

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XII · CODE 312

# The Bengal School and Cultural Nationalism

CUET unit: The Bengal School of Art and Cultural Nationalism /  
Modern Indian Art

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## Snapshot

- Indian painting evolved from the colonial Company School through Raja Ravi Varma's academic realism to the nationalist Bengal School of Art.
- Abanindranath Tagore and E. B. Havell were the architects of an indigenous modern Indian art rooted in Mughal–Pahari miniature traditions and Swadeshi values.
- Key developments: the Shantiniketan/Kala Bhavana model under Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy's folk-renaissance, Gaganendranath Tagore's Cubism, and pan-Asianism via Okakura and the Bauhaus exhibition of 1922.
- Modern Indian art was the outcome of the conflict between colonialism and nationalism — moving between internationalism and indigenous tradition.
- Ten signature artworks are examinable: **Tiller of the Soil, Rasa-Lila, Radhika, City in the Night, Rama Vanquishing the Pride of the Ocean, Woman with Child, Journey's End, etc.**
- This chapter bridges medieval miniature painting (Iefa101–105) and the broader history of Modern Indian Art (Iefa107), supplying the named artists, dates and political context that frame twentieth-century Indian art.

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

NCERT opens with a sweeping historical contrast. Prior to British rule, Indian art existed in three principal forms — temple statues, miniature paintings illustrating manuscripts, and decoration on village mud-house walls. With the consolidation of colonial rule from the eighteenth century, English officers began to commission local artists to document Indian people, flora, fauna and locales. Local artists who had been working in the erstwhile courts of Murshidabad, Lucknow and Delhi migrated to colonial cities; they adapted their traditional miniature technique to the close observation that was a striking feature of European art, and produced what came to be known as the Company School of Painting. Albums of such Company paintings were also in demand in Britain, where they served as exotic documentary records (NCERT §Company Painting, p. 85).

The Company style declined in the mid-nineteenth century with the arrival of photography, which displaced the documentary function painting had performed. What

flourished instead in the British-established Art Schools was the academic style of oil painting — a European technique applied to Indian subject matter (NCERT §Raja Ravi Varma, p. 86). The single most successful Indian exponent of this academic style was Raja Ravi Varma of the Travancore Court, Kerala — a self-taught artist who imitated the European paintings popular in Indian palaces, mastered academic realism, and depicted scenes from the **Ramayana** and the **Mahabharata**. Many of his paintings were reproduced as oleographs and calendar images, which carried his iconography into millions of Indian homes and made him the first modern Indian artist with a mass audience.

With the rise of nationalism by the end of the nineteenth century, Ravi Varma's academic style came to be looked down upon as "foreign and too western" to depict Indian myths and history with authenticity. Out of this nationalist climate emerged the Bengal School of Art in the first decade of the twentieth century. The Bengal School was an art movement that originated in Calcutta — the centre of British power — and was spearheaded by Abanindranath Tagore (1871–1951) and supported by E. B. Havell (1861–1934), the principal of the Calcutta School of Art. The movement was politically associated with the Swadeshi movement, and culturally drew its visual language from Mughal and Pahari miniature painting rather than from the Company School or the academic European style (NCERT §The Bengal School, p. 86).

Both Abanindranath and Havell were critical of colonial Art Schools and the imposition of European taste. The year 1896 is identified by NCERT as crucial in Indian visual-arts history: Havell and Abanindranath redesigned the curriculum of the Government Art School, Calcutta (now the Government College of Art and Craft, Kolkata) to include Indian technique and themes. Sister schools in Lahore, Bombay and Madras at the same time focused on crafts. Abanindranath was the main artist and creator of the journal of the Indian Society of Oriental Art, and the first major supporter of Swadeshi values in Indian art; his painting **Journey's End** (1913) shows Mughal–Pahari influence in its delicate palette and wash technique (NCERT §Abanindranath Tagore and E. B. Havell, p. 87).

His followers include Kshitindranath Majumdar — painter of **Rasa-Lila** — and M. R. Chughtai (Abdul Rehman Chughtai) — painter of **Radhika**. Both developed personal idioms within the wash-technique tradition. Nandalal Bose, a student of Abanindranath, was invited by Rabindranath Tagore to head the painting department at Kala Bhavana — India's first national art school — at Shantiniketan, Visva-Bharati University. Bose drew systematically on local Bengali folk-art forms in his teaching and practice. In 1937 Gandhi invited Bose to paint panels for the Haripura Congress session — the famous Haripura Posters — depicting ordinary rural folk such as a musician, a farmer and a woman churning milk in sketchy, colourful figures that placed common people at the centre of nation-building (NCERT §Shantiniketan — Early modernism, pp. 87–88).

