would have been made of Mukul Dey? Of all the talents born of Indian art up to today, Abanindranath Tagore has played the biggest role. I can never finish talking about Abanindranath Tagore. Volumes could be written about him but you can’t ever finish talking about him. Can the sea be measured? You can read all his books and see all his pictures and still not understand him. Even then he remains hidden.

From the habit of my student life I call Rabindranath my Gurudev, but my real guru was Aban Tagore. I place him in the position of my guru in my artistic life. I know I couldn’t be one thousandth of him. Sitting at his feet I was able to learn art, I was his companion for so long, and as a result I can hold my head high amongst the world’s artists. I am indebted to many people for helping me learn art: Gurudev, Abanindranath, James Blanding Sloan, Sir Muirhead Bone, Yokohama Taikan, etc. I had many teachers but only one guru. As Rabindranath was the world’s poet, Abanindranath was the world’s artist. Throughout my life I never saw a better artist than him. In my life I went many places to

289 Although the Tagore family name is spelled ঠাকুর and thus would be best translated into English as “Thakur”, in this thesis I maintain the conventional English translation of “Tagore.” Mukul Dey often uses the familiar form “Aban” which I maintain when and as he used it, in lieu of the full name Abanindranath.
learn and to teach art. I worked at the Government Art School (গভর্নমেন্ট আর্ট স্কুল) for fifteen years. Today I think if I hadn’t done all that, and had instead stayed with him I could have become a better artist. I made a big mistake, I can’t get rid of this regret. Even now I feel his absence.

I said before that Gurudev was my bridge of communication with Aban Tagore. After 1911 I came directly into his world. From then on I learned art by sitting near him. At that time the centre of Indian art was the Tagore home in Jorasanko. Someone of this time can not imagine that environment. Gunendranath had three very talented sons, the youngest was Abanindranath. The eldest was Gaganendranath, the middle was Samarendranath. Everyone was a painter. But Samarendranath, unlike his big and little brothers, didn’t attach the greatest importance to it. He looked after the family property and zamindary.

When I went to Aban Tagore some of his students were already famous. Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar, Khsindranath Mazumdar, Sarada Ukil, Durgeshchandra Singha, Surendranath Ganguly, you can name many like these. They were mostly all senior to me. As far as I know Suren Ganguly was Aban’s first disciple, Nandalal was second. Nandalal had passed the art school design class. Shailen Dey, even Samar Gupta came to the art school as Aban Tagore’s students. Not only Bengalis. Two students came from Lucknow to be his disciples, Hakim Mohammad Khan and Shami-uz-Zama. And a South Indian student,
Venkatappa. Roopkrishna from Punjab also joined us. Soilen Dey later stayed with Krishnodas in Benaras. Krishnodas used to make only Krishna Lila pictures. He painted such beautiful cloud pictures. You would be amazed if you saw them, even now it stays with me. Later on Soilen Dey became a teacher in Jaipur.

However, I began to learn my work with Aban Tagore, he had a large art collection. Many large albums. In the beginning he showed all the albums to me. I became amazed. I used to look, forgetting my bath and food, and I used to wonder how people could make such pictures. They were more lifelike than life itself. Aban Tagore gave all his students the book *Bharat Shilpo.* ²⁹⁰ It was published from Basumati Press, it cost eight annas at that time. This book was our Gita, like our bible (বাইবেল). I had it with me always and I read from it always. Getting a teacher like Aban Tagore was a matter of great good fortune. He didn’t think that once he had taught his student how to paint, that his duty as a teacher was therefore completed. He had a vigilant eye for all aspects of every student’s life.

Aban Tagore had a different type of teaching method. He didn’t like to be involved in a conventional or restrained way. In an open and unconfined environment, with no distance maintained between leader and students, he taught how to work, sitting beside us. I think there was one main reason behind this, his childhood school life. I have heard that when

²⁹⁰ *Indian Art*, written by Abanindranath Tagore and published in 1909. Although here Dey states that it was printed by Basumati Press, according to the copy that is preserved at the Mukul Dey Archives in Santiniketan the publisher was actually Kantik Press. My thanks to Satyasri Ukil for pointing this put to me.
he was young Aban Tagore was very afraid to go to school. The strict, time-bound relationship between teacher and student, he realized from that time that it was useless. So, having himself sat in the teacher’s chair, in the students’ lessons he never insisted on what the students would have to do. All of us together worked on a picture. From the outside, you couldn’t tell who was the teacher and who was the student. Aban Tagore used to say, “First open your eyes and look carefully. First the picture happens in your mind. Then it won’t take much time to put it on paper and add colour.” He never imposed his own idea on any student’s idea of work. He told everyone to paint in their own way.

We made so many mistakes when we went to work. But he was never angry or scolding about that. He had endless patience. He used to affectionately point out errors. A lot of the time it can be seen that a teacher thinks of his students as his own competitors, but Aban Tagore used to want his students to surpass him. He never wanted his students to copy his painting methods. Many of us, having painted or drawn something, used to show him our own work. If necessary he would add a little colour/shade with just a brush-stroke, then return the picture to us. And in that one gesture the painting would come to life.

Aban Tagore didn’t used to like to work on the same picture for a long time. I remember one time I was painting a picture on the south veranda of Jorasanko of the Torpon ritual. At the lunar eclipse girls were bathing in the Ganges. It was three feet by two and a half feet, but it was not at all becoming what I wanted. Thinking and painting, keeping the tools at hand, I was aware of nothing else. Suddenly I came to my senses and realized the
painting was no longer there. After all my hard work I almost started to cry. Later Aban returned the picture to me. But the picture no longer existed, it was badly torn. Aban Tagore said, “If it becomes so big, won’t it tear? Don’t work so long on one picture. Make another.” Then I understood what he wanted. I did a picture of a ferry ghāt. Seeing it, he became very happy. Since then if I don’t like a picture, with courage I tear it up.

From whom did Aban Tagore learn painting? It’s hard to say. I believe he was his own teacher. His eye, his mind, his perception. Certainly at the very beginning of life he did learn some piddling technique291 from a European artist. But he didn’t have a formal education. Seeing his natural attraction to art, his mother and his aunt encouraged him to become an artist. By then his father had died. He was seventeen and married. However – at that age he began studying art with the then vice-principal (রবইস রপ্রিরন্সিপবল) of the art school, the Italian Mr. Ghilardi. Not at the art school, he went to Ghilardi’s house to learn art. He then learned pastel, oil and watercolour techniques. Watercolour he learned from Mr. Palmer. And one other noteworthy artist was like his teacher E.B. Havell. Everyone knew Havell’s support for Indian art. He brought Aban Tagore to the art school as Vice Principal. How many times did Aban Tagore talk about Havell, or say his name, this can’t be measured.

