

CUET · FINE ARTS · CLASS XII · CODE 312

# The Modern Indian Art

CUET unit: The Modern Indian Art (Bengal School, Shantiniketan, Calcutta Group, Bombay Progressives, Abstraction, Neo-Tantric, Baroda Narrative, New Media)

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## Snapshot

- Modern Indian art ran from the colonial-era Bengal School through Shantiniketan (Kala Bhavana), the Calcutta Group, the Bombay Progressives, Neo-Tantric abstraction, the Baroda Narrative school of the 1980s, and finally New Media art from the 1990s.
- Indian modernism was shaped by the twin pressures of colonial Western influence (Cubism, Expressionism, Bauhaus) and indigenous nationalism (Ajanta, Mughal, Pahari, folk, tantric sources).
- CUET frequently tests artist–artwork–year–material/technique pairings (e.g., Santhal Family / Triumph of Labour / Hungry Bengal / Whirlpool) and group memberships (Calcutta Group, Progressives, Group 1890).
- Important visual studies — Mother Teresa, Haldi Grinder, Fairy Tales from Purvapalli, Whirlpool, Children, Devi, Of Walls, Rural South Indian Man-Woman, Triumph of Labour, Santhal Family, Cries Un-heard, Ganesha, Vanshri, Medieval Saints — are all examinable in detail.
- This is the most up-to-date topic in the NCERT syllabus, carrying the narrative into the 1990s and 2000s with New Media art.

## Detailed Notes

### 2.1 Core concepts

NCERT opens with the colonial inheritance. The British viewed fine art as European; the Art Schools they set up in Lahore, Calcutta, Bombay and Madras in the mid- to late nineteenth century promoted academic naturalism and Victorian tastes, and Indian crafts were reshaped by European market demand (NCERT §Intro, p. 99). The Bengal School of Art, nurtured by Abanindranath Tagore and E. B. Havell, emerged as the first nationalist response. India's first nationalist art school, Kala Bhavana, was set up in 1919 at Visva-Bharati University, Shantiniketan, conceptualised by Rabindranath Tagore. Kala Bhavana grew into the institutional heart of an entirely new pedagogy that placed Indian themes, folk technique and rural life at the centre of the curriculum.

Modern European art reached Indian artists via the Bauhaus exhibition in Calcutta and through international art magazines. The Tagore family were familiar with Cubism and Expressionism, both of which had rejected academic realism (NCERT §Intro, pp. 99–100). Gaganendranath Tagore used Cubism — geometrical facets and prismatic colours,

in the manner of Picasso — for paintings of mysterious halls and rooms with intersecting vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines, of which **A Cubist City** (1925) is a celebrated example. Rabindranath Tagore turned to visual art comparatively late in his life; he developed a personal calligraphic style derived from crossed-out words and doodles in his manuscripts, with a palette limited to black, yellow ochre, reds and browns. **Doodle** (1920) is the textbook illustration of this practice (NCERT §Intro, p. 100).

Nandalal Bose joined Kala Bhavana in 1921–22; under his leadership the institution produced two pathbreaking modernist artists: Benode Behari Mukherjee and Ramkinker Baij, both of whom explored Santhal tribal life as a defining subject of Indian modernism. Benode Behari Mukherjee created the mural **Lives of Medieval Saints** (also called **The Medieval Saints**) on the walls of Hindi Bhavana at Shantiniketan in **fresco buono** (true wet fresco). The mural was painted in 1946–47 and covers about twenty-three metres of the upper half of three walls, charting the history of Bhakti through Tulsidas, Kabir, Surdas and Ramanuja. Mukherjee was one of the earliest artists in modern India to realise the potential of a mural to function as public art (NCERT §Intro, p. 101; Plate, p. 113).

Ramkinker Baij's **Santhal Family** (1937) is regarded by NCERT as the first public modernist sculpture in India. It is made of cement mixed with pebbles over a metal armature, and it is placed outdoors in the open at Kala Bhavana — a deliberate rejection of the gallery convention. D. P. Roy Choudhury's **Triumph of Labour** (a bronze installed at Marina Beach, Chennai, in 1959) used the language of academic realism to celebrate the heroic working classes; it is a useful counterpoint to Baij's modernist **Santhal Family** (NCERT §Intro, p. 101; Plates, pp. 122–123).

