

ABANINDRANATH,  
KNOWN AND UNKNOWN:  
The Artist versus the Art of His Times

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Through the 1930s, Abanindranath Tagore (1871-1951) began to obsessively look back to the past and recount the course of his own life and career, alongside the activities of the remarkable Jorasanko household to which he belonged. The artist was then well past his prime, withdrawn from his public role as the leader of the nationalist art movement, fully immersed in his private world of writing, painting and crafting toys in the famous southern verandah of his home. (Figure 1) It was from this twilight zone of his creative life, that the ageing *Aban Thakur* wistfully gave himself over to a world of memories. His main impulse, he wrote, was



not to record or document, but to tell stories. The mind was like a tangled net, full of holes, collecting some remembrances and allowing others to slip through, letting a few pictures emerge in minute detail and leaving a host of others to fade.<sup>2</sup> Telling stories was what Abanindranath Tagore always did best, more so in this phase of his writing and painting than ever before. These kaleidoscopic memoirs, which would be published as three separate books in Bengali, remain the finest examples of the art of the master raconteur. The first set of stories, called *Apan Katha* (My Story), were the ones he wrote himself and published as serialized instalments in two journals before they came out as a book in 1946. The others were what he would narrate to the young writer, Rani Chanda, who acted as his faithful scribe and who, under Rabindranath Tagore's encouragement, prepared

these into two books, *Gharoa* (Homely Tales) and *Jorasankor Dhare* (By the side of Jorasanko), to be published in 1941 and 1944.<sup>3</sup> Abanindranath's memoirs stand as exemplary samples of a genre of personal remembrances, where the past is reconstructed less as objective history, more as a random flow of recollections, where the veracity of the stories lie enmeshed in the flavour in which they are told and heard. At

the same time, they offer an invaluable source on the social and cultural life of Jorasanko, not least of all, on Abanindranath's own artistic output and self-image. As vignettes of real life stories, these memoirs

have provided art historians with a rich stock of material for reconstructing Abanindranath Tagore, young and old, artist and writer, narrator and dreamer, where his present endlessly recedes into a sense of past times, places and peoples.

It is this persona of the old artist, steeped in nostalgia and wrapped in an intensely personalized world of painting and writing, that forms the starting and ending point of this essay. Its main thrust will be to juxtapose the artistic profiles of the nationalist and the post-nationalist Abanindranath - to mark his passage from public to an increasingly privatized domain of art, and to pursue his paintings through the 1920s, 30s and 40s, long after he recedes from the centre stage of modern Indian art history. The artist's image in history can be seen here as his greatest trap and liability. The terms on which he staged his arrival on the modern Indian art scene were what would

**Figure 1:** Photograph of Abanindranath Tagore at work in the *dakshiner barandah* of Jorasanko, 1944 – Collection: Rabindra Bhavana archives, Santiniketan, reproduced from R. Siva Kumar, *Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore* (Calcutta: Pratikshan, 2008).



**Figure 2 a:** Page from Francis Martindale's album of 'illuminated' manuscript, illustrating the poetry of Samuel Coleridge (gilt and water-colour, 1897) – Courtesy, (late) Sumitendranath and Shyamasree Tagore.

**Figure 2 b:** Abanindranath Tagore, "Shuklabhisar", illustration of lines from a *padavali* by Gobindadas (water-colour, c. 1897) (marked out at the back by the artist as his "first attempt at Indian painting") – Courtesy, (late) Sumitendranath and Shyamasree Tagore.

decisively fix his place in the history of this artistic field. His name became synonymous with the age of nationalism in modern Indian art, and the rise and spread of the movement that took on the denomination of the Bengal School. The nature of this nationalist intervention, its artistic merits and weaknesses, and its place in modern Indian art history, has been the subject of endless debate.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the day, the broad consensus has been to grant Abanindranath his place in the early phase of the nation's passage to modern art, and move ahead to the new modernist vocabularies of succeeding groups of artists. Frozen in time in his fixed slot, Abanindranath could then be dropped from that later history without any qualms.

This essay sets out to ask in what ways and on what terms can Abanindranath be recovered for the modern art history of the post-Swadeshi years. Looking back to the 1920s, the art historian, Asok Mitra, had proclaimed, "Swadeshi had served its turn, but served better still as it slowly retired from the scene"<sup>5</sup>. The rejection of the Bengal School model of 'Indian' painting would

form the fulcrum of the story of the unfolding of a new modern era in Indian art. Is it possible to mark a similar disavowal and break in Abanindranath's own painting career, that marks out the early from the middle and later phases of his work? There can be no doubt that the narrow label of 'Indian-style' painting is one from which Abanindranath has remained in great need of extrication. What it obliterates is the versatility and variety of his work of the later years, the interactive development of his pictorial and literary imagination, and the introspective fashioning of a creative personality that was as gifted with words as with visual images. An assessment of the full body of works of this modern master was long overdue - and has recently been accomplished in a magnificently-illustrated volume by R.Siva Kumar.<sup>6</sup> Undertaking a comprehensive documentation of Abanindranath's paintings of all periods, this volume's main intention has been to draw out from obscurity this exemplary modernist artist and bring into a public domain, for the first time, his entire oeuvre (especially, the little-known, best works of the later years). While this essay too turns towards this 'other' Abanindranath, it also addresses the



**Figure 3:** Abanindranath Tagore, Portrait of his son, Alokendranath Tagore (dry pastel, c. 1900) – Courtesy, (late) Sumitendranath and Shyamasree Tagore.

**Figure 4:** Abanindranath Tagore, Sketch of Yokoyama Taikan (brush and ink, sketchbook of 1902) – Courtesy, (late) Sumitendranath and Shyamasree Tagore.

inherent difficulties of such a retrieval. How effectively can we pull the artist out of his nationalist past and the folds of the Indian art movement and reposition him within the history of India's artistic modernisms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century? Can we script a new role for the latter-day Abanindranath Tagore within the larger history of modern Indian painting? There is a way in which Abanindranath, from the 1920s, willfully writes himself out of this history to play out his creative life within a private shell on stubbornly different terms. One of my concerns here will be to probe the nature of this retreat and withdrawal, to see how it both constitutes the essence of his modern artistic persona and, at the same time, pushes against the grain of the institutional and professional worlds of modern art activity in the country of this period.

Strictly speaking, Abanindranath's work of the later decades cannot be said to be completely 'unknown'. On the occasion of the artist's seventieth birthday, there was a full chronology and list of all the main series of his paintings prepared by Benode Behari Mukherjee, that has



remained the most reliable source for future scholars.<sup>7</sup> It was largely on the basis of this chronology and his own intimate acquaintance with the master that Abanindranath's student Mukul Dey later compiled the catalogue for the entire family collection of Abanindranath's paintings, that the artist's eldest son, Alokendranath Tagore, bequeathed in the 1960s to the newly founded Rabindra Bharati Society Trust. The Society came to be located at the site of their famous house on No. 5, Dwarkanath Tagore Lane. In a situation where only a small number of the artist's paintings were sold or given away in his lifetime, the Rabindra Bharati Society collection became the main institutional repository of Abanindranath's works of all periods. Banished into trunks inside the dark offices of the Society, these paintings have remained in permanent storage, unavailable for public viewing, just as the cyclostyled copy of Mukul Dey's catalogue was never to get published. Neither exhibited nor reproduced in journals in his own time, and stashed away ever since, the bulk of Abanindranath's works of his later years have never entered the public domain, and are known only within a tiny circle of art connoisseurs and scholars in Bengal – among