291 The term Dey uses is ছটকরনক ছফকরনক, literally “technique fechnique.” Such rhyming pair constructions are common in Bengali, with a word being a second nonsense word. In this way Dey is able to communicate the trivial nature of such technique that Abanindranath learned from European artists.
I said before that Aban Tagore was his own teacher. It’s true. Throughout his life he worked on many kinds of drawing and it was without end. Especially his own wash method. Many times, having painted some bright colour, he then used to wash it. In that washed, lightly coloured, shadow-like picture, no one could believe that this picture a little earlier had been so bright and dazzling, it had dazzled the eyes. I know why he made things in this way. In all his pictures that he painted, if you didn’t wash them, combustion (fire) will happen. Like for example the songs of Tansen which caused fire to catch. Compared to the harsh, bright realm of some art, he preferred a dreamy, soft environment. In all his work this inclination can be noticed.

Here I will say one thing. When I was the art school principal, if I had spare time I used to go and sit with him. I used to see how he was working. What new ideas were wandering in his head. One day I saw him, on a paper he had painted a flock of pigeons flying in a net. Having painted the picture, he completely washed it. Then, while I watched, there gradually arose the picture of a crow pecking at garbage, through the gradual touch of his brush. On one paper, within an hour or so, he often used to paint four or five pictures. Aban Tagore was a magician of colour and ideas.

Aban Tagore was an artist 100%. Nowhere was there any flaw, it was all pure gold. It can not be denied that towards the beginning he adopted a European technique. At that time he imbibed Mughal art and even Rajput art. In his mature age, having taken the essence from all kinds of art, he developed such a technique, it was completely Indian. Rather, it was
“the art of the technique of Abanindranath.” The rich modernity of art, he didn’t establish this through any severity or manipulation.

Before the appearance of Aban Tagore, Indian art was isolated. I’ll speak about one brief matter. In ancient times Indian art was famous in the world. All the instances in Ajanta and in the Buddhist period, in those instances the expression of art had its golden period, it can be said. The expression of art happened in India’s various temples through the ages. In the middle time Indian art diminished, but in fact that period was not long. Mughal emperors brought artists from Arabia, Persia and Europe. But a word of regret: many famous Mughal paintings were destroyed through the lack of proper preservation. Lord Curzon, when he came, recovered many paintings. Now in the world many famous museums keep a large number of Mughal paintings.

Then during the Company period many artists, having come to India from London, Germany, Holland, made pictures of the environment and lifestyle of this place. At that time Indian art was more or less directed by foreigners. Then there was almost nothing of India’s own art. At this time the Kalighat *pats* were very famous and they were Bengal’s own. Foreign artists and buyers have seen all these, many people sent them to their own countries. The Kalighat *pat* pictures have a certain charm (চম্প). These pictures were so filled with contemporary incidents, it was like a daily newspaper. All the prostitutes’ quarters (প্রস্তিটিউট কারাটার) were in the Kalighat paintings. The technical pictures were like
oil oleographs, on varnished paper. German artists used to make very good oleographs. Oleographs were done on glass. When I was staying in Kolkata, as an example of technique and having travelled to many places, I collected Kalighat *pats*. I had many in my collection. I.C.S. William Archer came and took many of the *pats* from my collection and published a book about Kalighat *pats*, but surprisingly my name was not mentioned.

As I was saying, at that time Indian art was almost dead. There was almost no one who could then be called an Indian artist. Just before Aban Tagore there was only one person who could be called an Indian artist, Ravi Varma. And there was no one else. He courageously started working, that was his contribution. Ravi Varma’s style was completely foreign. His pictures were very similar to still photography, they had bright colours and were thick. There’s not so much reflection of thought or subtlety there. Clouded by western influence, Ravi Varma used to paint pictures of the gods and goddesses, and to a certain extent their faces became those of sahibs and memsahibs. But Ravi Varma was before anyone else, because at that time there was only him. The Raj gave Ravi Varma, who was from South India, a title. He felt the scarcity and he took one

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292 Although elsewhere Dey uses the English word “collection” transliterated into Bangla, here he uses the Bangla term “sangraho” (সংগ্রহ).

293 W.G. Archer wrote several books on the Kalighat *pats*, including *Bazaar Paintings from Calcutta* (1959), *Kalighat Drawings* (1962), and *Kalighat Paintings* (1971). In the preface to the last of these, Archer does in fact mention Mukul Dey and thanks him for allowing him access to his own “pioneer collection” of *pats*. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, during a period of particular personal and professional difficulties, Dey had been compelled to sell much of his personal collection of Indian art, which consisted primarily of large numbers of good quality Mughal and Rajput paintings, Kalighat *pats* and other examples of folk painting, and modern Indian art paintings by the Tagores and their contemporaries. It was during this period that W.G. Archer acquired a large portion of Dey’s *pat* collection.
step (স্টেপ) towards reviving Indian art. In this, the first step (পদলক্ষেপ) was his.

At this time, towards the end of the nineteenth century, Aban Tagore came onto the stage. For so long there had been no one to lead Indian art. This absence was filled with the coming of Aban Tagore. He began to paint pictures in his completely individual style and with outstanding authority. The prestige of Indian art he re-established with honour. Of all, Aban Tagore had the biggest achievement here, his biggest achievement is this. After so long, rescuing a lost decorative tradition.

There were many other artists who were working at this time who were Aban Tagore’s contemporaries: J.P. Ganguly, Thakur Singh, and others. But western influence was spread in all their work. Aban Tagore was the exception, the one and only exception. From the very beginning when he was painting the Krishna series in his own style, Ravi Varma then came to visit once to the Jorasanko home. Having seen Aban Tagore’s work he foretold that one day he would be a very famous artist. Ravi Varma’s words, to the letter, came true.

In Indian art a little after Aban Tagore’s groundbreaking footsteps, many other artists soon followed and became famous. Suren Gangooli, Asit Haldar, Khsitin Mazumdar, Nandalal Bose, Sarada Ukil, Soilen Dey, Durgesh Singha, and me Mukul Dey. Aban Tagore sent Sarada Ukil as his ambassador to Delhi. Gradually Aban Tagore’s disciples

294 This sentence is interesting for its use of both the English word “step” and the Bangla পদলক্ষেপ.
and the disciples of his disciples, ruled all of India. Even in the next period, world famous artists like Ramkinkar, Deviprosad, Benode Behari, Diren Deborno, all of them directly or indirectly carry or have carried his influence. I hope that Chintamoni Kor and others don’t deny Aban Tagore.