Jamini Roy, whose folk renaissance was introduced in the previous chapter, rejected academic art altogether, drew on Bengal's folk and rural traditions, used vegetable and mineral colours, and developed simple bold forms — a path that parallels Picasso's engagement with African art. Amrita Sher-Gil (1913–1941), half-Hungarian and half-Indian, trained in Paris in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, then returned to India to assimilate Indian miniature and mural traditions with European modernism — producing one of the most original individual syntheses in the history of twentieth-century Indian art (NCERT §Intro, pp. 101–102).

The Calcutta Group was formed in 1943 under the sculptor Prodosh Das Gupta; its members included Nirode Mazumdar, Paritosh Sen, Gopal Ghose and Rathin Moitra. The group rejected the sentimentality of the Bengal School and its retrospective gaze. NCERT draws a comparison between Das Gupta and the South Indian sculptor P. V. Janakiram, whose **Ganesh** worked with sheets of metal (NCERT §Modern Ideologies, pp. 102–103). The 1943 Bengal Famine produced two great political print-makers: Chittoprasad and Somnath Hore. Both used etching, linocut and lithography for political art; Chittoprasad's **Hungry Bengal** (1943) sketches were commissioned by the Communist Party of India and document the village hunger of the famine years.

The Bombay Progressives' Group was formed in 1946; the outspoken leader was Francis Newton Souza, and the members were M. F. Husain, K. H. Ara, S. A. Bakre, H. A. Gade and S. H. Raza (NCERT §Progressives, p. 103). Husain combined Western expressionist strokes with bright Indian colours, drawing from mythology, miniature painting, village crafts and folk toys; his **Mother Teresa** (1980s) shows the debt to Michelangelo's **Pieta** — a grown man lying horizontally on the lap of the maternal figure — translated into flat, collage-like Indian shapes. S. H. Raza moved progressively to abstraction, using the **mandala**, the **yantra** and especially the **bindu** (point) as symbol of oneness; V. S. Gaitonde also pursued pure abstraction. K. K. Hebbar, S. Chavda, Akbar Padamsee, Tyeb Mehta and Krishen Khanna oscillated between abstraction and the figurative (NCERT §Abstraction, p. 104).

The sculptor Pilo Pochkhanawala and the printmaker Krishna Reddy explored abstraction in three dimensions and in print respectively. K. C. S. Paniker founded the artist village Cholamandalam near Madras, becoming the pioneer of South Indian abstraction by incorporating Tamil and Sanskrit scripts and rural craft motifs into the abstract pictorial field (NCERT §Abstraction, pp. 104–105). Amarnath Sehgal balanced abstraction and figuration in wiry, attenuated bronze sculptures like **Cries Un-heard** (1958, NGMA collection; Mulk Raj Anand wrote on it). Mrinalini Mukherjee's **Vanshri** (1994, hemp / jute fibre) — translated as "Goddess of the Woods" — exemplifies abstraction in an unconventional natural medium (NCERT Plates, pp. 124, 126).

Neo-Tantric art emerged in the 1960s, developed by Biren De and G. R. Santosh in Delhi and by K. C. S. Paniker in Madras. The movement used geometrical yantra-like designs as meditative diagrams; G. R. Santosh visualised the cosmic union of purusha and prakriti through these symmetrical mandalic forms. Group 1890 was formed in 1963 under J. Swaminathan; it included Gulam Mohammed Sheikh, Jyoti Bhatt, Ambadas, Jeram Patel, Raghav Kaneria and Himmat Shah. Group 1890 emphasised rough texture and tactile surface, freedom from ideological commitment, and an indigenous modernist sensibility; though short-lived, it influenced Cholamandalam and the subsequent Baroda movement (NCERT §Tracing, p. 106).

Modernism reached India while the country was still a British colony, and so the swadeshi ethos (Ananda Coomaraswamy) and cultural nationalism shaped a selective rather than blind imitation of the West. NCERT highlights in a separate box that the subject matter of Indian modernism in the 1940s and 1950s was largely rural; the city and urban life rarely appeared as major subjects (NCERT §Tracing, p. 107).