K. Venkatappa in South India carried forward the Kala Bhavana legacy in the Madras region. Jamini Roy went one step further: he rejected colonial Art School training entirely to adopt the flat, colourful folk-painting style of Bengal's villages, painting

women, children and rural life with the bold outlines and primary colours of the Bankura pat tradition. Despite this rising nationalist art, the British Raj awarded the mural decoration of Lutyens's new Delhi buildings to students of the Bombay School — trained in realism under Principal Gladstone Solomon — while Bengal School artists were allowed only to decorate the Indian House in London. NCERT highlights this divide as evidence of the official colonial preference for European realism over Indian-modernist work (NCERT §Shantiniketan, p. 88).

The political background sharpens after the Partition of Bengal in 1905, when the Swadeshi movement peaked. Ananda Coomaraswamy wrote influential essays on Swadeshi in art and joined hands with the Japanese nationalist Kakuzo Okakura, who came to Calcutta with the idea of pan-Asianism — the proposition that India should ally with other eastern nations against western imperialism. Two Japanese artists accompanied Okakura to Shantiniketan to teach the wash technique as an alternative to western oil painting (NCERT §Pan-Asianism and Modernism, p. 89). The year 1922 is then identified by NCERT as a remarkable year in Indian art history: an exhibition of works by Paul Klee, Kandinsky and other artists of the Bauhaus School in Germany travelled to Calcutta. This was the first direct encounter of Indian artists with modern abstract art — squares, circles, lines and patches of colour rather than figurative representation.

Gaganendranath Tagore, Abanindranath's brother, was the artist whose paintings show the clearest influence of modern western Cubist style: building interiors broken into geometric planes, sharp angled lighting, and prismatic colour effects. He also drew sharp caricatures of rich Bengalis blindly following European living, providing the satirical edge of the early Bengal modernist moment (NCERT §Pan-Asianism, p. 89).

NCERT then notes that the divide between "anglicists" and "orientalists" was not strictly based on race. The Bengali intellectual Benoy Sarkar sided with the anglicists in his article "The Futurism of Young Asia," seeing the Bengal School as regressive; the Englishman E. B. Havell, by contrast, favoured a return to native art. This crossing of expected camps is important for understanding modernism in India. Amrita Sher-Gil exemplifies the meeting of pan-Asianist and modernist points of view, using a Bauhaus-inflected visual language to depict distinctively Indian rural and domestic scenes (NCERT §Different Concepts of Modernism, pp. 89–90).

Modern Indian art, NCERT concludes, emerged out of the conflict between colonialism — which had introduced art schools, galleries, magazines and societies — and nationalism, oscillating throughout the early twentieth century between internationalism (the appeal of Western and pan-Asian ideas) and indigenous-ness (the recovery of India's own artistic legacy).

Seven detailed picture studies round out the topic. **Tiller of the Soil** (Nandalal Bose, 1938) is one of more than four hundred Haripura panels: thick tempera in a bold cursory style reminiscent of patuas (Bengali scroll painters), with Ajanta-inspired formal design, placing common people at the centre of nation building (NCERT p. 91). **Rasa-Lila**

(Kshitindranath Majumdar, 1891–1975) is a watercolour in wash technique, showing Krishna dancing with Radha and the sakhis, drawn from the **Bhagavata Purana** and **Gita Govinda**; humans and the divine are shown in the same proportion (NCERT p. 92). **Radhika** (Abdul Rehman Chughtai, 1899–1975) is in wash and tempera, influenced by Abanindranath, Gaganendranath and Nandalal Bose; the calligraphic line is typical of Mughal manuscripts and old Persian paintings. Chughtai is described in NCERT as a descendant of Ustad Ahmed, the chief architect of Shah Jahan's Jama Masjid, Red Fort and Taj Mahal (NCERT p. 93). **City in the Night** (Gaganendranath Tagore, 1922) is a watercolour using Cubism's syntax to depict imaginary cities like Dwarka and Swarnapuri, with diamond-shaped planes and artificial theatrical lighting echoing Rabindranath's plays staged at home (NCERT p. 94). **Rama Vanquishing the Pride of the Ocean** (Raja Ravi Varma) is a Puranic theme in oil — the scene from the **Valmiki Ramayana** where Rama shoots a fiery arrow into the ocean when Varuna does not respond; Ravi Varma was one of the first Indian painters to master both oil and lithographic reproduction (NCERT p. 95). **Woman with Child** (Jamini Roy, 1887–1972, gouache 1940) demonstrates Roy's "folk renaissance": basic seven colours from organic materials (rock-dust, tamarind seeds, mercury, alluvial mud, indigo, common chalk), lamp-black for outlines, and a celebration of village community as resistance to colonial rule (NCERT p. 96). **Journey's End** (Abanindranath Tagore, 1913, watercolour) shows a collapsed camel against a red dusk background, symbolising the end of a journey or of life; the wash technique yields a soft misty impressionistic landscape. Abanindranath also painted a series of 45 paintings based on **The Arabian Nights** (NCERT p. 97).