In the realm of art, India’s own ideology has been maintained, and for that I firmly believe in giving credit to the contributions of Europeans. The Indian Society of Oriental Art (ইন্ডিয়েন সোসাইটি অব ওরিয়েন্টাল আর্ট)’s patrons and special friends such as Sir Woodroffe, Norman Blunt,\(^\text{295}\) Lord Kitchner, Lord Carmichael, Herbert Holme Todd,\(^\text{296}\) Lord Ronaldshay. Along with these people there were also many Indian art lovers. Aban-Gagan-Samar\(^\text{297}\) Tagore, Maharaja Pradyot Kumar Thakur, Bijoychand Mahtab, Sir Rajendranath Mukherji, the Maharajas of Natore and Cooch Bihar, many people like this. And there was also Sister Nivedita and O.C. Gangoly. At that time there were many exhibitions happening organized by this Society. In The Statesman (লেটেস্টস্টেটসম্যান), The Englishman (ইংরিজিম্যান), Rupam, The Modern Review (মডার্ন রিভিউ), Prabasi. How many times did all these reporters write about these exhibitions at that time? If you were to look through all these newspapers’ old issues you’ll see the heights that the Society of Indian Art reached then.

\(^{295}\) While the Bangla spelling clearly indicates “Blunt,” it seems likely that the person being referred to is in fact Norman Blount. Blount was an English jute broker and a close friend of Sir John Woodroffe, and was one of the founders of the ISOA. My thanks to Satyasri Ukil for pointing this out to me.

\(^{296}\) This may be a reference to H. Holmwood, a member of the Bengal Judiciary.

\(^{297}\) This phrase is commonly used by Dey to refer to the brothers Abanindranath, Gaganendranath, and Samarendranath Tagore.
At Jorasanko, when I was learning colour and brushwork with Aban Tagore, I was also introduced to many famous people. When I was travelling to Japan, Sir John Woodroffe made arrangements for my passport. O.C. Ganguli always used to love me. Now the scenario has changed. These types of people don’t exist anymore. On the one hand were the activities of the Society of Oriental Art, and on the other hand there were a group of students taking instruction from Aban Tagore at the Jorasanko house. Indian art was at a high level.

Aban Tagore never used to think that learning art means only taking a three- or four-year course. But now, what else happens? Aban Tagore used to say, if there is talent then six months is enough. If not, a whole lifetime isn’t enough. Nevertheless I would say that even if any first-class artist stayed with Aban Tagore with his whole heart and soul, then that artist would still always have more to learn. Aban Tagore was that intense.

Nevertheless, although Aban Tagore laboured so much to establish Indian art, how many people today know his worth? Soon after he died, Indian art stagnated. Nowadays again it has begun to copy (করি করা) western art. Despite that, I keep saying that the art that Aban Tagore established will survive, the rest will fade away. Perhaps a thousand years from now, Rabindranath’s songs will be no more but nevertheless Aban Tagore’s gift to the world will not die.

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This is a common strategy for the incorporation of English into Bangla, where an English word is combined with the Bangla verb kora meaning “to do” or “to make.” Thus the use here of “copy kora,” meaning to make a copy.
Many people ask me, why was the school of Aban Tagore almost destroyed? It wasn’t exactly destroyed, it just became lost or hidden. Besides, in Kolkata in the early days of the Society of Oriental Art, not so many young students wanted to go in for Indian art, and this was very damaging. In this matter I place the responsibility on Gurudev. He took Aban Tagore’s best students, that he himself had made, off to Santiniketan. At that time there was the plan for an ashram for young people. Suren Kar and Nandalal Bose, they were taken from Aban Tagore to Santiniketan. And before that, Asit Haldar was also brought to Santiniketan. Asit went to Lucknow. Gurudev also wanted to take unruly me. But I refused to fall under any group’s control. I was determined in this, right from the beginning. Suren Kar was a good artist but at Santiniketan he had so many other administrative things that he had to do in addition to his own art. Ashram management, supervision, shopping at the bazaar, all this. Seeing this, I did one sketch of Suren on a bullock cart, full with goods. I called Suren Kar *tui* and he was my friend, a good person. I was opposed to the crippling of Kolkata’s Oriental Society. Many people knew of this attitude of mine and because of this they didn’t like me.

Rabindranath’s wish was that, after his death, Aban Tagore would come and take over responsibility for Santiniketan. Aban Tagore did come, he was there for about four years. At that time Kala Bhavan became very strong. Then I too came to stay in Santiniketan,

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299 Bangla has three pronouns denoting the second person singular. *Apni* is the most formal or polite, and is used when addressing one’s superior or senior. *Tumi* is the most common, used between acquaintances and those of similar social standing. *Tui* is only used between very close and dear friends, or when addressing very young children or those of obviously lower social status.
after giving up the job at the Government Art School. Often, Abanindranath used to come and see me. I liked it very much, his presence and his company. At Uttarayan we would all together, young and old, sit together and listen to his stories. This was about 1945.

Truthfully, Aban Tagore was an ocean of good humour, an ocean of kindness. He used to create a true feeling in pictures, in stories, in his acting, in his manner of speaking. He used to give away, just like that, money to his students. In addition to that, he wasn’t just interested in his students’ painting but he also concerned himself in all other matters of their lives too. He helped so many people by giving money, I can’t even say how many, I could never stop speaking about it. Aban Tagore used to give each of his students a scholarship of 300 rupees every year. The students used the money to travel and see the country, to see different environments, to learn about all this for themselves. His enthusiasm for encouraging his students in this was never ending. His principle was, how could someone paint pictures without seeing something of the world? I myself used that scholarship money to go to Bodhgaya, Rajgir and Nalanda.

In my personal life too, Aban Tagore many times helped me at times of crisis. At any time he was willing to give money, to give counsel and advice. I can never forget this. After my father’s death I was unemployed. I had just returned from Japan and America. I didn’t know what to do. At that time Aban Tagore, Nandalal and Suren Kar together came to our rented home in Kolkata and gave me 60 rupees without question. Not only that, he also
told me that for as long as I had no other work, during that period I could teach art to the young children of the Tagore home. For that he would give me 60 rupees a month. Therefore I used to do this work, and he paid me for it. But at that time Aban Tagore’s children were very naughty and misbehaved. They used to annoy me to much. One day his second son (Koko) called my name in an insulting way. I gave him one slap and left the job. This was 1917. After that I went to Ajanta.