The Baroda Art School, founded in the late 1950s, became the centre of New Figurative or Narrative art from the 1980s onwards. K. G. Subramanyan was a founding member: Shantiniketan-trained, he learnt sand casting from Rajasthani artists and made the great Kala Bhavana mural **Three Mythological Goddesses** (1988) in sand-cast relief. Gulam Mohammed Sheikh painted the old bazaar lanes of Baroda, invoking the medieval Italian artists of Sienna and the Lorenzetti brothers in **City for Sale** (1984, V&A, London). The 1981 exhibition **Place for People** — held in Delhi and Bombay and curated/written about by the critic Geeta Kapur — gathered six artists: Bhupen Khakhar, Gulam

Mohammed Sheikh, Vivan Sundaram, Nalini Malani, Sudhir Patwardan and Jogen Chowdhury. This exhibition became the public manifesto of the Baroda narrative school (NCERT §New Figurative, pp. 107–109).

Bhupen Khakhar painted barbers, watch-repairers, queer experience — ordinary Indian middle-class life as the proper subject of high art (*Janata Watch Repairing*, 1972). Baroda painters celebrated popular art forms like truck and autorickshaw imagery. Mumbai painters borrowed from calendars, advertisements, film hoardings, even using photographic images on canvas; watercolour was painted to look like a photograph (NCERT §New Figurative, pp. 109–110).

New Media was the dominant trend from the 1990s. Liberalisation and globalisation brought video, photography and installation into the centre of practice; easel painting and conventional sculpture lost some of their importance. Nalini Malani (Mumbai) and Vivan Sundaram (Delhi) pioneered installation art. The photorealism technique was used by Atul Dodiya in *Bapu* (Rene Block Gallery, New York); T. V. Santosh and Shibu Natesan commented on communal violence and urban transformation; Sheba Chachi, Ravi Agarwal and Atul Bhalla used photography to document marginalised lives and environmental ecology (NCERT §New Media, pp. 110–111).

## 2.2 Definitions to memorise

Term	Definition	Page
Kala Bhavana	India's first nationalist art school, 1919, Visva-Bharati Shantiniketan	99
Fresco buono	True/wet fresco; Benode Behari Mukherjee's Medieval Saints mural	113
Avant garde	Artists at frontier of change from tradition to modernity	106
Cholamandalam	Artist village near Madras founded by K. C. S. Paniker	104
Neo-Tantric art	1960s Indianised abstraction using yantra diagrams	105
Viscosity printing	Krishna Reddy's multi-colour-on-one-plate method at Atelier 17	117
Group 1890	1963 manifesto group under J. Swaminathan	106
Swadeshi (Coomaraswamy)	Selective indigenous foundation for Indian modernism	107
Place for People	1981 exhibition curated/written by Geeta Kapur	109
Photorealism	Painting in the manner of a photograph (Atul Dodiya, Bapu)	111
Calcutta Group	1943, led by Prodosh Das Gupta	102
Bombay Progressives	1946, led by F. N. Souza	103
Baroda Art School	Late 1950s; New Figurative centre 1980s	107

Term	Definition	Page
Bindu	"Point" / dot symbol of oneness used by S. H. Raza	104
Yantra	Geometric meditation diagram, Neo-Tantric base	105
Purusha-prakriti	Male-female cosmic union, G. R. Santosh	105
Three Mythological Goddesses	1988 Kala Bhavana mural by K. G. Subramanyan	109
Hungry Bengal	1943 famine sketches by Chittoprasad, commissioned by CPI	103
Santhal Family	1937 Ramkinker Baij sculpture; first public modernist sculpture in India	123
Triumph of Labour	1959 D. P. Roy Choudhury bronze at Marina Beach	122
Cries Un-heard	1958 Amarnath Sehgal bronze	124
Whirlpool	1963 Krishna Reddy viscosity print	117
Vanshri	1994 Mrinalini Mukherjee hemp/jute fibre sculpture	126
Janata Watch Repairing	1972 Bhupen Khakhar painting	110
City for Sale	1984 G. M. Sheikh Baroda narrative painting	108