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Company School of Painting	Late-18th–early-19th-c. hybrid Indian-European style for British patrons	85
Academic style	European-style oil painting on Indian subjects (Raja Ravi Varma)	86
Bengal School of Art	Nationalist art movement, Calcutta, first decade of 20th c.	86
Swadeshi (in art)	Indigenous nationalist values in Indian art	87
Wash technique	Layered watercolour, taught at Shantiniketan by Japanese artists	89
Pan-Asianism	Okakura's idea of uniting eastern nations against western imperialism	89
Oleograph	Lithographic colour print reproduction (Ravi Varma)	86
Patua	Bengali folk scroll painter	91
Pat	Bengali folk painting (Bankura)	96
Kala Bhavana		87

Term	Definition	Page
	India's first national art school, Shantiniketan, Visva-Bharati	
Indian Society of Oriental Art	Journal/society founded by Abanindranath	87
Bauhaus School	German modernist movement; Klee/Kandinsky exhibited Calcutta 1922	89
Cubism	Geometric pictorial syntax adopted by Gaganendranath Tagore	89, 94
Haripura Posters	1937 Congress panels by Nandalal Bose	87–88
Government Art School, Calcutta	Indianised by Havell + Abanindranath in 1896	87
Bombay School (Gladstone Solomon)	Realist colonial school; Lutyens-Delhi muralists	88
Indian House, London	Building decorated by Bengal School artists	88
Abanindranath Tagore	1871–1951; Bengal School founder	87
Gaganendranath Tagore	Abanindranath's brother; Cubist	89
Nandalal Bose	Kala Bhavana head; Haripura Posters	87
Jamini Roy	1887–1972; folk renaissance	96
K. Venkatappa	South Indian carrier of Kala Bhavana legacy	88
Kshitindranath Majumdar	Painter of Rasa-Lila	92
Abdul Rehman Chughtai	Painter of Radhika	93
Amrita Sher-Gil	Modernist + pan-Asian meeting point	90

### 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

Plates to recognise: **Group of Courtesans** by Ghulam Ali Khan (Company Painting, 1800–1825, San Diego Museum, p. 85); **Krishna as envoy** by Raja Ravi Varma (1906, NGMA, p. 86); **Dhaki** by Nandalal Bose (Haripura Posters, 1937, NGMA, p. 88); **Rama's marriage** by K. Venkatappa (1914, p. 88); **Camels** by Amrita Sher-Gil (1941, NGMA, p. 90); **Tiller of the Soil** (Nandalal Bose, 1938, p. 91) — farmer ploughing under an arch, Ajanta-inspired; **Rasa-Lila** (Majumdar, p. 92) — wash painting of Krishna with gopis; **Radhika** (Chughtai, p. 93); **City in the Night** (Gaganendranath, 1922, p. 94) — Cubist geometric urban scene; **Rama Vanquishing the Pride of the Ocean** (Ravi Varma, p. 95); **Woman with Child** (Jamini Roy, 1940, p. 96); **Journey's End** (Abanindranath, 1913, p. 97).

The chronological backbone, easily memorised: 1750s–1850s Company School → mid-19th c. academic style + Ravi Varma → 1896 curriculum reform by Havell + Abanindranath → 1905 Partition of Bengal + Swadeshi peak → 1907 founding of Indian

Society of Oriental Art (Abanindranath) → 1922 Bauhaus exhibition Calcutta → 1937 Haripura Posters → 1940s Amrita Sher-Gil and Jamini Roy folk renaissance.