When I was working at the Government Art School I suddenly had terrible appendicitis (আপেডিসিস). In the middle of the night I was in terrible pain, and then it burst. Bina, seeing no alternative means, phoned Jorasanko. Aban Tagore made all the arrangements for my operation (অপবলরিশন), and he gave so much money. At the office of the DPI he made all arrangements. I can never repay all my debts of affection to him.

After I was married, Aban Tagore became even more involved in my life. He used to come sometimes to our Chowringhee house. I ran over to Jorasanko whenever I had the time. Bina came with me. He loved Bina like his own daughter-in-law. When Bina was pregnant she couldn’t eat anything. Terrible loss of appetite. Hearing that, Aban Tagore made sandwiches (স্যাডউইচ) with his own hand and sent them, and she used to eat them. He made all the arrangements for the improvement of Bina’s health. He sent Bina to Santiniketan in the care of his own niece.
When the Jorasanko home began to crumble, then whenever he became sad he used to call me and take my advice. So many words, so many stories, so many inner thoughts he used to share with me. Aban Tagore, Samar Tagore and Gagan Tagore’s children had wasted money and mismanaged the family affairs, because of this and for other reasons the Jorasanko house was mortgaged. After that one day there came an eviction notice. Then Aban Tagore was so sad. So many entangled memories were in that Tagore home. The creditors mercilessly broke up the house. Seeing the destruction, Aban cried out “They remove each brick one by one, and I feel as though my ribs are being taken.” Aban was by nature jovial and sensitive, but on that day he couldn’t conceal his sadness any more. Having left the Jorasanko house, Aban went to a rented house, “Guptanibas,” in the Boranagar neighbourhood. Bina and I brought Aban Tagore and his wife Suhasini Devi, along with their family deity, in my car to their house. I cried that day. I still have one picture of the decayed #5 house.

Today in my old age I intensely realize that every person should have a strong, solid home, a place to live, to stay in properly. For a long time I didn’t have my own place to stay in, so many of my pictures were ruined because of that. Just as my pictures were ruined, so too were many of Aban Tagore’s own pictures destroyed due to the lack of proper conservation. Even today many of his pictures are suffering through carelessness. No one is there to look after them. Nevertheless, Indian art lovers (লাভাদরী) should

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300 This photograph of the old house at Jorasanko is preserved at the Mukul Dey Archives in Santiniketan.
301 Here Dey has taken an English word (lover) and has transliterated it into Bangla before adding the Bangla suffix “–der” to make it plural. Hence the resulting “Banglish” word: labhader.
have by now published a good album of Aban Tagore’s works. It’s a huge work/undertaking, but why not? What doesn’t it happen? Because Aban Tagore was born in India he hasn’t received his due honour and respect. We don’t know how to give respect to our talented people.

Aban Tagore suffered terribly at the end of his life. I heard that his good, small pictures were sold for only twenty or twenty-five rupees to stupid, undeserving people. For example one picture of a tiya bird (parrot), just starting to show its small feathers, standing on the small branches of a tree, all this type of picture. My monthly salary then was 1000 rupees, but after all deductions I only received 500 or 600 rupees in hand. There were many expenses for various things, and therefore I couldn’t save anything. Otherwise I would have bought and kept all those pictures and they would have survived well. If ever it had been necessary for me to sell them, it would have only been into the hands of the right sort of people. This is a big regret of mine now.

In 1951, on 5 December, Aban Tagore died. After he had given up the vice-principal job at the Government Art School, he had painted his famous picture, “End of the Journey” (এন্ড অফ দি জার্নের). It pictures a camel in the desert, having fallen, unable to carry its heavy burden. So pathetic, this picture’s scene. I have visualized that picture many times in my mind. It has such appeal, that picture.
After Aban Tagore’s death, my mind and heart was so empty and bereft, I can’t explain it in words. When I heard the news of his death I hurried to his deathbed with my wife, from Santiniketan. His many friends, relations, students, disciples all came. I was surprised to see, it will sound like a story, but as I stood to the side with Bina, quite some time after his death, it seemed to me that his right hand rose a bit as if to give a blessing and then fell again.

The three gods of the south veranda of the Tagore house are now absent. Before my eyes it seems clear: three brothers, sitting, painting pictures. Perhaps many people don’t know that Samar Tagore also painted, he painted very good landscapes. Gagan Tagore was a very famous artist. Yet it’s such a pity that Gagan Tagore has been largely forgotten by the people of this country. Gagan Tagore also loved me a lot. When I was travelling to Japan he gave me one jobba. If I had been a Brahmin, he would have wished for me to marry his daughter. Many times he spoke about this to me. Samar Tagore also used to love me.

Aban Tagore was really a painter but he also made sculptures. That, I would call mostly a by-product. But is that all? In fact he made so many marvellous things out of broken bits, rejected utensils, glass pieces, wood, bits of earth, thrown-away scraps.

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302 This is again a reference to the brothers Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Samarendranath Tagore. The term trimurti (ট্রিমূর্তি) literally means three statues, and it implies the triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.  
303 A loose-fitting garment worn by men.
Many people don’t know about this. He called that series of work *kutum-katam*. Having set out do this work, he had to do combinations and permutations. Even this is fine to see. Having only heard or read about it, you can’t really understand. Today I sit and wonder, where did Aban Tagore’s creative power not go?

When I was at the art school I used to see some broken pieces of stone in and around the museum, in the school’s garden. I sometimes used to take a few of these and give them to Aban Tagore. He was so happy. He used big and small chisels on all these broken stones and used to make them into so many types of figures. He was a talented sculptor. Even if he didn’t do etching regularly he did once try his hand at this technique (*লটকরনক*). I had then just returned from America. Having thoroughly learned this technique from that country, I came to show it to Aban Tagore. Instantly he took the copper plate (*লপ্লেট*) and needle (*রনডল*) that I gave to him. I took a print (*রপ্রিন*). Having seen this picture, who would say this print was not made by the hand of an etching master (*এরচবাং মবস্টেবরি*)?