### 2.3 Diagrams / processes to remember

Plates to recognise visually: **A Cubist City** (Gaganendranath Tagore, 1925, p. 99); **Doodle** (Rabindranath Tagore, 1920, p. 100); **Black Horse** (Jamini Roy, 1940, p. 101); **Twins Bronze** (Prodosh Das Gupta, 1973, p. 102); **Hungry Bengal** (Chittoprasad, 1943, p. 103); **Farmer's Family** (M. F. Husain, 1940, NGMA, p. 103); **Ma** (S. H. Raza, 1972, p. 104); **Untitled** (G. R. Santosh, 1970) and **The Dog** (K. C. S. Paniker, 1973, both Neo-Tantric, p. 105); **Three Mythological Goddesses** (K. G. Subramanyan, 1988, sand-cast relief Kala Bhavana mural, p. 109); **City for Sale** (G. M. Sheikh, 1984, V&A London, p. 108); **Janata Watch Repairing** (Bhupen Khakhar, 1972, p. 110); the deep visual studies — **Mother Teresa** (Husain, p. 114), **Haldi Grinder** (Sher-Gil, 1940, p. 115), **Fairy Tales from Purvapalli** (Subramanyan, 1986, p. 116), **Whirlpool** (Krishna Reddy, 1963, p. 117), **Children** (Somnath Hore, 1958, p. 118), **Devi** (Jyoti Bhatt, 1970, p. 119), **Of Walls** (Anupam Sud, 1982, p. 120), **Rural South Indian Man-Woman** (Laxma Goud, 2017, p. 121), **Triumph of Labour** (D. P. Roy Choudhury, 1959, p. 122), **Santhal Family** (Ramkinker Baij, 1937, p. 123), **Cries Un-heard** (Amarnath Sehgal, 1958, p. 124), **Ganesha** (P. V. Janakiram, 1970, p. 125), **Vanshri** (Mrinalini Mukherjee, 1994, p. 126).

Chronological backbone: 1919 Kala Bhavana → 1937 Santhal Family → 1943 Calcutta Group + Hungry Bengal → 1946 Bombay Progressives → 1946–47 Medieval Saints mural → 1958 Cries Un-heard + Children → 1959 Triumph of Labour → 1960s Neo-Tantric → 1963 Group 1890 + Whirlpool → 1972 Janata Watch Repairing + Ma → 1980s Mother Teresa → 1981 Place for People → 1984 City for Sale → 1988 Three Mythological Goddesses → 1994 Vanshri → 1990s onward New Media.

## 2.4 Common confusions / NTA trap points

- **Santhal Family** (Ramkinker Baij, 1937) vs **Triumph of Labour** (D. P. Roy Choudhury, 1959): Baij = cement+pebbles, modernist, Kala Bhavana; Roy Choudhury = academic realism, bronze, Marina Beach.
- **Calcutta Group** (1943, Prodosh Das Gupta) vs **Bombay Progressives** (1946, F. N. Souza) — different cities, leaders, years.
- **Group 1890** (1963, J. Swaminathan) ≠ **Cholamandalam** (K. C. S. Paniker) ≠ **Baroda Art School** (late 1950s).
- **Mother Teresa** (Husain) draws on Michelangelo's **Pieta** — not on Indian sculpture.
- **Whirlpool** — Krishna Reddy, 1963, viscosity printing at Atelier 17 with S. W. Hayter, Met Museum, NY — NOT Somnath Hore.
- **Neo-Tantric trio** = Biren De, G. R. Santosh, K. C. S. Paniker (1960s) based on yantra; do not confuse with Group 1890.
- **Bengal School** = Abanindranath Tagore + E. B. Havell; **Kala Bhavana** = founded by Rabindranath (1919), led artistically by Nandalal Bose from 1921–22.
- **Hungry Bengal** = Chittoprasad's pamphlet sketches commissioned by CPI; **Children** (1958) = Somnath Hore's etching with aquatint inspired by the 1943 famine.
- **Vanshri** is HEMP/JUTE FIBRE (not bronze or marble).
- **Place for People** was 1981 — Delhi and Bombay — six artists; do not list five or seven.
- The **Bombay Progressives'** six members are Souza, Husain, Ara, Bakre, Gade, Raza.
- **Photorealism in Bapu** is by Atul Dodiya — not Atul Bhalla (who is a photographer).