## 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- Raja Ravi Varma was from the Travancore Court (Kerala), self-taught, used oil paint — NOT a Bengal School artist; his style was rejected by nationalists as "foreign."
- The Bengal School emerged in the FIRST DECADE OF THE 20TH CENTURY, not in the 19th; the curriculum reform with Havell was in 1896.
- Kala Bhavana is at Shantiniketan (Visva-Bharati), founded by Rabindranath; headed by Nandalal Bose. The Government College of Art and Craft is in Kolkata — do not confuse the two.
- The wash technique was taught at Shantiniketan by TWO JAPANESE ARTISTS who came with Kakuzo Okakura — not by European/Bauhaus artists.
- The 1922 Calcutta exhibition featured BAUHAUS artists Paul Klee and Kandinsky — they had rejected academic realism, which is why they appealed to Swadeshi artists.
- Gaganendranath Tagore (Abanindranath's BROTHER) used Cubism; Abanindranath himself used the wash technique drawing on Mughal-Pahari miniatures. Do not swap.
- Abdul Rehman Chughtai painted **Radhika**; Kshitindranath Majumdar painted **Rasa-Lila**. Both were Abanindranath's followers.
- LUTYENS'S DELHI murals went to BOMBAY SCHOOL students (under Gladstone Solomon); the INDIAN HOUSE IN LONDON was decorated by BENGAL SCHOOL artists.
- Jamini Roy is the "father of folk renaissance" and learnt from PAT paintings of BANKURA.
- Benoy Sarkar (Bengali intellectual) sided with the ANGLICISTS — not the orientalists.
- Havell (English) sided with the ORIENTALISTS — not the anglicists.
- The Haripura Posters were painted in 1937 — by Nandalal Bose — at Gandhi's invitation.

## 2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Ghulam Ali Khan	1800–1825	Company School painter; Group of Courtesans	85
Raja Ravi Varma	1848–1906, Travancore	Self-taught; academic oil; oleographs	86
Krishna as envoy, Raja Ravi Varma	1906, NGMA	Academic-realist Mahabharata scene	86
	19th c.	Valmiki Ramayana oil	95

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Rama Vanquishing the Pride of the Ocean, Ravi Varma			
E. B. Havell	1861–1934	Calcutta Art School principal; Indianised curriculum 1896	87
Abanindranath Tagore	1871–1951	Bengal School founder; wash technique	87
Journey's End, Abanindranath	1913	Collapsed camel; misty wash	97
The Arabian Nights series, Abanindranath	Early 20th c.	45-painting suite	97
Kshitindranath Majumdar	1891–1975	Painter of Rasa-Lila	92
Rasa-Lila, Majumdar	Early 20th c.	Krishna-Radha wash painting	92
Abdul Rehman Chughtai	1899–1975	Descendant of Ustad Ahmed; calligraphic	93
Radhika, Chughtai	Early 20th c.	Wash + tempera Mughal-derived	93
Gaganendranath Tagore	Brother of Abanindranath	Cubist Bengali modernist	89
City in the Night, Gaganendranath	1922	Cubist imaginary cities	94
Rabindranath Tagore (founder)	Visva-Bharati	Invited Nandalal to Kala Bhavana	87
Nandalal Bose	Student of Abanindranath	Kala Bhavana head	87
Haripura Posters, Nandalal Bose	1937	400+ panels of rural folk	88
Tiller of the Soil, Nandalal Bose	1938	Haripura panel; Ajanta-inspired	91
Dhaki, Nandalal Bose	Haripura	Drummer in folk-patua style	88
K. Venkatappa	Early 20th c.	South Indian Kala Bhavana legacy	88
Jamini Roy	1887–1972	Father of folk renaissance	96
Woman with Child, Jamini Roy	1940	Bankura-pat gouache	96
Amrita Sher-Gil	1913–1941	Bauhaus + pan-Asian synthesis	90
Camels, Amrita Sher-Gil	1941, NGMA	Late modernist Indian scene	90
Kakuzo Okakura	Japanese		89

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
		Brought pan-Asianism, wash technique	
Paul Klee, Kandinsky	1922 Calcutta show	Bauhaus modernism in India	89
Ananda Coomaraswamy	Scholar	Swadeshi-in-art essays	89
Benoy Sarkar	Bengali anglicist	"Futurism of Young Asia"	89
Gladstone Solomon	Bombay School	Lutyens-Delhi muralists	88
Ustad Ahmed	17th c.	Shah Jahan's chief architect (Chughtai's ancestor)	93

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

This chapter is a high-yield source for CUET Fine Arts, typically contributing 8–10 MCQs across artist–painting matching (Abanindranath, Nandalal Bose, Jamini Roy, Chughtai, Gaganendranath, Ravi Varma), key year recall (1896, 1905, 1922, 1937), and statement-based questions on the Bengal School, Swadeshi, wash technique, pan-Asianism and Bauhaus influence. Assertion-Reason questions on the rise / decline of the Company School and the academic style are also common. CUET 2024 carried a four-statement Kala Bhavana question; CUET 2025 included a Jamini Roy / folk-renaissance identification.