One of the most memorable events in my life was making a portrait of Aban Tagore. This was because catching him still was very difficult, especially for a portrait (*লপবলররট*). Him working, him sitting and thinking, him in a gossip session, I did many sketches (*লসচ*) of these kinds of poses. I also took many photos. But to make his portrait exhausted me. Usually to make a portrait I need a couple of hours, but to catch and hold his image I

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304 Literally, “Making his portrait, I ate exhaustion.”
needed 130 days. I would anyway have made a portrait of Aban Tagore but in this matter Mr. Ponten-Moeller was insistent. Even though he was Swedish, Moeller sahib was very devoted to the Hindu religion, he studied it a great deal. He sincerely loved Indian art, and he was endlessly devoted to Abanindranath. He used to say to me time and time again: “Make Aban Tagore’s portrait. You people don’t understand that he is an even greater man (লগ্রেটবরি মতবন) than Gandhi and in a way even better than Rabindranath.” Moeller sahib bought many of Aban Tagore’s pictures, having given a good price for them. He loved Aban Tagore and his paintings a lot. He also had a lot of affection for me. When I was doing Aban Tagore’s portrait he came every day and used to give me encouragement. Every Sunday we used to eat an excellent lunch at his house.

Making Aban Tagore’s portrait was not an easy job in such a situation. Could it really have taken 130 days? He was impossibly restless and mobile, he couldn’t sit still for one moment. How could I work? Even if I sat to work, he did various types of postures. Even having sat quietly, he made many different types of expression (এক্সপ্রেশন) with his eyes. Having gone to make his portrait, all that was left was to cry. Now I think that all this was just his way of testing his own student. Nevertheless, I held on to my patience to the end and I was able to finish. He gave me much praise. And in my life what can be a bigger reward than that? Now without a doubt I can say that that was the best portrait of my life.

Sitting with Aban Tagore to paint a picture together was a great honour and fortune for an
artist, I can’t fully express how much. I sat to work with him on many pictures. Among those, “Sakuntala” is one picture, “Ganesh and his Mother” is another, and “Shiva and Parvati.” I remember it very well. If I think about we two, touching our brushes on this one painting together, even now my hairs stand on end. Today I have no one to show me my mistakes and to guide me. While working, sometimes I wonder: this tonal effect (লটবনবল এলফক), if he saw it, would he accept it? Or would he have asked me to think about changing it? Even now, when I feel a tension coming to the brush in my hand, or when the brush is stuck, I remember him. Having dipped the brush in the colour, while pulling it across the canvas, I feel as if he’s present. He gave me everything, he revealed everything to me. Even though he is not visible, he is still showing me everything. I am always his student.

I am a poor man, I don’t have money. I can’t do the work I want to. I can’t get Abanindranath’s album published. I can’t get curry, chop, fish, meat, nor can I eat what I want. Just a little earlier through the main entrance, the fish-seller’s call of magurmachh was heard, but my pocket is empty. I couldn’t buy it. It makes me a little sad. Nevertheless, the fact that there is enough work to feed rice and dhal twice a day to five people, that is a blessing. Almighty guru, almighty Abanindranath.
Travels at Home and Abroad, and Becoming an Artist

From Santiniketan, several of us went travelling all together. Nepal Ray, Sudhakanta Roychoudhury, Rathida, Protima Devi, Dinu Thakur, Narabhoop who was a Nepalese student, and me. At that time I didn’t have the money for this. Gurudev then told Rathida to buy one of my paintings. Rathida bought and took one large watercolour of religious rites on the Ganges. From this I had enough to pay for the entire trip, food, lodging expenses. We took many photos of the road to Ramgarh. Rathida and I especially took photos. Kalipada Roy received those photographs from Nepal Roy. Now they have become the treasure of Rabindra Bhavan. I don’t have any of them.

While going to Badrinath I observed that the flies were a terrible menace at the small roadside eating places. I even saw on that road a man who had died, lying there on the roadside. This is the way of religious pilgrims. If any person with them dies, they don’t stop their journey because of it. They leave the dead body behind and move on. I liked Badrinath very much. The priests there were very welcoming. They look after the needs of religious pilgrims and, to whatever extent, make their lives easier. And what did I do? I did my puja, I wandered around, but then, as the saying goes, “When the miller goes to heaven he still husks the grain,” and I did the same. I painted countless pictures. Diary (ডবলয়েররি), travel writing, I didn’t learn all these things. My expression of feeling is through
the medium of pictures. If a person is sad or happy he sings, or talks. And those who have
the power to write, they write. But I never had the least speck of such power. All my
sadness, all my happiness, all my existence, is trapped in the lines of my pictures.
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[Translator’s note: Dey goes on to relate that he and Sarada Ukil were employed by
Patrick Geddes, a town planner for the British colonial government who was studying and
making recommendations regarding the development of Kolkata. Geddes hired Dey and
Ukil to travel to various villages to take photographs of sample dwellings and structures,
where they attracted the attention of the colonial policing authorities who arrived at their
lodgings one night to question Ukil while Dey was sleeping]

At that time the C.I.D.\textsuperscript{305} men came and asked Sarada why we had come there, where we
had come from, we were boys of what family, various questions. They wanted to wake me
up to interrogate me too. But before that, Sarada stopped them and said “don’t wake him,
he’s a dangerous youth.” I pretended to sleep, and in this way I continued to hear
everything. After that, thinking they had left peacefully, I prepared for a good rest but
there was no opportunity for that. I’m not trying to belittle the mosquitoes of Santiniketan,
but that night the hospitality we received from the mosquitoes of Krishnagar was
incomparable. So much so that in my 90 years I’ve never experienced the like. The next
day Sarada and I started working according to Patrick Geddes’s instructions.

\textsuperscript{305} Criminal Investigation Department.
We went everywhere in Krishnagar, and saw various types of structures and houses, took note of their design. Along the way we took many photos. While taking photos, we found ourselves at the home of a zamindar family of that area. The zamindar was petrified on our arrival, perhaps he thought we were dacoits (thieves). When we arrived we attracted a lot of attention. He welcomed us out of fear. He wouldn’t let us go without feeding us. Then I thought, well why not enjoy myself? We ate sixteen cooked dishes. The women of the house stood there, even the zamindar himself stood with a cloth tied around his neck in humility, supervising the situation. Having finished the ritual of eating, again we went and took photos. Having taken many photos we returned to the Tagore house in Jorasanko at dusk, laughing. It was such a funny story. Also in Kolkata, several times I got into trouble with the police. In the end my name went into the police register. At the time of my travel to Japan they refused me. Andrews went on my behalf and explained to the police that I wasn’t doing swadeshi activities, it was for town planning (টাউন প্লেনিং) that I had gone around taking photos and painting pictures. As well, my father was a police inspector. John Woodroffe himself helped me with the passport. Samar Tagore of the Jorasanko house introduced me to Sir John Woodroffe, and then he gave the passport. Woodroffe was a scholar of tantric scriptures. I have one photo of him standing in front of Konorak Temple, wearing a dhoti and chadar.
Before my travels to Japan, one event happened that is worth mentioning. The matter might not seem so important to other people but at that age it made a big impression on me. Perhaps this one thing made me able to become an artist. The Maharaja of Burdwan, Bijoychand Mahtab, bought two of my pictures for 800 rupees. On that trip when returning from Japan via America I bought one press (লপ্রিস) from America with that money. Pearson knew about the matter of buying a press, and he helped me. I still have this press with me, even if it has become old and rusty. The Maharaja was a great art patron. Later in life also he helped me a lot, he bought a lot of my pictures, he even kept my painting in his own room hanging about the head of his bed. Later I came to see it.