## 2.5 Key artworks / artists

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Kala Bhavana	1919	First nationalist art school, Shantiniketan	99
A Cubist City, Gaganendranath Tagore	1925	Cubism in Indian modernism	99
Doodle, Rabindranath Tagore	1920	Calligraphic personal style	100
Nandalal Bose (artist)	Joined Kala Bhavana 1921–22	Trained Mukherjee and Baij	100
Lives of Medieval Saints, Benode Behari Mukherjee	1946–47	23 m fresco buono at Hindi Bhavana	113
Santhal Family, Ramkinker Baij	1937	First public modernist sculpture in India	123
	1959		122

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
Triumph of Labour, D. P. Roy Choudhury		Academic-realist bronze, Marina Beach	
Jamini Roy	1887–1972	Bengal folk rejection of academic art	101
Amrita Sher-Gil	1913–1941	Paris-trained, miniature-mural synthesis	102
Haldi Grinder, Sher-Gil	1940	Rural Indian scene	115
Calcutta Group	1943	Prodosh Das Gupta + Mazumdar/Sen/Ghose/Moitra	102
Hungry Bengal, Chittoprasad	1943	CPI-commissioned famine sketches	103
Children, Somnath Hore	1958	Famine etching with aquatint	118
Bombay Progressives	1946	Souza + Husain/Ara/Bakre/Gade/Raza	103
Mother Teresa, M. F. Husain	1980s	Pieta-influenced	114
Ma, S. H. Raza	1972	Bindu abstraction	104
G. R. Santosh, Biren De, K. C. S. Paniker	1960s	Neo-Tantric trio	105
Untitled, G. R. Santosh	1970	Neo-Tantric mandalic	105
The Dog, K. C. S. Paniker	1973	Cholamandalam Neo-Tantric	105
Cholamandalam (artist village)	Founded by Paniker	South Indian abstraction centre	104
Cries Un-heard, Amarnath Sehgal	1958	Wiry abstraction bronze, NGMA	124
Vanshri, Mrinalini Mukherjee	1994	Hemp/jute "Goddess of the Woods"	126
Whirlpool, Krishna Reddy	1963	Viscosity print at Atelier 17	117
Group 1890	1963, J. Swaminathan	Manifesto group	106
Devi, Jyoti Bhatt	1970	Group 1890 member	119
Three Mythological Goddesses, K. G. Subramanyan	1988	Kala Bhavana sand-cast mural	109
Place for People exhibition	1981	Six narrative artists, Geeta Kapur	109

Artwork or Artist	Period	Significance	NCERT page
City for Sale, G. M. Sheikh	1984	Baroda narrative, V&A	108
Janata Watch Repairing, Bhupen Khakhar	1972	Ordinary middle-class subject	110
Of Walls, Anupam Sud	1982	Print of woman with hollowed face	120
Rural South Indian Man-Woman, Laxma Goud	2017	South Indian narrative	121
Ganesha, P. V. Janakiram	1970	Metal-sheet sculpture	125
Bapu, Atul Dodiya	1990s	Photorealism, Rene Block Gallery NY	111

## Practice MCQs

## PYQ Alignment

This chapter has consistently provided 8–10 MCQs / year in CUET (UG) Fine Arts since 2023, with NTA favouring artist–work–year–material pairings (Santhal Family, Triumph of Labour, Whirlpool, Hungry Bengal), group memberships and leaders (Calcutta Group / Progressives / Group 1890), and definitions of techniques (fresco buono, viscosity printing, photorealism, Neo-Tantric). Plate-based image identification and matching-type questions on Husain, Sher-Gil, Subramanyan, Jyoti Bhatt, Anupam Sud, Laxma Goud, Krishna Reddy and Somnath Hore appear almost every year. CUET 2024 set a Place for People six-artist question; CUET 2025 set a Vanshri material identification.