Much later at the Government Art School in Kolkata there were a bunch of people who used unscrupulous means to force me to leave my position. At that time he stayed beside me, truly benevolent, truly desiring to be helpful, he loved me just the same as before.

I will say one more thing about Japan before I forget it. I’ve just said that something happened much later after going to Japan, so now is the time to talk about it. I was then the Government Art School Principal. I saw that Gurudev wrote many books and he dedicated them to any number of people. In my mind one day I thought to do a naughty experiment on Gurudev about these dedications. Meeting with him I said “You are dedicating books to every Tom Dick and Harry (টম ডিক হারি), but you have not dedicated any book to me.” That was all I said, but Gurudev’s face immediately blushed red. Then he said, “Since when are you concerned with all this? You are a bombhola
I laughed and replied, “No, no, I’m just having fun with you, teasing you.” But the words must have gone to Gurudev’s heart. Some days later I met with him again and he said to me: “Mukul, I have written about you in my book about the Japan travels.”

[Translator’s note: Dey goes on to discuss his journey to Japan and America in 1916 and 1917, when he travelled as the assistant or protégé of Rabindranath Tagore.]

On the ship we travelled in the cabins. Gurudev would sometimes chat with us, and sometimes he would just look far away into the distance. I didn’t like being confined in the cabin. Unless it was absolutely necessary, I didn’t stay in the cabin. I spent my time up on deck. I was very surprised to see all the interior workings/system of the ship.

After crossing the mohona we came to the Bay of Bengal. Boundless blue sea, endless waves. Within a few days of travel I’d seen the entire boat and was a little bored. I made friends with the ship’s workers. Even within a short time there developed a great affection between myself and the crew. They used to tell me stories of their lives and they used to attentively watch me sketching. Gurudev sat in his cabin and wrote a great deal, I think

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306 It is perhaps impossible to find an entirely adequate translation for this term in English, but one possible interpretation would be to say that a bombhola person is one whose head is in the clouds, who is not concerned with mundane matters. The term is associated with the ritual and festive consumption of various intoxicants during the worship of Shiva, and also describes the divine state of intoxication of the god himself. Thus a bombhola person is one who is spaced-out and carefree, but in a divine sense.

307 The wide estuary/delta of the Ganga River.

308 The phrase used by Dey to denote one’s life stories is a typical one in Bangla: সুখ-দুঃখের গল, or “happy-sad stories”.

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this is how he expressed the nature of his mind. To my ear used to come the sound of the poet’s voice, of poetry and song. And my own language remained in colour and painting. Visualizing this new empire with the eye, I tried to hold it in a picture. I never gave much attention to writing, I never gave my mind to anything other than painting. Later on in the future, in London I did write a book about Ajanta, at the urging of many people. And as a result of their efforts, in a haphazard manner I wrote it. They organized the text and had it published. I never went to any publisher’s door (পাবলিশারের দোর) for the sake of my book. Gurudev certainly used to encourage me a lot to write, and he used to say “You should write. I’ll look at it and correct it.” But I wasn’t able to fulfil this request of Gurudev’s. I lived my whole life in pictures. I certainly used to write letters to my father, giving all the news and all manner of description. Today it would be useful to have all those letters. But I used to be afraid to write anything more than letters, as if doing so would mean that I would have some disagreement with my painting. I don’t write any more. I live in my pictures.

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Before, I spoke about Kolkata’s art exhibition. I said that seeing that exhibition opened my eyes and gave me some hint of the art world. Having come to Japan, the true vastness of the art world became apparent to me. My eyes were opened. I was totally amazed and

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309 The phrase used to describe the correcting of the text is again quite typical in Bangla and it denotes the easy mixing of English and Bangla in common parlance. The offer from Rabindranath is to make the text “tick tock.” Combined with the verb kora meaning to do or to make, the resulting Banglish verb is “tick-tock kora,” meaning to make right or to place in good order.
impressed. In my eyes, Japan is the best country in the world for art. Many people will say this about Paris. The art of Paris is certainly beautiful (more than good), the best in the world. But Paris’s art world and environment is unhealthy and has fallen into sickness and darkness. Paris’s art is harsh and aggressive. But the art of Japan is very calm and dignified. Unless you go to Japan you will not believe that a whole country could be so influenced by art.

…

Whenever we had meetings or gatherings on this trip to Japan and America, I used to earn a great deal of money. It was a very easy method of gaining income. Many people used to want Gurudev’s autographed books to keep as a souvenir (সমুলররনয়েরি). Some people also wanted him to write one or two lines for them. But for these people it wasn’t possible for them to gain direct access to Gurudev. They used to persistently ask me for help. In Gurudev’s leisure time, I used to get him to sign and write poems according to the Japanese people’s requests. When these people received these things they were extremely happy. In their happiness they used to give me money. I used to give all this to Pearson.

In this way I earned a lot of money. Having returned to India I gave all of it to Gurudev. With all that money that I earned, the debt of the Jorasanko red house was repaid. I was very happy. But if I think of one thing even today I get upset and saddened. After

310 Literally, “having received all these in hand, it was as if those people had heaven in hand.”
returning to India, my father wanted to see one dollar (ডলবরি), to see what it looked like. I hadn’t kept even one paisa with me, therefore I couldn’t show a dollar to my father. Later on after that I earned many dollars but father couldn’t see them, he had died. If I think of this then a constraint arises in my heart.

...

In Japan art exhibitions are frequent. When Taikan’s pictures are included, there’s nothing more to say. The exhibitions become so crowded. It was exhausting to control the crowds! Taikan one day while talking with me said that almost all Japanese artists were jealous of him, jealous of his pictures. This isn’t at all unusual. It can be seen amongst the experts in all fields of work, from ancient times to the modern era. In music, literature, sculpture, painting, science, politics, in all respects. In all respects there is continual envy and rivalry, this is one thing that always continues: “you are nothing, I am the best.” This type of scenario. Also it can be seen, in any particular field, when a person bit-by-bit has reached such a high level, that even fighting with him if you’re jealous, it’s impossible to reach him. But even then that gentleman has no respite. Even then the people are still jealous. All others together will try to suppress his positive contribution and, using their brains, will highlight some negative element. Then they will write something, making a mountain out of a molehill, and make it sound believable or marketable. In many cases the real competitors are the guru’s students, they are the ones who do the most damage. Amongst artists this happens more. Spicy stories about many artists are told or written,
gossipy and quarrelsome stories. What is there to say about others? I, Mukul Chandra, am not safe from this. But let those people fight, I don’t fight with other people.

…

After Honolulu we came to Vancouver Island (ব্যাডকুডার আইল্যান্ড). In our ship, the “Siberia Maru” I observed something. On the ship’s mast there were two big hawks. They used to eat the ship’s leftover food. In the daytime they used to fly high, and after dusk they would return to the mast. At that time almost every ship used to keep one or two of this type of animal as pets. They were good luck for the ships. While travelling across the ocean we saw the curve of the horizon. I sketched it. I very much liked the view from the ship of the clouds breaking apart and the moon appearing between them, I used to make sketches of that too. In Honolulu Gurudev didn’t descend from the ship. I and Pearson got down there and wandered and looked around. There is an ancient stone attached to the mountain there. There the women wear small dresses like lungis made out of straw. Their complexion is copper colour. They love to dance. If American foreigners go there, they dance and entertain a lot and make merry. We reached Vancouver in the morning. They were people under British control. Their gestures and behaviour were extremely sluggish and slow. They eat a lot of beef (বিফ), drink a lot of alcohol, gamble and they’re all musical people.

…
For a long time my hobby was collecting picture postcards (সিক্কার পোস্টকার্ড). During that tour I collected approximately 500 or 600 postcards. At the Grand Canyon (গ্রেট ক্যানিয়ান) I bought many postcards from one old woman for just a few cents. She thought I was a red Indian (রেড ইন্ডিয়ান). I don’t know why, but she kept pressing my big toe.

Having returned to the hotel, when we were going up in the lift two rowdy men caught Gurudev’s beard and said “Hello, what kind of guy [are you]? Are you a Santa Claus?” Gurudev didn’t say anything. I didn’t like it at all. My hand was itching to do something.

I used to notice one strange habit of Szukalaski’s. When he was making Gurudev’s portrait then sometimes he would take a small bit of white powder and eat it. One day I asked him about it. I was surprised to hear him say it was the powdered bones of his father. In 1969-70 he once wrote me a fourteen-page letter. It was addressed only to “Mukul Dey, India.” The letter went all over for many days before it finally reached me. From it I learned that he had built a studio in California and married a pretty woman. After that I didn’t get any news of him.

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311 The entire statement is transliterated into Bangla as: হিতবললব, ছহিবয়েবট কবইন্ডি অফ আ গবইআরি ইউ এসবনবলকবজ?

312 Stanislav Szukalski, a Polish artist whom Dey and Tagore met in Chicago.
My Father’s Death, and Journey to Ajanta

In 1917 on 1 July my father died. Gurudev had made me return, therefore having seen it happen, I did the final rites. Earlier I mentioned that at that terrible time Aban Tagore came and stood by me. He arranged for me to stay at “Bichitra” at the Tagore family home in Jorasanko, he gave me responsibility for teaching the young children of painting for which every month he gave me 60 rupees. But I wasn’t able to stay in that place any longer. Because one day Aban Tagore’s second son Koko called out to me “Hey Mukul!, Hey Mukul!” contemptuously. I gave Koko’s cheek one slap. Having given that slap, I then left that place of shelter. About this I have certainly spoken earlier.

...

[Translator’s note: Dey explains that once he could make arrangements to relocate his mother and siblings to their village home following the death of his father, using money he had earned through the sale of paintings he set out travelling in India. He purchased a third-class train ticket and boarded a compartment where anyone wearing European clothes was allowed to sit.]

I had one Indian cap with me. But, having sat in the European compartment, then there was no way I could wear the Indian cap. Therefore I kept it in my bag.

313 In the previous chapter Dey recounted that he had received several offers of scholarships and sponsorship during this tour of Japan and America, but that Tagore had insisted that Dey decline these offers and return to India, saying “I took him from his father and I will return him to his father.” Because of this insistence, Dey was able to see his father before he died and to perform the final funeral rites.
While leaving Nagpur station, at that time one Marathi gentleman hurried into the European compartment with his suitcase and wife. They were wearing Indian clothes. Therefore the solar-topi wearing Anglo Indians got into a terrible argument with him.

While I was watching, a crowd gathered on the platform (দ্বারা). To control the situation, they ran to get guards, the station master (স্টেশনমাস্টার), but the gentleman wouldn’t move from the compartment. He said he was a lawyer.

...

[Translator’s note: Upon reaching Ajanta after many trials and tribulations, Dey was astounded to find there a group of Japanese men, including the artist Kampo Arai whom he had known Japan and at Jorasanko. The Japanese group was working on making copies of the Ajanta cave murals, a project to which Dey himself would return on his second visit to Ajanta the following year.]

One thing that I liked about the Japanese artists, when they’re working they don’t speak. While they were working, my hand was restless to do something. But I hadn’t received permission from the Nizam’s government to be able to paint, because of this I was very sorry. I thought, here is this golden temple, and the Japanese are able to work on it although they are foreigners. No, no, in saying this I’m not belittling them in the least little

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314 The Nizam of Hyderabad, who controlled the area in which the Ajanta caves are located and granted permission for working in the caves.
bit. In this matter I completely appreciate (এরপ্রিরসলয়েট) and admire (এডমবয়েবরি) them.\textsuperscript{315} They have fully developed the art of their country. They have travelled throughout the world, learning techniques and collecting materials. But our country’s wealthy people haven’t come forward (for art), they haven’t done anything.

Japanese artists have such dedication (ডিডেকেশন) to art that they don’t chat or talk while they work, I’ve seen with my own eyes. And us? Even before one time touching the paper we start talking. There is unwanted noise all the time. Even our family life is no exception. In such circumstances, is it possible to keep working with a focused mind, especially for artists?

\textbf{Publishing my First Book, Meeting Sri Aurobindo, and Journey to England}

Yes, this time too the initiative came from Pearson. A letter came from Pearson saying to come to London. Pearson had kept empty a space for me at the art school, and wrote me the letter. Just before going to London I went to Bombay. I sold many pictures—sketches, portraits—all of these. I received a lot of money for the sale of the Ajanta pictures. Even ordinary people, I could paint their portraits in fifteen minutes or a half an hour. In this way I collected thirty or thirty-five rupees each. Then I was in need of money, I did all this

\textsuperscript{315} Here Dey combines the English words for “appreciate” and “admire” with the Bangla verb kora (করা) meaning to do or to make, thus arriving at the Bangla phrases, “appreciate kora” and “admire kora.”
for money. While staying in Bombay I became very popular as an artist. Many people helped me, many people bought my pictures. At one time I wished to make another Twelve Portraits based on the distinguished people of Bombay. Due to various difficulties this never happened. I did sketch portraits of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and B.P. Wadia. I bought many art books from Taraporewalla, a distinguished person of Bombay. At this time I also procured coloured reproductions of world famous works of art. I say this as the background to my travels to England.

…

The ship’s name was Liberty, a brilliant white ship. In Bombay, through the help of a patron, my fare was almost free. For food only 50 rupees was needed. This gentleman’s name was Purusottam Morarji, he bought two of my pictures. One more young Gujarati gentleman, in buying one very expensive painting of mine, gave me my route to England. His name was Kolyanji Koromsi Dasji. He used to call me Mukul C. At the Bombay docks, the Maharaja of Patiala came. His son was also travelling on that ship. He came to wave a white handkerchief to see him off. There was no one then to wave for me.

…

316 A book of portraits by Dey of various eminent personalities of Bengal at the time, published in 1917.
317 According to research done by Satyasri Ukil, the ship that Dey sailed on was most certainly the S.S. Loyalty, not the Liberty as here indicated. The error could perhaps be attributed to the great span of time between these events in 1920 and Dey’s narration of them in the 1980s, or perhaps to an error of transcription during the editing process of *Amar Katha.*
When I first went to join the Slade School, I had the book *Twelve Portraits* with me. Professor Tonks,\(^{318}\) having turned a few pages, said to me with a solemn face: “I do not know why you have come to our country to learn our bad art, which we are almost going to discard. You are from India, the country I know is carrying the tradition of spiritual art over a thousand years. What can you learn from our school of art? You better go to your own country and try to find out the golden treasure of art hidden there.”\(^{319}\) I then said to the professor, with much hesitation, “Sir, I want to learn the techniques of oil painting, etching, etc.” Then the professor said, with a sweet and light smile, “Alright, you go to the life class.”\(^{320}\) From then I started my life class. About fifty people, boys and girls were in this classroom (কবসরুলম).\(^ {321}\) Everyone was surprised, wondering where had this “blackie” come from? Many sahib’s children even after trying for five or ten years don’t receive entry (এনরত্র), and here was one Indian young man, how did he get permission (পবরিরমশন)? Thus began my Slade School life. At first the European students\(^ {322}\) didn’t pay me any special attention. But later, although it won’t sound good me saying so, I saw that gradually, having seen my work, they became devoted to me. They used to hover around

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318 The artist and art teacher Henry Tonks (1862-1937).
319 This speech by Henry Tonks and Dey’s reply are among the few rare cases in *Amar Katha* where English speech is written in the English alphabet instead of being transliterated into Bangla.
320 Although Tonks's first speech is written in English, his response to Dey is transliterated into Bangla. The text here reads: অলরিবইট, ইউ ছগব টমু রদ লবইফ কবস.
321 Dey here combines the English word for classroom with the Bangla suffix “-e” to denote location. The result is the Banglish term “classroom-e,” meaning “in the classroom.”
322 Dey combines the English words for “European student” with the Bangla suffix “-ra” to denote plural. The result is the Banglish phrase “European student-ra” or ইউরোপিয়ন স্টুডেন্টরা.
very closely. My drawn line, my colour composition (কমপোজিশন), all this they used to observe. I don’t think it’s ever bad to observe the work of others, everyone does this to make their own work better. Even I did this, from Aban Tagore, Taikan, James Blanding Sloan, from everyone’s work. I believe the individuality of ideas should really remain, but technique has to be learned. From as many people that an artist learns from, by that much will his work be enriched (এনরিচড).

... 

Later on Muirhead Bone moved to a different place. To Pearson he gave many drawings, etchings. I saw these pictures with Pearson in Santiniketan. It can be said that then I became acquainted with Bone. Even having become very famous, Bone never forgot his debt to Pearson. With no hesitation, time and again he acknowledged the debt. For a long time he kept me with him, like a son, and lovingly taught me drawing and etching because Pearson was fond of me. If not for that, why else would anyone help such a foreigner with no means or connections?

... 

In London I had many women friends. They were very beautiful. I had good friendship and connection with them. I used to laugh, chitchat, wander around, with them. Many times with them I went to the cinema (সিনেমা), theatre (থিয়েটার), opera (অপেরা). From that I gained a fairly good idea about European ballet (ইউরোপীয় ব্যালে), drama (ড্রামা) and
music (সিউজিক্যাল). I used to drink (ড্রিন্ক) with them, and also danced (ডান্স) with them, but I never got into a state of riotous drunkenness. When I became an ARCA, that was the first time that I drank, with my class we drank port. And later I never drank. After that I drank just if I went to a party (পার্টি). And now, I don’t drink. But at one time, I used to drink a lot, when I was principal of the Calcutta Art School. Then, every day I had a ration of one bottle of black and white scotch whiskey (ল্যার্বল ব্ল্যাক এন্ড হুইট স্কট হৌইস) and one tin of fifty “555 State Express Cigarettes” (ফ্রিক্টাইটফাই স্টেট একসপ্রেস সিগারেট). With that, I sometimes smoked Havana cigars (হাভানা সিগার). However, I only consumed the best quality (বেস্ট কোর্সিটি) things.

[Translator’s note: As previously mentioned, a translation of the entire text of Amar Katha is beyond the scope of the current project, both because much of the narrative of this book remains chronologically separate from the time period under direct consideration in this project (up to and including the 1940s), and because of the limitations of research time and of this author’s proficiency in Bangla at the time of research. Translation of the entire text awaits a future research opportunity.]

323 Here, instead of using the standard Bangla construct meaning to drink alcohol (মদ খেয়াল), Dey instead combines the English word “drink” with the verb kora meaning to do or to make, to arrive at the Banglish phrase “drink kora.”
324 An Associate of the Royal College of Art.